If Them's the Rules

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If Them's the Rules

by MayMarlow

Summary

Unable to accept the aftermath of the war, Harry decides to travel back in time to become the parent Tom Riddle obviously should have had. Except that things don't go as planned and Harry finds himself part of a game with hidden rules, trying to survive while raising a boy whose understanding of family has nothing to do with love.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Don't Make Me Sad

Chapter Notes

All right, yeah, I started the first version of this fic in 2010, and I've left it alone for long periods of time, but I've rewritten the story and will start putting more effort into it. This is going to be my last attempt at writing ITTR, and I really hope that it'll be all right.

1999

“I can’t believe you’re going to do this,” Ginny said, leaning against one of the recently emptied cupboards. Her fingers were toying with the tip of her long, red braid and the look on her face made Harry wonder how exhausted she must be. He shrugged and put down the lukewarm cup of coffee he had been holding.

“Ginny,” he started, but didn’t find the words to continue. She did.

“I heard Hermione talking about it,” Ginny said with a sigh. “I think it’s a pointlessly reckless and dangerous thing to do. You have to be aware of how rash the whole plan is.”

“I know,” Harry admitted quietly. “But I think it’s worth doing anyway. I feel like it’s something that has to be done.”

“Has to be done?” Ginny repeated, and once again Harry found himself thankful for the fact that Ginny wasn’t in the habit of raising her voice, no matter how upset she was. It had been perhaps the first thing that Harry had truly liked about her: the way she spoke. “It’s in the past. It happened decades ago. His life was miserable, but so were the lives of many children. Why save him from it?”

“The consequences were too terrible. You know that well.”

“People deal with the aftermath. We soldier on.”

“I’ve done enough of that to know it by heart, Ginny. I will always do it, one way or another. But if I go through with this plan, no one else will have to,” Harry insisted, hoping that she’d understand.

“Going back in time to somehow fix Tom Riddle may not change anything for the better,” Ginny pointed out. “If you do manage to stop him from becoming Voldemort, do you seriously think that there won’t be another Dark Lord trying to do what he did? Terrible things won’t stop happening even if you stop him.”

“Ginny—”

“What he did – and tried to do – is just a reflection of who he is. He’s a psychopath, and that’s just not something you can change, Harry. He can’t be saved because he would never view himself as someone who’d need saving. You know that better than anyone.”

“Be reasonable—”

“I am reasonable,” Ginny said sternly, but not unkindly. Harry’s heart ached. “Don’t try to tell me that I’m not being reasonable. The thought of you using some shady, untested ritual to go back in
time to take care of Tom Riddle is nothing short of crazy. I’m the one who’s reasonable here, and if you can’t see the fault in this naïve and idealistic plan of yours, then I—"

“Yes, you’ve made your thoughts on the matter very clear,” Harry interrupted. “But Ginny, whether or not you think it is stupid is not going to stop me. You don’t understand half of the reasons why I want to do this, and I’m not going to explain everything to you. I shouldn’t need to.”

“Ron and Hermione haven’t been able to talk you out of this.”

“They understand how important it is to me. They know I have to do it.”

“No, you don’t have to do anything. You owe nobody anything. You never did!”

“This isn’t about owing anyone anything, Ginny,” Harry said, shaking his head. He didn’t sound upset or angry anymore, just very tired. “I want to do this. For him, and for me.”

“I hope that’s true. Because all I want,” Ginny said, “is to make sure that you’re doing this for your own sake, not for the sake of someone else. Wanting to save the rest of us from something that has already passed is unnecessary. You’re no one’s champion anymore, and you shouldn’t feel the need to dedicate your life to one quest after another just to feel accepted.”

“Gin—“

“I want you to stop measuring your self-worth through your achievements. You don’t need to be miserable first to justify being happy later.”

Harry stared at her for a few quiet moments, before he said: “I really don’t deserve you.”

“That’s exactly the way of thinking I wish you’d get rid of,” Ginny sighed, before giving him a sharp smile. “Harry, why are you going to use an untested ritual to send yourself back in time to raise Tom Riddle?”

“I want to,” Harry replied hesitantly, feeling selfish and unsure all of a sudden. “Because the thought of him in an orphanage hurts me and I don’t know why. But when I think of him being so little and cold and hungry and that in the end I killed him, I…”

“You feel like you gave his bad life a bad ending,” Ginny said. “No matter how much he deserved it. I’d call your guilt complex amazing if I wasn’t so angry about it.”

“The orphanages back then were terrible,” Harry continued quietly. “It’d be worse than living with the Dursleys. You know how that was, I told you. And then you hexed Aunt Petunia even though I said—“

“She was capable of living happily while forcing a child to live in her cupboard for almost a decade,” Ginny deadpanned. “She’ll survive having random and loud fits of laughter for the rest of her life. If your uncle was still alive, I would have— Oh well, no need to think of that now. Don’t digress. Let’s go through your reasons.”

“I just want you to know that life back then for orphans was terrible,” Harry said, trying to find the words to express what he felt in his heart. “The rooms were dark, winters long and freezing, clothes thin and old, food diluted or already going bad. They rarely got doctors to see orphans when they were ill, the little education they had was given only to the smartest kids by the local churches… if there were any and if they felt like it.”

“And you think that once you appear there, everything will change for the better?” Ginny asked. “If
you’re going there to fix someone else, you’ll be dissatisfied until you succeed – if you do. Do you think that’s something you should be doing?”

“It’s a risk,” Harry admitted. “A risk that I’m willing to take. Hermione has already researched the hell out of the ritual and Ron has arranged my finances in Gringotts so I have at least something I can take with me. Please, don’t try to stop me.”

“I won’t,” Ginny said with a grimace. “I won’t try to stop you, Harry, but I do believe that you deserve more than to spend the rest of your days on a quest that may very well leave you with nothing. I wish that when I asked you for your reasons to go there, you’d have told me that you’re doing it for yourself without hesitation. That you want to go somewhere to start anew and take a real shot at happiness.”

“It,” Harry said hesitantly. “I’ll… do my best to be happy.”

Ginny sighed, closed her eyes and shook her head. “Merlin, I don’t even know what to tell you.” She then opened her eyes and scowled at Harry. “Just keep in mind that we love you here.”

“Gin—,” Harry started, but the woman shushed him.

“Wait, let me finish,” she said. “I know you better than you feel comfortable with, and I know that there are times when you feel like an outsider and insecure about your own worth. What’s going to make it worse for you from now on is that we won’t be there to tell you that you’re being silly.”

“Gin…”

“We’ve always loved you,” Ginny said firmly. “We loved you when you were eleven, we love you now, and we will love you forever. Mum, dad, me… all of us. Our love for you is not the kind that requires you to behave in a certain way for us to keep on loving you. Remember that, Harry Potter. No matter what you do, you will always be loved, even if we’re not there to tell you so.”

Harry didn’t cry, but the burn of tears wasn’t entirely absent. “Ginny,” he said, breathless. “Thank you. Thank you, I—”

“It’s fine,” Ginny interrupted, smiling sadly at him. “It… it will be fine.”

1935

Sullen, small, and spiteful. Pale and scrawny, the fine features of his face made sharp by chronic hunger, hard work, and fatigue. Some suffered from reluctant admiration towards the intelligent boy and most of those who did not outright dislike him were too afraid to approach him.

And yet, despite his few redeeming qualities, there wasn’t a single person in the neighbourhood who could swear to their God that they particularly liked Tom Riddle.

Tom knew that he had given his peers quite a few reasons to hate and fear him, and the whispered rumours wildly exaggerated those reasons. He didn’t mind. The little ones stuttered and shook when they saw him and most of the older children chose not to approach him. The caretakers, however, had no reason for fear and all the reasons for anger, and they hated Tom nearly as much as Tom hated them.

The orphanage itself was a miserable, wretched building full of nasty memories and people who hated being there. It was full, noisy, filthy, and people got sick easily. Doctors were rarely summoned
and funerals were wasted on orphans, which simply meant that after a period of sickness some simply disappeared.

Tom knew that not even half of the children there were really orphaned, as much as simply abandoned either temporarily or for good. The caretakers were more focused on showing their authority than anything else and the orphans tried to excel in everything they could – especially after the administrators had introduced the new fostering system.

It was odd; Tom didn’t understand it. Why would anyone want to take care of a child not their own? There had to be a reason, a motive for that. What was it?

What Tom did understand, however, was why no one wanted to adopt him. There had been a few who had tried, at first, but were warned away quickly. They were told about the time he had taken Billy Stubbs’s rabbit and hung it from the rafters after some petty argument. They were told about how he liked to steal and burn things and how he liked setting snakes on people.

Maybe they were even told some vague whispers of the Cave Incident where he taught Dennis Bishop and Amy Benson a well-deserved lesson about who they definitely shouldn’t be messing with. It got out of hand, almost, but that didn’t matter. The fools had been and still were too scared to say a word about it to anyone in fear of a repeat performance, even though the after-effects had been delightfully obvious.

Tom knew he was special. He was better than the others around him because he was different. Life had somehow made him unlike the people surrounding him and that must have meant something. Perhaps he was meant for something… something great.

“Hey Riddle,” a nasal, unfortunately familiar voice called. Tom turned to see a tall, lanky boy with freckles and somewhat faded burn scars on his face walking closer. He knew who the boy was: Jennings, who had been sweet on Benson and hated Tom with a passion that overwhelmed fear and common sense. “I’m going to get taken in by a family today.”

“Good riddance,” Tom replied. Did the other really think that taunting him with something Tom didn’t want anyway was going to work? Adoption? That fostering system? Tom didn’t want it! The orphanage was bad but he was sure that whatever would be waiting in a foster home was bound to be worse.

He had heard and seen those kids who were brought back after they were adopted. He had seen what happened to those Unsuccessful Placement-people who were returned even more broken than they had been before. Ellie something-or-other had been a lively girl on her way out. The echo of her laughter could be heard in the wind long after she had disappeared into the distance with her new parents. Six weeks later she was back with cropped hair and bruised eyes and a fear of men she had not had before.

“I will have a family,” Jennings insisted. “I won’t be alone like you.”

“If that’s what you want to believe,” Tom said evenly, “then far be it from me to tell you otherwise.” He looked at Jennings, and couldn’t help the disgust he felt towards the boy. People like Jennings shouldn’t even be alive. Too dumb to be of use and too stubborn to obey those who knew better. And despite their lack of worth, they were so noisy and loud. Always trying to be noticed, never apologising for existing.

Tom hated people like that.

When Jennings left, Tom forgot him soon after. Children were being adopted on a regular basis;
some returned, some died, some were never heard from again. Tom never thought about himself as a subject for adoption – never yearned for it, never saw its point. Who cared about family anyway, when all the children at Wool’s were proof of how fickle families were?

Not Tom, that’s for certain. He didn’t care for a family.

The day when everything changed started normally enough.

The fourth of November was a dark, cold day. The sharp wind swept through the hallways, smothering traces of warmth and burrowing into the residents of the orphanage. Tom was shivering as he ate his breakfast of thin porridge and diluted milk. It wasn’t as if winters were beautiful – the snow was dirty brown, the wind merciless, the cold unyielding, and the place was cramped since no one was willing to spend their days outside like during the summers.

Laundry duty was certainly the worst part of Tom’s day. The children had to take old and rusty buckets outside to fill them with snow that would melt into icy water, after which they would wash nearly never-ending piles of dirty clothes. “Making good use of what nature gives us for free,” the caretakers had said, enjoying the warm wool they had wrapped around their hands.

Tom’s hands were numb as he washed clothes from the pile in front of him. Dunking the fabric into the cold water and scrubbing it hard, as if the stains could truly disappear. He was crouching in a row with nine others who had laundry duty for the week, and Tom resented the mere thought of having to do this. He hated this filthy task, having to wash the dirty clothes of someone else – this wasn’t something he should have to do.

“Change the waters!” hollered the woman keeping an eye on them. Her face was as stern as her voice, and her arm holding a heavy clock was steady. Her small beady eyes wearily watched the children as they scrambled up and went outside to dump the dirty water and replace it with fresh snow.

Tom was filling his bucket when he felt someone approaching him from behind, and expecting an insult of some sort, he didn’t turn or pay attention to the person in question. When the bucketful of freezing cold, dirty water washed over him, he cried out in surprise and pain. He tried to stand up with limbs that were suddenly too numb to move only to get pushed into the snow.

“Sorry, I misaimed,” a voice giggled, and Tom shuddered, feeling the cold sweep instantly through his clothes, soaking him completely. Gritting his teeth, he glared up at Ben Buck who was already running inside with a bucket full of snow.

‘I’ll kill you,’ Tom thought, the hot fury inside him doing nothing to fight the cold that was sweeping into his bones. ‘There’ll come a day when I’ll butcher you like an animal.’

1999

“It’s going to be so bloody odd to not have you around anymore,” Ron sighed, slouching on his chair with a sad look on his face. “I’m too used to you. Merlin, I’ll probably miss you a lot.”

“Cheers,” Harry replied, not looking away from the runes Hermione was drawing on the floor. “How do you even know how many swirls those things need?”

“I know what I’m doing,” Hermione assured him. “I’ll be done soon and then we can go for a cup of tea while the runes settle.”
“While the runes settle. I don’t even know what she means by that,” Ron said. “You still sure about this, mate?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “I am.”

“Well, it might do you a world of good,” Ron admitted. “Living away from all the bloody reporters and crazy fans. Remember that guy who tried to break into your house and said that he wanted to be a part of your life?”

“He peed in front of my house,” Harry groaned. “It’s hard to forget someone who does that.”

“It was so funny.”

“It really wasn’t.”

“All right,” Hermione suddenly said, standing up. “It’s almost done. Just a few minutes and it’ll be ready. Does anyone want some tea?”

“I’d like something to eat,” Ron said. “Grilled chicken and roasted potatoes.”

“I’m not going to make any of that,” Hermione replied, heading towards the kitchen with both Ron and Harry walking behind her. “But I’ve got some lemon tarts that I made this morning. Tried out your recipe, Harry. They turned out pretty well.”

“Glad to hear that,” Harry said with a grin and sat down by the table. “Got the recipe from Molly, actually. I hope that I’ll be able to find the ingredients in the 40s, too.”

“Speaking of that, do you have everything you need?” Hermione asked, gesturing for Ron to pour them some tea. “Muggle money, too, I mean. How much did you take?”

“I didn’t empty the vaults, if that’s what you were wondering,” Harry replied. “I couldn’t – there are apparently limitations to that kind of request. I took enough money to last me a few months, but I’ll look for a job as soon as I arrive.”

“Finding a job would be great, but it might be difficult. Be careful, Harry, and if something confuses you be subtle about it. I bought you a few books to read—“

“Books? But—”

“You must realize that raising a child like Tom Riddle won’t be an easy task,” Hermione said seriously, leaning closer towards her friend. “I’m not sure how old he’ll be when you get to him, but he started going… bad very early. It could be the environment – we can hope that, since problems caused by the environment are fixed more easily than the other option.”

“And the other option is…?” Harry asked, not really wanting to know.

“That the madness brought by generations of inbreeding combined with the potions Merope made the muggle Tom Riddle consume before impregnating her could have done something to addle his mind. Worst and most probable case is, of course, that he is a victim of all three: misuse of potions, genetics, and environment,” Hermione explained with a sad sigh. “No matter what, though, read the books and then burn them – you don’t want someone asking about the publishing date.”

“I will do what I can,” Harry promised. “How do you think he will behave? I mean, Dumbledore told me about some things Riddle did at the orphanage – hurting animals and burning things and stealing. He’s apparently a pathological liar, too.”
“Doesn’t surprise me,” Hermione said, smiling gratefully at Ron when he set down a cup of tea in front of her. “He was a very troubled child. Harry, I have to admit that while I’m certain that you’d make a wonderful father, I think that Tom Riddle could be, perhaps, a hopeless case.”

“I’m not going there to turn him into a saint,” Harry reminded her. “I just want to point him towards healthier coping methods that do not include things like world domination and murder.”

“Fair point,” Ron said. “I can see you succeeding if that’s the plan.”

“We should start soon,” Hermione sighed, pulling her hair into a tight bun. “The runes are likely to be settled by now and they shouldn’t be left that way for too long.”

“Right,” Harry said, feeling nervous. He stood up and looked at Ron and Hermione with a troubled expression, unsure of what to say. Final farewells were out of the question.

“Your luggage is with you?” Hermione finally asked after a period of silence, reaching to hold Harry’s hand. “You sure you’ve got everything you need?”

“Shrunken and in my pockets, don’t worry about the luggage,” Harry assured her. “And I’m sure I’ve got everything. Guys…”

“Don’t say it,” Ron said, his hand heavy on Harry’s shoulder. “Don’t say goodbye.”

“I won’t,” Harry replied. “Instead just promise me you won’t name your kid Harry. Pick something else. A name people can’t link to someone who fought in the war. Name him Emil or Hugo or something like that.”

“Got it, mate,” Ron smiled. He didn’t look particularly happy, though. “Good luck. Give ‘em hell.”

“Be careful,” Hermione hurried to add. “And yes, good luck, Harry.”

*

1935

Harry had no idea where in England he was. The streets were narrow and crowded, and the buildings that towered around him were unfamiliar. The square Harry stepped into reminded him more of Diagon Alley when he had first seen it than of Surrey.

The midday sun was high and bright whenever the clouds of smoke, dust, and fog allowed it to shine through. Despite the brightness of the day, the sun would start setting soon – the winter days tended to be short and chilly. Ice and filthy snow were covering the pavement and Harry could see people moving carefully to avoid falling. A cold, unpleasant wind was slowly picking up.

A car drove by – loud and nothing like the Toyota the Dursleys had had. It startled Harry, who then realized that standing still was not going to help him forward at all. He took a deep breath and looked around him again, paying more attention to the stores and boutiques in the area. Closest to him was a coffee shop that boasted to be open twenty-four hours a day and served ‘original French drip coffee’. It was a starting place as good as any other, and Harry quietly made his way towards it.

Perhaps, should he get the chance, a cup of coffee would be a good thing to get down. At least it’d warm him up for a moment or two.

Inside the coffee shop was quite empty. The top shelves behind the counter were filled with bags of sugar and flour, and the tables near the window had empty flower vases on them. A young woman
with steely blue eyes and a forced smile had just handed a customer a cup of coffee.

“Excuse me,” Harry started, stepping closer to the counter. “May I have a moment, please?”

“A moment with or without coffee?” the girl asked, pushing her clenched fists deep into the pockets of her dark grey cardigan. Harry offered her an awkward smile, unsure of how to respond. She squinted at him, shivering slightly.

“Depends,” he finally replied. “Do you know if there are any flats for rent nearby? And, perhaps, if you know of any places that are hiring right now.”

“If you haven’t got a job, I doubt you’ll be wanting coffee,” the girl said. “It’s six pence a cup these days.” Her stern expression softened slightly, and she managed to even smile at Harry.

“I don’t know of any flats,” she then continued. “I doubt we have free ones here in this side of Deptford. I wouldn’t know about that, though. But say, if you know how to hold a needle and sew buttons, I suppose you might as well drop by Maggie’s. It’s two streets down, corner store. She’s looking for an assistant.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “I’d like that coffee, then.”

“Confident, are we? That sure you’re getting hired?”

“Thirsty, rather.”

“Take a coke then,” the girl told him. “Four pence. This French drip just isn’t worth the six. Not even in this bloody weather.”

“Thank you,” Harry said again, his smile a bit more genuine now. “I’ll have a coke, then.”

After drinking his coke and leaving the coffee shop, Harry cast a warming charm on himself before making his way down the street to where he hoped to find the place the girl had referred to as “Maggie’s”. Much to his relief, it was relatively easy to find.

Maggie was, apparently, a dressmaker. Her boutique was small, clean, and elegant, and Harry felt very much out of place in her tiny store. The woman herself was tall, sharp-eyed, and reminded Harry vaguely of Aunt Petunia.

“I need you to do something for me before I hire you,” she said, her pale green eyes assessing him with a cold look. Here stood a woman who wouldn’t hesitate to chuck him out should she find him useless. She handed Harry a needle, some thread, and a folded piece of fabric. “Here, sew a line for me.”

Harry had rarely had to sew for Aunt Petunia, but simple things he certainly could manage. Maggie – who told him to call her Modiste Maggie – seemed to be rather satisfied with what he could do, and nodded approvingly.

“With cotton it’s fine to use that needle,” the woman told him, observing his work. “With satin you’ll need a finer one. Some fabrics are very sensitive to the puncture marks needles leave behind, and considering our very distinguished clientele, we provide them only with the best of the best. You’re fine, I suppose, with seams and such. What’s your name?”

“Harry,” Harry said. “I recently came to this area... I’m still looking for a place to live.”

“Family?”
“N— well, I have a little brother. He’s not yet here with me, though, but will come once I find us a place to live.” Harry smiled nervously, thinking of Riddle. He’d need to find the boy as soon as possible and convince him somehow to leave the orphanage.

“You won’t need much space, then,” Modiste Maggie said. “Once you’re done here today, go down to Fishers Road and look for Amanda Millington. She has a flat she’s renting out for four shillings a week, if I remember correctly. I’ll be paying you three pounds a month – I assure you it’s far more than most people here would pay their assistants. I believe in rewarding hard work, you see, and in order to stay here you will work hard. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” Harry said. Modiste Maggie nodded, visibly pleased.

“We have quite a few orders to complete. You will do no more and no less than sew seams for today, and strictly follow the instructions I give you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

It certainly wasn’t the kind of job Harry had ever imagined himself doing, but he was well used to doing whatever he must in order to get by.

For now, it was all right.
The flat was small, cramped, and gloomy. The lock on the front door needed a push before the twist of the key in order to be unlocked, and the hinges made a terrible sound when Harry finally pulled the door open. The landlady had been quick to leave, presumably in order to avoid answering any possible questions. Stepping further into his new home, Harry couldn’t exactly blame her.

The place hadn’t been aired or properly cleaned for quite a while, that much was obvious. The narrow entrance led directly to a kitchen with numerous shelves, a fireplace, a spacious cupboard, and an oven that seemed to be held together by the sheer willpower of the woman who did not want to buy a replacement. The doorway to the barely furnished bedroom lacked an actual door, and the tiny bathroom would need far more than a round of cleaning charms in order to be usable.

‘Well, isn’t this bloody amazing,’ Harry thought, sighing deeply. No wonder Mrs. Millington was renting it for such a low price. ‘I wonder if Riddle – Tom, I have to start calling him that – will pick this over the orphanage.’ Harry did not know – and didn’t want to think of – what he’d do if Tom was to reject his adoption offer. It wasn’t as if he could afford to let the boy just be. He’d grow up into Voldemort once again, for sure!

With some magic he could surely make even this flat a nice, decent place to live.

The cold weather made fixing the windows and the heating a priority. After that, there would be plenty of work to do in the bathroom. Determined to do as much as possible before nightfall, Harry pulled out his wand and got to work.

No amount of cleaning could change the truth and it was soon clear to Harry that while he could indeed fix most of the damages, the flat would need a miracle to look good. A scourgify could do only so much for the stained walls and Harry quietly swore that living in Deptford would be only temporary. It was better than being out and homeless, for sure, and with some transfiguration Harry would be able to manage quite well.

By the time he was done with fixing and cleaning the bathroom, Harry took a shower and washed his clothes – by hand, which was strange but not unpleasant. In the morning he could clean up the spacious cupboard and transfigure a small bed in there. It wouldn’t be the kind of new room he wished he could promise Riddle, but at least a warm, comfortable bed was something he could offer.

As far as transfiguring fabrics went, Harry was quite good with wool and cotton, them being the kind of fabrics he had experience transfiguring. They weren’t luxurious, but certainly good enough to keep Tom warm. Hermione had been able to conjure cotton out of thin air, and Harry had always been impressed by that. He was good at transfiguration, but his conjuring abilities were chancy at best.

Tomorrow he’d have work. It was a good thing – he had really gotten lucky. Hermione had told him plenty of the hardships of finding a decent job without proper recommendations, and while this wasn’t the first time luck came his way so strongly, it still left Harry feeling oddly wary. He didn’t know when the other shoe would drop, and dreaded the moment already.

There was no denying, however, that having found a job and a place to live would allow Harry the state of mind to focus on Tom.

The first step would be locating the orphanage, which shouldn’t be too difficult. He knew the name of the place and that it was somewhere in North London. If he would get a day free come the
weekend, he could apparate to Enfield and ask for some instructions on how to get to where he wanted to go. Eventually someone’s bound to know where to direct him.

He’d need to come up with a realistic story to feed the people who would eventually ask why he was so interested in Tom – including Tom himself. Harry doubted that the boy would accept kindness as a reason for anything. He dismissed the idea of claiming to be the boy’s father instantly – he was far too young for people to believe it.

‘I don’t think that claiming any blood relation would end up working well,’ Harry thought. ‘It can be proven false too easily, and somehow I doubt that little Voldemort – Tom, damn it, I need to start calling him by his name – would just smile and accept it.’ In fact, Harry was sure that Riddle would treat that sort of revelation as a personal betrayal and use it to justify his destructive plans.

It would be such a… Voldemort thing to do.

‘Well, no use thinking of that right now. For the next few days all I should focus on doing is settling down properly and making sure that I can actually keep my job. And maybe check on Tom once or twice before adopting him. He doesn’t need to even know that I’m there. I really hope that tomorrow goes well,’ Harry thought, making his way towards the bed. This would be his first night in the past, and oh, wasn’t that odd? Hermione and Ron weren’t even born yet. His parents weren’t even born yet.

As much as the thought of giving everyone he loves a chance to live happier lives, Harry couldn’t help but feel lonely. He knew he had chosen this. He didn’t regret coming here and still believed that this was the best course of action he could take – and yet.

Knowing he was alone… was rather sad, wasn’t it?

* *

The following day was just as cold as the one before it. Harry woke up shivering, his thoughts a mess, trying to remember everything he had done yesterday and everything he’d need to do today. It took seven warming charms to make the whole flat’s temperature tolerable again, and two more to stop him from shivering after a quick shower.

Making tea for breakfast was just about the only thing he could do in the absence of food, and Harry hoped that he’d be able to drop by a marketplace at some point after work. He didn’t know anything about the opening hours of the stores in this time, but hoped that they weren’t too hard for him to figure out.

‘Even if I find Riddle soon, I can’t adopt him immediately,’ Harry thought, tucking the hem of his shirt into his trousers and reaching for his shoes. ‘I need to get used to living here – in this time, not just place – or else he’ll figure out that something’s wrong. It’d be just my luck.’

The walk to Maggie’s was thankfully not too long, though the cold and the wind made it feel like miles. The people walking past him and around him seemed to be far better dressed for the weather than he, and Harry was sure that had it not been for the warming charms he had cast on himself, he’d be faring much worse.

Modiste Maggie was already working when Harry entered the boutique. There were pins tucked into the folds of her sleeves and a tape measure tied around her waist, and her hands didn’t pause their work when she looked at him from her seat.

“Take your coat off in the back room and sweep the floor. Once you’re done, you’ll be working on
buttons. You do know how to sew a button properly, don’t you?”

“I do, yes.”

“I will be the judge of that, then. Sweep the floor, young man, and then get to work. We’ve got plenty to do before customers walk in through that door.”

Obediently, Harry did as told. In the back room he went as far as charm his shoes clean and dry to avoid making a mess while he walked around with a broom. Strangely enough, Harry felt far more comfortable cleaning than actually sewing – perhaps it had to do with his lack of confidence. He knew he could sweep a floor and not fail at that, but meeting Maggie’s standards required some practicing. Luckily, simple stitches and buttons didn’t require much for Harry to learn.

The first customer didn’t come in until well after ten in the morning. Harry suspected that the people who could afford to have their clothes made here could also afford missing the morning hours.

“Mr. Riddle,” Modiste Maggie called. “Once you’re done with the button of that coat, skip the dress and do the jacket by the door. Mr. Higgins will be dropping by with his new charge today.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Modiste Maggie was not unkind, but she was very demanding and didn’t believe in breaks as long as there were customers around or something urgent to do. With her business being as popular as it was, customers were constant, and Harry’s breaks were short and few.

By the time he could leave work and apparate to Enfield, his fingers were aching and he was exhausted. The task of buying dinner was nearly forgotten, and it was that thought that prompted him to buy a loaf of bread from a corner store to munch on. It had been a long time since he hadn’t been able to have a table full of food, but Harry didn’t mind. As far as problems and complications went, this was easily fixable.

In Enfield, the wind was harsher than it had been in Deptford. The streets were more crowded as well, despite the late hour, and the chatter of people was much louder. Harry hunched his shoulders and started walking, unsure of where he’d find the orphanage he was looking for and hating the weather more and more with each step he took forward.

Harry didn’t dislike snow. Perhaps it had to do with far too many bad memories of having been stuck in the cold at unfortunate times, but Harry just wasn’t particularly fond of it.

After wandering for a long time in the snow, munching on the bread he had bought, Harry finally caved in and asked for directions. It took him a few tries before he got even close, as most people didn’t even know the place, but eventually found himself standing in front of the gloomy Wool’s Orphanage.

Harry looked at the run-down, grim square building that was surrounded by high railings, as if to ward off any visitors. What were the chances that he could just waltz in and adopt Tom Riddle legally? He, a relatively poor, single guy who wasn’t even twenty yet, notably lacking any sort of identification papers? Was going through that route even worth a try?

’Well then,’ Harry thought, sighing deeply. He thought briefly of his resolution to not meet Tom at all today, and sighed deeply again. ’I guess kidnapping it is. Not tonight, though. Tonight I’ll just... take a look. See what he looks like and how he’s doing. And introduce myself, definitely.’

Harry nodded to himself, determined to leave a good first impression. There wasn’t much that could go wrong, was there?
“He caught a cold?” Ms. Mudget cried, shaking her head with frustration. “Buck has been punished already, but that doesn’t solve the Riddle problem. If he gets worse, he’ll need a doctor. He already has a fever and—”

“Myra,” Mrs. Shelley snapped. “A bit of sleep is all he needs. Tomorrow, or the day after it, the boy will be alright again. No need to even think of calling a doctor.”

‘You’d just rather see me dead,’ Tom thought groggily, unable to open his eyes. There was a fire in his lungs and sand in his skull, and breathing was harder than it had ever been before. ‘Stop talking about me as if I can’t hear you.’

“Someone will have to watch over him,” Ms. Mudget sighed, clearly displeased.

“Oh, surely not! What could possibly happen to him? He’ll be asleep—”

“Buck might—”

“Doubtful. That boy learns from his punishments, unlike this one here.” A cold hand was briefly pressed against his forehead, and Tom couldn’t guess which caretaker it was. Not that it mattered. All Tom wanted to do right now was sleep. “A little bit of rest is all he needs and he’ll be up and about in a matter of days.”

Tom’s throat hurt and the coughs made his whole body shake and ache. He drifted in and out of consciousness, losing his sense of time and feeling more and more disoriented. Sometimes one of the caretakers would drop by to feed him something – he couldn’t remember what, but oatmeal was his safest bet – before leaving and allowing him to continue his restless sleep.

Sometimes he’d wake up gasping for air, hating how weak being sick was making him. He couldn’t move, couldn’t even sit up – how was he supposed to defend himself if someone decided to hurt him? He didn’t have anything to keep him safe after all.

The worst was perhaps the fear. The fear of not waking up again if he were to fall asleep. And Tom… Tom hated death. The mere thought of it.

Perhaps it was because he resented his parents for dying, for leaving him like this. Alone. At the mercy of these people who wished only ill upon him. Sometimes, during the weak moments Tom had, during the pathetic minutes when he’d curl up in the darkness under his bed covers, he’d dream of having someone to rely on. Someone who’d protect him when he was weak like this. Someone who’d actually care.

Alas, Tom knew better than to hope. His family was dead, and even if someone was alive, it was painfully clear that this someone wasn’t much interested in Tom’s life or welfare. So better just to… not hope.

Tom didn’t know how much time had passed since he had fallen ill. It must have been enough time for the fever to break, however, as his thoughts were becoming clearer and clearer each time he woke up from a short-lived nap. He was happy… up until the time he realized that he wasn’t alone in the room anymore.

“About time you woke up,” a familiar voice said, before giggling with evident delight. Tom, alarmed, tried to sit up to look at whoever had come, but was only met with failure. His vision swam and he felt nauseated and threatened as he forced himself to turn enough to take a look at the intruder.

It took a moment for his sight to focus on Buck and Tipalley.
“Piss off,” Tom croaked, trying to figure out what to do. There was no way he could get past the two boys and run away, let alone fight back. Screaming for help was definitely not an option either, not with the pain his throat was in.

“Watch the door,” Buck hissed, and Tipalley nodded with a nasty grin on his freckled face. Buck smiled too when he turned back to Tom. “You’re a piece of shit, Riddle. And I’m here to make you sorry for that.”

Tom had never felt hatred as intense as he felt in this moment. Fear, too. He knew nothing good was about to happen, and was right when the pillow he had been using was snatched from under his head. A moment later it was pressed heavily against his face, the rough fabric being the least of his problems when breathing became a struggle.

‘He’s going to kill me.’ The certainty of that hit Tom like a ton of bricks, making him gasp for air and fight down the rising panic with renewed vigor. He wasn’t going to die like this, was he? Surely Buck couldn’t be serious about this! The consequences of a murder—

Except that who could prove that it was Buck? People could suspect, but would they really care enough to voice their suspicions? Most probably not. They’d probably just file Tom’s death due to the fever and be done with it. It wasn’t as if they liked him enough to bother with an investigation.

‘I don’t care who.’

Panic was throttling him worse than Buck. Tom didn’t want to die. Never wanted to die. He didn’t want to die today or tomorrow or a thousand years from now on. But what was his wish in the face of reality? The blackness was sneaking upon him, merciless hands still pushing the pillow against his face.

‘I don’t care how.’

Was he dying? It felt terrible. If he survived, he’d make sure to kill Buck. Set him on fire. Drown him. Cut him to pieces and— Oh Jesus, why couldn’t he breathe through the pillow?

‘Somebody please save me!’

It wasn’t his powers that pushed away Buck and the suffocating pillow, even though for one mad moment Tom thought so. Coughing and gasping for air, he couldn’t focus on his surrounding for a few moments. When he finally looked up, he met a pair of vivid green eyes, staring at him with startling intensity.

“Are you alright?” the man asked. His voice was soft and low, very soothing and firm. Tom nodded, still trying to breathe evenly again, and glanced at Buck and Tipalley who were both unconscious on the floor.

“What did you do? Who are you?” Tom asked as soon as he could, dark eyes narrowing into a suspicious glare, desperation still gnawing at the edges of his self-control. His whole body was shaking and his throat hurt even worse than before. His voice was barely audible. “What are you doing here?”

“We don’t really have the time for explanations,” the man, who looked more like an older teenager than a fully grown adult, whispered nervously. “Someone might barge in at any time.”

“And what would it matter if someone barged in?” Tom hissed, feeling alarmed and still very weak. “Are you here to kill me?” Even before asking, Tom knew that that wasn’t true – the guy had saved him from Buck, after all. Regardless, it didn’t mean that this man had no intention to harm him.
“This is not turning out how I expected,” the man muttered with an apologetic grimace. “You’re Tom Riddle, right?”

“Yes,” Tom replied, shifting to sit better and resisting the urge to rub his throat. “You didn’t say who you are. What do you want from me?”

“Do you… um… enjoy your life here?”

“Stop avoiding answering me. Who are you and what do you want?”

“Now this is going downhill,” the man said with a sad sigh. “And fast. My name is Harry. And I’m here to adopt—”

“No,” Tom interrupted, knowing well enough that the other could easily just grab him and go. So why the pretence? “I don’t want to be adopted, especially by someone as suspicious as you.”

“Ouch,” the stranger winced. “But I—“ Suddenly he stopped, turning to look at the doorway. Tom, hearing the approaching footsteps turned to see who was coming in. The man – Harry – was going to get caught, which could prove to be rather interesting.

Except that when Mrs. Shelley entered the room and Tom turned to see Harry’s reaction, the man was nowhere in sight. Gone as if he hadn’t been there. Had he been a ghost or some other paranormal manifestation?

That was, perhaps, the first time Tom felt a kind of fear that had nothing to do with death.

\*

Well that went well.

Just how could he mess things up so badly? The little brat had been on the verge of dying and Harry couldn’t help but just rush in to save him. Did he get even a ‘thank you’? No. Trust Tom Riddle to be a paranoid little bastard even as a kid. Honestly, any other orphan would have been overjoyed at the chance of getting taken away from an orphanage.

“Cynical little shit,” Harry huffed, kicking his shoes off and slumping on the couch he had transfigured from the remains of a barrel he had found outside. “Less than a week and I’m already in trouble.” Hermione had warned him about this. Then again, Hermione had warned him about lots of things. He’d have to be patient, careful, calm, understanding, and accepting.

What a joke.

He had a bad start with the kid, so what could change the course of events now? How could he adopt Riddle if he didn’t want to be adopted? Harry sighed, shook his head, and stood up – might as well make some light dinner with the few things he had bought on his way back home before planning his next move. If he could get the oven working without any spellwork this time, that’d be great.

It was lucky that the next day was a Saturday. He’d have plenty of time to work on the flat and prepare for Tom’s – hopefully – inevitable arrival. So far he’d done only a few things, but the kitchen still needed some fixing and the house could do with another round of cleaning spells.

In Wool’s Orphanage Tom was thinking about the green-eyed stranger who had vanished like a ghost or a bad dream. The little boy hated being confused and not understanding things that might concern him, and the event that had taken place less than an hour ago most certainly did concern
"Are you alright?"

Not to start growing soft or anything, but no one had asked him that question with real concern before. Then again the stranger could be – and most probably was – a good liar. How did he enter the room anyway? How did he leave?

“Riddle,” Mrs. Shelley said, catching his attention. “We need to address your punishment now.”

“My punishment?” Tom asked, bewildered. “For what!?”

“While Buck and Tipalley were wrong in entering your room, you must have done something to render them unconscious—“

“Buck was trying to smother me!” Tom exclaimed, getting a surge of energy from his panic and rising anger. “He was holding a pillow over my face!”

“That’s unlikely,” Mrs. Shelley said, making the little boy gape with disbelief. Could she really mean — Yes, yes she did mean her words. She didn’t believe Tom and wanted to punish him for something he hadn’t done. Arguing would be a waste of time.

“Then what is my punishment?” Tom asked, thin lips pressed into a tight line. Mrs. Shelley sighed and signalled for Ms. Mudget to come closer.

“Since you’re still quite ill, we cannot give you the outdoors punishment or the stick. Cutting down your food is not favourable either,” Ms. Mudget explained. “So it’s the attic, Riddle.”

Ah, that. Tom had heard of the attic but had never been there before. What could be scary about being locked in a dark attic for a few hours? Surely the other punishments were worse? So far the Attic Punishment had managed render the toughest, roughest bullies into crybabies numerous times, but Tom knew that those guys were weak.

“This way, Tom,” Ms. Mudget said and led the boy towards the upper part of the orphanage. “Sally has already put all of your three meals in there. I do not recommend eating, though, since you will not be permitted to go to the toilet. Just sleep if you can, alright?”

“How long will I be there?” Tom asked, following the woman into the dusty, dark attic. The only thing illuminating the area was the candle she was holding, creating rather ominous shadows in the room when she set it down next to a tray of food.

“Overnight, through breakfast and lunch and right after dinner you’ll be released. No one will be letting you out before that and the trapdoor will be shut from outside and locked.”

“I see,” Tom sneered, and sat down. If anyone expected him to ask for forgiveness – especially for something he didn’t do – they would wait for a very long time indeed. The woman cast him a rather odd look – a mix of smugness and pity – before leaving. The young boy could hear the trapdoor being locked before Ms. Mudget shuffled away, leaving him in utter silence. He didn’t mind. What was so scary about all this anyway?

A small gust of wind played with the candlelight, and the deformed shadows twisted and fluttered. Not that Tom was nervous or anything, but did they look like hands? Were they reaching for him? Ah, of course not. Ridiculous. They were just shadows.

“I’m not scared,” Tom said aloud, swallowing nervously. He still felt feverish and his throat wasn’t
feeling too good, but it wasn’t as if he could do something about that. “I’m not scared of the dark.” His eyes scanned over the room, trying to find something he could focus on and entertain himself with. He couldn’t, and soon he was thinking again of how the man from earlier had vanished so mysteriously. So… abnormally.

Suddenly the chill of the room seemed to be more profound, and Tom huddled closer to the candle. Not that the tiny thing could offer him any warmth, but at least his hands weren’t freezing if he held them right above the weak flame. Was it normal for the place to be so… creaky? Feeling paranoid, Tom looked warily around the room; just in case he’d see something he should be aware of. Never before had the empty darkness been so… threatening.

Stupid Buck, this was his fault.

And stupid Mrs. Shelley who seriously thought that Tom could have knocked both Buck and Tipalley unconscious. He was still very weak, feeling shaky and sick, and wouldn’t have been able to fight any of the little kids, let alone both Buck and his pet of the week.

Tom admitted now, rather reluctantly, that he had been frightened almost senseless back there. He had almost died, and that wasn’t something he had planned on doing anytime soon. But the fear, the gut-wrenching fear that had filled him and almost made him cry… Tom would make Buck pay for it. Sooner or later, for sure.

Darkness flickered around him, reminding him of the possible dangers lurking in it. What if ghosts were real? Or worse, what if a person was hiding in the darkness? Someone who had snuck in here to hide from the cold and was ready to attack Tom at any given moment.

Tom snatched a piece of bread from the tray and nibbled at it, brown eyes darkening with worry when his imagination was getting the best of him. If someone attacked, he’d stick the burning candle into their eye. He wouldn’t even hesitate.

Then, a gust of wind snuffed out the tiny flame of the candle, leaving Tom in absolute darkness.

“No!” the boy croaked, scrambling up, dropping the tasteless bread. “Light! I need a new candle! Ms. Mudget! Ms. Mudget!” Tom moved towards where he supposed the trapdoor was, knowing with desperation that no one was going to come for him. Fear gripped his rapidly beating heart and he was so sure, so damn sure that someone was staring at him through the darkness.

“I don’t want to die,” the boy gasped, clawing at the locked trapdoor and curling as small as he could, as if that could keep anything from touching him. “Let me out! It wasn’t my fault!!” The wooden floor of the attic creaked as if someone was standing on it. The sound sent surges of fear through Tom, and his voice rose into a high-pitched scream. The fear of dying was returning, and he felt suffocated as if someone was throttling him again. He was sobbing, but he didn’t feel his own tears as his little fists started hitting the wooden trapdoor desperately.

“Let me out!! They’re going to kill me! Someone let me out!” Who had helped him last time? That stranger, yes. Would he help Tom again? Would he? What had been his name again? Harry, wasn’t it? Must have been! Would he hear? Would he come to save him?

“Harry!” the boy screamed, accidentally kicking the cooling candle and mistaking it for someone trying to grab his foot. “Harry save me!” His whole body was shaking now, he was feeling dizzy but he wouldn’t - couldn’t - fall unconscious now because then he’d be completely defenceless and how long had it been since Ms. Mudget locked him here?

Suddenly, Tom heard a muffled crack that startled him into silence. His eyes widened when he
clearly saw the outlines of someone standing there.

“Tom?” a soft, almost familiar voice said soothingly. “It’s me, Harry.” With a relieved sob Tom scrambled up and was wobbling towards his saviour, who with a few quick steps was standing in front of him. Tom couldn’t see Harry through the thick darkness even now, but he could feel the arms wrapping around him.

“I’ll get you out of here,” Harry promised, and that was the last thing Tom heard before finally closing his eyes and giving in to the exhaustion.

Harry apparated back to his flat in Deptford, with an unconscious Tom Riddle in his arms. He had been almost asleep when a jolt of electricity had woken him up very effectively, and as if by pure instinct he had known who it was who needed his help.

It wasn’t as if anyone else knew of him, and he doubted that Modiste Maggie would consider him useful enough for help.

He had apparated, expecting to find himself again in the ugly room with sick Riddle on the bed. His shock – and anger – had been immense when he had ended up in a pitch black attic where Riddle was scared like any other eight-year-old boy would be.

It felt odd to be faced with the realization that Tom Riddle – Voldemort – was a child. Of course he had known it before, but there was something different in actually seeing him act like one, even if it was in a situation as terrible as this. Tom Riddle was a child. He was eight years old – soon nine – and no matter how tough he acted or how many fancy words he knew and used or how cynical he was… he was still just a child who needed as much care as any other.

Trying to remain as calm as he possibly could, Harry had hugged the boy and rubbed his back soothingly, before bringing them both back to their new home.

Harry took a moment to thank himself for having the sense to prepare the cupboard and change it into a small room. He could only guess what Tom would think once he’d wake up there, and after a few moments of letting his imagination run wild, Harry vanished the door of the cupboard. He didn’t want to make the boy feel trapped in any way.

He tucked the blankets around the boy tightly and, after casting a few heating charms to keep the bed warm, sat down in front of the fireplace to think of the sudden change of situation that had just happened.

Perhaps this was meant to be, after all.

What had made Riddle call for him? Because that’s what it must have been – Riddle’s magic reaching out to get Harry, since Harry was the most likely person who’d help Riddle out of whatever predicament the boy had gotten himself into.

‘That was a punishment,’ Harry thought. ‘He was being punished. Just what had happened after I left? Why did he call me? He was obviously frightened… is he afraid of the darkness? Does he want to stay with me?’

“He’ll need new clothes,” the time traveller told the crackling fire. “He’s so scrawny.” From Hermione's notes Harry had a vague idea of what sort of clothes boys in the Muggle world used in this time. Naturally, as soon as Harry could afford it, Riddle would be getting both magical and Muggle clothes. Making the boy adapt and accept both worlds equally would only help him in the
long run… hopefully.

Harry sighed and stood up, deciding to strengthen the privacy charms on his personal belongings and pretty much everything that could give away too much information. He knew that Riddle was at this point - while not a criminal - rather quick to lie and steal. How he could manage to make Riddle abandon those nasty habits, he didn't know yet, but he was damn well going to try. Harry doubted that giving speeches would help – he knew first hand that words needed something else, something real with them, to make an impact.

Harry knew that Riddle was capable of reading and writing well, but was the boy educated in other subjects? Home schooling hadn’t been something Harry had thought about, but he was quite sure that if he just provided Riddle with the books and occasional assistance, the boy would be just fine until getting into Hogwarts.

In any case, hopefully teaching Riddle would create some sort of bond between them. And if not between them, then between the kid and the Muggle world’s science. Unless Riddle proved to be already good enough at math… it wouldn’t surprise Harry too much. The brat was only eight, but it was Riddle, and therefore not one to be underestimated. Harry could already foresee the series of headaches this parenting thing was going to cause him.

But when he returned to watch over the small boy in his cosy bed, wrapped in blankets made of spare strings and magic and with tear stains on his little face, Harry couldn’t regret his decision.

“No matter what trouble arises,” Harry whispered, petting Riddle’s hair. “I will be here for you.” Harry knew that what he mostly felt towards the boy was wariness and pity, but he also knew that feelings were prone to change with time and circumstances.

Tom, who wasn’t as asleep anymore as Harry thought, was confused. He wasn’t sure how exactly this man had gotten him out of the orphanage and to a soft, warm bed in a room that smelled of wood and rain and dust, but he couldn’t just sit back and accept it all. Life didn’t work like that, there had to be a catch. This was just too good to be true. Too good to happen to him anyway.

The hand caressing his hair felt good, even though Tom didn’t know why. There were so many things about this Harry that Tom didn’t know and the boy felt as if his life was suddenly all about unanswered questions.

But… Tom was tired, the bed was comfortable, and if he leaned just a little bit towards the caressing hand, it must have been an accident.
In the morning, Tom seemed to be faring even worse. Harry had made the boy drink some milk and eat a little bit of the food the older wizard had rushed out to buy at the crack of dawn, but neither the milk nor the food had made a difference. Tom was barely conscious and very feverish, and the way his breathing sounded worried Harry.

'I don't think I can just wait for this to pass without doing anything.' But how would he call a Muggle doctor? Harry didn't have a phone and didn't know how to even get one. And even if he did, even if he went right now to a neighbour and asked to borrow their phone, who would he call, anyway? How much would it cost?

Harry pulled out his wand and wondered if there was anything he could do with it that'd make Tom feel any better. The charms keeping the whole house warm were still strongly in place and wouldn't need to be renewed for a couple of hours at least, but it obviously wasn't enough. Harry had never bothered to learn healing charms beyond what he had needed for basic wound treatment and the occasional broken bone, and he regretted it now. At Hogwarts there had always been Madame Pomfrey and after Hogwarts, well, he had gone to... oh.

'St. Mungo's,' Harry thought, realizing suddenly that taking Tom to that particular hospital was an option. He had plenty of galleons saved and unless the prices were far higher than they were in Harry's time - which he doubted very much - he should definitely have more than enough money for the appointment and whatever potion Tom would need. But was it allowed to just... apparate there? Harry's flat wasn't connected to the Floo - he didn't even know how to set that up - and using Muggle means was out of the question.

"Tom," Harry said, shaking the boy gently. Riddle didn't so much as twitch, and Harry doubted that he'd wake up again anytime soon. Somehow, however, he didn't feel entirely comfortable with taking Tom to St. Mungo's without at least telling the boy something - anything. What if he woke up only to see someone performing magic? Then again he had already experienced side-along Apparition. "Tom, I'll take you to a hospital now, all right? You'll be just fine soon, I promise."

'If he wakes up only to ask questions right away, I won't be surprised at all,' Harry thought, moving to make sure that the robes he had transfigured for Tom earlier would keep the boy warm. The child would need help in getting dressed, and Harry could only hope that the boy wouldn't remember it afterwards. Voldemort had been unreasonably prideful, which, well - Harry couldn't understand why it was more acceptable to trick someone into helping you rather than accept help when it was offered.

'I need coffee before I even try anything else.' Harry knew that what would actually do him some good was either a pepper up potion or a few hours of sleep, but neither was an option at the moment. Maybe he should have just found a job and a place to live in one of the magical towns of Britain, but aside from Hogsmeade, Harry didn't really know where and how to find them. Besides, living with Muggles was part of making sure that Tom's experiences with them wouldn't make him hate them all indiscriminately.

But, Merlin, living surrounded by magic would make so many things so much easier.

'I wish I could firecall St. Mungo's ahead to get an actual appointment, but no point in thinking of that now,' the wizard thought, making himself a cup of coffee that he drank sips of every time he took a break from helping little Riddle into a clean set of robes. The boy's skin felt hot to the touch,
and yet he wasn't sweating - Harry wasn't entirely sure if that was a good sign or not, but he suspected that it wasn't. 'He won't die, will he? Merlin, this must have happened to him the first time around, too, right? He survived it with Muggle medicine then, surely he can pull through now?'

There were so many other things to take into account, as well. What would happen if Tom's illness continued for longer than the weekend? Leaving the boy alone in the apartment didn't sound like an option, but it wasn't as if Harry could tell Maggie that he'd need a few days off work. What if she fired him? Sure, he had galleons to keep him afloat for a while, but they wouldn't last forever!

'I wonder if I'll have to start looking for another job eventually,' Harry thought, setting Tom down to sit on the couch while he quickly changed into something that wouldn't raise eyebrows in the Wizarding World. The thought of finding another place was appealing, and perhaps Harry would look into finding a bakery or a shop to work at while Tom went to Hogwarts. 'I doubt I'll get the opportunity to do so anytime soon, though. For the time being I have to focus on what I have, not on what I could get.'

Ready to leave, Harry turned to where Tom was slumped against the armrest. He cast yet another warming charm on the boy - just in case - before stepping closer to pick up the child. Making Tom stand up on his own seemed like an unreasonably cruel thing to do. 'Let's hope there'll be a simple potion to fix this. Merlin, I can't believe I'm feeling sorry for Voldemort of all people. I hope he'll remember this and maybe trust me a little bit afterwards. Is that an awful thing to wish for?'

Harry wrapped his arms around his little charge, took a deep breath, and apparated to St. Mungo's. *"Oh, bloody hell, I forgot."

Harry wasn't particularly proud of himself at the moment, and could only blame the recent changes in his life for the way his memory had failed him. The apparition point that had been reserved for those seeking St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries did not exist yet - when would it be built, anyway? - and therefore rather than ending up indoors safe from the cold, Harry found himself outside, a few dozen feet away from where he wanted to be. Harry had known that the apparition point wouldn't be moved indoors until after the first rise of Voldemort, but he had... well... he had forgotten.

At least he was close enough to where he wanted to be.

Despite the years, nothing had changed when it came to the outward appearance of St. Mungo's entrance: red brick walls, signs of on-going renovation and a smell that reminded Harry of a strange mixture of bleach and incense. And yet, despite the size of the entrance, it was still hard to notice by someone who wasn't specifically looking for it.

For Harry, there was something about seeing the Purge and Dowse department store in London that made him sigh wistfully. The last time he had gone to St. Mungo's through this entrance had been with Ron, looking to fix the aftereffects of a prank gone slightly sideways a few weeks after Voldemort had been defeated for good. Despite the circumstances at the time, the memory remained pleasant enough to remind Harry of the people he loved.

Readjusting his hold on Tom, Harry walked closer towards one of the shop's display windows. A mannequin turned its head towards him as he approached, and no matter the events he had gone through in his life to get where he was now, very few things unnerved him the way the faceless guards of St. Mungo's did.
"We're here for my ward's illness," Harry said. "He has a terrible fever and I would like to have him properly treated." The mannequin remained still for a few seconds, before it nodded and moved aside. Harry took a quick look around him to make sure no Muggles were watching him before he took a step through the window and right into the busy reception hall of St. Mungo's Hospital.

An elderly witch behind the counter smiled at him as he approached. "Floo not working? Can't imagine another reason why you'd step outside in this weather, young man. Even Muggles wouldn't walk out there unless they had to."

"Er, yeah," Harry said, feeling awkward and out of place. "Today of all days. Broken. Yes, um, listen, my ward here is very sick and I would like to, uh, make an appointment with a healer. As soon as possible, if that could be done."

"Absolutely! Let's see... family name and age of the child?"

"Riddle. And, um, ten." Was Riddle ten? Or nine? Oh, Merlin, Harry knew he was so bad and he— He should know the boy's age. He did know it, had calculated it at some point earlier, but right now he just couldn't remember—

"Fell ill or was it an accident?"

"I... I think he just caught a cold. An awful one. He's been coughing all night and hasn't been properly conscious for hours and I just, I'm worried."

"Never you worry," the witch assured him with a sympathetic smile. "Colds are fixed easily, if that's what it is. Floor six, and waiting room number eight. Healer Lutterworth will call you when it's your turn, Mr. Riddle."

"Thank you," Harry said, readjusting his hold on Tom again before hurrying towards the elevators at the end of the corridor. Tom's hair was dark with sweat and his forehead, pressed against Harry's throat, felt hot. Did Voldemort ever get sick after he grew up? It was hard to imagine the man being down due to anything less than a nasty curse. Was he— had he been human enough to fall ill?

'Not the time to think of that,' Harry thought to himself while waiting nervously for their turn. 'Voldemort doesn't exist. And won't exist, if I do this right. There's just Tom Riddle and he'll stay Tom this time.'

Healer Lutterworth was a witch with a pleasant and cheerful demeanour. Her dark grey hair was tied into a bun on top of her head, with some sort of astrological arrangement hanging off it. It was very distracting.

"Let's run a few diagnostic spells first, shall we," Healer Lutterworth said, touching the tip of her wand against the back of Tom's head. "A cold, you said? Do you know if he might be suffering from anything else?"

"Well," Harry started, unsure of how to say what he knew he'd need to tell the witch. "I honestly don't know. I adopted him recently from a Muggle orphanage because, well, I couldn't let them raise a wizard, you know? They wouldn't know what to do with him. His accidental magic so far had them already scared, so..."

"I see," Healer Lutterworth said, her voice just as pleasant as it had been before. Harry wondered if she was really as unaffected as she sounded. "That is good to know. He definitely has a bad cold, which we will treat first with a couple of potions and as much rest as possible. Once I have the full results of his health, I will owl you the diagnosis. Do you suspect him to suffer from something else
"Well," Harry said hesitantly, "he's a bit light and small for a ten year old child, isn't he? I doubt they could really feed him much at the orphanage."

"I will make sure to send you a list of professionals that specialize in food plans and nutrition acquisition," Healer Lutterworth assured him with a nod. "I assure you, Mr. Riddle, you have no reason to worry. Boys his age are surprisingly resilient and he'll be up and running before you even notice."

"Let's hope so," Harry sighed, holding Tom tighter against his chest.

Healer Lutterworth hadn't been wrong in her assessment regarding how fast Tom's health would return. Much to Harry's relief, Tom's fever broke well before midnight, and by Sunday morning the boy seemed to be far better and healthier and was likely to wake up soon. Harry, having managed to sleep a few hours here and there, made himself a cup of tea before getting started with making breakfast for the two of them.

The Healer, true to her words, had sent him a list of mediwitches and wizards who would know how to advise on matters such as nutrition, and Harry had decided to contact any of them should it become necessary later on.

It wasn't long before Harry heard Tom moving in his bed, though he didn't turn until he heard the boy's bare feet hit the floor. Riddle's face was still flushed, but his blue eyes were focused as he looked at Harry with a scowl. The boy's dark hair was a mess and the stitching on the pillow had pressed its small sign on the child's cheek.

"I don't remember your name," Tom said and kept on scowling, his thin arms crossed over his chest. "Where am I and what do you want from me?"

"Good morning," Harry replied while setting the table. "I'm Harry. And, um, well, how much do you remember? You were quite sick when I got you out of, well, the orphanage you used to live in. You don't want to go back, do you?"

"What do you want from me?" Tom repeated, looking at the room he was standing in. The boy didn't look impressed in the least, and Harry was very aware of how lousy the flat really was. Despite not being dirty or cold, it was certainly nothing to brag about. "I remember I was put in the attic. And you somehow... How did you get in? How did you get me out?"

"Would you like to wash up first, before I answer your questions?" Harry asked. "Because it's going to take quite some time to tell you everything and I'd rather do so while we're eating. I've got some clothes for you to change into in the drawer right under your bed--"

"That's not even a real bed," Tom interrupted, scowling at where he had slept. "That's a cupboard! A cupboard turned into a bed."

"I make do with what I have," Harry replied with a shrug. "Bathroom's behind you, the green door there. There's a blue basket right by the door, you can put your dirty clothes in it. Remember to put on socks as well, the room's pretty warm but I think the floor is too cold for bare feet. And, listen, if you really hate it here even after what I'm going to tell you, I can take you back to the orphanage. If you don't want to stay with me, I mean. Because that's on the table too. It's actually what I'm offering."
Tom frowned, but didn't say a word before he turned to dig out some clothes from the drawer. There
wasn't much - Harry hadn't had the opportunity to transfigure more than the bare necessities for the
boy, and in all honesty he preferred to buy actual clothes for Tom rather than transfigure small rocks
and pieces of wood into fabric.

Harry refocused on finishing making the rest of the breakfast while trying to come up with things to
say in order to convince Tom to stay. He couldn't blame the boy for being suspicious or for wanting
to go back. He could only imagine how alarmed the child was: to wake up in a stranger’s home, not
knowing where in the world he was or how he got there… Harry was lucky that Riddle didn’t
demand to be taken back to the orphanage right away, and seemed to be willing to hear him out.
Maybe.

Then again, the boy had asked to be taken out of there. He had called for Harry to help him.

By the time Tom returned from the bathroom, Harry was finished with making breakfast and setting
the table. He gestured for the boy to sit down and help himself to the food. The boy did sit down and
spared a look at the food but touched nothing. Instead, he scowled at Harry and asked:

"Why am I here? And how did you bring me here? Did you adopt me?"

"I... wanted to adopt you," Harry replied, fully aware of how badly he was handling the situation.
Oh, how he wished for Hermione to be there! She'd know what to say! "I had - still have - interest in
adopting you. I was simply planning on checking up on you, but, well… I found the circumstances
you were in to be far less pleasant than they should have been. You were very sick for a while. Eat,
before the food gets cold."

Tom bit his lip, torn between hunger and pride. He felt like he hadn't eaten anything in a long time,
which was likely to be true, but was it safe to eat anything this man - Harry - was offering him? The
food was tempting. Tom was so used to thin porridge that the sight of bacon and eggs - and a whole
loaf of bread - was nearly unbelievable. But no, he wouldn't eat yet. Maybe later, soon, but not yet.

“You said that you want to adopt me,” Tom started, looking up at Harry. “Why?”

“I've wanted to adopt for a while now,” Harry lied, the words he had practiced rolling considerably
easier than anything else he had said before. “No one else there seemed interesting enough.”

“And my opinion is completely ignored?” the boy sniped, disliking the response instantly. Was the
man going to return him as soon as he got bored?

“Of course not. If you wish, I can take you back to the orphanage after we've eaten.” That,
apparently, wasn’t what Tom had expected. The boy blinked, leaned back on the chair he was sitting
on and eyed Harry with wide eyes for a few silent seconds. His face then twitched before twisting
into a scowl again.

"I'll decide later," the boy said. "How did you vanish from the room when you appeared for the first
time? And how did you get into the attic just like that? How did you get us out?"

"It's going to sound unbelievable," Harry started carefully, "but do you believe in magic?"

"Magic?" Tom repeated, and was clearly ready to say something else when he suddenly fell quiet
with a contemplative expression on his face. Eventually he said: "Does it matter? Whether I believe
or not, I mean."

"It does," Harry said. "But we can approach this subject from a different angle: have you ever done
something... unexplainable? Moved things without touching them or... anything like that?"
"I can tell if people are lying to me," Tom said suddenly, leaning forward. His thin fingers were gripping the edge of the table tightly as he continued: "I can talk to animals and make them do what I want. I... I once tripped a policeman without touching him."

"Yes, that, er, that's called accidental magic--"

"Nothing I did was accidental. I wanted him to trip."

"Yes but, you see..." Harry took a deep breath, his thoughts racing while he tried to come up with a decent and clear explanation. "Any magic you do before getting an education is considered technically accidental--"

"Education?" Tom interrupted, looking delighted for the first time since Harry had seen him. "There're schools for magic?"

"Let's establish one thing first," Harry said. "You believe me? Believe in magic?"

"I don't... not believe you," Tom said, and Merlin, what a roundabout way of saying yes that was! Harry was reluctantly impressed. "Besides, I've always known that I'm special. Different. That I can do things others can't. Magic makes sense to me."

"Oh, well. I guess that's... good enough for now. I can show you a spell or two later, just to help you come to terms with, well, you know. But how about you start eating, now? You'll go back to rest soon - you might be feeling better now but you're not completely healed."

"I'll eat," Tom agreed, "but only as long as you tell me about magic. And show me. Can you make things fly?"

Harry levitated a fork in response, remembering his own reaction to seeing magic for the first time. Tom was far more composed about it than Harry had been, but then again Harry hadn't grown up considering himself special in any way.

"There is, without a doubt, a lot that you'll want to ask about," Harry started, "and no matter how much I tell you today, there'll be much more for you to still learn. There is magic - the world is full of it. There are hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of wizards and witches, numerous magical communities and several schools that teach magic. There are magical laws and rules and magical hospitals and… you name it, we have it. But, it’s all a secret. Like a separate world. Muggles will never be a part of it, and they’re not to know of it."

"Muggles," Tom repeated. "What are those? And what sort of communities? Is there one in England? How many wizards and witches are in England? If I stay here, can I attend a school where they teach magic?"

"Muggles are people without magic," Harry explained patiently. "The British wizarding community is said to be one of the largest ones. Or, well, that’s what British sources claim anyway. The Union of Arabia and Africa - that would be Africa and the Middle East -is the oldest and largest recorded, followed by the United Asian Societies. The Fenno-Scandinavian community - calling it that is a bit misleading, though, since Russia is a very big part of it - ranks the third. The geographic lines are quite unclear at times. Magical Britain is a large society but there are much bigger ones out there, no matter what other people say. The British institution of magic is Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and since you’re a wizard, too, you will be attending it regardless of whether you’re here or at the orphanage, so... do not let that influence your decision regarding whether or not to stay."

"I think I’ll stay," Tom told Harry, who didn’t fool himself into thinking that the little boy had
suddenly grown fond of him. No, Harry knew that the boy had probably realized that staying here would be more beneficial than going back to the orphanage, and as any Slytherin would, the kid had acted on that realization.

Shit, no. Not a Slytherin yet. Even if there was no doubt of it being the House where Tom belonged. Harry had received quite a few talks about House-related prejudice, and he had put conscious efforts into improving on that matter. Sometimes, however, he still slipped.

“I’m happy to hear that,” Harry said and reached for his glass of water.

“How did you appear in the attic?” Tom asked next. “How did you hear me? How did you really get me out?”

“It’s called Apparating,” Harry explained. “I’m not completely sure how I heard you – I was asleep and I woke up suddenly, knowing that you needed me. I reached you by Apparation – that’s sort of like teleportation, in Muggle terms, if you know what that—“

“I know what it means,” Tom cut in impatiently. “How did you do it?”

“Well,” Harry started, taking a deep breath and somehow feeling tired already. Tired, but not upset by any means, even as he resigned himself to a day full of questions of all sorts from his new charge.

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Forks don’t fly on their own. Tom Riddle knew that.

Every book he had ever read - every book that had mentioned magic, at least - had told him that witchcraft and sorcery did not exist. Had told him that moving things without touching them was wishful thinking and controlling animals without training them was madness and that his belief in his own superiority was shameful arrogance.

But now he knew: they were wrong.

He didn't trust Harry - if that really was the man's name, anyway - at all. He didn't know the man, didn't believe that he had brought Tom into his home out of the goodness of his heart. But he knew magic, and Tom could do magic, and if they were the same species then wasn't it just better to stay with him rather than go back? Harry's home was admittedly hideous, but it was nowhere near as cold as the orphanage. There were no other children in sight and Tom could see a couple of books on a shelf near the bathroom. Not to mention that the clothes Harry had left him were better than anything he had ever worn.

Wasn’t it common sense to stay where he could get fresh bread and bacon rather than porridge that was barely thicker than water? Tom wasn't hungry and he wasn't cold and didn't he deserve to be warm and well-fed? Didn't he deserve a better life than he had had at the orphanage? If better meant staying with this person, then Tom would do it.

"--but a license to apparate is required by the law," Harry was saying while adding an outrageous amount of sugar into his milky tea. "And to get that license you need to be at least seventeen years old."

Magic was real.

Tom felt a little bit silly now, for not realizing it sooner. Magic. Of course it was magic. The things he could do were all caused by his magic. He wasn't just special, he was magical. There was so much that Tom wanted to learn and ask about, and the mere thought of a school in which he’d be
taught magic delighted him to no end. Perhaps he could ask Harry to buy him books about magic, if
he didn't have some already?

"Oh, to another matter for a moment," Harry suddenly said, looking at Tom. "I work at a
dressmaker's boutique every week from Monday until Friday. I'm afraid that unless I get her
permission to bring you with me, you'll have to wait here for now. I'll leave you with enough food
should you get hungry, and the only rule I have for you is to not leave the flat."

"A dressmaker?" Tom said, pursing his lips. "A magical one?"

"No," Harry replied. "Muggle."

"But why not work with magic?" Tom demanded to know. "Why waste time here?" How could
anyone choose to not work surrounded by magic? Was Harry crazy?

"Because you need to learn more about magic before I take you into that world," Harry said
carefully, after a brief moment of silence. "Tom, there're people who won't be friendly once they find
out that you used to live among Muggles. The best we can do is to simply teach you as much as
possible before we move from here to, well, there. Because the more you know, the better chances
you have to fit in."

Tom frowned, but decided to leave that particular conversation for a later date.

"How's magic used? Are there spells?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, finishing his breakfast but not moving to clean the table quite yet. "Mostly it's
used through spells, which can be divided into hexes, jinxes, charms, and curses. Charms are the
ones most used in everyday life, I guess. At Hogwarts - that's the school in Scotland, where you'll be
going - there's a whole subject focused on charms."

"Will you teach me?"

"Not spells, no. When you go to Hogwarts, you will be taught by the professors."

"When will I go there?" Tom asked, reaching for another slice of bread. He wasn't really hungry
anymore, but he wanted to eat just in case. "Soon?"

"When you're eleven," Harry replied. "Say, did you study at the orphanage? You had teachers,
right?"

"Not really," Tom said, thinking of the few lessons he had been allowed. "I mean, they made sure
we know how to write and read and do basic maths, but that's it. I like maths. Do you have books
about magic? I want to read. I like reading almost as much as I like maths."

"No, but we can buy you a few soon," Harry promised. "You'll get your own collection of books,
eventually."

Tom chewed on his slice of bread for a few moments, before he spoke up again. "Why would you
spend that kind of money on me? Books aren't really cheap, you know. How do you even know me?
There's no way that you finding me inside the orphanage was a coincidence. Is Harry even your real
name?"

"Um, yes," Harry replied, looking slightly overwhelmed. "My name really is Harry. Well, Harry
James. And Tom, you're my charge now, you see. Buying you a couple of books isn't remarkable at
all. It's just... part of the thing. The... family thing. Us. Becoming family, or something like that."
"James is your surname?"

"Well, no. My actual family name doesn't matter anymore, because I've started using yours. Officially, to everyone, I am Harry Riddle."


"It's practical," Harry replied patiently. "Your name is recorded in Hogwarts papers, so if I were to adopt you and give you my name, that would arouse potentially uncomfortable questions. For that reason, we cannot have different surnames either. So, Harry James Riddle is what I will be officially known as."

"What about me?" Tom wanted to know. "You're Harry James, but all I have ever been is Tom."

For some reason that seemed to startle the raven-haired man, who blinked a few times before shaking his head.

"Really?" he said. "You don't know your whole name?"

"How could I? My parents are dead. Or well, I was told that my mother died. Who knows about my father, after all? He could be alive somewhere."

"Indeed," Harry muttered, before straightening in his seat and looking at Tom. "Your name is Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Marvolo?" Tom repeated, frowning. The name sounded ridiculous. Stupid.

"It's a good old wizarding name," Harry told him gently. "Means marvelous. Your mother chose that name."

"Wizarding name? Was my mother a... a..."

"Witch. She was a witch."

"Did you know her?" Tom asked, and even though he didn't really know why he asked, or why he even wanted to hear about that weak woman who had died so easily and left him alone from the beginning. And yet, his heart was beating rapidly with anticipation, waiting for Harry to tell him something. Anything. Anything at all about her.

“I knew her a little bit,” Harry lied. “You and I are not actually related, but...well, you could consider me some sort of a godfather, I guess.”

The smile on Tom’s face was anything but happy. The boy did not seem to be impressed or convinced by anything Harry had said, and the older wizard wondered what he could do to make the kid settle down and accept being here. Accept being with Harry. Actual, genuine acceptance rather than simply tolerating it while waiting for something better.

"I've told you quite a bit, haven't I?" Harry suddenly said. "How about you tell me a bit about yourself, hm? Surely there's more to you than scowls and apparent love for mathematics."

"I'm special," Tom started easily, brushing some stray strands of his hair away from his eyes. "I can hurt people, you know. I can make them do what I want to. I can even make them hurt themselves if that's what I fancy at the moment."

If he had meant for the words to alarm or startle Harry, he would have been disappointed. The man didn't look surprised in the least.
"Compulsion," Harry said instead. "Wandless. Impressive. However do keep in mind that while with Muggles your skills are superior, there are dangerous people in our world. Some of them can sense the compulsion you'll try to weave around them quickly, and then overpower you with experience and cunning. You need to be very careful, Tom, because hurting people has consequences."

"If you say so," Tom claimed, visibly amused for the first time since Harry had brought him to Deptford. "What I know, however, is that hurting me has consequences. I can hurt people and they won't be able to do anything."

Harry looked at Tom, who stared back with a pleased expression. The older wizard was only now starting to realize the exhaustingly big problem that he was facing; Tom Riddle was, even now, so full of himself and his morally questionable philosophies that it would take a lot for him to change.

And how would Harry know from where to even begin?

“Well,” Harry started, readying himself for a lengthy talk and a possibly offended child. “I recall you being attacked by a few kids when I first came to see you. And being locked in the attic… that is a consequence, too, isn’t it?”

He could only hope that the boy would feel tired and go to sleep soon.
"You said you will be working tomorrow?"

"Yes."

Tom had just finished eating dinner - his third meal of the day! - and was watching Harry use magic to wash the dishes while simultaneously trying to brush his shoes clean. "And I'll be here alone?"

"Yes," Harry said again, and looked up from his shoes. "I'm sorry, I can't imagine that to be entertaining for you. There are some books here that you're welcome to read and, well, it's best for you to rest for a bit longer anyway."

"You work all day?"

"Pretty much."

"Will you buy me new books as soon as I finish the ones you have?" Tom asked, his eyes following the path of a spoon that floated its way towards the sink. "Books about magic? You used a wand to cast spells, didn't you? That stick you have, I mean. It's a wand, right? Will I get one too?"

"Yeah, that's my wand," Harry replied with a smile. "And of course you'll get one, although only once you get your Hogwarts letter. I mean, the acceptance letter to Hogwarts when you turn eleven."

"That's over a year away," Tom frowned, turning away from the floating dishes and looking at Harry. "I'll be turning nine soon. Why can't I get my wand then?"

"You wouldn't know what to do with it," Harry said, promising silently to remember the boy's birthday and age from now on. "Besides... it's illegal to buy actual wands for anyone younger than eleven. Unless there's some kind of special circumstances that requires you to get your wand before that. But it's alright, I promise you. You can spend your time until then learning on a purely theoretical level."

"What kind of place is Hogwarts, anyway?" Tom asked, imagining a grey building with stained windows and iron gates not unlike those of the orphanage he had lived in. "Are the teachers strict? Do they punish you if you do something wrong?"

"Hogwarts is amazing," Harry sighed wistfully, envying Tom a little bit for having the whole school experience still ahead of him. "It's a big castle in Scotland, with high towers and big rooms and moving staircases. You'll have a lot of fun there, I'm absolutely sure. I know you'll love their library - the books are endless and I don't know anyone who has managed to read them all."

Tom wasn't sure he could imagine that many books in one place, or having access to them all. "Do they teach maths there?"

"No," Harry said. "Although there's the option of studying arithmancy later on as an elective. It's not the same, though. I don't think it's the same, at least. I mean, I didn't study Arithmancy at all, so I don't know."

"What do they teach there, then?" Tom wanted to know, endlessly curious. "You said something about Charms?"
"Yes, that. And other subjects like Transfiguration, Potions, Herbology, Divination... Then there are other subjects that combine things you've learned from the other classes."

"Like what?"

"Well, in Defense Against the Dark Arts you'll be using information that you studied in Charms and Potions, for example."

"Dark Arts?"

Harry sighed, not liking the way Tom had focused on that particular part of what he had just said. "Yes, Defense Against the Dark Arts. You'll hear more about those later on, I'm sure. Defense was my favourite subject, but I think you might like charms more. Say, what do you think of animals?"

"I don't think of animals," Tom replied, rolling his eyes. "They're all right. I don't really like or dislike animals."

Harry eyed him for a moment, tempted to ask about whether or not the boy had interacted with snakes yet. He didn't want to push the matter, however - hopefully Tom would volunteer the information eventually. "Well, at Hogwarts there's a whole class that focuses on animals. Care of Magical Creatures."

"Magical creatures?" Tom repeated, an alarmed expression on his thin face. "You mean there really are things like... like dragons and unicorns?"

"Yes, but dragons are dangerous and you shouldn't go near them," Harry frowned wondering whether or not Voldemort had ever tried to use dragons in his war. Probably yes. "There are other creatures too. Things like basilisks, and hippogriffs, and... lethifolds. And centaurs, too."

Tom stared at Harry for a few long moments, his face paler than it had been before. "What about werewolves?" the boy asked, his voice slightly shaky. "And, well, I've read Dracula. Is- do vampires really exist?"

"Those too. Veela and dementors as well."

Tom couldn't even begin to guess what veela or dementors could be, but the mere idea of intelligent and dangerous things that were not human, running around, was making him anxious. He didn't like it at all.

"Are those things restrained?" he asked. He didn't want to let Harry know how deeply uncomfortable the thought of somebody stronger than him roaming free made him.

"Why should they be?"

"Aren't they dangerous!?"

"Tom," Harry sighed, looking down at his shoes and resuming his task of cleaning them. "Everyone is dangerous, humans included. One of my best friends was a werewolf, and he was a fine man. Another friend of mine was half-giant, and he was the kindest person I've ever known. My best friend’s brother married a part-veela. My divination teacher was a centaur - well, one of them anyway. I have met people - one hundred percent humans - who were far more dangerous and vicious than any of the non-human creatures I have met in my life."

"But how can you trust a werewolf to not attack you?"
“Just like you’d trust a human to not attack you.”

'I don’t trust anyone to not attack me,’ Tom thought instantly, but didn't say anything. Instead he turned to where the now clean plates and utensils were drying slowly, wondering if the magic that could do such mundane things could defend him against the creatures that could hurt him.

"Hey," Harry said then, calling the boy's attention back to him. "It's getting pretty late, isn't it? How about you brush your teeth and go to sleep, hm? You must be tired. If you have any other questions tomorrow, I'll gladly answer them once I get back from work."

"Alright," Tom agreed easily, already thinking of all the things he wanted to ask. "Tomorrow, then."

Much to Tom's displeasure, Harry didn't come back home on Monday until very late in the evening. He watched silently as the man took off his shoes and coat before slumping down tiredly on a chair. There were traces of quickly melting snow on his hair and face, and his socks were so wet they created small puddles under his feet.

"Hi," Harry said, and yawned. "Did you eat dinner yet?"

"Yes," Tom replied, and didn't tell him about the two neatly wrapped sandwiches he had hidden under his pillow. "Do you always work this late?"

"Pretty much," Harry sighed, rubbing his eyes and slowly standing up again. "Were you bored? Or were the books enough entertainment?"

"It was alright," Tom said, watching the older man head towards the bathroom. He had, in all honesty, enjoyed being able to read in his warm bed while eating whenever he wanted to. No one had bothered him and he had been able to just... be. He wasn't about to sound grateful, however - there was something in him that resisted the thought of showing Harry how much better he had made Tom's life. "I wasn't too bored."

He had, at times, heard movement outside the flat; their neighbours were quite loud. Tom didn't mind it too much, and it was strange how suddenly everything around him was so much more... interesting. Even watching cars and buses drive by while leaning against the window had been entertaining for almost a whole hour.

"That's great," Harry said, emerging from the bathroom with a towel thrown over his head. "Merlin, it's so cold and wet outside, you're welcome to stay here all day if you want. I did, however, speak with Maggie about taking you with me to work if you want."

Tom narrowed his eyes, leaning slightly forward. "Go to work with you?"

"Tomorrow, if you're up to it," Harry continued, heading towards the fridge. "You can take a book with you and I'll pack us a nice lunch. It'd but my mind at ease, knowing you're within sight in case something happens, but considering that you're barely over that nasty cold you managed to catch—"

"Colds don't heal that fast," Tom interrupted, scowling again. "You said I was sick. Did you get me a doctor? I remember what being sick feels like and it's never healed in two days like you said mine was."

"I took you to a hospital," Harry told him cheerfully. "St. Mungo's. It's a wizarding hospital and we met a nice Healer who gave you potions and that's why you're now all right again. Now, do you want to come to work with me tomorrow or would you rather stay here?"
Tom fell silent for a few long moments, and Harry could only imagine what kind of thoughts were running through his mind. It was strangely funny, in a way, to realize that Voldemort had such a cranky thinking face. He had an actual expression he made whenever he was thinking too hard. It was beyond adorable and Harry had to focus on the cheese in front of him in order to not laugh out loud.

"I'll go with you," Tom finally decided. "In case you end up doing something stupid or going again to a magical establishment without telling me."

"Awesome," Harry said. "If you don't like it tomorrow, you can spend the other days here. I suppose it's a lot more peaceful than the orphanage, right? Wool's, was it?"

"Does it matter?" Tom hissed angrily, leaning back again and looking away from Harry. "I don't want to talk about it."

"That's fine," Harry sighed. He didn't seem like he was lying, but Tom wasn't about to trust his word. "It's really fine, Tom. I'm serious."

"I know. You said it twice already."

"You don't believe me."

Tom's head snapped up and he shot Harry a mean glare, to which Harry responded by shrugging and gesturing to his face. "Your nose twitches when you're, you know... being paranoid, I guess? Or well, not exactly paranoid, but when you indulge in what I think are suspicious thoughts and question the motives of everyone around you. So, um, your nose. It twitches a little bit." Had that contributed to Voldemort resurrecting himself without a nose? Harry wished that he had Ron there to discuss this new possibility with.

"It does not," Tom said, his hands flying to his nose, sounding deeply offended. Harry shrugged again, this time offering an apologetic smile.

"We all have tells, don't worry," the older wizard assured him, though it didn't make Tom any less furious. "But, uh, moving on. If you end up getting lonely here, I'm sure we can eventually buy you a pet. A puppy that you can take care of. I'm sure it will be fun."

Taking care of a dog did not sound like a fun thing to do, and Tom told Harry so. "Besides, can you even afford a dog? Can't you just buy books instead?"

"All right," Harry agreed easily. "But if there's no dog in this equation, I think we'll have to figure out how to make you interact with actual people eventually. You know, for social purposes. You can't live your life only with books by your side. You ought to know how to behave around people."

"I know how to behave around people," Tom snapped. "Besides, what about you? I haven't heard you mention a single friend or a family member. Got no one, do you?"

"Well, I have you," Harry said, grinning cheerfully, though the cheer didn't seem genuine or heartfelt. "But you do make a good point, so congratulations. Now, how about you brush your teeth and go to sleep? Tomorrow we've got an early start and a long day. And Maggie doesn't like people who're late or lazy."

"I don't care," Tom huffed, but did as told.
Tom wasn’t used to places like Maggie’s.

The boutique was clean and the floors were polished, and the various fabrics on display were finer than anything Tom had seen before. What he liked the most, though, were the buttons. Maggie’s had a collection of buttons of all colours and sizes, and they looked more like a treasure than the coins Tom had once stolen from Mrs. Shelley. The boy was tempted, for more than just a moment, to nick one or two– some of the colourful ones – but in the end he didn’t dare to.

Modiste Maggie was very different from Harry. She had sharp eyes and a hard look on her face. She didn’t look like a woman who believed in giving second chances or forgiving any kind of misbehaviour. There wasn’t the slightest inclination of a smile on her face, not even when she was speaking with obviously rich clients of higher class.

Then again, Tom didn’t yet know Harry very well, did he? The boy had seen kind vicars and caretakers turn horrible with time and opportunities. There wasn’t yet any proof that Harry wouldn’t be just like everybody else, no matter how kind the man came across as at the moment. However, should Tom keep on treating the man with suspicion or should he pretend to have bought into his, well, friendly act?

Scowling, Tom turned back to his book, focusing on the numbers on the page in front of him. Numbers, at least, were easy to predict and understand. Harry was a few feet to the left from him, hunched over whatever he was working on – trimming yet another hemline, probably.

“Say,” a client with a purple feathery hat said, “have you seen the designs of that French tart in Paris? Rumour has it that she walks around in men’s suits!”

“Oh, but that is not quite true,” her friend hurried to add. “I find her collections delightful! Not as delightful as Modiste’s, of course. And please, don’t use that hideous word. It’s so vulgar of you!”

“I just find it rather odd,” the purple hat continued with insincere confusion, “that her brand of fashion has become so successful, whereas clearly superior British designers have barely a boutique in London!”

Harry glanced up from his work, and instantly lowered his gaze back once he noticed Modiste Maggie’s stony expression. He knew that the woman wouldn’t say a thing – not out of fear of losing a customer, but rather to maintain the dignity she so valued.

Tom, on the other hand, did not bother with lowering his gaze until Harry discreetly threw a button at him. Giving the man a dirty look, Tom finally turned back to the series of numbers on the papers in front of him. He took the opportunity to slip the button – dull brown and boring, Tom nearly left it on the floor as it was nothing like the shiny buttons he so liked – into his pocket. He hadn’t stolen it, really. Harry had given it to him, although that perhaps hadn’t been his intention. Absently Tom wondered if Modiste Maggie would fire Harry if he said something now. What would Harry do then?

It was demeaning, for a wizard to work in this place. Not that a boutique like this was bad – before Harry’s appearance, Tom wouldn’t have been allowed to walk in through the door. Harry was, however, a wizard. Surely someone with magic could find himself a better job than this? He could become a police officer or even a business owner!

“She used to be a cabaret singer or something,” the purple hat said, her shrill voice irritating Tom to no end. “Imagine! And her hair is so short, I heard. I cannot see the appeal at all.”

“You have to admit the name is catchy,” her friend replied. “Coco Chanel. Very French, isn’t it?”
‘If she’s so impressive,’ Tom thought, ‘why didn’t Harry go and work for her? Why here?’ The boy scowled once more, and shook his head. So far the man who had taken him in seemed like he lacked both common sense and ambition, but how reliable was that impression, really?

Only time would tell what Harry was really like. For now, however, there wasn’t much else for Tom to do aside from simply test Harry whenever the opportunity for that arose and make do with whatever life threw at him.

The boy’s fingers curled around the button he had stolen, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Well, if there was something he wanted and life didn’t throw it at him… he’ll just make sure to take it anyway.

* *

Weeks passed, winter became colder, snow became heavier, and more often than not Tom preferred to stay at Harry’s place rather than join him at work. It was easier to deal with the cold when he was in his bed, under blankets and with a good book keeping him entertained.

Even more entertaining than books were the times when Harry would tell him about magic. Things called Floo systems and Diagon Alley and Ollivander’s. He spoke of streets and shops that Tom would visit in the future and told him about foods like chocolate frogs that actually moved and pumpkin juice that never went stale. He described flying – with brooms! – and Tom wasn’t sure if he really believed all of that.

“There’s this game called Quidditch,” Harry told him one evening during dinner. “Two teams—“

“Sports?” Tom guessed, and made a face. He remembered what the rare football games at the orphanage had been like. “I like books more.”

“That’s all right,” Harry said, and shook his head with a small smile on his face. "Though that reminds me - when was the last time you left the house? I recall it being at least two weeks since you last came with me to Maggie's."

"It's too cold for me outside,” Tom instantly replied. "I don't want to go there."

"Oh, you don't have to come to work with me if you don't want to," Harry said. "But tomorrow's a Saturday and there's a park nearby. I don't know it's name, but from what I've seen it's quite lovely and there're plenty of people who enjoy spending their time there. We should go there and you could try interacting with other children around your age. I'm sure it'll be great."

Tom was certain that however that particular experience would turn out, describing it as great was incorrect. "No."

“You future best friend could be there!”

“I doubt it,” Tom said with obvious disinterest, “The park nearby is full of muggles.”

“So?” Harry asked. “You’re not going to develop superiority issues towards muggles, are you?” Tom did an odd half-shrug-shake combination that made absolutely no sense, and turned a new page in his book, as if he no longer was part of the conversation.

“I hate crowds,” the boy finally said. “And most people are stupid anyway.”

“So young, so jaded,” Harry sighed, before grinning cheerfully. “Give them a chance, Tom. How
about we go tomorrow afternoon to take a look?”

“No thanks.”

“It’s decided, then!”

“I said no thanks!”

And that was the chain of events that led to Harry leading a reluctant and quietly protesting Tom with him to the park on Saturday. It was freezing, and Tom was shivering regardless of the charmed clothes he was wearing. He felt quite angry at the prospect of being dragged out from the warmth of his home just for the sake of meeting other people.

What kind of a person would look at the snow outside and think that oh yes, interacting with people while knee-deep in said snow was exactly the kind of thing they wanted to be doing?

Harry, evidently.

“You said that there are jinxes,” Tom started suddenly, wanting to hear more about magic and the things he could do with it. If nothing else, at least he could squeeze out some more information out of the man. He was owed that much, at least!

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “Why ask?”

“I was just wondering if they’re like spells, or if they’re the sort of jinxes even muggles sometimes believe in. Like, when two people say the same thing at the same time. Or when someone says that something is going to happen and is then told ‘you jinxed it’ or something.”

“Jinxes are spells with negative effects and from my experience they’re used mostly for pranking. No permanent damage, just some minor discomfort is what they’re meant for. Then again the category itself is rather loose, in a way. For example the jinx ‘silencio’ is a charm that makes you temporarily mute. So it’s both jinx and a charm at the same time. ‘Tarantallegra’ is a jinx used to force another person’s legs to begin dancing uncontrollably, but it’s also categorised as a very mild hex.”

“Were you a tutor at some point?” Tom asked. There was something in the way Harry explained things that made the boy suspect so. The man shrugged and grinned.

“Something like that. Look, there’s the park!”

“How about a snowball fight?”

“No thanks.”
“How do you feel about making a snowman?”

“Can’t we just go back home? I want to study and make sure that I know everything before I go to school in a few years.”

“Oh, I wish my son would say that sometimes!” an older woman nearby exclaimed with a loud laugh. “But no, all he wants to do is play and annoy his teachers to death.”

“You’re here with your son now?” Harry asked with a grin, and the woman nodded, pointing at one of the wet, snow-covered lumps nearby. Tom tried to not cringe too visibly.

“I’m Eliza, by the way,” the woman said, her blue eyes twinkling. “Eliza Williams.”

“Harry Riddle,” Harry said, the name slipping out easily despite it not feeling natural to him quite yet. “And this is Tom.”

“Nice to meet you Harry, Tom,” Eliza replied with a smile. “I’m sure that we’ll get along well! My son, Henry, loves befriending new people. I’m sure you’ll fit right in with everyone here.”

Tom knew then, much to his horror, that if he didn’t interfere and put a stop to this farce, then Harry would do something really stupid. Like make friends. And heaven forbid, that would mean more socializing and less time spent indoors in peace.

"Thank you,” Tom said, knowing better than to ignore the woman. What he did next, however, was close his eyes for a moment and lean against Harry, feigning exhaustion. "My head hurts, though. I feel sick.”

"Is it nausea or something else?” Harry asked, kneeling to get a better look at Tom's face. Eliza looked slightly concerned, stepping closer as well.

"Kids have been catching colds pretty frequently," the woman said. "Perhaps your son now, too?”

"Perhaps," Harry repeated, and it was hard to tell whether or not he had seen through Tom's antics. "Tom, do you feel feverish?"

“Yeah,” the boy said, squinting pitifully at Harry and Eliza. “My eyes feel like they're burning, too.”

'Merlin, he's quite the little actor, isn't he,' Harry thought, feeling slightly amused at witnessing an act eerily similar to what Ron used to do sometimes to escape a chore or a class. Usually it had failed, but Tom was a better liar by far. ‘Better play along with him, at any case. I don’t need to call him out on his excuse now.’

Harry remembered how petty and easily offended Voldemort had been. Anything less than enthusiasm and admiration at everything the man had done and said, he had considered a personal insult. Harry doubted that Tom now was any different in that aspect, and feared that by calling the boy out on his lie would embarrass him so much that their relationship would suffer from it.

“Well, then,” Harry sighed, slightly disappointed at the spectacular failure that was supposed to be the beginning of Tom’s social life. “I guess we’ll go back right away. How unfortunate.”

“We gather here almost every weekend,” Eliza assured him quickly, smiling warmly. “If the weather is good, that is. So whenever your son feels better—”

“I’m not his son,” Tom mumbled, his whole being seemingly rebelling against the idea. He peered up at Eliza with a grumpy expression. “He’s just a distant relative. I’m an orphan.”
“Tom,” Harry sighed, and glanced at the startled woman. He plastered an apologetic expression on his face, knowing that it was unlikely that he’d bring Tom to the skating ring anytime again soon. "Sorry."

"It's all right," Eliza said with a wink. "Children get cranky when they're sick. I hope he’ll feel better soon."

“Thank you. It was really nice meeting you,” Harry said, smiling politely while taking a hold of Tom's hand and standing up. “Tom? Let's go.”

Tom was practically running to keep up with Harry, feeling quite a bit of apprehension and wariness. He hadn't pushed too far with what he had done, had he? It wasn't his fault that he didn't want to go outside - Harry had known that Tom didn't want to go outside today, and yet he had made it happen anyway. And if he was angry about Tom telling that woman about them not being relatives, well, it was only the truth, wasn't it? Harry couldn't get mad at Tom for being honest, could he?

'Yes, he could,' he realized. ‘I know what adults are like. They put up with you for a while, but eventually they’ll shirk away from you. Maybe he liked what he saw in that woman and decided that he wants kids of his own?’ And what would happen to Tom if Harry wanted his own kids? Back to the orphanage, that’s what!

And it wasn't Harry leaving him that made Tom feel so upset, no. It was having to go back to the orphanage and face all the people who'd make fun of him for being returned just like every other placement failed kid.

They reached their ugly apartment complex and climbed up the dirty stairs in silence. Harry opened the front door and waited for Tom to get in first, before following and locking the door. Quickly Tom kicked off his shoes, shrugged off his coat and was pulling at the scarf while still walking towards one of the creaky chairs in the kitchen and sitting down on it, looking at Harry with badly hidden worry. He was blinking rapidly and aside from the redness of his nose, the boy was very pale.

Harry walked towards the fridge, pulled out some milk, and poured it into two mugs. He then added some cocoa and cast what Tom remembered to be a warming charm. Soon the mugs of hot chocolate were set on the table and Harry gestured for Tom to grab one. It tasted like nothing in his mouth, and the longer he had to wait for Harry to say something, the worse Tom felt.

“You don’t think of me as family, do you?” Harry finally blurted out. “Even though we are. Kind of.”

“That’s what’s gotten you angry?” Tom asked. Harry frowned, and shook his head while pulling out his wand. In a matter of seconds Tom felt his clothes dry and warmth returned to his limbs in tingles.

“I’m not angry, not really. Sure, I don’t approve of the way you behaved, but I think there’s something more important to focus on right now.”

“You’re not my parent,” Tom said quickly, ready to defend against whatever accusations Harry would throw at him. “What does it matter, though? I’d hate you if you were.”

“Your mother deserves your respect,” Harry said, trying to sound like he knew what he was speaking of. He had been about to say ‘respect’ but realized that no, Merope had never been the kind of person to inspire respect in people like Tom, regardless of whether or not she would have
deserved it. And though she had done some things that Harry personally found repulsive, Tom didn't know of them and therefore his reasons for hating his mother revolved only around her death. Which, well, wasn't right. She couldn’t help... dying.

"You’re doing it again," Tom suddenly said, and Harry frowned with confusion. The little boy had an alarmingly calculative look when he continued. “Every time I say something bad about my parents, you hurry to defend my mother. Did you love her or something? Is that why you defend her?”

“No,” Harry snapped, feeling ill at the idea. “I swear on my magic that I have never been in love with your mother.”

“Well then,” Tom mused. “There’s the other option: you don’t defend my father because you think that he deserves the insults.”

Too clever by half, the boy was.

“I didn’t know your father well,” Harry replied evasively. “Do you really think that you will never consider me family?” Tom stared at him with an unimpressed expression, before he focused on drinking the hot chocolate Harry had prepared. It was yet another thing that Tom had never had the luxury to try before. Where had Harry even gotten cocoa like this? How much did it cost?

“Cousins,” Tom said finally. “That’s the most I will manage. Distant cousins.”

“All right,” Harry sighed, after a moment of silence. He doubted that anyone would start making a fuss about custody, even if they would be just cousins in the eyes of the Wizarding World. "I'm fine with that."

At least, that's what Harry hoped. He wasn't sure what he'd end up doing if someone questioned his custody over Tom for any reason. Then again, it wasn't an issue he needed to think of now. "Say, your birthday is soon, isn't it?"

"What of it?"

"Well, what do you want?"

"Books," Tom said in a heartbeat. "And no people."

"Of course," Harry sighed, rolling his eyes. "Why did I even ask?"
Weeks passed, and Harry became more and more used to having Tom live with him. Tom's birthday went by quietly and eventually the weather grew warmer and warmer. The boy was still quiet and scowled far too often at far too many things but seemed to settle well enough into his new life. At times there were nightmares but they grew less frequent as time went by.

Harry pretended to ignore the food Tom hid for later consumption and answered the boy's questions about magic as well as he could. Despite all this, however, Tom was a painfully independent child, and although Harry wished for the boy to rely on him more, he couldn't blame him for his reluctance to do so.

Harry could relate. Surviving the Dursleys didn't mean living as if they had never existed.

“What do people learn at Hogwarts in their first year?” Tom asked one evening, not looking up from the paper he was reading: a few days old copy of the *Financial Times* that he had found somewhere while Harry was catching up on the latest news about King George’s health. Tom was curled atop of a chair, with a half-eaten piece of bread in front of him. “Do spells have difficulty levels or something?”

“Yeah, they do,” Harry replied, wondering absently if he should get Tom a book or two on the subject. He still had plenty of galleons that he had been saving for Tom’s school supplies, and could definitely afford buying the boy a useful book or two. It'd still be some time before he went to Hogwarts, but helping him prepare for it couldn’t possibly be a bad thing. Harry remembered how much his own lack of preparation had stressed him when he had first gone to Hogwarts. He knew that had it not been for Hermione's academic enthusiasm and Ron's knowledge of magic, he would have had far more trouble with, well, everything back then.

“But the types of difficulties can vary,” Harry continued. "A spell can be technically easy and yet require a lot of power. Or it can require very little magic but is so delicate that not many even attempt it. Not to mention the impact of intent during the casting.”

“What’s the toughest spell you’ve ever cast?” Tom asked then, carefully nonchalant. Harry fell silent for a moment, listening to the sounds of the late traffic outside while thinking of all the spells he had had some trouble with.

“It's hard to say” he replied hesitantly after a while, unsure of how to respond. Some had been difficult to learn, but after learning them they were easy to cast. “There’re quite a few.”

“What about the easiest?”

“Wand-lighting charm,” Harry said immediately, smiling fondly at the memories the mere mention of learning the spell brought to his mind. “It’s one of the first spells we were taught alongside other easy spells like the levitation charm or the unlocking charm.”

“What’s so easy about it?” Tom wanted to know, finally looking up from the article he had been reading. The tired look on his little face made Harry feel something strange, though he didn't know what to do about it. Instead he stood up to close the window and pour himself another cup of tea, glancing at the few scones that were left on the table. Harry missed the days when he could have simply walked out to buy cake. Now, however, not only were there very few places selling the kind
of cakes Harry was used to, he doubted he could actually afford that kind of a treat anytime soon.

Which was, in a way, odd too. He hadn't expected to have to worry about finances after he left the Dursleys and got his own inheritance, but it was funny how life worked sometimes. Harry didn't regret leaving everything behind, though, despite the small hardships.

"I mean," Tom continued. "Is it just saying the spell? What does it do?"

"Well, it makes the tip of the wand light up," Harry explained, setting down his cup of tea in order to dig out his wand and hold it up. "It's just a bit of light. Not hot, shouldn't flicker. Doesn't feel like anything when you touch it, but it's very bright so don't bring it too close to your eyes."

"Can you show me how it's done?" Tom asked, and reached for his sandwich. He really liked white bread, Harry had noticed. He couldn't help but wonder if Voldemort had liked it as much - and wasn't that odd? Thinking of how Voldemort must have had likes and dislikes that had nothing to do with mass murder and world domination? "Is it bright like the sun?"


Tom's expression remained unimpressed and almost uninterested, though he did indeed keep both eyes on Harry. The tip of the wand cast a bluish light, and for a moment Tom expected something more to happen. Nothing did.

"That's it?" he asked, sounding disappointed. With a scowl he tucked a stray brown curl behind his ear and glared at Harry. "Doesn't look like much, does it?"

"Well, I did say it makes the tip of the wand light up, didn't I?" Harry grinned. "Don't knock it. It's one of the most useful spells I've ever learned. No need to carry matchsticks and a torch anywhere, as long as I know how to do this."

"Whatever," Tom muttered, refocusing on the article he was reading. "I hope there's something more interesting than that at Hogwarts."

"Maybe," Harry replied, wondering if his amusement at Tom's reaction was fair. In the end he just shook his head, shoved his wand back into his pocket, and turned to grab his cup of tea. The muffled sounds of the traffic outside, Tom's breathing, the quiet shuffle of the pages he was turning, and Harry's own heartbeat made the man feel bizarrely happy in ways he didn't quite know how to explain.

Perhaps the life he had with Tom wasn't quite perfect yet, but Harry felt more content than he could ever remember having felt before. And that had to mean something, right?

*  

"Did you hear, Miss Maggie," a lady with feathered shoulder decorations and ruffled sleeves said, her shrill voice far too loud in the small store. "Did you hear? They're making a train that could go from London to Paris. Imagine! A train! From here to there!"

"I've heard," Modiste Maggie said curtly, reaching for a sequin flower to sew somewhere amongst the ruffles. Though she did not quite approve of the design, she knew exactly what her customer would love to pay for. "What a thing to witness, in my old days."

Tom, who had accompanied Harry to Maggie's once again, rolled his eyes and wondered how anyone could be anything but pleased with the project. The boy briefly glanced up from the book he
was reading, and happened to see a basket full of bright green buttons nearby. They were even prettier than the button he had taken months ago. In fact, they were even prettier than any coins he had ever seen, and it was odd to think that something so beautiful was less valuable than the ugly things people hoarded.

From the corner of his eye Tom could see Harry working diligently on trimming hemlines, and Modiste Maggie was quite obviously fully focused on her customer. No one was watching him.

“To think that Paris will be but one train ride away! We will surely get our hands on their newest designs most urgently, won’t we?” The woman's hat was shaking with her excitement, her voice bordering on intolerable with its high pitch. "All those lovely fabrics they've been designing there will come here faster than ever!"

“I believe that will take some time still, Mrs. Tippet,” Modiste Maggie said, somehow managing to sound disapproving without the hint of a frown on her face. Tom held back a grin, delighted by the irritated tone of her voice. He then, as if absent-mindedly and seemingly focused on his book, moved to lie on his stomach, one of his hands but a few inches away from the basket of green buttons.

“Oh but I’ve heard you could come and go in two days,” the customer said, her red-painted mouth smiling wide enough to make dimples appear on her cheeks. It was nearly charming. "So much faster than any ferry, without a doubt."

“And who would do the work in my absence?” Maggie asked dryly, bowing down to tug at the waistline of the dress, making the sunlight sweeping in through the windows hit the colourful glass-ornament she always used to keep her hair tied up. Tom thought it odd to admire colourful fabrics and piles of lace when glass and light could together be so much more stunning. “These are tough times for business owners, Mrs. Tippet. Closing for two days even once a month would be quite unwise.”

Tom peeked up from his book, making sure that Maggie and her client were turned away from him, and that Harry was still focused on his work. He hadn’t dared to do this earlier, and it was unlikely that the opportunity would arise again. Tom believed wholeheartedly in taking advantage of the opportunities that presented themselves, and was proud of being able to recognize these opportunities when they did come. Once more glancing at Maggie, Tom moved his hand and grabbed the first green button he could touch, before returning his hand to rest under the book. The button was hidden with him now, pressed between the cover of the book and his palm.

“The competition will be tough, then,” Mrs. Tippet said, sighing heavily. “Maison Lucile will surely recreate the Parisian designs here. I believe they have errand boys to send over the sea.”

It wasn't as if Tom wanted to start collecting buttons. It was just... he had already grown bored with the brown one and had decided that a button of a different colour would be refreshing to look at. It wasn't as if Maggie would suddenly miss one of the countless buttons she already had in her store.

“Quite the errands those boys will be running, then,” Maggie replied evenly, before finally finishing her work and taking a step back. “And I assure you that Lady Duff-Gordon has her own designs and no need for imitation. Now, there you go, Mrs. Tippet. All fixed.”

“I do love your handiwork the most, Miss Maggie,” the other woman sighed happily, running her hand over the front of her dress with a delighted expression. “You needn’t worry about Madame Lucile and her boutiques, my dear. She’s half-Canadian, did you know? When Caroline Townscreek suggested trying her out, I was quick to set her straight. Caroline herself has a German sister-in-law, and really should think twice before choosing her company, if you know what I mean. We English women prefer to stick to our own, don't we?”
When the door swung shut behind the leaving Mrs. Tippet, Tom couldn’t help but notice the tense lines of Maggie’s posture. He thought of how much harder it was for a single woman to operate the kind of business that she was doing – and how many other women had managed to do the same.

Women, Tom realized for the first time, could be just as formidable as men, if not even more so. Should their goals be the same, women would still be asked to prove themselves at every turn, while some men with a good name or two could fail at every step and hardly anyone would question or belittle them. Women would need to be craftier, endure more, be smarter and stronger just to get even.

What if women didn’t need to waste their time on getting even? What if they got the same starting point as men? Who would win the race then? Tom pressed his palm harder against the cover of his book, letting the button bite into his skin. Even stealing that little thing meant setting Maggie a little step back. Tom wanted to feel guilty, wanted to feel sorry enough to return the button back into its basket.

He couldn't... he couldn't muster up an ounce of regret. All he could think of was the joy of having that small, green, shiny button all for himself. Besides, if the woman didn't know about it, then surely she wouldn't feel upset?

Modiste Maggie’s evident exhaustion was in great contrast against her strength to stand tall and work hard. Tom admired that strength and even respected it, but didn't hesitate in sliding the button into his pocket when he got the chance to do so without attracting attention.

“What do you want for dinner?” Harry asked, locking the front door and kicking off his shoes. "Is soup good enough? I think I have some spinach still left for that one."

“Whatever,” Tom replied, heading towards the radio to switch it on and pick one of the three channels that they had access to. “Do wizards have food that’s different from what Muggles have?”

“Probably,” Harry said, trying to remember if he had eaten anything that would be unusual to a Muggle. "The candy is very different - the chocolate frogs move and the jelly beans can taste like anything."

"What are jelly beans?” Tom asked, making a face. He finally settled on a channel, listened to it for a few moments before stepping away from the radio and sitting on a chair by the table. "Doesn't even sound good. Jelly beans sound disgusting."

"They're good, I promise. Or well, some of them," Harry assured him, before nodding towards the radio with an amused, if tired, grin. "Financial debates again? What's this channel?"

"British Broadcasting Corporation," Tom told him. "The one you called B-B-C. They're discussing alleg... allegations of, um, mismanagement of resources. Someone pilfered something and then things escalated."

"How come every time you settle down to listen to what's being broadcasted, it's about money," Harry asked, pulling out two bowls. It made him undeniably happy, however, that Tom seemed to have taken an interest in something that didn't have anything to do with magic. "How come not
politics or... or even entertainment? I think they have some sort of a talk show where someone reads stories."

"I listen to what I like," Tom said firmly. "Isn't Chamberlain the current Chancellor of the Exchequer? Do we have someone like that, too?"

"Minister of Finance, yeah," Harry replied, remembering the position Malfoy had tried to attain with no success. "I don't know much about it, though. I've never really been a fan of the ministry. Or politics in general."

"All the more reason to learn about it," Tom said, sliding off his chair the moment Harry put the bowl of porridge in front of him. "I'll go wash my hands."

"You do that," Harry said, and reached for the coat and hat the boy had carelessly thrown on the floor. When lifting the coat to hang it next to Harry's own, he felt something strange in one of the coat's pockets. That little something turned out to be a shiny green button, like the ones Harry knew Maggie had in her store.

The man stood still for a few moments, staring at the button, thinking of what had brought it there. Maybe Tom had simply forgotten it there and would return it tomorrow? Or had Maggie suffered from a bout of madness and displayed uncharacteristic generosity by giving the button to him? He didn't want to jump to conclusions, but was it unwise to ignore the most likely option: that Tom has simply stolen it?

'It's just a button,' Harry thought, shaking his head and turning back towards the kitchen. Tom had already returned and was pouring himself a glass of milk. 'It's just a button, not murder. Don't overreact. Don't accuse him of anything. Don't--'

"Did you steal this?" Harry blurted out, holding the green button up for the boy to see. Tom glanced at it, and shrugged, his face expressing no interest in what Harry was saying. "Tom, did you steal this from Maggie's?"

"So what if I did," Tom finally replied, tone somewhere between indifferent and defensive. "Not like she's going to miss it."

"That's not the point," Harry argued, and sat down in front of the boy. Thoughts of the soup were long gone from his mind. It didn't help that Harry wasn't sure what the right words were for times like these. "Stealing is an awful habit to have," he ended up saying, rather weakly. Tom snorted.

"I don't really care," the boy replied. "She probably won't even know--"

"It's not a matter of whether she knows it or not," Harry said. "It's about you. It's about you taking something that is not yours. She worked hard for every single thing within that store and gave me a place to work, and it's... stealing from her is an awful way to repay her for her kindness."

"She's not kind," Tom said instantly, understanding why Harry didn't like what he had done, but still finding it beyond him to feel guilty about it. "She would have hired anyone, you just were first in line probably."

"I can't take you to the boutique with me again if this is how you're going to behave," Harry told him, feeling frustrated at how little impact his words were having. "I'm serious, Tom. You have no right to take something that is not yours, and the fact that you don't seem sorry about it worries me a lot. Do I have to get you a minder for whenever I'm working, to keep an eye on you and stop you from stealing?"
"You wouldn't be able to afford a minder," Tom said quickly, feeling alarmed for the first time. He didn't know how much hiring a nanny would cost, but only rich families could afford them.

"I would," Harry replied. "We'd not be able to afford a lot of other things such as more books for you or cheese but if--"

"I'm sorry, all right?" Tom interrupted, scowling. He didn't much care for cheese but if stealing one stupid button meant depriving him of new books in the future, then he certainly could muster up some regret for that. He sighed heavily and tried to guess what Harry wanted to hear. "I'm sorry that I took it. I know it's wrong, but I really liked the colour. I won't steal again, I promise."

"Will you return this and say sorry to Modiste Maggie?" Harry asked.

"No," Tom replied, shaking his head. "I don't want to do that, don't make me. I swear I won't steal again." At least not without making sure that Harry would never find out.

Harry looked at him for a few more seconds with a pinched expression. He was obviously trying to assess how truthful Tom was being, and the boy decided to help him by adopting a very sorry expression.

"Fine," Harry finally said, feeling lost and unsure. "We can forget it, but if it happens again—"

"It won't," Tom lied, his tone reassuring. "I promise you, Harry. I won't do it again."

* *

It happened again.

Harry was sure that Tom didn't expect him to find out, just like Harry hadn't expected to step out during his lunch break and walk to the crowded marketplace nearby to buy something to eat, only to see his ward picking the pockets of strangers and slipping away before his victims even realized that they had been robbed. His ward who, as far as Harry remembered, was supposed to stay home and not leave without Harry's permission.

Funny how Harry felt like he's the one who had been robbed.

He felt cold and numb, and the hunger that had driven him to the marketplace disappeared. He stood still for a few moments, unable to decide what to do next. He couldn't confront Tom - not yet.

It was lucky that Modiste Maggie didn't require any smiles from him, because with the way he was feeling now, mustering up a smile felt like too much. He should have known. He should have remembered that this wasn't an ordinary child. He should have kept reminding himself that this was Tom Riddle, the boy who grew up to be Voldemort once already.

But at the same time, Harry didn't want to keep thinking of Tom as Voldemort. He didn't want to keep expecting the boy to drift away with misdeeds and accusing him of things before he had even done anything wrong. Harry knew how it felt to grow up in the care of someone like that, and didn't want for Tom to go through the same.

Most of all, Harry didn't want to ignore the progress that had happened so far. Despite the unacceptable stealing, Tom behaved quite well usually. He didn't sulk as often anymore, he talked about his interests and enjoyed reading whatever books Harry could buy him. Now, however, it was obvious that things weren't going as well as Harry had believed. Tom had not only left the apartment without permission, but he—
"That boy of yours at home?" Modiste Maggie asked suddenly, cutting fabric into shapes that Harry couldn't make sense of.

"Yes," Harry replied, not knowing what else to say. "He enjoys spending time here but it's hard for him to focus on his studies."

"It's good that you both know what to prioritize, then," the woman said stiffly. She was clearly just as bad as Harry at small talk, but the man appreciated her unexpected effort. The thoughts of that did not occupy his mind for long, and by the time Harry was on his way back home, he had gone back to thinking about Tom.

What had prompted the boy to steal? Did he feel like he lacked something? Well, obviously Harry couldn't afford to give him many luxuries, but was that the only reason? What else— could it have been his birthday? Harry hadn't celebrated it and hadn't given him anything special. If that had made Tom feel like he was being deprived of something, then perhaps it was what had prompted him to steal?

A few cars drove by him as people rushed to their homes after a long day. Most were walking, though, and Harry doubted that many could afford a car in Deptford anyway. It wasn't an area known for its wealth. No, it was much more likely to see people riding carriages than driving cars.

When Harry finally arrived home and shut the door behind him, he felt so nervous it nearly made him sick. He didn't like the thought of confronting Tom about the stealing again, and didn't know how to even bring it up. He sighed heavily as he took off his coat and shoes, moving much slower than he usually did. He then went to the kitchen where Tom was reading a book without any signs of him having gone out.

What did he need the money for, anyway?

"Tom," Harry said quietly, sitting on a chair in front of his ward. "Please leave the book for now, I need to... we need to discuss some matters."

"Alright," the boy agreed, a wary expression on his thin face. "Your tone doesn't make me think of good news, though."

Harry shrugged, wondering if he should lead with a question. Should he ask if Tom had gone out today? He already knew the answer, though, didn't he? "I went to buy lunch today... I went to the market area a few blocks from here. You know the place."

"I do," Tom said, narrowing his eyes, already suspecting what Harry would say next.

"I saw you today," Harry told him, exasperated. "Tom, you promised."

"I didn't steal anything," Tom claimed.

"Pickpocketing is stealing."


"But it shouldn't be what you do," Harry argued. He kept his hands on the table, palms pressed against the wooden surface. He deliberately - despite his anger - didn't stand up to loom over the boy. He didn't want Tom to feel threatened, even in the middle of an argument.

"Nobody cares—!"
"Of course they would care! Think, Tom! What if it had been a police officer who had seen you?"

"That—," Tom tried again, his voice unusually brittle.

"Your actions have consequences," Harry said, doing his best to keep his voice steady and calm, and not give in to the urge to shout. "If there's something you desperately need the money for, then you come to me and we discuss our budget. But you don't go stealing, Tom. That's wrong. That's not the solution."

"I don't care," Tom insisted, turning his face away. He didn't sound as sure as he had earlier, though, which Harry took as a victory of sorts. "So what, I don't get books anymore? And what was it also... a minder? The things you threatened me with before?"

"You can fool any poor soul I bring to keep an eye on you," Harry said tiredly. "No, every time I leave I'll cast a tracking charm on you." He hesitated then, for a moment, thinking of the other punishment. He didn't want to prevent Tom from reading his books and studying, but something had to be done.

"You can keep your books," Harry finally said, "but no radio. Don't even try to make it work, you won't be able to." The boy didn’t reply, and the two sat in silence for a few long moments, during which Tom kept his eyes fixed on the book in front of him. He wasn't reading, though, that much was obvious.

After a while Harry stood up tiredly, feeling an ache in his hips, before he went to the bathroom to freshen up. The face that looked at him in the mirror was tired in ways it hadn't been before, and Harry tried to not regret what he had done. Hadn't he already thought about this before? He'd stick with Tom through the good and the bad.

Once done with that, Harry returned to the kitchen. "Does soup with bread sound good to you?" he asked. Tom remained silent for a long moment, before he finally scoffed.

"I'm not hungry," the boy said sullenly, as if he had suffered some great injustice. "I won't eat. In fact, I'll go to sleep now."

Well, Harry thought, suddenly not feeling hungry either. *That could have gone better. Then again, it also could have gone much worse, so I suppose... I should be grateful.*

Harry woke up with a start, unsure of what had pulled him out of sleep. He sat up, the thin sheets pooling at his waist and reached for his glasses at the bedside, when he heard some noise coming from the kitchen area. He stood up, his bare feet hitting the uncomfortably cold floor, and made his way towards the kitchen and Tom's cupboard.

The boy was asleep, yet visibly distressed. His fringe stuck to his sweaty forehead and his face was scrunched up in a scowl that did nothing to hide the tears that kept slowly falling from his eyes and onto the pillow. His hands were in tight fists and his breath was laboured.

Everything about what he was seeing hurt Harry and made him think of the times he had had to smother his tears in fear of Aunt Petunia's wrath. When Tom let out another sad whimper, Harry knelt down and reached to shake him awake.

It was funny, in that entirely painful and not at all amusing way, that fear was the only thing that could truly strip Tom of his defences. When the boy woke up, he sat up fast and lurched towards Harry, as if to hug him closer for comfort, but years of having no one by his bedside couldn't be...
erased so easily and the boy ended up moving away instead. His eyes were clenched shut as he huddled against the wall, hunching his shoulders as if to make Harry let go.

He wasn't crying anymore.

"Tom," Harry whispered, wondering if he should back away to give Tom more space, or to stay close to let him know that he wasn't alone. "Darling, it'll be alright. Whatever you dreamt of isn't what's happening."

Tom didn't respond, only lifted his covers to hide his face behind the fabric. He was still breathing heavily, and for a moment Harry feared that he'd have a panic attack – and Harry did not know how to handle that. He wasn't good enough at this. Parenting. He didn't even know how to comfort a kid he was supposed to raise and help and be there for.

"Hey, let's have some milk and cookies," Harry whispered, remembering what Ron had done a lifetime ago to comfort him whenever the nightmares became too much for him to deal with alone. "I think we've got a few cookies left in the jar, still. Come on, love, it's alright. It'll be alright."

The boy didn't resist when Harry gently moved him from his bed and onto a chair, before he quickly filled two glasses with milk and dug out the few cookies they still had left. He put the cookies onto a plate and set it in front of Tom. The boy's tear stained face remained horribly blank as he stared at the snack tiredly. Harry wrapped a blanket around the boy's shoulders in case he got cold, before he sat down as well.

"Tom," Harry said gently. "Take a cookie."

"I don't want to sleep," Tom whispered, still not looking up at the older wizard. "I don't..."

"You don't have to," Harry assured him. It was still a few hours until sunrise and Harry decided that soon he'll take a cup of coffee rather than milk or tea. "Do you want to talk about what you dreamt?"

"I don't need you," Tom said suddenly, taking a cookie but not eating it yet. "Even if you kick me out, I'll survive."

"I'd never kick you out," Harry replied, unsure of what had prompted that particular reaction. Surely the boy hadn't thought that Harry would throw him out after their argument? Except, well, maybe that was exactly what Tom had thought. "I told you that this is your home, and I meant it. We'll stick together and if we ever part ways, it's because of something beyond my control."

Tom didn't respond, but he finally pulled the glass of milk closer and dipped his cookie into it.

"Stealing is wrong," Harry said, searching for the right words to say. "But just because you make a mistake doesn't mean that you are a mistake. I don't want you to think that you need to look somewhere else for a place to belong. I mean, I've never thought that you belong anywhere else but with me."

"Where were you before you came to get me?" Tom asked suddenly. Harry took a deep breath and leaned back on his chair.

"There was a war a few years ago," he finally said. "I took part in it and had to recover for a while."

"So you're a war hero," Tom said, looking interested, and while it was an improvement from how he had been moments before, it also made Harry worry. He didn't want the boy to associate any positive thoughts with war. The older wizard shook his head with a grimace.
"Heroes are less common than we all wish," he said, thinking of how many of the Aurors, who had fought against Voldemort, had been awful people with little respect for others and had serious misconceptions about their own rights and capabilities. "Especially in wars. Anyway, Tom... about yesterday." The boy sighed, and rolled his eyes.

"Back to the same topic?" he asked, clearly hating the thought of it. "I already apologized, didn't I?"

'No, you didn't,' Harry thought, but he simply replied: "The punishments will not be cancelled, but if you show me how well you can behave for the next three weeks, we can go somewhere fun."

"Can you even afford a vacation?" Tom asked, instantly suspicious. Harry shook his head.

"No, I didn't mean traveling. I mean that we could go to Diagon Alley - I've told you about it, haven't I? You could meet other wizards and witches, maybe make a few friends. We wouldn't go yet, but in a couple of months. Perhaps once the summer is over – it’s less crowded that way. Closer to December."

"I don't want friends," Tom said instantly, looking better than he had in a while. "I want books. And that’s almost eight months away, what you’re promising. You better not forget."

"I won’t," Harry assured him, "but just remember to, you know... behave. If there's anything you need, just tell me and we'll work together to make sure you can get it. But stealing is not a solution. Promise me. For real, this time."

"Fine," Tom huffed, and glared at the cookie he was holding. "Fine. I promise."
Life went on, and the sunny summer days became hotter and hotter before beginning to cool again far too soon. As far as Harry could tell, Tom had kept his promise and focused solely on reading and, when boredom became intolerable, using his rapidly improving mathematics skills to calculate things that Harry couldn't even fully understand.

"Clever with numbers, isn't he," Modiste Maggie said after hearing Harry's response to her inquiry about his ward. "I believe my niece may have a few school books that she doesn't need any longer. I can bring them to you - for free, of course. I wouldn't charge you for books that nobody else needs."

"Thank you," Harry said, grateful but not used to such generosity. "If it is no trouble, ma'am, I'd still prefer to pay—"

"Don't hinder the boy's education because you're too prideful to accept something as irrelevant as a few books that would be going to the bin otherwise," Modiste Maggie told him, her harsh words somewhat softened by a small humourless smile. "I will bring you the books on Monday."

"Thank you," Harry said again. He was spared from further awkward conversation when he heard the door open, and a lady with her gentleman companion entered the boutique. They were quite obviously wealthy, but Harry had learned that that was a trait quite many of Modiste Maggie's customers had in common.

"Mr. and Mrs. Whorlhood," Modiste Maggie said, absently shooing Harry towards his small workstation. The man sighed, knowing that it'd be yet another day spent sewing buttonholes and trimming hemlines. Perhaps he should start looking for another job - there was a lot else that he could do. Surely working at a bakery would be preferable to this? "I have Mrs. Whorlhood's cloak ready, if you'd like to try it on?"

"Absolutely," said the woman, her heeled shoes clacking loudly against the floor as she walked. "Say, I thought there was a shoemaker across the street. Where did he disappear to?"

"I believe he retired a few months ago," Modiste Maggie replied. "His son is a rather successful lawyer and there was no need for the father to work anymore. A milliner from Germany has bought the place and will move in soon, I've heard."

"Oh, but what do Germans know about fashion?" Mrs. Whorlhood sneered rather rudely, while Harry thought of Germany. Was Hitler in power yet? It was disappointing how hard it was to find information of other countries; the radio channels tended to focus mainly on what was happening in the different parts of England, with only a few mentions of the rest of Europe.

"Quite right," Modiste Maggie agreed, and helped the client to put on a heavy cloak that would be more suitable for the colder weathers that hadn't quite yet arrived. It did look beautiful, and Harry discreetly admired the careful embroidery Modiste Maggie had worked so hard on.

"It looks absolutely lovely, my dear," Mr. Whorlhood said. "But is it not a bit too, hm, colourful?"

"Goodness, no, Michael," Mrs. Whorlhood said. "I do think that a few more nice ribbons near the hemline wouldn't go amiss, though. Green ones, like the linings on the cuffs."

"Absolutely," Modiste Maggie agreed instantly, and gestured for Harry to come closer. "How about
"My assistant takes care of that while I help you with the hat?"

"Lovely," Mrs. Whorlhood said. "I needn't take off the cloak, then. Good. Now, did you hear that they're opening up another Tesco nearby?" Harry knelt down to work on the new ribbons, and nearly poked his finger with a needle when he heard the name of the store. Seriously, there were Tescos in this time and date?

"That grocery store? I heard their tea selection is quite generous."

"It is preferable to the market that the locals seem to favour," Mrs. Whorlhood admitted. "I heard that the business is... What's the word you used earlier, darling?"

"Diversifying," Mr. Whorlhood said helpfully. "They're diversifying."

"Yes, that. To books and even clothes," Mrs. Whorlhood finished for him. "I cannot imagine buying clothes from a grocery store! Who would do that?"

"Who indeed," Modiste Maggie said, her voice not entirely hiding how displeased she was at the news. Harry couldn't help but wonder what the impact of Tesco opening nearby would be. He knew that buying clothes from retailers was going to be quite a success, but would that end up with Maggie's customers disappearing?

And if that was the case, would she still need Harry to work for her?

'Realistically, people will probably have their reservations about buying clothes from what has been so far a grocery store,' Harry thought then. 'At most, though, it'll take a year before they get used to it.' At worst, Harry would need to look for another job sooner than he had originally intended. Sure, he had thought about it before - entertained the idea, as his current salary barely covered his and Tom's expenses and knowing eventually that it wouldn't be enough. But he didn’t really feel ready for it.

"I, personally, am disgusted," Mrs. Whorlhood declared, shuffling a bit in a way that made sewing the ribbons slightly more difficult. "I know that some people find the readymade clothes quite delightful, but I could never! Imagine buying a dress and then seeing the exact same dress on someone else."

"Absolutely horrifying," Modiste Maggie murmured in agreement, before adding: "Readymade clothes tend to be quite ill fitting."

"They truly do!" Mrs. Whorlhood said, and moved again. Harry tried to finish his work faster without giving Maggie any reasons to criticise him later. "Why, I saw Margaret Mills the other day - you don't know her, dear, but she buys her readymades from some cornershop - and my goodness, the shoulders were too tight and the waistline could have fit quite the belly under it! It was such a sad sight, let me tell you."

Harry finished sewing the ribbons and made sure that they looked good and weren't in the risk of falling, then carefully tied the thread and cut it before retreating away from Maggie's work station. Truly, he ought to look for another job quite soon. Perhaps if he took Tom to Diagon Alley soon, as he had promised, he might find something worth considering.

Yes, yes. He’d do that. It’d be a delightful surprise to Tom, who probably believed Harry to have forgotten his promise already.
"It doesn't look the way I thought it would," Tom said as soon as Harry had led him to Diagon Alley. "I don't hate it."

Harry remained silent as he observed the familiar street with an ache in his heart. It was strange how decades in the past very few things were different. The streets were slightly cleaner, the buildings were obviously newer, and only a handful of stores were unfamiliar to him. What looked like a small diner was occupying the place that had sold potion ingredients during Harry’s first year, and Floo-Friendly Fireplaces had been replaced by a milliner’s workshop.

It was strange to walk there without being singled out by the people surrounding him and without Ron or Hermione anywhere nearby. Harry kept expecting anyone who so much as glanced his way to call his name, ask for an autograph or even to just stare at his forehead, trying to catch a glimpse of the scar. Much to his delight, however, nobody cared about him or Tom at all.

What had changed the most, perhaps, was the number of people dressed in muggle clothing. In Harry's time most of the muggle-born witches and wizards never wore robes outside of school, and even some of their half-blood or pureblood friends had grown to enjoy wearing some muggle outfits in their free time. Now, though, aside from himself and Tom, Harry could see only a rare few people dressed like muggles.

"Books?" Tom asked, tugging at Harry's sleeve with impatience. "I want more than one. I already finished the books Maggie gave you and I’ve been bored out of my mind. We don’t need to go anywhere else, right? We should just go directly to the bookstore."

"This way," the wizard replied, leading Tom down one of the streets hoping that Flourish and Blotts had always been at the premises that Harry knew to find. Then again it would be easy to simply ask for directions. "You finished the books already? Maths is that easy to you?"

"It's not easy," Tom said with a roll of his eyes. "It's fun. Easy things are boring. Maths give me something to think about."

"Of course," Harry sighed, thinking of Hermione again. It was strange how much Tom resembled Hermione, and he doubted that either one of the two would be particularly happy or flattered by the observation. Then again, he would never get the opportunity to tell Hermione about it, would he?

In no need to hurry, Tom and Harry continued their way slowly through the crowded streets, passing by numerous stores that captured Tom's attention. The boy was so occupied by what he was seeing that he nearly bumped into a few people while walking. Harry snorted and kept a hand on Tom’s shoulder until they reached the decorated doorway of Flourish and Blotts.

Flourish and Blotts hadn’t changed much, and though Harry was pleased to find it so familiar, what made him truly happy with his decision to bring Tom here today was the expression of utter delight on the child's face. Harry knew that he had never seen the little rascal so happy, and couldn't help but pat him on the head and say, "Three books this time. No need to hurry."

As soon as the boy had disappeared between the bookshelves, a young man wearing an apron with the Flourish and Blotts symbol on it turned up with a polite smile on his face. Something about his face was vaguely familiar, but Harry couldn’t for the life of him figure out what it was. "Hello, sir! Can I help you? Are you looking for anything specific?"

"Not really," Harry replied, wondering why someone working at a bookstore would need an apron. "Though, now that you asked, could you tell me where I could find the books that are most suitable for children who're not yet at Hogwarts?"
"Absolutely," the clerk, whose nametag identified him as “Rudolf”, replied just as the door of the store was pushed open, and another person stepped in.

The newcomer was a man who, though only slightly taller than Harry, carried himself in such a way that made him appear tall and intimidating. His robes were finely made and tastefully decorated and by now Harry could indeed recognize an expensive outfit when he saw one. The gloves he was wearing and the cane he was holding reminded Harry of Lucius Malfoy in his heyday, though the expression on the man’s face was more like Snape’s brand of haughty contempt.

The man’s dark hair was tied back, and his startlingly light eyes – a grey so pale it was unsettlingly close to white – were sharp and cold as he briefly glanced at Harry.

"Lord Black," Rudolf the clerk all but simpered, instantly forgetting Harry, who decided to stand still and wait for Tom quietly. He was quite sure that there was nothing dangerous in the bookstore, and was confident that Tom could find books that would interest him without help from anyone else. In fact, knowing the brat, he’d be annoyed by anyone trying to help him. "Is there anything I can do for you, sir? Anything at all? We received a shipment this morning of wonderfully informative books discussing the connections between mind healing and divination—"

Lord Black, clearly used to being treated like some sort of royalty, simply gestured for the clerk to quiet down. He then took a few steps further into the store and eyed the piles of unsorted books with disapproval, before finally speaking up.

"Rumour has it that you have acquired a rather rare copy of Gaspard Shingleton's original biography," Lord Black said, his voice surprisingly high and soft. "If that is true, then I would like to see it."

"Of course, sir. Of course," the clerk said immediately, going so far as to bow twice, his floppy brown hair falling to hide his face. "Just a moment, please, I will go and get it for you."

Harry had wondered for a moment if now, with the absence of the clerk, the pureblood would turn to talk to him. Much to his relief, that didn’t happen. In a manner that reminded Harry of Narcissa Malfoy, Lord Black ignored him with practiced ease, and the younger wizard couldn't bring himself to be particularly sorry for that. Certainly, some people would have felt it rude, but Harry was well aware of worse alternatives.

He hadn’t been there in person, but Hermione had told him of a shopping trip at Diagon Alley right before their fifth year at Hogwarts had started, where she had bumped into Morag MacDougal, a pureblood witch from Ravenclaw. Rather than ignore Hermione, MacDougal had followed her for nearly an hour, criticizing everything she did and insulting her in every way she could come up with. Hermione wasn’t easily shaken and she hadn’t felt afraid, but it had been a greatly upsetting experience.

"Harry," Tom said, emerging from the labyrinth of bookshelves, carrying four books instead of the three that Harry had set as a limit. "I want these."

"We agreed on three," Harry reminded the boy, who frowned in response, before eyeing the books he was holding.

"These count as one," Tom finally said, gesturing at two books on etiquette and tradition of all things. "It's one book in two parts. Not my fault the folks here can’t handle more than a few hundred pages in one binding, apparently. See? It even reads here: part one, part two."

"Perhaps a mudblood such as yourself should think twice before criticising the world they can very
easily be kicked out of," Lord Black suddenly spoke, and Harry turned to see him staring at Tom with no small amount of disgust. He then glanced at Harry and narrowed his strange eyes. "How the times have changed. A few years ago people like you would be waiting outside until their turn came around. After decent folk, that is."

"Times are changing," Harry said with an easy smile despite the anger that was building up inside of him. It had been quite a while since he had faced such open prejudice, and he definitely did not miss the experience. "Perhaps it would be better to change with them rather than be left behind."

"I see you're not denying being a mudblood," Lord Black replied, turning now fully towards them. His gloved hand was clenched tightly around his cane, and Harry wondered if he kept his wand hidden there, like Lucius Malfoy had done. "With eyes like yours you could have gotten away with it, for a few moments at least. But with that boy by your side it's clear what kind of gutter the pair of you crawled out of."

"Charming," Harry said, just as the Flourish and Blotts clerk returned, holding a heavy book in his hands. His face was flushed and there were some stains on his apron, but he looked deeply satisfied.

"Lord Black," Rudolf said, sounding slightly more confident than moments ago. "Here's the book you requested, sir. It's in very good condition and I've had two experts evaluate its worth and—"

"I'll buy it," Lord Black cut in, not looking away from Harry. "Though at times when I'm reminded of what sort of folk you welcome into your shop, Barnabas, I am hard pressed to think of why I should buy anything from here."

"Oh, Lord Black," the clerk said, laughing nervously. "Business is business to me. And, well, my name is actually Rudolf, not… not Barnabas. Sir."

"Indeed," Lord Black said, finally turning away from Harry to pay for the book. Once the door swung shut behind him, Rudolf let out a loud, relieved sigh and collapsed over a stack of books, as if the encounter had drained all power out of him. Harry glanced at Tom, who was eyeing the clerk with a wholeheartedly unimpressed expression.

"Well, that was pleasant," the man said weakly, before he turned towards Harry and Tom. "Sorry about that, eh. I promise we ain't got no problem with anybody here. Pureblood, half-blood, or muggle-born, all's good. Some folk just can't… you know… They just, you know what I mean? Anyway. Moving on. You've got some books to purchase?"

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Dinner was an unusually quiet affair that night. Harry had ended up buying all four books for Tom in hopes of giving him something to keep his mind off the things Black had said. Harry had known that the prejudice against muggleborns was stronger in this era, but he hadn't quite expected the kind of open hostility he had seen today. Even the Malfoys - well, the parents - had rarely ever said anything outright offensive so openly in public. They had tended to imply and snub more than outright come out and say their thoughts.

Then again, the general public in Harry's own time were far more accepting of muggleborns. To numerous people that kind of acceptance served as a tool to distance themselves from Voldemort and his ideologies. Whoever had expressed their dislike towards muggleborns had been pretty much branded as a Death Eater instantly, regardless of whether that was true or not.

Now, though, things were different. Harry couldn't help but worry about what kind of treatment Tom would end up receiving in Slytherin. He knew that the kid was smart and cunning, but what if the
older students of Slytherin were even more so? Although, if Tom could once again become a favourite of Slughorn's—

"Is it always like that?" Tom asked suddenly, snapping Harry out of his thoughts. The boy had just finished his dinner and pushed the plate away. He was clearly displeased and slightly worried when he continued: "I mean, do most people really think about us like that?"

"Some do," Harry replied, trying to find the words to describe the situation without making it sound hopeless. "Some don't. It's not unlike how Mrs. Tibbs from two floors below thinks that foreigners are below her in their worth as human beings. She's wrong, of course, and so is Lord Black."

"Does the upper class in the wizarding world agree with him?" Tom wanted to know, eyeing Harry with a frown on his face. "When I go to Hogwarts, will people treat me like that all the time?"

"I... I don't know," Harry admitted, hating his inability to change that particular truth. "Some houses are more open-minded than others."

"Is being a pureblood better?" Tom asked then. "Does it come with any advantages in terms of intelligence? Is magic easier for them? I mean, for sure they start learning earlier, don't they?"

Harry shook his head, and thought carefully of what he would say next. While it was true that the pureblood children who had grown up surrounded by magic knew more than the muggleborns who didn’t, it wasn’t something that Tom should consider a weakness, was it? "It’s all about what you can do, in the end," he finally said. "If you’re smart and work hard, eventually that will do more for you than a bloodline and money for someone who doesn’t put any effort into doing anything with what he has. It won't be easy, especially in the beginning, but I know how clever you are. And... people gravitate towards power. You know that."

"So it's all about building an image," Tom decided, nodding with a pleased expression on his face. "I can work with that. Even if some people hate me, I can make them fear me."

"Be careful," Harry said immediately, shaking his head, wondering if he should discuss Tom’s logic. "People's impressions can change from favourable to downright hateful rather quickly." Not to mention that despite all of her achievements, the highest praise Hermione had received from Pureblood traditionalists was 'pity she's a muggleborn'. Some people could never get over the prejudice they had grown up with.

"I'm aware. Ever since King Edward started his thing with that American woman, people have been on his case no matter how much they were praising him just a few months ago."

"What?"

"It's obvious," Tom said with an eyeroll. "Just listen to BBC. A while ago they were praising him and saying how suave and charming he is, and now all they talk about is how England cannot have an American divorcee for a queen and how dare he be so selfish as to suggest something like that. Anyway, blood is one thing - I'll need to read about that more. What about money? Let me guess... being rich is important."

"I wouldn't say important," Harry sighed, thinking of the Weasleys. "But unsurprisingly, most people think that the more money you have in your bank account, the more deserving you are of their... friendship."

"We're poor," Tom pointed out, the tone of his voice slightly accusing. "Can't you get another job? Maggie’s is bound to go bankrupt eventually and then things will be even worse."
"I'm looking for one," Harry replied, feeling slightly insulted. "But it's tougher than you'd think. I was so caught up with war and trying to survive that getting a useful degree didn't really matter to me back then. I can't become a lawyer or a doctor just like that you know. Besides, what I make is enough to keep us well alive for a while still."

"You need to have bigger ambitions than sewing buttons all day," Tom said, and this time his tone was definitely accusatory. "If you have to stick to that honest earning thing, become a policeman. I think those make enough money to at least get us a better place to live."

"I'll do my best," Harry groused sullenly. "Have you already started on the books we got you today?"

"Of course," Tom replied with a small shrug. "The one about etiquette is really good. I'm glad I bought it because else I'd be completely lost and make a fool out of myself for the first few years at Hogwarts."

"What's there to know, really," Harry said, finishing his dinner as well and standing up to clean the table and wash the dishes. "Just be polite and nice."

"You're an idiot," Tom sighed, though by now the words coming from him sounded more like a fondly mentioned fact rather than an insult. "It's all right. I wasn't counting on you to teach me any of this anyway."

"Hey!" Harry was scowling as he dried the dishes and put everything back to where it belonged. "Merlin, can't you start by being nice to me?"

"I need to practice on strangers," Tom said then, ignoring what the other had said. "Harry, we need to go and find people I can practice on."

"Contrary to what you seem to think, I do not have people lined up somewhere just waiting for the day when you'd find them useful."

"I thought you said you wanted to talk with people. Our neighbours or something."

"Yes, and you've seen how my attempts at creating a social life for us have failed," Harry said. "Mostly because of you. Besides, do you think any of these people would know a thing about wizarding etiquette?"

"Good point," Tom sighed, brushing aside his fringe and squinting at Harry. "Well done. I'm impressed. Back to books it is, then."

* *

Far too soon it was December again, and dirty snow covered the streets while the people of Deptford wrapped themselves in layers of wool and cotton. Tom gave up on trying to accompany Harry to Maggie's, preferring to stay home, protected from the cold by the charms that Harry never forgot to renew.

It was on a bright, cold morning when Maggie's had been open for a few hours that a distraught man rushed in. His hat was askew, a dusting of snow covered the top of his head and shoulders, and the expression on his face was an alarming mix of shock and horror. Harry himself expected the worst - had an accident happened nearby? Should they call the police or the ambulance?

"Good morning," Modiste Maggie said, setting down the designs she had been comparing and eyeing the man with displeasure. "How may I help you?"
"Ma'am," the man gasped, pressing his palms against the counter and leaning forward, the panic still fixed on his face. "The radio! Could I ask you to switch on the radio? Please, this is important!

"Well, I hardly—"

"The King is speaking, I've been told," the man continued, and with an angry hiss Modiste Maggie turned to do as requested. Soon the tired voice of King Edward filled the boutique.

"—have never wanted to withhold anything, but until now it has not been constitutionally possible for me to speak."

"He sounds ill," Modiste Maggie said, and Harry couldn't help but shudder at how ominous the atmosphere suddenly was. "Is he ill? Is that what this is about?"

"A few hours ago," King Edward continued, and the words seemed dull and heavy as he said them, pausing every now and then as if to gather his strength to continue. "I discharged my last duty as King and Emperor."

“What?” Modiste Maggie stumbled and sat down heavily on the closest chair, while the man who had barged in earlier sighed deeply and hung his head in dismay. Harry himself felt strangely horrified, despite having known that this would happen eventually. Somehow witnessing it made it so much... worse.

"...and now that I have been succeeded by my brother, the Duke of York, my first words must be to declare my allegiance to him. This I do with all my heart."

"But why would he do this?" Modiste Maggie whispered, and Harry had never seen her so emotional before. There had been some rumours and speculations on what kind of future King Edward could give the nation, but nobody had suspected this. Maggie clenched her eyes shut when the king continued, his voice stumbling and brittle at times, making Harry wonder how voluntary the abdication truly had been:

"You all know the reasons which have impelled me to renounce the throne. But I want you to understand that in making up my mind I did not forget the country or the empire, which, as Prince of Wales and lately as King, I have for twenty-five years tried to serve. But you must believe me when I tell you that I have found it impossible to carry the heavy burden of responsibility, and to discharge my duties as King, as I would wish to do without the help and support of the woman I love."

"I knew it!" the man at the counter bellowed angrily, grabbing his hat and throwing it on the floor in disgust. "It's that bloody yank hussy that he's been—!"

"Hold your tongue," Modiste Maggie snapped instantly. "I will not tolerate that sort of language here, no matter what!"

"And I want you to know that the decision I have made has been mine and mine alone. This was a thing I had to judge entirely for myself. The other person most nearly concerned has tried up to the last to persuade me to take a different course. I have made this, the most serious decision of my life, only upon the single thought of what would, in the end, be best for all."

"This is an outrage," the man continued, face twisted with anger. "Think of how this makes all of us look! He's the king! And he didn't want us! Nay, he picked a married woman – a divorced woman – over the country that kept him in gold and silk since the day he was born! And this is the way he thanks us? This is the way he serves his country?"

"The Duke of York is a fine man," Modiste Maggie said after a few moments of listening to the
king's - well, former king's - speech. "He's a good, sensible man married to a proper British lady."

"And what does it matter, how fine he and his lady are, if the man can't string two words into a sentence!"

"I now quit altogether public affairs and I lay down my burden. It may be some time before I return to my native land, but I shall always follow the fortunes of the British race and empire with profound interest, and if at any time in the future I can be found of service to his majesty in a private station, I shall not fail. And now, we all have a new King. I wish him and you, his people, happiness and prosperity with all my heart. God bless you all! God save the King!"

The silence that followed was awkward and unpleasant, and Harry didn't feel relieved until the radio had been switched off once again and the man who had barged in took a deep breath, shook his head, and staggered out. His loud curses could be heard long after the door had swung shut in his wake.

'I wonder how far away the Second World War is,' Harry thought, not moving from his seat. From the corner of his eye he could see Modiste Maggie shuffling the designs in front of her, before she returned them into their folder, shook her head and stood up.

"Harry," she said, her voice brittle. "Go home. We're closing early today."

"It's not even noon yet," Harry pointed out, but stood up while reaching for his coat. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes," Modiste Maggie replied tiredly, looking old and fragile all of a sudden. "Go home. I will see you here tomorrow again. And should you find some faith in God in your heart, a prayer for Britain wouldn't go amiss."
"Happy birthday," Harry said cheerfully, setting a mug of hot chocolate in front of Tom. There was also a small but delicious looking cake on the table, with a bowl full of cookies right next to it. Everything was mismatched and one of the spoons was slightly bent, but Harry was proud of the birthday breakfast nonetheless. "Ten already! Time flies, eh?"

"Why are you so cheerful?" Tom asked sleepily, clenching his eyes shut and pressing his nose against the mug. His usually neatly combed hair was messy and Harry could tell that the brat had defied curfew once again and stayed up half the night, reading. "I want to sleep. That's your birthday gift to me this year, Harry. I want to sleep until tomorrow."

"Don't be ridiculous," Harry said with a laugh. He sat down on the other side of the table with his cup of tea, and reached for a cookie. "We could go to Diagon Alley again if you want. Buy you a few more books."

"You are ridiculous," Tom muttered, though he finally looked interested in what was going on. "How many, though? And can we go next Saturday because I know that it'll be very crowded this close to the new year."

"I have ten galleons put aside for your books," Harry said. "It depends on which books you buy, but I'd say you can manage at least three. Possibly four. And yes, of course we can go next Saturday."

"Fine," Tom sighed, as if going all the way to Diagon Alley had suddenly become a chore. Harry didn't bother holding back his grin, pleased with how much the boy's hostility had mellowed out since the beginning of his stay. Tom was still quite cranky and stubborn, and Harry didn't know what the boy thought of him most of the time, but by now they got along well enough to fall into a routine of living together.

They weren't a family, not really. Not the way Harry had wished for, not the way the Weasleys had been. He could only hope that that would change on its own eventually.

"You don't have work today?" Tom asked, finally reaching for the cake and cutting himself a slice. "I have a question about Gringotts, by the way. The wizarding bank."

"Maggie's is closed since nobody comes in around the new year, so I'm free today and tomorrow," Harry explained. "Gringotts? All right. I can't promise to know the answer to whatever you're asking, but I'll do my best."

"In Enhanced England, the author says that the bank is completely run by goblins. There are no actual people involved at any stage of the management. I can understand having goblins working there but are there really no witches or wizards even to handle some paperwork or public relations?"

"I don't think there are, but it's not that surprising, is it? I think the bank was first founded by a goblin and since goblins were never fond of people, they just decided to not hire them. Although they do sometimes make temporary contracts with curse breakers and I knew someone who worked at Gringotts as an account manager for a while. They needed someone who spoke French, so... Then again she wasn't completely a human."

"I don't care about that. Not the point," Tom said impatiently. "Ever since the Goblin Wars the
relationship between goblins and wizards has been tense and according to the book even now goblins are extremely rude and uncooperative. What if they decided to wage a war against the wizards someday again? Everything we own would be trapped in their vaults!

"I think they're under oath to not do that, aren't they?" Harry said, shaking his head. "It's a ministry regulation, and since it has to do with money, I'm pretty sure that the ministry makes sure that it's obeyed."

"Maybe in earlier generations," Tom replied quickly, his mind racing to think of the possibilities. "But employing new goblins without informing the ministry and without making them take the oath would be easy, wouldn't it?"

"I... guess so?" Harry said, and Tom sighed, rolling his eyes.

"I'm just saying that by now wizards should have taken control of Gringotts. If I was a goblin, I would have found a way to get out of taking any kind of oath of servitude. Even if it involved money."

"But the goblins do a better job. And they remain neutral at all times which is not only important, but also something wizards are incapable of doing. Besides, for all we know, the oath could be just something as simple as telling them to never take sides. I don't know. I never was interested in how Gringotts works, to be honest."

"Yes, that much is clear. And I don't think that the oath is something as simple as that," Tom said with the certainty of a ten-year-old who knew he was smart and believed he was always right. "What's the relationship between Gringotts and the Minister of Finance?"

"I have no idea," Harry admitted, refilling his cup of tea and taking another cookie to enjoy it with. "But I'm sure that we can find you a book on the subject. I doubt any articles from the Daily Prophet would be useful, even if they printed anything important."

"Books get outdated really quickly when it comes to that sort of news. Are there papers like Financial Times in the Wizarding World? Can we subscribe?"

"Um, well, there's Global Galleons. But we can't subscribe since it's too expensive for us right now and they use eagles to deliver. Can you imagine what people around here would say if they saw an eagle at our window once a week?"

"You need a new job and we need to move," Tom decided, and Harry sighed. For all of his maturity and cleverness, sometimes Harry felt as if Tom didn't really comprehend how difficult earning money really was.

"Let's first get your books, though," Harry said. "And I'm pretty sure that there are old copies of Global Galleons being sold somewhere with a reduced price. It's better than nothing, right?"

"Right," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "Better than nothing."

* 1937 *

"It's strange, isn't it, how little wizards seem to take advantage of muggle trade?" Tom said, the top of his head barely visible from behind an issue of Global Galleons Harry had purchased for him less than an hour ago. His cup of tea was untouched, most likely forgotten, and Harry wondered if he ought to remind the boy of its existence.
'Why bother,' the older wizard though then, leaning back on his chair and looking out through one of Cordelia's Coffee & Cakes' windows to the streets of Diagon Alley.

"I mean," Tom continued, "using magic to make, say, a delivery company more efficient than whatever most Muggles use at the moment can only bring profit, right?"

"Sure," Harry said absently, still looking outside at the falling snow. "I can hardly believe you're ten already."

"You keep saying that," Tom pointed out, finally putting down the paper. "What are you even looking at? There's nothing but snow outside. Can we go to other places aside from Diagon Alley every now and then?"

"You've barely seen anything in Diagon Alley," Harry snorted, turning away from the window and grinning at Tom. "Eventually, yes. There are other great places for us to visit. One in particular - I'm sure that you'll love it."

"Great by your definition or great by my definition?" Tom asked, narrowing his eyes. "You think the park is a great place to visit."

"No, it's nothing like the park," Harry replied, thinking of Hogsmeade. "It's another village, actually."

Tom had been clearly about to say something, when someone familiar stepped into the coffee shop, distracting him into silence. Harry glanced towards where the newcomer was, and saw Lord Black standing, presumably getting ready to place an order. His companion - a beautiful woman dressed in a dark red velvet cloak - had moved further into the coffee shop and chosen a table not far from Harry and Tom's.

The woman sat facing Harry, though her attention was on Lord Black. Her perfectly groomed eyebrows were arched in a way that could only speak of amused contempt, and the gentle smile on her face formed an unsettling contrast against the cold look in her eyes.

"What village?" Tom finally asked, though his voice was quieter and he didn't seem to be sitting as confidently as he had moments before. Harry bit his lip, hating the impact Black's presence seemed to have on his ward. What to do about it, though? Should he suggest going elsewhere? If he did... wouldn't that only make Tom think that he didn't have the right to be in the same place as Black?

Circe be damned, Harry wasn't going to be chased away by Black's presence.

"Hogsmeade," he said, smiling at Tom in what he hoped was a cheerful and reassuring manner. "Though I do think that the book shops here in Diagon Alley are better."

Black walked past their table, followed by a waitress - Harry hadn't even known that this place had waitresses! - who set down the couple's order and poured their tea for them. Black's companion looked down at the tea and it was very clear to Harry that she had no intentions of drinking it. Black, on the other hand, was already reaching for his.

"Books on economics get outdated so quickly," Tom said, frowning at the issue of Global Galleons in front of him. "A book written today won't likely be relevant two years from now. That's why I think that a subscription to a paper like this would be better. Do they teach economics in Hogwarts?"

"Unless something has changed since I was there, then no," Harry said. "Which might be a good thing since I doubt many children your age would be ready for it. I think you, too, need to learn much more before you get started with this particular subject."
and articles about fiscal theories was a far cry from being able to understand the whole picture in the way Tom seemed to want to do.

"Whatever," the boy muttered, picking up his paper again. "But if someone wants to be, say, a lawyer or an entrepreneur or something like that, what would they do? Are there universities that teach these things or is Hogwarts all there is to the education system?"

"I believe people seek apprenticeships in order to acquire the skills they need for whatever career they want," Harry said, and Tom looked at him with a grumpy and very unimpressed expression. The child looked downright disgusted.

"But doesn't that mean that people will get jobs based on who they know rather than what they can do?" Tom asked. "And if jobs are given to people with no actual talent for them, won't that eventually affect the industry as a whole?"

"Well..." That would explain the levels of incompetence that Harry had encountered, actually. "There are some career paths like... Aurorship or... becoming a Healer that need you to have certain grades when you graduate. Once you have achieved the specified grade requirements, you can apply through annual entrance exams, eventually be interviewed and if successful, you'll be accepted into a training program."

"That makes more sense than the apprenticeship thing," Tom said, nodding with a slightly less disgusted expression on his pale face. Harry suspected that the boy's distress came from the fear of not being able to reach his own full potential by being overlooked in favour of less competent, but well-connected, peers. It was a very valid fear, if Harry wanted to be completely honest. He could only hope that something would happen to bring a change to the status quo while Tom was still in Hogwarts.

As long as it wasn't Tom who was changing the status quo with an army of people ready to die for him.

"You done?" Harry asked after a few minutes of silence. "If you don't want to drink your tea, we might as well finish buying the things we came here for."

Time passed fast and though life didn't suddenly become void of problems, Harry and Tom found something akin to a common tune and settled further into a peaceful routine. The warmer weathers made Tom less reluctant to leave the house, and by June Harry had managed to convince the boy to come with him to Maggie's nearly every day.

It was Tom who first noticed how much older and stressed Maggie had begun to appear lately. The look in her eyes was sharp as ever, but the way she would sometimes spend her free moments at the boutique staring at nothing in particular with a tired expression on her face told Tom enough of how she must have been feeling.

"Funny that you say that," Harry had said during dinner, after Tom had told him of his observations. "Last year around this time there were no free moments during working hours. There was always someone who came in with an order or something urgent to be finished."

"You think she's losing customers?" Tom had asked, and Harry had shrugged in response.

"I hope not."

Tom couldn't help but remember that particular conversation when the milliner from a few buildings
to the left dropped by with a small box of pastries. "Maggie," the woman called, stepping in. "If you're not too busy, how about a small break? I brought something delicious and I'm sure you have some tea in the backroom."

"I suppose I can spare a few minutes," Maggie relented with a sigh, not sounding particularly happy about it. "It's good to see you, Marie. Did you leave your assistant in charge of the shop?"

"No," Marie said, setting the box of pastries on the counter. Tom wondered what she'd have in there and if he would get the chance to taste any of it. "In all honesty, my clients have been disappearing so fast for the past few months I couldn't afford to keep her anymore. Some places sell more readymade hats than I can make and, well, people seem to find low quality hats acceptable if they're cheap."

"That is unfortunate," Maggie said, and Tom noticed her gaze flickering quickly to where Harry was working. A feeling of dread settled at the pit of his stomach. "I do understand your situation, my dear. While I am still doing quite well, I am not blind to how the number of customers have decreased during the past couple of months. It is extremely difficult to try and compete against department stores."

"We can't all be like the Burberrys of London. I heard that particular house isn't about to fall under this wave of mass production anytime soon."

"To be fair, they have been in business for decades longer than you or I."

"I thought about moving my boutique somewhere else, to a better location," Marie admitted. "But I simply cannot do that. I can barely afford my store's rent right now and the expenses that would go into moving-- no. I can only try to hold on for as long as possible. Same for you, right?"

"Excuse me?" Tom started, turning fully towards the two women. Harry's head snapped up, though he didn't look disapproving, only curious. "But if making enough money for rent is a struggle and the number of clients for each store individually is dropping, why not combine your businesses?"

"Combine?" Maggie said, narrowing her eyes with a contemplative expression on her face. Her friend seemed much more open to the idea, and Tom absently wondered if she had thought of a merge before. "Explain."

"You find bigger premises that are located in a better place. Even if the rent of that place is higher, since each one of you only pays half of it, you'll be paying less than what you do now," Tom started, not really understanding why his suggestion would even need explaining. "You share those premises and make a joint business that sells clothes and hats. Modiste Maggie's clients will go there and Madame Marie's as well."

Tom hoped that they wouldn't ask him to explain further, mainly because he wasn't sure of how to even do that. The logic behind his suggestion was so very clear to him that the thought of someone else not understanding it made him annoyed.

"The suggestion does have merit," Maggie murmured, and Marie looked at Tom with a curious expression before gesturing for the boy to step closer. Tom resisted the urge to roll his eyes and stayed where he was.

"Say, dear child," the woman began, her bright red lips pulled into a wide smile. "How old are you? You look quite young."

"Ten," Tom replied, and turned to look at his book again. Having said his piece, he had no more
interest in the conversation. "And I'm going to work on my maths problems now." The request to stop bothering him didn't need to be said aloud: it was implied and quite clearly so.

"The idea does have some merit to it," Maggie said again, interrupting whatever questions Marie had intended to ask. "A boutique closer to the square will be noticed easier and though I do make hats sometimes, I am nowhere near as skilled as you are in making them, Marie."

"We should pick a place with big display windows," Marie decided immediately. "Have our best samples there for people to notice."

If Maggie's goes bankrupt, maybe Harry will finally go and find a better job,' Tom thought, glancing at the man in question. Harry was working on what looked like buttonholes, with a smile on his lips. Who smiled when they were doing something that boring, anyway? Tom would understand it if Harry had just solved some exciting numerical problem, but buttonholes? Hardly.

It didn't occur to the boy that the reason for Harry's happiness had nothing to do with his work, and everything to do with Tom's actions on that day.

* *

By late October Maggie's had been renamed Modiste & Milliner, and moved further away from where Harry and Tom lived, but closer to where the crowded streets were. Getting to work involved riding a bus and walking for nearly half an hour to get to where the new store was. Despite that, Harry wasn't complaining.

"I know you're happy with the job," Tom said one Saturday, looking up from yet another copy of Global Galleons that he had made Harry buy him. The paper, though a week old, was still recent enough for the boy to find it an enjoyable read. "But we have to leave even earlier than we used to and we rarely get home early enough to spend some time before having to go to sleep."

"I got a raise, though," Harry pointed out, using a couple of spells to make Tom's shoes appropriate for the cold and rainy weathers that had been increasing in number lately. "The additional money that I am now making is quite helpful, I'll have you know."

"Not too helpful, since nothing has changed in our lives," Tom sniped, before leaning back on the chair he was sitting on. "I'm not going to go with you at all next week. Or the week after. Having to be awake and ready to step outside before the sun goes up is not something I want to do."

"All right," Harry agreed easily, understanding Tom's reluctance to go with him and jealous of the option of staying home. "But do keep in mind that classes at Hogwarts will start at eight sometimes."

"I can handle 'sometimes'," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "But I don't want to wake up early every day. Besides that will be completely different."

"Really? How so?"

"Because I'll be waking up early to learn something new! Something exciting! Nothing like going with you to Maggie's at the crack of dawn just to sit there for hours and trying to do math while hoping that Marie won't bother me with her chatter. That woman is never quiet and it's really bothersome."

"She's fond of you," Harry grinned, greatly having enjoyed the milliner's numerous attempts to befriend Tom. "She buys you pastries every Friday. I know you like the madeleines, so why not just enjoy them and put up with her for their sake?"
"I don't mind the food," Tom replied sullenly. "I can take the cookies any and every time. I just don't want to socialize in order to somehow earn those pastries. Aren't they supposed to be gifts? Why do I have to earn gifts? Why can't she just give me the food without talking to me?"

"You know you'll have to learn how to get along with people once you go to school?" Harry sighed, trying his best to not let on how funny he found the situation. "No matter which House you end up in, making as many friends - or friendly acquaintances, at the very least - is a question of survival. You know by now that to many, being anything less than a rich pureblood makes you... a target. And I don't think that being a first year old student will make them all hesitate before trying to hex you."

"I see," Tom said after a moment of contemplative silence, before nodding his head approvingly and looking pleased all of a sudden. "Amassing a loyal following makes people think twice before trying to cross me. That's a smart suggestion, Harry. I didn't know you had it in you."

"What? No!" Harry looked at Tom with an alarmed expression. "I didn't say anything about amassing a, what did you call them again? A loyal following? I mean, it is something that would keep you safer, but Tom, the point is to have friends and not followers!"

"But friends will think that they're equal to me," Tom protested, scowling. "I don't want that. They will try to talk with me all the time, for sure. Or even worse: they'll try to make jokes and they'll expect me to want to talk to them. And laugh. They'll expect me to laugh at their jokes."

'Merlin, how do I even deal with this?' Harry wondered, shaking his head. "Why would you think that they're not equal to you?"

"Are they as smart as I am?" Tom asked. "Because if they are, then I will consider friendship an option. Anyway, I don't think it's necessary to discuss this right now, right? I mean, I'm still many months away from going to Hogwarts in the first place."

"I just... I worry sometimes," Harry admitted. "I want you to have a good time and I worry that you won't. And time goes by so fast, you'll be off to school before you even realize it."

"Don't worry about me," Tom said, and something in his voice made Harry wonder if he should worry about everyone else instead. "I'll be fine. I survived at Wool's didn't I? Hogwarts cannot possibly be worse than that."

"It better not," Harry sighed, finishing fixing Tom's shoes and reaching for the boy's coat that had been draped over a chair nearby. "I'll tell Marie that you won't be coming with me to the shop anymore. I'm sure that she'll want to know, if only to not buy those expensive treats in vain. I can't believe that you can give up the madeleines so easily."

"It's not that I don't like them," Tom said. "I just don't like them enough to make me want to go through all the trouble of going to the boutique every day. Besides, the cookies you make are better."

"Thank you," Harry grinned, feeling flattered and surprised. It had been a while since he last thought of the life he had left behind, and these days whenever he remembered it, he didn't feel as sad as he used to.

Things were turning for the better... mainly because of Tom.

*\* *

On his birthday, Tom woke up to a strange tapping sound coming from the window. It took him a moment of glaring at the bird outside for him to finally realize what it was there for.
"Harry!" the boy shrieked, scrambling out of bed and opening the windows as fast as he could, allowing in not only the owl but also a gust of cold wind and even a bit of snow. "Harry! Wake up! My Hogwarts letter has arrived!"

As soon as the owl had dropped Tom's letter from its hold, the boy snatched it up and ran to Harry's room. The man was still in bed, and his eyes were barely open. Tom was gracious enough to not jump on Harry to make him snap out of the sleepy daze he was still in, and opted instead to climb on the bed and jab Harry's side sharply with one of his fingers as hard as he could.

"My eyes are open," Harry yelped. "I'm awake! No need to get violent!"

"Look," Tom said with a delighted smile on his face as he waved the envelope in front of Harry's face. "It's here!"

"Well, how about you open it, then?"

"I've never had a letter before," Tom said, eyeing the wax seal with interest for a brief moment, before he broke it and opened the envelope. "When I go to Hogwarts, you have to send me letters."

"Only if you promise to reply to them," Harry said with a smile, and watched the boy pull out his Hogwarts letter. "Happy birthday, by the way. Congratulations on turning eleven."

"Yeah, whatever," Tom mumbled, eyes already fixed on the papers he was holding.

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**HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY**

*Headmaster: Armando Dippet*

*(Member of the Board of Governors of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries
Order of Merlin, Second Class)*

*Dear Mr. Riddle,*

*We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.*

*Term begins on 1 September. We await your owl by no later than 31 July.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Albus Dumbledore*
"There's a list of things we'll need to buy," Tom said, moving on to read the other pages of the letter. "A wand! And so many books - I'm happy that I'll have a few months to read through the books before I go to school. Robes? All right. Harry, how soon can we go to Diagon Alley?"

"Later on today, if you want," Harry muttered, rubbing his eyes before dragging himself out of the bed. "Although I don't think we'll need to buy the robes right away. It's better to wait until the summer rather than have you outgrow the robes before you even get to use them."

"I don't care about the robes anyway," Tom admitted. "I just want books. And my wand. Can I start using my wand as soon as I get it?"

"Technically no," Harry said, picking out clean clothes and heading out of the bedroom. "Have you had breakfast yet? I can make us some breakfast after I shower."

"All right, but what do you mean by technically no?" Tom asked, following Harry to the living room and pulling a chair right outside the bathroom as soon as Harry closed the door. "You can hear me, right? So what do you mean by technically no?"

"You won't even wait for me to finish– or even start -- my shower before asking your questions?"

"You can shower and speak at the same time, can't you? Besides, this is important!" Despite the sound of the running water, Tom could hear Harry laugh. He did not doubt that he'd be able to hear whatever the man would say, as long as he didn't whisper or speak too quietly. "Multitasking, Harry!"

"Students are not allowed to use their wands during the summer breaks," Harry finally said. "Technically you haven't started school yet, so the trace won't be activated until you get there."

"The trace?"

"It's a charm that's put on the wands of every underage witch and wizard to make sure that they won't use magic outside of Hogwarts. The point is to prevent misuse and accidents. It'll disappear once you turn seventeen, though."

Tom sat quietly for a few moments, thinking of whether or not he'd want to get rid of the trace before he turned seventeen. Was that even possible? "The letter says that I'm allowed a pet. Do I have to get one? Do other students have pets? Do some students seriously bring toads as pets? Why would anyone want a toad?"

"Some do," Harry replied, and the sound of running water stopped soon after. Tom took it as a sign to move the chair away from the doorway. "Most don't. If you want, we can get you a pet once you're sure you want one. In all honesty I'd prefer to not buy you an animal that you don't really want."

"I don't like animals," Tom said immediately. "And I don't want to spend time taking care of one. Buy me more books instead."

"Big surprise, that," Harry said, emerging from the bathroom. "Buy me books. You always say that. We'll have to make another bookshelf for your books soon."

"Good," Tom said, nodding with a pleased expression on his face. "I can't wait."
"I know that you can't," Harry huffed. "But before you start daydreaming of what kind of books you want to buy next, how about you tell me what you want for breakfast? Is porridge good enough?"

"Yes," Tom sighed, rolling his eyes. How could Harry even think of breakfast right now? "And right after that we go to Diagon Alley, right?"

"Right," Harry agreed, as if saying anything else had ever been an option.
"Little Tommy isn't coming today either?"

Harry looked up from the fabric he was carefully cutting and was met with Marie's disappointed face. He didn't have the heart to tell the woman that at least part of the problem was her habit of calling Tom 'Tommy', and offered an apologetic smile instead.

"He's preparing for school," Harry said. "He's a smart one, as you know, and he earned himself a scholarship to a boarding school in Scotland."

"That's amazing!" Marie gasped. "Oh, but do allow me to give him a gift for an achievement like that! When will he be leaving? Not soon, I hope!"

"In September," Harry replied, smiling. The fact that there were people like Marie who adored Tom despite his grumpy attitude made him happy. "And I'm certain that he'd be happy and honoured to receive a gift from you. It'll be tough on him to move so far away and I have no doubt that having something from home will help him."

"Oh, absolutely," Marie agreed, when the bell tied to the door jingled and a group of four men entered the store.

"Hello," said one of them, walking closer to the counter where Maggie was. "My friend here is looking for a set of hat and gloves for his sweetheart. Do you have a selection or do you make custom?"

'I'm glad that I don't work on hats,' Harry thought, watching Marie join Maggie and the newest customers at the counter. Soon Marie was talking enthusiastically to two of the four men whereas Maggie had returned to designing a bridal gown for one of her usual customers.

"What kind of event is it that the hat must be suitable for? A cocktail party?"

"No, not at all," one of the men hurried to say. "But it is said that Professor Freud himself will be coming to London soon. My father is a lecturer at Oxford and will most certainly invite Professor Freud at some point for dinner, and perhaps even host a welcoming party in his honour. Therefore, if possible, I'm sure something slightly less colourful and more suitable for a gathering of intellectuals would be appropriate."

"I've heard of Mister Freud," Marie said, nodding. "Though I had no idea that he was planning on coming here. He lives in Germany, does he not?"

"In Austria."

"Goodness. What could drive him from Austria all the way to England?"

"There's some sort of political unrest going on there at the moment," one of the clients said, joining the conversation. "It traces back to Germany but those two countries have always been close. I also heard that he's quite sick, but perhaps those are just rumours, I'm not sure. He's quite old, too. In his eighties, if I remember correctly."

"I heard there are a lot of starving people in Germany right now," another one said. "And no jobs
available. Which understandably has made people restless. I doubt anyone as old as he would prefer to stick around and watch that chaos take over."

"Oh, but I don't think it's the depression that's making people angry."

"Whatever it is, it has nothing to do with us, and therefore we have no reason to care about it," the fourth man huffed, clearly bored with the discussion. "In fact, I'd say it is fortunate for us since it's making Professor Freud move to London. I heard his sister-in-law is already here."

'They can't be talking about what I think they are,' Harry thought, frowning while continuing with his task. 'Surely it's too early for Hitler to be on the move already? Merlin, if only I could remember when the Second World War did start. I'm so happy that Tom will be going to Hogwarts - at least there he will be safe from any muggle attacks.'

The thoughts of the upcoming war were still on Harry's mind when he made his way back home. He didn't remember much of what he had read about the Second World War, but he did know that London had been one of the cities that had been attacked the most. Would he be able to risk having Tom home during the summers? Did he have a choice?

"Don't you like the soup?" Tom asked suddenly, snapping Harry out of his musings. The boy had helped Harry make soup for dinner and hid his worry over its success quite well. Not well enough to fool Harry, though.

"I love it," Harry replied. "Today just feels like it has been going on forever."

"You do work at Maggie's for way too many hours almost every day," Tom pointed out. "Are they getting more customers now?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Your suggestion was spot on. A better location and shared premises have made more and more people notice the boutique. I'm quite sure that the business will continue to flourish for a long time to come."

"I just hope that you won't be working there forever," Tom said. "Really. You'll overwork yourself into an early grave if you don't find a job that allows you to rest."

"It could be worse," Harry sighed, not denying how tiring it was to work for so many hours with only a few short breaks. "People in construction have tougher jobs and worse salaries than I do."

"I believe that you could find a job that lets you use more of your potential," Tom told him. "If you tried."

"Potential," Harry repeated, a smile tugging at his lips. "You mean magic. You want me to find a job where I can use magic."

"Well, I'm not telling you not to do that."

"I'll consider it."

"Will you really?" Tom asked, narrowing his eyes at the older wizard. "Or are you just saying that to make me stop asking you about it?"

"No, I will consider it," Harry assured him. "I promise."
"Harry?"

"Yes?"

It was a late Saturday afternoon when Tom looked up from his book with what Harry assumed was intended to be an innocent and hopeful expression. Perhaps it would have convinced Harry of Tom's innocent motives had he not known the boy so well.

"You haven't let me try anything with my wand yet," Tom said. "I've had it for months already and I haven't used it once. Can you teach me something? Anything? I promise I won't use it without permission. I've almost ran out of books to read and I really think I'm ready to try a spell or two."

Harry wasn't sure if what he was going to do was the right and wise course of action, but he doubted that sending Tom off to Hogwarts - and the Slytherin House in particular - without him knowing a single spell was…not necessarily a good thing. Therefore he put down the plate he was washing and turned to the boy with a determined expression on his face.

"All right," Harry said. "But I pick the spells and you don't try them without me being here to supervise. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Tom agreed quickly. He then watched with a happy expression as Harry went to get Tom's wand from its case and handed it to the boy. His wand, made of yew and the feather of a phoenix according to the wandmaker, fit into his hold like it belonged there. Tom waved it a few times before he focused on Harry, who had pulled out his own wand as well.

"So," Tom started. "What are you going to teach me?"

"We're going to start with some simple spells," Harry said. "The locking and unlocking charms. Do you know why those are useful?"

"For privacy reasons," Tom answered quickly. "You said I'll be getting a trunk, too, right? To put my things into. In that case I think it's very useful to know how to lock and unlock the trunk to prevent other people from opening it."

"Also if you're locked somewhere," Harry said, thinking of multiple situations that he hoped would never happen. "Or if you need to lock someone somewhere - but only for a very good reason, Tom, not for pranks."

"I don't prank people," Tom huffed, rolling his eyes. He wouldn't prank people, but if he would ever need to punish them by locking them into a bathroom stall or a closet, then he wasn't about to hesitate. 'I don't think Harry needs to know that, though. He's very sensitive when it comes to doing bad things to people who deserve it. It's as if he thinks that no one deserves being punished.'

"We'll begin with the unlocking charm," Harry started, kneeling down next to Tom. "To make it work, you need to point at the locked object - be it a door or a trunk or a locker - and move your hand as if you're writing the letter S in reverse. And while doing so you say: alohomora."

Tom frowned, focusing on doing as instructed. His hand movement was sharp in the beginning but he corrected it quite fast before Harry could help him with it. It made the older wizard think of Hermione, and how delighted she would have been to teach a child like Tom. Feeling proud, Harry watched Tom repeat the spell a few times before he pulled the boy closer towards the bathroom door.

"I'll lock this door now," Harry said, using a spell to lock the door as he spoke. "And you can see how successful you are with the unlocking spell. Give it a couple of tries and don't worry if it takes some time before you figure it out. First time doing magic is a little bit strange, but I'm sure that you'll
get the hang of it quickly. Keep in mind, though, that the spell doesn't work on locks that have been
protected with stronger magic."

"I figured," Tom muttered absently, pointing the tip of his wand towards the bathroom. "I mean, it
makes sense, right? There's no protection to be had if all locks can be opened with a spell that any
kid can cast correctly, right?"

"Right," Harry sighed, not surprised at all by Tom's conclusion. He also wasn’t surprised when less
than an hour later he heard a small click as the bathroom door was unlocked. By then, despite his
success, Tom looked a little bit drained and tired.

"I did it," the boy said, smirking proudly as he pushed the bathroom's door open, as if to prove to
himself and Harry that he had indeed succeeded in casting the unlocking spell. "See, Harry? I did it."

"I knew you could do it," Harry said. "Usually it takes students a bit longer to succeed, but I'm not
surprised that you managed it so quickly. That's enough for today, though."

"But--!"

"I promise you that tomorrow I'll teach you the locking spell."

"You really promise?" Tom asked, and Harry felt a moment of surprise at the lack of resistance,
wondering if practicing the spell so intensively had drained the boy enough to make him too tired to
argue. "It'll be Sunday so you have time then, don't you?"

"Yes, I promise," Harry replied, brushing aside Tom's fringe and thinking of taking the boy to the
barber to have his hair cut. Then again he wasn't the only one to need a haircut – Harry's hair could
be easily pulled into a small ponytail now, and he didn't particularly like the look. "And yes, I do.
Now, how about some dinner?"

"Not porridge," Tom was quick to say. "We keep eating porridge almost every day. Let's have
something else. I want potatoes."

"All right," Harry sighed, rolling his eyes and standing up to start looking into what to prepare.
"Something with potatoes. As you wish."

* *

It was nearly a week later that Harry came home carrying what Tom assumed to be his future school
trunk. He wasn't wrong, but he didn't like it, and he wasn't about to be quiet about his disapproval.

"It's old and ugly," the boy protested, eyeing the trunk in question with no small amount of disgust.
Harry had set it down near the couch and eyed it with a satisfied expression. Tom hated Harry's habit
of buying cheap things and pretending that he could somehow make them better. "And it smells
bad."

"It doesn't smell bad," Harry sighed, opening the trunk and peering inside. "Besides, you'll have this
for the first year only. I just need to save up a little bit before I get you a proper trunk from Diagon
Alley or somewhere else like that."

"I notice that you didn't argue against it being old and ugly," Tom pointed out, crossing his arms and
scowling at the man. "I can't use that. Everyone will laugh at me. I don't want people to think that I'm
too poor to afford a proper school trunk."

"I'll fix it up so it'll look better," Harry assured him, though his words did nothing to improve Tom's
mood. "It's in pretty good condition. And you can always tell them it's a family heirloom. I know people there appreciate family heirlooms no matter how ugly they are - in fact, the older it is, the more value it has."

"I don't care," Tom said, now glaring at the turn. "How can you fix it? What kind of fixing would turn that into something acceptable?"

"I've become quite good at transfiguration, I'll have you know," Harry told him. "Even though this won't be as good as a custom made trunk, it'll do for now. I'll fix the interior first, make sure there are no holes or stains. Give me a couple of weeks and it'll be good as new."

"Let's not exaggerate," Tom said, still looking disgusted. "I don't think anything can make that look good as new."

"Rude," Harry huffed, but couldn't quite stop himself from smiling. "How about you come with me to work tomorrow? Marie misses you greatly. Besides, you hear plenty of interesting things at the store these days. Last week I heard that Sigmund Freud is coming to London. You've read about him, haven't you?"

"Not much," Tom said. "I didn't really understand some of the things he wrote about and most of it sounded like rubbish to me."

"Give yourself some time," Harry grinned. "Maybe you'll understand in a couple of years. I suppose the love you have for numbers and money doesn't extend to other subjects, eh?"

"Numbers make sense," Tom insisted, scowling as he returned back to the chair he had been sitting on. "They're logical. People are not."

"Magic isn't particularly logical either, most of the time," Harry reminded the boy gently. "And you will need to learn how to understand people if you want to get along with them."

"I don't--"

"And before you tell me that you don't want to get along with people, I would like to remind you that getting along is important for the sake of establishing connections. Which, I am sure, will help you in the future."

Tom fell silent for a few moments, and Harry could see that although the boy could reach for the book he was currently reading, he didn't. Instead Tom said:

"You told me about Hogwarts Houses. Which one do you think I'll get into?"

"Slytherin," Harry said immediately. "If you don't end up in Slytherin, I'll eat my soggy socks for breakfast."

"Thank you for that mental image," Tom said with a disgusted expression. "You said, though, that the studious ones are the Ravenclaws. How can you be so sure that I won't end up there?"

"You can be a very studious and smart Slytherin," Harry told the boy. "There's no rule that says that there's only one right way to be anything at all."

"You said you were a Gryffindor?"

"Yes."
"Hm." Tom looked at Harry quietly for a few moments, before he said: "I don't think I'll be a Gryffindor."

"I really doubt that you could get yourself into Gryffindor," Harry said with a grin. "You'd find us all frustratingly loud and reckless, I'm sure. I had a good time there but I know that you wouldn't."

Realistically, Tom would perhaps enjoy being a Ravenclaw the most. From what Harry had understood, the Ravenclaw House had never cared much about bloodlines or wealth, and focused mostly on the students' love for learning.

'Not just their grades,' Harry thought. 'I think Cho told me that good grades were admired but that they weren't seen as the definition of intelligence.' It was unlikely, however, that Tom would end up anywhere outside of Slytherin, due to his heritage. Which was a bit of a pity, and Harry knew he'd spend plenty of his days worrying about how Tom was being treated in the dungeons.

"The fourth House you mentioned was Hufflepuff, right?" Tom said. "So if Ravenclaws are smart and Slytherins are cunning and Gryffindors are brave, what are Hufflepuffs?"

"Loyal," Harry said, and when he saw Tom's unimpressed expression, he continued: "Don't underestimate how formidable bottomless loyalty to a person or a cause can be. Besides, it's not like students don't have traits that could have made them end up in another House. There are brave Slytherins and cunning Ravenclaws and smart Gryffindors. And I assure you that there are smart, cunning, and brave Hufflepuffs as well."

"Bottomless loyalty," Tom said, narrowing his eyes with a strangely contemplative expression. "You mean loyalty that can make people do anything for the sake of whatever they're loyal to?"

"Yes, so do keep that in mind," Harry advised him. "Now, do you want something else to do? The locks of this trunk are rusted but you can practice the locking and unlocking charms on them anyway. Interested?"

Time seemed to fly by so quickly, and often Harry caught himself thinking of how much time had truly passed since he had seen Ron and Hermione. There were days when he missed them very much, but somehow the realization that he had gotten used to their absence hurt even more than missing them. It didn't help that aside from Tom and his work, Harry had rarely any time to find new friends that he could hang out with.

Then again, even if he did manage to make a friend or two, how would he find the time to spend with them? It wasn't as if he could spend the weekends he had reserved for Tom on anyone else. He didn't even want to.

Practicing spells, watching Harry work on transfiguring the trunk, and reading his school books were activities that kept Tom entertained for nearly two weeks. Eventually, though, the boy finished his study material and Harry finished working on the trunk, and Tom found himself looking for something else to occupy his mind.

Harry had suggested sorting through his growing book collection in order to decide which books to take with him to Hogwarts, but Tom had done that a couple of times already and didn't want to do it again. He had even put some books into the now decent looking school trunk, ready to take them with him in September.

"You could practice the locking charm."
"But I'm so bored of the locking charm," the boy said, waving his wand in random patterns with an annoyed expression on his face. "I know how to lock and unlock things now. Harry, I've been doing it all week, I swear."

"I believe you," Harry muttered tiredly. He was lying down on the couch, still dressed in the clothes he had worn for work, and was resting his eyes for a couple of minutes before he'd have to stand up, shower, make dinner, and prepare for the next day.

"Can you teach me something else?" Tom asked, climbing to sit on Harry's stomach, making the man groan and open his eyes. Tom resisted the urge to stick the sharp tip of his wand into Harry's disturbingly green eyes and simply pouted instead. "Anything else? Just another simple spell that will make my day better?"

"I'm tired," Harry whined, closing his eyes again. "And I have so much else I still need to do today. Like dinner. I'll teach you a new spell during the weekend, I promise."

"But I want to learn now," Tom insisted. Why didn't Harry understand? Surely teaching Tom another simple spell wasn't that tiring and time consuming? Harry had done it before, so why couldn't he do it now? "I'll die of boredom if I have to wait until Saturday for you to have time and energy to teach me. This is why I'm telling you to find a better job with fewer hours. You wake up early and go to work, and you come back home drained like this!"

"Mm-hm."

"Harry! Open your eyes and teach me!"

"I'm tired," Harry repeated, and laid still as he waited for Tom's response. The child's position on Harry's stomach made him close enough to stab Harry in the throat with his wand if he wanted to. Harry hoped that he didn't. Eventually he heard a huff, before the boy plopped down to press his face against Harry's shoulder. A sharp elbow hit him on the side and bony knees dug into his thighs and Harry knew that resting for much longer was not an option anymore.

"I just really want to learn from you," Tom said, his voice muffled by the fabric of Harry's shirt. "If I have something to do, I won't get bored. And if I don't get bored, I won't feel lonely. You don't want me to feel lonely, do you?" Or rather, Harry didn't want Tom to go and find his own entertainment from somewhere else, knowing how destructive the devious child was. No matter how well the two got along now, Harry wasn't blind to the mean streak that intertwined with every aspect of Tom's personality.

"You can always come with me to work," Harry reminded him, lifting his hand to pet Tom's soft hair. For some reason it made him think of Crookshanks and the way the cat had demanded pets from Hermione no matter how busy the witch had been at the time. "That way you'll be with me and you won't be lonely."

"But that's not the same," Tom hissed, his voice becoming clearer as he turned his face. Some strands of his thick hair tickled Harry's chin, making the man shift to brush them aside before he continued to pet the boy's head gently.

"How is it not the same?"

"It just isn't. Please? Could you just... do this for me? One tiny spell and I won't bother you anymore, I promise."

"Fine," Harry relented with a deep sigh, but couldn't regret it when Tom slid off him with a happy
grin on his face. "I'll change my clothes and shower first, all right? And then make something quick for dinner. It'll be better for the both of us if I teach you this spell after we've eaten."

"Which spell is it?" Tom asked. "Is it something useful?"

"It's the general counter-spell to undo spells of all kinds. It doesn't work on potions or transfigured objects and it won't help any actual wounds or injuries a person receives due to a spell," Harry explained, standing up and stretching a bit, before heading towards the bedroom to fetch a change of clothes. "It undoes a spell but it doesn't undo the damage. It's usually taught during the second year at Hogwarts, but I think it'll be useful for you to learn before you even get there. Just in case someone tries something."

"So if someone hexes or jinxes me, I can undo the damage with this spell?" Tom asked, looking pleased and intrigued. "Neat. Let's get to it, then."

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It wasn't until July that Harry finally decided to take Tom to Diagon Alley and buy him his robes and a few extra books in addition to anything else the boy would need for his first year at Hogwarts. He knew that spending considerable parts of his savings on Tom's expenses now would make Harry live on a pretty tight diet after the boy left for Hogwarts, but he dreaded to think of how having cheap and second hand things could affect his standing with the Slytherins.

Ron, in Gryffindor, hadn't been safe from people's mean comments about his old and worn belongings, and Harry suspected that in Slytherin they'd be even less merciful. Especially to a boy who wasn't a pureblood.

"Can we go to Scribbulus as well?" Tom asked as soon as they had walked past Gringotts. "I want to buy some quills and ink. You told me that people don't use pens at Hogwarts, didn't you? And I've never used a quill before, so I'd really like to practice before I have to start writing essays using a quill."

"Don't worry, we'll drop by Scribbulus too," Harry replied. "But first we'll get you your school robes."

"From where? I mean, I haven't seen a single place that looks like it sells clothes here."

"Imagine a magical version of Maggie's."

"Without the hats, I hope," Tom said, frowning once again. Harry couldn't help but think of how often the boy was frowning or scowling at things, and if getting used to some hopefully positive communication at Hogwarts would make the boy muster up a smile or two. Or at least keep his face neutral and stop scowling at everything. "How do you know where to go? Did you get your robes from there?"

"No," Harry said. "The place I got my robes from closed down, unfortunately. But I do believe that I saw a robemaker's workshop somewhere around here-- ah! There it is!"

Tom eyed the small shop Harry was dragging him towards with no small amount of suspicion. It looked nothing like Maggie's and the boy sincerely hoped that Harry knew what he was doing. The shop's door was slightly ajar to allow people in, and a wooden sign with the words "Robes & Ribbons" scratched on it was floating above the entrance. On the inside the place was... even less like Maggie's.

There were piles of fabric floating near the ceiling and needles stuck on a wall behind the counter. At
least two measuring tapes were fighting - Tom hadn't known that things like that could even fight - by hitting one another due to what hopefully was a spell malfunction rather than a possession.

"Gentlemen," said a voice from a far corner of the shop, and an old man with curly white hair and a bright blue beard started walking towards them. "How can I help you?"

"We're here for Tom's school robes," Harry said, resting his hand on Tom's shoulder. "Hogwarts. First year."

"You came to the right place, then," the old man said, rubbing his hands together before gesturing for the two to step further in. "Has the order changed from the years before? Three sets of plain black work robes, protective gloves, and a winter cloak with silver fastenings?"

"And a hat," Harry said. "One plain pointed hat."

"I see they still haven't gotten rid of that ridiculousness," the old man grumbled. "Nobody uses those plain black hats after their first year."

"I'm happy to hear that," Tom said immediately, having seen a couple of pointed black hats in the crowd earlier. "I'm not much of a hat person."

"No wizard with an ounce of sense is, son," the old man said. "Now, step on the stool and I'll have your measurements down in a minute. The clothes will be ready for pick up in two hours. Name for the tags?"

"Tom Riddle," Harry said, and braced himself for the most painful part of the outing. "Should I pay now or when we pick up the clothes?"

"Now, if you may," the old man said, and as soon as a measuring tape - pulled from his pocket rather than the corner where the tapes were still fighting - was working and measuring Tom, he gestured for Harry to follow him towards the counter.

"Riddle isn't a pureblood name, is it?" the wizard said, not unkindly. "Muggleborn, that boy?"

"Halfblood," Harry replied, smiling wryly. "Though I doubt that distinction will be of any help. How much do I owe you?"

"Thirty-six galleons, two sickles and thirteen knuts," was the response, and while Harry had expected the price to be even higher than that, he couldn't help but feel slightly sick. "Usually muggleborns end up buying their robes from Stitches & Seams - it's right next to Ollivander's. How come the two of you ended up here?"

"Coincidence," Harry admitted, wondering if the other place was cheaper. "Does it make a difference?"

"I am biased, of course, but I must tell you that the quality there isn't half of mine here," the old man said with a shrug. "It is rare that anyone buys their school robes from me. I have considerable credentials and my clients tend to work in remarkable positions. Stitches & Seams like to believe that big windows, polished floors, and seamstresses in uniforms make robes better, but quality needs nothing but experience and hard work."

"You work is recognizable, then?" Harry asked, and the old man nodded. "Is it recognizable enough for other students to notice?"

"Purebloods who see their fathers more often than twice a year will notice, for sure," the man said.
"Say, you look a tad young to be a father. Is the boy really yours?"

"No," Harry admitted, glancing at Tom who was eyeing the measuring tape warily. "I'm not related to him, but our circumstances were so similar that I couldn't help but take him in. It's been a few years and I haven't regretted it since."

"Circumstances?"

Harry glanced at the man, thinking carefully of what to say next. He didn't know who the man really was, but there could hardly be any harm in seeing where some strategic information would lead him eventually. "We're both halfbloods. The magical halves of our... parentage come from two respectable Pureblood families who didn't particularly fancy the idea of acknowledging either one of us. I found him in a Muggle orphanage where he had been abandoned."

"Ah," the old man said with a grimace. "Yes, that... does not surprise me in the least. Some young men are in the bad habit of expressing their rebellious spirits through affairs with Muggle women. Those affairs rarely end up well for anyone involved. I suppose you are prohibited from mentioning the families?"

"Until Tom reaches maturity, I can't mention his," Harry said, glad for the excuse the other wizard had unknowingly given him. "Though I wouldn't be surprised if someone knowledgeable of old wizarding families figures it out well before that. He possesses some hereditary traits that are... very recognizable."

"It can help him," the old man said, just as the measuring tape had finished its work and Tom stepped off the stool. Not wasting a second, the boy made his way to where Harry was standing. "Even at Hogwarts there are too many people who think that blood is worth more than anything else."

"And you don't believe that?" Harry asked, curious to know the man's stance on the matter. "You don't believe in Pureblood supremacy?"

"At the end of the day, I'm a merchant," the old man said, shrugging. "I only believe in money."

Harry nodded, and tried not to read too much into the expression of delighted realization that the man's final words brought to Tom's face.
"Did you check that everything you need is in there?" Harry asked, making breakfast for the two of them while preparing something for Tom to take with him for the train ride as well. Meanwhile the boy himself was making last-minute decisions on which books to take with him to Hogwarts, and which books to leave. "Everything that is not related to books, that is."

"Yes, I did that yesterday," Tom said, rolling his eyes and brushing his fringe aside in an impatient gesture. "And I'll wear the school uniform before we go because the last thing I want to do is change clothes in a moving train."

"All right," Harry said with a nod while wrapping up the two neat sandwiches that he had prepared for Tom to snack on later. "Don't worry too much about the books, Tom. I told you that Hogwarts' library is bigger than you could possibly imagine and the library is open every day."

"You also told me that the train ride is nearly seven hours long. That's a book and a half!"

"Just finish packing and come have something to eat. It's nearly nine and we should leave a bit before ten."

Tom sighed loudly before finally closing his trunk and moving to sit at the table, ready to eat his fill. There were two kinds of bread, pudding, bacon, and even some cheese - a rare treat that Tom quite liked. Any other day he would have enjoyed the food with his whole heart, but today he was too nervous for that. He ate silently, thinking of all the things that could go wrong. He didn't want to have friends and didn't want people to pester him, but he also didn't fancy the thought of being disliked for his blood or lack of money.

"You're not going to work today?" Tom asked after a few moments of silence. He pushed his plateful of food aside, not feeling particularly hungry anymore. "I mean, it's Thursday. You won't just drop me off at the station and expect me to find my way to the platform, right?"

"Of course not! Don't be ridiculous," Harry said, sitting down to enjoy his share of breakfast while he still could. "Maggie and Marie both know that you're leaving today and told me that I needn't be there until I've seen you off. Since the train will leave around eleven o'clock, I suppose I can make it to work by noon. Are you done? Have you tasted the scones? I bought them yesterday from the baker on the way home."

"I did take one, but I'm full now. Is it too early to change my clothes already?" Tom asked. "I mean, we're leaving in less than an hour."

"Wash your face first," Harry replied. "And make sure you have everything you need. No, not in the trunk-- I mean the things you want to keep in the small bag you'll be carrying with you. Is your wand in there? I packed some food for you just in case you get hungry. And a book or two."

"Yes, yes, everything is in the bag," Tom huffed, but checked to make sure anyway. Harry shook his head and gestured at the packed lunch. "When will you be getting dressed? I want to be early there at the station... I mean, you did tell me that the compartments get filled pretty fast."

"Oh, yes, you have a point," Harry agreed, standing up and contemplating whether or not he could shove two scones into his mouth without Tom judging him for it. In the end he chose to just leave the
"Will you be wearing robes, too?"

"Yes, I think it'll be better from now on to wear robes when there are no Muggles around. When you come back for the summer, we'll get you some casual robes for you to wear whenever we decide to go to Diagon Alley or someplace like it."

"Will you buy my robes from that old man again?" Tom asked, curious. "I mean, his work seems decent."

"We'll see," Harry replied, knowing that Tom had been impressed by the man's alleged reputation. It was a bit of a bother that the old man had never given his name - had he simply assumed that Harry knew it or that he'd find out easily? *Perhaps I would, if I knew anyone in the wizarding world right now."

"How are we going to get there?" Tom called from the bathroom, where he was washing his face. "Will you apparate us to the train station?"

"Yes," Harry said. "It's easier to simply apparate there, since we'll be wearing robes. If we took a bus to King's Cross and went through the glamoured entrance, we'd be attracting too much attention from Muggles. Which, well, is not a good thing. Secrecy is important."

Harry then quickly put the leftovers into the fridge and put the bread back in the basket before charming the plates, utensils, and glasses to float towards the sink. He then hurried towards the bedroom, where he had already set out clean robes for himself to wear. He could hardly believe that the day had finally come! Tom would leave for Hogwarts and end up in Slytherin and hopefully won't introduce him to Dark Arts.

Then again, it wasn't as if Harry expected Tom to become a saint or a paragon of kindness and goodwill - he knew that Tom simply wasn't that kind of a person. All he truly wanted was for Tom to grow up and become the kind of a person who wouldn't cause excessive grief to those around him. Anything less than a Dark Lord hell-bent on genocide would be improvement and make Harry proud.

"Harry," Tom yelled. "I'm ready!"

"All right," Harry yelled back, buttoning up his robes. "Just a second and we'll go!"

* A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said *Hogwarts Express, eleven o'clock.* Smoke from the engine drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every colour wound here and there between their legs. Owls hooted to one another in a disgruntled sort of way over the babble and the scraping of heavy trunks.

Tom felt as if he had stepped into a dream.

“Let’s get your trunk into the cargo car and find you a compartment,” Harry said, and Tom hurried right after him, with his trunk floating above his head.

“Will there be empty compartments left?” Tom asked, wishing that they would have arrived even earlier. Harry found a place in the cargo car for Tom’s trunk and as soon as he had put it there, he turned to the boy.
"The train usually starts filling up from the middle first," Harry explained, pulling Tom gently with him as he began walking again. "The first and last cars are often the last ones to be filled, so why don't we head to the first car right now and take a look."

"Okay," Tom said, and as he watched Harry look for an empty compartment for him, he couldn't help but feel... strange. He wasn't nervous or sad, not exactly. But he didn't feel happy either. "Harry, I--"

"Oh, there's one," Harry said, stopping as he peered into the train through one of the windows. "The door's right there. Do you want me to go inside with you?"

"No need," Tom muttered, and when Harry turned to look at him, something must have shown on his face. Harry smiled encouragingly at him, and kneeled down in front of him.

"You'll be all right," Harry said, his voice gentle and kind. "Just be yourself, love, and remember to write sometimes."

"What if I don't fit in there?" Tom whispered, words slipping out and voicing concerns he hadn't even wanted to admit to himself. He didn't like other people but he didn't want to be the odd one out -- again. "I don't mind being alone, but I don't want to be looked down on."

"You will fit in just fine," Harry assured him, tugging at one of the boy's dark brown curls and smiling at him. "And you'll do so well, Tom, we both know it. I know that they have a thing for bloodlines and they tend to cater to those with money, but people will always respect intelligence -- no matter how reluctantly. So just be the smart boy I know you are, and you'll do just fine."

"Right," Tom said, feeling slightly better. "You'll write to me, right?"

"Of course!"

"And you will take proper care of yourself," Tom continued, narrowing his eyes. "You’re such a pushover sometimes. You can't let Maggie boss you around forever. And I don't want any 'Marie says hi' sort of letters, you hear me?"

"Absolutely," Harry grinned his response, his green eyes twinkling with amusement. "Anything else, your highness?"

'Don't find another family while I'm away,' Tom wanted to say. Instead, he shook his head. "No. Nothing."

"Well then," Harry sighed, pulling the boy into a hug. "Take care of yourself, don't get into trouble and if someone tries to pick a fight with you, go and talk to a teacher immediately."

"Yeah, yeah."

Eventually Harry let go, his eyes looking suspiciously bright, as if he was holding back a few tears. With a shaky smile the raven-haired man gestured for Tom to enter the train. "Off you go, then, before someone else gets there first."

Tom grabbed his small book bag with him as he stepped into the train and headed towards the compartment Harry had found for him. As soon as he got in there, he locked the door and rushed to look at Harry through the window. Harry smiled, and said something, but Tom couldn't hear him through the glass. He didn't know how to open the window, and suspected that the window frame itself was jammed shut rather than locked.
‘He can’t hear me,’ Tom thought, pressing his hand against the glass and staring at Harry. Could he really say what he had been holding back so far? Maybe if he let it out he could control these stupid feelings of attachment that he had towards Harry?

“Thank you,” the boy said, pressing his forehead against the glass. “I’ll miss you.” He could see the other wizard smile, before he suddenly had to step back as the train made a loud noise. More students kept rushing into the train and Tom knew that soon the train would start moving, taking him away from London and all the way to Scotland.

Harry felt his heart ache as he watched Tom sit in the compartment alone. He remembered his own first trip and how he had met Ron, and he desperately hoped for Tom to be able to make a few good friends at Hogwarts. When the train finally began moving, Harry saw Tom wave at him one last time before he was gone.

‘And off he goes,’ the wizard thought, feeling suddenly miserable. All he had now was a job that he liked well enough but didn't enjoy and an empty flat where he'd live alone until Christmas.

"Of course you'd be here, too," a voice said, and it took Harry a moment before realizing that it was him that the voice was speaking to. He turned to see Lord Black staring at him with a contemptuous expression on his face. Next to him stood the woman who had been with him at the coffee shop, and her eyes were fixed on Harry with a sharp, assessing look.

"Lord Black," Harry sighed, reluctant to waste any time on listening to the man. "And... Lady Black, I assume?"

"You assume correctly," the woman replied, managing to somehow look at Harry with both disgust and contempt while maintaining a coldly polite smile on her face. "Arcturus, shall we go? I have elsewhere to be."

"In a moment," Lord Black said, looking at Harry in a way that he found highly unsettling. "It never ceases to amaze me how... bold some of you are. Despite Hogwarts not being where your kind belongs, you still insist on going there."

"Your opinion on the matter does not surprise me in the least," Harry said dryly, resisting the temptation to roll his eyes. "However I would like to remind you that magic exists in people regardless of their blood and leaving witches and wizards untrained due to personal opinions such as yours would result in an unknown number of people causing magical accidents in the Muggle world. Which in turn would risk the exposure of the wizarding world."

"You make a strong argument," Lord Black said, though he didn't sound particularly approving of Harry's opinion. "Spent some time thinking of this, have you?"

"Perhaps," Harry said. "Now, however... as nice as it is to discuss these matters with you, I must go. Good day."

"Before you leave," Lord Black said. "I do not know your name, do I? Since you know mine, I believe it is only fair for me to know yours."

"Riddle," Harry replied. "Harry Riddle."

"Well, Mr. Riddle," Lord Black said, sounding amused for reasons Harry couldn't begin to guess. "It was a pleasure to meet you." Harry narrowed his eyes in suspicion but nodded anyway as he walked past the couple.

If he never saw the two again, he'd be happy.
"Interesting," Melania Black said, watching Riddle walk away. The man was rather well dressed for a mudblood, and though he was a pleasant sight for the eyes, he wasn't quite handsome enough to justify the admiring looks certain people were giving him.

"Riddle?" Arcturus scoffed with insincere disagreement. "Hardly!"

"Oh, I wasn't speaking of that mudblood," Melania said quietly, glancing at her husband with a condescending look. Oh, she could see exactly what he thought of Riddle. She hadn't spent over a decade and a half without learning how to read him like an open book. "I meant your... behaviour. Forgive me for being surprised by your sudden need to speak to one of his kind with politeness reserved usually for people of some status. What on earth could be the reason for that?"

"Shall we go home?" Arcturus asked instead of replying to her question, and began leading the woman towards one of the fireplaces. "I have some work to do at the ministry later on. I'd like to go home and rest for a little bit before that."

"Oh yes," Melania said pleasantly and nodded in greeting to Mrs. Goyle who had just walked past them. "You did buy that Order of Merlin, didn't you? First class, I believe?"

"I would like to remind you that I earned it. Unless, of course, you have a reason to believe that Minister Fawley would engage in any kind of foul play," Arcturus hissed, his fingers curling around the woman's arm. Melania's smile didn't waver even when Arcturus' nails dug into her skin painfully. She remained silent until she had flooed back home to Grimmauld Place with Arcturus right behind her, and it wasn't until he sat down to unlace his boots that she spoke.

"He is rather lovely looking, isn't he?" she said, tugging off her gloves. "I suppose you do like your... friends to be shorter and slender. He does look like he'd put up a fight, though, so you might want to watch out for that."

"What in Merlin's name are you talking about?"

"Oh, darling, you know what I'm talking about."

"I advise you to be more careful with your words, then," Arcturus said, not amused in the least. The familiar anger and resentment he often felt towards his wife burned in his blood again, and he could only curse the bad luck that made him marry a woman who would rather punish him for not being the husband she wanted than be grateful for the wealth he had allowed her to live in. "Anyone else would take grave offense and seek retribution, my dear."

Melania laughed softly while taking off her hat and then sat down on a chair nearby. She looked at him with a smile on her face, reminding Arcturus of a beautiful painting. "Oh, Arcturus, is it the truth that wounds you so? Perhaps you could have thought of that before engaging in activities unbecoming of your status."

"You really do need to be careful of what you speak. I assure you that whatever you believe you know of this situation is wrong."

"Ah, but there is a situation."

"There's a rumour that Dark wizards and witches are gathering somewhere in Germany," Arcturus said, and for a moment Melania wasn't sure if the man was discussing the mudblood still or if he had dared to move so carelessly to a different subject. "I wonder if Malfoy knows something about this. Perhaps I should ask him."
"Malfoys refuse to believe in the existence of potentially important gatherings unless they are the first ones invited," Melania said, before leaning against the table and eyeing Arcturus with a pleasant smile on her face. "You don't wish to discuss the mudblood, I take it? I cannot fault you for that, I suppose. After all if anyone else knew of your inclinations, you'd lose far more than your reputation. Money can buy tolerance but it cannot buy acceptance."

"There's nothing to discuss," Arcturus snapped. "For some reason you're overreacting to whatever delusions your mind has conjured up."

"Oh, do forgive me," Melania said, and the clear pitch in her voice promised him no good. His instincts were proven right when the woman continued: "However, since I'm aware of your habit of enjoying young men whenever you believe I do not notice, I suspect that I am allowed my... delusions, as you said."

"You're out of line with these vulgar accusations of yours," Arcturus said, feeling angrier than before. "I know what my priorities are and I assure you that I am not about to forget them anytime soon."

"I am most relieved to hear that," Melania said, unaffected by her husband’s angry expression. "I know you believe yourself to be entitled to everything you fancy, Arcturus, but that is only because I have yet to find any of your ridiculous activities relevant enough of my attention. However if you do keep speaking to this... Mr. Riddle... more often in public, I'm afraid that I will have to interfere."

"For your own sake, I hope that you're not trying to threaten me," Arcturus said, standing up. "How about you have a cup of tea and calm down a little bit, my dear? It seems that dropping the children off has made you hysterical. I would join you, but I'd like to take a nap before I go to the ministry."

"Rest easy, Arcturus," Melania said, waving her hand dismissively. "I will enjoy my tea in your absence. Have a good day."

"Likewise," the man replied, more than ready to leave. "I'll see you in the evening."

* *

It had taken Tom slightly over ten minutes of staring outside through the window before he grew bored of seeing the sceneries flying by and dug out one of the books he had taken with him. The sight of the lunch Harry had packed for him made Tom nearly smile, and he couldn't deny how pleased it made him to have someone who would happily care for him like that.

A few times in the beginning someone had tried to open the compartment's door, but everyone had given up as soon as they had realized that the door was locked. Tom knew, however, that eventually someone would try to come in despite the locking spell - and he was right. Two chapters into the book he was reading, a girl with thin black hair and a sour expression had managed to open the door and step in.

"That was a locking spell, wasn't it? It's good that I knew the counter spell, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to get in," she said, sitting down in front of Tom. The boy promptly refocused on his book, hoping that the girl would understand the hint and leave him alone. "It's rude to keep a compartment all for yourself when there are others looking for a place to sit."

"I don't care," Tom replied, already hating her for existing and annoyed at her for stepping into his compartment. If he had to be disturbed, why couldn't it have been someone who enjoyed silence and didn't seem to have the need to talk to him? "And yes, Captain Obvious, that was a locking spell. A locked door is not an invitation for you to try and open it, you know."
"Are you a first year student?" the girl asked, ignoring everything that Tom had just told her. "You
don't look old enough to be a second year."

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"It was just a question, you know. No need to be rude about it."

"I'm not being rude," Tom snapped, refusing to look up from the book he was busy trying to read. "I
just don't think that you're entitled to know anything about me. Now be quiet, because I'm trying to
read."

"What book is that?" the girl asked a moment later, making Tom even more annoyed. "I brought so
many books with me even though my mother told me that I wouldn't need to, but I'd rather have too
many books than not enough books. Is that about arithmancy? I see numbers on the cover."

"Investment," Tom replied, and scowled at her. He couldn't believe that only a few hours ago he had
wanted to make friends and meet people. Harry's tolerable company had made him forget how
endlessly annoying everybody else was. "I told you to be quiet. I'm trying to read."

"Whatever," the girl muttered, rolling her eyes as she pulled out a book of her own. "I don't usually
talk with people but my mother made me promise to try. So I tried. Now I'm done."

"Quiet," Tom repeated once more, and ignored the angry huff coming from the girl's direction. The
two then proceeded to read quietly for nearly a full hour before someone else barged into their
compartment.

"Hello!" the boy - clearly an older student - said cheerfully. His voice was loud and the smile on his
face made Tom want to throw a book at him. "My name is Emerson Blair, and I am a Hufflepuff
prefect here to greet first year students and help them if there's any need for that. We're already a few
hours into our journey to Hogwarts and I hope that you've had a good time so far. Is there anything
you wish to ask about? Now's your chance!"

"No thank you," the girl said immediately, eyeing the older boy's black and yellow tie with a
disapproving frown. It made Tom remembered when Harry had told him a little bit about the
different prejudices people had when it came to each Hogwarts House. "I think we're good."

"Actually," Tom started, just to be contrary. "I'm a half-blood, you see, and there's a lot that I don't
know yet about Hogwarts."

"Oh, I'm a half-blood too," Emerson said, his smile becoming slightly less cheerful but somehow
more genuine. "I promise you that if you run into any prejudice at school, you won't have to deal
with it alone."

"Yes, thank you," Tom said impatiently, before asking: "What are the opening hours of the library?"

"Oh." Emerson looked surprised for a second, before he laughed and shook his head. "If you don't
end up in Ravenclaw, I'll be surprised. Hogwarts library opens at six thirty in the morning and closes
at nine thirty in the evening."

"Is there a limit to how many books you can borrow at once?"

"I... I have no idea."

"All right," Tom said, glancing down at his book again. "Thank you for answering my questions.
Have a good day." The prefect sat still for a few moments, before he stood up and left after making
sure that the two had no other questions to ask. As soon as he had closed the compartment door after him, the girl said:

"You asked him your stupid questions just because I said that we have nothing to ask, didn't you?"

"My questions weren't stupid," Tom protested, though he didn't bother denying the accusation. "I just wanted to know the opening hours of the library."

The witch rolled her eyes, clearly not believing his excuse. Tom didn't care - he had no interest in making the girl believe him anyway. In fact the only thing he wanted from her was for her to leave him alone and never speak to him again.

'I really hope that I won't end up in the same House as her,' Tom thought. 'Anything would be better than that.'

The girl remained blissfully quiet for the rest of the trip, and eventually Tom forgot her presence altogether. It wasn't until he felt the train slow down that he looked up and remembered her being there. The girl looked at him too, and seemed alarmingly ready to say something when a voice announced:

“We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes’ time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately.”

‘Here I go,’ Tom thought, feeling slightly queasy and wary. He left the compartment only after the train had stopped, joining the crowd filling the corridor and leaving the dark-haired girl behind in the compartment. As soon as the doors opened, people - Tom drifting along with them - rushed out onto a tiny, dark platform. Tom silently wondered what the time was - it was dark outside and quite cold, too.

“First years this way,” a loud voice shrieked, and Tom turned to see a short man levitating a glowing sign to catch the attention of the students. “First years! This way! Follow me!”

“They seriously need someone taller for that kinda job,” said someone standing right behind Tom as they walked down a narrow, steep path.

“What, a giant or something?” another boy snickered. “Because you’d have to be thrice as tall, four times as wide and infinitely louder to not gum up the works like this one is doing.”

“You’ll soon see Hogwarts,” the short professor yelled, his voice carrying with surprising ease. Tom wondered if he was using a spell of some sort to make sure that everyone could hear him. “Come on, just around this bend here.”

Harry had called Hogwarts magnificent, but Tom only now realized how magnificent Hogwarts could actually be. The narrow path had opened suddenly onto the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.

“No more than four in one boat,” the short man instructed, pointing to a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore. “No more than four! And don't touch the water!” Tom walked towards one of the boats and he had barely sat down when he was joined by the two boys that had been talking right behind him, and, much to his ire, the girl with whom he had shared his compartment.

“Where do you think you’ll get sorted?” one of the boys asked the other.
“Mum said I better be a Ravenclaw if I want to go back home,” the other replied. “I don’t think she was really serious about it, though. As long as it’s not Slytherin…”

“My parents will probably disown me if I end up in Slytherin,” the first boy agreed. “They-“

“Are pretty pathetic and not very good parents to begin with if they’re ready to throw away their own child just because he or she got sorted into a House the parents don’t like,” the girl said sharply. Tom silently agreed with her and wondered if Harry’s attitude towards Houses wasn’t common. Harry had said that any House was fine.

“Who asked you, Prince?” the first boy asked. The girl rolled her eyes and didn't respond, which only seemed to irritate the two boys more. They were distracted, however, when the fleet of little boats started moving towards the castle.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” one of the two boys said, staring at Tom. “Are you a Muggleborn?”

“Half-blood,” Tom replied, reluctant to talk more about his parentage. Luckily the boys didn't seem to be interested in hearing more about it either.

The boats then entered a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle until they reached a small underground harbour, where they clambered out onto rocks and pebbles. The short man led them up a passageway in the rocks that took them to a flight of stairs and a huge door. The short man turned to take one last look at the students following him before he turned and pushed the door open.

The stone walls of the entrance hall were lit with flaming torches, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors. A tall, thin man with auburn hair and a cheerful smile walked towards them.

“The students, Professor Dumbledore,” the short man said.

“Thank you, Tuggs,” Professor Dumbledore replied, smiling pleasantly. “Welcome, everyone, to Hogwarts. I am the Deputy Headmaster, Professor Albus Dumbledore. Please do follow me, ladies and gentlemen.”

The man then led the students to a small, empty chamber out of the hall. The students crowded in, standing rather closer together than they usually would have done, peering about nervously. Dumbledore then turned to them again. “The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your House.”

‘Harry explained all this to me already,’ Tom thought impatiently, zoning out. ‘The Houses, the points, the competitions…’

“Form a line, please,” Professor Dumbledore finally said, still smiling kindly to them, “and follow me.” They walked silently out of the chamber, back across the hall and through a pair of double doors into the Great Hall, and Tom couldn’t remember a time when he had been more nervous than this.

He had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in mid-air over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the end of the hall, on an elevated platform, was another long table where the teachers were seated.

Professor Dumbledore led them up towards the platform, and they came to a halt in a line facing the
other students with the teachers behind them. The hundreds of faces staring at them made Tom feel nervous, and he scowled, trying to not look bothered by the attention.

A four-legged stool was placed in front of the first years. On top of the stool there was a pointed wizard’s hat, and Tom remembered Harry telling him about it. The Sorting Hat. It was, frankly, a disappointing garment; patched and frayed and looked rather dirty. A few students gasped with surprise when the hat twitched and a ripped brim opened wide like a mouth. And then, the hat began to sing.

Ten centuries ago
a school was built on a hill,
to teach magic to each child
with an ounce of wizarding will.

To ease the task of learning
four Houses came to be,
and the task of sorting you all
was left up to me.

With sharp wit and wisdom
Ravenclaw leads your steps
to a road of books and knowledge,
and learning that never ends.

A cornerstone of achievement
remains hard work,
surpassing talent and luck
is this Hufflepuff quirk.

A daring heart seen by all
or courage hidden inside,
it will take you to Gryffindor
where the brave dwell with pride.

Ambitious folk, cunning and clever
with dreams of high glory,
in the noble House of Slytherin
remains a common story.

So come closer and take a seat,
let’s have a chat.
I know exactly where to send you,
I am the Sorting Hat!

The whole hall burst into applause as the hat finished its song. It bowed to each of the four tables and then became quiet and still again.

“‘We just have to try that on,’” someone whispered behind Tom, sounding relieved. “Dad told me I’d have to slay a dragon.”

‘Idiot,’ Tom thought.

Professor Dumbledore, smiling even brighter than before, stepped forward holding a scroll of parchment. “When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted,” he said.
“Ainsley, Linda!”

Tom saw a pink-faced girl with a worried expression stumble out of the line in front of him, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sit down. A moment’s pause, and —

“GRYFFINDOR!” shouted the hat. The table on the right cheered and clapped as the girl went to sit down there among the cheering people who welcomed her enthusiastically.

“Avery, Aloysius.”

“It’s Al!” protested a blond boy, walking past Tom, who wondered what kind of a name was Aloysius.

“SLYTERIN!” shouted the hat, and smiling smugly Avery scurried towards the table of Slytherins. After him ‘Balfour, Yvette’ was sorted into Gryffindor and ‘Blishwick, Regina’ became the first Ravenclaw.

And so it went on… Bones, Boot, Brown, Burke… There were a few names Tom could recognize to belong to rather notorious families, such as Dorian Lestrange and Duncan McLaggen. And then, finally, it was his turn.

“Riddle, Tom,” Dumbledore said, and keeping his face calm and impassive with practiced ease, Tom made his way towards the stool. He wondered where he’d end up and the last thing on his mind when the hat was placed on his head was which House would make Harry the happiest.

“Hmm,” said a small voice in his ear. “Quite complicated, hm? I see intelligence worthy of Ravenclaw— you do so love studying, don’t you? But your loyalty to that man… could land you in Hufflepuff.”

‘Harry,’ Tom thought.

“You’re… not particularly brave, are you? Then how about Slytherin? Oh yes… yes… Well, look at this. A peculiar skill indeed… Well, this solves it. Quite unexpected! Without a doubt, you belong to — SLYTERIN!” Tom heard the hat shout the last word to the whole hall. He took it off and walked calmly towards the Slytherin table, where some other first years were making space for him. To his secret relief, the students were clapping for him, too.

He wasn’t sure why he had expected them not to.

It didn’t take long for the rest of the students to be sorted and after Weasley, Franklin was placed in Gryffindor, Dumbledore rolled up the scroll and took the Sorting Hat and the stool away. The Headmaster – Tom didn’t remember his name – stood up. His smile wasn’t quite as annoyingly cheerful as Dumbledore’s, although Tom would have preferred a serious expression instead of an idiotic grin on the man’s face. He looked like nothing could have pleased him more than to see them all there.

“Welcome,” the old man said. “New and returning students, welcome to Hogwarts!”
The Slytherin common room was deep in the dungeons, partly beneath the lake the first year students had crossed to get to the castle. It was strange and yet amazing, to look up and see the lake above them. Tom wondered if anything lived in the lake, and if something did, whether or not he'd see it.

"Good evening," an older student called over the crowd, standing on what looked like a small platform. "I have no doubt that everyone here is tired and really looking forward to going to bed. Before that can happen, however, a few things must be addressed first. I am the seventh year prefect, Clair Betancourt, one of the six prefects of the Slytherin House."

"But not the Head Boy, eh?" someone behind Tom muttered.

"If at any point you find yourself in need of assistance, especially if you think that you are being targeted by other students for mean-spirited purposes, reach out to one of us," Betancourt continued. "You'll recognize the prefects by the badges we carry."

"Could he sound any more pompous about this?" the same boy who had spoken earlier, whispered.

"Don't let him hear you," someone else replied. "He'll take points. You know he will. Besides, he's not so bad anymore."

"The other seventh year prefect is Pandora, standing here next to me," Betancourt continued, "and familiar from last year, the current sixth year prefects are Floyd and Arielle."

"Notice that he only introduced himself by his full name."

'Who cares?' Tom thought, and knew better than to actually say that to the boy behind him. 'I just want this to be over with.'

"The fifth year prefects who have joined our ranks this year are Chester and Tanya."

"Wait," an older girl said, a disdainful expression on her face. "Tanya Simmons? Why would a Mud- a Muggleborn be a Slytherin prefect?"

"Because most of us have outgrown those outdated views that you seem to be clinging to in regards to family background," the girl Betancourt had introduced earlier as Pandora, said sharply. "Should I catch any of you bullying people for not being purebloods, I'll give you enough detentions to last you a lifetime."

"Isn't that special treatment?" someone asked hesitantly. "I mean, I don't hear you saying that Purebloods can't be bullied?"

"Nobody is allowed to bully anyone," Betancourt sighed. "And if you're bullied for being a Pureblood, that'd be a first. Now, we'll hand out the schedules and then first and second year students will go to their dorms. Tomorrow morning our Head of House, Professor Horace Slughorn, will greet the first year students and walk them to the Great Hall for breakfast at seven o'clock."

"I just don't understand why everything that has to do with Mudbloods must be such an issue," Tom heard a girl say while he waited for one of the prefects to hand him his schedule. "Why couldn't they just say 'don't bully anyone' rather than 'don't bully mudbloods'?"
"Because Bailey specifically commented on Simmons being a prefect," her friend hissed. "And don't use that word. You know they take points for it."

"Oh, not Floyd," the other girl said dismissively. "He lets it slide unless there's someone else to call him out on it. Which almost never happens, anyway."

"Riddle, right?" Tom heard, and turned to see one of the prefects holding a piece of paper towards him. "Welcome to Slytherin."

"Thank you," Tom said, and eagerly took a look at his timetable. There were seven subjects that Tom had read ahead for already and then flying on Fridays. He remembered Harry telling him about his exciting times on a broom, but Tom personally hated the whole idea of not having both feet on solid ground.

"First and second year students," Betancourt then said, yelling in order to make his voice carry over the noise. "Up to your dorms! Remember to wake up tomorrow early to meet Professor Slughorn!"

The dorm room was larger than Harry and Tom's entire home - Tom was absolutely sure of that. In the far wall were a row of tall arched windows through which yet another part of the lake was visible. On each side of the room there were three beds with heavy curtains, large oaken desks, and comfortable leather chairs for the students to use. There was a small fountain in the middle of the room and in one corner Tom could see a silver door that led to a spacious bathroom.

On each bed was a trunk, and as soon as Tom saw his own, he headed towards the bed it was on. Much to his secret delight he had one of the two beds close to the windows, which would allow him to look out at the lake as much as he'd want to.

"Merlin, I can't believe I'm finally here," one of the boys said, throwing himself onto one of the beds. "About time."

"Tell me about it," another agreed. "Finally we get to actually start doing some magic!"

"Not what I meant, Al, but whatever," the first boy said with a yawn.

"Well, what did you mean, then?"

"Who cares what he meant, Avery?" the boy from the bed right next to Tom's said. "Shut up, I don't want to hear your voice after a long day."

"If I want your opinion, Lestrange, I'll ask for it," Avery said. "I'm trying to talk with a friend, so stay on your side and keep your nose out of my business."

"Since when have you and Mulciber been friends anyway?" Lestrange asked. "Or does talking to a narcoleptic count as friendship these days?"

'Shut up,' Tom thought, but didn't say it aloud, not wanting to give the two boys a chance to turn against him. Instead he changed into his nightwear, brushed his teeth, and climbed into bed, hoping that the two squabbling boys would have the sense to go to sleep soon.

That night, tucked into a bed far better than any other he had ever slept in, Tom spent a moment marveling at how much his life had changed since Harry had taken him in. He didn't want to think of how awful the years and months leading up to this moment would have been at the orphanage, and chose to think of Harry instead. He'd need to write a letter and send it to the man, but so far it wasn't as if Tom had anything surprising to say. Somehow Harry had always been so sure of Tom being a Slytherin.
"Going somewhere?"

Arcturus hadn't noticed Melania walk into their shared bedroom but didn't let his surprise show. Instead he continued buttoning his robes and didn't reply for a few long moments. Eventually, he said: "To Diagon Alley."

"Dressed so nicely?" Melania asked, with a hint of a smile on her lips. Arcturus had never understood how such a sweet-faced woman could be so vicious and twisted on the inside. "Goodness, has that place become so fine as of late to deserve all this care?"

"I resent the implication that I am not always well dressed," Arcturus replied mildly, reaching for his gloves. "As Lord Black I consider it one of my duties to always look my best. Surely that does not come as a surprise to you."

"There's well-dressed," Melania said, walking further into the room and stopping right behind Arcturus, smiling at him through the mirror. "And then there's dressed in Pembroke robes for no reason. It does make me wonder if you expect to run into someone important in Diagon Alley."

Arcturus barely contained a grimace, and hated the woman for bringing up Riddle again. The problem was that the more Melania kept mentioning the man, the more Arcturus thought of him. "Perhaps you've grown paranoid in your old age, my dear."

"You have seven years on me," Melania replied, her voice light enough to sound almost innocent. "I suppose you would know what age does better than I do."

"It is idle minds that conjure the strangest delusions," Arcturus said then, levelling the woman with a look that would have intimidated many others. "Perhaps you ought to step out for a bit of fresh air, hm? Meet up with a few friends - I'm sure that even you have some people who enjoy your presence this late in the evening. Invite Mrs. Goyle for dinner, I'm sure she'd love that."

"Step out for a bit?" Melania repeated, arching one of her carefully sculpted eyebrows and ignoring the man's suggestion. "I would love to. You're going out now, aren't you? If you'd like to wait a few minutes, I'll gladly accompany you to... Diagon Alley. Although do forgive me for not planning on wearing Pembroke for this kind of outing - I'm saving that particular dress for the next ministry function we'll be obliged to attend."

Arcturus looked at his wife in silence, rage welling inside of him. Why, oh why, was he still keeping her around? Certainly, a divorce would be quite a mess, but it'd be worth it to see Melania humiliated on her way out of the Black family. A proud woman like her, abandoned by her husband. Arcturus knew how their society worked - he knew that though people would pity Melania and speak ill of him for a while, at the end of the day it'd still be him at the top of the food chain and her at the bottom of it.

"Don't trouble yourself," Arcturus finally said. "I wouldn't want to prevent you from having a pleasant evening with a friend by keeping you with me."

"So kind of you," Melania replied mockingly. She took a step back towards the door, and Arcturus hoped that she'd soon leave him be. "I just might owl Morag, then. I'm sure she'll appreciate the company - after all, her son Amadeus is at Hogwarts as well. I do believe, however, that I will leave Diagon Alley to you, my dearest. I prefer places of a different... atmosphere. No mudbloods or poor people running around. Only people worth knowing."
"I wish you a good day, then," Arcturus said, mustering up a smile that was as close to genuine as he could manage. "I'll see you later."

"Enjoy your... outing," Melania said, pausing at the doorway to throw the man yet another look before she continued: "I do encourage you to be mindful of your behaviour, dear. You know how easily people talk, and should your company consist solely of young, passably attractive young men, well... someone might just misunderstand what they're seeing."

"Woman, I am warning you—"

"Oh, no need for warnings. I am simply concerned. Even the madness that runs in Black blood won't explain away the shame of being caught with a mudblood of your own sex."

Arcturus froze where he stood, paling dramatically before his face flushed red with anger. He was reaching for his wand when he realized that Melania had left, the sound of her footsteps hurrying away from their room. Shaking with rage, Arcturus sat down on a chair, imagining going after his wife and skinning her alive for her insolence. The way she spoke to him! The way she spoke of him!

'I will kill her,' Arcturus thought, unable to remember a time he had ever felt this angry at her. 'One of these days I'll be done with her disrespect and kill her. Circe, I already have two children - there's no reason to keep her around, is there?'

For now, however, he needed to calm down. He needed an outlet.

Arcturus had never been the kind of man to enjoy a drink or a drug. No, his vice laid in desire, and the mere thought of wrapping his hands around a pale throat and fucking a body that struggled to breathe aroused him enough to drain some of the anger he was feeling. He could... he could go and do what he wanted, despite Melania's warnings. She wouldn't dare speak of his activities anytime soon, knowing how much she had pushed him today.

He could go and find someone. Anyone. Someone young, preferably with green eyes. Someone who wouldn't be missed even if they disappeared, never to be found again.

The man took a deep breath before pushing himself off the chair to stand up again. Taking a look at himself through the mirror confirmed that nothing was out of place, and with an approving nod to himself, Arcturus swept out of the room.

* *

Harry had never thought of working on button holes to be particularly enjoyable, but somehow the task had managed to become even more mind numbing than before. And yet, despite how dull the work was, it was still better than not doing any work at all, and Harry was not looking forward to a weekend without Tom.

"You look so very sad," Marie observed, looking at him with a pitying expression. "I felt sad, too, when my last child married his sweetheart and moved to Birmingham. Living alone after becoming so used to the company of someone else is hard."

"Mr. Riddle can find himself a hobby to keep him occupied, I'm sure," Maggie said. "He's a grown man who is fully capable of functioning even in the absence of his... ward."

"Well," Harry said. "I could work more, if that's all right? My weekends are free now."

"Oh, that would be so nice," Marie sighed, but then shook her head with an apologetic expression. "But I'm afraid that we cannot give you any additional work because we cannot afford paying you
for it. The sales have gone up lately, though, so perhaps in a couple of months the situation will be good enough for that?"

"No," Maggie said, and looked at Harry with a stern expression. "Mr. Riddle can use his free time to connect with people of his own age. You've worked with me for a long time, and somehow not once have you mentioned a friend or an acquaintance you enjoy spending your time with. From what I've gathered, you have no friends."

Harry felt insulted by the assumption. Well, it was true, but Merlin, she didn't need to be so blunt about it!

"Oh, in that case," Marie said, looking delighted all of a sudden. "I heard from one of my neighbours that there are plenty of opportunities to meet people at pubs in the afternoon."

"I'm not much of a pub goer," Harry admitted, cringing at the mere thought of drinking beer and imagining a bar full of rowdy, Dudley-looking people. "But I will make sure to, um, come up with something." Perhaps he could go to Diagon Alley in the near future, or even Hogsmeade.

"You're still young, Harry," Marie continued, sitting down on a chair nearby and leaning closer with a cheerful smile on her face. "You're a hardworking young man who deserves to have someone who loves and supports you. Enjoy your weekends and meet new people. There's no guessing who you'll end up bumping into, right?"

"Um..."

"There are many girls who'd be so happy to meet you, so don't be afraid of stepping out and making new friends!"

"Sure," Harry said, having no intentions whatsoever to start a relationship with anyone who might end up distracting him from his original mission. Besides, somehow Harry truly doubted that Tom would be particularly welcoming towards anyone new in their lives. In fact, Harry wouldn't be surprised if the boy ended up actively protesting against the idea of adding anyone to their small family. "Thank you, Miss Marie. I appreciate your advice."

"Oh, to be young again," Marie sighed dreamily. "When my Matthew was still alive, he was such a charmer! Always knew I'd marry him, I did. Ever since he bought me a ribbon for Christmas when we were fourteen. We had a lovely wedding at a small church and he always made me so happy – to the very last day, he did."

"I'm certain that you made him happy, too," Harry said, not sure if there was another standard response he ought to give in this situation. Marie smiled at him and patted his hand with a pleased expression on her face before she stood up to start folding a pile of leftover fabrics on a table nearby.

"I'm sure that Tommy would appreciate having a mother figure in his life," the woman continued after a while. "He's a tad too shy, isn't he?"

"Well, he's a quiet one, for sure," Harry said. "But he'll grow out of it eventually. You see, he's been living with me for around three years now, but before that he used to live in a... rather unfortunate orphanage."

"Oh." Marie's eyes were wide with surprise, and Harry felt compelled to continue:

"I hadn't known about his existence until about a week before I adopted him," he said. "We're quite distantly related but it's easier to simply tell people that he's my brother."
"The poor dear. How bad was it?" Marie asked, and Harry could see that even Maggie had paused her work to listen.

"He still hasn't told me much of it," Harry admitted, "but I think he was bullied quite badly. You know how different he is from other children, and I'm guessing that no one took kindly to that... difference. He was too clever and too sharp and sometimes mean, which made him stand out enough to be a target."

"That is terrible," Marie murmured, and shook her head as she continued folding the fabrics. "Did you speak with any of the caretakers? Surely they must have known about this."

Harry bit his lip and thought of the attic he had found Tom in. "They knew."

"Well, isn't that good?"

"From the look on your face, Mr. Riddle, I suspect the caretakers were not exactly suitable for their jobs," Maggie said, joining the conversation. Harry nodded hesitantly.

"The week I got to take Tom with me, another child had caused him to catch a terrible cold and he became quite ill," Harry explained, remembering the panic he had felt when he had first realized how sick Tom really was back then. "They hadn't called a doctor and seemed to be perfectly content leaving him to just... pull through on his own."

"Well," Marie said after a moment of stunned silence, trying to sound cheerful. "At least he's with you now, right?"

Early on Saturday morning, Harry stumbled out of his bedroom, took one look at Tom's empty bed, and decided to have his breakfast in any of Diagon Alley's coffee shops. Not needing to buy food for two, and having saved plenty of money before, Harry knew he could afford eating out a few times more than he had so far, despite the money that he had spent on Tom's robes earlier in the summer.

The thought of eating breakfast alone after getting used to sharing with Tom was sad, and Harry wondered if Mrs. Weasley had felt like this after sending Ginny to Hogwarts.

'Then again the Weasleys are a well-liked family with many friends,' Harry thought, sighing with no small amount of jealousy. 'And Mrs. Weasley had Mr. Weasley with her, didn't she? Merlin, I really need to socialize more. I can't stand the thought of being alone all the time like this.'

Diagon Alley wasn't half as crowded as it usually was.

Harry assumed the reason to be simply that most kids were at school now, rather than shopping with their parents. Not that he minded - it was nice to walk through the streets trying to remember which stores he had seen in his own time and which ones had vanished without having to spend half his energy on pushing through masses of people.

'I wonder what Ron and Hermione are doing now,' Harry thought suddenly. Were they too perhaps in Diagon Alley? Were they standing in front of the bookstore Harry had passed a few moments ago? 'And Tom? He's probably studying right now. I wonder which lesson... Maybe Dumbledore’s? Well, this time around there's no reason for Dumbledore to notice Tom, and I hope that Tom won't come up with a reason to hate Dumbledore.'

"Mr. Riddle," a familiar voice drawled, and Harry almost cursed aloud. Did the man have nothing else to do but to skulk around Diagon Alley, waiting for any opportunity to pick on somebody?
“Fancy seeing you here!”

“Lord Black,” Harry said, turning around while trying to come up with any excuse to flee. He was slightly surprised to see Black accompanied by a tall, blond man with a displeased expression on his vaguely familiar face. ‘Wonder if that’s the Malfoy of this time. I mean, the hair colour matches. Can’t even guess the name. Bet the ferret would know.’

“This is Lord Marchosias Malfoy,” Black introduced, and for the life of him Harry couldn't understand the man’s habit of introducing people to Harry for no apparent reason. “And this, my friend, is Harry Riddle.”

"Pleasure," Malfoy said, and Harry was hard pressed to remember when the last time was that he heard someone say the word as insincerely as Malfoy was doing now.

“Honoured,” Harry replied, before shooting a wary glance at Black. “It’s always a pleasure to see you, Mr. Black, but I must leave—“

“Nonsense,” Lord Black cut in, stepping forward with a look in his eyes that made Harry almost reach for his wand.

“Surely, Arcturus, we’re not going to keep the man from doing… whatever he was planning on doing,” Malfoy said hastily, throwing another disgusted look at Harry. “We have a lot we need to discuss after all… about that meeting in Europe.”

“We have already discussed all we could regarding that subject,” Arcturus said, smiling sharply at Malfoy. “And since neither of us knows much, the discussion was short. Disappointingly so.”

‘I need to get out of here,’ Harry thought, eyeing the stores nearby. If he went into one, perhaps Black wouldn't follow?

“So, Harry,” Black said. “You don’t mind me calling you Harry, do you? Were you, perhaps, shopping for something specific?”

“Not really,” Harry replied warily. He glanced at Malfoy who was looking at him with a frustrated expression while occasionally shooting glares at Black. Did the blond expect him to do something? “I was going to look for something I could send to Tom.”

“Oh yes, your… little charge,” Black said pleasantly, and Malfoy sighed loudly. Harry felt increasingly awkward and he was just about ready to fake a sudden headache and flee home and stay there when someone else caught Black’s attention. A short, bald man dressed in green striped robes had pushed open the door of the apothecary nearby and smiled cheerfully at Black.

"Arcturus!” the man yelled. "Good thing seeing you here, now! The thing you ordered has arrived, if you wish to pick it up."

“I hear you, Higgs,” Lord Black said quickly, looking slightly annoyed but already moving to where the man was still standing. “Harry, Marchosias, please wait for me here. I won’t be gone for long.”

‘Next time I come here I’ll wear a disguise,’ Harry decided as he was left alone with Malfoy, standing in the middle of the street. ‘Or just not come at all. I'll go to Hogsmeade instead. Why am I here with Malfoy of all people?’

“How do you know him?” Malfoy asked suddenly. Harry, startled, replied with the first thing that came to mind - the truth.
“I don’t, really,” he said quietly. “We bumped into each other a few times before, that’s all.”

“You’re not a Pureblood,” Malfoy said then, managing to sound accusing while keeping his expression neutral.

“I’m a half-blood,” Harry replied.

“Your kind doesn’t believe in the purity of blood, isn’t that right?”

“Lord Malfoy,” Harry started, taking a deep breath. “I have met all kinds of people during my life, and I have found that clinging to beliefs of blood bringing superiority makes one miss certain valuable chances to ally himself with… talent.”

“You believe there’s power in being a mudblood,” Malfoy stated, and Harry shrugged, not bothering to feel offended by the word. He wasn’t going to fight against these beliefs in this time and place - someone else, decades later, could do it. All Harry wanted to focus on was preventing Tom from accepting these beliefs as his own.

“I think that power exists in some of us, regardless of blood.”

“I disagree.”

“Feel free to.” At Harry's words, Malfoy scowled, not having expected the easy acceptance of his words and not knowing how exactly to go on arguing for them.

“There is so much that mudbloods do not know or understand,” he said after a few moments of contemplation. "They are inferior. Half-bloods are tolerable, I suppose. At least they’re better than the other options.”

“I see.”

“You're not going to try and make me believe what you say?” Malfoy asked then, sounding suspicious, as if expecting the counter-arguments to start at any moment. Harry couldn’t hold back a grin.

“You can have your own opinions,” Harry replied cheerfully. “I think you’re wrong but I am not here to argue against a man who has decided to not change his mind, no matter what.”

"Do you have any interest in politics?" Malfoy asked then, and looked downright annoyed when Harry shook his head. Neither continued the conversation, however, and soon Black returned, tucking something into his pocket.

"Gentlemen, would you be interested in some tea, now?" the man said, as if inviting Harry to drink tea with him and Malfoy made sense. At least Malfoy seemed to share Harry's thoughts on the matter, and looked relieved when Harry quickly declined the invite.

"Perhaps some other time," Harry said, vowing to avoid Black for as long as he possibly could. "But thank you for the invitation.”

"Well, we're sorry to hear that, Mr. Riddle," Malfoy said, quickly accepting Harry's rejection in fear of Black trying to argue against it. "Let us meet again soon."

Harry left Diagon Alley as fast as he could manage, glad to be free of Black and whatever ulterior motives the man surely had.
The first weekend at Hogwarts wasn't unpleasant, but it wasn't entirely enjoyable either. It was clear to Tom that aside from one boy in his dorm - Elliot Mulciber - everyone seemed to find his blood status something to scoff at. It made him think of rather unfortunate memories of his time in the orphanage, and the way people like Buck had treated him.

Aside from Mulciber, the only other person who seemed to want to speak with him was the girl he had shared a compartment with: Eileen Prince. She was sharp, mean, and quick to argue with whoever so much as glared in her direction. It was annoying, but somewhat entertaining as well.

On Monday, Tom's day began with two hours of Transfiguration with Professor Dumbledore, the Deputy Headmaster. The man smiled far too much but was most definitely competent in what he was teaching, and by the end of the class Tom had not only earned ten points for Slytherin, but felt much more interested in transfiguration than he had before.

"Did you do some studying beforehand?" Prince asked, eyeing him with a scowl on her face as they waited for their next class, Herbology, to begin. "I mean, you answered all of Professor Dumbledore's questions correctly."

"It's easy to me," Tom replied with a shrug. "Besides, his questions were more about logic than Transfiguration."

"Or maybe," Dorian Lestrange said, turning in his seat to look at Tom with a sneer on his freckled face. "You're cheating."

"That doesn't even make any sense," Prince snapped back. "How do you think he could have cheated, hm? Besides—" Whatever she would have said next was interrupted by the arrival of a tall, thin man with a white trimmed beard and a bald head. His brown robes had strange stains on them and the mere sight of them made Tom cringe in disgust - surely a teacher could afford to have his robes cleaned!

"Hello, everyone," the old man said, aiming perhaps for a grandfatherly impression but missing by a mile and sounding ridiculous instead. "First year Slytherins and my Ravenclaws, eh? My name is Archibald Whittle, that's Professor Whittle to you, and I couldn't be happier to see all of you here today. Welcome, welcome!"

"He's the Head of House for Ravenclaw," Prince whispered, as if Tom hadn't realized that yet. "I've heard from some reliable sources, however, that he's not exactly the finest wizard to step out of that tower."

"Please take out your parchments and writing supplies," Professor Whittle said. "We'll start right away with the basics. As most of you know, I'm sure, in Herbology we study all kinds of plants and fungi, some of which you've never even heard of!"

The class wasn't half as interesting as Transfiguration had been, but Tom could see the benefit of it. He couldn't imagine voluntarily studying more of it, however, and had to put some effort into not getting distracted by every other stray thought that crossed his mind. Despite his lack of interest in the subject, he had read ahead and was quite easily capable of answering the few questions the man had asked the class, earning Slytherin five points.

Overall the class went rather well, up until the very end. Once Professor Whittle had assigned them some homework to do, he dismissed the students with a cheerful wave. However, before Tom had even begun packing his parchments and other supplies into his bag, Lestrange had left his seat and
approached Professor Whittle with a smarmy smile on his face. Rosier, who seemed to be close friends with Lestrange, cursed under his breath and packed the other boy's bag for him. After what looked like a very brief discussion, Lestrange walked back to grab his bag before looking at Tom with a smug expression.

"Professor Whittle wants to talk with you," the boy said, clearly amused by something that Tom was bound to not like.

"Do you want me to wait here?" Prince asked, not looking away from Lestrange. "Or would you rather I went ahead?"

"No need to wait," Tom muttered, and glanced at the teacher who immediately gestured for him to approach. Sighing, not looking forward to whatever was about to happen, Tom grabbed his bag and walked to the front of the class. Something about the way the man was smiling made Tom want to do something violent. He'd do anything for the opportunity to burn the man's face off.

"A concerned student came to me," Professor Whittle said as soon as Tom was close enough to hear his quiet voice, as if Tom hadn't seen him talking with Lestrange moments earlier. "And it was brought to my attention that there's reason to suspect that you haven't been... a paragon of integrity, so to say, when it comes to school work."

"You mean that Lestrange claimed that I'm cheating," Tom said, raising an eyebrow and doing his best to hide the rage boiling inside of him. "Pray tell, Professor, cheating in what? It's the first week of school, as I'm sure you're aware. The only questions I've replied to so far in class were asked first by Professor Dumbledore this morning, and in this class by you. Do you think that cheating can even happen in this situation?"

"Well, Mr. Riddle, it is simply a matter of a classmate expressing their concern. It is not an accusation," Professor Whittle said with a smile, though from the look in his eyes Tom could see that the man had finally caught on to how ridiculous his actions were. "No harm done."

"With all due respect, sir," Tom said, hating the man with an intensity that he hadn't felt for a while. Thinking carefully of what to say, he continued: "You pulled me aside to ask me about baseless and illogical accusations - ah, sorry, I meant to say concerns. A part of you must have believed that there's a grain of truth to those concerns, otherwise I wouldn't be here right now. However, if you want, I can bring this matter to the attention of Professor Dumbledore and he can assure you that I didn't somehow cheat in his class. Since, it seems, that replying correctly to a teacher's questions is something that can raise concerns about cheating."

"Oh, no, no, there is absolutely no need for that," Professor Whittle hastily said, his smile chased away by an expression of alarm. "No need to bother Dumbledore about this at all. Say, your work today was quite exceptional, wasn't it? How about... three points to Slytherin? Yes? Now, I believe you have a class after this, right? You better hurry, young man, or you'll be late!"

Tom did leave the classroom then, sure of two things:

One, Harry would never hear about this.

Two, Lestrange was going to pay.
Wednesday afternoon found Tom in the library working on his homework.

The Hogwarts Library was quite far away from the Slytherin common room, but the boy didn't mind the distance. According to the introductory pamphlet a gargoyle standing near the doorway had handed him and Prince, the library contained tens of thousands of books, each of which was protected against theft and ‘misuse’ – whatever that meant. It saddened Tom a little - without the spells, no one would notice if he took a book or two without ever returning them.

"We have astronomy tonight, don't we?" Prince said, not looking up from the two books she was comparing. Her black hair was pulled into a bun so tight it looked painful. "You have a telescope, don't you?"

"Doesn't everyone?" Tom asked. He wasn't sure how exactly he had ended up spending so much time with Eileen Prince of all people, but despite being annoying in many ways, she was still more tolerable than most of their other fellow Slytherins. "Is one of those charms books by Poole? Pass it to me once you're done with it."

"Alright."

Malciber, who had come with them but was currently resting his head on two copies of Malva Mordaunt's Cyrillic Runes for Beginners, yawned loudly. "You two are so studious," he said, though he didn't sound judgmental. Tom had quickly come to find that the boy was surprisingly calm and accepting of anything that didn't disturb his numerous naps.

"You should study, too," Prince said, eyeing the boy with a scowl on her face. "At least take a look at your Herbology homework. Go find the right books - why do you even have those? Only older students study runes."

"I'm hoarding them," Malciber replied easily, before he yawned again and tugged strands of his light brown hair to cover his eyes. "Besides, Professor Whittle is a bore. I'm not going to stress over his class."

"Well, after he fell for Lestrange's trick so easily, I've lost quite a bit of respect for him as well," Prince said, and Tom wondered if friendship meant hating people together. "Regardless, he's a professor and in order to pass his class, you need to do at least some of the required work."

"Dorian has always had tutors teaching him things," Malciber said. "He's used to being the smart one in the group. But now we have Riddle so Dorian doesn't know how to deal. He'll settle down once he figures out something he's better at than you."

"Quidditch," Tom said immediately. "That's the only thing." Even if Lestrange stopped treating him badly eventually, it wouldn't make Tom's plans for revenge any less valid.

"If you're friends with Lestrange, then why are you here?" Prince wanted to know. "You seem to know him too well not to be friends with him."

"Because Riddle is quiet," Malciber said approvingly. "And you too, sometimes. Riddle doesn't make me talk like Al tries to do, he doesn't call me narcoleptic like Dorian and Chad do, and he definitely doesn't try to trick me into exercising at six in the morning the way Eugene—"
"Nott really does that?" Prince looked every bit as horrified as Tom felt.

"He wants to get into the quidditch team next year," Mulciber explained. "He's a bit crazy when it comes to quidditch, if you haven't noticed. It's all he talks about. To be fair, though, he's one of the best fliers I've ever seen."

"That justifies nothing," Prince muttered, shaking her head. "What do you think, Tom?"

"If you're done with Poole's book, give it to me," Tom said again. Prince stared at him in silence for a few moments, as if she had expected something else from him, before rolling her eyes and pushing the book in question towards him.

"Here," she snapped. "I recommend taking a look at chapter six in particular."

Tom made a point of browsing through the book in order, rather than skip directly to chapter six. No matter what kind of friendship was apparently happening between him and Prince, he didn't trust her enough to rely on information provided by her. If roles were reversed, he'd have tricked her somehow, for sure. The girl didn't say anything, perhaps too focused on the other book she had to notice what Tom had done.

It was nearly time for dinner when Avery appeared, his tie sloppy and one sleeve rolled up. The boy made a face when he saw Tom sitting there, and ignored Prince altogether. Instead, he leaned across the table to shake Mulciber awake.

"Elliot," Avery said. "I've been looking for you everywhere! What are you even doing here?"

"Studying," Mulciber replied and pulled himself up to a sitting position. "What are you doing here? Done fighting with Chad or something?"

"Rosier is not worthy of my time," Avery declared. "And neither should these people be worth yours! Prince is poor, and Riddle is poor and a mudblood. Come on, let's go eat dinner."

'I hate him, too,' Tom thought, feeling familiar anger burn inside of him. He hated how people looked down on him like this, and resented Harry a little bit for not looking for a better paying job than the one he had at Maggie's.

"Go away," Mulciber said. "Or sit down and be quiet, I don't care. Riddle and Prince were studying and I was... preparing to study. So if you don't want to go back to where you were apparently not fighting with Chad, then grab a book or something like that and join us."

Avery scowled and sat down, clearly having expected a different outcome. Tom glanced at Prince, who rolled her eyes and made a face, which was funny enough to make Tom duck his head in order to hid the sudden smile on his face. After a few moments of doing nothing, Avery sighed loudly and pulled out some hastily folded and rolled pieces of parchment, presumably to start working on his homework as well.

By the time the four left for dinner, Tom had come to the conclusion that having friends wasn't a bad thing, provided that they knew how to be quiet and hated the same people that he did.

It's later than usual when Harry finally makes his way out of Maggie's. A young bride had come in and placed an order not only to have her wedding dress made by Maggie, but also all of her bridesmaids' dresses. It meant more work, but Harry was only happy about it. After his unfortunate meeting with Black and Malfoy, he hadn't dared go back to Diagon Alley quite yet.
He passed by the marketplace and was well on his way towards the bus stop when he decided to simply walk home after all. It'd take him a while, but it wasn't as if he had someone waiting for him there. Tom was at Hogwarts, hopefully making friends and having lots of fun while reading books to his heart's content. Harry did hope that the boy would soon write him a letter - for someone who had asked Harry to write him daily, Tom sure had been quick to forget all about it.

'I hope it's a good sign, though,' Harry thought, feeling optimistic. 'Maybe he's having so much fun that everything else pales in comparison. I really hope so.'

Harry crossed the street and walked past a bakery. For a moment he was very tempted to walk in and buy some fresh bread, but then chose not to. At this hour most bakeries were almost ready to close for the night, anyway.

'I wonder if any of these bakeries are hiring... Merlin, I'm starting to sound like Tom. Maybe rather than ask for extra work from Maggie and Marie, I should just get another job for the weekends.'

It was then that Harry noticed an old woman staring at him from an alley. He would have simply walked past her and continued on his way, but there was something about her look that made him feel wary and cold on the inside. He stopped to admire the roses a florist had set outside their flower shop, and discreetly pulled his wand out of his pocket.

Not a minute later the old woman had walked up to where he was standing, and stared at the roses with him in silence. Harry was tense, ready to move at any sign of danger while trying to come up with explanations to what was going on. Had Black sent someone to... do what? Kill him? Surely not! And somehow it was hard for Harry to imagine Black hiring an old woman to get the job done.

"Is this you pretending to not have your wand ready?" the old woman then asked, her voice sharp but not angry or hostile. "I've been waiting for you to walk by here for some weeks already, young man."

"Who are you?" Harry asked, turning to look at her. The woman was short and stocky, with thick white hair cut short and pitch black eyes. She was dressed in dark blue robes with a purple shawl thrown around her shoulders. "And what do you want from me?"

"Calm down, boy," the old woman told him, sounding unimpressed by his behaviour. "I've been waiting for the opportunity to discuss a certain matter with you. There's no need for fear - I'm hardly fit for a duel, especially in the middle of the street, surrounded by Muggles. I'd have Aurors after me in a matter of minutes and let me assure you, child, I am too old to be dealing with those hex-happy, over-enthusiastic ministry puppies."

"That doesn't answer my question," Harry said. "In fact, it doesn't answer either one of my two questions. Who are you, and what do you want from me?"

The old woman's smile was hard to see on her wrinkled face, but Harry did observe a hint of a smirk. "My name is Cassandra Trelawney. And I've been waiting for you, Mr. Riddle."

Cassandra Trelawney.

Harry knew about this woman.

She had been a famous, celebrated Seer.... and also the great-grandmother of the Trelawney who had effectively ruined Harry's life with her prophecies. It had been known, though, that Cassandra was a far more skilled Seer than Sybill had ever been. Was this really her, though? And if so, then what did she want from Harry?
Merlin, he really hoped that he wasn't about to get involved in another prophecy again. Harry had had enough of those to last him a lifetime!

"You're looking for a job, are you not?" the old woman asked.

"Er, yeah," Harry replied. "How did you know that?" Surely she couldn't have used legilimency on him? Merlin, Harry really hoped that she hadn't!

"I'm a Seer, boy, you know that," Trelawney said impatiently. "The story of how you will come to work for me will take us a few minutes, and I am not going to stand outside explaining it all to you."

"How can you be so sure that I'll accept whatever job offer that you're about to throw at me?" Harry asked, scowling at the woman. He wasn't quite yet sure if he wasn't missing something important about what was going on, but he doubted that apparating away from the middle of the street would lead to anything good.

Although, if Harry wanted to be completely honest, this sounded like an exciting adventure. And if a strange witch wanted to hire him for a job, Harry wasn't going to say no right off the bat. No matter how suspicious the whole situation was.

"I will explain everything to you, but not here," Trelawney said. "You'll follow me, and we'll go to my home - it's hardly a block away from here - and you will listen to me telling you about some options that you ought to be aware of. It's disgraceful for a wizard to waste his time working for a Muggle. Merlin, how can you stand it, I will never know."

"The work is fine," Harry defended his job. "And the pay is good."

"No, it is not."

"But—"

"Oh, do be quiet already, and follow without annoying me even more. It is bad enough that you've made me wait for this long before you bothered to turn up."

"Fine," Harry relented, against his better judgement. He couldn't deny, however, that his earlier boredom had completely vanished. "Lead the way, Ma'am."

* *

"Why can't the Astronomy class be moved to Friday nights?" Prince hissed, rubbing her eyes. "At least then we could sleep as much as we want to on Saturdays."

"Or even Thursdays," Opaline Pucey grumbled. "Our first class on Friday starts at eleven."

"I could sleep past that," Mulciber said. "I could easily sleep past that."

The first year Slytherins were heading towards the Astronomy Tower, where the rest of the first year students from other houses would be as well. The tallest tower at Hogwarts Castle was usually out-of-bounds for students, for reasons that Tom wasn't sure of.

"I think having to carry the telescopes with us up and down is very impractical," Lestrange huffed, and though Tom hated to agree with the other boy on anything at all, he couldn't help but feel the same. In fact, the only one who didn't seem to mind having to carry his telescope all the way to the Astronomy Tower was Nott, who had looked disturbingly happy about the extra exercise this would give him.
Tom did not understand people like that, but reluctantly admired him for it nevertheless.

Entering the classroom, Tom could see at least four students from the other Houses struggling to stay awake. At the other side of the classroom stood a woman who waved in greeting and gestured for the Slytherins to sit down.

"Welcome, everyone," the woman said as soon as the children had each found a chair to sit on. "Welcome to Astronomy for beginners. I am Professor Summerby and I've taught Astronomy here at Hogwarts for nearly twenty years now. I have no doubt that you all will find astronomy absolutely enjoyable and very fun!"

"I think I have to hate it just on principle now," Avery whispered with a grin on his face, before he realized that he had just spoken to Tom and not Mulciber, which caused him to jerk back in surprise and scowl. Tom was torn between feeling amused and insulted.

"We will have the Astronomy classes here, for two hours every Wednesday night," Professor Summerby continued. "The first hour will always be theory, and the second hour will be held outside on the floor above this - it's the top of the tower and a great place to look at the stars from."

"But what if someone falls?" a boy with a black and yellow tie asked his friend, who shrugged in response before turning back to whatever she was doing. Rolling his eyes, Tom leaned forward to whisper:

"There must be charms protecting the students from those kinds of accidents," he said, and the boy turned to look at him with a slightly surprised expression. "I mean, logically speaking the safety of the students is an absolute priority." Which was something any student should have known - what kind of an idiot didn't?

"You're right," the boy whispered in response, before smiling in relief. "I'm Kirk, by the way, Kirk Diggory."

"Tom Riddle," Tom said, and leaned back again in a clear gesture to end the conversation. It was important to him to prove his superiority at every opportunity - eventually these people would have to start realizing how much better than them he was. Even if they mistook it for him being friendly.

"Making friends with Puffs, hey?" Avery couldn't resist saying.

"Oh, come on, Aloysius," Lestrange said mockingly, and oh, how Tom hated him. "Diggory's a Pureblood. Maybe Riddle has decided to compensate for his own—"

"Gentlemen," Professor Summerby said, swooping in. "Is there a problem here?"

"Lestrange called me a mudblood," Tom lied with a straight face, and he heard various students gasping in surprise. Professor Summerby paled and turned to look at Lestrange with a very serious expression.

"I didn't!" Lestrange shrieked, his eyes wide in panic as he realized with no small amount of disbelief what Tom had just said. "He's lying!"

"I heard him say it," Prince joined in, backing Tom in his lie and the boy struggled to not laugh. If this was friendship, then he'd definitely keep it up with Prince.

"I heard him, too," Avery said, shooting Lestrange a smug look. Tom should have known that Avery wouldn't pass on a chance to get Lestrange into trouble. "Tsk, I'm horrified by your manners, Dorian."
"Who's to say that Riddle didn't provoke him?" Rosier asked, intending to come to his friend's aid but only making his situation worse.

"Oh, no, he was telling me that there must be charms preventing students from falling off the tower," Diggory said, and Tom was just about ready to laugh with glee at how well this all was turning out. He glanced at Prince and saw her pursing her lips in a way that spoke of a badly suppressed smile. "I was nervous about that, you see, and, er, Riddle noticed that."

"This is not a good start for you, Mr. Lestrange," Professor Summerby said, visibly upset. "Detention with me on Friday at four. Be here."

"But I didn't even do anything!" Lestrange protested angrily. "He's a lying—"

"Careful, Mr. Lestrange, or it will be points off of Slytherin next."

The boy shot Tom a look that was nothing short of murderous. Tom would have responded with a smile, but knew better than to ruin the impression the other students were forming of him now: a helpful muggleborn Slytherin student who couldn't possibly set anyone up for trouble. If Tom managed to keep up the image, it'd become quite useful in the long run.

"I enjoyed that," Prince whispered once Professor Summerby left them to return to the front of the class and resume her lecture. "We should do it again."

"Do what?" Tom asked, unable to stop a smile from finally appearing. "You mean defend ourselves against bullies? I agree."

"You guys are mad," Avery said, but it didn't sound like a bad thing. "I can see now why Elliot spends so much time with you two."

* 

Trelawney's house was unlike anything Harry had ever seen before.

From the outside it was no different from the other houses around it, but inside there were several colourful, thick carpets covering every inch of the floor. The walls were made of a curious mix of dark wood and different coloured glass while lamps of all sizes and shapes hung from the ceiling. The furniture was mismatched and the shelves full of strange objects were crooked.

There were different crystal balls on nearly every flat surface, numerous books were lying around on the floor, and what couldn't possibly be less than three whole decks of tarot cards were floating above a bowl of water. Harry - much to his amazement - could also see what looked like a miniature copy of the planetary and stellar systems with moons and other things that Harry couldn't even name, slowly moving in an almost hypnotising manner.

"That's for astrology," Trelawney said, startling him. Harry hadn't even heard her move. "Sit down somewhere - anywhere - just don't disturb the readings."

'This place is unreal,' Harry thought, sitting down on a chair and feeling slightly dazed. The place was nothing like Hogwarts in appearance, and yet Harry couldn't help but feel that it was similar, somehow.

"Boo, tea," Trelawney ordered, and an elf wearing a yellow turban, a purple loincloth, blue sparkly shoes and a bright red scarf popped in, bowed deeply, and then vanished again. It reminded Harry of Dobby, although much quieter.
"So," Harry started. "The job offer?"

"Do you know how wizarding history is written?" the woman asked, sitting down on an armchair and waving away a feathered hat that was trying to land on her head. "No? Well, the history that is known to us has been preserved due to the continuous efforts and teamwork of Seers and Witnesses."

"I'm afraid that you'll have to explain more about that," Harry said, watching the odd house-elf serve tea and scones before disappearing again. "I've never heard of Witnesses before."

"I have visions regularly," Cassandra Trelawney told him, pouring generous amounts of honey into her tea. "Most of the visions are irrelevant, but some... some are very important. I occasionally see things that... must be remembered and recorded for future generations as accurately as possible. Things that are important, that change history and shape generations and affect millions of people."

"That sounds intense," Harry muttered, unsure of what else to say. The old woman shrugged.

"It is," she said. "What I do helps us prepare for the important events that will happen, but I cannot record what happens. That... is not something I can do. It is, however, what Witnesses are hired for."

"So... Witnesses record history? How?"

"Once I have a vision," Trelawney continued, "I send a word out to the ministry, who in turn will contact the Witness that works with me. The Witness receives a portkey and will be sent to the location of the... incident that must be recorded. Once the portkey reactivates to return the Witness home, he - or she - uses one of the ministry-provided memory holders to slip the memory of the incident into. Then the holder is sent back to the ministry and the Witness is paid for their work."

"That... sounds interesting," Harry said, genuinely intrigued by the work Trelawney had described. The old woman wasn't done, however, and continued:

"The ministry will provide two sets of work robes, the portkeys that you will need, special identification papers in case of emergencies, and the necessary memory holders," she said. "And a salary of fifteen hundred galleons a month."

Well, alright then. Harry had never thought himself to be desperate for money but a salary like that would make his and Tom's lives so much easier. They could move to a better house and Tom would be able to get proper clothes that hadn't been transfigured in order to look remotely decent.

"If I say yes," Harry started, as if he hadn't already decided to accept the job offer. "What would happen next?"

"We'll go sometime next week to the Ministry of Magic, where you will take a non-interference vow," Trelawney said, her scowl nearly disappearing into the wrinkles of her face. "A few years ago a man who wanted to play a hero decided to try and save someone who was meant to die. His actions resulted in doubling the number of casualties."

"Ah... I see."

"It is an honour for a wizard or a witch to become a Witness," Trelawney told him while pouring herself another cup of tea. "Even I do not know why the Sight chooses the Witnesses it does. A Seer sees their Witness and is led to them by magic. And in magic I trust."

"Well, I accept," Harry said, and the old witch nodded, entirely unsurprised. "I mean, of course I do. Thank you."
"You can go now," Trelawney said. "Harry Riddle, right? Oh, don't look so surprised - what kind of a Seer would I be if I couldn't even figure out your name? Riddle, you're dismissed, but keep an eye out for an owl. I'll send you the exact time and date of our ministry appointment once I've booked it."

"All right," Harry said, standing up and ready to leave. "Thank you, Mrs. Trelawney."

"Lady Cassandra is what I am called," the woman said. "Now stop standing there and get out."

"You can expect Dorian to come up with something in response to what happened yesterday during the Astronomy class," Avery said, sitting down next to a napping Mulciber. "And you three need to find another place for these meetings, I'm not particularly fond of libraries."

"We don't care, Aloysius," Prince said, writing something on her parchment before crossing it out with a frustrated expression. "But since you're here, be a dear and get me Abraham's Guide to Cauldrons. It's on the shelf behind you."

"We had Potions this morning," Avery said, standing up with great reluctance and passed Prince the book once he found it. "You can't be seriously working on the homework already!"

"I love that class," the girl sighed dreamily. "All those small details and that sense of danger when mixing ingredients... It's like working on a puzzle where every mistake has terrible consequences."

"And that is what makes you happy?" Avery asked, shaking his head. "Whatever, I knew that you're crazy anyway. Have you finished the history essay yet? Elliot? Tom?"

"Yes," Tom replied, not willing to admit that although he had found most subjects highly interesting, the one that he couldn't get tired of was History of Magic. There was so much to learn from history and it seemed like wizards and witches missed out on most of it out of sheer disinterest! It was maddening!

"No," Mulciber said. "But it's not like Binns cares."

"You will still need to pass his exams," Prince reminded the boy. "So start studying or you'll fail. Aloysius--"

"Just call me Al, for Merlin's sake," Avery begged. "I mean, really, Al is so much easier for everyone."

"As long as you're quiet, then fine," Prince snapped. "Merlin, I want one of Shingleton's Self-Stirring Cauldrons. Imagine how useful it would be!"

"You can ask for one next Christmas," Avery said, before he suddenly turned to Tom. "You muggleborns celebrate Christmas, too, right?"

"I'm a half-blood," Tom snapped, narrowing his eyes at the other boy. "And yes, we do."

"Oh, right, I forgot," Avery said, not sounding particularly concerned over his mistake. Then again, Tom doubted that he saw a difference between a muggleborn and a half-blood. "Elliot, do you—"

"It's too early to discuss Christmas," Mulciber interrupted. "And all I want right now is for you to stop talking. Just focus on your homework, Al."

"That's rich, coming from you."
"I don't bring down the productivity of other people."

"He's right," Prince said. "Avery, be quiet or leave."

"You guys are so rude," Avery sighed, but turned back to his homework. Something about his behaviour made Tom wonder if the boy even had any other friends aside from Mulciber. It was clear that Avery did not get along with Lestrange or Rosier, but what about Nott or the girls? Why wasn't Avery spending his time with them?

Tom then thought of Harry, all of a sudden, and felt strangely guilty for not having thought of the man for a few days. Well, Harry had warned him that this would happen - Hogwarts as a new experience was quite overwhelming, but it had been a week already and Tom should really send Harry a letter and give him a proper update on what was going on. And hopefully ask about Harry's own activities, as well.

'Then again, I can already guess his response,' Tom thought. 'Worked at Maggie's, spent hours talking with Marie, slept through the weekends.' Although, perhaps Harry had managed to resurrect his social life and made a friend or two. Hopefully not too many because Tom didn't want to compete for his attention when he went back home.

"I still find it funny that Dorian is the first Slytherin to get detention this year," Avery said suddenly. "I mean, I can only imagine the Howler he's going to get in the mail soon."

"For all we know, maybe Lestrange made it sound like he's the victim of a mean prank," Prince said, smirking smugly. "Not that any of us would ever do that, of course."

"Even if Dorian tried to make it sound like it's not his fault, his dad wouldn't accept it as an excuse," Mulciber said. "I know his whole family. His dad won't care about whether or not Dorian did it - only that he got blamed for it. In fact, if Dorian told his dad that he was stupid enough to get set up like that, his dad would be even angrier."

"True," Avery agreed. "It's much better to just say that he got caught using the word mudblood. Then it'll be just a careless, forgivable mistake for getting caught doing something his parents commit, too. I mean, they throw that word around so casually."

"A bit like you, then," Tom said, not looking up from his parchment. "I think you need to be more careful with whom you allow to hear you using that word. You never know who'll take offense and decide to make you pay for it." Perhaps by drowning him in the lake so he'd slowly float down to the other side of the Slytherin common room's glass window. Oh, Tom would *love* to see that happen.

"What do you mean?" Avery asked, a sharp edge suddenly in his tone. "Should I be worried?"

"You need to decide that for yourself," Tom replied evenly. "I'm certain that none of us want to see you punished for something as irrelevant as a foul word."

"Besides, it's becoming less and less acceptable to use that term in public, anyway," Prince said. "Better get rid of the habit now than carry it with you and have it ruin your reputation when it matters more."

"I really don't understand that," Avery said, scowling. "I thought we had freedom of speech in this society! I should have the right to say what I want!"

"You do," Mulciber said. "No one has the right to silence you, but people have the right to respond. And if you think that everything you can say will have no consequences, then maybe you need to tell your dad that you won't be following his footsteps into politics."
'I didn't pick these friends,' Tom thought, feeling pleased. 'I didn't pick them, but I'm happy I got them anyway.'
Being obsessed with someone wasn’t a first for Arcturus, Melania knew that for sure. Even before she had married him, she had heard whispers of the way his interest and focused attention made the people on the receiving end quite uncomfortable. That those people tended to be male of a much younger age did not help Arcturus’s reputation, and he had spent many a galleon to keep it all from tarnishing his reputation in the eyes of the world.

It wasn’t Arcturus’s fascination towards sodomy that made Melania shudder in disgust, however. Rather, the idea of sodomy was simply something Melania took care to not think of too much - not until it had become a weapon to torment Arcturus with. No, what did disgust Melania was Arcturus’s inability to dismiss his own desires for the sake of upholding his duties. The man would rather risk ruining the Black name for the sake of bedding every young man he could stomach to look at for the duration of the three seconds that it takes him to finish.

Melania’s lips twitched, amused by how bad having sex with Arcturus had been for her. She knew now that it was most likely due to his lack of interest in her body, but it wasn’t as if Arcturus could actually say that to defend himself.

"You look quite pleased, my dear," the man in question said, eyeing her from across the table with a suspicious look in his eyes. "What about this breakfast delights you so?"

"The company," Melania promptly replied, reaching for her cup of tea. "Although I do believe that said company would prefer my presence to be replaced by that of a certain Mudblood."

"You're going too far with this jest of yours," Arcturus snapped, scowling at the woman who simply smiled in response. "I am not the kind of man who will take your insults endlessly. I have been very gracious and forgiving towards you—"

"Oh, I know exactly what kind of man you are, my dear," Melania said, thinking of his three seconds. "But I must remind you that bedding men won't make you more of a man, just like bedding house-elves won't make you more of a master."

She could see, for a moment, a fury of the kind she had never seen before on Arcturus’s face once he heard her words and realized the implications. Melania expected him to pull out his wand and curse her, or at least threaten to, but to her surprise he suddenly relaxed as if all the anger had suddenly disappeared.

"Jealousy does make you vicious, my love," Arcturus said lightly, not bothering to hide his smug smirk. Something must have occurred to him - a plan of action that would give him back his confidence and illusion of superiority. Melania was dying to know what it could be. "It angers you so, doesn't it? That I would rather have that boy bent over this table than spend a night bare in our bed?"

"Finally admitting it? I'm shocked."

"Why deny it? You won't speak of it to anyone in fear of ruining your own reputation along with mine."

"So where does this leave us?" Melania asked, looking at her husband with a stony expression and
imagining driving a butter knife through his throat. "Keep in mind, however, that if you choose to approach the boy, I will make sure to ruin you for it. I will not have the Black name tainted by your unbecoming behaviour."

"Goodness, for a moment I thought you were concerned about him," Arcturus said lightly, resuming eating his breakfast. "Though I assure you that even if I chose to, ah, approach him, he couldn't possibly keep me entertained for longer than a week. He's a mudblood, and that sort tend to be rather poor and simple. Helpless. Good for warming up, but can hardly pull off a whole show."

"And yet you find yourself attracted to him," Melania said. "I find that so strange."

Arcturus knew that his wife could never truly understand how desire and lust worked from his perspective. To her it was all so clear and dull and predictable: attraction had everything to do with a person's appearance and she couldn't care less for anything else. Arcturus, on the other hand, needed more than that. He wanted his boys weak enough to overpower, but strong enough to attempt resistance. He liked them pretty, not handsome. Not shy but not particularly outgoing and confident either.

Most of all, he wanted them filthy. He wanted his boys to be outcasts of society who he could have never married, no matter the circumstances. There was something delicious in feeling a twinge of disgust mixed with desire.

"Merlin, if that's the face you make when in heat, I suppose I've been lucky to have avoided it so far," Melania said, snapping Arcturus back to reality. "Either way, if you think that I will approve of this... whatever you are planning on doing when it comes to him, you are wrong."

"Oh, you won't be hearing of it," Arcturus said dismissively. "It'll be over before you even realize."

Melania shook her head, wanting nothing more than to stop Arcturus from indulging himself at every turn. "Do not take this lightly, Arcturus. You won't like me when I'm angry. You should know that by now."

"I hardly ever like you, regardless of your mood," the man replied, and burst out laughing, as if his words had been a great joke. Melania stared at him in silence, before she took a deep breath and stood up. If this was how he wanted to play it, then she would make him regret it. And unlike him, she had people who would walk an extra mile to help her win her battles.

"I have some errands to run," she said, unwilling to stay in Arcturus's presence for a moment longer. "I'll see you in the evening."

When Harry told Maggie that he'd been offered another job that he was considering, the woman nodded and accepted his resignation easily, paying him slightly more than he deserved when she gave him the salary of the month so far. Marie hugged him and looked sad to see him go, but admitted to being relieved as well.

"I worried, you see," the woman told him. "The business here is good but it's not really booming. We weren't sure for how much longer we could afford to pay you. I'm glad that you've found something else to do."

"Thank you for having me for this long," Harry said, smiling at the two women fondly. "I appreciate your patience with me."

"Oh, dear boy," Marie sniffed, reaching to hug him once more. "Please do visit, you and Tommy,
anytime you're nearby."

"I will keep that in mind," Harry promised, and though he hadn't lied, he doubted that he would come back. It was a strange feeling and he didn't know how to explain it, but he chose to not dwell on it too much. He hoped that this wouldn't end up being a mistake, but Trelawney hadn't really made the job sound difficult.

He arrived home and closed the front door, thinking if the dreams of buying - or renting, rather - a better place to live could truly become a reality soon. No more noisy neighbours and windows that needed fixing every other day. Heating that worked and a proper kitchen. Most importantly, however: a real room with a real bed for Tom. He'd have his own bookshelves in his room and a desk and a chair, and maybe Harry could even afford buying him that Global Galleons subscription that the boy kept wishing for.

'The real question is, though,' Harry thought, shrugging off his jacket and moving towards the kitchen to make something to drink. 'Do I tell Tom now in a letter or later on? Should I wait until after I've made sure that I'll stick with this job?' Although, if he was honest with himself, Harry was reluctant to give up on anything with a salary that high.

It would have been impressive even in the future when the worth of the pound wasn't as high as it was now. In this time, however, fifteen hundred galleons – six thousand pounds a month was a fortune.

Harry poured hot tea into a mug and pulled out the breakfast leftovers from the fridge. It was strange to be home before noon on a weekday, but he didn't mind. He had some things he'd need to do, starting from reading the pile of papers Trelawney had sent him earlier. She had told him that their appointment with a ministry official would be on Monday, and that if Harry knew what was good for him, he'd be there at eight in the morning and not a second later.

'She reminds me a little bit of Aunt Petunia,' Harry thought suddenly, grimacing. 'I wonder what she- - Ah, no, better banish those thoughts.' Was it ridiculous, that after so many years he still couldn't quite let go of what the Dursleys had put him through? He had managed to overlook what Voldemort had done to come and take care of Tom, but somehow the Dursleys were so much more... difficult.

Hermione had once suggested making an appointment with a therapist, but Harry had never actually followed her advice. Meeting a therapist who knew of the Wizarding World and what Harry had done would come with the risk of possible - and likely, if he wanted to be brutally honest - leaks and reveals by 'anonymous sources'. The last thing he wanted was to confide in a so-called professional, only to wake up two days later reading about his traumatic experiences in the Daily Prophet.

And, well, meeting a Muggle therapist would have required omitting so much of what had actually happened after he turned eleven that no issues could have been truly discussed.

'Why am I even thinking of this?' Harry thought, shaking his head and pushing away the thoughts of his previous life. 'I'm here now, and nothing that happened then matters anymore.' Determined to focus on the present, he refilled his cup of tea and sat down again to take a proper look at what Trelawney had sent him.

The first couple of papers were a contract, and Trelawney had kindly added a note saying 'DON'T SIGN!!! READ CAREFULLY!!!' on top of where Harry's signature was meant to go. Aside from the contract, there were several documents explaining his new job in more detail, providing information about some practical arrangements that weren't directly related to the missions he'd be sent on.
Oh, Merlin, he couldn't wait to get to travel and see the world outside of London. Harry had always liked the thought of travelling all over the world, but he had never gotten the chance to think of it seriously. Now, however, it seemed to be somewhat of an option. Sure, he'd just be there working, watching, rather than walking around and enjoying the experience, but still.

A vast improvement from Maggie's boutique. He owed her so much for hiring him and keeping him despite the financial struggles, but he wouldn't have wanted to remain working there for years to come.

'Tom really ought to be happy about this,' Harry thought, delighted. 'Although I wonder if his next demand will be for us to move to a place where we can be surrounded by magic. A muggle neighbourhood might not be the best of places to raise a young wizard in, but Merlin, the rent is far cheaper.'

His thoughts kept going back to how Tom would react, and Harry wondered how he'd actually tell the boy. It did occur to him later on that Tom wasn't the type to appreciate surprises, and he was very likely to sulk for a day if Harry didn't tell him of this newest development as soon as it happened.

Well, he'll consider telling the boy after his appointment at the Ministry.

* *

No longer working for Maggie left Harry with hours of freedom between waking up and going to sleep. The house had never been as clean as it was now, and Harry was eagerly waiting for his appointment at the Ministry, dearly hoping that after that, he'll have more to do during the day. He had been reluctant to return to Diagon Alley, in fear of bumping into Black again, but eventually he decided to go.

Black couldn't be there every day, surely. Besides, Harry truly doubted that the man could somehow find him in Diagon Alley again. So why not go out, enjoy a nice cup of hot chocolate with something sweet in one of the many coffee shops while writing a letter to Tom? He could even drop by the owl office to send the letter on his way home.

Perfect plan!

A perfect plan that failed within half an hour of Harry entering Diagon Alley – though it was quite perfect in theory.

'This is not amusing,' Harry thought, seemingly standing in front of one of Diagon Alley's many stores, pretending to not see Black's reflection through the glass. He expected the man to approach him immediately as he tended to do for some reason, but much to Harry's relief, he didn't. The relief turned into something else, however, when Harry realized that Black was following him.

'What does he even want from me?' Harry thought, moving forward feeling increasingly bothered and worried. 'I don't think I've done anything that could be a reason for this... whatever this is that he's doing.' Should he go home, or would that just end up leading Black to where Harry lived? Would the man follow him there? Harry didn't know and he wasn't willing to risk it.

Surely the other wizard wouldn't follow him all day long, now would he? The man was Lord Black after all, and someone of that status was bound to have some duties that'd need his attention soon enough. From what Harry could remember, Lucius Malfoy had always been busy doing something or other. With any luck, Black would leave him soon.

Resigned to being stalked, Harry continued his way towards Scribbulus to buy some paper and an
envelope for the letter he wanted to write. He had brought a pen with him, preferring pens over quills, not wanting to deal with ink spilling everywhere while writing. Harry pushed open the door of the store and stepped in, enjoying the familiar and quiet atmosphere inside.

He headed instantly towards where he knew he would find what he wanted, half expecting Black to pop out behind him. It seemed, however, that the man had chosen to remain outside, perhaps thinking that following Harry into the store would be too risky. Harry was relieved – and now also reluctant to leave the safety of the store. He didn't like being followed, but he wasn't sure if confronting Black about it would only make things worse.

"Hello," a saleswitch said cheerfully from behind the counter. "Have you noticed the special sale we have today? This quill and ink set in colours of each Hogwarts House. A guaranteed nice gift for anyone, I must say."

"Hello," replied Harry, smiling in return while setting the items he had picked up to buy on the counter. He had missed positive interactions like this, no matter how impersonal they were. "Are they basic quills or do they have any additional charms?"

"Just basic, I'm afraid," the witch admitted. "Mainly for the younger students who're still proud to announce which House they ended up in. Do you have anyone at Hogwarts right now?"

"Oh yes, he's in Slytherin," Harry said. He considered briefly buying the green set for Tom, but suspected that the boy would much rather receive something more useful. "I think I'll pass this time on the quill and ink, though. How much do I owe you?"

"Eight sickles, three knuts, please," the saleswitch said, and when Harry moved to pull out his wallet, he once again saw Black lurking outside, leaning against the window. When he turned to pay for his purchase, he couldn't quite muster up another smile for the girl.

"Say," Harry started hesitantly, leaning slightly against the counter. "I really do not want to be a bother, but...

"If there's anything I can help you with, sir, I'll gladly do my best," the saleswitch assured him immediately.

"It doesn't really have anything to do with the products," Harry admitted. "But, well, someone has been following me from shop to shop for a while now and I'm starting to get increasingly bothered by it. For the past few weeks he seems to find me every single time I come to Diagon Alley. I've spoken with this person twice at most, and both times were extremely unpleasant, and now..."

"Now you have a creep stalking you," the witch said, grimacing. "Merlin, some men do that and I cannot begin to understand what could possibly be running through their minds to justify that kind of behaviour. It's unfortunately quite common here."

"It is?" Harry asked, surprised. The witch nodded.

"I suppose it doesn't happen as often to men, but I swear to Circe that every other day one of the girls working here has someone following her. It's worse during the later hours when everything is dark and there aren't so many people around anymore," she sighed. "But listen, if you walk to where we keep the fancier notebooks in the back, you'll notice a narrow brown door with a blue lock. It's the backdoor, and from the inside it's enough to just 'alohomora' it to get it open."

"Oh, Merlin, thank you so much," Harry breathed, feeling relieved. "I've been thinking of going home but I didn't want to lead him to where I live."
"Understandable," the girl said, nodding. "But please, consider filing a report of some sort. If he has ever exhibited aggressive behaviour towards you and is now stalking you, it could turn out really badly eventually."

"I will," Harry said, wondering if he could do something like that and if it would even work against Black. Probably not. "Thank you. Um, really. Thank you. Have a good day and I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"No trouble at all," the witch assured him with an encouraging smile. "Have a good day and I hope to see you here again soon!"

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"Here, take this instead. It's better than the one you're reading now."

Tom looked up from a copy of *Tales of Traditions* that he had picked from the library, only to see Mulciber holding another book towards him. It had no real title, only the words 'Book One' above a name written with too many curls and swirls and twists for Tom to focus on right now.

"Is this about the same subject?" he asked. Mulciber threw himself down next to Tom on the boy's bed in the Slytherin dorms.

"Yeah," Mulciber said, closing his eyes. "Mum sent me a package and that was one of the things she included in it. Feel free to read it."

"Shouldn't you read it first?" Tom asked, and glanced at the other boy's bed, rolling his eyes when he saw the contents of the box he had received scattered on it. It explained why Mulciber wasn't there.

"I mean, she did send it to you."

"I had to read it once," Mulciber replied. "I don't remember much of it but I do know somewhat about it. I also know that I didn't like it. It's old, but every pureblood has or will read the whole series in their lifetime and you're much more likely to encounter someone who follows Humphrey's Rules rather than any other code of conduct."

"How kind of you to share the book with me," Tom said, suspicious of the other boy's motives. Mulciber had quickly become his favourite person at Hogwarts, just slightly surpassing Prince, but it didn't mean that Tom was about to trust him. Tom didn't believe in other people's good intentions and didn't want to be caught off guard were they to try anything. "What do you want in return?"

"Write my history essay," Mulciber said, not opening his eyes. "I want an O and I really have no interest in writing about the development of wands or whatever our homework was about."

"That's all?"

"And let me take a nap here."

"All right," Tom said. "But I'm not moving so you'll have to stay like that with your feet on the floor."

"Good enough for me," Mulciber yawned, and fell silent. In a matter of seconds he was breathing deeply, clearly asleep. Tom was reluctantly impressed by the boy's ability to sleep anywhere and seemingly whenever he wanted to.

Tom looked down at the heavy book for a moment, taking in the obvious signs of time and use visible on its cover and corners. The pages were rather thin but the words were very clear and easy to
read - perhaps thanks to a charm of some sort. The English used was mostly familiar, but soon enough Tom realized that there were a few terms that he'd need to look up.

He didn't know how much time had passed when Avery suddenly walked into the dorm room, looking slightly upset. He noticed Tom and Mulciber, and headed immediately towards them.

"Seriously, he's asleep?" Avery said, sitting on Lestrange's bed. "It's barely seven."

"We all know his sleeping habits by now," Tom replied. "I can only be amazed by his determination to stay unconscious for as much as possible."

"Tell me about it," Avery huffed, and the silence that followed was slightly awkward. Tom knew very well that Avery didn't consider him someone worth knowing, which was very insulting and quite irritating. Avery, on the other hand, was stuck having to put up with Tom's presence if he wanted to spend time with Mulciber.

How that particular friendship survived when Mulciber was barely ever awake enough to hold a conversation was a mystery.

"I saw Prince in the library," Avery said suddenly. "How come you guys aren't there?"

"The room was empty and I had something to read, so I saw no reason to go there," Tom explained, wondering why he and Avery were even talking. "Is Lestrange in the common room?"

"Yeah," Avery sighed. "Could do us all a favour and stay there. I can't stand the guy. And he can't stand you, by the way."

"I'm aware," Tom replied, turning back to read the book he had on his lap. "I'm not a fan of him either, to be quite honest."

"Is that one of Humphrey's books?" Avery asked suddenly, leaning forward. Tom hoped that the boy wouldn't decide to leave Lestrange's bed to sit on Tom's. Where he'd fit, Tom didn't know, but with Mulciber there the bed was already too full. "Book one, right? It's a good read. The series has its boring bits, though, since every book addresses something specific."

"The first one is about traditions and etiquette," Tom said, and looked up at the other boy again, suddenly interested in what he had to say. "How many books are there in this series?"

"Fourteen in total, I think," Avery replied. "Book seven is my favourite - it's about warfare. There's some controversy, however, since many of the books were written this century, and Humphrey was known to have lived in the late 1700s. There's a rumour that he's immortal, but nobody really believes that. It's a lot more likely that someone is just using his name to sell more books. Only the first five are confirmed to be actually his."

"What are the other books about?" Tom asked. "Do you remember which subjects were discussed in the series?"

"I haven't read all of the books," Avery admitted. "But the second book was about celebrations and I know that the third one had to do with marriage or something because my sister had to reread it before she went to Montague. Still can't believe why and how that happened - Montague's an absolute prick with nothing special about him. Annette - that's my sister - should have picked someone else. Someone better."

"I don't care about that," Tom said bluntly. "Tell me more about those books. Is there anything about banking?"
"Hold on," Avery said, standing up and moving towards his bed. "I have the books listed down somewhere because I promised mum to read them all whenever I could. Which, well, I haven't yet. But whatever, I'll do it later. Or now. We can read together, or something? Anyway, the list..."

It had been quite a while since Arcturus had done this, but the routine was easy enough to remember.

Drugging Melania's drink to ensure that she'd sleep till the morning, glamouring himself carefully, carrying just enough cash to pay for what he wanted, changing the way he spoke just enough for it to matter. It was easy, and he had had a lot of practice from the years before. Abel Meredith was a man no one would connect to Arcturus Black - he was certain of that. He never wore jewellery in that place. Never used cologne that could be recognized. Dressed in fine clothes, but not so fine that they would stand out. Always used cash to pay.

The old spice factory was nothing but an abandoned place to any witch or wizard who didn't know which entrance to use. To those who knew, it was a discreet and trusty brothel for men with peculiar needs, seeking release. The only laws that applied in this place were those defined by money, which was something that Arcturus wholeheartedly approved of.

The owner, a man known as Mortlake, didn't seem to remember Abel Meredith. He did, however, know how to recognize a customer with money to spend recklessly on things that pleased him, and this man with his fancy robes and cocky smirk was exactly that kind of a customer. Men who thought they were entitled to everything struggled with knowing when to stop, and Mortlake had built his whole business to take advantage of that.

"A room for myself and one of your boys," Arcturus said, watching Mortlake nod and pull out a heavy book to write him in. "The name is Abel Meredith, and yes, I'm willing to pay upfront."

"Right away, sir," Mortlake said, bowing with a wide grin on his face. "Any preferences? We've got boys from all walks of life, you see. Anything you fancy, you can get it."

"It doesn't matter, as long as the boy is slender and slightly shorter than me. And white," Arcturus said, knowing how much he'd need to work on the prostitute to make him look the way he wanted. "The face can be customized with potions."

"Yes, sir," Mortlake said immediately, and handed him a key. "Room seven, sir. It's one of our finest, which is nothing less than what you deserve. I will send up a boy right away."

The prostitutes of the old spice factory were mostly kidnapped muggles with no family and no possessions. Their inability to use magic made them incapable of fighting back, and were in the bad habit of dying within a few years of service. The high mortality rate was perhaps due to the potions they ingested daily to change their appearance, to heal some injuries, to relax or to do anything that needed to be done. However, as muggles, the magic of the potions damaged them regardless of any other effects.

To Arcturus, it was simply part of the charm of the place. The ruthless lack of regard towards the lives of the muggles crawling around delighted him and added to his arousal. Oh, if only he could bring Melania here, to see her disgust. It'd entertain him greatly.

Arcturus had already pulled out the potions required to please him this time when a young man slipped into the room. He was slightly taller than Riddle - Harry - but seemed to be about as slender as him. Arcturus gestured for the boy to lock the door and step closer, which he did readily.
"I pulled out the potions for you," Arcturus said, finding joy in making the boy mistake him for a friendly customer for now. The impression wouldn't last for long, and the look of horror and panic on the boy's face would surely be delightful. "You can manage black hair and green eyes, can't you? I'll take care of any other changes. A glamour on the face will be enough, so you needn't worry." Before his next visit, Arcturus would do his damnest to get his hands on polyjuice potion and a strand of Harry's hair.

"Anything for you, sir," the boy said, smiling coyly. In less than five minutes, a passable replica of one Harry Riddle was standing in front of him. Arcturus took in a deep breath, the anticipation and lust making his heart beat faster. He thought of the time he had spent following Harry through Diagon Alley before he had lost him eventually. He thought of Harry, walking down the street unaware of being followed. Oh, if only he could have taken a hold of the damn mudblood and done away with him.

"The role you're playing is that of a kind-hearted man who has never been involved with another male before," Arcturus instructed. "Your name is Harry."

"Yes, sir."

"You're embarrassed, inexperienced, and confused," Arcturus continued, bringing the other man closer to him, looking at the face that greatly resembled the one he wished he could be staring at instead. "Speak casually, like any other young man in his twenties, but do address me as master. Remember, you're not cocky. You're practically a virgin."

"Is it that obvious," the wh-- Harry stammered, looking down at his feet, somehow managing to look scandalized when Arcturus's hand crept further down his body. "That I haven't, you know, d-done this before."

"Done what?" Arcturus asked, before pressing a soft kiss against the man's throat. Merlin, how could he have ever given this up? "Had a cock inside of you?"

"Oh," Harry moaned, and Merlin, his body was trembling. Fuck, Arcturus wanted him so badly. This imitation would have to do for now, but eventually... "I, yes, I— I didn't think this was something that people did, I—"

"I'm going to fuck you," Arcturus interrupted, letting go of the young man suddenly and taking a step back. "But first, love, get on your knees. I've wanted to see you sucking my cock since the first time I saw you."

Really, perhaps he ought to consider becoming single again, if it meant being able to come here every damn day.
When the time finally came for Harry to meet Trelawney at the ministry, he was thrilled. Strangely enough, it felt like returning to something he should have never left in the first place.

Trelawney herself was dressed in lilac robes and a matching hat, making her quite easy to spot among the darkly dressed ministry employees in the lobby. As soon as she saw him, she gestured for him to follow her into one of the elevators.

"We'll be meeting Chief Brown and one of his lawyers," Trelawney explained. "You've read the contract carefully, haven't you? They'll make you sign a copy here and you'll be offered a chance to read it before signing. I suggest you skim through it to make sure that they haven't added or changed anything, but it shouldn't take you longer than a minute."

"All right," Harry replied, just as the elevator stopped, its doors opening with a loud ping. He followed the witch into a spacious, interestingly decorated reception room of an office. The thick carpet covering the floor had an animated picture of the solar system. On the walls and shelves there were items and pictures with small notes telling where they were from, and there was a world map on the ceiling with glowing runes and flickering names.

Harry was amazed by every small detail.

"Lady Cassandra," a tall wizard said, walking into the reception room with a smile on his face. "It's an honour to see you here again."

"Chief Brown," the seer replied. "I am here with my witness, Harry Riddle."

"Yes, indeed," Chief Brown said, and shook Harry's hand. There was something about him that reminded Harry greatly of Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Welcome to the Department of Divination. We're not quite as mad as other departments think we are, but I suppose that's just how it is. Would the two of you like some tea or coffee?"

"Tea would be lovely," Trelawney said, and Chief Brown signalled for one of the receptionists to make it happen. "But perhaps it would be better to continue this in your study? We've plenty of papers to read and sign, do we not?"

"You're absolutely right," Chief Brown agreed. "Please follow me."

In the man's office was a smartly dressed witch with a folder on her lap. As soon as she saw them, she stood up with a bright smile on her face. "Lady Cassandra and Mr. Riddle, I presume? I'm Manal Haddad, one of the acting lawyers of the Department of Divination. It's a pleasure to meet you both."

"I remember you," Trelawney said, sitting down on one of the chairs. "You once led a lawsuit against the Daily Prophet. It was quite the scandal, back then."

"Manal is one of our finest lawyers," Chief Brown bragged. "She's here in case you or Mr. Riddle have anything to ask about the contract. She'll also be the one assisting in the binding of the non-involvement vow that Mr. Riddle will take should he wish to become a Witness."

"All right," Harry said, accepting the copy of the contract that Manal handed him. It took him a couple of minutes to read through, and once he could confidently say that nothing was different from
the contract he had studied at home, he signed it as neatly as he could. The payment agreement was
signed by Chief Brown as well, and sent to Gringotts immediately.

"The Goblins will take care of the monthly payments to your vault," Chief Brown explained.
Regardless of how many missions you have during the month, we do not allow bonuses or cuts. It's
simply a safety measure that the Department of Finance insisted on. Now, if you're ready and there is
nothing to ask about, how about we move on to the vow?"

"Do you have anything to ask about the non-involvement vow?" Manal asked Harry as he stood up
and moved to where Trelawney was pushing him to. "It's basically to prevent any kind of
interference and to ensure that all you, as a witness, will do during the missions is simply observe
quietly."

"Stand still," Trelawney instructed. "And say nothing unless it is to agree."

The binding itself was done in a matter of minutes, and reminded Harry greatly of the casting of an
unbreakable vow. This, however, was far less severe. The aftermath of the binding made Harry's arm
ache for a little bit, but Chief Brown assured him that it was a passing side-effect. Trelawney poured
herself another cup of tea before asking about the uniform.

"It's here," Chief Brown said, levitating a box from behind his desk. "The uniform will adjust on its
own once you try it on at home. If, however, there are any complications or if it is faulty somehow,
please contact us without any hesitation."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, accepting the box and knowing when he was being dismissed. "Thank you,
and, um, have a good day."

"Likewise, Mr. Riddle," Chief Brown replied, smiling kindly. Trelawney was still sitting on one of
the couches and Harry doubted that she wanted him to wait for her. He left, carrying the box, feeling
excited about his new job and hardly believing how lucky he was. It was a thought that stayed with
him all the way until he reached the lobby again, and heard someone calling his name. He turned,
unsure of who it could be, and dearly hoping that it wasn't Black.

It wasn't.

It was Malfoy.

"Good, you waited," Malfoy huffed, as soon as he was close enough to be heard without raising his
voice. "Listen, I don't particularly want to be seen with you, but there's something I must— Is that
from Divination? Do you work for them? Wait, are you a Witness?"

"What do you want?" Harry asked warily, not replying to any of the man's questions. Malfoy
frowned, before schooling his expression to practiced disinterest that couldn't possibly fool anyone
who had taken a look at his face during the past minute.

"If you're a Witness, that'd explain Black's interest in you," Malfoy said. "Have lunch with me. We
need to talk."

"No," Harry said, determined to spend as little time with strange Purebloods as possible. "I have to
go home and—"

"Nonsense," Malfoy interrupted him, waving his hand dismissively. "Lunch. It's on me. Let's go."

Sighing, his earlier good mood disappearing instantly, Harry gave in.
Tom did not care for Quidditch.

He had never been fond of sports in general, but there was something unclear and unpredictable about Quidditch that annoyed him to no end. The matches, the few that he had seen, had been chaotic from start to finish. It didn't even look safe, no matter how well-charmed those brooms allegedly were.

Which was why, when Avery first suggested heading out to the Quidditch pitch to watch the Slytherin team practice, Tom wasn't thrilled. Mulciber had said that it didn't make a difference to him whether he slept in the library or the bleachers, and Prince had just shrugged. In the end, Avery had looked at Tom with an unusually contemplative expression, and said:

"I'll lend you the second book of Humphrey's series."

To which Tom had said 'fine' and graciously allowed himself to be dragged with the others to the Quidditch pitch. He hadn't even realized how much colder the weather was now than it had been when he had first come to Hogwarts, and it made him think of Harry. They had exchanged a fair amount of letters, but it wasn't quite the same.

"Oh, you guys are here too," Nott said, appearing seemingly out of nowhere. "Awesome! It's always more fun to watch with other people, and for some reason Dorian always says no when I invite him. And if Dorian says no, Chad usually says no too."

"Never mind those two, who even wants them here? Not me, that's for sure. Anyway, to a more important subject... is it true what I heard?" Avery said. "That Hufflepuff agreed to a practice match? I know everyone says that they're too innocent for foul play but I don't trust anyone who's that nice."

"They really did," Nott confirmed. "I heard it myself. Their team this year is really strong and in return Reg has been making our team practice like crazy. Sometimes I get to practice with them because he knows I want to try out next year. I really want to be a Chaser, which might be possible since Norton will have to focus on his NEWTs next year."

"Oh, that's right," Avery said, frowning. "Seventh year students can't play Quidditch because they have to focus on all the other stuff. Ridiculous, I say. I hope the school will abolish that rule someday soon because Merlin, I really don't want to see the Slytherin team not led by Flint. The next captain would be Warrington and he thinks the only way to win a match is by kicking the other team off their brooms."

"Is Hufflepuff strong enough to be a real concern?" Prince asked suddenly. "I mean, I don't much care about Quidditch but a loss against Hufflepuff would be a tough pill to swallow."

"Or against Gryffindors," Avery said, making a face. "Imagine how smug they would be if they won."

"The Hufflepuff team is pretty much the only thing standing between us and the final victory," Nott said. "They have a second year as a seeker and Lott is one of their beaters. But if we win the match, the House Cup is ours for sure."

"Even without the Quidditch victory, we might end up winning the House Cup anyway," Avery said, sounding pleased. "Riddle here has been getting us points every single day."

"I know," Nott said with a grin, turning towards Tom. "You've got the older students wondering what in Circe's name is going on. They keep seeing the House Points increase without explanation."
The other day Pucey told Smith, who told Simmons, and people are now either stunned or annoyed.

"Why would they be annoyed?" Prince asked, scowling. "Oh no, someone is so good at his studies that he keeps getting us points, let's be very annoyed at him. The logic of that!"

"Well," Nott muttered, shrugging with a slightly awkward look. "I don't know... I mean, who can tell, really?"

"They hate that Riddle is smarter than they are," Mulciber said, joining the conversation. He blinked his eyes open and squinted at Nott. "He's a half-blood. They would be more comfortable and feel more secure if he wasn't proving to be smarter and more competent than they are at every turn."

"I thought you were asleep," Nott said, looking slightly shifty. "But, well, who knows? Maybe you're right."

"I was asleep," Mulciber said. "But my allergic reaction to stupidity woke me up."

"Wow, you're snappy today," Avery said approvingly. "So there is an actual personality hiding behind all of those yawns and naps."

"It just annoys me when people ignore the obvious," Mulciber explained, and Tom had never seen the boy this agitated before. "I mean, you know what's the reason, we know what's the reason. Why not just say it? Why must we pretend that we don't read between the lines? Just because you imply it rather than say it outright doesn't make the insult any less offensive."

"I think you need to be awake more often if this is what you say when you open your eyes," Prince said. "Well done, Elliot. I approve."

"Why do you call him Elliot, but call me Avery?" Avery wanted to know. "We're all friends here, aren't we?"

"He earned it," Prince said. "Anyway, Nott, what about the Gryffindor team?"

Tom ignored whatever conversation had started between Prince and Nott, and turned to where Mulciber was lying down quietly. A moment later, Mulciber turned his head to look at him and Tom felt the strange desire to thank him for what he had said. He frowned instead.

"Whatever," Tom said, and moved slightly to the left. It made no difference to him, but now his body shielded Mulciber's face from the sun. The other boy grinned in response and closed his eyes.

"Your friendship is so weird," Avery muttered.

* *

When Arcturus set down a beautiful bottle of perfume in front of Melania, the woman was instantly suspicious.

"Well, this is unexpected," she said, not touching the bottle. Instead, she set down the book she had been enjoying and leaned back on the chair she was sitting on. She took a look at her husband, and asked: "What did you do?"

"Melania," Arcturus started, pulling another chair closer and sitting down across of her with a seemingly serious expression. His handsome face and beautiful eyes made Melania think of the reason why she had been so smitten with him in the beginning. Oh, how the times have changed. "There is something we need to discuss."
"I'm all ears," the woman replied. "Though I wouldn't mind some tea while we're talking. Trippet!"
A wide-eyed house-elf appeared a moment later, and bowed deeply before disappearing to fulfil his mistress’s wishes. It was truly strange how the little creatures seemed to be fond of Melania. Arcturus had noticed their eagerness to serve her above all.

It was slightly insulting, but he didn't care enough to address it. Instead, while waiting for the tea, Arcturus allowed himself a moment to admire Melania's delicate features and dark curls. It was absurd how someone who looked so defenceless and downright sweet, was so terribly vicious and cruel. As soon as the tea had been served and the house-elf disappeared, Arcturus sighed heavily and began:

"We have had our differences in the past. Lately, all we do is argue. And while I understand that there're very... valid reasons for our arguments, I have no doubt that we're both capable of moving forward from those problems. You and I are, after all, very like-minded and sensible people."

"What do you want?" Melania asked, reluctantly curious and very tempted to remind Arcturus how like-minded they actually were. Which, if she were quite honest, was not much at all. Her husband wouldn't know sensible even if it had a notable heritage and a cock to suck. "You wouldn't say any of that if you didn't want something from me."

"I want to become the Minister of Magic," Arcturus lied, looking at his wife with a determined expression. She narrowed her eyes, surprised but not suspicious. "I want to stand at the top of the food chain, my dear, and I could imagine no one else but you to stand there beside me. Our society is falling to ruins with mudbloods and foreigners increasing every single day. That is not how our world is meant to be."

"I'm not entirely repulsed by the idea," Melania said, imagining the prestige such a status would give her. Arcturus had always been somewhat active politically, and it was perhaps only a matter of time before he went after recognized, official positions. "What made you think of it?"

"Malfoy," Arcturus told her, finding it easy to sound annoyed at the mention of the man. He had never been particularly fond of Malfoys, no matter how important the other family was. Or rather, precisely because of how much influence and power that particular family held. It resembled rivalry too much and was nothing like an alliance that Arcturus had wanted years ago. "He mentioned something about doing it himself, and I thought—"

"You thought that there is no way that you'd allow Malfoy to surpass you like that," Melania finished for him. "I absolutely agree. I cannot bear to think of him or his wife or, sweet Circe, that sister of his."

"Marchosias has always been surprisingly soft when it came to dealing with mudbloods. Granted, he does not like them, but he'd rather do nothing and ignore their existence than erase them once and for all."

"One can only hope that something will happen to snap that family back to sound logic. Tolerating vermin will not purge the society."

"The next elections are still a couple of years away," Arcturus continued. "But you must understand how important it is for us to stand united if we wish to succeed. We will have plenty of enemies trying to bring us down, and I'd rather not have you standing with them, my dearest. You and I together... there is no one who could destroy us."

"And that is why you brought this perfume," Melania said, picking up the bottle and looking at it. "To sweeten the deal." She then sprayed a small cloud of the perfume towards her, not noticing
Arcturus leaning away from it. The man’s expression was carefully neutral, though he did allow himself a pleased smile when Melania expressed her approval of the scent.

"Yes," Arcturus said. "It is only polite, no? Do you accept my proposal?"

"What do you want me to do?" Melania asked, thinking already of the things she’d need to work on in order to somehow make Arcturus’s terrible public reputation suitable for a Minister. There were quite a few people who knew some of Arcturus’s nasty traits and didn’t approve of his obsessive personality or inappropriate disregard for good manners. "Have you thought of anything specific yet?"

"Not yet," Arcturus replied, standing up. "For now I am simply counting my allies and assessing my opponents. There’s be plenty of work that needs to be done before I start planning the campaign. Until then, however, I’d rather you did not speak of this to anyone else. Not even Mrs. Goyle."

"Of course not," Melania said. "Morag is very dear to me but hardly trustworthy."

"We can count on the Goyle’s to support us, rather than the Malfoys, right? Though Mr. Goyle is a friend of Marchosias..." Arcturus bit his lip, trying to come up with any names he could theoretically use to keep Melania from growing suspicious. "Perhaps it will be better to focus on people who we know for sure to not support them."

"Start with McLaggen," Melania advised. "Merlin know, he hates the Malfoys even more than you do."

"Yes," Arcturus said, nodding. "I will do that."

Like hell he would.

* *

Predictably, the place Malfoy led Harry to, was by far fancier than anything Harry had seen in quite a while. The tables were made of marble and cherry wood and the beautifully designed leather chairs would have been far more suitable for a lounge or even an office than a restaurant. Malfoy, unlike Harry, was very clearly used to places of this calibre and not only got them a table by the window within seconds of walking in, but also ordered for the two of them before dismissing the waitress with a wave of his hand.

"Well," Malfoy started, suddenly sounding awkward. "I’m sure you’re... confused and curious about some... things."

"You’re right about that," Harry replied, eyeing the man sitting across of him, noticing more and more differences between him and Draco Malfoy. This couldn’t be the ferret’s grandfather, most certainly. "Hopefully you bringing me here means that you’ll be explaining some things."

"Yes, well, perhaps," Malfoy sighed, leaning back on the chair and eyeing Harry with a contemplative frown on his face. "I simply cannot understand why Black would introduce you to me. He never does things without ulterior motives and I’d rather know what that man is up to than simply wait for a hex to hit."

"Malfoy," Harry sighed, and the man twitched, clearly uncomfortable with being addressed so informally by Harry. "I cannot begin to guess why Black has decided to go out of his way to speak to me. I’d rather he wouldn’t do that, but I haven’t yet figured out how to tell him that without him being offended by it."
"Oh, there's no way to tell him anything without him being offended," Malfoy said, not sounding particularly concerned about that. "You... Are you really a mudblood or is there something Arcturus knows about your heritage that I do not?"

"Merlin, Black knows nothing about me, and neither do you," Harry snapped. "I'm a half-blood, and I'd like to ask you to kindly refrain from using that term in my presence."

"If Arcturus knows nothing about you, does that mean that he also has no knowledge of your occupation?" Malfoy asked, not reacting to what Harry had just said. "I could see from the stamp on the box that it's from the Department of Divination. Usually boxes that big contain uniforms or other-

"I recently became a Witness," Harry interrupted, scowling at the man. He saw no reason to hide his new job from Malfoy, but it did feel strange that he was the first to know. "Black doesn't know that, though."

"That is odd," Malfoy muttered, but remained quiet when the waitress came back with platefuls of food that smelled delicious but looked entirely unfamiliar to Harry. He could distantly hear the sound of the radio, where a man was speaking of unrest overseas. Harry thought of Hitler and wondered if this unrest had anything to do with the upcoming war, or if it was something unrelated.

"Has Arcturus ever spoken to you about me?" Malfoy asked as soon as the waitress left, and Harry wondered if the man truly thought that Harry and Black were in the habit of meeting up for casual gossip every other day.

"Malfoy," Harry said. "I'm not sure what you're imagining but Black and I are not acquaintances. He hasn't said anything about you to me because he has barely ever said anything to me at all."

"But—"

"I think you're overreacting," Harry continued, interrupting the other wizard. "I'm not sure why introducing me to you once, in a casual setting, is something that would make you want to question me about him."

"Because Arcturus hates mudbloods," Malfoy said quietly, leaning forward. "And I don't mean hate the way I don't like your sort. I mean that less than a year ago Arcturus was leading a campaign to have all mudbloods marked and registered. Regulated like werewolves. He once even proposed a bill that would make it legal to breed mudbloods like dogs and have them integrated into wizarding society only after ensuring magical parentage for at least three generations. Generations created in captivity. He's not the kind of a man who'd voluntarily want to speak with a mudblood in public."

Harry didn't feel hungry anymore. Instead, he felt slightly nauseated.

"I take it he never spoke to you of any of that."

"I told you already that he and I are hardly even acquaintances. We haven't spoken about anything at all."

"But you do understand now why I am curious about you," Malfoy said, and glanced at Harry's untouched plate. "Eat. The food here is too good to be wasted."

"I understand now," Harry admitted, feeling worried for himself and glad that Tom was safely at Hogwarts. "But there's nothing I can tell you that would satisfy your curiosity. I know even less of Black's possible motives than you do." That was clearly not what Malfoy had hoped to hear.
“Whatever interest he does have in you is unlikely to disappear,” the man said after a moment. “Especially once hears of you becoming a Witness. How did that happen, anyway?”

“Lady Cassandra found me and recruited me,” Harry said with a shrug. “The job sounds interesting and the pay is great, so I accepted. I was told that the position is rather prestigious, although I’m not yet sure why.”

“Some people wish to go down in history,” Malfoy explained. “They believe that if they flatter a Witness enough and send gifts at every opportunity, it could happen.”

Harry couldn’t quite relate to people’s need to be famous and remembered forever, and the thought of someone trying to use bribery to make that happen was ridiculous. His thoughts must have shown on his face as his expression made Malfoy smirk.

“I never said they were particularly clever, did I?” the man told him, and Harry sighed. “Either way, the more you mingle with people, the better off you’ll be in the future. Many, however, won’t forgive you for your shortcomings.”

“You mean for being a half-blood,” Harry said, and Malfoy shrugged. “I’m surprised you’re being civil towards me now, then.”

“I’d never wish to join my family with yours,” Malfoy admitted. “And were you not a Witness, I’d prefer to not be seen with you either. But with the situation being what it is, I don’t mind. Now... would you like some wine?”

It was getting late, and Tom knew that soon he’d have to leave the library and start making his way towards the Slytherin common room, if he wanted to get there before the curfew. His friends hadn’t bothered to return to the library after dinner, and Tom had spent a peaceful hour reading on his own.

Now, however, it was time to go back to where he’d have to put up with the other Slytherins and their sneers and unfunny jokes. Tom packed his books, quills, ink bottles and parchments slowly into his bag, reluctant to leave. On his way out of the library, he couldn’t help but be slightly unsettled by how empty and quiet the place was at this hour. The librarian - he had forgotten her name - looked up briefly from a pile of what seemed to be damaged books, before finding him uninteresting and returning to her work.

The hallways were silent and dark, and once he reached the dungeons, they were even darker. Torches that lit the way were few and far from one another. Despite how paranoid walking alone in the dark dungeons made him - especially since he knew that there were students who’d love nothing more than to curse him with a nasty spell - Tom couldn’t bear the thought of joining his housemates quite yet, and chose a longer route to get to the common room.

All the portraits that he could see on his way were either empty or asleep. They were weird, Tom thought. The portraits. How they worked. How they behaved. He didn’t like them - he couldn’t feel comfortable in an environment where even objects could spy on him. In theory, wouldn’t it be easy to gift someone a painting claiming it to be art, only to have hidden a spy in the scenery?

Few corridors away from the entrance of the Slytherin common room, Tom heard the sound of loud whispering. As far as he knew, people who had nothing to hide, rarely whispered. Especially people who were tucked away in this part of the dungeons at this hour, and if Tom had learned anything in his life, he knew that it was always beneficial to know what others were trying to hide. Just in case.
With that in mind, it seemed logical for Tom to slip off his shoes and quietly walk towards the sound of whispering. He held his shoes in one hand and his wand in the other, ready to defend himself in case someone were to notice him and try to hex him.

The sight that greeted him was that of four older students - the Slytherin sixth year prefect Chapman being one of them - crouching around a small, brown cat. The cat’s body was twitching and convulsing, and its mouth was stretched wide open, as if it was screaming. There was no sound, however, and it didn’t take for Tom long to realize that a silencing charm had been used on the animal.

‘Not just a silencing charm, it seems like,’ Tom thought, watching the cat suffer. ‘I wonder what this spell is. Somehow I doubt that it’s part of the curriculum.’ None of the four seemed to find torturing the cat enjoyable, and Tom wondered if they were simply trying to appear tough in the eyes of their friends by doing something like this.

Soon the only girl in the group of four whispered something, and one of the boys - with a Ravenclaw tie - nodded, before poking the twitching cat with the tip of his wand. The quivering mess of an animal made Tom frown, and the boy nearly gasped when one of the cat's eyes suddenly burst, splattering on the floor and leaving a small pulp of what looked like blood and disgusting slime.

‘Somehow, I doubt that I could ask Harry about this,’ Tom thought, biting his lip. ‘How advanced is that curse? What does it do, exactly? Is it illegal? Does it work on humans as well or only on small animals?’ He had never liked animals, really, but somehow the sight of the tortured cat made him upset. It was almost a relief when one of the boys murmured a quiet spell that made the cat stop twitching. After a moment, the girl waved her wand and their voices became much clearer.

Tom realized then that they had been using a spell to prevent eavesdropping, and learning that spell would surely be even more useful than the one that had made the cat suffer so much.

"Not bad," the Ravenclaw said. "I didn't know the eye would explode like that, though. Scourgify."

"I'd still feel more comfortable if we were in an actual classroom, behind closed doors," the girl said. "Anyone could see us and that would get us all expelled, if not worse."

"I told you already," the third boy hissed, rolling his eyes. "Spells like this can be detected by the wards of the classrooms. Corridors, on the other hand, have dead spots like this one where these kind of Dark curses won't be detected. If we tried this in a classroom, we'd have half the staff running here with their wands out. Is that what you want?"

“And we can’t change the place,” Chapman whispered. “It took us forever to locate this dead spot. Besides, who’d see us? Everybody else is busy elsewhere at this hour.”

“This is far too close to the common room entrance,” the girl insisted. "I really think... I mean, we could do this outside."

‘I better leave before I’m found out,’ Tom thought, taking a few steps back before turning and hurrying silently away. Surely people who could cast curses like this knew how to hex him badly, too. The last thing he wanted was to be caught by older students like that.

Later on, tucked into his bed, Tom's thoughts kept revolving around the new spells, and the possibility of learning how to cast them.
1938

He had resisted the conclusion for a long time, but after the most recent failure, there was no denying it any longer: his wand, the Elder Wand, wasn't working.

Gellert Grindelwald had acquired the wand in question a long, long time ago, and it had served him well. It had always been swift to obey him and eagerly answered the call of his magic... up until four years ago. He had felt a slight change right away, but for the longest time it had been easy to ignore. Sure, the wand felt heavier in his hold than it used to, and it seemed to be increasingly reluctant to obey him, but it had worked.

Not anymore, though. It wasn't working for him. And as much as Gellert had tried to deny the problem, there was no ignoring it when he couldn't use the wand to cast a single bloody cleaning charm.

He entertained the idea of researching the issue himself and solving the problem on his own, but there was so much else that needed his attention. In the end Gellert decided to head to Gregorovitch's workshop and ask the wandmaker for advice. It wasn't as if the old man would dare lie to him. Not since Gellert had made a point about the importance of honesty about a decade ago.

Sadly, Gregorovitch didn't appear to be happy to see Gellert in his workshop again.

"The wand - you know which one - isn't working for me anymore," Gellert said as soon as he had kicked out the rest of Gregorovitch's customers. "Do something about it."

"I didn't create the wand," the old wandmaker told him. "There's nothing I can do about it."

"Mykew, my old friend," Gellert sighed. "I am asking for nothing but your assistance here. Treat me like any other of your usual customers. Help me."

"None of my customers would have forced my workshop to close at this hour," Gregorovitch snapped. "And even if I wanted to help you, I doubt that I could. The wand was in my possession for a very brief time, thanks to you, and the time I spent studying it was very limited. Once again, thanks to you."

"Be reasonable," Gellert said. "This wand was never meant for a collector, but a man of action such as myself. You and I both know that."

"A man of action," Gregorovitch repeated scornfully. "I have heard rumours, you know. Of a Dark Lord carrying the mark of the Deathly Hallows. You do not have them all, do you?"

Gellert eyed the old man with a cold look on his face, before he smiled brightly. He then pulled out a wand - the one he had used before the Elder Wand had fallen into his hands - and held it at his side. He didn't cast a curse - he didn't need to. The message was clear as it was, and Gregorovitch took a deep breath before sitting down.

"Hand me the wand and I will take a look," the old wandmaker said. "But I promise you no results."

"I am not an unreasonable man, Mykew," Gellert said, handing him the Elder Wand. "All I want is genuine effort and compliance from you."

Gregorovitch’s Advice
While Gregorovitch worked, Gellert decided to take a walk inside the workshop to pass some time. He remembered coming here a long time ago to buy his own wand, and not much had changed since then. The same old shelves that wobbled under the weight of countless wands. The rows and rows of different ingredients and pieces of wood lying everywhere. The same few books piled in one corner and a painting of a woman that stood frozen in time. It was all the same.

"In fact, out of everything that is inside this place right now, 'the wizard thought. 'It seems that only I have changed.'"

And oh, how much had changed since the first time he came here. The things he had learned, the people he had loved and left, the goals he had embraced, and the ambitions that he lived by. Gellert had come a long way since the days of confusion and hesitance. And if achieving his goals meant accepting and overcoming any guilt for having caused collateral damage, then, well... All wars had casualties, and his war was no different.

It wasn't as if he had attacked innocents - not really. Simply people who had knowingly chosen to stand in his way, protecting Muggles and making his work harder. Unlike many others, Gellert himself had never particularly cared about purity of blood. As long as the person was a witch or a wizard, he would have readily welcomed them to his ranks. It was only Muggles that he thought were unnecessary to keep around unsupervised.

Besides, it wasn't as if he had wanted to kill all Muggles. He just didn't think them capable of governing themselves.

Sighing, Gellert made his way back to the front of the workshop, and stood quietly watching the old wandmaker study the Elder Wand carefully. Eventually, Gregorovitch shook his head and turned towards Gellert with a frown on his face.

"Listen," Gregorovitch said, looking up from the wand. "Like I suspected, there's nothing that I can do to fix it. It doesn't seem as if the wand is broken or faulty, so even knowing what to fix is impossible for me to detect. However, there is a man who is more knowledgeable than I am when it comes to diagnosing wands, and he perhaps can at the very least tell you where this one's defect is."

"Who?" Gellert asked, not particularly surprised by the wandmaker's words. "Do you know where he is now?"

"His name is Garrick Ollivander," Gregorovitch said with a grimace. "I do not like the man, but he is competent. He has a shop in London. I can give you the address."

"Very well," Gellert said, mustering up a smile. "I am very grateful for your... help, Mykew. Have a good day, and may you never run out of use to me."

"Here's to hoping," the old man huffed, and waited until the Dark Lord had left before sitting down and breathing in relief. He had survived yet another encounter, much to his own surprise.

There was snow outside, and Tom hated the mere sight of it. Snow made him remember too many things that he'd rather forget for good.

Nott and Avery were throwing snowballs at Lestrange and Rosier, and somehow, instead of anger at being targeted in such way, the other two seemed to enjoy scooping up snow and throwing it right back. It made no sense. Prince was sitting on a bench with the other three Slytherin first year girls, while Tom and Mulciber had chosen a bench further away from everyone else.
It suited Tom just fine. Mulciber's quiet company allowed Tom to focus on his own thoughts in peace, which was exactly what he wanted to do. He had tried to find some information of the spells he had seen the older students use the day before, but he hadn't been able to find much. He had managed to write down a short list of privacy spells that he wanted to practice later on, but any mention of pain-inducing curses led to nothing useful.

No matter how annoying it was, it did make sense that the school would make it difficult for students to find and learn spells that were so clearly harmful.

’If they didn't learn that spell at school, it means that they must have learned it back home,’ Tom thought, not liking the advantage such an arrangement implied. How was he supposed to maintain his superiority over students who were being taught strong, destructive spells like that? Somehow he doubted that Harry would teach him anything of the sort.

Then again, learning how to heal with magic was almost as useful as learning how to destroy, and Tom could explain that particular interest without making Harry worry about his state of mind. Or state of morals, rather. Tom knew better than to assume that Harry thought him entirely innocent, but he was also quite aware that people rarely ever realized how little Tom actually cared about the difference between wrong and right.

It wasn’t that he didn’t know the difference – it just didn’t matter, really. The only thing that mattered was whether or not something was beneficial to him.

"They are so energetic,” Mulciber suddenly said, snapping Tom out of his thoughts.

"Hm?"

"Al and the others. Look at them."

The snowball fight had become even more chaotic, and Tom recognized a couple of the older students that had joined. The teams seemed to no longer exist and everyone was throwing snowballs at each other. How could something like that ever be considered fun, Tom didn't know. Avery seemed to have formed a temporary alliance with Lestrange of all people and the two were busy throwing snowballs at Nott, who was laughing loudly and punching the snowballs that came his way.

"I feel tired just looking at them," Mulciber said. "Dorian hasn't been bothering you much lately, has he?"

"No," Tom replied, not considering Lestrange's occasional insults to be much of a bother anymore. Once everyone had realized how many points Tom was capable of gaining for the Slytherin House, people had started treating him better than they had during the first few weeks. Tom resented the fact that he had to prove himself in order to be treated as well as his peers, but knew that there was nothing he could do about it.

At least he had it better than the likes of Tanya Simmons who, despite being a prefect, was barely treated as such due to her blood status. It didn't help that the girl didn't seem to have the courage to give detention to every person who spoke ill of her.

’If I was her,' Tom thought, 'I would have each one of those bullies in detention every time there was a Quidditch match.' Even though the Quidditch Cup hadn't yet started, the teams of each house had played a few unofficial matches against one another already. It was clear by now that anything Quidditch related was very important to the majority of the students, and Tom found Simmons' reluctance to exploit that obsession against her bullies downright irritating.
"You're not fun to bully, I guess," Mulciber said. "By his standards, I mean. You don't cry, you just hit back where it hurts. He can't really handle something like that."

"He's lucky he stopped with this stupid attempts when he did," Tom huffed. "He's ridiculously easy to set up and get into trouble with the teachers."

"Especially after what happened with Professor Summerby," Mulciber agreed. "To be quite honest, Chad is actually the more vicious one between the two."

"Really? How so?" Tom asked curiously. "I've never really interacted with him. Whenever Lestrange says something, Rosier is quiet. So I thought that he's a bit of a sidekick, to be quite honest."

"He just prefers to target other purebloods, for some reason," Mulciber said. "He's been on Al's case for a long time now. I'm sure you've noticed that whenever Al does or says anything, Chad just has to make fun of him for it."

Tom had noticed Rosier's constant commentary that clearly had an impact on Avery, but he hadn't really paid much attention to it. "But why?"

"I don't know," Mulciber admitted with a shrug. "He's always been like that. Maybe he doesn't need a reason."

"People are so strange," Tom said, tugging at his scarf and thinking of going inside. "I like books more."

"Tom, Elliot," Prince called, leaving her bench and walking towards them. "It's dinnertime soon. We probably should get going."

"Al!" Mulciber yelled, catching the attention of the boy in question. "Dinner! Let's get going!"

"How kind of you to not just leave him behind," Tom said, and Mulciber shrugged.

"He's insecure," the boy said. "Leaving him behind will just hurt him. He cares about things like that, you see, no matter how ridiculous wanting friends may seem to you."

Tom nodded, Mulciber's words confirming what he had already suspected: Avery was lonely and unlike Tom, being alone was something the other boy seemed to truly hate.

'I could have him as a friend,' Tom thought, suddenly, as he watched the red-faced boy brush snow off his shoulders and jog towards them. 'He's useful and if all he needs in return is to be included, then that's... easy enough to do.'

It hadn't been long until boredom drove Harry back to the busy streets of Diagon Alley. He had read and reread all of his work-related documents and instructions multiple times, but he hadn't yet been called in for a mission. He had, however, received a hefty payment from Gringotts, which made him wonder... why on earth were Witnesses paid this well? Was there something about the job that Harry was unaware of? Was it more dangerous than being an Auror?

Then again, perhaps the value was in the rarity of those capable of becoming Witnesses. Trelawney had told him that not everyone could do it.

'But why would a job like this even need specific requirements?' Harry thought, walking past the
apothecary and heading towards Flourish and Blotts. 'I mean, I'm not complaining about being overpaid... I'm just... curious.' Then again, it wasn't as if the Ministry was known for being particularly fair when it came to handing out compensations and rewards. Harry was certain that there were many others who worked long hours for which they were grossly underpaid for.

Leaving the snow-covered street and entering the warm bookstore made Harry sigh in relief. The vaguely familiar wizard behind the counter smiled brightly and readjusted his nametag. From where he was standing, Harry could barely read the name 'Rudolf' that was written on it.

"Is it still snowing out there?" Rudolf said. "I took a look a couple of hours ago and the weather was dreadful, then."

"It's not, thankfully," Harry replied, stepping further into the store. "Though it is terribly windy."

"Well, let's hope that the snow stays until Christmas," Rudolf said, smiling again. He smiled an awful lot, Harry noticed, even for a saleswizard. "How can I help you? Are you looking for anything specific? Perhaps a gift for that young charge of yours?"

"Yes, well," Harry started. "I know that his Christmas break is still over a month away, but if I find anything for him now, I might as well buy it. It's been so long since I last saw him."

"Oh, but surely you and your wife have had some relaxing months together," Rudolf said, leaning over the counter slightly. "I mean... assuming that there is a Mrs. Riddle at home?"

"There isn't," Harry replied, feeling slightly awkward. "I'm not married. I... yeah. I'm single. Which is fine. I'm fine with it."

"Oh," the other wizard sighed, biting his lip before offering Harry a smile that was perhaps meant to be slightly more pleasant than it actually came across as. "But don't you get lonely, then?"

"A little bit, sometimes," Harry admitted, unsure of how long he'd have to keep talking with the man before he could simply go and look for a few books to buy. "But it's alright. I'm used to it. Tom's absence has just thrown me off a little bit, but eventually I'll get used to that, too."

"Mr. Riddle, forgive me for being this forward," Rudolf said, moving from behind the counter to rearrange a few of the books on the shelf behind Harry. He was standing close enough for Harry to feel the man's arm brush against his own. "But don't you think that you deserve to have more than just... loneliness that you hope to get used to?"

"I, um, well...," Harry stammered, feeling that there was something going on that he was missing. "I'm not sure..."

"Think about it, Mr. Riddle," Rudolf said, and oh Merlin, what was his hand doing on Harry's shoulder?

"I... I will, thank you," Harry said, unsure of how to extract himself from the situation without offending the other wizard. What had he come in for, anyway? Oh yes, Tom's gift! "S-say, do you have any books about finance? My ward has always been particularly interested in accounting and banking and economics."

"Well," Rudolf said, standing far too close for Harry's comfort. "We do have a few books in that particular section, but unfortunately the only place that can sell you relevant books on the subject is the bookstore Polskoff & Findley. It's right across from Begonia's. You know where that is, right?"

"Yes, I do," Harry replied hastily, taking a step towards the door. "Thank you so much, I appreciate
your help. Have a good day."

"You as well, Mr. Riddle," Rudolf said cheerfully.

Harry stepped out of the store, and hurried away as fast as he could, feeling awkward. If only he was a better speaker in situations such as these— but he knew that he had never been smooth or suave. He was barely charming on a good day, to be quite honest, and--

Suddenly, Harry's thoughts were interrupted when he rounded a corner only to walk into someone and nearly fall down due to the impact. Before that happened, however, the person he had walked into took a hold of Harry's arm and helped him stay on his feet. It was embarrassing, but less so than actually falling into a pile of snow due to his own carelessness.

An apology ready at the tip of his tongue, Harry looked up at the person in front of him. The man he bumped into was tall, and carried himself with the easy confidence of someone who has never had to doubt his place in the world. His blond hair was cut short and though he had a pleasant expression on his face, there was something about his blue eyes that made Harry wary.

"I'm sorry," the man said, his English accented in a way that reminded Harry of Viktor Krum. "Are you alright?"

"No, no, I should have been more careful," Harry hurried to assure the stranger. "No harm done. Um. Thank you for the catch, though."

"Ah, you're most welcome," the man said, smiling again. "I am sorry, but do you mind if I trouble you with a question? I am on my way to Ollivander's for wand-related consultation, but... I do not know where it is, exactly."

"It's a fair distance from here," Harry said, "but if you would like, I can take you there. Consider it an apology."

"You have nothing to apologize for," the stranger said. "But I accept your offer. Thank you."

* 

Gellert barely remembered the last time he had visited Diagon Alley, and couldn't for the life of him remember where he could find the wandmaker's shop. He was growing increasingly annoyed and considered using the point-me spell that he had never been particularly fond of, when someone bumped into him. The stranger - a young man with bright green eyes and an unruly mess of black hair - nearly fell on his arse, had it not been for Gellert grabbing a hold of him.

The moment he let go of the young man, however, he felt a curious tug in his pocket, exactly where the Elder Wand was.

"I'm sorry," Gellert said politely. "Are you alright?"

"No, no, I should have been more careful," the young wizard insisted hastily, eyes wide and sincere. "No harm done. Um. Thank you for the catch, though."

"Ah, you're most welcome," Gellert replied, wondering if there was something special about this stranger, or if the reaction of the Elder Wand had been just a coincidence. He'd need at least a few more minutes to come to a decision regarding that, and so he said: "I am sorry, but do you mind if I trouble you with a question? I am on my way to Ollivander's for wand-related consultation, but... I do not know where it is, exactly."
"It's a fair distance from here," the British wizard said with a sorry smile, as if he was the one to blame for the shop's distant location. Gellert wondered if he was truly about to hear yet another apology. Not even his own people apologized this much to him. "But," the wizard continued. "If you would like, I can take you there. Consider it an apology."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Gellert said, pleased. "But I accept your offer. Thank you."

"My name is Harry, by the way," the young man said after a couple of minutes of walking in silence. "Harry Riddle. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"I am Gellert Grindelwald," Gellert said, imagining already the shock this stranger would feel when he'd read Gellert's name in a newspaper in the near future. "The pleasure is mine, I assure you."

"Have you been in England for long?" Harry asked, and there was a barely noticeable change in his smile. He couldn't have recognized Gellert's name - he hadn't made himself a public figure quite yet - but the name must have had some sort of an impact. Perhaps it reminded him of someone or something else?

"Barely a day," Gellert replied, pronouncing the words carefully, exaggerating his accent just enough for it to make an impression. There was an art to deception that many people failed to understand. "My wand is malfunctioning, and I was advised to visit Mr. Ollivander to see if there is something that can be done to fix it."

"Oh, yes, Ollivander is the best wandmaker around here," Harry said. "He'll definitely be able to help you. And if nothing else, he'll be able to sell you a wand that is even better than the previous one."

"One can only hope," Gellert said, resisting the urge to correct the wizard's assumption. He still hadn't managed to pinpoint anything special about the man, but the way the Elder Wand had begun vibrating in his pocket couldn't be a coincidence anymore. "You seem to have faith in him - is he your mentor, perhaps?"

"What? Oh, no," Harry hurried to say, shaking his head. "I have never worked with wands. I mean, it would be interesting, but I suspect the work needs far more dedication and finesse than what I possess."

"With hands like these," Gellert said, stopping to reach for Harry's hands and holding them between his own. "Surely you could create wands unlike any other."

"Um." The younger wizard's confusion was obvious, as was the blush crawling up his neck. His hands were warm, but not sweaty, and Gellert could wrap his fingers easily around the man's wrists. "I, er, no?"

"No?" Gellert asked, enjoying his flustered reaction, stepping just a little bit closer. The Elder Wand in his pocket was hot enough for him to feel it through the layers of fabric, and he wondered if the man would recognize the wand were he to see it now. The man clearly couldn't sense it, as far as Gellert could tell. "What do you do then, Mr. Riddle?"

"I work at the ministry," Harry replied, and did not elaborate further. Instead, he began walking again, slipping his hands out of Gellert's hold. The German wizard followed silently, assessing him as they walked. The man couldn't be an Auror, most certainly. He didn't seem like a fighter, though Gellert knew better than to trust appearances. He could imagine Harry as a personal assistant - smartly dressed, pleasant to look at, and helpful.
"Well, we're here," Harry said suddenly, and Gellert stopped, taking in the sight of the wand shop with dirty windows and a narrow doorway. *This* was where Gregorovitch's rival worked? Honestly, he wasn't impressed. "This is Ollivander's. I hope that he'll be able to help you."

"I hope so too," Gellert replied, and offered Harry a fleeting smile. He brushed his fingertips against the man's cheek in an affectionate gesture, enjoying the blush that appeared on Harry's face. "It was truly a delight to meet you, Harry Riddle. Have a good day."

"Likewise," Harry said, and left without looking back.

What a strange man.

★★

Dinner was, without a doubt, the most enjoyable meal at Hogwarts. There was no rush to be done in order to get to class on time, no need to muster up the energy for anything in particular, and Tom could simply eat and read quietly, surrounded by his friends who knew better than to talk to him at times like these.

For some reason Prince had brought one of the other Slytherin girls to sit with them, which seemed to delight Avery greatly. Opaline Pucey was a shy girl with a quick smile and a chronically nervous demeanour.

"There's a rumour going about something that happened last night, and I think it's true," Pucey was saying between small bites of whatever she had on her plate. "Two older students were caught casting some nasty spells, and they were suspended."

'Two?' Tom thought, wondering if it was the same group that he had happened upon. *There had been four at least."

"Who?" Avery asked. "And what kind of nasty spells, do you know?"

"Esther Nichols, she's a sixth year student from our house, if I remember right," Pucey said. "And someone called Creighton from Ravenclaw. I don't know anything about him, though. Some say the curses were very Dark, but nobody really knows which spells exactly were cast. All that's known for sure is that they were suspended."

"Merlin, those morons," Prince huffed, rolling her eyes. "Of course the teachers would know if someone casts Dark magic inside the school. Haven't they read *Hogwarts: A History*? There's a whole chapter about the protective runes, wards and charms at Hogwarts."

"Some say that a house-elf reported their actions to the Headmaster," Pucey continued, clearly enjoying being the one who knew the most of what had happened. "Some others say it was one of the ghosts. Personally, I agree with you, Eileen, it's most likely the protective wards that alerted the staff. I mean, Dark magic is very illegal so of course the school would have no tolerance for it."

"Do you know what the word in regards to the spells that they used is?" Avery wanted to know. "I mean, you said nobody really knows, but there must be some guesses going around. Not the Unforgivables, though?"

"Oh no, no," Pucey hurried to assure him. "Definitely not the Unforgivables, otherwise they'd be expelled and in Azkaban already."

"What are the unforgivables?" Tom thought, wondering if this was something worth looking into. The name alone made him interested, and he was tempted for a second to ask his classmates right
then more about the matter. In the end he didn't, deciding to not bring their attention to the things that he didn't know.

"The spells must be very Dark if they were suspended," Prince said. "Taught at home, I take it?"

"Well, it's not like there's someone out there going around teaching teenagers Dark spells, now is there?" Avery said, rolling his eyes. "It must be at home. They're lucky if their parents don't end up being investigated for this."

"Actually," Mulciber started, joining the conversation. "My aunt in Germany told my parents a while ago that there was something like that going on there for a while. Someone - I don't remember his name - was recruiting teenagers for something and taught them all kinds of Dark spells. The IAA had their hands full with that case and I don't think they have managed to find the criminal yet."

"What's the IAA?" Tom asked.

"International Auror Association," Mulciber replied. "It's when crimes happen in more than one country and they need an international team of Aurors to solve it."

"Becoming an Auror is tough enough," Avery said, sighing dreamily. "And only the best of the best can join the IAA. It's even better than being a professional Quidditch player."

"It's creepy, though," Pucey suddenly said, frowning. "I mean, why would anyone do that?"

"What? Join the IAA?"

"No. Recruit teenagers and teach them Dark magic. What is that person supposed to gain from it?"

Tom could think of many reasons why an adult would be interested in teaching a teenager anything, thanks to quite a few interactions he had witnessed during his time at the orphanage. Vulnerable teens were easy to attract, and no matter how suspicious the circumstances were, it was hard to keep one's guard up at all times. Especially when someone offered help.

'I thought they had said that they would be safe from detection,' Tom thought. 'I suppose they were wrong.' It was good to know this early on, just in case he ever ended up needing to practice anything that wasn't particularly approved of.

"Christmas break will be here soon, can you imagine?" Pucey suddenly asked, clearly unwilling to continue the previous discussion. "I can't wait to see what my parents will give me! Last year they bought me a pony but I wish they would have bought me a kitten instead. What about you, Eileen?"

"Anything's fine," Prince replied, shrugging. "I'll be glad to go home, though. I've missed my family."

"We can meet up during the break, can't we?" Avery asked. "Riddle, where do you live?"

"A muggle neighbourhood in London," Tom replied, unwilling to be more detailed than that. "But I can get to Diagon Alley from there easily."

"We really should meet during the break," Prince said. "No gifts, though. I don't want the headache that would give me."

"Agreed," Tom said, thinking of his own probable inability to even afford gifts.

"That's fine," Avery said. "We can just have cake together, right? Elliot, you'll be coming too,
"Right," Mulciber said. Opaline bit her lip and looked at the four of them quietly for a few moments, before she spoke.

"Can I come too?" she asked. "I mean, I don't want to impose..."

"Of course you can come," Prince hurried to assure her. "I promise you that we're all super friendly, even if Tom scowls at everything and Elliot is always asleep."

"I don't scowl at everything," Tom said, scowling at the two girls.

"I don't sleep all the time," Mulciber said right after. "If I did, I wouldn’t hear half the things you say. But speaking of sleeping, can we go back to the common room? I miss my bed."
Something was wrong.

For the past few weeks Melania had felt increasingly sick, and though the cold weather had given her enough reason to suspect a cold, by the time the second week of illness came to pass with no signs of improvement, she began to worry. Arcturus had been suspiciously concerned by her condition, asking her nearly every day if there was something - anything at all - that he could do to help.

It was suspicious. No matter what kind of alliance she and her husband had for the time being, for him to be so concerned and helpful was simply... too strange. She didn't trust him, truce or no truce, and eventually she had started noticing signs that only increased her own suspicions.

Arcturus had told her that he'd look into forming alliances, but so far Melania had seen no signs of such attempts. The man hadn't invited anyone over for a lavish dinner to foster relationships, had had no meetings with his lawyers or financial advisors to draft any campaign plans, and had made no new alliances with anyone from the ministry. In fact, he hadn't even made any effort to refresh old alliances, which was either very unwise or simply intentional.

And if it was intentional, then what could it mean?

Perhaps Arcturus had lied to Melania about his ambitions regarding his career and place in ministry, but why would he bother with that? Had he truly wanted simply a shortcut to convince her to accept his offer for a truce?

'That is possible,' the woman thought, leaning back against her pillows and looking at the book she was holding. She had wanted to read a few chapters more, but her headache made that impossible, leaving her alone with her own thoughts instead. 'Perhaps Arcturus thinks that by forming an alliance with me, I'd turn a blind eye to all of his activities that he knows I disapprove of. If he thinks that I will be too occupied with his fabricated plan of becoming the minister of magic, he'll feel freer to do what he wants. Has he found that mudblood of his again? Circe, if only that poor fool knew what Arcturus would do to him once he gets bored.'

It would have been amusing, had Melania not resented Arcturus so much for his selfishness. How could the head of the House of Black be so controlled by his own desires? The man had always been quick to indulge himself and was very reluctant to let go of the harmful things that he enjoyed. Melania could only hope that her own children wouldn't inherit that trait of his.

'But if it's all a ploy to keep me occupied and looking away from his shenanigans,' Melania thought. 'Does that mean that he doesn't truly intend on becoming the Minister of Magic? That it's not only a side-project for him, but simply a lie from start to finish?' Because if that was the case... then Arcturus had finally crossed the final line. Melania had put up with a lot for his sake, to make sure that everything was up and running in the Black household and that their branch of the family wouldn't be the one to tarnish the family's reputation, no matter how often her husband slipped and made a mistake.

"My dear, how are you?"

Melania looked up, mustering up a smile when she saw that the source of her current headache had
appeared in the doorway. He was once again finely dressed, his dark hair stylishly cut and boots polished carefully. The friendly expression on his face did nothing to fool Melania, who knew him too well to take him at face value.

"Sick," Melania replied, feeling the ache in her lungs press heavily on her heart. "I will go to St. Mungo's tomorrow, to have the Healers take a look at what could be wrong. This has been going on for too long for it to be a simple cold."

"Rather than go to the hospital, would you like for me to call a Healer here?" Arcturus offered. "I wouldn't want you to trouble yourself with the distance. Surely a Healer can come here and-- In fact, I know Healer Davis personally. I have no doubt that she'll do a house visit for you."

"No," Melania said, feeling her suspicions increase. "Thank you, but I'll just go there. Just in case."

"Well, if you say so," Arcturus said agreeably, shrugging. "If you change your mind, though, please do tell me. For now, I must take my leave - I have a meeting with a friend to discuss certain matters. Is there anything you wish for me to buy on my way back? Jewelry or a new book? Anything at all?"

There it was again. That over-the-top helpfulness that Arcturus had never in his life exhibited before.

"No thank you," Melania replied. "I will see you in the evening. Enjoy your day, my dear."

Oh, but did he not look strangely cheerful? For someone who claimed to be so concerned about her health and worried about her condition every day, did he not look far too carefree? There was a bounce to his step and an air of constant amusement that seemed to linger around him, and for the life of her Melania could not dismiss those impressions as imagination. There was something going on, she was sure of that. Arcturus was, without a doubt, up to something. And that something had nothing to do with becoming the Minister of Magic.

'The last thing I need is one of his Healer friends trying to diagnose me,' Melania thought, shaking her head and sighing deeply. Knowing the crowd Arcturus was so fond of, he could easily have one of his friends telling Melania exactly what Arcturus wanted her to hear. Her being sick was giving him plenty of freedom, and prolonging her illness for his own gain was certainly not something that he wouldn't do.

'In fact,' Melania thought tiredly. 'I wouldn't be surprised if he turned out to be the reason for my sickness in the first place.'

"I'm going to work on a study plan for the end of term exams after the break," Prince decided. "I heard a couple of Ravenclaws talking earlier, and from the looks of it they seem to think that their House will do the best when it comes to exam results."

"I'll make my own plans," Tom told her quickly. "You know that I don't need any help."

"Why?" Avery asked, resting his head against a closed book on the table. "Is it because you don't think that Prince will make yours demanding enough? Besides, I think everyone knows that even if you took those exams right now, you'd pass them."

"It's not enough for me to pass," Tom replied, but didn't elaborate further. He did not feel like explaining to the others that to him, achieving high grades was part of proving his superiority to everyone else, and he didn't trust Prince to know which subjects to focus on. Knowing her, she'd have them all studying potions half the time, and squeezing barely any Transfiguration or Defense
He knew his own standards, and knew that he demanded from himself far more than what other people even realized. Prince was smart and hard-working, but she wasn't as smart or as hardworking as Tom. And to him that made all the difference.

"Not to mention that it's perfectly normal for Ravenclaws to have the best grades," Pucey continued. "I mean, they're Ravenclaws. Being smart is their thing. Just like Hufflepuffs are loyal and Gryffindors are brave and we're cunning."

"That's a ridiculous generalization," Prince huffed, and Tom secretly agreed with her. "There's no rule that says that Slytherins can't be smart or brave or loyal."

"Let's revisit this discussion once we come back from the Christmas break," Pucey suggested. "I've already started packing some of the things I want to take back home with me."

"You won't take everything?"

"No, I'm leaving some of my school books here. There's no need to take them home, I won't be reading them there anyway." Tom turned away from the girls, though their talk of books had made him wonder whether or not it was possible for him to borrow a few from the Hogwarts library and take them with him. He'd need to ask one of the prefects - probably Simmons, who truly was the most helpful one.

"Once we get back, the Houses will start working harder on Quidditch," Avery said enthusiastically to Mulciber, who didn't appear to be particularly interested. "I can't wait for the official matches to start! I've never seen a real one, and I'm dying to see if Hufflepuff's team is as good as people say it is."

"Will you be trying out next year?" Tom asked. It wasn't as if he wanted to know, but he had already made the decision to secure Avery's friendship for practical purposes, and if all the other boy wanted was a little bit of attention, Tom would readily give that.

"I'm not sure," the boy admitted with a shrug. "I mean, Eugene will be trying out. He's always been interested in sports anyway, so it's obvious that he'll want to--"

"I don't care about what Nott wants to do," Tom interrupted. "I was asking about you, not him. Will you try out next year? Because from what I've seen, anyone who can fly relatively well has a chance."

"I might," Avery said, after a moment of contemplation. There was a small grin on his face and he looked unreasonably happy for someone so indecisive. "Will you guys come cheer for me if I did?"

"Might as well," Tom replied with a shrug. "It'd give us an opportunity to make sure that Mulciber gets a dose of fresh air. Hopefully a bit of sunshine, too."

"I'm not a plant," Mulciber said, though he didn't sound particularly upset by the way Tom was speaking of him. In fact, he was quite clearly amused. "Besides, you need fresh air as much as I do, Tom. You're paler than some of the ghosts I've seen floating around."

"Rude," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "I've always been pale." Besides, he had decided to avoid sunshine as much as possible as soon as he had realized that sunshine made freckles appear on his face. The only time Tom had ever been called adorable by a caretaker at the orphanage had been when one of them had looked at his freckled face and cooed at how much they suited him.
Tom knew that if Harry ever found out about the freckles, he'd be subjected to having his picture taken. For a person who pretended to not find anything adorable enough to gush about, Harry was in the habit of doing exactly that whenever Tom said or did something unexpected.

The man was so strange. Tom missed him terribly.

"Have we decided already when we'll be meeting, exactly?" Pucey suddenly asked. "Perhaps after the New Year celebrations are over? I'm afraid that my family will have me attending some events with them, and I won't have any free time before all of that is over."

"Works for me," Mulciber said. "My mum threatened to make me attend a ministry function with her."

"It's fine by me, too," Tom said, thinking of spending his birthday with Harry. What kind of a book could Tom ask for this year? Or has Harry already bought him a gift? "We'll meet in Diagon Alley, right?"

"Right," Prince agreed. "But not the Leaky Cauldron. Too many people go through there and it's really not safe."

"We don't need to decide the precise place quite yet," Pucey said. "I can ask my sister for suggestions of where to go. She works as a consultant for a company there and often spends her lunch breaks in the coffee shops of Diagon Alley. I'm sure that she knows the best places for us to go to!"

Tom felt... slightly wary. On one hand, the thought of meeting up with his friends didn't sound bad at all, but he knew that Harry wasn't quite as financially blessed as the parents of his peers. Would Tom asking to eat out with his friends cause a strain on Harry? Tom hoped not.

And if it did, well... Tom was confident that he could weasel his way out of the meeting, if he had to.

* *

Tom was finally coming home! Harry couldn’t believe how long it had been since he had last seen the boy. How on earth had Mrs. Weasley been able to allow Ron to stay at Hogwarts every Christmas? Had Tom asked to stay there now, Harry wasn't sure if he would have given him permission to do so. At least, not without asking him why.

There wasn’t much to clean at the apartment, which left Harry feeling restless for the better part of the morning. He had already prepared a nice meal, though he knew it was nothing compared to all of the delicious dishes the elves at Hogwarts prepared every day. He hoped that Tom hadn’t gotten too used to hot chocolate and pancakes.

Then again, even if he had... Harry could afford buying him sweet treats regularly now. He could afford so many things he hadn't even realized that he had given up. It was true that money did not bring happiness, but Harry felt far more safe and secure with the knowledge that if there was a problem that required money, he'd be able to solve it. If there was a need to pay for hospital bills or new clothes or good food, Harry wouldn't be in trouble.

First, though, he'd have to figure out how to break the news to Tom. He couldn't hold on to the secret for much longer, especially if he didn't want Tom to feel like he wasn't important enough to be informed of the matter. Harry was quite confident, however, that even if Tom would act displeased in the beginning, he’d lighten up the moment he realized the increase of income that their household had experienced. And if anything, Tom loved money.
Which was, well, funny. Harry wasn't quite sure why he found Tom's obsession with money hilarious, but he couldn't help but grin every time he imagined the boy counting his small stash of coins.

'Perhaps for Christmas this year we could go out and look for new apartments?' Harry thought suddenly. 'Then again, I doubt anyone works during Christmas. But the day after. Merlin, there are so many things that we'll need to look into... Location, distance from Muggles...' Then again, Sirius's home had been in a completely Muggle neighbourhood, and Harry doubted that the Black family had chosen that location for the neighbours.

He still had a few hours before he'd start making his way towards King's Cross to pick Tom up. Harry could stare at the clock on the wall all he wanted, but time seemed to only slow down. Merlin, why had he woken up so early, anyway? He could have at least waited before making the food - by now everything was ready and under a preserving charm, and no amount of checking had unveiled any new tasks for Harry to occupy his mind with.

He couldn't wait for Tom to be home. He missed having someone to talk to regularly - or talk to at all. The last person he had had an actual conversation with had been--

Oh. Right. Grindelwald.

Harry was still processing that particular experience, not understanding how it had even come to pass. The charming foreigner with a great smile had been the Dark Lord that Dumbledore had defeated - would defeat - and... and Harry wasn't sure what he was supposed to think of that. He had never studied Grindelwald's actions much, but surely by now he had done something to deserve his title as a Dark Lord? Had he? He wasn't known in England yet, that much was clear - otherwise Harry would have heard his name at some point while spending his time in Diagon Alley.

The man had been clearly older than Harry, with a warm and firm handshake, and oh, how crazy was it that Harry had shaken hands with a Dark Lord? Hermione would have been horrified.

'I wonder if Voldemort ever used Grindelwald's actions as an example,' Harry thought. 'I mean, that would make sense, wouldn't it? He must have studied at least some of his strategies, otherwise he wouldn't have known what to do. Had Grindelwald ever even attacked the British ministry? Merlin, I should have studied his story more when I had the chance.'

Then again, even if Harry had read a book or two about Grindelwald four years ago, would he have remembered anything at this point? Somehow he really doubted that.

"It's none of my business, anyway,"

Harry said aloud, shaking his head. Dumbledore would deal with this particular Dark Lord, and Harry would stay out of it from start to finish. Bumping into the man had been nothing but a coincidence, since he had come to Diagon Alley just to have his wand che--

Oh no.

It couldn't be that wand, could it? The one that Harry had ended up snapping in half. The Elder Wand. It had been in Grindelwald's possession at some point, he knew about that, but when had it gone to Dumbledore? Logically only after their final duel. Merlin, did that mean that the man was currently in possession of the Elder Wand?

'It doesn't mean anything if he doesn't have the stone or the cloak,' Harry thought, forcing himself to calm down. 'And the cloak at least is safely with the Potters. There's nothing to worry about.'
Besides, hadn't Grindelwald said that the wand was malfunctioning somehow? He had said it quite a while before he had gone and touched Harry's cheek as if that was a thing that people simply did. Was it, though? Was it something that people nowadays considered a casual and friendly touch? Was Harry reading too much into gestures that didn't even matter?

'There's no reason to think about his actions,' Harry decided, standing up and opening a window, allowing a bit of cold air to sweep in. 'He was a very charming man. I can understand how he could attract so many people to fight for him.' Voldemort had been strong and charismatic, but not charming and most definitely not handsome.

'But that was Voldemort,' Harry thought, thinking of Tom and smiling a little bit. 'Might as well go to King's Cross now to welcome my own charismatic little nightmare home.'

Waiting for the Hogwarts Express to arrive lasted an eternity. That, at least, was what it felt like.

Harry waited at the station with an increasing number of parents and older relatives of the arriving students, and nearly cheered with them when someone finally noticed the red train approaching. He could easily understand their happiness - he felt happy, too, knowing that soon he'd see Tom again. Harry was, however, admittedly impatient and couldn't help but think 'Finally!' when the train stopped and the doors opened.

Students began pouring out - older students first, from what Harry could see - and the station became very crowded and chaotic in a matter of few short minutes. People were talking loudly, pushing past one another and trying to catch the attention of whoever they were looking for. Bags and pets were levitated above the heads of people to the waiting arms of happy owners and frustrated parents, and Harry could see at least a few families doing their best to exit the chaotic crowd as quickly as they could.

Harry wondered if it'd always feel like this – waiting on the platform for Tom to arrive. Then again Harry suspected that by the time the boy finished his fifth year, he wouldn't even want Harry to come and pick him up. From what Harry had observed during his own stay at Hogwarts, it was only a matter of time before students felt like they were too old and independent to be picked up by their guardians.

'Well, there're plenty of years to go before we get to that point,' Harry thought with a sigh. He turned to look at the mass of students and parents again, and nearly missed the moment when one of the train's doors was pushed open, and a very annoyed Tom Riddle stepped out. He was still dressed in his school uniform, and something about the way he stood and looked at the people around him reminded Harry of Hermione. He wondered how often she had felt frustrated by the people around her.

Harry knew he was grinning like an idiot when Tom saw him, but he also had noticed that despite the unimpressed eyeroll, the boy's lips had twitched into a tiny, quick smile.

"Tom!" Harry called, pushing past the people in his way to get to where the boy was standing. A few other children had emerged from the train behind him, and Harry briefly wondered if he could get away with hugging his cranky ward in front of his friends. When the mother of one of his companions all but lunged to hug her own son, Harry decided to not hold back this time either.

"Hi, Harry," Tom said, his nose pressed against Harry's jaw, and Merlin, it felt like years since Harry had last heard his voice. "Glad to see you."
"How are you?" Harry asked, letting go of the Slytherin and pulling away slightly. Was Tom taller now? How much had he grown during the past few months? How fast were children supposed to grow, anyway? "You look fine. Did you have fun at Hogwarts?"

"Yes, it was... fun," Tom replied, clearly not wanting to describe his educational experience with that particular word. "Let's go home, Harry."

"How about we go grab your trunk first, and then I'll apparate us home," Harry said, hugging the boy briefly once more. Merlin, he hadn't even realized how happy seeing Tom again would make him. "There's so much I want to talk with you about, and I have no doubt that there are plenty of things you didn't include in your letters..."

Tom waved his goodbyes to his friends before showing Harry where he had his trunk stored. It was nice, to be with Harry again. Tom wasn't sure what he had expected, but he had been afraid that something would have changed during his absence. What if Harry had realized all of a sudden that living without Tom was better? What if he had met someone and decided to live with them instead? What if he had changed somehow in ways that Tom wouldn't have been comfortable with?

Those thoughts disappeared, however, the moment Tom had actually seen Harry, and been hugged twice within a few minutes. It was odd how anyone could be so happy to see him, but it wasn't unpleasant. It wasn't unpleasant at all.

"You said you have something to talk about?" Tom asked, taking a hold of Harry's sleeve. Harry hadn't sounded upset, which made Tom quite sure that whatever the man wanted to talk about was not something bad. "Did something happen?"

"Yes, but don't worry, it's something I know that you will be happy about," Harry replied cheerfully, locating and summoning Tom's trunk with a few quick flicks of his wand. "It's in relation to something you've been telling me to do for quite a while now. I wanted to owl you about it, but decided that it's better to tell you in person, after all."

"Something like what?" Tom asked, trying to figure out which advice of his Harry had decided to finally follow. Tom had tried to tell him how to do many things - including how to avoid spending too much money on food and how to locate the cheapest products and what to say in order to get fruits for less than their price and—

"I'll tell you once we get home," Harry promised, taking a hold of Tom's trunk and leading the boy away from where people were still crowding. Tom looked at him with a small frown, resisting the temptation to question him now. Oh well, he'd be able to do it soon enough. "Ready to apparate home? I bet you're hungry, aren't you? I have a nice dinner prepared at home."

"Yeah," Tom said, happy to be able to leave the station already. "I'm ready. Let's go home."

Tom had missed the small flat he and Harry lived in, which was a bit of a surprise, if he wanted to be quite honest. Before staying at Hogwarts for nearly four months, he wouldn't have imagined himself missing the flat. Tom had never told Harry this, but he had always somewhat resented the place for how small and ugly it was.

"How about you shower and change into something more comfortable," Harry suggested, taking off his shoes and throwing his coat on the couch. "I'll make sure that the food doesn't need any final touches or heating up, all right?"
"Sure," Tom replied, feeling tired all of a sudden. It was as if the months spent at Hogwarts had been taxing in a way that he hadn't quite noticed, and it was only now, with the burden gone, that he realized that something had been burdening him at all. Was that something Harry could tell him about? Then again, something like that wasn't worth talking about if Harry had actual news he wanted to share. Not to mention that Tom, too, would much rather tell Harry about Hogwarts than discuss whatever exhaustion he was feeling. Harry had been a Gryffindor, and couldn't possibly know how the Slytherin life was like.

The food that Harry had prepared wasn't as well-made as what was served at Hogwarts, but Tom liked it more nevertheless. It felt great to be able to dine in peace without Avery talking on one side and Prince on the other. Harry wasn’t quiet, but somehow hearing him talk wasn't annoying in the least.

"You made a few friends at Hogwarts, you said," Harry started, sounding pleased and proud. "I'm glad. Are they fun to be around?"

"Mulciber is all right," Tom said, thinking briefly of the boy in question. "He sleeps most of the time. Prince is tolerable, and now even more so since Pucey joined - they prefer to talk to one another rather than talk to me, which is a good thing. Avery... was annoying at first. He's decent now."

"Is there anyone giving you a tough time?" Harry asked, refilling Tom's glass with more milk. "If there is, I'm sure that we can put a stop to it."

"Lestrange tried at first," Tom replied, deciding to not explain the details of how he had stopped Lestrange from bothering him anymore. "But since he and the others realized how many House points I can get us, they've left me alone. It's nice there, now. The Slytherin dorms are very... interesting." Tom wasn't lying, really. Him winning points for Slytherin on nearly a daily basis had helped him remain safe from his hostile peers.

"Well then, that's good to know. What about the subjects you're studying there? Is there anything specific that you don't like?" Harry asked then, curiously. "I wouldn't be surprised if you told me that you enjoy all of your classes, but surely there's at least something you don't adore?"

"I'm not fond of flying," Tom admitted with a frown, remembering how it had felt to sit on a broom with his feet dangling in the air. "Or Herbology. The Herbology professor is an absolute idiot. But between Herbology and flying, I'd rather have Herbology. I went to watch a practice match between the Quidditch teams of a few houses and the whole sport is so confusing. Did you ever play? I think you told me that you used to."

"Oh, yes," Harry sighed wistfully. "I was a Seeker. Merlin, it was so much fun. I love flying and I loved playing Quidditch. I've had two girlfriends in my life, and both of them were excellent Quidditch players."

"I'm not surprised," Tom said, his tone full of judgement.

"Hold on, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Tom rolled his eyes, before changing the subject, "You said you had something to tell me about. What is it? You made it sound like it's something important."

"Oh, that," Harry said, his green eyes suddenly wide as he bit his lip nervously. "Um, yes. There's something that happened and... Well, it's a good thing, I promise. I got a new job."

"A new job?" Tom repeated, that not being what he had expected to hear. "What kind of new job?
How much are you being paid? I noticed that your robes are new and they seem to be of better quality than anything else you own, but I didn't really make any conclusions based on that.

"I work for the ministry now," Harry said with a sigh, resisting the urge to show his amusement. Trust Tom to ask about the salary. "The Ministry of Magic, I mean. In the Department of Divination. I get paid a lot more than Maggie could have afforded to, and, well... I'm not actually sure how to tell you this, but... If you want, I think we could consider moving to a better place."

"Really?" Tom asked, thrilled by the mere suggestion. He imagined a room all for himself with numerous bookshelves and a big bed and maybe even a proper desk. "You're sure that that's something you can afford?"

"Absolutely," Harry assured him, smiling slightly, clearly pleased.

"What's the job about, then, if they're paying you well enough for you to be able to do that?" Tom wanted to know. "Department of Divination? Please tell me that you didn't become a fortune teller of some sort."

"What? No," Harry said in response. "Merlin, that would be a laugh. No, I've become what is known as a Witness. My job is, to be brief about it, to go to where a Seer tells me to go, and witness an incident that I later on record and store in a memory holder. It's part of writing history, and it's quite the prestigious job, I've been told."


"Thank you," Harry said, amused. He stood up, ready to start clearing the table. "But now, if you’re done eating, I do believe you're better off brushing your teeth and going to bed. You look barely awake. We can talk more tomorrow morning."
Gifts and Greetings

1938

Tom woke up on Christmas day, feeling the kind of anticipation he hadn't felt before. Perhaps the reason was simply that this time he didn't know what Harry had bought him, in contrast to all the previous years when Harry had simply taken Tom to a bookstore and allowed him to pick his own gifts.

Rather than only porridge, the breakfast included hot chocolate and even vanilla cookies that Tom liked to dip into the drink before eating. Harry had smiled at him and shaken his head.

"Do you have anything planned for us today?" Tom asked. Personally, he wouldn't mind even if Harry wanted to stay home all day - the weather outside was cold and windy, and Tom was feeling rather lazy.

"Not really," Harry replied. "We could go to Diagon Alley if you wish, but I doubt that there'd be anything exciting this year. Do you have anything specific in mind you want to do?"

"Open my presents and read," Tom said, eyeing the two packages that had been carefully wrapped in green paper and positioned on the couch. "That one by the pillow doesn't look like a book."

"You don't need to guess for much longer," Harry grinned. "Finish your hot chocolate and you're free to open the gifts. I hope you'll like them. Next year, you could do me the favour of writing a wish list of some sort." Tom didn't dignify Harry's suggestion with a response, and instead gulped down the rest of his drink before hurrying up towards the couch.

"Can we have a tree next year?" Tom asked suddenly, while trying to decide which gift he wanted to open first. "I think it'd be nice."

"Sure," Harry promised, wondering if buying a small tree would require for him to save money or if he could just trust his Witness salary to keep him afloat until then. According to his contract, he'd be working for the ministry indefinitely, but that didn't really tell him anything about the expected duration of his employment. "You can even be the one to decorate it, if you wish."

With an excited expression on his face, Tom began opening the presents Harry had bought him: a winter coat that was warmer than any other coat Tom had at the moment, and a few books he had picked up from different bookstores. Tom looked quite pleased with his gifts, and it wasn't until Harry saw how happy the boy was that he realized how worried he had been about Tom's approval.

"Will our next Christmas be in a new house?" Tom asked suddenly, looking at Harry with a curious and slightly hopeful expression. "When could we move to a new house, anyway? How long does it take?"

"Well," Harry started. "First we need to find an available place that we'd like to move into. Then we contact the seller or their agent and discuss prices and contracts and other important things. If everything goes well, moving from here to there would happen quickly and easily. It also helps that we don't really have much to move with us."

"Have you thought of what kind of house you want to live in?" Tom wanted to know. "All I want is a room for myself. That's my requirement."

"If that's your only requirement, then I can handle the rest while you're at Hogwarts," Harry said.
"So when you return for the summer, it'll be to the new house. And no, I haven't yet thought of what kind of a house I would want to live in. To be honest, I think it'd be better to look at the available options first."

"It's so crazy," Tom sighed. "How you got that job. I always told you that you're better off working with magic."

"Yes, you did. Although this isn't something I expected at all," Harry mused aloud. "To think that Trelawney recruited me herself. I got lucky." He had repeated the story of his encounter with Trelawney to Tom at least a dozen times already, and the boy seemed to always have something new to comment on. This time, he was shaking his head with a small, disapproving frown on his face.

"You're lucky she wasn't someone dangerous," Tom said. "You shouldn't follow people into their homes so carelessly. She could have been trying to lure you to another destination just to kidnap you."

"I may have never told you this," Harry said. "But I'm actually quite good with my wand. Defense was always my strongest subject at Hogwarts. No matter what, I'm quite confident that at the very least I can escape the situation. Besides, anti-apparition wards are easy to sense, and she didn't have any of those in her house. At any sign of danger I could have just apparated somewhere else."

"Still," Tom insisted. "Think of what sort of an example you are to me."

"The difference is that I am a fully trained adult with experience in combat and defense," Harry said, reaching to ruffle Tom's hair. The boy had a small obsession with keeping his hair neat, which was one of the funny traits that Harry couldn't help but be fond of. "You, however, are a child. You shouldn't go with anyone anywhere unless you know that you're safe and that the person is trustworthy."

"Thank you for that very inspiring advice," Tom muttered, rolling his eyes. "Whatever."

"For the most part, my life here is boring," Harry said. "You're the one who's having lots of fun at Hogwarts. With friends! I'm so happy that you have your own friends now."

"Something about what you just said is making me really annoyed," Tom told him. "Besides, they're... they're all right. We're not friends, we just spend time together sometimes. And that reminds me - for some reason they want to meet up after the New Year's celebrations. Somewhere in Diagon Alley. You can say no if you don't want me to go."

"Why wouldn't I want you to go?" Harry asked. "I can take you there to make sure you— Oh, is this you trying to use me as an excuse to not socialize? That is not going to work."

It hadn't been, but Tom wasn't about to correct Harry's assumption. He did have a reputation to uphold, after all, even with Harry.

"Fine," was all the boy said, pretending that his life wasn't exactly how he wanted it to be at that moment.

* *

Christmas dinners had never been particularly celebratory in the Black household, but this year the dinner was especially miserable. Melania was sicker than ever before, and could only stay up and dine with the family for barely an hour before her son Orion had to help her back to her room.

The room that, much to Arcturus's well-concealed delight, she had insisted on moving into shortly
after falling sick. Melania had claimed her reason to be not wanting to bother Arcturus with her
coughs during the night, but the man knew that that couldn't possibly be it. Despite their current
alliance, Melania did not trust or like Arcturus at all.

Once their mother had gone to bed, Lucretia and Orion were quick to find their own excuses to be
dismissed. Arcturus did not care; as long as the children were out of his way and incapable of doing
anything that would end up affecting him in any way, it was easy to ignore their existence and not
bother himself with them. It wasn't as if he didn't like his children, no. He simply... was not
particularly fond of them. They weren't yet old enough to be useful and they clearly adored their
mother too much to be trustworthy.

Well, it wasn't as if he needed their loyalty. He had the house-elves for that.

Nearly an hour after midnight, Arcturus was finally ready to begin his own celebrations. He had
made sure that his wife and children were all asleep, and that the house-elves wouldn't come to
bother him while he... enjoyed himself. The hour was too late for any visitors to bother come
knocking, and there was absolutely no reason why he couldn't go and have fun until the morning.

Anticipation was making him smile as he made his way towards his own room, loosening his tie and
holding on to a bottle of Odgen's Whisky. Once inside his bedroom, he locked the door, cast a
handful of privacy spells, and turned towards the bed. A quick flick of his wand resulted in the sound
of something heavy being moved, and soon there was a large, wooden box in the middle of the
room.

Arcturus took a deep breath before he kicked the lid of the box open, and smiled down at the
transfigured prostitute petrified inside it.

"Hello, beautiful," he said, kneeling down to brush away the tears that were still falling from the
other man's eyes. There were bruises on the prostitute's face and body, and a few wounds here and
there. Arcturus shook his head, not liking how messy certain wounds looked. "You should stop
crying, my love. You won't be here for much longer anymore."

Oh, there it was. The sparkle of hope. Circe, it made him so
hard how these poor little fools truly
seemed to believe that Arcturus would let them go after he was done with them. It was as if they
couldn't think well enough to see the truth through their desperate hopes.

'Then again,' the wizard thought, moving the prostitute from the box and onto the bed. 'Then again,
if they think that pleasing me is the key to freedom, why not let them delude themselves? It's just
going to make them put some more effort into keeping me happy.'

"Harry," Arcturus said, pressing a soft kiss against the muggle's mouth, before leaning back again.
Transfiguration had always been something he was particularly good at, and human transfiguration
had come with relative ease to him. The prostitute he had brought home in a box had started out
looking nothing like Riddle, but within an hour the resemblance had become remarkable. Not quite
like a polyjuice, though, but it was enough for the time being.

"How about a bath, hm? I'll help you with that, alright?" Arcturus then dragged the wounded and
shaking man to the bathroom, and waited for the bathtub to fill with water.

"I know you want me to just fuck you," Arcturus murmured, pressing another kiss against the
prostitute's lips and brushing his hair gently with his fingers. Merlin, was Harry's hair truly this soft?
"But I really need to wash you first, darling. Hygiene is important to me, you see. I know nothing
can clean the blood inside of you, but I can try, love. I can try to fuck that filth out of you." He
waited silently for a few moments longer, and as soon as there was enough water in the bathtub,
Arcturus took a hold of the prostitute again and pushed him into the tub.

Merlin, it was deeply liberating to hold someone under the water for so long that they gave up on fighting back. The muggle tried so hard to breathe, and Arcturus relented a few times and allowed him to take a breath before pushing him down again. Arcturus moaned loudly, pressing his body against the struggling muggle, rubbing his crotch against the man's arse.

He had intended to pull the prostitute out of the water eventually and take him to bed for a good fuck, but by the time Arcturus remembered his plan, the man had already stopped moving. A closer look resulted in the disappointing realization that the man had not only passed out, but actually died. Which was, well, it was a pity, but hardly the end of the world. Arcturus did know, after all, where he could go and pick up another poor fool off the streets.

And perhaps, sooner or later, he'd go for the man he truly wanted.

For now, he had a body to get rid of.

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Considering the gifts he had received for Christmas, Tom truly hadn't expected to get anything for his birthday. At most a hug and some cake, because Tom knew Harry well enough to realize that the man would not simply ignore Tom turning twelve without doing anything at all. However, he had underestimated his guardian once again: much to Tom's delighted surprise, Harry had suggested a late breakfast at Tremlett's Treats and a visit to any of Diagon Alley's bookstores right after that.

The heavy snowfall didn't seem to deter people from enjoying their day outside, and as they walked past the different shops and stores, Tom could hear at least a few places still blasting Christmas songs. The merry atmosphere was yet to disappear, which Tom didn't mind as it somehow made people more pleasant to one another. Even the cold did not feel as terrible as it usually did, although that could perhaps be due to the coat Harry had given him.

Tremlett's Treats was quite full, but it didn't take long before a group of witches left their table by the window in order to carry on to wherever they were heading. Tom moved to sit on one of the recently vacated chairs and watched the people walking outside while waiting for Harry to bring their treats to the table. Every now and then he would recognise a few people from Hogwarts, which made him think of school again. He truly enjoyed his time in Hogwarts, but spending time with Harry was even better.

"Your apple pie," Harry said, setting down Tom's order in front of him, accompanied by a large mugful of honeyed milk. "Twelve already, eh? How time flies. Merlin, I can barely remember when I turned twelve." Wait, no. He did. That disastrous summer at the Dursleys' was impossible to forget -- thanks to Dobby.

"How old are you?" Tom asked, curious to know. "I mean, I don't think you've ever told me your actual age, have you? You don't look old."

"Twenty-two," Harry replied with a grin. "Exactly ten years older."

Tom watched Harry bite into his slice of treacle tart, and considered asking him about his life before coming to London. Harry had told him once, vaguely, that he had lost all his friends in a war but surely he still had someone? It was strange to think that a twenty-two year old Hogwarts graduate, who got along with people as well as Harry did, didn't have a single friend his own age. No friends, no family. Simply appearing out of nowhere, all but adopting Tom and starting a new life.
No matter how badly Tom wanted to learn about Harry's past, it wasn't something he wanted to ask the man about, though. Mainly because he could guess already what kind of emotional discussion that would be and Tom personally had never liked emotional discussions of any kind.

"How many books will you let me buy?" Tom asked instead, deciding to stick to a safer topic and leave the dangerous waters for a later time. "I found a mention of something in *Hogwarts: A History—""

"Oh, *that* book," Harry said, startled by the mention of the book that had featured so strongly in Hermione's study sessions. Suddenly he missed her and Ron and the times they had spent together at Hogwarts so badly. "Merlin, the memories..."

"You're probably thinking of a different book," Tom said, giving him a strange look. "Because the version I'm talking about was written by Bagshot and was published only last year. Anyway, the book mentioned something about Hogwarts' Myths and did you know that it's believed that there are actual *mermaids* in the lake? It's also been almost confirmed - although a lot of people are trying to argue against it - that Rowena Ravenclaw's real name wasn't Rowena, but *Rehema*, and that she was actually from Africa. It's said that one of Hogwart's Headmasters from the past didn't want a founder to be remembered as a black woman, so he had almost all mentions of her edited."

"I've heard of the mermaids, but not about Ravenclaw," Harry said, thinking of one Slytherin-related myth in particular that he did not want Tom to find out about. The last thing he needed was for Tom to discover the Chamber of Secrets during his first year. "But most of the interesting creatures are in the Forbidden Forest. Mind you, I strongly advice against going there - the centaurs may negotiate and bring you safely to Hogwarts, but most other creatures won't."

"See, there's so much I should read about," Tom said. "Which is why I want to know how many books I'm allowed to buy this time. I really want something about the myths of Hogwarts but it's not really the most important subject for me right now."

"How about this," Harry started. "You'll get one book, but also a subscription to *Global Galleons*. I know you've been wanting that for a while now and I know that they will be able to deliver your weekly paper at Hogwarts."

"Can I?" Tom asked, looking more excited than Harry had ever seen him. The boy's eyes were wide with surprise, and there was an actual smile on his little face. It was heartwarming and made Harry really tempted to reach his hand across the table to pinch the boy's cheeks fondly. "You're serious?"

Harry nodded, briefly wondering if he was spoiling Tom, before dismissing that thought from his head. Tom had come a long way from the sullen child he had been, and considering how little he had had in the orphanage - and how little Harry had been able to give him before his career change - he surely deserved a treat every now and then.

Besides, how could he ever bring himself to regret anything that could make Tom so happy?

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[One thing remains unforgotten: It seemed that only a miracle in the twelfth hour could save Germany. We National Socialists believed in this miracle. Our opponents ridiculed our belief in it.]

A few short moments ago, she had been in her living room reading the planets while enjoying the silence of her own home. Now, she was standing in the middle of a vaguely familiar crowd, feeling cold and hungry and unreasonably angry.
Cassandra Trelawney had had this same vision thrice already. She knew what was going to happen. She knew where it would happen. And most importantly, she knew now, finally, when it would happen. She'd be able to send Riddle on to his first mission, and make the boy earn the money he was handed so easily.

It wasn't that Cassandra didn't like Riddle, no. In fact, she had found the bright-eyed man far more tolerable than the Witnesses of other Seers. At least he hadn't asked for an autograph, even though Cassandra was sure that Riddle had recognized her name. There was nothing quite as irritating as people who stared at her with blind awe and tripped over themselves in order to please her.

[Had the German Reich sunk into Bolshevik chaos, it would at that very moment have plunged the whole of Western civilization into a crisis of inconceivable magnitude.]

The crowd around her suddenly broke out in cheers, snapping her back to the vision she was still stuck in. The hands of the masses were raised in a salute, and much to Cassandra’s displeasure, her hand rose as well. It seemed that this time she had ended up watching the events unfold through an actual German person, like a spy behind their eyes.

Subtly turning to look at the people surrounding her, it was only a matter of a few short seconds before she located the man she had seen every single time in her vision. The tall man whose hands were not raised, but instead held behind his back. The man who was wearing a Muggle suit but, to Cassandra, certainly didn’t feel like a Muggle. The blonde man whose amused expression wasn’t quite enough to hide his contempt.

Yes, every time she saw him, her decision was only strengthened: she would have to warn Riddle about this one. There was something unsettling about him, and though Witnesses were protected, accidents sometimes happened.

[How much blood has been shed in vain for this goal! How many million Germans have consciously or unconsciously trodden the bitter path to sudden or painful death for the sake of this ideal!]

The words were in German, like they had always been, and yet Cassandra found herself understanding the language that she had never studied in her life. The witch sighed, ready to turn away and focus on the man who was still speaking to all these people, when she realized that the blond stranger wasn’t watching the stage at all.

Cassandra squinted, tried to look for what the man could be watching, but saw nothing but the backs of people’s heads. It took her a few moments to realize that the back of someone’s head was exactly what the stranger was staring at so intently. He clearly hadn't come here for the speech, had he? Or perhaps he had, and been distracted by the person who had caught his attention so well.

She followed his gaze again, and with a start she found herself staring at a familiar someone. With the feeling of dread soaking her bones and reaching for her heart, Cassandra realized that all this time the blond man had been staring at none other but Riddle, who was dressed in his uniform, different from the people standing around him but invisible to all Muggles.

This only confirmed Cassandra’s suspicions about the blonde man, and now she knew for sure that he was a wizard. Was he simply fascinated by the presence of a Witness, or did he know Riddle from somewhere? Merlin, this was definitely something she'd need to tell that boy about. She couldn't just send him blind into this, no matter how much easier it would have made her job.

[In 1918 no one took the trouble to find out what their will was. But while the Allies thus upheld the right of self-determination for primitive Negro tribes, they refused in 1918 to grant to a highly civilized nation like the Germans the rights of man which had previously been solemnly promised to
Cassandra knew that Riddle hadn't been told much of the job's risks, which was an oversight she hadn't yet corrected. While it was true that Witnesses were invisible to Muggles and the magical folk knew to not approach them, accidents and deviations from that pattern weren't unheard of. In the early 1700s there had been a terrorist group of wizards who had specifically targeted Witnesses who recorded important achievements of women.

Then, a century later, emerged a group who believed that the Witnesses were somehow holy and received their assignments not from Seers, but from higher deities. This misconception led to a widespread hunt of Witnesses and their brief classification as non-human, before the law was overturned.

Nowadays the Witnesses were treated with respect, but somewhat like healers and charity coordinators. Respect that stemmed from admiration towards people who contributed to their society, rather than from actual respect towards the job itself. Some witches and wizards with the potential to become Witnesses had refused to, in order to continue their own prolific careers.

Well, at least Riddle hadn't seemed to be particularly ambitious. In fact, the man had looked overwhelmed at times and downright stunned once he found out his salary. It was sad, in a way.

'We shall see how things will unfold,' Cassandra thought, turning away from the blond stranger. The beginnings are often challenging, and there have been too many signs of an upcoming era of turmoil for me to relax. Riddle will be in hot water from the get go. Can he survive that?'

1939

If there was one thing that Healer Oaley hated about home visits, it was having to deliver the bad news to the family in their own home. Not that he ever enjoyed giving bad news to the loved ones of the patients, but at least in a hospital it was considerably easier to remain impersonal and detached from the situation.

The man took a deep breath and turned to where his patient's husband was standing. "I am sorry to say this," Oaley started. "But your wife's condition does not look promising at all."

"How bad is the situation?" Lord Black asked. "Surely something - anything - can be done?"

"There, no, I'm afraid not," Oaley said, before continuing hesitantly: "The best we can do is make her as comfortable as possible for the time being. It'd be better of course if we could move her to St. Mungo's, but at most that would give us a better understanding of what caused this. All I can say right now is that the damage has already been done, and there's no way to undo it. If you wish, Lord Black, I can send you a written report of the details of her condition. I must warn you, however, that it is... not going to be an enjoyable read."

"Even if we find out what it is that has caused her health to deteriorate," Arcturus continued. "Are you sure that it couldn't be somehow reversed?"

“Her lungs are on the verge of collapsing,” Healer Oaley explained. “Even if we were to start a surgery to replace them, her blood is by now too… tainted by this... illness. I have never seen this kind of disease before and I do not know what kind of potions could make her better. Experimenting is too dangerous - it might kill her immediately. I’m sorry, Lord Black, but there really is nothing I can do.”
Besides, it couldn't possibly have been an ordinary illness that was destroying Lady Black's body from the inside so terribly. Oaley could see the signs of either a curse or a very potent poison, but had learned long ago the benefit of leaving some stones unturned. He was, after all, a Healer and not an Auror.

On the bed, a coughing fit shook Melania's body, leaving her gasping for air. The taste of blood was strong in her mouth. She couldn't stop the tears that filled her eyes, and left her feeling deeply humiliated. It couldn't have possibly been a coincidence that made her fall ill so soon after a truce with Arcturus. She was dying, and it was her husband's fault.

"How long do I have?" Melania asked, her voice raspy and pained. "Days? Weeks?"

"Two weeks," Healer Oaley said gently. "At most."

In two weeks she was going to be dead, and Arcturus would remain happily alive, free to do whatever he wished with the Black name and fortune. What about her children? She couldn't just leave them like this. Arcturus was still standing by the door, a sad expression on his face. Oh, how much she hated him - how could she have been so stupid as to fall for his truce? The damn bastard must have been laughing at her all this time.

It wouldn't be his victory, though. She wasn't about to allow that.

"Is there anything you can give me," Melania started, mustering up a shaky smile. "Anything to make the pain... and the fatigue... easier to bear?"

"Not really," Healer Oaley said, shaking his head. "Pepper-up potion and something to ease the pain at most, but that can only increase your mobility for a very limited amount of time."

"That's fine," Melania said, closing her eyes and feeling deeply exhausted. "If you have any of that with you, please leave them by the table."

Once alone, the witch let out a shaky breath, resisting the urge to cry. What an end she was facing. And oh, how helpless she was against it. Arcturus had won this round, thinking it was the last, but Melania wasn't about to admit defeat quite yet. Even more than being bested by the man she despised, what gnawed at her pride so mercilessly, was the knowledge that her death would leave her husband happy.

Arcturus didn't deserve to be happy.

If only she could take him down with her, somehow. There must be something that she could do. Anything at all.

'He's doing all this to get what he wants in the end,' the witch thought, still struggling with the realization that Arcturus truly had gone this far. 'But what does he want? Clearly not to be the Minister of Magic, after all. Surely all this couldn't possibly be for Riddle's sake? That mudblood didn't even look interested in Arcturus!'

Melania's eyes grew wide as she began to realize the situation her husband had put himself into. Arcturus, like the miserable wretch of a man that he was, had once again given into whatever desires his obsession was feeding currently. In all likelihood Riddle was the target of that desire, and unless something had happened to change the status quo, it was likely that the mudblood has yet to fall for any of Arcturus's traps.

A small smile that appeared on her lips spoke of hope and satisfaction, and Melania was already thinking of what to say in her letter before she even began moving to retrieve some parchment and a
quill. She'd have to provide at least some information in order to convince Riddle to meet her and listen to her. Warning the man would surely make Arcturus's obsession remain unfulfilled.

It wouldn't be much of a victory, considering her own end of the deal, but at least it was something.

Returning to her bed, Melania laid still for a few moments, gathering her thoughts and deciding what to start with. Then, a few minutes later, she began to write.
Chapter Notes

Yes, it's an actual update. I rewrote the whole story and some parts were changed a lot, so if you want to understand what led up to the events of this chapter, you might want to reread the whole fic.

1939

Harry was busy making breakfast when the owl arrived.

'I wonder if that's from the ministry,' he thought, pushing the window open. The only other option that occurred to him was, well, anyone from Tom's new group of friends. Merlin, just thinking of how the boy was socializing with people of his own age made Harry ridiculously happy and proud. He had taken Tom to Diagon Alley just a few days ago to meet these friends of his, and from what Harry had observed, they all seemed to be alright.

He had given Tom a couple of galleons and allowed him to roam freely with his friends. Later on, watching the children bond over the things they had bought made Harry wonder if the lack of money had prevented Tom from connecting with people the first time around... if he had distanced himself in hopes that no one would bother to question him about money, or put him in a situation that'd force him to admit that he had none. With Tom's proud personality, it was very likely that he had been quite sensitive when it came to all kinds of disadvantages he had had while growing up.

Currently the boy was reading the latest edition of Global Galleons, occasionally telling Harry about the fiscal policies or whatever some parties were proposing, and how terrible they were. Harry wasn't sure if that was even what Tom meant - it all sounded completely alien to him and a part of him wondered if the lack of common sense most wizards seemed to suffer from stemmed from the general lack of education when it came to anything not magical.

Hermione once had ranted about it, a long time ago, but Harry hadn't paid much attention to the speech then. Now, however, he felt that he could understand her frustration a lot more. Why wasn't maths taught alongside Arithmancy? Why wasn't Muggle history taught alongside Magical history, considering that some of the most formative incidents in human history were completely void of magic. Why were they taught how to apparate before teaching students geography or at least how to read maps?

The small owl that had flown in let out a loud hoot, startling Harry out of his thoughts. The bird had dropped a piece of parchment on the counter in front of him before settling down on the table nearby. Tom looked up from his paper, stared at the owl with a scowl on his face for a few silent moments, before shooing the bird away and returning to reading whatever had caught his interest. Harry sighed, and reached for the letter to read it.

"Mr. Riddle," the letter began, each word written with a beautiful handwriting that was entirely unfamiliar to Harry.

"I am Melania Black, the wife of Arcturus Black."
As I am short on both time and energy, I shall not waste your time on unnecessary formalities. It has come to my attention that my husband has been, perhaps, of bother to you. I am unsure of how much he has told you so far, but there are important matters you must know before you even entertain the thought of spending time with him.

It would delight me greatly if you were to accept my invitation for brunch...

The rest of the short letter consisted mainly of the precise time and location, with a few lines of how Black was up to no good. It was, overall, quite a strange letter. Not strange enough for Harry to dismiss it, though. The place Lady Black had suggested was public, and she didn't seem the type to attack anyone with witnesses around. Besides... perhaps it was for the best. He'd rather meet her in public and hear what she had to say, than risk being cornered somewhere in less neutral circumstances.

'This is exactly the kind of thing that Tom would tell me to stay away from,' Harry thought, looking at the letter with a contemplative expression. He then shrugged, deciding to accept the invitation. At the very least he could try to find out what Black was up to - all the stalking and the strange and pointless conversations the man had insisted on initiating every time he saw Harry were disturbing and unpleasant. His behaviour was absurd and alarming and Harry didn't like it one bit. If meeting Lady Black could bring a stop to this... then Merlin, Harry would be happy to meet her.

"Is it from the ministry?" Tom asked suddenly, not looking up from his paper. "That letter you just got."

"Something like that," Harry replied vaguely, before sending the owl away with his response to Lady Black. "Say, you'll be going back to Hogwarts tomorrow. Have you packed everything you need?"

"I'll do it later," Tom promised, not sounding particularly enthusiastic about leaving Harry again. It was quite flattering. "It's not even noon yet. Can we have pancakes for breakfast? I really don't want porridge again."

"Fine," Harry huffed, rolling his eyes and turning towards the fridge. "But after that you'll go and start packing. No need to pack everything right away, but it's better to not leave it all for the evening. Or, Merlin forbid, tomorrow morning."

"Whatever," Tom muttered, and Harry could hear him rolling his eyes. Well, not really, but he knew that it was happening. "I'll do it if I must."

'I'll miss him even more once he goes back,' Harry thought while working on the breakfast. 'I really hope that Trelawney will send me on an actual mission soon, I need something to do. Diagon Alley is becoming less and less interesting and I don't enjoy walking around London like this. Then again, I could start looking at available houses... Tom said that his only wish is to have a room all for himself. That ought to be an easy request to fulfill, right?'

Wouldn't it be great if he could welcome Tom to a new, better house? Just imagining how happy Tom would be made Harry feel happy as well. Now, if only he had a few good friends to share this happiness with... his life would be complete.

Henry's Cross station was nearly just as busy as it had been in September.

"You're sure you have everything you need?" Harry asked, as if he hadn't personally made sure that
Tom hadn't forgotten anything. "Remember to write. More frequently now, please. And don't waste all your money during this trip, you never know if you need some for when you come back home in the summer."

"Sure," Tom replied, and was very close to hugging Harry goodbye when he saw Mulciber heading his way. No matter how good of a friend Mulciber was, Tom didn't fancy the idea of hugging Harry in front of anyone. "And you have to write to me, too, Harry. About your job and just... anything else. And don't worry - if there's something I know how to handle better than you do, it's money. We both know that."

It was ridiculous, Tom thought, that as soon as he had turned his back to Harry and stepped into the train with Mulciber, he was struck with a strong desire to turn right back and ask Harry to just take him home. It wasn't that he didn't like Hogwarts - on the contrary, Tom loved Hogwarts - but there was just something draining in being away from home.

"Elliot," a voice called, and Tom saw Rosier walking down the hall towards them. "Have you found a compartment yet? I'm looking for an empty one now, too."

"Not yet," Mulciber replied. "But we're looking for an empty one right now. Want to come with us?"

Rosier glanced at Tom with a slightly annoyed expression, as if he had expected Tom to simply disappear by now. "If this is the company you keep, I think I'll pass. Besides, it'll be only a matter of time before Al turns up and I just can't stand him. I'll see you once we arrive."

Tom and Mulciber continued their way quietly for a few moments, before Tom asked: "What does Rosier have against Avery anyway?"

"I don't know," Mulciber admitted. "They've never gotten along, but as far as I know, Chad's the one who keeps picking on Al, rather than the other way around. Oh, hey, speak of the devil."

They had opened the door of yet another compartment, and found Avery sitting there alone. The boy turned to them with a cheerful smile. "Speak of the devil?" Avery said. "You two were talking about me?"

"Just wondering where you were," Tom lied easily, sitting down. "Did you see Prince and Pucey yet?"

"I haven't seen Eileen," Avery said. "But Opaline was talking with Ursula Carrow about something, I don't know what. Looked pretty intense. What if Prince ends up being late and misses the train?"

"That's very unlikely to happen," Tom said. "Besides, enjoy the rest while you can. You do remember that she has the study plans ready for you guys?"

"Oh no," Mulciber groaned, slumping down. "I forgot."

"I wonder how intense it is," Avery mused. "I mean, she studies a lot every day, doesn't she? I really hope that she doesn't expect the same level of effort from me. All I want to do is pass."

"You could stick to that level," Tom said, eyeing Avery with a smirk. "Or you could study hard and get better results than Rosier."

"He'd be so angry!" Avery grinned, looking enthusiastic all of a sudden. "I can imagine it already. Merlin, if I beat his score in all subjects, he won't be able to speak to me the way he usually does, right? Because it'll prove that I'm smarter than he is, doesn't it?"
"What's his problem, anyway?" Tom asked, too curious to bother with pretending to be sensitive enough to not pry. "He's unreasonable when it comes to you. How come?"

"I'm not actually sure," Avery said, frowning. "It's just... that's how he's always been towards me, for as long as I can remember. I just hope that he'll grow out of it or, at least, won't get worse. It's pretty annoying. And I doubt that Dorian's company really helps."

"Lestrange," Tom muttered, scowling at the mere mention of the name. "Merlin, there's a piece of work." How Mulciber could remain on good terms with both of them, Tom didn't understand.

"Tell me about it," Avery agreed. He then glanced at Mulciber and rolled his eyes. "You're seriously about to take another nap? How much sleep do you need? Is that even healthy?"

"I love sleep," Mulciber replied, not opening his eyes. "It's comfortable. You should try it, too. We've got plenty of hours before we're anywhere near Hogwarts."

"But I'm not sleepy," Avery protested.

"Then be quiet and let me sleep," Mulciber said. "Wake me up when we're about to arrive."

"That's nearly seven hours away," Avery huffed, turning to Tom. "He can't possibly sleep until then!"

"Can't he?" Tom asked, pulling out a book and thinking of a way to keep Avery from bothering him. "Just wait until Prince turns up. I'm pretty sure that she'll have plenty of things to talk about. Including the study schedule she made. Unless you do as Mulciber said and take a nap. She won't try to wake you up, that's for sure."

"What? Oh, well, in that case... I think I'll do that, then," Avery said hastily. "Um, yes. A nap. Now."

Merlin, he was so easy to manipulate that Tom felt almost guilty about it. Not for long, though, especially after Avery managed to indeed fall asleep within a few minutes. Once the train began moving, Tom paused his reading in order to lock the compartment's door. It wasn't that he didn't want Prince and Pucey to join them, but he had decided to enjoy the current silence for as long as possible. And while Prince was many things, she wasn't a quiet person.

* * *

The restaurant that Harry met Melania at was stunning and outrageously expensive. He was wearing one of the new robes that he had purchased recently, and even the better-than-average quality of the clothes wasn't quite enough to make him fit into the crowd that seemed to frequent this place. He had thought that the restaurant Malfoy had dragged him to had been fancy, but even that place couldn't possibly compete with this one.

Melania Black was sitting by the window, and though Harry had seen her only twice before, he was surprised by how pale and sickly she looked now. Despite whatever was ailing her, the look in her eyes was sharp and focused, and her voice was steady when she spoke.

"Mr. Riddle," she said. "Thank you for agreeing to this meeting."

"It is my pleasure," Harry replied, taking a seat across from her. A well-dressed waiter appeared to pour him a cup of tea before moving away, working quietly and efficiently. In a corner not far from them, a witch wearing a beautifully designed gown was playing the piano with a few wizards loitering nearby, perhaps hoping to catch her attention.
"Did the contents of my letter surprise you?" Lady Black asked while mixing honey into her tea. "Speak freely, Mr. Riddle. There are strong privacy charms around each table. It is one of the finer points of this establishment."

"I was, am, surprised that you contacted me," Harry admitted, not yet knowing how honest he could be with the woman. "But the subject itself does not."

"I have nothing to lose anymore," Lady Black said. "And, to be quite honest, it is not a small thing that has made me allow the presence of a mudblood around me, Mr. Riddle." Harry rolled his eyes, wholeheartedly unimpressed by her attitude already. What was it with purebloods and their eagerness to insult his blood as quickly as they could fit the words into a conversation?

"If my presence offends you so—"

"I do not think that you deserve the pain that Arcturus would be more than glad to bestow upon you," Lady Black continued calmly, watching Harry with an unapologetic expression. "Do you understand that, Mr. Riddle? Even though you are a mudblood, and I hold no regard for you, I do not think you to be deserving of that pain. Arcturus is not, and has never been, a good man. At most, usually after quite a lot of effort, he can be charming. Often not even that."

"I'm not surprised," Harry said, thinking of how socially awkward the man's behaviour around him had been. "I've rarely ever spoken with your husband, and yet I've seen him follow me through Diagon Alley from one end to another. Whenever he approaches me to talk, he speaks as if we're meant to become close friends. It's... odd."

"He does that sometimes," Lady Black told him, contempt colouring her voice. "He becomes so obsessed that he forgets that it's all one-sided. Have you decided what to do about it?"

"What to do?" Harry repeated. "Er... nothing? Wait it out? I haven't really thought of what to do in order to make him stop."

"Waiting it out is not an option," Lady Black said, looking at Harry with something akin to pity. "I'm running out of time, Mr. Riddle."

"What...?"

"I am dying," the woman continued, her voice carefully neutral. "Soon, in a matter of days, I will be dead. The only reason why I could come here today is due to a generous amounts of potions that are keeping me conscious and capable."

Well, that wasn't what Harry had expected her to say. "Ma'am, I'm not... Are you...?"

"I have no interest in hindering our conversation with lack of trust, Mr. Riddle," Lady Black said, reaching for her purse and pulling out a small vial of clear liquid. "Can you guess which potion I have here with me?"

"I... have an idea," Harry muttered, his heart beating faster in anticipation. He wasn't sure what he had gotten himself into, but wasn't about to turn away from it. "Veritaserum? How do I know it works?"

"You and I both will add a drop of it into our drinks," Lady Black said, looking at Harry with a challenging smirk on her face. "That is, if you really want the truth, and nothing but the truth, Mr. Riddle."

"If I say yes," Harry said, thinking of all the ways this could go wrong, and somehow not finding
any of them a reason good enough to stop. "I will need the privacy charms to be strengthened."

"Naturally," Lady Black agreed, gesturing for a few staff members to step closer. In a few minutes not only had the privacy charms been strengthened to Harry's satisfaction, but also a light lunch had been served. Lady Black carefully added a drop of veritaserum - only a drop, to ensure that the truth was spoken but allowing both freedom in how to word it - into the teapot before allowing a waiter to pour them each a new cupful. She took the first mouthful, and only after that did Harry drink as well.

"Arcturus is killing me," Lady Black said, leaning back on her chair and mustering up a smile so bitter that it hurt. "I haven't yet found out how, but I know that it is him."

"But why?" Harry asked, frowning. "Why would he want to kill you? You're his wife."

"It was an arranged marriage," Lady Black explained. "I was young, and he was handsome and rich and from a good family. I didn't know what I was getting into, although it became very evident to me in a matter of weeks. It was too late by then, of course, and ever since he and I have had a very unfortunate relationship between us. I never thought, however, that he would go this far."

"What would he gain from... doing that?" Harry wondered, finding it hard to wrap his mind around the idea of anyone wanting to kill their own wife.

"As far as I know, simply the freedom to do as he wishes," Lady Black said. "And that is, Mr. Riddle, where you come into the picture."

"His... interest in me?" Harry guessed, sighing heavily. The thought of Black wanting him in any way was enough to make his skin crawl. As handsome as the man was, there was something too wrong about him for Harry to find him remotely attractive. "I'm not sure what I can do about it, to be honest."

"Simply do not give in to him," Lady Black said. "He's a dangerous man, and I cannot believe that I am warning a mudblood--"

"I'm not, actually," Harry said, the unintended words slipping out of his mouth. Lady Black fell silent, and narrowed her eyes at him with an expression that Harry didn't know how to describe. Instead, he continued: "Well, by your standards I might be. I'm half-blood, you see. My dad was a Potter."

"That is already better than what I thought you could be," Lady Black said, her tone far less frosty than it had been before. "I can see the resemblance. Why keep something like this hidden? Why deny your blood?"

Harry paused for a second, trying to find the right words to say to abide by the potion's compulsion without giving away too much. He knew that no one could overhear them now, and even if he doubted that she'd share his secrets with anyone else, he couldn't quite count on that. "I have... a secret mission. The Potters do not know about me, and that is how I want it to be."

"And what is this secret mission?" Lady Black asked, disbelief kept at bay only by the trust she had in the truth potion. "I assure you that I won't be sharing the information with anyone. Indulge a dying woman's curiosity, Mr. Potter."

"Please, just call me Riddle," Harry replied, hardly believing that this was the person he'd end up telling the truth to. Or at least part of the truth. "Tom, my ward, is a direct descendant of the Slytherin line. I'd rather wait until he's a few years older before allowing the world to know of his... status."

Lady Black's hand froze above her drink for a few moments before she continued reaching for it.
Perhaps it was to control her shock, but she drank quietly for nearly a full minute without even looking at Harry. Finally, she put down the cup, took a deep breath, and said: "Arcturus must never know."

"Of course," Harry agreed, but the woman shook her head.

"You do not understand the severity of that information," she said. "Arcturus will find a way to contest your custody if he finds out that the boy you're raising is a Slytherin. An actual Slytherin. The fame and heirlooms that the name will bring... He does not deserve any of it. Merlin, I do believe that this is the first time that I have ever been impressed by a Potter."

"I don't plan on using his name to my advantage," Harry said. "All I want is to raise Tom in a safe environment--"

"As long as Arcturus is interested in you, you can't trust any environment to be safe," Lady Black interrupted, and for the first time since the beginning of their meeting, her voice trembled. "He is vicious and ruthless and there is no line that he wouldn't cross. He barely knows his children, has no friends or family who actually like him - the man is utterly incapable of maintaining a lasting relationship with anyone."

"Well, what can I do about it?" Harry asked, frowning. "You said that I can't just... wait it out, so what can I do?"

"There's one thing," Lady Black replied. "But I'll need something in return from you."

"As long as it doesn't put Tom into any danger," Harry said, trying to think of anything he had that the woman could ask from him. "I'll at least do my best to try."

"How familiar are you with the 'verae amicitiae'?"

"The what now?"

"Not at all, then," Lady Black sighed. "It is a vow of friendship pledged to a grieving widow. The spell was developed a few centuries ago when Duke Glanmore Pinkstone's sister was murdered by her husband's closest friend and lover. The purpose of the spell is to ensure that nothing intimate can occur between the widow and the friend for at least three years. It became customary to take that vow either to dispel rumours or to ensure loyalty."

"Ensure loyalty?"

"Should you take the vow, you'll be obliged to spend some time in Arcturus's presence during the three years. Meet him every now and then, talk like friends do."

"Why would I do that?" Harry asked. "I thought the whole point was to not interact with him."

"Lose a battle but win the war, Mr. Potter," Lady Black replied. "You may end up spending time in his company, but he will be unable to approach you in unpleasant ways for three whole years. That will allow your ward more time to grow before Arcturus becomes a threat again."

Harry fell silent for a moment, thinking of his options. "You said that you want something in return for this information? And please, I insist, call me Riddle or Harry."

"Mr. Potter," Lady Black said, ignoring his request. "I have two children, Orion and Lucretia. Two children whose father does not care for them and whose uncle does not have their best interests at heart. I need to know that there is someone they can reach out to, should they ever wish to do so."
With the ‘verae amicitiae’, as Arcturus's friend, you'll be in the ideal position to be there for them."

"You want me to... take care of your children?"

"Once I'm dead, yes. In any way you can."

Harry entertained the idea of refusing Lady Black's request for a few moments before he took a deep sigh, knowing that he couldn't just leave children to suffer the way her children likely would. "Alright. I'll do it."

The first week back in school passed quickly. The older students were either focused on preparing for their OWLs and NEWTs while some others were busy training for the upcoming annual Quidditch Cup. Tom had neither to worry about, but spent most of his free hours in the library nevertheless, reading on numerous different subjects that he found interesting. It was just as Harry had told him before - Hogwarts' library had more books for him to read than he could have imagined.

It was in one of the oldest history books that he first saw a mention of a chamber built by Salazar Slytherin, hidden somewhere in the castle. This place - referred to as the Chamber of Secrets - was said to house a beastly creature with some sacred mission given to it by Slytherin himself.

'It's all just speculation, though,' Tom concluded silently, browsing through the pages of the book he was holding, hoping to find anything else about this chamber. 'There's no proof of it even existing. Figures. I finally find something that sounds like fun and it turns out to be a story.' Then again - if it turned out to be true - where could it be?

'It seems unrealistic that there's no magic that could locate the chamber now,' the boy thought. 'Which probably means that it's not true, after all. My time is better spent on reading other things.' It was perhaps too early for him to start studying for the end-of-term exams, but it wasn't as if he couldn't do that. Perhaps it'd be beneficial and help him in what he wanted: to rank first among his peers. It had been quite easy to see that academic success was something most people - no matter how prejudiced they were - struggled to argue against.

It was Tom's advantage, and he didn't want to lose it to anyone.

At least he could study in peace now, since all of his friends were caught up in Quidditch and the strange notion of having to 'be there' for a team they weren't actually a part of. Those who weren't, such as Prince and Pucey, were earning debts and favours from older students who were too busy studying for the exams to bother with things such as proofreading their own essays. Pucey in particular, who seemed to genuinely enjoy fixing linguistic mistakes, had managed to become quite popular as of late.

Tom didn't mind being alone at all, and these new activities kept his friends busy and away from him, allowing him the freedom to study whatever he wanted without having to explain his interests to them.

It was great. Unfortunately, not meant to last.

"E-excuse me," a hesitant voice said, and Tom turned to see two vaguely familiar girls standing behind him.

"Yes?" he snapped, annoyed at being bothered. Why wasn't the act of holding a book considered a universal I am busy sign? Surely it wasn't unreasonable to ask for people to leave him alone if they saw him reading? The girl who had spoken to him shifted a little bit, tugged nervously at her
Gryffindor tie and said:

"We... well, we have a few classes with you, and... um... we know you're very smart. And we were, um, wondering if you could... help us a little bit?"

"Just some help, we don't want to copy your homework or anything," the other girl - a Hufflepuff - hurried to say. The two looked at him with hopeful faces, reminding Tom greatly of some customers that had frequented Maggie's boutique. For a moment, the boy considered refusing. He would have, had he not thought of the long-term benefits of having people owe him. If either one of these two girls was a pureblood, then helping them would be an investment that Tom couldn't wait to get a return on.

"Alright," he said, putting down the book he had been holding. "Which subjects?"

"Charms for me," the Gryffindor girl said, sitting down and pulling out a rolled up piece of parchment and a bottle of ink, before digging through her bag to find a quill. "I'm Ramona, by the way. Ramona Prewett."

"I'm Fabia Cornfoot," the Hufflepuff said, taking a seat right next to her friend. "I'm trying to make sense of the Potions assignment, but I'm struggling with it. You're really good at Potions, I've noticed. Everyone has, really. I wanted to write my essay on the difference between dicing and slicing ingredients, but the actual textbook doesn't discuss it much."

"Take a look at Filbert Ink's *Magic of Methodology* book," Tom said, wondering if that was truly the extent of help the two needed. Honestly, why couldn't people just start thinking for themselves and solve their own problems? "It's all about the practicalities of potion making."

"My levitation charm is very unstable," Prewett said, looking now far less nervous than before. "I really want to be done with it already, but I keep trying to cast it on things and it just... doesn't work."

"Let me see," Tom told her, leaning back on his chair. "Try to levitate one of the books I have here. Then we can try to figure out what you're doing wrong."

Really, he was much too kind, wasn't he? All he could do was hope that eventually this would prove to be more than a waste of time. If nothing else - at least it's something he could tell Harry about.

Finding a new place to live was harder than Harry had thought it would be.

There weren't many available places listed in newspaper advertisements, but the wizard didn't know where else to look. Perhaps the whole experience of searching for a new home to move into would've been easier if he had any friends in the Muggle world who could've helped him. The way things were, however, left Harry as he had pretty much been for years - alone.

'Merlin, how come every time Tom leaves, I end up feeling depressed?\" the man thought, sighing as he walked down the street aimlessly, hoping to find new houses available for sale. Or even a real estate agency of some sort - surely there must be some! He felt quite silly now, having thought earlier that finding a new home for him and Tom would be easy.

Harry walked for quite a while, not in a hurry to return home quite yet. He didn't find any signs of houses for sale nearby, and eventually his thoughts drifted back to his meeting with Melania Black. Or, more specifically, the conversation that they had had. He hadn't thought that he'd tell anyone of Tom's heritage and his own identity, but it wasn't as if Lady Black would actually tell anybody. She had become considerably friendlier – or well, less hostile – and more helpful as soon as she found
out that neither Harry nor Tom was a muggle-born.

It was... it was odd. That prejudice, and how it changed people. It was easy for Harry to imagine Lady Black as a beloved mother and a friend - but only based on the way she treated him after she had found out his blood status. The person she had been before that, however... Circe, it was like a completely different woman.

'Well, at least she warned me about her husband,' Harry thought, crossing a street and finding himself in what seemed to be one end of an unfamiliar shopping district. 'Merlin, how can a man be so bloody strange?' Arcturus Black had turned out to be the kind of dangerous that Harry hadn't encountered before in his life. He wasn't sure what he could do to keep himself - and more importantly, Tom - safe.

He had had his fair share of dealings with killers and torturers - Death Eaters and other criminals of all kinds. But Arcturus Black... that man reminded him more of the muggle serial killers that Dudley had loved to watch documentaries about. Harry vaguely remembered Dudley's fascination with the Sunderland Strangler, who had been arrested during Harry's third year at Hogwarts, and it was so easy to imagine someone like Arcturus Black doing something equally terrible.

'She wants me to, what, take care of her kids?' Harry shook his head, wondering if that was even something that he could do. 'I can make myself available, sure, but I doubt that Black will take kindly to me interfering with his children. Vow or no vow.' Ah, speaking of which, he'd need to drop by one of Diagon Alley's bookstores to find some information relating to the vow that Lady Black had mentioned.

It was well into the afternoon that Harry finally decided to head home. He hadn't found any potential houses for sale, but was determined to try again the next day. If nothing else, he could perhaps apparate further away from Deptford and take a look there, or he could even ask around for a real estate agency that could help him find the kind of house that he and Tom would like to live in.

At home, Harry sighed, kicking the door shut behind him and walking further into the small flat. He was in the process of taking off his shoes when he saw a small owl perched on a branch outside, eyeing him in a way that was far too judgmental for a bird. After a moment of hesitation, Harry let it in. With a loud hoot the owl dropped an official looking envelope on Harry's table before stealing a cookie from a plate and flying out again - making sure to hit Harry's face with a wing on its way.

Harry would have, perhaps, spent a few moments glaring after the bird, had the Ministry's seal on the envelope not caught his attention. As it was, it did, and he knew what this letter was about.

His first mission.
1939

The envelope contained more than a mission description, Harry found out.

There was a simple ring that turned out to be a timed portkey, meant to take him to wherever he would be going, and then bring him back home. There was also a small memory holder, an identification paper that he was instructed to keep with him at all times, and a few other documents that Harry knew he would need to read carefully before leaving for his mission.

'Should I write to Tom and tell him about this?' the man thought suddenly, before shaking his head and deciding not to. There was no need to tell Tom anything quite yet – Harry could wait until after the mission, if only to tell the boy a bit more about the experience. 'Besides, if I write to him about this now, he’ll ask for another letter with more details anyway.'

With a deep sigh, Harry looked down at the mail he had received, browsing through the small stack of papers to find the detailed instructions. Curious and eager to know more about the historical event that he’d be sent out to witness, Harry sat down to read. He had never gotten around to studying history properly, and his knowledge of muggle history was nothing compared to the little bit of magical history that he had learned during his time at Hogwarts.

'I’ll be going to... Berlin on the thirtieth of January,' he realized, suddenly worried of what it could mean. Were there other reasons to go to Germany on this time and date, other than the growing Nazi regime? There weren’t many mentions of Hitler in the muggle news yet, but there were some. And to Harry, even those few moments were nothing but ill omens of what was to come.

Also – not that he was against it, but it was quite unexpected – why would he be sent out to record Muggle events? Would the Second World War impact the wizarding world as well? And if so, how come there had been no mentions of it in any of Binns’ history classes? Unless historians hadn’t bothered to differentiate between Hitler's and Grindelwald’s actions.

In addition to the official-looking documents, there was a small message from Trelawney herself. The few words, scribbled in bright blue ink with unexpectedly bad handwriting, were not the encouragement that Harry had assumed that he’d be getting. Not that he minded – he didn’t feel like any encouragement was needed, really.

Riddle, the letter read. Read the mission description and instructions carefully. Do not lose your portkey and do not interact with anyone. During my vision I saw a man watching you – do not let that become a hindrance to your task and do not acknowledge that person in any way. If anything happens, if he approaches you, make sure to not include those moments in the memory holder. I expect nothing short of excellence.

The letter carried a messy signature at the bottom with what looked like a seal or a stamp of identification.

'Someone was – or will be – watching me?' Harry thought, feeling slightly alarmed. What reason would anyone have to do that? Harry was a nobody here, and ought to be so also in Germany. ‘Whoever will be watching me, won’t be doing so because of who I am. Why, then? Because I’m a
Witness? Because I look different? From what I read, the Witness uniform is meant to keep me nearly invisible to muggles… so it must be a wizard.’

Was being a Witness something that would truly turn heads? If so, then Harry wasn’t looking forward to that particular aspect of his profession. He did not miss the celebrity status that he had left behind years ago, and saw no reason to seek it.

‘Then again, with what they’re paying me, I suppose a bit of attention is going to be worth it,’ the man thought, before wondering how much witnesses were paid during his time. It seemed like a ridiculous salary in comparison to what some others were paid. ‘Were there even witnesses? Merlin, I can’t remember if I ever saw or heard of one. I don’t think Ron or Hermione ever mentioned Witnesses… and neither did Binns.’

Was being a Witness a job that had disappeared before Harry had been born? How? Why? Would whatever had happened to make the job disappear happen again? Had there been Witnesses working for Voldemort? There was so much that Harry was dying to know, and yet… there was no way to find out any of it.

‘Perhaps that’s for the better,’ he thought with a sigh. ‘If Voldemort had killed them off, I think I’d rather not know.’ The last thing he wanted to do was think of Voldemort and the things Tom had done the first time around. Voldemort was a nightmare that would never come to pass, Harry would make sure of that.

Sighing heavily once more, Harry pushed himself up from the chair and moved to change into more comfortable attire. His thoughts kept revolving around the mission, and he couldn’t help but worry – what if something went wrong? What if the stranger watching him turned out to be a threat of some kind? Could it be possible for Trelawney to have misunderstood the situation somehow?

‘Not that I can ask her,’ Harry thought shaking his head. ‘I don’t even want to imagine what she’d do to me if I ever questioned her.’ The old woman did not seem to be tolerant of such, and Harry wasn’t particularly keen on finding out whether or not his assumption was right. Besides, he had something else to do for now.

He had forty-eight hours to prepare, and he planned on spending each one of those hours well. And once he’d get back, he could refocus on house hunting.

*\n
It wasn’t that Tom didn’t enjoy his Potions classes – he just wasn’t particularly fond of the idea of working together with someone. He didn’t find the thought of other people’s subpar contributions holding him back to be entertaining or educational in the least.

If he absolutely had to work with someone else, Prince was often his partner of choice during this particular class. Despite being annoyingly talkative when it came to ingredients and ridiculously obsessive about that one specific chopping method that she had deemed superior to all others – Tom secretly agreed with her, but didn’t want to actually tell her that – she knew what she was doing and was capable of keeping up with Tom’s work.

This time, however, Avery slipped into the seat beside Tom before Prince was even in the classroom. It was, in a word, unusual, as the other boy had so far preferred to stick by Mulciber’s side.

“Work with me today,” the boy said, and Tom agreed easily; he didn’t want to chase Avery away and deal with his hurt feelings later on, just like he didn’t want to inflate Prince’s sense of self-importance by demanding her to be his partner.
Besides, investing in a friendship with Avery was a potentially beneficial venture; the other boy was a pureblood from a well-known and wealthy family. By birthright, in this society, he’d be able to access things that Tom wouldn’t be allowed to even look at.

Professor Slughorn beamed at his class with a delighted expression, before waving his wand to make neatly written instructions appear on the blackboard. “Today,” he said, “we’ll be diving right into a slightly more challenging potion: a cure for common poisons. Now, mind you, it is not enough to know how to brew this potion, but also to know what the poisons that it works on are. You’ll find a complete list in your books, page two hundred and thirty-five.”

‘He’ll ask about that in the exam,’ Tom thought. ‘That’s fine, lists are easy to memorize.’

“Right now, however, I’ll assume that everybody did their homework and read chapter nine before coming here,” Slughorn continued. “And we’ll start with the brewing right away!”

“Get me the bezoar first,” Tom told Avery, “after that you can focus on getting the rest of the ingredients. I’ll take care of the chopping and we’ll do the brewing together.” And by together, Tom meant alone. He wasn’t going to risk his track record of success.

“All right,” Avery agreed, and made his way to where most of the students were already crowding to get their hands on the biggest bezoars available. Tom watched his partner roll his sleeves up and elbow his way ruthlessly to the front of the crowd, with the carefree attitude of a person whose consideration for other people shined with its absence.

He couldn’t help but feel reluctantly impressed after witnessing a particularly vicious elbow thrust that left a Hufflepuff boy tearfully rubbing his throat.

“Here,” Avery said after a needlessly violent return trip through the crowd of students. “The bezoar. That was fun. I could get you another one?”

“No need,” Tom replied. “Get me the herbs listed on the board now. I’ll start working on the potion right away.”

“You always make brewing seem so easy,” Avery said a few minutes later, once he returned with the other ingredients. “In fact, you act as if every class is easy to you. Doesn’t that get boring?”

“Well, to me school in general is easy,” Tom replied with a shrug. He wasn’t going to tell the other boy – or anyone, really – how much he studied and all the things he struggled with. It was better to make them think that he was gifted. “And sometimes boring, you’re right about that.”

“Merlin, I bet you’d be much more entertained by what the older students are studying,” Avery said. “Too bad you can’t get your hands on their books.”

“It’s fine,” Tom lied. “Now go get me two mistletoe berries from the other cupboard.” It’d take a while before the potion would be ready, but Tom didn’t mind. Not when Avery had unknowingly given him something interesting to think about.

* *

It was cold.

The sky was grey above his head and strong gusts of freezing wind sent snow blowing everywhere with it. People were quick to move from one shelter to another, and it was clear to Harry that none of the men and women crowding around were outside in this weather for the fun of it.
The portkey had left him standing in front of a large building with an official feel to it. Harry couldn’t find it in himself to be surprised when he saw a row of red flags with a white circle and a black swastika in the middle. It was so odd – so unsettling – to see those flags now and realize that they were not yet a part of history. To realize that soon millions of people would suffer due to the people carrying and believing in that flag.

It was a thought that left him sick with dread.

After a moment of hesitation, Harry entered the building, following the footsteps of those heading to where most of the excited people around him were going. No one seemed to take notice of him, and soon the young wizard found himself standing in a large hall, not unlike one of the grand auditoriums within the Ministry of Magic. The hall was ridiculously cold for being an indoors area, and Harry was glad to have his coat to keep him warm.

It took nearly twenty minutes before a man dressed in a military uniform walked to the front of the auditorium, on an elevated stage of sorts in front of a speaker’s stand, and said a few sharp words. Within moments after that, the crowd quieted down, their eyes fixed on the man, who then nodded and left the stage once again.

‘I wonder if someone will translate what I’m hearing to English,’ Harry thought. ‘Merlin, I wish I knew how to speak German.’

It didn’t take long before another man came to stand at the podium, and said a few words in German that resulted in a sudden wave of cheers from the gathered audience. And then – Harry recognized him from pictures he had seen many years ago – Hitler came to stand on the stage. The cheers from the audience continued for a long time still, while the man stood silently, assessing the crowd with a blank look on his face.

When he spoke, his voice wasn’t entirely aggressive, though there was a tone to it that gave Harry a rather unpleasant feeling. It reminded him, strangely enough, of Uncle Vernon.

‘I wonder if Voldemort ever learned German,’ Harry suddenly thought. ‘Did he know about Hitler? He definitely must have – he did spend his summers at the orphanage back then, I think.’ Sighing and trying to refocus on a speech he did not understand, the wizard found himself soon observing the crowd around him instead. And it was only then that he remembered Trelawney’s warning of a man who would be watching him from behind. A man who was, quite potentially, dangerous.

‘He wouldn’t attack me in a crowd like this, would he?’ Harry thought. ‘Maybe I should turn around and confront him. Peacefully. Just see who he is.’

Besides Harry and Trelawney both had only assumed that the man would be dangerous – what if he wasn’t? What if it was simply a bystander who noticed a Witness in the crowd? Harry didn’t think that he’d need to be on high alert at all times – he didn’t have a Dark Lord or a bunch of Death Eaters out to get him this time.

‘I’ll have to look up a translation spell of some sort,’ Harry thought suddenly, wondering what Hitler was saying to get everyone so riled up.

[Dieser Erfolg wurde erkämpft durch eine unermeßliche Willensanstrengung und durch die Kraft tapferer und fanatisch durchgehaltener Entschlüsse—]

Hermione had studied German for few months after the war, and Harry regretted now not joining her in that particular activity. Regardless, there was nothing he could do about that anymore, except either useful spellwork or hard studying.
“Enjoying the speech?” a vaguely familiar voice suddenly said, and it wasn’t until Harry felt a gentle press of a hand against his shoulder that he realized that he was the one being spoken to. He turned, and nearly stumbled a step back.

Grindelwald smiled charmingly at him, but there was something about the expression that didn’t quite seem disarmingly genuine… or friendly.

Harry smiled nervously in return, wondering if this was the beginning of some unwanted trouble, or if Grindelwald had approached him simply because he remembered him from their last meeting.

“I don’t really understand it,” Harry admitted, before awkwardly carrying on with: “It’s a pleasure to meet you again, Mr. Grindelwald. Did Ollivander succeed in the… consultation, was it?”

“No,” the older wizard told him with an easy smile, and though he appeared as friendly as he had the last time they met, something was very different about him today. “He couldn’t, which is why I decided to go to the only other lead that I have. In fact, I was hoping to see you.”

“What a coincidence,” Harry said, feeling increasingly worried and ready to flee, job be damned. Ah, no, he couldn’t do that – Trelawney would kill him. “How… how may I help you?” What on earth could the man want from him? They had met only once before, and nothing interesting had happened during that encounter!

“Oh, it’s hardly a coincidence,” Grindelwald said with a short laugh. “A bit of liquid luck, and here we both are.”

[—daß Deutschland nicht einen einzigen Soldaten mobilisiert hatte, trotz der gleichen Versicherungen, die den Vertretern auswärtiger—]

“As for how you could help me,” Grindelwald continued, the tone of his voice deceptively light, “you could perhaps tell me what you know of the Elder Wand.”

Oh.

Oh no.

Oh, no no no no.

How had—

Why would he even—

Harry took a deep breath and plastered a smile on his face while desperately trying to figure out how on earth could Grindelwald even suspect that Harry knew anything about the Elder Wand. Had he used legilimency on Harry without him noticing? What would even prompt him to do such a thing?

“I,” Harry said, “have no idea—“

“You did recognize the Elder Wand when I mentioned it just now,” Grindelwald interrupted him, looking visibly less amused than earlier. “I’m quite good at reading people, Mr. Riddle, even if I say so myself. And since my time here is limited, I will go straight to the point and skip the pleasantries – forgive me for that, will you? The problem – that you perhaps can help me with – is that for quite a while now the wand hasn’t been working the way it once used to. I almost gave up on finding an actual solution – up until I bumped into you in Diagon Alley. And do you know what happened then?”
“I don’t,” Harry said, wondering if he was about to regret his words, “but I’m sure that you’ll tell me.” Whether Harry wanted to hear it or not.

[—daß das nationalsozialistische Deutschland keine Feindschaft mit anderen Völkern will—]

“The wand… twitched,” Grindelwald said. “On its own. Wands do not do that, Mr. Riddle. Not unless they recognize a signature they resonate with.”

“That doesn’t sound like it has anything to do with me,” Harry told him, wondering if the man would attempt anything in this crowd. Merlin, of all the things that had worried him, this hadn’t even crossed his mind! “I have no interest in the wand—“

“Your interests are of no importance,” Grindelwald said, interrupting him again. Which, wow, rude. “What matters is the wand’s interest in you.”

“The hypothetical interest that you think exists,” Harry pointed out, alarm and worry giving way to annoyance. “I’m not sure what you expect me to do.”

[Wir haben es erlebt, daß, nachdem in unserem Volk am Ende des Krieges schon mehr—]

“I suggest you figure out a way to fix this, Mr. Riddle,” the older wizard said, and though his words were spoken in a polite and nearly friendly tone, the threat was impossible to ignore.

“Or what?” Harry asked. The last thing he wanted was to engage Grindelwald in a battle of any kind, but if the man would somehow find out a way to cause trouble to Tom, Harry would have to put a stop to him. “An accident happens?”

“I am a man of deliberate action, Mr. Riddle,” Grindelwald replied, reaching suddenly forward with his hand. “I advise you to take my words under serious consideration, because the only other solution is of a rather permanent nature.”

“Recreational murder is not a healthy hobby to have,” Harry said, refusing to flinch as the Dark Lord touched his cheek gently, in a manner very similar to the one he had made in Diagon Alley. This time Harry knew better than to see the flirtatious move as anything else than an empty gesture.

“I beg to differ,” Grindelwald replied, before taking a step back. “Enjoy the rest of your day, Mr. Riddle. I’ll find you when I need to.”

‘I hope not,’ Harry thought, trying to not give in to the feeling of panic rising inside of him. ‘Merlin, I need a plan. How did this even happen? Why is it always me? How do I tell Tom about this? Should I tell Tom about this? How would he find me?’

Grindelwald’s departure brought up another issue that Harry would need to figure out, and quite fast, too: what would he slip into the memory holder? He didn’t wish to share the memory of speaking with the current Dark Lord with anyone, but knew that modifying the memory to exclude Grindelwald would require far more energy and time than Harry had counted on.

‘It’s fine,’ the wizard decided after a few moments of silent contemplation. ‘I can look for new homes some other day – tomorrow, or the day after it, or next week. This is more important.’

After all, he didn’t want to get on Trelawney’s bad side if he could avoid it, and somehow, he couldn’t help but think that this was something that would upset the woman greatly.
It wasn’t just a coincidence that led Tom to take a seat close to a small group of older Ravenclaw students in the library.

Most Ravenclaws, Tom had realized, loved learning. What they varied in were their preferred learning methods. Most of them seemed to particularly enjoy learning about things that they weren’t required to study. Their research frenzies tended to lead to desks overflowing with books and papers and quills; a chaos made even worse by the constant risk of breaking ink bottles. Quite often their school books were pushed aside in favour of older tomes and charts and maps and, on one memorable occasion that landed three Ravenclaws and a Gryffindor in a detention for a month, a floating structure made entirely out of bacon.

Tom suspected – hoped – that some of the less organized Ravenclaws wouldn’t realize that they had lost a book – or anything they weren’t using, really – until well after it had already happened.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised if misplacing their belongings is just a natural thing to them,’ Tom thought, watching the group of Ravenclaws push a few books and parchments off their table to make space for what looked like an experiment involving three bottles of ink and some strange blue powder. Why they would do that in a library, Tom didn’t know.

‘Then again, to be fair, there’re people like that in every house,’ the boy thought. ‘Maybe the Ravenclaws are just more obvious about it since that’s what’s expected of them.’

The only real challenge would be the acquisition of one of their school books. He wasn’t about to ask them if they could lend him one, as he had no intention to ever return it, really. And since Harry wouldn’t scold him for what he didn’t know, all that was really required was for Tom to not get caught.

He wasn’t picky about the subject, as long as the school book was that of an older student. Technically he could ask Harry to buy and send him one – but why bother?

Tom pretended to look for a parchment in his bag, turning just enough so he could see a copy of what looked like a charms book lying on the floor, about a foot behind one of the Ravenclaws. However, regardless of how focused the group seemed to be on their experiment right now, there was no way they wouldn’t notice Tom walking by and grabbing a book from right under their noses.

‘There’s a book shelf behind them,’ Tom thought. ‘I could go to its other side and summon the book through a gap in the lower shelf.’ Would they notice? It was a risk he’d need to take. He could always tell them that he was just practicing summoning charms in general and didn’t mean to take anything of theirs.

‘I better do it now,’ the boy decided, standing up. ‘There’s no guarantee that Prince or Mulciber or Avery won’t come to look for me here, and I’d rather not let anyone know about this.’

If he did succeed in acquiring the book, he’d hide it in his bag and study quietly for about an hour still – he did have some homework to finish after all. Leaving too fast would be suspicious after all, and that was the last thing Tom wanted. Besides, he wasn’t going to read the book right away; he wanted to have it now, but reading it could wait.

Owning things that he didn’t need was, to Tom at least, a sign of luxury. The days of being able to afford only the bare necessities were no longer a part of his reality. He had risen above that now, and he was determined to continue to do so no matter what.

‘Harry doesn’t have to know,’ Tom thought again. ‘He’s somewhat sensitive about things like this.’
There was really no way to tell if the book could be traced afterwards – Tom wouldn’t put it past a bunch of Ravenclaws to somehow put tracking charms on their books, if only for the sake of experimentation. The best course of action to take, therefore, would be to hide the book under Nott’s bed for a few days. Perhaps even a week. If there really was a tracking charm, it’d lead the book’s owner to Nott rather than Tom.

He would rather get Lestrange into trouble, but that would be too obvious, wouldn’t it?

‘Besides, he hasn’t done anything to deserve a punishment for a few weeks now,’ Tom thought, with a satisfied feeling warming his heart. ‘When that happens, I’ll figure out something better. Something more permanent than a warning.’

He’d cross that bridge when he’d get to it. Right now, however, he had a book to steal.

* *

Her head hurt. She could barely muster up the energy or the willpower to keep her eyes open for longer than an hour at a time. Her scalp was sensitive to the point where brushing her hair had become painful. She knew: her time was running out fast.

The only thing Melania could take comfort in was the knowledge that her deal with Riddle – or Potter, rather – would ensure that her children weren’t completely left to their father’s mercy. That should they ever need the help, there was someone who’d give them that.

A few days ago she had written a letter addressed to both Orion and Lucretia, containing information and advice that they would need in order to survive living with Arcturus without her interference. Orion was in his fourth year at Hogwarts, and Lucretia in her third – there was a long time to go before either one of them would reach an age suitable for the kind of independency that they would need now.

‘They’ll pull through,’ Melania told herself, fear in her heart but determined to hope for the best. ‘They’re my children. Merlin, if only I could muster up enough power for a killing curse… I could take that bastard down with me.’

She was weak now, but there were still a few things she could do. Arcturus would suffer eventually, and Melania would do her utmost to contribute to his downfall. She could only hope that Potter would hold his end of the bargain. She, well, she had no other option but to put her faith in a stranger.

‘I need to send him more detailed instructions,’ the woman thought, sighing deeply. ‘And Gringotts – I must contact my account manager.’

The thought of writing was not pleasant, not with the headache that she already had, or the chronic exhaustion that made her want nothing more than to close her eyes and sleep for just a little bit longer. She couldn’t wait, though. She knew she wouldn’t be getting better, and the letters would need to be written and sent before she got worse.

‘Gringotts first,’ Melania thought. ‘And then— oh, a third letter, too. Another. Circe, I am tired.’

The letter to the bank was short, as there wasn’t much she’d need to say. A simple command to freeze all of her current accounts until her son graduated Hogwarts, a confirmation signature with a drop of her blood, and a request to have a decent amount of money sent to her children every month— in secret. There was no need for Arcturus to know a thing about this.

That done, Melania reached for a new piece of parchment, and paused for a moment to collect her
thoughts. She’d need to make sure that Potter also received an invitation to her funeral, otherwise it’d be terribly challenging to find an opportunity to vow his… temporary allegiance to Arcturus. She’d also need to write down the exact steps the man would need to take in order to make this mission a success.

Even if, though – even if Arcturus managed to somehow put a stop to this particular part of the plan, Potter would still need to take care of her children. That was the deal, after all. She’d tell him about the ritual to keep him safe, and he’d make sure that Orion and Lucretia weren’t left wanting.

‘I should have killed him years ago,’ the woman thought bitterly. ‘I should’ve done so many things that I never did. Merlin, this isn’t fair.’

It took Melania quite a while to calm down and gather some strength – crying was such a draining thing to do. Eventually she managed to finish the letter that she would send to Potter and sealed it twice, as well as the letter to Gringotts. She couldn’t bear the thought of someone else reading the contents.

The third letter was, perhaps, the easiest to write. Melania knew the recipient, trusted her intelligence and pride - if not much else - and felt free to skip over tedious explanations that could be concluded logically from what she did choose to write down.

“Dear Mrs. Cynthia Crabbe…”

The old woman wouldn’t be of much use to her anymore, but Potter would most certainly need her help eventually. It would be better to lead him to someone who wouldn't mind going against Arcturus for Melania's sake, rather than letting him fumble his way and eventually ending up having to hire a peasant for a task far greater than he or she could hope to handle.

Melania took a deep breath, and felt her muscles ache as she tried to relax. The pain in her lungs was still there, as was the nausea. Her grip on the quill was shaky at best, as she signed the third letter, and rolled the parchment before placing a seal on it to close it.

Now... now she could sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I actually had a longer and more detailed explanation regarding the salary system in the Wizarding world, but about a month ago my computer crashed and I lost all of my fic plans and notes so I have to start everything from zero. But yeah, about Harry’s salary as a Witness:

Yes, the salary is high. In some governments (and on a smaller scale: companies) it is not uncommon to use salaries to create a type of segregation among the people in order for the power-holders in high positions to make sure that a certain type of people do not rise above a certain level and thus access more wealth, rights and power.

The wizarding world in the 40s is even less tolerant of muggle-borns and muggle
"lovers" than it was in Harry's time.
Through nepotism, high-level jobs with money and power are kept mostly for purebloods, and the higher the job, more nepotism has an impact. However, hiring people just because they're somebody's son or somebody's daughter doesn't guarantee any kind of competence, which in the long run has its own negative impact on the government. A prejudiced pureblood officer is not going to hire a muggle-born if they can avoid it. And they definitely can and do avoid doing so.

However, being a witness is not something anyone but the Seer can really control (to some degree). The exclusivity of the job has given it a kind of prestige usually reserved only for high-ranking positions held by purebloods. I'll touch on the subject more later, but in my headcanon there are plenty of pureblood seers who refused to employ muggleborn Witnesses and would rather wait until they See a pureblood (or at least a halfblood) Witness for them to work with. Trelawney just doesn't happen to be that kinda person.
1939

Harry couldn’t, for the life of him, stop thinking about his encounter with Grindelwald. He wasn’t sure what he could even do regarding the problem, and he very much doubted that he could just... ignore it. Push it aside. Harry couldn’t afford to do that, not if Grindelwald would somehow find out about Tom and attack him—

The man was a Dark Lord. If hurting Tom meant getting what he wanted from Harry, there was no doubt that he would go for it.

'Merlin, what a mess,' Harry thought, sitting by the window and watching the snow fall outside. To him this, if anything, proved that he didn’t go looking for trouble – trouble always found him. And this time the trouble came in the form of the Elder Wand.

As much as Harry would have liked to stay inside and mull over the incident with the current Dark Lord, he had plenty of other things to do. The most important of which was looking for a new house for him and Tom. He had already located some promising places, and had even made appointments with a select few.

'I wonder if I can afford having the new home warded,' Harry thought, standing up and walking to his bedroom, where he fished for a sweater from under his bed. 'I mean, I doubt I can get a Fidelius Charm request to pass – the permits for those tend to be pretty hard to get. But at least something else that could be useful.' He didn't know Grindelwald - hadn't looked much into him back in the day - but he didn't doubt for a second that the man wasn't capable of tracking him down and trying something nasty.

'I should brush up on defense spells,' Harry realized, bending down to tie his shoelaces. 'It's been quite a while since I did anything that required quick spell-casting. I wonder if there are any dueling classes available for people who're not aurors.' He wouldn't mind participating in something like that - in fact, Harry welcomed the thought of being able to duel freely with people who weren't Death Eaters, and weren't out to kill him.

The thought of Grindelwald was momentarily knocked right out of him once he stepped outside, right into the heart of a snowy gust of wind that nearly made him fall over. Harry grimaced, before cringing as he felt the cold in his teeth.

'Merlin, would this winter ever end?'

Harry had never been house hunting before, not really. Or at least, not alone. The first apartment was pleasant, but something about the man renting it seemed slightly off. He kept glaring at his neighbours – who glared right back – and it took him an oddly long amount of time to produce the key to the flat. Once he had managed to do that, he ushered Harry in by pushing him rather strongly through the open doorway. Inside, the beautifully decorated apartment turned out to be covered in dust, and the windows... the windows hadn't been just closed, someone had boarded them shut.

Needless to say, Harry was quick to find his way out of that particular deal, and arrived to his next appointment early. He didn’t mind waiting for a while, as there was a small coffee shop right outside
That appointment went well enough, but it still left Harry with the certainty that no, that house wouldn’t be a home for him and Tom either.

'Unless I just settle for whatever is somewhat acceptable,' the wizard thought gloomily, before apparating to his third appointment. 'I mean, anything is better than where we live now. If this turns out to be a bloody waste of time again... Merlin, I just want to be done with this. How can people do this kind of house hunting for days? Even weeks? It's been two houses and barely half a day and I'm already ready to accept any decent offer that I can get.'

Third time seemed to be a charm, however, as lady luck finally arrived to Harry’s side. The house in East Dulwich was... well, it was very ordinary, and exactly what Harry was looking for.

Much to his delight, it was even bigger than what Harry would have been satisfied by: the two-story house had three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen, and a spacious area that served as a living room and a dining room at once. The walls were painted white, and the wooden floors were polished and stain-free. It was nothing like his aunt's house at Privet Drive had been, and nothing like Grimmauld Place or even the Burrow. It was a completely new place, and all for him. Well, him and Tom. Them.

The owner's daughter, who was there to show him around the premises, spoke in length about the charms of living in that part of the town. "The neighbours are very nice, too," she said, gesturing towards one of the windows. "And there's a bakery on this same block - great place, their bread is to die for."

"It sounds great," Harry said, eyeing the kitchen and hardly believing the amount of counter space the kitchen had. And the size of that fridge. "Rent only, you said? How much?"

"A pound a week," the woman replied. "I know, it sounds like it's a lot, but I promise you - it's worth it. No crime, no loud noises... It's really a great place to settle down in and enjoy the piece with your family. You've got family, aye?"

"Yeah," Harry said, making up his mind and not feeling an ounce of regret for it. "I've got a son. Say, how soon could I move in?"

"If we sign the papers today, I'm very sure you can move in next week," the woman told him. "We just need to sort out all the payments and the insurance and other things. You've got a car?"

"Ah, no. Never had one, really."

"Just as well - some people have been protesting against parking spaces in the area recently. Say that if you've got a car, park it on your own lawn or something, rather than the street outside."

"Well, lucky that I don't have one, then," Harry said, mustering up a pleasant smile. He had never really considered cars to be of value - why bother, when there were other, so much more efficient transportation methods? "If you have the papers with you, Ms. Gibbs—"

"Oh, just call me Lucy," the woman said, immediately reaching for her bag and pulling out a thick folder. "How about we take a seat?"

It was late by the time Harry arrived back home, holding a folder full of signed papers and other related documents. The flat looked even gloomier and dirtier than before, in comparison to the house...
in East Dulwich. There was no doubt that Tom would be delighted by the move, and Harry couldn't wait for that to happen. Luckily, he didn't have much to pack - he was confident that all the arrangements could be done easily within a few short days.

‘I won’t tell him about this yet,’ the wizard decided. ‘It’ll be a surprise. I’ll write him as I normally do, and avoid any questions he has about house hunting.’

Harry was humming happily, rubbing the cold off his fingers as he moved to prepare some warm tea. The feeling of satisfaction made everything seem better than it had in days, and even the thought of Grindelwald wasn't enough to bring his mood down again.

'Merlin, I can't believe this,' Harry thought, grinning to himself. 'I can't wait to start packing. I never thought I'd find the move to be so exciting, but here we are.'

His thoughts were interrupted by a tapping sound against the window, and Harry looked up just in time to see an unfamiliar owl on the other side of the glass. He hesitated for a second, before opening the window and letting the bird in. The letter it was carrying wasn't from Trelawney or the Ministry, but from Melania Black surprisingly.

'I wonder what she wants now,' Harry thought, sitting down and feeling conflicted. He didn't... he honestly couldn't bring himself to like the woman. At the same time, it was hard not to feel sorry for her. She had clearly gone through a lot due to Lord Black, who... well. Harry wasn't sure if he had met anyone nearly as unsettling as Arcturus Black.

“Dear Mr. Potter,” Melania Black had written, the blue ink of her words blotchy at times, as if she had written her letter with a shaky hand. "It is with a heavy heart that I am writing this final letter to you."

'Well, if that doesn't sound dark,' Harry thought, but knew that the woman did indeed have all the reasons to be as dark and gloomy as she could manage.

"My time is drawing to an end, and the only fear that I have is for my children. I do not doubt that you remember what I told you of the vow when we met, but allow me this personal indulgence for the peace of my mind: I do not mean offense by repeating my instructions in a written form that I have attached to this letter. I ask you to read them carefully."

'Oh, good,' Harry thought, with no small amount of relief. He would certainly need to drop by a library to make sure that everything Lady Black told him about the vow was indeed accurate. This would be much easier with notes written down already, otherwise he wouldn’t even know what he was fact checking in the first place.

"I will die soon," the woman continued in her letter. And was it not strange how such heavy words could look so small and simple when written down on parchment? "An invitation to my funeral will reach you afterwards. Arcturus will be made aware of this, so he will know to expect you. Do not reveal that you and I have ever communicated, however. As far as he knows, a house-elf made the mistake of sending the invitation to you after hearing your name mentioned a few times in our household."

Didn't that imply that the Blacks have spoken of him before? Merlin, what had they been saying? What if they were working together to set Harry up for something?

'Unlikely,' the man thought, 'but not impossible.'

"Should the circumstances not work in your favour, Mr. Potter," the letter carried on. "Should you
find yourself incapable of proceeding with the vow, I ask you, regardless, to not give up on my children. I will be informing Orion and Lucretia to consider you a person worthy of their trust, and I beg you - *I beg you*, Mr. Potter - to not fail them."

Harry paused then, and stared down at those words with a serious expression on his face. He did not envy Melania Black for the situation she was in. He couldn't imagine how hard it was to trust the wellbeing of her children to a virtual stranger. Or rather: to end up placing more faith in a stranger than in the father of those children.

'*I've heard a lot about the Blacks in general,*' Harry thought, '*but Merlin, this is... this is ridiculous. What on earth happened the first time around, when I wasn't here? Who did she trust then?*

"On a final note, Mr. Potter," Lady Black had written. "Should you ever find yourself with evidence against Arcturus on any violation, contact my lawyer Mrs. Cynthia Crabbe. Send her an owl, tell her that you wish to speak to her in regards to what happened to Melania Black. She will not turn you away - on the contrary: she, if anyone, will walk through fire to see him brought down."

'*I feel like I'm being pulled into an issue far greater and more complicated than I predicted,*' Harry thought, folding the letter and tucking it into his pocket. '*Merlin, I don't want to be involved in someone else's family issues. I'm here for Tom.*' Despite his reluctance, the thought of not helping Lady Black's children - Orion and Lucretia - didn't sit well with him at all.

*I'll see what I can do,*' Harry decided in the end. '*Things will turn for the best in the end, surely.*'

"*I can't believe I'm spending my Sunday in the library,*" Avery groaned, slumping over his homework. Tom could see the half-written essay on the parchment, and absently noted how neatly the other boy wrote. It was oddly surprising that, despite his rowdy and careless personality, Avery’s handwriting was a work of art. '*Is this what my life has come to?*"

"The exams will be starting soon," Prince replied, not looking up from where she was furiously adding something to her colour-coded notes. '*It's better to start early and study well, rather than leave everything to the last minute. Besides, you're still working on your homework rather than revising.*"

"She has a point," Nott agreed with a nod. Tom eyed him for a moment, not sure what he was even doing there; since when had Nott started seeking their company, anyway? '*Hey Eli, are you still conscious?*"

"Don't call me that," Mulciber muttered, the heavy scarf he had put on his face to block the light muffling his voice slightly. '*And I'm not. Just let me sleep.*"

"Mate, that's—"

"Which one of you has the vial guide book?" Opaline Pucey interrupted from where she was sitting, right next to Prince. '*By Quigley. I need it. Merlin, why are there so many vial types anyway?*"

*I left it on the shelf, actually,*" Avery said. '*Since we’ve got Tom here to share his knowledge.*"

*I wanted to ask someone, I’d ask Eileen,*" Pucey snapped, before glancing at Tom. '*I mean... no offense. I just—*"

*I'm fine,*" Tom replied, wondering if the reason why she’d ask Prince was because the two girls were friends, or if she *really* thought that Prince was better than him. He could easily forgive the first, but the second...
"Oh, come off it," Avery said, rolling his eyes, clearly incapable of giving up on an argument that would distract him from his homework for a minute. "We all know that Sluggy favours Tom above all."

"That doesn't make him the best," Pucey insisted. Prince hadn't looked up from her notes once, but the expression on her face showed her displeasure clearly. "They're both really good, you know."

"I didn't say that she isn't good," Avery replied. "I'm just saying that Tom is better." The atmosphere grew tense, and Tom could tell that Mulciber wasn't even trying to sleep anymore. The boy was still, his face covered by his scarf, but he wasn't breathing the same way that he had before.

"At least Tom is good at something useful," Pucey then said, her voice suddenly sweet. "I mean, it's far more useful than, say, History of Magic." At this even Nott paused his writing in order to follow the situation. Avery was known to be quite well-versed when it came to wizarding history and etiquette, and Pucey's words were a clear jab at him.

"It really does depend on the worth of the family, whether or not they value manners and etiquette," Avery replied, narrowing his eyes. "My family and I happen to think that being educated and knowledgeable of our own heritage is important. If you'd rather flounder around like a muggleborn, then that's up to you, isn't it? I wouldn't be proud of it."

Pucey took a deep breath, and Tom wouldn't have been surprised to see her pulling out her wand at this point. He briefly contemplated interrupting the growing argument and speaking up, perhaps in Avery's favour, to give the boy even more reason to take Tom's side in the future. Then, however, he remembered Maggie. There was no telling what kind of person Opaline Pucey would grow up to be, and Tom didn't want to risk alienating her for someone else's sake. He knew that girls could be just as lethal and cunning as any boy.

No, if he had to address or diffuse the situation, he would have to do it in a way that offended no one.

'Why do I have to do these things, anyway?' Tom thought, with no small amount of annoyance. He didn't sign up for this kind of responsibilities when he decided to allow other people to spend time with him. 'Such a waste of time.'

"Besides, speaking of being good at something," Avery continued, "what are you good at, hm? Because if I think of you, nothing comes to mind."

"Shows how much you know, doesn't it?" Pucey shot back with a hiss, and was about to continue, when Tom spoke.

"Say, Nott, do you need a specific level of grades in order to join the Quidditch team?" he asked, changing the subject entirely. "It occurred to me a while ago that surely the school doesn't allow Quidditch to take priority over academic success, right?"

"In theory, sure," Nott replied, latching on to the new thread of conversation with evident relief. Avery and Pucey had both fallen silent, despite still glaring at each other. "No one really enforces that rule, though. No one is going to kick a great player off the team just so they could work on their grades. After all, what if that meant the loss of the Quidditch Cup? That'd be devastating!"

'Not really,' Tom thought, but nodded anyway. Honestly, the things he had to do just to keep some people calm and out of fights. He then turned to Mulciber and elbowed him hard enough to make the other boy yelp. "What's the situation with your homework?" Because no matter what, he didn't want Mulciber to fail. Most classes were tolerable precisely because he could team up with someone who
didn't insist on talking all the time.

"Most of it is somewhat done," Mulciber said dismissively, rubbing his side and eyeing Tom’s homework. "Well, the charms essay needs a little bit of work, but I can do that later. You'll help, right?"

“Yes,” Tom sighed, reluctant but resigned. “Fine, I’ll help.” Because eventually, he’d reap the benefits of helping Mulciber out. With interest.


She was dead. He was free. Strangely, though, he didn't feel free quite yet. He didn't feel as joyful as he would have expected. He wasn't exactly remorseful either, not at all. He just... he felt tired.

Arcturus didn't smile when the Healers that he had called in earlier declared his wife officially dead. One of the mediwitches pressed a comforting hand briefly against his arm on her way out, before walking past him. Eventually, he stood in that room alone, without having said a word to any of the wizards and witches that had been there with him earlier. He was alone, alone with his dead wife.

"I'm not sorry that you're dead," Arcturus said quietly, sitting down by the bed. Melania’s face was covered with a white sheet, which was, well - it was good. Arcturus didn't want to see her face. Her death had been a necessity, and he didn't regret it, but it was curiously sad to let go of the only person who knew the ugly sides of him so well even if she had been quick to use it against him time and time again.

'I'll give you a good funeral,' he thought. People would look at him and see grief, which suited him just fine. 'I'll contact your friends, I'll make it beautiful. It's the least I can do – you did put up a good fight, didn't you?' He wouldn't be truly free until he buried her for good and said his last goodbye. And once that was done, he would finally be able to go ahead with his plans. Even if he cornered Riddle and dragged him here, there was no longer anyone who'd be able to stop or hinder him.

Arcturus leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes momentarily. He sat with his legs spread slightly wider than usual, as he imagined Harry Riddle kneeling there, looking up at him. Circe, if only that was true and Melania's ghost could see him then. Her fury might just be enough to bring her back from the dead.

The thought of it made Arcturus smile. Melania’s fury had always been a sight to see: like a caged beast, strong and ruthless, but rendered helpless and contained. If she had been more like him, and less like herself, she would have been a greater enemy than he could have handled on his own.

He had put up with a lot and held himself back in many ways. Not just in matters pertaining to pleasure, but regarding his own personal ambitions as well. An acquaintance in Bonn had informed him of rather interesting developments in the political scene of the mainland, and had invited Arcturus to join him and a few others for a meeting of sorts. Allegedly there was someone important for him to meet, although Arcturus couldn’t imagine what kind of person that would be.

'I might as well go. Nothing is holding me back anymore, I can come and go as I please,' he thought, now moving to gently tug at the white sheet, revealing Melania's face. 'No more screaming, no more questions. No one here waiting in the dark, using everything they can against me.' He no longer had noteworthy opponents: Melania's game was over, there was nothing that she could do to him anymore. No matter what would happen after Arcturus's visit to Bonn, there was no one here who would hold him accountable for every small action he chose to take.
Merlin, that feeling of power. That feeling of success. That feeling of victory.

"Your story ends here, my dear," Arcturus said quietly, before he leaned forward to press a kiss against the woman's cold lips. He then pulled the sheet back to cover her face, and called for one of the house-elves. The one that appeared was ugly and teary-eyed, and likely one of the small vermin that had actually liked Melania.

How that had happened, Arcturus couldn’t even begin to guess.

"Your mistress is dead," he told the creature, the tone of his voice both mocking and accusing. "Why didn't you take better care of her? Now she’s dead, and that your fault."

"Morpy tried!" the thing wailed, throwing itself on the floor and bawling. "Master! Punish Morpy! Morpy wasn't good enough! Morpy failed!" Arcturus stood still for a few moments, watching the house elf work itself into a frenzy of grief so strong it left the creature convulsing. It cried. For Melania. Would anyone be that saddened by—

Oh, yes. Their children. He knew he had forgotten something.

Arcturus thought of Orion and Lucretia, and couldn't muster up an ounce of sympathy towards them. He had never been particularly close to either one of his children, and the thought of them moved nothing in him. Orion, with his pale face and serious eyes, and Lucretia, whose eyes reminded Arcturus too much of Melania.

He'd need to contact the school, and have Horace break the news to the two. They'd then come to attend the funeral and pay their respects, before returning to Hogwarts. If all went as Arcturus wanted, he wouldn't even need to speak with them. He did have, after all, far more important things to take care of.

'I suppose I'm not much a family man,' Arcturus thought, giving in to the feeling of amusement and letting out a laugh that made the sniveling house-elf freeze. 'Well, better to realize that late rather than never.'

Moving to East Dulwich took very little time and effort, in the end. There was no furniture involved in the move, as Harry had no desire to bring anything from the old flat with him. The new house, while sparsely furnished, had the bare necessities that he could survive with until he got around to buying more.

'That's not so urgent, really. What I first need to buy is food,' Harry thought, feeling strange as he eyed the kitchen. It was so much bigger and better than what he had had in the previous flat – in fact, it was perhaps even bigger than the kitchen at Aunt Petunia’s house. 'I'll take a look at the bakery that's supposedly nearby. I do need some bread at least.'

The winter so far had been colder than any of the previous ones, much to Harry’s dismay. Despite that, the weather outside was slightly less cold than it had been the previous week. It wasn't quite enough for Harry to forego using warming charms on his coat and hat, however, as he made his way down the street towards his destination.

Outside, there weren't many people in the area, and only one car had driven by. The few people that he did see looked quite stressed and grim. Their demeanor was certainly made no less sullen by the dull colours most of them were wearing – there were greys, blacks, and browns, as if specifically chose to reflect the people’s darker moods.
He couldn't blame them, not really.

Hitler's activities in Germany were becoming increasingly alarming. The reports - the few that managed to make it through to the British broadcast, that is - spoke of government-sanctioned violence towards certain groups within the German society. But was it concern for these people that made the general public so grim and gloomy, or was it the whispers of Germany's alleged plans to continue its military actions **outside** the country?

'Grindelwald attended Hitler's speech in Reichstag,' Harry remembered then, all of a sudden. 'Is he a Nazi, though? I doubt that he disapproves of Hitler's plans and policies, but did he ever get involved in Muggle affairs? Is he that kind of person? He's nothing like Voldemort had been.' For one, Grindelwald seemed somehow more... politically suave than Voldemort had been. More subtle, if anything.

*Then again, what do I know? I know nothing of Grindelwald's current activities, aside from the problem he and the Elder Wand are posing for me right now,*' Harry thought, shaking his head just as he arrived at the bakery. "Hello," he said, stepping in.

"Good day," a young woman behind the counter replied, smiling pleasantly. It was easy to see the curiosity in her eyes, and Harry wondered if this sort of situation required introductions. Were the businesses around here familiar with the locals? Was there some sort of expectation for continuous social interaction that he'd have to meet? Even if Harry personally was fine with that, he doubted that Tom would approve of it.

'Merlin, this is awkward,' the wizard thought, after a few moments of prolonged silence. *'I'll just buy a little bit of bread and leave.'* He would've liked to buy much more than what he got in the end, but it was easier to shield a smaller portion of barely wrapped bread from the wind and snow.

Soon enough his thoughts returned back to Grindelwald, and his possible activities. For someone who had been the greatest Dark Lord of all time – second only to Voldemort – even in the notoriously self-centered point of view of the British Wizarding Society, the man kept a really low profile. Harry hadn't been able to find so much as a mention of him.

*‘It’s only a matter of time before his name becomes known and he gains more power,’* Harry thought with dread. He knew that there had been quite a few Pureblood wizards in Britain who had sided with the Dark Lord – something Voldemort had capitalized on a generation later to create his own recruitment strategy.

*‘Malfy didn’t seem like the kind of man who’d join a war voluntarily.’* Harry thought, unlocking the front door and stepping in, away from the terrible weather outside. He didn’t really know the Malfoy of this generation, but the man hadn’t come across as… well, he just didn’t **seem** like it.

Black, on the other hand…

Black reminded Harry strongly of Bellatrix, which wasn't surprising: he knew that the two must have been related somehow, even if he didn't know how exactly. Melania Black, too, seemed like the sort of person who'd approve of any cause advocating Pureblood supremacy and would perhaps even join it.

*‘Not that she would ever get the opportunity to do so,’* Harry thought, kicking off his shoes and heading towards the kitchen. *‘If her health is half as bad as she described, she won’t live long enough to join him. With those two as parents, I wonder what her children are like.’*

Merlin, what a depressing social circle he had developed for himself. Why were those the only...
people that Harry could remember properly interacting with during Tom's absence? Clearly his work
wasn't keeping him busy enough, even if he did have one mission scheduled for the following day. It
wasn't as if he really did anything with Tom either, but somehow the boy's mere presence made
days seem so much more interesting.

‘I should write him a letter,’ Harry decided suddenly. ‘Ah, I wish I could be at Hogwarts, too. I miss
those days.’ He also missed Quidditch, and the school feasts, and his friends. Why couldn’t he go
back to that, instead of having to worry about Grindelwald, the Blacks, and work?

‘Well, at least money isn’t an issue anymore,’ the man thought. ‘Now, what to tell Tom... he doesn’t
need to hear about the house quite yet, so that’s out. I could start the letter now, and then after my
mission I could tell him about that. I’m sure he’ll appreciate it.’

Chapter End Notes

A pound a week doesn't sound like much in today's money, but the £1 of 1939 is the
equivalent of £60 in 2015. Inflation + rising prices. Also yes, I did actually check real
housing prices of that time.
"I really like the winter sunrise on Saturdays," Nott observed, his face turned towards one of the windows near their corner of the library. It was almost nine in the morning, and the sun was only now making its appearance. "Merlin, it's like everything is golden. Just look at it."

At this, Tom raised his head from where he had been reading a letter Harry had sent him. He eyed the wooden desks, shelves, and every other spot the sunlight could reach, before reluctantly agreeing with Nott's assessment. "I suppose," is all he said in the end, not really understanding the value of admiring sunlight of all things. Then again, it was Nott, who was... slightly strange in ways Tom couldn't quite describe. He didn't really have much to talk about with Nott, and with Mulciber still sleeping in the dorm room, Tom had ended up alone with Avery, Nott, and Prince in the library this time.

"I can't believe how fast this week has passed," Prince huffed, tucking a stray strand of her hair behind her ear. "Merlin, there's so much I still need to go through. Has anyone finished their Herbology assignment yet? Tom? Have you?"

"Yesterday," Tom said, having once again focused on the paper he was holding in his hands. "Although I still have to proofread it later, in case I missed something worth adding."

"What are you reading?" Avery asked, eyeing the paper Tom was holding with a curious expression. "Is that a letter?"

"Yes," Tom replied. "My... guardian. I've told you that he's a Witness, yes? He just returned from another mission in Russia and says he bought me a book from there."

"Circe, I'm so jealous," Avery sighed. "Not that I'd want a book from Russia, mind you, but - a Witness as a guardian! How sick is that?"

"Think of all the places he could travel to," Prince joined in, sighing dreamily. "I wish I could be a Witness, too. There's so much that he knows, can you imagine? There're so many events and things that we won't necessarily even recognize as important now, but he knows about them. And why wouldn't you want a book from Russia? There are incredible magical resources there, and—"

"Calm down," Avery interrupted, rolling his eyes. "Don't get too distracted by the books of the world now. Isn’t all this intense studying already occupying your time and energy enough?"

"If you think this is intense now," Prince sneered, shooting Avery a look of contempt, "just wait until the last month before the exams. I have a very special study schedule for then."

"But why?" Nott wanted to know. "I mean, do you really need to study that much? You're smart, I think you could do well even without studying this much."

"Probably," the girl agreed easily. "But, well, I like studying. I like making a routine out of it, too. It helps me keep my thoughts clear."

"Chad likes studying, too," Avery said. "He doesn't do it half as much as you do, though."
"Perhaps if he did, Rosier would actually pass a pop quiz for a change," Tom said, gaining a thankful look from Prince and an amused snort from Avery for his contribution. "I'm surprised to have never seen him in the library."

"He's probably avoiding it because of you," Nott told him bluntly. "Dorian isn't particularly fond of you, as you know, and he and Chad are best friends."

"Lestrangle should get over himself already," Prince said, before something behind Tom caught her eye. It must have been something quite interesting, as it caught Nott's attention as well. Avery opened his mouth, perhaps to ask them for one thing or another, when Prince shushed him.

"Lucretia Black just walked by," she whispered, leaning forward. "Looks quite sick, doesn't she? I wonder if I should ask her if she's alright. Considering the circumstances."

"I have no idea what these circumstances that you're speaking of are," Tom said, wondering if she was related to that other Black from some time ago. Besides, what was it with other people and their concerns over strangers' well-beings? Why did they even care? Tom didn't. "Is she a Slytherin?"

"Yes, of course," Prince replied. "But, the thing is-- Lady Black passed away due to an illness recently."

"How recently?"

"Not even two weeks, I believe?"

"What is she doing at school, then?" Avery asked. "I mean, shouldn't she be home? If she's here, then Orion is, too. Why aren't they with their father?"

"Rumour has it that she and Orion will only go to the funeral, and then return right away," Prince revealed, a contemplative expression on her face. "Imagine, to have lost a parent already – she's barely older than we are."

"I don't need to imagine," Tom said, thinking fleetingly of his own parents. A long time ago, Harry had said a word or two about them in passing, but who had they been really? Should he ask Harry again? "In case you forgot: I'm an orphan, too. She'll survive." The Blacks were all born into wealth, after all. Tom had been dealt cards much worse than hers, and he was doing just fine.

"Oh, yes," Prince stammered, looking flustered all of a sudden. "I mean, o-of course. I'm sorry. I didn't forget."

"Do you miss your parents?" Nott asked curiously, and Tom could hear Avery making a scandalized sound, before slamming his book shut with unnecessary noise and enthusiasm.

"Well!" Avery said loudly. "How about we go have some breakfast now, aye? There's still plenty of time, but it'll be nice to eat without a hurry."

"Sorry," Nott said, still looking at Tom. "Was that an inappropriate question? I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"You didn't. My feelings aren't easily hurt," Tom said, because he wasn't easily hurt. He was, however, wary of Nott's insensitivity - had it been just badly expressed curiosity, or did the other have more sinister purposes for asking? Either way, Tom didn't feel comfortable around him. Strangely enough, his mood did improve a little bit when he later overheard Avery snapping at Nott regarding the matter. It was... nice.
The funeral was stunning in ways that funerals rarely were, with extravagant flower arrangements and overflowing food trays and self-filling wine glasses. The quiet chatter of the guests was soothed over by slow, tasteful music that began as soon as the eulogies were finished. Melania Black had been, despite her cold and closed personality, a woman well-liked in her social circle.

Melania’s coffin was made of black marble with pure golden etchings on the sides, and a simple white rose resting below her name on the closed lid. The coffin itself was floating still above an empty grave, ready to be buried when the time was right. Arcturus stood beside it, tall and silent, feeling neither happy nor sad; Melania’s death had been a necessity that would make his life easier, but a small part of him – somewhere deep, deep inside – was almost sad to see a woman such as she gone.

If only she had shared his interests… they could have been magnificent together. Alas, her belief in her own superiority and inability to simply step aside and let Arcturus live his life had made her an obstacle – even an enemy – at times.

Melania’s death had eventually become a necessity, and Arcturus wasn’t about to feel guilty about it. Perhaps slightly sorry, but it was hard to regret something that solved a problem or two so easily for him. Now he had the freedom to come and go as he pleased, and further his involvement in certain… projects that were deserving of his interest.

He could still remember how she had been when he had seen her for the first time: barely fifteen, fierce and proud and angry and hopeful. Easy to charm with his name and estate and a handful of diamonds and well-worded promises. She had, naively, believed in him and all his promises. For a while.

‘Somehow, I can’t see any of that working on Riddle,’ Arcturus thought as he saw the man in question among the guests. Arcturus hadn’t even thought of inviting Riddle, but what else could a house-elf’s mistakenly sent invitation be but a sign from a higher power? Perhaps the stars were aligned in his favour. As they should - the favour of stars would be wasted on lesser men after all.

In the crowd of people waiting for their turn to pay their respects and express their condolences to Arcturus and his two children, Harry felt uncomfortable and out of place. He hadn’t had the opportunity to make any vows to Arcturus – certainly not the vow Melania had wanted him to make – and somehow he doubted that he could do anything as flashy as that while giving his condolences with a slew of purebloods within hearing distance. It’d catch too much attention, and Harry didn’t want that.

He would, however, make sure that both Orion and Lucretia would be able to seek him out should they ever feel the need to. He wasn’t going to break his promise to Melania, even if he couldn’t go through with the vow.

“Harry Riddle,” Arcturus said as soon as Harry stood in front of him. The man looked the same as always: perfectly put together and in control of everything around him. He did not look like a man struck down by grief due to the early demise of his wife. “I am pleased to see you here. Even though I do wish that the circumstances would have been better.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Harry said evenly, careful to keep his condolences as simple as possible to discourage discussion, before turning to look at the two children standing by the older man’s side. There wasn’t much that he could say without arousing Arcturus’s suspicions, but Melania had told him that she’d make it clear to her son and daughter that he was an ally. For now, platitudes would have to do. “Orion and Lucretia, right? I’m really sorry for your loss.”
Orion, tall for a fourteen year old boy, looked at Harry with a serious and tired expression on his pale face. The vaguely familiar blue eyes that made Harry suddenly think of Sirius were dull with exhaustion, and his dark hair was neatly combed back much like Draco Malfoy’s had been once upon a time. His sister, a small and frail slip of a girl who looked very much like her mother, was holding her brother’s hand tightly. Harry’s heart ached with sympathy for the two.

"Thank you,” Orion said hesitantly, wary and tense and so clearly trying his best to carry the burden of loss for his sister as well. His voice sounded almost steady as he continued: ”We... appreciate it.”

Harry nodded, and after one more look towards Arcturus, he moved forward. There wasn’t much for him to do here, surrounded by unfamiliar purebloods, but he couldn’t leave quite yet without catching unnecessary attention for that. In the distance he could see Malfoy standing with two women - one who had to be a close relative for her to bear such resemblance to him, and wasn’t it... amazing how different families could be?

The Blacks, the Malfoys, the Weasleys, the Dursleys... and Tom and Harry. Unlike many others, however, it didn’t seem as if the Blacks had much love for one another – certainly not if Melania’s speculations about her husband were true. Harry couldn’t help but believe what the woman had said, which meant that Arcturus Black wasn’t the kind of man that Harry could simply shrug off.

Which also meant that there were two children currently in the custody of an unpredictable, dangerous wizard who had murdered his own wife.

"The only dark wizard I was supposed to think of was meant to be Tom,’ Harry thought with a sigh. How was the boy doing, anyway? It felt like an eternity since Harry had last seen him, and he couldn’t wait until the summer break started again in a few months. The few letters they wrote to each other weren’t enough, as there was plenty that Harry was sure Tom wasn’t telling him - it would be unrealistic, really, to expect the boy to reveal every single scheme he was involved in. Harry just hoped that none of those schemes were... bad.

"I don’t need him to become a saint,’ the wizard thought. 'As long as Lord Voldemort is never born and the wars are prevented, I’ll be able to count it as a victory.’

Less than a week after Melania’s funeral found Arcturus in a coffee shop in Bonn, in the company of a man he had met only a handful of times before, and very briefly at that.

"Your company has been highly recommended to me,” said the man calling himself Grindelwald - whether that was his real name or an assumed one, Arcturus did not know - while spreading a generous amount of jam on a slice of toast. "Do you know, Lord Black, why I chose this place for our meeting? Why here, why not in any of Germany’s magical cities?”

"I suspect you may have wished for me to observe the muggles around us,” Arcturus said neutrally, not showing his disdain as openly as he usually would have. "As for the reason to that wish, I can only imagine.”

"The muggle world is in a state of war,” Grindelwald told him, setting down the jam-covered slice of bread without actually taking a bite of it. "A war that will only get worse as time goes by, I have no doubt of that. This is not the first time chaos of this scale has ravaged through the muggle societies, and that, if anything, brings up the question: can muggles be trusted with themselves? Should they be allowed to govern and rule one another?”

"I’ve never wavered in my belief that their kind needs to be controlled, if not entirely exterminated,”
Arcturus told the other man, who nodded with a pleasant expression. "I am certain that you know this already, Lord Grindelwald."

"Plenty of people have tried to purify the wizarding world and eliminate the mudbloods thriving in it," Grindelwald continued after a moment of silence. "That has never worked, do you know why?"

"The resistance is too widespread, I believe."

"Not exactly." The German wizard leaned back in his chair and levelled Arcturus with a look that the other man couldn’t quite decipher. "Mudbloods are not the illness, Lord Black, their presence is merely a symptom."

'You cure the illness, you erase the symptoms,' Arcturus thought immediately before gesturing for the man to continue. Grindelwald did, but only after a moment of silence that had stretched a bit too long to not be deliberate.

"Unmonitored interaction between our world and theirs has resulted in procreation, if not marriage, between their kind and ours," Grindelwald said. "It has been happening for a long time now, causing the number of mudbloods being born to rise dramatically. Even if a half-blood ends up a squib, their child or grandchild or great-grandchild could manifest their magic and force their way back into our world."

"With their tainted blood," Arcturus said grimly, the familiar feeling of rage simmering in his blood once more.

"It is not only their blood that is the problem," Grindelwald continued. "It is their minds. You see, Lord Black, I do not exactly hate muggles or mudbloods. I do not particularly like them, and I do not mourn for their loss, but I do not hate them either. They’re naive and narrow minded. Weak. Infantile. I do not hate them, but I cannot tolerate to see them grow and live in their own illusions of grandeur. I do not wish for their kind to mingle with ours, and I do not wish for them to view us as their equals when we so clearly are their superiors."

"And how do you propose to enforce that level of segregation?" Arcturus asked, interested in knowing what the other wizard was aiming for. "The current precautions—"

"A failure of a system, that one," Grindelwald interrupted, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. "The Statute of Secrecy is clearly not enough to separate them from us, otherwise that sort of mingling wouldn’t be increasing as we speak. Respect for magic is diminishing as less and less people remain aware of the dangers that mudbloods bring – their beliefs that aim to suppress ours, their bad decisions and the need to be catered to and treated with unearned respect. The increase of mudbloods is a symptom that is caused by the failure of the Statute of Secrecy."

"There is plenty to discuss in regards to your theory," Arcturus said, thoughts already racing a mile a minute. "A complete segregation that keeps the magical and the other kind separate... it wouldn’t necessarily decrease the number of mudbloods for a few generations still, but it certainly is a viable course of action. That is, of course, if the public can be convinced of the merits of this cause."

"The muggle war - a world war, they call it - will help us quite a bit with that," Grindelwald told him. "In very simple terms, we begin with emphasizing how dangerous and barbaric muggles are to plant a seed in the minds of the public. Then we create resentment. Who’s to say whether it’s a muggle bomb or something else that demolishes an entire magical town? A few stunts of that kind, followed by the rise of a sudden mudblood terrorist group - Imperio is such a lovely spell, isn’t it - and a few concerned journalists ready to dip their pens in our favour... You needn’t worry about the public, Lord Black, their minds are easily controlled."
"You've put plenty of thought into this," Arcturus said, feeling pleased and excited. "Impressive."

"Of course," Grindelwald said. "Now, do you know why I asked for you, specifically? Many wizards have been recommended to me, most of them ready to kneel before me with no questions asked - unlike you. And yet it is you that I finally chose. Instead of anyone else. Instead of Lord Malfoy, who was the only other candidate that I seriously considered."

"I can only guess," Arcturus murmured, thinking of Marchosias with no small amount of resentment. "Lord Malfoy is a good friend of mine. Perhaps not the brightest man to grace his lineage, but certainly a competent one."

"The problem is that Malfoy is weak," Grindelwald said with an easy smile. "Not magically, by any means. Or in terms of influence. Rather, his resolution is simply an illusion. He believes in our cause but does not have the courage and the intelligence to do anything to support it. You, on the other hand... I’ve heard plenty of your willingness to take action rather than stand by."

"And that is why you called for me," Arcturus said.

"That is why I called for you," Grindelwald repeated in agreement, before his smile faded into something sharper and more predatory. "Now, Lord Black... what do you say?"


Weeks and months went by, and though Harry had plenty of free time on his hands, he had also received quite a few mission assignments that kept him somewhat occupied. Easy, short missions, mainly to witness births or speeches or – twice in April – early graduations. None of the missions were anything to write about, and Harry found himself plagued with boredom more and more every day even though some of his trips had brought him to places in the world that he would love to visit again with Tom. The arriving spring and increasing hours of daylight were, in Tom’s absence, the only things that could cheer Harry up.

It was one of late May’s sunny days that found Harry at the local marketplace, eyeing a pile of potatoes with a contemplative expression. The farmer guarding the pile kept glancing at Harry for a moment, before he seemed to make up his mind and leaned forward to speak.

"Say, lad," the man started, his voice rough but friendly. "You look young, eh? How old are you?"

"Twenty-two," Harry replied absently, wondering if he should wait until later before buying the potatoes.

"Quite a narrow escape then, eh," the farmer said, and that snapped Harry out of his thoughts.

"What do you mean?" the young wizard asked curiously, turning to look at the farmer. "A narrow escape from what?"

"You haven’t heard? Son, where have you been? It’s all over the news these days," the farmer told him, his eyes wide with surprise. "Heard it on the radio, too, I did! The Military Training Act, they’ve been calling it. All men of twenty or twenty-one years are to participate in six months of obligatory military training. Nasty rumours have it that there’s a war possibly coming."

"Possibly," Harry repeated numbly, the sudden feeling of dread nearly overwhelming. He had been somewhat aware of Hitler’s activities in the world, but he hadn’t thought that they were yet so noticeable as to worry the British people uninvolved in politics. "That’s the last thing anyone wants, but if it does happen..." Just why, why hadn’t any of this been taught at Hogwarts? Harry wasn’t sure of how much damage London would come to experience. Would he and Tom need to relocate?
Would there be any safe places in England?

"Oh, you needn’t worry,“ a woman said nearby, smiling brightly. "My son was called up to join a week ago, and he told me all about it. It’s only temporary, a security measure of some sort. Quite a good thing, too, if you ask me. Better have the boys training there than lazing around, what with the jobs being scarce these days."

"Methinks your lad might have downplayed the seriousness quite a bit, ma’am,” the farmer said, shaking his head. "They take those boys and train them, then keep them on reserve. If Europe’s unrest reaches us here, everyone on reserve might very well end up on the front lines eventually."

"You paint such a dark picture,” the woman said with a sniff, before turning to Harry again. "Don’t let this old fool’s worries bring you down, dear. We don’t get sunny days like this too often, you know. Don’t waste it by worrying over silly things. Enjoy your day!"

"Likewise, ma’am,” Harry said hesitantly, and remained silent until the woman had moved on to another stall. He then turned back to the farmer who was scowling while digging out a cigarette. "Do you think Europe’s unrest will affect us?" It would, Harry knew that. It *would*, so why bother asking?

"Who knows, really. I believe it quite likely, to tell you the truth,” the man grumbled. "Do mark my words, however, that soon they won’t be content with just young men of twenty or twenty-one. Soon it will be older, and eventually younger, too. That is the nature of war."

Harry knew that, had experienced it firsthand. And yet somehow there was something very different between this upcoming war and the one he had fought against Voldemort. This one made him feel... helpless, in a way. There was nothing he could do to truly change things for the better, and he had already sworn to not even try. This war seemed so much larger than his own had been, so much more *devastating.*

*There are so many issues that factor into that,* Harry realized. Hitler wasn’t an outlaw in his country - on the contrary. The acts of terrorism that were carried out in Germany and beyond were fully planned and supported by Hitler and his government. They weren’t hindered by the need for secrecy or having to obey the law: they *were* the lawmakers. There was no one in Germany who could oppose Hitler publicly and hold him accountable for what he was doing, whereas in Britain—

"Ah, you don’t need to look so worried, son,” the farmer said. "Britain is great, and there’s nothing those ruffians from the Continent can throw at us that we cannot weather."

"I certainly hope so,” Harry said hesitantly, before mustering up a hesitant smile and excusing himself from that stall. He could buy potatoes some other time without having to think of war first. The man had, however, brought up something for Harry to worry about: the Military Training Act. How long would it take before someone would come to recruit Harry?

Fighting in a Muggle war wasn’t something he could afford to do, no matter how ashamed that made him feel. He had to stay alive for Tom’s sake, and he couldn’t risk being separated from the boy for years at a time. Especially during Tom’s teenage years - Hermione had told him that those were the most formative years and that Tom would need a lot of support from him.

Whatever *that* meant.

Harry wasn’t sure what teens who weren’t being hunted by Dark Lords and prophecies could struggle with, but from what he could remember Hermione had explained to him - a lifetime ago - quite a bit about how his perspective wasn’t exactly a common one. Even Ginny had pitched in with
"you’ll need more than an expelliarmus to deal with that, Harry” before raiding his cookie jar with a gleeful cackle.

'I'll deal with that when it becomes an issue,' Harry decided with a heavy sigh, before the thought of Ron and Lavender during their sixth year at Hogwarts crossed his mind. 'But really, what if Tom starts dating? What do I tell him about that?'

Merlin, murder was so much easier to deal with than love.

* *

"I control my own destiny," Prince said, clutching her Charms book with her eyes closed. "I control my own destiny."

"What is she doing?" Tom asked, taking a seat between Pucey and Mulciber, right across from Avery. It was an early Wednesday morning, about an hour and a half before their Charms final exam. "Did someone hex her?"

"No, although I'm tempted," Avery replied, rolling his eyes while adding a spoonful of cranberries into his bowl of oatmeal. Tom grimaced, not understanding how anyone could voluntarily eat oatmeal if there was something better available. "She's telling herself that she can succeed, I guess? Pass the exam, I mean."

"Of course she can succeed," Pucey snapped, as if it had been Avery who had been doubting the girl. She turned to Prince with an encouraging smile on her face. "Eileen, of course you can succeed - you studied so hard for a long time. You've barely ever struggled with homework when it comes to charms - there's absolutely no reason to worry! Now eat something. The last thing you want to do is go to an exam hungry."

"Pucey is right, it's just charms," Nott added with a shrug, although he too had his eyes fixed on a piece of parchment full of notes. "The fifth year students have their Potion OWLs today. Think about that."

"Someone else having their own struggle doesn't make hers less difficult," Pucey pointed out. "It's an unfair comparison, especially since they already have five years worth of academic knowledge in their heads."

"I feel like I've forgotten everything," Prince whimpered, opening her eyes and looking at Tom with a miserable expression on her thin face. The boy felt mildly disgusted by her panic. He knew that she wasn't the only one to feel that way, but somehow it irritated him all the same. "Tom, ask me something!"

Really, now? Oh, if she insisted.

"What are the five most dramatic breakthroughs made in the Charms field since the sixteenth century?" Tom asked obligingly, while preparing to eat his own breakfast. There was a moment's silence on Prince's end, before the girl wheezed something unintelligible. She then suddenly stood up, gathered her books, and left the Great Hall.

"Oh no," was Pucey's sad input, before the Slytherin girl stood up as well. She wrapped a few muffins into napkins and shoved them into her bag before moving to follow her friend. "I'll see you boys later," she called over her shoulder.

"Wow, they both really need to start learning how to deal with exams," Avery managed to say through a mouthful of oatmeal. "Prince especially. Bloody hell. I want good grades, too, but Merlin
"I don't remember learning about historic Charms achievements in class," Nott suddenly said, looking at Tom with a curious expression. Tom couldn't help but think of how unsettling he still found this particular classmate; he didn't trust him. At all. "Was that really part of our curriculum?"

"Oh, perhaps not," Tom said without an ounce of regret. "My bad. I panicked." While Nott didn't look particularly approving, both Avery and Mulciber saw the humour in the situation, and clearly approved of it, if their laughter was anything to go by.

"Prince will hex you later for sure," Mulciber told him after finishing his third cup of coffee. "Merlin, I can't wait for all these exams to be over and for the summer break to start already."

"And then we'll start our second year," Nott said cheerfully, and Merlin, was there any hope for the boy to somehow die in an accident during the summer? "That means trying out for the Quidditch team!"

"Should I try out, too?" Avery sighed, looking contemplative. "I'm a decent Keeper. Probably better than our current one, even. But don't go telling him that, yes? He looks like he could punch me through a wall."

"Let's not be hasty, the break hasn't even started. There's no need to discuss the next year before this one's even over," Mulciber protested, before turning to Tom. "Do you have any plans for the summer? Something that doesn't involve Quidditch, I trust?"

"Nothing yet," Tom said, and thought of Harry. He had received quite a few letters from the man, but somehow they didn't tell him nearly enough of what he was doing. Knowing Harry, he could've easily forgotten to write about something extremely important. His job as a Witness wasn't keeping him busy at all, and Tom couldn't help but think that for someone so well-paid, he surely should work more. "I'm thinking of subscribing to Global Galleons Weekly sometime soon. I've heard they release double issues during the summer months, and right now I've subscribed only to the monthly, abridged version."

"Global Galleons is a good paper," Mulciber said, nodding approvingly. "The weekly one is even better, I've heard. My mum prefers Financial Feats and How To Achieve Them, though. Dad says there's no difference between the two, but he doesn't really know much about business or finance anyway. Mum says that the only thing dad knows about money is how to spend it."

"Is there a difference?" Tom asked, choosing to not comment on the mention of Mulciber's father. "Or is it just the same articles written in different ways? Because I've seen that happening, too."

"They do have some overlapping subjects, of course," Mulciber replied with a shrug. "But Global Galleons focuses more on what's going on in mainland Europe, I believe. They even have sections about Muggle finance, since some businesses do trade with them."

"This is what you two choose to talk about?" Avery said, rolling his eyes. "Even studying is better. Or just finishing your breakfasts, because we really do have to go soon."

"I'm not ready," Mulciber said with a grimace. "Are you ready, Tom?"

"Of course," Tom replied. "It's just a Charms exam. Of course I'm ready."

And even if he didn’t feel like it, there was no reason for him to tell that to anyone.
Since y'all never pass an opportunity to grill me on the details: yes, I know that according to canon Orion was born in 1929 and Lucretia in 1925. However in this very AU fic he was born in 1925 and she in 1926, making Orion 14 and Lucretia 13 at this point of the story.
Black wasn’t as smart as he thought he was.

Gellert settled into the comfortable chair in his study and called for a house-elf to bring him a cup of glühwein while thinking of the man he had met some time ago in Bonn. It was ridiculous how fools were the same, no matter where they hailed from. Lord Black was no exception, as he was yet another greedy fool who mistook his recklessness for courage and lack of honour for strength. Wizards like him were a dime a dozen, not realizing that they were neither unique nor destined for greatness.

What Black didn’t realize - and likely wouldn’t, not anytime soon - was that he, too, had an expiration date. He wasn’t the sort of ally one kept around for long without a risk of instability manifesting itself. And if anything, it was instability in his ranks that Gellert couldn’t afford. Black wouldn’t care for the end goal if any part of the journey to that goal compromised him, or if he perceived any of Gellert’s own key players to be a threat to him - the man would act as he wished, resulting in potentially disastrous consequences.

Gellert knew better than to dismiss the potential trouble that Black could easily cause him, as it was often petty men with personal agendas who were the most disruptive.

He hadn’t told Black much of his current activities in Europe, although Gellert had already gained quite a reputation that Black had apparently been very aware of. He had his people in key positions in both German and Austrian Ministries of Magic, eager to purify their societies the way Hitler’s regime was doing.

France was deep in denial of what was about to happen, believing that a lack of preparation for war would somehow make them invisible enough to avoid invasion. Greece was struggling like a fly in a spider’s web, unwilling to say yes but unable to say no. Gellert had also approached Italy, but unlike its Muggle counterpart, the magical society of Italy seemed to have no desire to join him, or even entertain him for a while.

No matter, he knew how to deal with that.

Mapping out the opposing ministers of the Continent would lay the foundations of his next great mission: the eventual elimination of the high profile figures. He needed a year, perhaps two, before he could do it. By then his position in both Germany and Austria would be solid and strong enough to declare himself the head of a new society, and a prophet of a new age. In a few years the muggles wouldn’t stand a chance, not even with their fancy machinery and who knew what else they liked to use. They wouldn’t stand a chance after Hitler’s war depleted their resources, and destruction and desolation would only spread the further the Nazi forces reached.

Only after securing all of the Continent would he turn his eyes to the United Kingdom. Strike their hospitals down and cut off their resources. Starve them into weakness before killing them off, only offering a good life to those who swore their loyalty to him. That would happen in the future, but meanwhile... he could recruit. Men like Black were easy to lure, but their value was limited. He wanted strong wizards and witches to side with him. Exceptional people with incredible power and intellect. People like Albus.

'I wonder how he is doing,' Geller thought suddenly, reaching for the cup of glühwein the house-elf
had brought him. ‘Ended up becoming a teacher, didn’t he? What a waste. What an absolute waste.’

Albus Dumbledore, the current Transfiguration Professor of Hogwarts, was the embodiment of disappointment in Gellert’s eyes. The man - Dumbledore - was powerful and intelligent, and had once upon a time seen the world the way Gellert did. Up until he hadn’t. A long time ago Gellert had viewed the other wizard as an equal, someone who could match him, and perhaps even win a duel against him every now and then.

Not anymore, he wouldn’t. Not when Gellert had the Elder Wand in his possession. Now, if the blasted thing would start working again, that would be one less problem for him to worry about. The Elder Wand not working for him had never been a possibility that Geller had considered. Even now it was hard for him to understand, accept, or fix.

As entertaining as it would be to simply yank Riddle’s chain to see which way he would dance, Gellert didn’t think that he could afford to spend time on that. He didn’t know what kind of a man Riddle truly was, did not know his capabilities or his ambitions, and did not know why the Elder Wand reacted to him the way it did. And therefore the longer he allowed that unknown factor to exist, the more a potential threat it became.

He couldn’t go after him quite yet, no matter how much he wanted to. Right now he was still too busy cleaning up the German and Austrian ministries of anyone who had, at some point, expressed interest or desire to stand against him. Dealing with the other ministers was also a matter of higher priority than dealing with Riddle - it wasn’t as if Gellert needed the wand to succeed. He liked it, preferred using it and appreciated the advantage it gave him... but not having it didn’t make him weak. Therefore, dealing with Riddle would have to wait until Gellert had the time, without compromising the scheduling of his other plans.

Unless... he assigned that particular task to someone else. Someone with something to prove. Someone who could look for Riddle and deal with him for good.

Someone like Black.

* * *

"The time of freedom has come,” Avery declared, throwing his books into his trunk in a manner far too energetic for someone who had been up before the sun. "We’re going home!"

"I can’t believe that you haven’t finished packing yet,” Nott said. He had finished a few hours ago and was currently munching on a muffin he had saved from breakfast. "You were the first one awake. What were you up to, if not packing?"

"Just basking in the knowledge that I’ve survived a year, and will get to enjoy my entire summer without worrying about homework or exams.”

"We do have summer homework, you know.”

"Ssshh,” Mulciber shushed from his bed. "That is not something you should speak of, Eugene.”

"I haven’t seen you pack at all,” Avery noted, turning to look at Mulciber. "Where’s all your stuff?"

"In my trunk,” Mulciber replied. "Unlike the rest of you, I actually know how to tell house-elves to do their jobs."

"Bollocks,” Avery gasped, dropping his shirt. "Maybe I could--”
"Well, it's too late now.

"You may want to hurry up," Tom said, joining the conversation. "We're supposed to be leaving for the carriages in about an hour."

"The carriages leave in groups," Lestrange sneered. "It's only the first one that leaves in an hour. The second will leave half an hour after the first group, and the third will leave an hour after the second group."

"Allow me to be the first to remind you that compartments fill up quickly," Tom told the other boy with a smile so friendly it made Avery pause his packing and Mulciber raise his head in alarm. "If you wish to sit in one of the shared carriages, that is up to you. I, however, prefer to sit in one of the smaller compartments."

"I don't mind sitting in the shared carriage," Nott said, and once again Tom felt a wave of dislike and annoyance towards the boy. "I have quite a few friends from other Houses and don't mind travelling in big groups with them."

"That's because you talk about Quidditch with literally everybody," Avery said, quickly packing the rest of his things. "I mean, I like Quidditch, too, but I don't think I could talk about it for hours and hours every single day."

"It's my hobby, and I like it," Nott said easily. "Don't you talk about your hobbies?"

"He doesn't have any," Rosier said mockingly, as if not having a hobby was something to mock someone about. Merlin, Tom couldn't believe how petty that was. "Anyway, Al, are you done? Hurry up so we can all go."

"You don't have to wait for me," Avery told him. "It's not like we're even going to sit together, since you hate Tom and Tom doesn't notice you—"

"I don't give a blasted newt about him," Rosier snapped, and Tom was torn between feeling insulted and accomplished. He pretended to be still fully focused on reading the book in his hand, while keeping his expression neutral. "But fine, I'll go. Don't really want to be around you either, to be honest. You talk too much. Dorian, are you ready to go?"

"Of course," Lestrange said, and soon after the two left with their trunks in tow.

"I don't think you should have said that," Nott said, turning to Avery. "About Tom not noticing him. It's rude."

"Him calling Tom a mudblood every other day is rude," Mulciber said from the bed, before pushing himself up to sit. The look in his eyes was unusually sharp as he looked at Nott. "But who cares, really? Do you care, Eugene? Because I don't think you do."

"Of course I—"

"I think you were just antagonizing him," Mulciber continued. Tom gave up the pretense of reading, and fully focused on the unusual scene before him. Mulciber was the calmest person Tom knew of, if only due to the other boy's constant sleepiness and general laziness. What on earth had managed to motivate him to speak now?

"Why would I do that?" Nott asked, and there was something in the way he said it that made Tom wonder.
"I have a few ideas as to why, but that doesn’t matter,” Mulciber said, finally leaving the bed and reaching for his trunk. "Let’s go to the train now and get ourselves a compartment. You guys are exhausting and I don’t want to see any of you until next semester.”

"Oh, come on,” Avery protested. "That’s a lie.”

"True. I don’t mind seeing Tom. He’s quiet.”

"Don’t pull me into this,” Tom said. "I don’t want to see any of you either. Yes, Al, including you. All I want right now is just to go home.”

Home. To Harry.

Harry hadn’t changed much. His hair looked like it had been recently cut, and his robes were neat and of good quality. His hug was as strong as ever, and Tom allowed himself to lean into it for a second, before pulling back.

"You’ve grown taller again,” Harry said with a proud grin. "We’ll definitely have to get you a new set of robes before the summer is over.”

"That’s fine,” Tom replied, satisfied to know that they could actually afford buying another set of high quality robes. "Let’s just go home, I don’t want to stick around here.” He hated the crowds and didn’t fancy the idea of being sucked into a series of goodbyes with his classmates who were just as annoying as they were unnecessary. He would see them in a few months anyway, wouldn’t he?

"All right,” Harry said, and strangely enough, he looked excited about something. While Tom did wish to go back home, there was hardly anything exciting about the flat they shared. Wondering if the older wizard was up to something, Tom watched Harry shrink his trunk and pocket it before reaching out to him and tapping his forehead with the tip of his wand.

"It’s a Notice-Me-Not charm,” Harry explained. "We’ll apparate right outside. Just you wait and see.”

"You’re up to something,” Tom said, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. "It doesn’t involve other people, does it?” He doubted that Harry would truly try to introduce him to people as soon as he had returned, but it was better to just... make sure.

"What? No!”

"Really?”

"Really,” Harry assured him. "Now, grab a hold of my arm. We’ll apparate.”

Tom’s grip around Harry’s forearm was tight, and he didn’t have time to think of Harry’s strange behavior as the world began spinning around him. Tom hated apparating, even if it was the fastest and most practical method of transportation.

"We’re here,” Harry said, and Tom had to take a moment to just feel the solid ground under his feet before blinking his eyes open and taking in the sight of an unfamiliar block.

"Did you misaim us into a different neighbourhood?” the boy asked dryly, causing Harry to roll his eyes and point at the house directly in front of them. It was a lovely two-story building made of what looked like white bricks, with large windows and a front door made of dark wood. The front yard
was very small, but well-kept and pleasant looking.

"That’s our new home," Harry told him, and a wave of disbelief and hope washed over Tom. "I didn’t tell you because I wanted it to be a surprise. I bet you thought I forgot, huh?"

He had. Tom had fully expected to have to hound Harry into looking for a new home for them during the summer. But Harry had actually remembered, and he had found them a house, and Merlin... this was unbelievable.

"I already moved our things," Harry continued, pushing Tom forward while cancelling the Notice-Me-Not charm with a wave of his hand. "Not that there was much to pack and move. It’s not yet fully furnished, so you’ll get to pitch in with the decor here, if it matters to you. Come on, let’s go inside. You can take a look at the house while I warm up the food; you’re probably hungry by now."

Tom could hardly believe what he was seeing, when the front door opened to a light-filled hallway that led directly to a comfortably furnished living room. Quietly walking further into the house, barely pausing to kick off his shoes, Tom took note of the dining area behind the living room’s couches, the large kitchen, and the neat and clean bathroom. He then climbed up the stairs, eager to see the rest of the house.

"Second door on your right," Harry called after him. "That one is your room."

There wasn’t much in Tom’s room yet, and he was quite fine with that. The bed looked better than any bed he had slept on before, and the large bookcase had plenty of space for new books that he’d buy. The carpet was soft and the walls were green and there was even a desk in the corner, just for him, and Merlin — Tom loved every inch of his new room. It was his. All his.

Curious to see the rest of the upper floor, Tom peeked into the room to his left, and there was no doubt that it was Harry’s room. There were a few books thrown around, but also several maps, a broom, and all kinds of strange items that the man had picked up during his travels. There were constellations climbing up the walls, the carpet felt like warm sand but wasn’t, the compass hanging from the ceiling was spinning on its own and honestly, Tom couldn’t help but think that Harry’s personality didn’t reflect his room at all.

'I guess he, too, has hidden depths,' Tom thought, rolling his eyes. He then moved to peek into the remaining bedroom, an impersonally decorated guestroom, located next to Tom’s room and right across from another bathroom.

Tom wasn’t—he didn’t often feel things strongly. If he did, the feeling was usually anger. Right now, however, the feeling of something was nearly overwhelming. Was it happiness? If it was, then why did he want to cry? Why did he want to go to Harry and say thank you time and time again, as if the words weren’t enough if only said once. Tom had never thought - had never dared to believe, really, even after being taken in by the older wizard - that he would end up in a nice house like this, with his own room.

"Once you’re done, wash your hands and come downstairs," Harry yelled, his voice muffled by the distance. Tom nodded, before realizing that that wasn’t a response to someone who couldn’t see him. He couldn’t say anything, though, not through the lump that was in his throat. He felt strange, as if he was about to cry. Which he wasn’t, because there was no reason for him to cry right now, was there?

Tom took in a shuddering breath before heading to the bathroom to wash his face and hands.

His summer was already proving to be... something else.
Though the Parkinsons weren’t much of a family in Arcturus’s eyes, they admittedly knew how to throw a party. Unlike the Malfoys who believed in diluted alcohol and slow dances and child-friendly activities, the Parkinsons were notorious for their very liberal, at times scandalous, habits. Even now the large dance hall of the Parkinson Estate, decorated in generous amounts of gold and crystals, entertained not only every Pureblood wizard worth his wand, but also a selection of scantily clad women - and even a few men - with painted lips and coy smiles.

Most disturbingly, however, the Parkinson family was also known for treating their women the way they treated their men. Even now Arcturus could see Mrs. Parkinson leaning against her husband while making eyes at one of the men brought in to service the few ladies in attendance.

"I see Marchosias turned down an invitation once again,” Elijah Parkinson, the brother of the host, said. He had a tight grip on a young woman whose smile remained radiant despite the stench of alcohol surrounding him. "Figures."

"He’s a man of a much... calmer nature,” Arcturus said. "Or perhaps it is the women that bother him so.” Because they sure bothered Arcturus.

"That’s ridiculous," Elijah said dismissively. "How can he deem a woman good enough to bed, but not find her his equal? I would never lay down with someone unworthy of me."

"He’s a twat," said John Avery, who had clearly drunk more than his fair share of whisky. "But really, who isn’t. According to the papers we’re all twats. Bigoted, prejudiced, discriminating—"

"What papers?” Elijah asked, curious, privately admiring Avery’s ability to speak without slurring despite his evident intoxication.

"Oh, I can’t remember. I read an article somewhere, or something. Some witch wrote about how we should start employing more mudbloods. Bloody hell, what a joke. If they want work, they can go work for muggles, am I right?"

"Unfortunately, the general public seems to find such statements agreeable,” Arcturus said. "More and more limitations will be imposed on us as time goes by. In the name of equality, of course. Any sane man would be concerned, I believe.”

"There’s not much that can be done,” Avery complained, letting go of the woman he had been holding on to, and pushing her aside to focus on talking. "See, while the Daily Prophet performs fairly better than other papers, even they have recently exhibited signs of this ridiculous, naive acceptance towards potentially risky groups of— well, I mean mudbloods, you know? They do not have our culture, they do not know our customs, yet they barge in expecting special treatment and demanding more and more with every passing day.”

"Would it not be great if there was someone who could do something about that,” Arcturus said mildly, observing the crowd of purebloods in the hall. "Someone who knows the dangers of tolerating mudbloods, and isn’t afraid of making tough decisions to prevent their invasion.”

"I can tell you right away, no one like that is in the Ministry right now,” Avery said with a snort. "Not even old Selwyn - the man is all tough talk but when it’s time to face the public, he sings a different tune. The coward.”

"It is unfortunate that the only man with any intention of doing something about this terrible situation is from overseas,” Arcturus continued. "Germany, more specifically.”
“Oh, I’ve heard about that,” Elijah said, nodding his head. “Or well, of him. Fancies himself some sort of a saviour.”

“I don’t care if he pretended to be Merlin himself,” Arcturus said. “As long as he actually does something. Circe knows the longer we wait, the harder it will be.”

“You mean you’d join some rebel cause?” Avery asked with a skeptical tone. “I don’t know about that.”

“I would,” Elijah replied instantly, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “If it meant putting a stop to the mudbloods inserting themselves into every part of our lives, demanding rights that are ours, not theirs, trying to force our society to change into something that will accommodate them, and not us. I would, John, I would join and I’d gladly be among the first to do so.”

“That is madness you’re speaking of,” Avery said, though he didn’t sound appalled. “But would you trust a man from overseas to lead a change in Britain?”

“Temporarily, perhaps,” Arcturus said, joining the conversation again. “Have him take the lead until the problem has been taken care of. Then we simply... remove him from Britain. One way or another.”

“Have you met him?” Elijah wanted to know. “This German wizard.”

“I have.”

“And what is your opinion of him?”

“I was impressed,” Arcturus admitted reluctantly. “A pureblood, wealthy wizard with power, ambition, and intelligence. He seems to have already some sort of a backing for whatever change he’s about to bring, and I personally wouldn’t be quick to turn him away should he set his sights on fixing our ministry as well. For the faint of heart, he speaks of relocating mudbloods, not killing them.”

“That does sound reasonable,” Elijah agreed, but Avery shook his head.

“I don’t trust a German wizard to do what is best for us,” he said, and Merlin, for a drunk man he was awfully perceptive, wasn’t he? Arcturus didn’t like that. “Before you realize, he’ll be using our soil as a dumping ground for his mudbloods. Never, ever trust a man who’d rather relocate an enemy than dispose of him.”

“Come on, John,” Elijah said, rolling his eyes. “Even if he says he’ll relocate them, most will definitely die one way or another soon enough. He has the right idea, that friend of yours, Arcturus. Introduce us when you get the chance.”

“We’re hardly friends,” Arcturus told him, pleased by the results of this conversation. Despite the strange gender equality thing the Parkinsons always kept harping about, when it came down to real issues... they were always among the first to move.

*—and honestly, I know that Nott is up to no good,” Tom said. He was sitting on one of the couches - they had more than one! And it was nothing like their old one had been! - talking to Harry while the other wizard was packing a small bag for his next Witness mission. “I don’t know what he’s planning, but I don’t trust him. At all.”
"What about your other friends?"

"Mulciber is all right, and Avery is a lot more tolerable than he was in the beginning and Prince is, too— but they’re not my friends! We’re just classmates."

"Right," Harry said, not quite able to hide his smirk. "Of course. I forgot."

"Anyway," Tom continued, giving the older wizard a suspicious glare, "where did you say you’re going this time? Back to the Continent? You should be careful, I read the newspaper yesterday and almost every article kept emphasizing how dangerous it is there right now."

"I’m going to Dublin. It’s a short mission and I’ll be back well before dinner. You’ll be all right?"

"Yes. Don’t worry."

"Don’t open the door to anybody. I haven’t yet gotten around to looking for someone to set up the wards - it’s going to be expensive, though, for sure. There’s also food I prepared for you in the fridge, so please don’t use the oven either. If anything dangerous or out of ordinary happens, just run to one of the neighbours’ houses. Don’t try to fight."

"I’m not an infant. I actually do know how to use an oven."

"I know," Harry said, looking at Tom with a lopsided smile. "But please, for my peace of mind?"

"Fine," Tom relented, rolling his eyes. "I don’t want to make anything anyway. I have things to read."

"Do you have summer homework? You could get started with that," Harry suggested, finally closing his bag and standing up. "Not that you’re in a hurry or anything, the break just started. We could go to Diagon Alley sometime soon for ice cream and shopping, if you’d like. Maybe you’ll meet up with a friend or two?"

"We’ll see," Tom said. He didn’t actually wish to waste time on his classmates during the break, but there was value in re-establishing their bonds outside of school again. Besides, the closer Mulciber and Avery were to him, the further away they were from Nott. Tom sincerely hoped that the boy would get on the Slytherin Quidditch team, and end up being too busy to spend time with Tom’s friends anymore.

'If he doesn’t, he’ll be miserable,’ the boy thought. ‘I suppose it’s a win-win situation for me in that case.’

Quietly Tom watched Harry cast a cleaning charm on his shoes before leaving to change into his Witness uniform. After a few moments of peaceful silence, Tom tried to focus on the book on his lap, but found his attention and thoughts drifting from one subject to another. In the end he pushed the book aside, and opted to look at the scenery outside. The large windows of the living room let in sunlight rather generously, and Tom couldn’t believe that he was truly at home in such a clean, light-filled place. It had been years since he had left the orphanage, and yet sometimes... it all still felt so unreal.

A small part of him couldn’t help but wonder what had happened to the other children there. Were they still at Wool’s, grasping at straws to find something to be happy about? Was Ben Buck still there, or had he been adopted? Did any of them ever wonder what had happened to him? Did they even remember him anymore?

'He better remember,’ Tom thought, thinking of the boy who had so often tormented him at the
Because as much as Tom disliked Lestrange, Rosier, and Nott, none of them came even close to being Ben Buck.

Harry didn’t have to drop by the Ministry often: just once a month at any day of his choosing, for a quick check-in on how he was holding up, and to see if there were any concerns he had that would need to be addressed. Harry never did, and usually managed to leave the ministry within an hour of his arrival. Which was exactly what he wanted. This time, however, things didn’t go quite as smoothly.

Harry’s mission in Dublin had gone by fast and had been remarkably easy, and so with plenty of time to spare he had decided to do this month’s check-in now rather than later.

Harry was making his way out of the Ministry, opting to use the main entrance rather than the Floo system, when someone took a hold of his arm. Turning fast, a hex at the tip of his wand, he was taken aback when he saw Malfoy of all people. The older wizard had let go of Harry’s arm quickly and was in the process of... casting a *cleaning spell*... on his... *gloves*? *What?*

"Malfoy,” Harry said, still eyeing the man’s hands and wondering if he ought to go ahead and feel insulted, or just settle with being annoyed at the ridiculousness that seemed to be the most distinctive trait of the Malfoy bloodline. "How can I help you?”

"Mister Riddle,” Malfoy said, managing to muster up a smile. "A minute of your time, please?”

"Sure,” Harry allowed, feeling curious despite himself. As far as he could tell, Malfoy was very different from Black. What would *he* want with Harry? "Here?”

"Merlin, no, no. Follow me, please.”

Harry knew that this was precisely one of those situations that Tom - and Hermione, were she here - would tell him to steer clear of. For all he knew, Malfoy could be leading him to some sort of an ambush inside the Ministry. Although, the man didn’t seem the type to do that.

‘*Just like Wormtail didn’t seem the type to betray his friends, I guess,*’ Harry thought, following the older wizard quietly, his wand still ready in case of any sudden movements. He was now in an unfamiliar part of the Ministry, walking down a corridor with what seemed like an endless amount of doors on both sides. Somewhere closer to the end than the middle, Malfoy stopped, and pushed a door open. He then ushered Harry into the small office before closing the door behind him and gesturing for the other man to sit down.

"Right, let’s not waste any time,” Malfoy said promptly, taking a seat as well. "Mr. Riddle... I wish to discuss with you the matter of a rather sensitive nature.”

"I suppose you’ll be wanting some sort of an oath to keep quiet, then,” Harry said dryly, and complied when the other wizard nodded. That done, he leaned back in the chair and eyed Malfoy with a contemplative expression.

"You... have associated with Arcturus Black,” Malfoy started. "You attended his wife’s funeral as well. Now, as a Witness, people are quick to forgive your lineage, and honestly, I haven’t brought you here to discuss that.”

’*Why even mention it, then?’* Harry thought, but remained quiet.
"A friend of mine," Malfoy continued, "reached out to me recently with rather troubling news. It seems that Lord Black has... expressed interest in activities that could potentially cause serious disruption to our society. Now, I’m not speaking of terrorism... rather, he seems to be planning an alliance with a vigilante from the Continent. Some German wizard with dreams of greatness."

'Black is teaming with a German wizard? Could it be Grindelwald? Really, what would be the odds of that happening? Not likely, I think.'

"Now, I’m unsure of how well you know Lord Black," Malfoy said when Harry interrupted him.

"I don’t know him at all, really," he said. "I believe I have mentioned this before: I don’t know him. I also know nothing about a vigilante from the Continent. However, Malfoy—"

"That’s... Lord Malfoy, thank you."

”— I did meet the late Mrs. Black, and if you believe something to be amiss regarding Black himself, then perhaps it’d be best if you trusted your instincts."

"Pardon?"

"I don’t have much to say," Harry said, already thinking of going home and checking on Tom. "But if the late Mrs. Black was correct, there’s plenty that we don’t know about Black. Things that I probably don’t even want to know. I promised myself that when it comes to Arcturus Black, I’ll just do my best to stay as far away from him as possible. I advise you to do the same."

"Just— one thing, tell me one thing," Malfoy said. "Do you think that Black could get involved in acts of domestic terrorism?"

"Honestly," Harry sighed. "I believe that man isn’t one to be stopped by morals. If there’s something for him to gain through domestic terrorism, then yes, he probably would. If that was all, Malfoy, I’ll take my leave now."
1939

[—steps taken by our government which, while denying that they are intended to take us into war—]

“Who’s that?” Tom asked as he listened to the unfamiliar voice on the radio. “He sounds weird.”

“Hoover, I believe,” Harry replied, not looking up from the mission assignment he was reading through. “A former president of the United States. He made some sort of a speech or a statement yesterday, and different radio channels have been repeating it a couple of times since. Say, have you finished your book yet?”

“Almost,” Tom said. The book in question – *Cyrillic Runes Revisited* by Mordaunt – was fascinating, but there was something about Hoover’s words that bothered him. He had heard some other people quoting the man’s speech during an earlier broadcast, but had never actually heard the original one. Now that he was listening to it, there was something about it that made Tom feel… on edge.

[—yet entangle us with these very controversies, the end of which may be war—]

“If you’re getting bored, or if you want to read something else, we can go and get you some more books later this week,” Harry said after a moment of silence, finally looking up from the papers in front of him. Tom noted the evident exhaustion on the man’s face and his struggle to keep his eyes open. Harry was pale and, as far as Tom was aware, he hadn’t been eating particularly well either.

‘Why don’t you go to sleep?’ the boy wanted to ask, but decided not to. Even if Harry was busy working on something else instead of talking, Tom would rather have him awake and nearby. “I’d rather subscribe to something, instead,” he said.

“Do you have a specific paper in mind?”

“Financial Feats And How To Achieve Them is said to be good. I wouldn’t mind taking a look at what they’ve got.”

“Well then,” Harry said with a smile, “How about we get you the latest issue, and if you like it, we subscribe?”

“That’s fine,” Tom agreed, before another thought crossed his mind. He wasn’t as sure about asking for this one, though. Just because they could – probably – afford it now, didn’t mean that Harry would actually agree to it. Even if he was generous with his money.

[—whatever our sympathies are, we cannot solve the problems of Europe—]

The two sat quietly in the living room, Harry going back to his paperwork while Tom tried in vain to focus on his book. Eventually he took a deep breath and looked up again. Hoover’s words became
nothing but white noise drowned by Tom’s worries.

“Did you have a pet when you were at Hogwarts?” he asked. “A cat or an owl or something?”

“I had an owl,” Harry replied with a quick smile. “Her name was Hedwig.”

“Did you like owning a pet?”

“Absolutely,” Harry said with a nod. “Are you thinking of getting one?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to that,” Tom said with a shrug, trying not to look as eager as he felt. “An owl would be useful. The school owls are all right, but they’re pretty slow and anyone can use them so most of them tend to be busy.” Besides, Tom hated the thought of having to use a school owl when most of his classmates had already their own.

“You know what, how about this,” Harry started. “I’ll be a bit busy for the next two days, but on the weekend we could go to Diagon Alley. First we take care of that subscription thing – get you the current issue, I mean. We need to get you your school supplies anyway, so there’s no harm in doing other things while we’re at it. I’m sure that getting everything done won’t take all day, so we can go and take a look at the pets available at a store there. If I’m not entirely wrong, Eeylops Owl Emporium has only owls, whereas Magical Menagerie has no owls, but plenty of other animals.”

“I want to see the other animals first,” Tom decided. “Do you think they’ll have snakes in there? I like snakes.” At this, Harry looked at Tom again, this time offering him a smile that was… there was something off about it. Was it exhaustion or something else, Tom didn’t know. Either way it wasn’t the kind of a smile that would make him warm on the inside.

[—dangerous emotionalism is diluting the American reasoning—]

“I’m sure they have snakes,” Harry said. “Although whether or not you can take one with you to Hogwarts, I’m not sure. We’d need to look into that. As long as you’re sure you can take care of a pet, we can get you anything you want.”

“Anything?”

“Within reason.”

“All right,” Tom said, unable to completely hide his smile. Thoughts of war and Hoover’s words were of no importance – it was hard to worry in the light of his life with Harry. Besides it wasn’t as if he and Harry even belonged among Muggles, right? As far as Tom was concerned, even if a war among Muggles was going to happen, it had nothing to do with him.

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It wasn’t that Tom didn’t like Diagon Alley – he did. What he didn’t like, however, were the crowds that swarmed through the streets. It’s as if everyone had decided to go out and buy their school supplies on the same day! Why couldn’t they just owl-order whatever books they needed? Unlike Tom, most of them weren’t about to look for some extra reading!

“We’ve got quite a bit to do today,” Harry said, leading Tom forward with a hand on his shoulder. “But let’s start with the robes.”

Robes & Ribbons hadn’t changed one bit – not that Harry had expected it to. Inside the store they found the old man they had met a year ago, this time talking heatedly with a woman whose agitated gesturing was bordering on violent. The moment she saw the newcomers over the old man’s
shoulder, she took a deep breath, brushed invisible dust off her sleeves, and began walking towards the door.

“I will return tomorrow, Mr. Twilfitt,” she said, her voice surprisingly calm for someone who was clearly still upset. “We have quite a bit to discuss after all.” And then with a failed attempt at a friendly smile towards Harry and Tom, the woman stepped out of the store. A brief, awkward silence reigned as the door closed behind her with a click.

“She isn’t a bad person,” the old man said suddenly, as he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “Emily Tatting, a brilliant seamstress. Too proud to work for Stitches & Seams, however. Merlin knows where that attitude will take her.” He then took a deep breath, put his glasses back on and looked at Harry and Tom.

“Now,” Twilfitt said, “gentlemen. Another set of school robes for Mr. Riddle, if I presume correctly?” He gestured for Tom to come and stand on a stool once again, and one of the measuring tapes lying on a table nearby slithered closer to begin its work.

“Yes,” Harry replied, still feeling as if he had intruded on a conversation not meant for strangers. “For his second year.”

“And which House did young Mr. Riddle manage to get into?”

“Slytherin.”

The old man’s assessing look towards Tom didn’t make Harry nervous. Though the boy did have rather aristocratic features that most wizards and witches associated with Pureblood lineage, Harry knew for a fact that Tom looked too much like his father for his mother’s blood to be recognized in him. There was no way anyone could look at him and truly believe him to be a descendant of Salazar’s by looks alone.

“Slytherin, eh? Enjoying your time there, I hope?” Twilfitt said, writing down Tom’s measurements. “It’s a good place for those wanting to learn more of the world. Say, Mr. Riddle, could you write me the address to which the robes will be delivered? I have quite a few orders lined up, and it might take me up to three days to finish young Mr. Riddle’s robes.”

“Sure,” Harry replied, and tried to make his handwriting as neat as possible. While Twilfitt seemed like a relatively likable man, something about him made Harry feel that he’d be judged for messy writing.

Eventually they were done, and after paying the man and confirming the address once more, Harry and Tom continued their way to Flourish and Blotts. The streets were, if possible, even more crowded than they had been in the morning, and every coffee shop and restaurant they passed by was full.

“Let’s hope there will be less people after we’re done with your books,” Harry said. “You brought your list with you, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did,” Tom replied. “And a list of other things I want to get, too. Like the paper I told you about, *Financial Feats And How To Achieve Them*."

“Great,” Harry said with a smile. “Let’s get that done, then.”

The day went on pleasantly, and though Tom knew he would never grow fond of walking that much during the day or staying outside for so many hours in a row, completing most of the tasks on his list made him feel very accomplished. He would get new robes, he had bought his books and the paper,
he had bought a new set of quills and inks and other required equipment. And most importantly: Harry was now leading him to Magical Menagerie, the pet shop Harry had mentioned before.

“We’ll first take a look at what they have there,” Harry explained as they walked. “But if nothing there appeals to you and you still want an owl, we can move on to Eeylops Owl Emporium.”

“That’s fine,” Tom said.

Magical Menagerie turned out to be a small, cramped store that smelled weird and was incredibly noisy. Every inch of the walls was covered by cages full of animals – some of which Tom didn’t even know existed. There was a cat with six spidery legs and a lizard that kept constantly changing colours and there was even some sort of a... dog with... human legs.

“Hogwarts-approved pets for children are at the back,” an employee said the moment she saw Tom and Harry, waving them away from the strange animals.

“Why are those right by the door?” Harry asked, curious to know.

“They reflect the magic of our little shop,” the employee said unconvincingly with a smile that looked more like a pained grimace. “For Hogwarts students – I assume your child is one, right? – we’ve got cats and dogs and rats and snakes and other, uh, more or less exotic animals. Puffskeins are pretty popular these days.”

“Snakes,” Tom said, and glanced at the strange dog with human legs. “Nothing with legs, I mean.”

“Y-yeah,” the employee muttered, nodding. “Let me show you where the snakes are.”

'I wonder if Tom will understand them,' Harry thought, watching the employee tell Tom about the safety measures taken to keep the snakes harmless. 'Well, of course he will, that’s not really the issue here. I know I can’t understand snakes anymore, what with Voldemort’s horcrux long gone. Will Tom tell me about being a parslemouth?'

Did the boy even know what being able to speak with snakes meant? If he had read about the ability in a book, he hadn’t asked Harry for more details about it.

'I have to tell him before he goes back to Hogwarts,' Harry decided. 'If he doesn’t bring it up himself, I have to somehow speak about it without making it seem awkward.' Considering what being a Parselmouth meant to people – what it would reveal about Tom’s heritage – Harry couldn’t just let the boy discover it on his own. Tom would figure out very fast that Harry knew about his skill and him being a descendant of Slytherin, and without proper problem management there, the entire situation could turn out messy really fast.

And even though about an hour later Tom ended up deciding to get an owl instead, Harry had already made his decision. Now, it was only a matter of finding the opportunity to start the conversation.

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Less than a week before Tom’s second year at Hogwarts would start, Harry received a mission assignment that he was advised to prepare for with care. The days before leaving he spent constantly by the radio, listening to the increasingly alarming news. Tom watched him in silence, only asking questions when he saw Harry turning completely away from his mission description and focusing on the broadcasts.

The solemn atmosphere wasn’t only in their household. Outside, the sunny smiles and greetings of
their neighbours had become more tense and forced, and Tom would see adults talking quietly to one another with an intensity that was new and different.

“What’s wrong?” Tom asked. Harry looked up at him and, for a moment, was about to brush the question off with a smile. Something about Tom’s expression, however, changed his mind.

“Germany and the Soviet Union have entered a non-aggression pact,” Harry replied. “The creation of that pact implies that Germany’s future actions will... well...”

“That Germany will be picking fights in the future?” Tom said with a frown on his face. “Doesn’t Germany already have some sort of conflicts with several countries?”

“Mhm. Yes.”

“But why do we have to worry about it? It’s not as if Germany will really try to fight us, right?” Tom had expected a quick smile and a few comforting words in response to his question, but none of that was forthcoming. Instead Harry looked down at his mission description, clearly not reading a word of it.

“Where will you be going?” Tom asked. “I know you’ve been to Germany a few times. You’re not going there again, are you?”

“Not this time,” Harry replied. “I’m going to Coventry and will be absent for a day, maybe two. At least now you have a pet to keep you company, right?”

“I don’t know how much company an owl can be,” Tom said skeptically, allowing the subject of Germany to go. “Then again it’s not as if I like cats or dogs either.”

“And snakes?”

“I... I do like snakes. A little bit.”

“We can get you a snake next year, then,” Harry offered. Tom looked at him for a few seconds, before finally asking:

“Do snakes have a specific significance for wizards and witches?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, well, owls are used for sending things and such. Do snakes have a purpose? Are they easier to communicate with, for example?”

“Not really,” Harry said, before hesitantly continuing: “unless you’re a parselmouth, of course. If you’re not, then communicating with snakes is just as difficult as with any other creature that doesn’t speak human languages.”

“Parselmouth,” Tom repeated. “I’ve heard that word before. What does it mean?”

“A parselmouth is someone who can speak and understand parseltongue, the language of serpents,” Harry explained. “The ability is believed to be unique to the descendants of Salazar Slytherin, although there are parselmouths in the Middle-East and some parts of China and India. In Europe, however - and especially in Britain - being able to speak parseltongue is considered proof of being part of the Slytherin family. To be quite honest, there were some rumours that Salazar was of Middle-Eastern descent, but scholars have argued against that for a long time.”
“What.” The tone of Tom’s voice was off, and Harry wished he knew what was running through the boy’s mind.

“There are a few Pureblood families who have attempted to claim the Slytherin name as part of their identity,” Harry continued, “but without a single parselmouth in the family, such blood relation is nearly impossible to prove. You know, your mother’s family – the Gaunt family – also claimed--”

“I can speak to snakes,” Tom cut him off, speaking in a rush. Harry paused, unsurprised but unwilling to show it.

“You--”

“I’ve always been able to,” Tom said, interrupting him again. “Even back at the orphanage. And at the pet store, too. I wondered if other witches or wizards can do it, too. Can you? Does that mean that I’m a pureblood after all? From the Slytherin family?”

“I’m not a parselmouth,” Harry said. “And you’re a half-blood, despite the strength of your mother’s heritage.”

“I need to research this,” Tom decided. “I wonder if Mulciber knows anything about parselmouths.”

“At this point, Tom, I strongly advise you against revealing that skill to anyone,” Harry said, his heart beating fast and heavy in his chest. “Not until you’re fully capable of defending yourself if someone decides that a half-blood Slytherin heir is not something they could... tolerate.” It wouldn’t be the worst thing done by the likes of Umbridge.

“I understand,” Tom said, and he truly did. From what he had seen, plenty of purebloods struggled with the concept of other people – people who weren’t pureblood – being strong or smart. If Tom were to reveal that the only thing that allowed them to still consider him inferior was, in fact, the one thing in which he was far above and beyond them, well... who knew what they would end up doing. This new discovery did, however, make something in him feel more at ease.

“Did you know that I might be a Slytherin by blood when you took me in?” Tom asked, wanting to continue the conversation for several reasons. One of them was, to some degree at least, the desire to keep Harry from refocusing on the depressing news and his upcoming mission.

“There was always the possibility,” Harry said carefully. “But no, I didn’t know. So many families claim to be from the Slytherin line that such proclamations aren’t usually believed.”

“That’s fine,” Tom said with a shrug, already thinking of how to use this skill to its full potential. Honestly, yet another thing about him that was unachievable by others - wasn’t Tom special even among wizards and witches? He wasn’t special just among muggles, it seemed. What else could he do that no one else can? And how far would he be able to go with what he had?

“Don’t worry about it too much,” Harry told him with a smile. “It’s a useful skill to have, and there might be some books that describe it in unfavourable ways. In truth, being a parselmouth has no real connection to a person’s morality or magical affinity, be it dark or light. It’s simply a skill that allows you to converse with serpents. It is up to you to decide how to use it.”

’He’s worried about me,’ Tom realized. ‘He’s worried about my... feelings?’

That was funny. In a strange way, that was really funny, though Tom wasn’t sure how or why. The only thing he was certain about was that Harry wouldn’t find it as funny as Tom did. Worrying about him fretting over whether someone thought of his ability as light or dark.
When Harry returned from his mission to Coventry, he was silent and had tear tracks on his cheeks. From the radio Tom had heard of the IRA orchestrated bombing and its consequences, and was relieved that when Harry returned, the news reporters had already moved to discuss the evacuation of paintings from the National Gallery in London. While that, too, implied far too much about the possibility of an upcoming war, it was still less devastating than the news from Coventry at the time.

The words BROADGATE WRECKED BY EXPLOSION were printed in large letters on every newspaper that had been thrown at the front steps of their house. FIVE DEAD. TEN SERIOUSLY INJURED. FORTY TREATED AT HOSPITAL.

That Friday Tom spent sitting quietly in his room, unsure of how to deal with whatever Harry was going through. And when the day came for Tom to return to Hogwarts, he almost didn’t want to. He didn’t want to leave Harry alone for months and months. Who knew what would happen to him in the light of these recent events? Being fond of someone with a questionable sense of self-preservation was very tiring, but there wasn’t much Tom could do about it.

On the morning of Tom’s departure, he ate his breakfast while trying to come up with some sort of a solution. Harry wasn’t weak, and Tom wasn’t too worried about the man being crushed under all the bad news, but... for the first time, Tom felt that it would have made it easier for him to feel less worried if he knew that Harry had at least one good friend who would entertain him in Tom’s absence.

“It’s good that you’ve got Hogwarts to go to,” Harry told him just as they arrived to King’s Cross. It wasn’t yet as crowded as it would be soon, and Tom was torn between rushing to find an empty compartment for himself, and spending as much time as possible with Harry. “They’ve begun evacuating children from London anyway.”

“Evacuating people? Last I heard they were evacuating paintings,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. “It can’t be that bad, can it? We’re not at war.” The mere thought of another country declaring a war on England - on Britain - was absurd.

Harry knelt down and, much to the boy’s annoyance, ruffled his hair with a grin on his face. He didn’t tell Tom that the Royal Navy had already been moved to war stations or that the broadcast they had been listening to in the morning was from the freshly launched BBC Home Service. Instead he said, “You’ll be safe at Hogwarts.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be fine, too. I’m a wizard, remember?”

“Just don’t do anything reckless,” Tom said, scowling. “And write to me. Often. At least once a week to let me know that you’re, you know, not dead.”

“Sure thing,” Harry promised. “Now off you go.”

War. It was amazing how such a small word could carry so much weight. Harry had lived through a war once, and years ago a part of him that had been only vaguely aware of the upcoming second world war had believed that he’d be ready and prepared. It wasn’t until now that he realized that wars, too, could differ from one another in every way while still being devastating. Knowing that the world war in Europe would last only for a handful of years didn’t make it any less frightening.
"Germany from overseas," Harry thought while watching Tom get into the train, "and IRA from the North. I wonder..."

Should he perhaps move somewhere safer? A wizarding village that was kept protected with barriers and wards would indeed help him remain away from danger, but something about doing such a thing felt... wrong. There was no real reason for Harry to leave East Dulwich quite yet, and if it ever came down to that... then surely he could just pack up a bag and go to Hogsmeade for a while. Harry wasn’t worried about his own survival, really, and Tom would be safe far away in Scotland.

"Hello, Mr. Riddle," a voice said, and Harry turned to see one of Tom’s friends - he wasn’t sure which one - being pushed forward by a really harried looking woman whose stylish hat was almost falling off her head.

"I swear to Merlin, Elliot, if you don’t start walking faster on your own then Circe help me I will--“

"Mother, it’s Tom’s caretaker,” the boy pointed out, not moving an inch. “The Witness.” At this the woman stopped, let go of her son’s arm, and turned to look at Harry. Her sharp eyes were quick to peruse him up and down, before she smiled politely.

“Margaret Mulciber,” she said. “Mr. Riddle, right? A pleasure to meet you.”

“Yes,” Harry replied hesitantly, unsure if he should reach forward and shake her hand or something. “Harry Riddle. Um, likewise.”

“I guess Tom’s already in there, isn’t he?” Mulciber - the son - said, gesturing at the train. “I probably should go then, too, huh.”

“Oh, how gracious of you to finally come to that conclusion,” his mother snapped, looking both cranky and tired. “I’m already late for work, Elliot. Merlin, I should have just let your father drop you off. Goodness. Let’s get going. Hurry up!”

“It was nice to see you, Mr. Riddle,” Mulciber yelled over his shoulder as he made his way towards the train, his mother right beside him as she levitated a heavy trunk above their heads. Harry watched them go, happy that Tom had friends at Hogwarts. From what the boy had told him, Mulciber seemed to be his favourite friend anyway. It was hard to imagine this boy growing up to become one of Voldemort’s Death Eaters, but Harry wasn’t going to ignore the fact that such a thing had already happened. In a different time, sure, but it simply meant that the potential for becoming that person was still there.

‘Same goes for Tom, doesn’t it,’ Harry thought. ‘No matter how unlikely it is for him to become Lord Voldemort, the potential for it will always be there.’ Not to mention that Voldemort was more than just a name. Even if Tom would never adopt the name Voldemort as his own, it didn’t mean that he wouldn’t do the things Voldemort had done.

Merlin, he really needed something to do. A new hobby, or even a part-time job that would keep him occupied and too busy for thoughts like those. With so many people - thankfully not of his age group quite yet - getting suddenly drafted for training and enlistment, it shouldn’t be too difficult for Harry to find someplace that needed an extra pair of hands.

* Arcturus didn’t mind travelling for leisure. In fact, he quite enjoyed visiting countries far away from home, taking advantage of the temporary anonymity that absolved him of any accountability.

What he did not like, however, was travelling to Bonn for the seventh time that year for the sole
purpose of wasting time on yet another discussion with Grindelwald. Really, why couldn’t he just send an owl? Besides, if the discussions really required them to actually meet in person, why didn’t Grindelwald come to England? Why was it Arcturus, Lord Black, who had to travel for the sake of a common wizard from the Continent?

But here he was, once again making his way to yet another meeting point. This time perhaps worse than the ones before it, what with the location being some remote house tucked behind several anti-apparition wards, far away from anything that even remotely resembled a decent road to walk on. Naturally, it was also raining.

'This better be worth it,' Arcturus thought sourly as he finally reached the door. He had barely knocked once when it swung open, and a blank-faced maid led him to where Grindelwald was seated. The older wizard eyed Arcturus’s travel-worn appearance with evident amusement.

“Glad you found the place,” Grindelwald said, and gestured to a chair across from him. “Do take a seat – I can only imagine how tired you must be after the long walk.”

“I’m sure there’s no need for you to imagine, after all you did come the same way,” Arcturus replied, sitting down and gesturing for the maid to bring him something to drink. The lit fireplace kept the room warm, and soon enough Arcturus had taken off his jacket as well, letting it hang off the armrest of the chair.

“Oh, I apparated,” Grindelwald said lightly, with an easy smile of a man who found enjoyment in someone else’s suffering. “I set up the anti-apparition wards after I came here, and will take them down before I leave. Precautions, you know. Times like these, you can’t be too careful.”

‘I hate him,’ Arcturus thought, though his own polite smile didn’t so much as waver. “I do know. What I would like to find out, however, is—”

“Quite a few English fighters have joined our ranks during the past weeks,” Grindelwald continued, interrupting Arcturus as if he hadn’t even heard the other man speak. “I’d like to see even more following suit. I expected greater numbers by now, you see.”

“They might become more keen on joining once they see things actually happening,” Arcturus replied, unable to completely prevent the irritation he was feeling from showing in his tone. “Speaking of plans is good enough for men who appreciate them, but most prefer action over theory. Too many are aware of the risks involved and would like to know whether or not you’re actually capable of doing what you promise before they commit to anything.”

“Of course,” Grindelwald said agreeably. “They will soon get what they have been asking for. Some things are too important to be revealed carelessly to strangers right now, and they should know that. However, it is only a matter of a few weeks - a couple of months at most - before our cause will see the light of day and everyone will know who we are and what we’re fighting for. We already have people in key positions in several ministries in Europe waiting for the signal to begin.”

“Ministries such as? France? Italy?”

“France, Belgium, Austria,” Grindelwald said, “and a few others. Not Italy, however. Their Minister of Magic has turned out to be a rather difficult man to reason with. Achille Di Maria - you might be familiar with the name.”

“Unfortunately yes,” Arcturus said, remembering the infuriatingly calm man who, despite his short stature, refused to be intimidated. Describing Di Maria as difficult to deal with was an understatement. “We haven’t had much reason to associate with one another, however. He isn’t the
kind of man who would frequent the circles that I enjoy.”

“Yes, he doesn’t seem like the kind of man who would do that, does he,” Grindelwald said mockingly. “Men like him in politics are absolutely insufferable. Too much honour and a strange sense of duty with no regard to the bigger picture and overall functionality of the entire system. Thankfully he’s a bit of a rarity, anyway. Other politicians are far more accepting and easier to reason with. The best of them are willing to work together with us for a better future.” Work which mainly revolved around over-sharing information and looking the other way whenever necessary.

“Speaking of work,” Arcturus said, eager to move the discussion forward. “I doubt you called me here to discuss Di Maria. Is there anything that I can do for you?”

“Actually, yes,” Grindelwald said, setting down his drink and leaning back again in his chair. “Due to certain reasons that I wouldn’t wish to bore you with, my personal and direct access to England is rather limited. This means that in order to locate something, I will need the assistance of someone there. In this case it would be you.”

“And what is it that you wish to find? Something of great importance?”

“Not exactly something. Rather, it’s a some one.”

“A person,” Arcturus murmured, now genuinely curious. “Do tell me more.”

“It is a wizard, most likely in his mid-twenties or so,” Grindelwald said. “He may look rather ordinary and practically harmless, but make no mistake - he is a threat and needs to be taken care of as soon as possible.”

“And you’re sure that this wizard lives in Britain?”

“Yes, I believe so. He speaks like one of your people, and I’ve bumped into him in Diagon Alley before.”

“Anything useful you can tell me about him?” Arcturus asked, wondering if it was someone he could have a bit of fun with before eliminating. “It’d be impossible to find him with the vague description you’ve given me so far.”

“His name,” Grindelwald replied. “His name is Harry Riddle.”
“Dear Tom—”

With no new missions on the horizon and too much time on his hands, Harry was quick to set out and look for a part-time job to keep him at least somewhat busy. He did his best to push the events of Coventry from his mind and tried to focus on the good things about his life at the moment. And while he wasn’t looking forward to the upcoming months without Tom, he was glad that the boy would be far away from danger. There was no predicting London’s future anymore, really.

Finding a job would have perhaps been more difficult had Harry been aiming for something with a decent pay, the way he had done in the past before becoming a Witness. Now, however, the sight of the first ”Help Needed!” sign was good enough for him, and Harry didn’t spend much time thinking before he walked into the bakery and spoke to the middle-aged woman at the counter about the sign.

“How have you got any experience?” the woman asked, eyeing him up and down. Something about her reminded Harry of Molly Weasley, although she didn’t seem to be half as kind. Her mousy brown hair was pulled into a very tight, thin braid and her uniform was spotless. “Working in a bakery is much tougher than people think it is.”

“I’m no baker,” Harry admitted in response, “but I’m quick and efficient when it comes to cleaning dishes.”

“I could teach him how to knead properly,” a man said, peeking out of a door behind the counter. He was tall, with shaggy red hair and a sparse beard, and looked nothing like the woman Harry was conversing with. “God knows we need someone to do that – I have no time to knead bread as much as it should be kneaded, and what with the machine broken and more people suddenly asking for bread instead of cakes... well, it’s tough back here.”

“We could take you on for a few weeks first, to see how well you manage,” the woman decided, turning back to Harry. “I’m Susan Tipps, the owner of this place. That one is Marcus. Come tomorrow at half past five in the morning and we’ll discuss things in detail, all right?”

“—I know it’s been barely a day since you left, but I decided to write you a letter regardless. I’m sure you already have things to tell me about; I remember how busy those first days of Hogwarts were—”

The bakery was clean and brightly lit, although a far cry from the nicely decorated and comfortable bakeries and coffee shops of Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. In the early morning – Merlin, even the sun wasn’t up yet! – the place looked even less attractive. It didn’t bother Harry much, however, and as the day went by and he had more and more dishes to wash, thoughts of that kind were no longer an issue.
After experiencing the quiet – despite how busy it was sometimes – work life at Maggie’s, and then the private and independent job as a Witness, it was strange to suddenly work in a place where he was surrounded by people. Susan, despite being very strict, was a well-meaning woman who treated everyone fairly. Well, equally meanly, at least. Marcus was much easier to get along with, and Harry was glad to spend most of his hours with the man. There were a few other people working at the bakery as well, but Harry couldn’t quite yet remember their names.

“Eventually you’ll even remember the names of our regular customers,” Marcus assured him. “Just give it some time. It’s not an urgent thing to memorize, anyway. For now, most of your time here in the mornings will be spent kneading in the backroom. A bit of a boring task, that, but really easy after you get the hang of it.”

“That’s fine,” Harry said. “Susan told me that aside from kneading I’ll be washing dishes whenever they start piling up. Which, well, I’ve been doing already.”

“All right,” Marcus said with a grin. “Let me teach you how to knead dough, then, and get you started on that, too, so you won’t end up washing dishes all day.”

“— I didn’t expect to work at a place like this, to be quite honest. I’m glad that this is where I ended up —”

Despite the attempts of nearly everyone to stay positive all day, it was easy for Harry to see the tension and worry right beneath the surface. The BBC broadcast was always kept on a relatively loud volume, and when something particularly important was being reported, everyone paused to listen.

‘This is unbelievable,’ Harry thought while trying to focus on kneading. Quite a while had passed since the last time he had used his arms this much, and they were already aching slightly after barely an hour of work. ‘This whole atmosphere of waiting for the other shoe to drop... it’s unreal. I can’t imagine how hard dealing with this is for people who don’t know what’s ahead.’ None of the people around him knew how wide the reach of Nazi Germany’s impact would be. They couldn’t possibly anticipate how many lives would be lost before the end of the war.

Harry wasn’t sure how this all would affect him and Tom. And that was what worried him the most.

“— You see, I’ve started helping out at a bakery. It’s not the bakery near our house, but I don’t mind the distance —”

“How come you weren’t drafted?” Susan’s question caught him off guard, and Harry nearly dropped the glass he was washing.

“The age-bracket of recruits missed me by a year,” he replied. The woman watched him for a few moments in silence, before nodding curtly and turning away.

“Didn’t miss my son,” was all she said before moving on to the front of the store, presumably to serve a customer. Harry watched her go in silence, unsure of what to do or say - or even if he was expected to say anything to that. What could he say, though? Was it arrogant to think that his circumstances were different? He had already made his decision to not get too involved in any conflicts that could cause a distance between him and Tom. Getting recruited and shipped off with the army to fight Germans in Poland was definitely one of those things.

Well... England had pulled through without him the first time around, and Harry knew that it could do that again. His first priority would always be Tom.
When Harry woke up on Sunday, he felt... strange. The feeling of having forgotten something important kept bothering him all morning, up until he finally reached Susan’s bakery and was put to work. The weather outside was cloudy and slightly chilly, but not rainy – it was just the kind of weather that drove in customers seeking a hot pastry to take with them. Bread was in high demand and Harry worked until his arms were aching once again.

“Imagine dealing with this demand without having someone to help me,” Marcus said, wiping his sweaty forehead with the hem of his apron. “Bread is still cheap, so most people can afford it.”

“You think the prices will rise soon?” Harry asked, curious.

“Oh yes, absolutely,” Marcus replied. “The way things are going in the Continent, there’s already some shortage in imported goods. Say, if you’re done with that, could you carry the next batch of rye bread to the front?”

“Sure,” Harry said. He had never been a fan of rye bread, but he couldn’t deny how good it smelled.

At the front, Susan was dealing with a long line of customers, and Harry was quick to go back to Marcus and work on another batch of whatever the man needed help for. Another co-worker, a girl who couldn’t be over twenty yet, was busy between cleaning, fetching ingredients, and helping out Susan at the front. At times she would pause to readjust the sound of the radio, before carrying on with her work.

“You’re lucky you get to leave early,” the girl huffed at some point, nearly collapsing against the wall near Harry. “We haven’t had a Sunday this busy in quite some time!”

“I don’t mind staying overtime today,” Harry said with a shrug. It wasn’t as if there was anything waiting for him at home.

“We do need the help, but I don’t think we can afford to pay you for the additional hours,” Marcus said. “I don’t think Susan would be particularly happy about it.”

“What wouldn’t I be particularly happy about?” Susan said just as she stepped into the backroom. “Amanda, take care of the front for a moment. I need a break.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the girl said quickly, and left in a rush. It was very obvious that she was intimidated by the older woman, and Harry could completely relate to that. Susan was intimidating. He tried to focus on the radio broadcast instead, but realized soon that Susan seemed to be expecting some sort of an explanation from him.

“I simply said that I wouldn’t mind working overtime today,” Harry said hesitantly, wondering if he should simply keep quiet. “I don’t need payment for it, either.”

“That’s a bit strange, isn’t it,” Susan mused aloud, eyeing Harry with a suspicious look. “Offering to work for no pay. In these times.”

“It’s busy. I appreciate the offer,” Marcus said. “If you don’t mind doing the work for free, Harry, I’d say yes. If there’s some leftover bread at the end of the day, you can take some with you.”

“I doubt there will be any leftovers,” Susan pointed out. “Sundays are very busy days for us.”
“All the more reason to accept his offer,” Marcus said. Harry was feeling increasingly awkward, and regretted his offer already. Perhaps he should have just went ahead and spent the rest of his day in Diagon Alley or even Hogsmeade. “Besides, if he doesn’t stay overtime today, he’ll be going home in less than an hour. And I can tell you right now that I alone cannot bake fast enough to meet the demand if I have to knead everything to perfection. We tried it last Sunday and you remember how that went.”

“Fine,” Susan huffed. “Thank you, Harry, for offering to stay. You’re welcome to do so.”

“Don’t mind her,” Marcus said as soon as Susan left. “She’s a bit cranky. Politics, you see. She worries about the world. It’s why we’ve got a radio here and a radio at the front. I personally can’t stand listening to politicians talk. Even now-- isn’t that Chamberlain?”

[I am speaking to you from the cabinet room--]

“Uh, yes,” Harry said, recognizing the speaker’s voice. “I can turn down the sound if you like?”

“Best to just let it be,” Marcus said dismissively. "Refill the salt if you could, please.”

[This morning... the British ambassador in Berlin... handed the German government... a final note.]

Both Harry and Marcus paused their work, and Harry felt suddenly sick. The door separating the front and the back of the store was pushed open, and Amanda peeked in with a worried expression on her pale face.

“What does that mean?” she hissed. “Marcus? What the bloody hell is a final note in this context?”

[Speaking that unless we heard from them by eleven o’clock, that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland…]

“I don’t like this,” Marcus muttered, now completely focused on the radio. Harry almost didn’t notice that Susan had appeared, too, and somehow the thought that there was no one at the front of the store to mind the customers didn’t seem important at the moment.

[—a state of war will exist between us.]

Susan’s face was void of any expression, but her hands were holding onto her apron with tightly clenched fists. Marcus had bowed his head down, his body tense and face scrunched up in a pained expression. Amanda was looking at the radio with large, horrified eyes, looking close to tears. Chamberlain’s voice was heavy with regret as he continued:

[I have to tell you now… that no such undertaking has been received. And that consequently… this country is at war with Germany.]

A long silence followed the Prime Minister’s words, until someone at the front burst into loud tears. Susan seemed to suddenly startle back into motion, and rushed back to work. A moment later Amanda joined her, shock clearly painted on her face. Harry reached for the salt container in order to pass it on to Marcus. No one spoke a word. No one could.

[You can imagine… what a bitter blow it is to me… that all my long struggle to win peace has failed.]

“Bloody fuck!” Marcus suddenly howled, startling Harry so badly he nearly dropped the bowl he was holding.
“Bitter blow to him?” Harry could hear a man’s voice boom from the front. “What about the rest of us? Germany will obliterate us!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” someone shrieked angrily. “Germany isn’t a threat to us, no matter how much they try! You think Germany could truly wage a war against Britain? Ha!”

[Yet I cannot believe that there is anything more or anything different that I could have done and that would have been more successful.]

“Gentlemen,” Susan’s sharp voice cut into the starting argument. “I would like to ask you to take any disagreements you may have outside the store.”

“This doesn’t have to mean anything yet,” Marcus suddenly said. “The fight might be kept on their turf.”

Harry, who knew better than that, couldn’t bring himself to say a word.

yet


“Homework?” Prince suggested.

“Responsibility?” was Mulciber’s guess.

“Any time spent in class?” said Ursula Carrow.

“First of all, I’m already working on my homework, so that accusation doesn’t count. Secondly, I’m plenty responsible, thank you very much,” Avery snapped, before turning to where Carrow was sitting. “And third of all – why are you even here? I thought you hated Tom! And libraries! And yet here you are, at the library with us, elbowing your way into our private study session!”

“I’m not fond of Riddle, but I do not hate him,” Carrow claimed, carefully not looking at where Tom was sitting. “I had an argument with Dorian and—”

“And the best way to piss him off is to trade him for Tom,” Avery realized. “Since it’s for that noble purpose, you can sit with us. For now.”

“Lestrange needs to get over his issues, honestly,” Prince said. “And you. Carrow. If you want to sit here, then be quiet and study. Merlin knows we’ve got enough noise with Avery here.”

“Hey--!”

“Does anyone have a book that actually discusses aconite properly?” Tom cut in. “Every book I have here just says what it does. I need to know more than that about it.”

“Nope,” Prince said after checking the books surrounding her. “And if I don’t have one, you can be pretty sure that neither does anybody else.”

“I’ll go look for some material, then,” Tom sighed, standing up. School had barely started, but everyone was already busy working on numerous assignments and getting back to the routines they had gotten used to before the summer break. Tom was happy to be back at Hogwarts, studying, even if he didn’t enjoy leaving Harry behind. On another positive note for the beginning of the school year: Nott had somehow roped a few older students into helping him practice for the upcoming Quidditch try-outs.
"With any luck he'll get onto the team," Tom thought while walking deeper into the library, looking for the potions books. "The more he focuses on Quidditch, the less time he spends around me."

As he made his way between the towering bookshelves, Tom felt at ease. He knew exactly where he was going and how much time it would take him to get there. The potions section was almost always empty, which gave Tom plenty of time to browse through books at his own pace. Even now when he arrived, he stood still for a moment, taking a look at the amount of books surrounding him.

'I want to take all of these with me,' he thought, before reaching for the first book he could find that discussed ingredients used for healing. He was so focused on what he was doing that it took him a moment to realize that there were people on the other side of the bookshelf - and that one of them was crying.

"It'll be all right," he heard a girl's voice say soothingly. "Honestly, nothing has happened yet, right? Your parents will be all right."

"But for how long?" another girl replied, her words whispered between heavy sobs. "I can’t focus on anything, I can’t sleep, I can’t study—"

Peeking through the books, Tom could see a hand holding what looked like a copy of the Daily Telegraph - was that a muggle newspaper? Was the girl a muggle-born? Well, for her to be that worried about her family, she had to be. Tom would’ve been worried, too, had it not been for the fact that if push came to shove, Harry could weasel his way out of a tough situation.

This wasn’t something he could use for blackmail in the future, but it wasn’t something he didn’t know how to use to his advantage either. Making sure that his expression was both wary and serious, Tom made his way to the other side of the bookshelf where the two girls – older Ravenclaw students, it turned out – were huddled together. He looked at them for a moment, and coughed to get their attention.

"Can we help you?" one of the girls – not the one who was crying - said, her voice sharp. Her dark brown hair was piled on top of her head in an updo that seemed far too fancy for a simple school day.

"It’s a Slytherin," the other one murmured.

"A half-blood Slytherin," Tom told her. "Whose only family lives in London. East Dulwich, to be specific. I heard you crying and I was simply wondering if you’re all right. Since it seems that you will be, I’ll just—"

"No, we’re sorry," the girl with the elaborate hairdo said. "We don’t mean that Slytherins aren’t—that you would—It’s just a bit of a tough time, you know. I’m Julia Landry. Her name is Eliza Dewitt. We’re seventh year Ravenclaws."

"Tom Riddle," Tom said. "Second year Slytherin. Listen, no matter how bad the situation will get in the Muggle world, you being unable to focus on your studies isn’t what your family needs right now. You’re a seventh year student - all you need to do is survive this year, and then you can start working at any of the wizarding villages that are protected, then bring your family to live with you there. You’ll be a full-fledged witch capable to putting up wards on your own, if you can’t move them anywhere and just have to stay in London."

The two girls looked at him for a moment, before Dewitt sniffled and wiped her eyes once more. "I guess."
“Those are great options, aren’t they?” Landy said, patting her friend on the shoulder. “And if things become worse before we graduate, you know your parents can stay at my parents’ house! We’re Purebloods, but not those kinds of Purebloods, you know.”

“I guess,” Dewitt said again, and glanced at Tom with an embarrassed expression. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Tom replied with a shrug, before he left the two girls and made his way back to where his friends were. He had found only one potential book, but didn’t wish to stick around for any longer. Both girls had looked like they were about to become emotional in ways that would drag Tom into the equation, and that was unacceptable. He didn’t want hugs and tearful thank-yous. He wanted to capitalize on his actions in the future and see how to benefit from what he had done today.

“ Took your time, huh,” Avery said as soon as Tom sat down again. “I was about to go and look for you. Did you get lost or something?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Tom pointed out calmly, and continued in order to evade any other questions Avery could ask: “You never did say what is it that you hate, did you? Homework?”

“No. I mean, yes I didn’t say it, and no it’s not homework. Not exactly,” Avery said with a nod. “I hate how early the teachers give us homework, you know? It’s still the first week! Why are they in such a hurry?”

Barely a few weeks had passed since Chamberlain’s declaration of war. A few weeks spent in a disbelieving daze among increasing amounts of panic from the people around him. Harry didn’t know what to do, wasn’t sure how to react. He felt out of place with his knowledge, yet perhaps even more fearful of what was to come because of it.

“Today you can start by mopping the floors and wiping surfaces,” Susan told Harry the moment he stepped in. “Janet will be assisting Marcus with baking.”

“Janet’s the other baker we have,” Amanda clarified later quietly when Harry was running a damp rag over the display counters. “She’s really nice, but really really old. Doesn’t have much energy to work so she comes whenever she’s able. Susan pays her by the hour. I can introduce you later.”

“That would be nice,” Harry replied, and quietly moved aside when the first customer of that morning entered the store. A woman with a tired smile and a handful of coins, dragging behind her a boy with a sullen expression on his face. It reminded Harry of Tom somehow, and he couldn’t help but think of the boy – what was he doing now? Harry had received a couple of letters from Tom so far, and he seemed to enjoy learning at Hogwarts, and yet... Harry couldn’t help but worry a little bit. Students were perfectly capable of being cruel to one another, and it wasn’t as if Draco Malfoy had been unique in his ways of treating muggleborns. Tom did have a handful of friends, but what if there were others, older students, who tried to hurt him? What if there were students who shared the same beliefs as Black?

‘Speaking of which, his children haven’t reached out to me yet,’ Harry thought. ‘I wonder if I should make the first move, or just let them be?’ Harry was startled out of his thoughts when the door of the bakery was pushed open almost violently. A man with a red face and a scowl on his face stepped in and headed straight to the counter, where Amanda was looking increasingly alarmed.

“A fruit cake, please,” the man grunted. “Or any cake, really. The cheapest one.”

“Well, sir, how big would you like for the cake to—”
“Big enough to feed at least six people,” the man interrupted. “God knows this isn’t the time for it, but my wife really wants to celebrate her birthday. Says it might be her last after all. God, I said to her: now is not the time to celebrate anything, but did she listen? Does she ever? No!”

“Well, sir, tough times are ahead of us,” Amanda said with a polite smile. “Why not celebrate when we can?”

“Because, let me tell you,” the man snapped, leaning forward. “Haven’t you lot heard the update from last week’s submarine disaster? I know not much has been said, but bloody hell – you must’ve heard something!”

“Um...”

“The bloody submarine that was sunk off some coast near the Continent,” the man said, his voice becoming louder. “Called it Oxley, or something. The broadcast did.”


“Well, it wasn’t the bloody Germans this time! It was another one of ours!”

“I have not heard such a thing,” another customer said, joining the conversation. The tone of her voice was dark with disapproval. “Where on earth did you hear that from?”

“The morning broadcast,” the man said. “Rescuers fished three survivors off the shore and tried to keep them quiet. Didn’t work well, now did it? One of them walked right away to BBC for a chat the moment his feet hit the homeland soil. Bloody idiots! The people that did it should be held accountable!”

“I’m sure they will be,” Amanda said politely. “Would this cake here be all right?”

“Yes, fine,” the man said, digging out his wallet and slamming some bills on the counter. “I can’t bloody believe that I’m buying a cake for a birthday celebration! This is ridiculous!”

“Methinks your wife has the right idea,” the other customer said. “Nobody knows how long the war is going to be. Who’s to say that we’ll even have cakes a year from now?”

“The war is not going to last a year,” the man sneered, rolling his eyes. “It’s going to be short and brutal. You think Hitler can afford a long war with us? This is Great Britain, not some continental country with no power!”

“Your cake, sir,” Amanda said, and Harry could see that her polite smile was a little bit tense. “Thank you. Good day.”

“Yes, yes,” the man huffed, and when the door swung shut behind him, it seemed as if everyone in the store took a breath and relaxed a bit. Harry sincerely hoped that the man wouldn’t complain that much to his wife.

“You know, I came here for some bread,” the other customer said, “but I think I’ll have some cake as well. Unlike him, I doubt these upcoming times will be easy on any of us.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So many children have already been moved up north. Plenty of other people have moved, too. My husband says that if the Germans attack, they’ll be starting with London.”
“Too bad for people like me then,” Amanda said lightly. “I’ve got nowhere else to go, you see.”

‘Thank Merlin Tom is at Hogwarts,’ Harry thought yet again. Would East Dulwich get hit? Harry couldn’t, for the life of him, remember any specifics. Perhaps that was for the best. ’I wonder how he managed the first time around, if he had to return back to the orphanage every summer despite the war.’

“I have only my mother-in-law in Manchester,” the woman replied dryly. “A last option, to be quite honest. Say, I’ll take the chocolate along with two loaves of bread.”

“Yes ma’am,” Amanda said. Harry by then was long done with mopping the floor and wiping the counters, and after a quick look around to make sure nothing was out of order, he walked to the backroom to offer his help there. Marcus introduced him to Janet, who then asked if Harry could help her by washing some dishes. Harry did as told, and wondered if the woman worried about the upcoming war with Germany the same way people younger than she did - did age have an impact on that? Perhaps her concerns were less personal and more about the country itself?

‘I’m overthinking this,’ Harry decided. He had opted to work at the bakery for a lousy salary to keep himself occupied during the day and hopefully focus on positive things. And that’s what he was going to do.

*

The dark grey sky was full of planes. The sound of their engines was loud, and Tom could hear it despite how far above him they were. Even louder than their engines, was the sound of the alarm, warning of a coming attack. The streets were suddenly full of people running to safety, but somehow Tom was stuck standing where he was: in the middle of the road, looking up at the sky.

Harry had told him about the sirens in one of his letters. Had described their loud wailing sound that kept going on and on. Now their sound drowned beneath all other noise, up until the first bomb hit a building down the street. Dust and chaos surrounded Tom, and for some reason - as unreasonable and ridiculous as it was – when the dust settled, he was somewhere else. In what looked like a backyard, with a bleeding body not two feet away from him.

A heavily wounded, bleeding body of a man with a familiar face and dark messy hair and glassy green eyes and oh Merlin, that was Harry, and there was something stuck in his stomach, and what was Tom supposed to do? What was Harry even doing there? Why wasn’t he healing himself? Why wasn’t he—

Tom woke up with a start, and it took him a moment to recognize the ceiling above his bed. He felt sweaty, his heart was beating fast in his chest, and his breathing was heavy. The feeling of tears falling from the corners of his eyes onto his pillow was disgusting, and the boy was quick to sit up and wipe his face dry. It took him a longer time to stop shaking, and then a few minutes on top of that to think clearly again.

Everyone else was asleep. The room was dark and quiet, and though Tom could have stayed there and tried to get some more hours of sleep, he decided not to. Instead he slipped out of bed and made his way to the common room, where the fireplace lit the moment he sat in front of it. The more time passed, the more worried about Harry he became. Not much had happened according to the man’s letters, but Tom knew that it would be only a matter of time before Germany made its move. Where would Harry be then?

It felt strange how so many witches and wizards weren’t even aware of the potential danger looming ahead. What if Hitler won? What if he succeeded in taking over Britain? Didn’t these people know
that German witches and wizards were likely to follow his example?

“You ignore the problem because you think it doesn’t concern you,” Tom thought bitterly, staring into the flames. ‘That’ll hit you where it hurts eventually.’

London would definitely become a target, but was it only parts of it or the entire city? Was Wool’s Orphanage still up and running? Were the same old people still there? Was Buck? The thought of the other boy dying without ever finding out how good Tom’s life was nowadays didn’t sound pleasing. But it wasn’t as if Tom knew how to let those people know. Or even if he should, what with Harry having pretty much kidnapped him from the orphanage.

Really. That man.

“Tom?” a faint voice said, and Tom turned to see Prince standing at the entrance to the girls’ dormitory. She was wearing her nightgown with a blanket thrown over it. Her hair was tied into a thin braid that looked more like a lizard’s tail than anything else. “Why are you here?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Tom replied, turning back to the fire. He could hear Prince’s light footsteps as she made her way closer, and sat next to him.

“Me neither, I guess,” she whispered. “There’s so much on my mind. You’re worried about your Harry, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Tom admitted. “And you?”

Prince hunched her shoulders and she stared at the fire with a sullen expression for a while, before she said: “I’m not like... Opaline or Ursula, you know.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s just... something someone told me during the summer.”

“That you’re not like Pucey or Carrow?”

“Not those words exactly,” Prince said, sighing. “But you see, I’m not a pretty girl, Tom. And for some of us pureblood girls, if we’re not pretty, then we’re not anything, you know?”

“How so?” Tom asked, genuinely curious. “Why is being pretty so important?”

“It’s not really being pretty, but rather what being pretty can get you,” Prince explained. “A good husband, that is.”

“You’re twelve,” Tom said, rolling his eyes.

“Aurora Poole from Hufflepuff got engaged last year,” Prince said. “She was fifteen. You have no idea how early some Pureblood mothers start trying to... match their daughters. Being pretty makes that matching process easier. And honestly, Tom, girls don’t really get good jobs out there. Becoming somebody’s wife is just... what every mum wants for her daughter. And I don’t think that’ll be an option for me.”

“Is this something you need to worry about now?” Tom asked, not really understanding a thing from what the girl was telling him. “Our second year has only just started. I don’t know how hard it is for women to find jobs, and I don’t know what you’re really afraid of. But if there’s something you want to become, then just go for it. Do what you want to do, and do it really well.”
“I wish I was pretty,” Prince said quietly. “But you’re right, too. I mean, it’s not as if I have any other choice but to try.”

“Either way, you shouldn’t worry about that now even if someone at home – or wherever else – tells you to,” Tom said. “You said even that... I forgot her name already, but the girl who got engaged. She was fifteen, and that was considered early. You’ve got at least three years before anyone bothers you about this issue with any serious intent. Merlin knows what will happen before then, anyway. Focus on something else instead. Something useful.”

“Like what?” Prince asked.

“I don’t know,” Tom replied dismissively. “Invent a potion or something, and enjoy the royalties. Merlin knows you’re good enough at potions to do that.”

“Such confidence in me,” Prince said with a rare smile. “And what about you? Won’t you become a Potions Master?”

“No,” Tom told her. “I’ve got something else planned. Something great.”

Something no one, not even Harry, could predict.
Marchosias Malfoy knew, better than anyone, his own shortcomings.

He knew that he wasn’t half as ruthless and cunning as his father had been. He wasn’t a pioneer in anything, didn’t dive into exciting adventures seeking wealth beyond what he already had. He enjoyed the position and money he had inherited, and was very wary of going against the law in any shape or form. In fact, he had been on active jury duty for years, before becoming a member of the Wizengamot.

Law, and upholding it, were of great importance to Marchosias. That was, perhaps, the reason to why he couldn’t quite shrug off the things Arcturus had told him about some Dark wizard in Germany. Sure, the thought of maintaining the rightful order in society was also important, but he wouldn’t go to war for it. And unlike Arcturus and quite a few others, Marchosias couldn’t even joke about killing people for the sake of it.

He didn’t think that mudbloods deserved to rise above certain positions, and they ought to be more restricted in their access to anything that could change the wizarding traditions – but killing them? Wasn’t that a bit… too much?

These thoughts were heavy on his mind as he attended the opening gala of a newly built wing of St. Mungo’s, and he saw Arcturus heading towards him with a smarmy smirk on his face. What on earth was he even doing here? As far as Marchosias knew, Arcturus didn’t even donate to the hospital!

"Just the man I’ve been looking for," Arcturus said as soon as he was close enough to be heard without shouting. "Marchosias! Alone, on this fine evening?"

"Yes," Marchosias replied. "I didn’t expect to see you here. From what I’ve heard, you’ve taken to travelling."

"For business, unfortunately, not for leisure," Arcturus said dismissively. Despite his light tone, there was a clear tension in the way he held himself. In fact, he looked almost agitated. "The upcoming few months will be quite busy for me, you see."

"Well, I’m sure you’ll be doing just fine. The children are at Hogwarts, aren’t they? Time passes fast, but they’ve still got some time before they come for the break."

"Hmm. Yes. Abraxas has yet to start, has he?"

"He’s ten," Marchosias said, and then warily continued: "How have Orion and Lucretia been holding up? Melania’s passing was rather… fast and unexpected."

"Some illnesses are like that," Arcturus told him. "The Healers couldn’t do anything. It’s sad and unfortunate. We’re all still learning how to cope."

"Oh, my friend, you seem to be doing quite all right," Marchosias replied with a chuckle, shaking his head. "A bit too well. Are you sure you had no hand in her passing?"
"What." The tone of Arcturus’s voice made Marchosias suddenly feel very, very cold. He swallowed nervously, and offered what he hoped to be a friendly smile. His left hand, hidden within the ruffles of his robes, inched towards his wand - there was no telling what Arcturus would do, if his temper got the best of him.


"Melania’s death was a surprise to all of us," Arcturus continued, his voice cold and sharp. He sounded convincing, but there was something about the look in his eyes that just... wasn’t. Marchosias couldn’t help but remember what Riddle had told him about there being things that nobody knew about Arcturus. Well, nobody but the late Melania Black, who had died just prior to Arcturus’s increased trips to the continent.

That was not, however, any sort of proof to support accusations of being involved in domestic terrorism. Or that he... really had something to do with his wife’s death.

"I, for one, am glad that your... project seems to be keeping you occupied," Marchosias continued. "In times of grievance it is best to be kept busy."

"Truly," the other man agreed, though the earlier pretense of joviality was gone. "There are things in this world that you do not understand very well, my friend. A whole world that is taking shape to usher a new dawn. And you choose to remain where you are - accepting silently the waves of mudbloods flooding into our society, without a single thought to clearing it up."

"You’ve been spending so much time with the Germans, you’ve begun speaking like one of them," Marchosias said lightly. "Clearing it - them - up? We should regulate their access to our world and limit their rights. Make them second class citizens, if you will. But clearing them up implies actions that no law could support outside of defense in wartime."

"This is a defense in wartime," Arcturus insisted. "A war on our values and traditions!"

"Our—? That is hardly a war that demands the kind of response you’re encouraging here!"

"This is why I said that there are things you do not understand very well, Marchosias."

"It is you who doesn’t understand," Marchosias hissed quietly, taking care to not catch anyone’s attention or cause a scene. This was, after all, a celebratory event. "There is no need for grand schemes or acts of violence to maintain the rightful order in our society. All that we need is to pass a few laws, and let time take care of the rest! Weed them out in ways they don’t know how to fight against."

"Weak," Arcturus said, shaking his head. "I can only hope that you’ll come to your senses soon."

'Circe, that is something I should be telling you,' Marchosias thought, but chose to stay silent this time. He knew a lost case when he saw one, and he had already pushed the unpredictable man enough for one evening.

'Does this mean that Riddle’s words have merit,' he thought. 'What of his wife, then? It can’t be true, can it?'

"I'll let you think about this for some time, still," Arcturus suddenly said. "However we ought to discuss things openly, in more detail, at a safer location. Not quite yet, however."

"If you insist," Marchosias replied, though he wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about the idea of such a meeting. He had no interest in taking any possible arguments with Arcturus elsewhere private, unless
the man’s wand had been confiscated first.

"A final piece of advice from a friend, before I move on to greet the minister," Arcturus said then. "If you’re to ever meet a man known as Gellert Grindelwald, be very... careful... with him. He’s an ally, but not a particularly trustworthy one.”

"I’ll keep your words in mind,” Marchosias said, undeniably relieved when the other man finally left. He had plenty to think about, and only one person he could truly confide in. Not yet, though. Not yet. First, he needed to investigate.

Harry wasn’t sure what he was supposed to Witness at Hoy in the Orkney Islands, but was very worried regardless. Times like these, there weren’t many happy events that he was sent out to write down in history.

The weather was nice and the streets were much cleaner than those in London. As Harry wandered aimlessly in Lyness, he enjoyed the peaceful atmosphere of the area. People were working or spending time with their friends, cars drove slowly past him, and there had even been a few kids fishing by a bridge Harry had crossed earlier. It was so... nice. Harry loved it. Tom would likely hate it.

‘That brat,’ Harry thought fondly, and didn’t stop until nearly an hour later, when he reached the top of a hill from where he could see the mouth of Ore Bay. A large battleship was moored there, surrounded by smaller ships. At the shore there were countless cars parked every which way, somewhere among the tents that were pitched in neat rows. His mission description hadn’t stated where in Hoy he should be, implying that no matter where in town he ended up, he’d be able to record what happened.

He didn’t have to wait for long.

At the sight of the first plane in the distance, Harry knew what would happen. The siren that rung out right then was only a confirmation: the Germans were here.

He stood still on the hill, protected by magical shields and his robes, watching the planes fly closer and closer. The fast German bombers were clearly aiming at the battleship, and the sight of soldiers running to their positions made Harry’s heart ache. How many of them would survive the next few hours? How many of them would live through the war? Harry wanted nothing more than to close his eyes when the first bomb hit the ground, but he couldn’t. He had learned from Coventry: if there was nothing else he could do - if he couldn’t fight - then at least he would keep his eyes open and make sure that everything would be written down.

He owed them that.

The ferry between the ship and the harbour was among the first targets to be hit. It sunk with every man on board of it disappearing violently under the waves. Another ship - a much smaller one than the main target - was also hit, and sunk in minutes.

Harry felt sick as he wrapped his arms around himself and watched the terrible disaster in front of him unfold. The huge battleship was hit time and time again, and the water surrounding it rose in aggressive waves as countless bombs missed their target. There was fire, and the screams that followed the explosion of a car were horrific. The fire spread to the tents, and soon an entire row of them was in flames.
The anti-aircraft tanks were quick to react, but not accurate enough to hit the fast German planes. The attack had clearly caught the soldiers off-guard, and they were scrambling to figure out how to fight back. Before a proper counter-attack could be launched, however, the Germans retreated.

Somehow Harry expected some sort of a silence. A moment of hollow quietness after a tragedy, but that didn’t happen - the loud wail of the siren continued, the crackle of the fire was loud, and pillars of thick black smoke rose high into the sky. There were soldiers running in the camp, rushing to salvage whatever they could, putting out the fires and fishing their comrades out of the water. The few who were left alive onboard the big ship were trying to communicate something to the others near the shore.

‘The ship hasn’t sunk yet,’ Harry thought, too afraid and shocked to feel truly happy about that. Somehow, despite all the bombing that had just occurred, the ship was still afloat. Harry thought of the people in town, wondered if they had been hit by any bombs, too, or if the German attack had been only aimed at Ore Bay. How long would it take before something like this would happen in London as well? Would the Germans attack during Christmas? Should Harry tell Tom to stay at Hogwarts?

‘He might find it upsetting,’ Harry thought, ‘but at least he’ll be safe.’ Then again... he really did not want to make Tom spend his birthday all alone. Harry could only imagine what kind of trouble Tom could get into, if he felt the need to distract himself from feeling lonely. No, he would bring Tom back to East Dulwich, but at the first sign of an attack, Harry would apparate them both somewhere else. To Diagon Alley, if nowhere else.

The first thing he’d do when he got back home, was reach out to a ministry officer and arrange for his home to be warded up. There was no time to waste anymore-

‘What I really should do,’ the man realized, ‘is connect the fireplace to the Floo system. That way Tom can get to safety even if I’m not there to apparate us both away.’

Harry sighed, thinking of the practicalities of making that happen, and held the portkey tightly in his hand. Strangely enough, he wasn’t yet being whisked back home by the thing, the way he usually was. Then the reason for the delay became glaringly clear: the air raid alarm rang again, and the sound of planes filled the air once more. This time, the Germans flew from a different direction, and dropped more bombs than they had earlier.

It was a sight that Harry never wanted to see again in his life - everything in him wanted nothing more than to somehow intervene, save a life or two... but he knew that he couldn’t. Not with the vows he had taken, and not when the outcome of the entire war could depend on the life of a single soldier, coincidentally saved or killed by an outsider like Harry. No, everything was better left to unfold on its own, no matter how devastating that was.

The battle was short, and brutal. The British troops succeeded in shooting one plane down, but one wasn’t enough.

By the time the Germans left for good, Ore Bay was a different sight from what it had been that morning.

What happened in Ore Bay became common knowledge in the entirety of Britain in less than a day, and was referred to as the Air Assault of Scapa Flow in the papers. The reactions of fear, dread, and panic the attack caused were widespread, as the people knew now that yes, Germany had and would attack on British soil.
In the weeks following Harry’s mission to Ore Bay, he was sent out to Witness a few other incidents like it in different parts of the world. The days he wasn’t out on missions, he was at the bakery, helping out more and more, never feeling the need to ask for a raise. Susan would, at times, give him a few suspicious looks for no apparent reason, and Amanda had found some semblance of comfort in creating fictitious scenarios to explain Susan’s increasingly hostile behaviour.

"She thinks you’re a German spy,” she had once said with a wicked grin on her face. "That’s why you’re so well dressed despite the salary you’re getting here. And how you sometimes take whole days off.”

"That makes my life sound far more interesting than it actually is,” Harry had replied dryly. "I’m sure the Germans know how to wash dishes and knead bread without my input.”

Overall, work at the bakery wasn’t exactly fun but it kept Harry busy. By late November he had gathered enough courage to approach Susan and ask for time off around Christmas, in order to spend time with his charge. The woman gave him another one of her suspicious looks and said, "That’s the busiest time of the year! We’re already struggling to match the demand on Sundays! December as a whole is nothing but Sundays for us!”

'Figures,' Harry thought, and was glad that he wasn’t as dependent on this job as the others were. He could always, after Tom’s break, look for something else. "In that case—"

"Your boy will survive this one break without you,” Susan continued, rolling her eyes. "Lord knows boys that age prefer to be away from their parents anyway!”

"I’m afraid that’s not an option,” Harry said firmly.

"If you leave, Mr. Riddle, then there’s no need to come back,” Susan told him. "And how will you live then? Or are you, perhaps, sitting on an inheritance of some kind? Working for your own amusement unlike the rest of the honest, hard-working people here?”

"Excuse me,” Harry said, baffled. "I’m not... sure what you...?” Never mind Amanda’s spy-story, did Susan come up with a background for Harry all on her own? Moreover - it was clearly the kind of background that she didn’t approve of. Was that why she didn’t seem to warm up to him, no matter how hard he worked?

"I cannot give you a holiday for the time duration that you’re asking,” Susan told him, and Harry nodded, deciding to not argue with her. He decided not to stay, either.

In the end, quitting was not only a relief to him, but to Susan as well. Marcus and Amanda were both surprised, but seemed to be aware enough of the tension between Susan and Harry that they didn’t ask any questions. Harry left the bakery feeling... somewhat off. He didn’t exactly regret working there, as it had helped keep him occupied during Tom’s absence, but it was a vastly different experience from working at Maggie’s.

Either way, he was done .

The days leading up to Tom’s return from Hogwarts were full of cleaning and organizing the house that had, surprisingly enough, become quite messy. Harry had thought that with the house being so big, there was no way he could mess it up all alone. It turned out, however, that several months of carelessness had left him with a state of disorder that Tom would definitely disapprove of.

The day of Tom’s arrival was dark, the snow that covered the streets was muddy, and the clouds spoke of an upcoming snowstorm. Oh, how much easier it would be to simply Floo to the train
station and then back! He really would have to look into connecting the fireplace as soon as possible - it would make travelling so much easier.

There were fewer people at King’s Cross this time, Harry realized, with little surprise. Even though he had decided to have Tom come back home for Christmas, it was obvious that there weren’t many parents who had decided the same. It was also clear that not a single parent waiting for the Hogwarts Express to arrive was a muggle or muggleborn.

’As bad as it is now, the situation will be worse next year,’ Harry thought grimly, just as the train finally arrived. Many of the waiting parents were quick to call for their children, as soon as the students began exiting the train. Harry remained quiet, knowing that Tom wasn’t the type to rush with the crowd.

It was nearly twenty minutes later when a small group of Slytherins stepped out of the train. Tom had, once again, grown taller. He was certainly taller now than Harry had been at that age. His hair was, as usual, neatly combed to the side, and the look on his face was that of disdain as he took in the sight of the crowded platform. His expression cleared up into something akin to satisfaction when he saw Harry, and began walking towards him.

"Hey,” Harry said, smiling, as soon as Tom had reached him. ”Good to see you.”

"I was worried you’d tell me to stay there for the break,” Tom replied, and levelled Harry with a sharp, knowing look. ”I’m glad you didn’t.”

"I thought about it,” Harry admitted, while leading Tom towards an apparition point. ”But, well, if something unfortunate happens, I can get us both to safety. You don’t need to worry.”

"I’m not worried,” Tom replied, rolling his eyes. ”You’re the one who always worries. Forget about doing that and just take us home. I’m so tired. You won’t believe the amount of stupidity that I’ve had to endure for the past few months.”

Harry smiled as he listened to Tom. And much later, after dinner and a few hours of catching up, he couldn’t help but feel happy that he hadn’t told Tom to stay at Hogwarts. With the boy at home, East Dulwich was a much better place for him.

For now, at least.

* * *

It was a house like any other in its wealthy neighbourhood in Hamburg, Germany. An old maid wrapped in several scarves and a thick coat was doing her best to shovel snow off the driveway. Inside, the lady of the house was enjoying tea with a few of her friends in a light-hearted, pleasant meeting. The children were asleep. All in all, it was an ordinary, pleasant day for everyone.

But below the house, in an unusually well-furnished basement, a meeting of a different kind was taking place.

"There’s no reason for us to wait, my lord,” said a man wearing a muggle military uniform. ”Our men in the German and Austrian Ministries of Magic are ready to do their jobs - all you need to do is say the word.”

"There’s no rush, Klaus,” Gellert said calmly. ”Although when we do begin, we will be starting with the German ministry. If too many people died in several ministries all at once, only to be replaced by people connected to me in any way... I’m sure you understand what kind of trouble that may bring to my doorstep.”
'With all due respect, sir, I do believe that kind of trouble to be very easy to manage. Everything can be chalked up to being a coincidence - if anyone even realizes the connection, that is. And by the time anyone has any proof - it’s too late.”

"I’d rather avoid taking unnecessary risks at this point.”

"In that case, we can use a bait. Send the trouble off to someone else,” Klaus insisted. "Where is that insufferable Englishman? He must be useful for something.”

"Don’t be jealous, my friend,” Gellert said, amused. "Black has his uses, although none of what he does is of significance in the big picture. His presence is not required here now and he need not be included.”

"While his absence delights me, sir, I would like to know his current assignment,” Klaus said. "For my own peace of mind, no other reason. I find it hard to imagine a task where someone who hasn’t served a day in any army, or even been in a battle man to man, could be useful.”

"I’ve given him a task to locate and eliminate a certain someone,” Gellert revealed. "Let the man make his bones, Klaus. We can give him more to do once we have him neatly trapped, with no way to back out of this.”

"If it is assassinations that you’re assigning him,” Klaus said, ”then what of the German ambassador in London? What’s his name - Löcke. Hermann Löcke. He’s married to a French woman who - I’ve met her once, an unpleasantly opinionated bint - is sure to have him stand against us, given the chance. If Black succeeds in making it look like an accident, there will be no way to connect it to us.”

"A bold suggestion,” Gellert said, but didn’t reject the idea. "A more effective target in terms of gauging the seriousness of his... commitment.”

"Do you think that he’ll do it, if you tell him to?’

"Men like Black can be convinced to do anything, if you just word it well enough.”

"Perhaps so,” Klaus said. "Has he manage to recruit more people from England? The turnover so far has been rather pathetic.”

"I suspect things might improve if he manages to get Malfoy into the mix, somehow,” Gellert said. "The Malfoy name has quite the weight in Britain. It is unlikely, however, that Black will succeed. While I do not know the head of the family, I’ve heard that he’s a rather... cautious man.”

"Cautious,” Klaus repeated. "Cautious, or a coward?”

"A bit of both, from what I’ve gathered,” Gellert said. "Nothing I couldn’t use to convince Black.” The man was competitive well beyond the point of recklessness. Despite Klaus’s opinions, Gellert knew that Black wasn’t incompetent or without use - if he could be used to get rid of a few unfortunate players on the board, then that was good enough already. It didn’t even matter which one Black would handle first - Riddle or the ambassador.

As long as they both were dead in a matter of months, he would be satisfied.

"You could be doing something exciting with your time,” Tom said. "Instead you insist on wasting your days looking for jobs that you don’t even need. Didn’t that thing at the bakery already show
"I enjoy working.\" Harry said, throwing the newspaper aside and slumping against the armrest of the couch. \"And I like to stay in touch with the muggle world.\"

"Find a hobby instead,\" Tom advised, before turning back to his notes. \"Something more productive than washing dishes.\"

\"Hm, I’ve been wanting to look into connecting our fireplace to the Floo system,\" Harry said. \"It’s a lot more convenient than a portkey or apparating every time we want to go somewhere. Besides it’s something you can use to travel independently, if the need for that ever arose.\"

\"Well, that’s a project I approve of,\" Tom said with a nod. \"Please get it done faster than you did the wards. Merlin knows it took you an eternity to get those done. It was a pleasant surprise to arrive to.\"

\"To be fair, wards are quite a bit harder to set up than connecting a fireplace to the Floo system,\" Harry defended himself. \"Besides, do you know how many ward-makers I had to deal with before I found someone who knows how to work in a muggle neighbourhood without making a huge spectacle out of it?\"

\"All I’m saying is,\" Tom replied with a smug smirk, \"that I’d like to see the Floo connection happening during my lifetime.\"

\"What’s this attitude, young man?\" Harry shot back. \"Where’s the respect for elders that I should be reaping the benefits of right about now? Is this the youth of today? I’m horrified. Shocked. Stunned.\"

\"You’re not that old,\" Tom said, giving Harry an assessing look. \"You look like the older students at Hogwarts. You’re really young.\"

\"Thank you, I’ll consider that a compliment,\" Harry told him. \"Still a whole decade older than you, though.\"

\"What if you actually acted your age then,\" Tom said. \"Instead of making me worry about whatever trouble you’ve gotten yourself into at any given time. That bakery thing was absolutely unnecessary. Can’t you just read a book or something?\"

There was something about those words that suddenly made Harry think of Ron and Hermione. But unlike so many times before, now the memory wasn’t painful, as much as simply something that brought a fond smile to Harry’s face.

\"Oh, I don’t know,\" Harry said, gleefully gearing up to say what had always annoyed Hermione to no end: \"There’s too much text in those. I’d like a picture or two. Or better yet, someone reading the summary of it aloud.\"

\"What?\" Tom snapped, narrowing his eyes at Harry with a disgusted expression. \"Of course there’s a lot of text, it’s a book! You— oh, I see what you’re doing. You think you’re being funny.\"

\"No,\" Harry said, keeping a straight face. \"Being funny wouldn’t even cross my mind.\"

Tom gave him a look, the expression on his face caught somewhere between frustrated anger and reluctant amusement. He then shook his head and went back to reading, clearly deciding that ignoring Harry was the best course of action to take.

\'He’s so small and angry,’ Harry thought, a warm feeling blooming in his heart. \'And his birthday is soon. I could take him to Diagon Alley again, or even Hogsmeade.’ Taking Tom to London would
have been a fun experience, but Harry didn’t want to risk anything - he didn’t know when the Germans would attack the city, and no matter how fast he could apparate them both to safety, there was no guessing what would happen.

"If we go to Diagon Alley, we might as well drop by the ministry to fill in the paperwork for the Floo Network application," Harry thought, settling deeper into the comfortable couch he was lying on. At peaceful moments like these, it was easier to treat the events of Coventry and Ore Bay like a distant nightmare that had no place in reality.

If only that were true.

"You’re sulking again," Tom said, not looking up from his book.

"Not exactly sulking," Harry told him. "Just... thinking. Hogwarts is such a beautiful place in winter, isn’t it?"

"Did you ever spend the Christmas break at Hogwarts?" Tom suddenly asked.

"Most of my Christmas breaks, yes," Harry replied, and tried to remember if he had spoken about the Dursleys to Tom before. "My, uh, relatives weren’t… We struggled with communication sometimes. They, uh, had their reservations about magic and... well, the less time I spent with them, the better it was for me. For all of us, really, but mostly me."

"Oh."

"But it wasn’t bad! Hogwarts during the break is great! You get fed well every day, it’s warm, it’s beautiful, you’re at peace there. And we’d sneak down to the kitchens for some extra snacks whenever we wanted."

"They didn’t feed you much, did they," Tom realized. "Those relatives of yours."

"That was then," Harry said with a shrug. "My life has changed a lot since."

"It’s all right," Tom agreed. "I wasn’t fed much either. They didn’t like me at the orphanage, even though they didn’t know about magic. They just didn’t like me." Granted, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t fueled those flames for his own amusement at times, but sometimes it had been... adults who didn’t like him, and children starving for attention who thought that the fastest way to gain approval of caretakers was to try and hurt him.

"Come here," Harry said, and sat up properly on the couch. Tom put his book down without argument, moving then to sit by Harry. Together they watched the flames crackle quietly in the fireplace, in a vast contrast to the snowstorm raging outside. There was a strange kind of comfort in being close to someone you cared about, Tom found out. As long as that someone was Harry, he didn’t mind.

"Life’s better now, isn’t it," Harry said, smiling a little bit. "I mean, despite everything that happened in the past, we’re here now, right?"

"I guess," Tom replied. Because even though he agreed wholeheartedly, he didn’t want to spoil Harry by telling him that outright. "Life’s decent."

Chapter End Notes
I took a lot of liberties when describing the battle of Ore Bay, because JFC there's not much to be found about it y'all. Historically accurate facts are: the attack is real, the time is real, the ship is real, the base is real, the German plane shot down was real (two pilots died, one was captured). Everything else I had to come up with.

Next chapter we'll get back to Arcturus, and we'll start seeing more signs of how WW2 is impacting the wizarding world.

Also don't send me death threats. If you don't like the fic, you can back out and read something else.
Chapter Notes

Seriously, shoutout and a million thanks to my amazing beta, Grace, who not only is super fast with her work, but is also hella patient with me and always supports me in my writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

1939

"Happy birthday!"

Tom had never really liked winter. In fact, for most of his life, he had hated winter and the cold and the snow and everything that had anything to do with the season. Now, however, things were different. He was in a beautiful house, warm, wearing clothes that actually fit him and were new and clean, and he lived with a person who genuinely cared for him. For breakfast that morning he had pancakes and hot chocolate and slices of white bread with cheese, and somehow it all tasted so much better with the snowstorm raging outside.

"Thirteen already," Harry said, cutting his own pancake into small pieces before eating it. "Merlin, time passes by so fast!"

"Not really," Tom muttered, wondering if it was impolite to ask about his present yet. Usually Harry asked him what he’d like to get, but this time around the man hadn’t so much as hinted that there’d even be gifts. It worried Tom a little. He liked receiving gifts. "Do we have anything planned for today? Are we going somewhere?"

"At first I thought we could go downtown, but goodness, it’s quite gloomy there at the moment," Harry replied. "Then I thought about Diagon Alley, but we’ve been there so many times already, it’s hardly special anymore, right? Besides, the weather is absolutely terrible for going outside."

"Yes," Tom agreed. Going to Diagon Alley didn’t feel like a celebratory event anymore. Which - wasn’t that a luxury already? To think that years ago he had thought that he’d never get bored with such a magical place! "So what did you come up with?"

"We’ll be staying home," Harry said. "And I’ll teach you something you’ll benefit from in the future for sure."

'That could mean almost anything,’ Tom thought, increasingly worried. Not that he minded staying at home - in fact, in a home like this, he preferred staying indoors over going elsewhere. "You’re not offering cooking lessons or something like that? I like your food."

"Thank you," Harry snorted. "As much as I think that you ought to learn how to cook for yourself - and eventually I will teach you, you brat - but no. That wouldn’t be the kind of a gift you’d appreciate right now, and I don’t particularly blame you for that. No, I’m thinking of something perhaps a little bit more useful for your time at Hogwarts."

"So it’s magic related,” Tom said, perking up in interest. "What is it? A book? A spell? It’s not a
broom, is it? I don’t actually want a broom.”

“It’s not a broom, I know your opinion on Quidditch, you’ve been very vocal about it. No, instead, I’m going to show you how to create some very basic protection runes,” Harry said, smiling fondly at the boy. “Nothing too serious, and you shouldn’t get too deep into that yet since misuse of runes can be really damaging to your magical core among other things, but there are some that are perfectly safe for you to learn and use independently.”

“What’s so good about runes, though? I can protect myself just fine with charms.”

“Protective runes require only a little magic and are very effective if you wish to, say, make sure that no one can unlock your trunk or open your bag without your permission,” Harry explained. “The only downsides are how time consuming making runes can be, and how immovable they are once drawn.”

“Immovable?”

“You’d have to erase the rune and re-draw it elsewhere, rather than simply relocate it or copy it using magic.”

'It would be beneficial to know how to keep people away from my things,’ Tom thought. Besides, it wouldn’t hurt to get some basic knowledge on runes, now could it? Who knew where that knowledge could lead to later on. "Sounds good. When do we start?"

"After I’m done washing the dishes,” Harry said, standing up. “Want to help out? We’ll be done faster that way.”

"Sure,” Tom agreed. He wasn’t a fan of dishwashing, but if it meant getting things done faster, then he might as well. "Will we be practicing indoors?"

"Yes, of course. Most of the practice will be to make sure that you can draw the runes correctly. Drawing a rune wrong can lead to some unfortunate reactions once you try to activate it.”

"Unfortunate like what?”

"While some runes simply do nothing until fixed, some may cause explosions,” Harry explained. "I’ve also heard of some incorrectly drawn runes emitting poisonous gas or smoke. The problem is that sometimes you don’t know if your incorrectly drawn rune is inactive or if it’s emitting that poisonous, invisible gas until it’s too late. That’s why you have to advance carefully.”

"But these runes you’ll show me are harmless?” Tom asked. Harry nodded.

"Yes, of course. Privacy runes on their own are very non-aggressive and the worst that could happen is that, well, it won’t do a thing.”

"What kind of runes would explode?”

"Well,” Harry started. "I’m not a runes expert, honestly. You’ll have the opportunity to study runes if you want at Hogwarts pretty soon. From what I know, any runes meant for timed attacks are risky. Don’t try them, please. Especially without someone experienced watching over you – it can turn out very badly and very quickly.”

That was an easy promise to make, in Tom’s opinion. While he didn’t mind learning about runes, they didn’t seem interesting enough to bother with, especially when he had so much else he’d rather learn first. For now, however, in the absence of anything else, it would be fun. He’d take his time.
learning, work on getting ahead in his studies, spend time with Harry, and then go back to school.

Simple, easy days were what Tom had expected.

Six days into the new year, things changed.

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1940

Tom was in the living room when an owl knocked its beak against one of the windows. With an annoyed huff, the boy stood up and opened the window to let the bird in. Tom scowled when the thing hooted loudly before dropping a letter, smacking him in the face with its wings, and flying out again.

"If I ever meet the person who owns that owl," Tom thought, reaching for the letter to take a better look at it. "I'll— oh, this is from the ministry." "Harry!"

"Yes?" Harry said from upstairs, his voice slightly muffled by the distance.

"You got a letter," Tom yelled. "From the ministry!"

"Another mission?" Harry asked, appearing at the top of the stairs before sighing tiredly and making his way to where Tom was. "Merlin, there's been more missions during the past few weeks than ever before."

"I don't know," Tom replied, handing him the letter. "It looks a little bit different from the messages you get when there's a mission."

"Let's see," Harry muttered, breaking the Ministry's seal on the envelope and pulling out a folded piece of paper. He stood still and quiet for several moments, and going by his expression, Tom suspected that the news wasn't welcome. By now it was clear that the message was not a mission assignment, which left Tom with the question: then what was it?

"Is everything all right?" Tom asked, and Harry glanced at him quickly before turning his gaze back to the letter. He nodded slowly, almost hesitantly.

"I've been summoned to the Ministry," Harry said after a few moments of silence. "My presence is required most urgently, it seems. Would you like to come with me? You might have to wait outside the meeting room, or at a coffee shop in Diagon Alley, but I'm sure that this won't take too long."

"Sure," Tom agreed. "I'll take a book with me and will wait for you at a coffee shop."

Curiously enough, for Harry, the Ministry's summon hadn't been signed by Trelawney, who was technically speaking his employer. No, it had been signed by the Head of the Department of Divination, the man that Trelawney had referred to as Chief Brown. If this was some sort of a regular, compulsory check-in, then Harry hadn't been informed of it beforehand.

The office of the Department of Divination hadn't changed one bit - not that Harry had expected it to. The thick carpet was as soft as ever, the animated solar system moving beneath his feet as he was led to the Chief's office. There he was met by not only the man himself, but also Trelawney, the lawyer Manal Haddad, and two other men that Harry didn't recognize.

"Please take a seat, Mr. Riddle," Chief Brown said, and Harry complied, wondering if he was in some sort of trouble. He hadn't done anything out of the ordinary, had he? "Allow me to introduce
you to the Minister of Muggle Affairs, Mr. Augustus Pepperidge, and Englantine Duvall, the newly assigned contact person of all Witnesses – in other words, the man you’ll want to get in touch with should you need the Department’s input on anything. You, of course, know Seer Trelawney and Miss Haddad already.”

"Yes, I do,” Harry said.

"Now, it has come to our knowledge that the war in the Muggle world is expanding fast to British soil,” Chief Brown said, his voice steady but clearly unhappy. "Not a week ago, I believe, the British Muggle army has begun calling for men between the ages of nineteen and twenty-seven to join the military service. If I am not entirely wrong, Mr. Riddle, you are twenty-three.”

"Um, yes, sir.”

"You were lucky to narrowly miss the previous draft, but not so lucky this time. Continuing to live in a Muggle neighbourhood will draw unwanted attention from people who might wonder why you haven’t joined your fellow countrymen on the war front. In addition, considering the current risks of living in London, it has become simply too dangerous to allow a Witness to live there for the duration of this war.”

'Please don’t tell me that we’ll have to move,’ Harry thought. 'I have wards up, isn’t that enough?’ Despite his thoughts, Harry knew already that moving would be a better option than staying.

"Mr. Riddle,” Duvall said, joining the conversation. "There are several Ministry-owned houses in the residential area of Vertic Alley. We would like to offer you one of the free apartments, for you and your ward to reside in for the time being. We strongly recommend you accept this offer, as it would make your life easier, and allow us one less issue to worry about.”

"I…” Harry did see the merit in moving to a completely magical area, but what about Tom? The boy was fond of their house and would surely be upset to leave it so soon after moving in! 'But would declining the offer be irresponsible? This would make it easier to keep Tom safe at home during the summer breaks. We’ve lived quite a while among Muggles already, and I don’t think he hates them, really. And… and we could always go back to East Dulwich once the war is over. If the house survives.’

This would definitely make it easier to avoid enlistment and dodge neighbours who’d perhaps start out as harmlessly curious, but would eventually surely view him with contempt for not joining the British troops in battle. It was bad enough that his apparent lack of a job made them slightly suspicious of him.

"We understand your hesitation, Mr. Riddle,” Duvall continued. "But we assure you that the apartment is suitable for a Witness-level employee. And should there be any trouble at all, as the person responsible for assisting Witnesses in any Ministry-related issues, I will do my utmost to help.”

"How soon would we need to move,” Harry asked. What would he and Tom even pack? Was the house furnished? They’d definitely have to bring all of Tom’s books, and readjust the recipient information for all of Tom’s subscriptions.

"As soon as possible, preferably this week,” Duvall said. "I assure you, Mr. Riddle, that I sympathise greatly with your current situation, and I understand the inconvenience brought by such an abrupt move. However, I firmly believe it to be necessary. For your safety, and for your ward’s safety as well.”
"All right," Harry said, thinking of Tom. "I'll... I accept."

A.B.

While the task discussed during our previous meeting is of great importance to me, there is another, perhaps more urgent one. Our friend Hermann Löcke is, in our humble opinion, quite ready to retire to greener pastures. I would like for you to make this early retirement faster and easier. My condolences to his widow and children.

G.G.

Arcturus was not a happy man. Earlier that day he had received a short message from Grindelwald - clearly instructions of a similar nature to what the man wanted to be done to Riddle - and Arcturus wasn’t sure how to treat the issue. He wasn’t a hitman, he wasn’t interested in doing hits for purposes that didn’t directly serve him. Getting rid of Löcke would mean unnecessary risk-taking on his part, while Grindelwald would benefit while staying completely safe and out of the country. None of that sounded fine to Arcturus, but he didn’t want to outright refuse the man’s orders - that would put their entire alliance under scrutiny.

'Löcke is one thing,' Arcturus thought, staring contemplatively at the burning logs in the fireplace of his office. 'But Riddle? I have my own plans for him, and I don’t want to ruin those plans for the sake of a German who doesn’t even know how to show proper respect or gratitude.'

He did firmly believe in Grindelwald’s cause, and had been – still was – ready to do quite a lot for its sake. And it wasn’t that murder was something he was opposed to doing - in fact, the mere thought of strangling the life out of someone was enough to make his cock harden. What he did not like, however, was doing these things for the sake of someone else. Where was the fun in that? To kill Riddle with a spell to the throat and be done with it quickly? What a waste!

'Well, I can do Löcke to keep Grindelwald satisfied,' Arcturus decided. 'But Riddle... I’ll take my time with that one. The Dark Lord will just have to deal with it.' He would, however, need to start actually working on getting his hands on Riddle. With Melania no longer in his way, there was no reason to hold back, was there? Orion and Lucretia had both chosen to stay at Hogwarts that Christmas, which had come as a pleasant surprise to him, as it left no one in the house who could somehow interfere or even have an opinion.

Most irritantly, however, none of those reasons, not Grindelwald’s disrespect and treatment, not all this time wasted without so much as a kiss from Riddle - none of that was what truly bothered Arcturus. The source of his worst headache was none other than Malfoy. Malfoy, who had - in jest, the man had claimed - implied that Arcturus had killed his wife.

'Does he suspect something?' Then again, would it matter even if he did? Marchosias had no proof - there was no proof at all, really. Not even the healers had suspected a thing, and unless Melania herself rose from the grave to testify against him, there was nothing anyone could do.

'He can always talk,' Arcturus thought then. 'And talk can turn into rumours, and rumours can turn into trouble. I have to somehow figure out a way to keep him too busy to think about whatever suspicions he might have had. At least he has no one he could discuss his thoughts with, and in time he’ll forget it all.' And if he didn’t, well... Arcturus could help him with that.

Merlin, there was so much for him to do, so many people he needed to somehow take into account as he moved forward. He ought to start with Grindelwald and the ridiculous Löcke situation. Once that
was out of the way, he could start dealing with Riddle. Approach him in a friendly way, perhaps to ask for some advice in parenting, or something of the sort. Or perhaps...

‘What if I took a bigger risk?’ Arcturus thought. ‘Gamble more, win more. What if I gave Riddle something serious to think about, something that would make him consider us allies in a way?’ He believed in Grindelwald’s cause, but it wasn’t as if he felt loyal to the man himself. Even though Riddle had no interest in politics, surely telling him about a man aiming to cause direct harm to his kind would create some sort of a reaction? If not gratitude, then at least... some form of dehostility.

Hmm. It was a possibility worth considering.

But first, he’d need to arrange a meeting with Grindelwald soon. Not only to discuss Hermann Löcke in more detail, but to talk about a handful of attacks that had happened in multiple locations in the Continent. Attacks that Arcturus knew had nothing to do with the Muggle squabble going on, and were a part of whatever grand scheme Grindelwald had cooked up.

He wanted in on that.

* *

Surprisingly enough, Tom hadn’t been too upset.

"Don’t get me wrong,” the boy had said. "I love this house. It’s my favourite place in the world. But I don’t mind trying to live among our kind, you know? To see magic used freely outside. And I’ve heard of Vertic Alley. A lot of my housemates go there during the breaks to meet up and spend some time together, and they’re the kind of people who’re really picky about where they spend their time at."

Now, a few days after Harry had made the decision to move, the day of the departure had arrived. They had packed everything they needed to take with them, and the Ministry-assigned portkey would be ready to take them to their new home at any minute now. A warding specialist sent by Duvall would arrive later that day to seal the house and reinforce the wards in such a way that wouldn’t require for Harry to return regularly to East Dulwich to maintain them.

"Are you nervous?” Harry asked as they waited. Tom shrugged, not looking particularly nervous or excited.

"Not really,” the boy replied. "I’m not ne—”

He was interrupted by the sudden activation of the portkey, and for the next few - unnecessarily long and nauseating - moments, all Harry could do was clench his eyes shut and hold onto it for dear life. Merlin, how he hated portkeys. How come nobody had bothered to figure out a better way to travel that didn’t involve uncomfortable body sensations or a dependency on fireplaces? What was wrong with just flying everywhere, on a broom? Harry wouldn’t end up clutching his stomach and fighting the urge to throw up after every trip that way!

The moment Harry’s feet hit solid ground, he kept his eyes clenched shut for a moment and tried to regain his balance. That done, he opened his eyes to see where he and Tom had been sent off to.

It was a pleasant area, indeed. The streets were well-lit and clean. To his right, there was a river, across of which Harry could see a church and a row of buildings. To his left there was a low four-story apartment complex with red brick walls, white windows and door frame, and a sturdy door made of dark wood. There were plants of some sort climbing up the front wall, making the entire house look like a cutout from a storybook. It was a look shared by most of the houses on that street.
"It’s pretty," Tom said, eyeing the building. "Do you know which floor we’re going to be living in?"

"Second floor," Harry replied, leading Tom into the apartment complex while digging for the key Duvall had given him. "I was told it’s fully furnished and everything, so if you want, we can settle in and rest a bit before we go out and explore the area. I’ve never been here before."

"All right."

Their new home was quite a bit smaller than their house in East Dulwich. The front door led directly to a spacious living room attached to a large kitchen. To the right there was a bedroom with its own bathroom, and to the left there was not only another bedroom with a bathroom, but also what turned out to be a utility room. To Harry, the size of the house was perfect, and it wasn’t hard to imagine himself living here for the next few years.

"I like it," Tom said. "But why is it black and white?"

"That... I do not know what to tell you," Harry said, wondering if there was a reason for it, or if this was simply a decorative detail. The floors were white, the furniture was almost exclusively either white, black, or striped with both colours, the curtains were either black or white - even the sheets and the cabinet doors and the plates and mugs! The only splash of colour ended up being a set of bright yellow towels in one of the bathrooms.

"I never thought I’d say say this," Tom said, "but we need something green here."

"Or any colour, really," Harry muttered. "It’s nice, though. Let’s unpack first and then see where to go, all right? I don’t think I’m going to cook tonight, so we might as well eat out."

"That’s fine," Tom said, pulling his floating trunk behind him towards the bedroom to the left. "I’m taking this one. It has more bookshelves."

"Sure!"

Despite liking the house, the move had happened so abruptly that Harry struggled with relaxing, even in the privacy of his new bedroom. He appreciated the service the Ministry had done for him, and he did agree with them on the reasons as to why the move was necessary, but it felt like yet another step towards a change that Harry wouldn’t be able to shield Tom from. The war was approaching fast, and anything could happen before it was over.

'It’s not just the Muggle war that I’m worried about,’ Harry thought, remembering Grindelwald, Black, and Black’s two children. 'I wonder what Grindelwald is up to. Well, the issue of the Deathly Hallows aside, at least that’s one problem that I really need not get involved in. Dumbledore will take care of him. What I should try to do something about, however, is Black. His children, are they doing well? I know that Melania had made it clear to Orion and Lucretia that they could reach out to me, but do they even know how? Should I make the first move, just in case?'

Approaching them, however, would involve interaction with Lord Black. And Harry wasn’t sure if he was quite ready for that. He was fairly confident that if it came to an all-out duel, he would come out on top. But the thing about people like Black was that they used... trickery, more so than spells. Harry didn’t have connections that would keep Tom safe if Black did something, and he doubted that being a Witness would help him against a pureblood from one of the most established Pureblood families in the United Kingdom.

He could wait a little bit longer. If an opportunity popped up, then he’d take it, but for now... he’ll wait.
“Madeleine,” Marchosias Malfoy said, stepping into one of the finest rooms of the Malfoy Manor. "How have you been, dearest?"

"Brother," a pale, blonde woman said, smiling faintly. Her bed of gilded frames and deep red sheets was by the window, close enough for her to enjoy the rare rays of sunlight that managed to break through the clouds every now and then. "I am well. Far better than yesterday, at least. The Healers say that if this keeps on, I might be able to leave the house before the summer. Perhaps I could have my appointments at St. Mungo’s instead of here."

"Delightful news," Marchosias said softly, coming to sit by her bedside. Madeleine, his sister who had always been so strong and vibrant growing up, had been sick for years now. Her condition had become steadily worse and worse, and though the Healers had indeed said that soon she could move on her own... a few had told Marchosias that it was likely a case of getting better before getting worse once more. "Is there anything I could do for you? I bought you some chocolate, I know you like it."

"How is Abraxas?" Madeleine wanted to know, tying her thin hair into a loose bun. "His tutors are impressed by him, last I heard?"

"Oh, yes," Marchosias said. "I have no doubt that you’ll miss him once he starts Hogwarts later this year."

"I will," Madeleine agreed. "Why on earth did you settle with having just one child, brother? This house is much too big for a small family. It takes you a while to get anywhere in here."

"Well..."

"I jest, darling."

"Speaking of jesting," Marchosias started, remembering an issue that he has been wanting to discuss with his sister for a while now. "Do you remember Lord Black?"

"That pretentious twat," Madeleine said, her chapped lips curling up in a smile at the scandalized sound her brother made. "Unfortunately yes. He’s a widower, if I remember correctly. Two children."

"Yes," Marchosias said, nodding slowly. "Now... objectively speaking, do you... think... I mean, does Arcturus strike you as the kind of person who would, hypothetically, murder his wife?"

Madeleine stared at her brother for a few long moments, before her smile widened. "What on earth have you gotten yourself into?"

"I haven’t gotten myself into anything," Marchosias protested. "But, listen to me. Recently I’ve met this person and— he’s a Witness, you see. And a Mudblood, but I suppose a decent one. Tolerable. Not entirely unpleasant. You would probably enjoy his company far too much considering he shares your lack of interest in politics. His name is Riddle. Harry Riddle."

"And this... Harry Riddle has convinced you of Black being some sort of a wife-murdering maniac?"

Madeleine asked. "You know what? I do like him already."

"It’s not— that’s. I know it sounds insane, but something is going on with Arcturus. Something serious."
"Such as?"

"Let’s start with, what was his name, Grindelwald. He’s a Dark wizard from the Continent,” Marchosias started. "He considers himself a Dark Lord, and from what I understood, he’s attempting to create some sort of a... an army that will rid the wizarding world of mudbloods. And while I don’t entirely disagree with that end goal, a systematic mass murder isn’t exactly the way I’d go about it."

"A mass mu— Merlin," Madeleine hissed. "So, what’s Black’s involvement in this?"

"From what I’ve gathered,” Marchosias said. ”Arcturus does the recruiting for him. I don’t know who he has convinced already, if anyone, but he tried to talk to me about it. I refused, because, well. We’re not that sort of people.”

"All right,” Madeleine muttered, a small frown on her face. "What about his wife? Is her death somehow part of this whole scheme?"

"I didn’t think so at first,” Marchosias said. "And even now I don’t know. But Riddle said that he spoke with the late Lady Black, and she had told him that domestic terrorism is definitely something Arcturus is capable of involving himself in. What if he found out that she suspected him and killed her for it?"

"The first part is horrifying,” Madeleine admitted. "But it’s still... I mean, it’s quite a jump from alleged domestic terrorism that he hasn’t even done yet to murdering his wife?"

"I thought so too, I did,” Marchosias said. "But when I last met him at a ministry function, we talked for a little bit. He tried to recruit me again and implied that we ought to discuss that further in private. But he also said that there are things I don’t understand and something about ushering a new dawn.”

"Merlin, that’s the Black madness settling in," Madeleine snorted. "I feel sorry for his children."

"So do I, but that’s not all. I said, it was a tasteless joke, I know, but I said something along the lines of him having a hand in her passing—"

"Marchosias!"

"I know! But it was just part of the conversation! It is suspicious how well he seems to be faring in the wake of her passing!"

"You don’t just say things like that,” Madeleine groaned. "So, what did he do?"

"He got this... strange look," Marchosias continued. "He looked like he would hex me, and he then insisted that her death was something nobody even expected. And I know his reaction makes sense when I explain it now, but the way it actually happened... I think Riddle is right. I think that if Arcturus didn’t outright kill his wife, he still must have done something."

"Well, in that case it might be better to keep some distance between you and Black,” Madeleine said. "We might be Malfoys, but we’re not invincible. Don’t get involved."

"I know, and I won’t,” Marchosias said. "I am however curious to know if Riddle knows something else about Arcturus. And how on earth did Riddle ever come to associate with Lady Black? I met that woman when she was still alive, she hates mudbloods. Even being a Witness wouldn’t change that."

"And you’re sure Riddle is a mudblood?"
"Yes, absolutely."

"The way I see this, Marchosias," Madeleine started. "You’re becoming too... interested and involved in matters that are nothing but unnecessary trouble, really. If you just let everything be, forget Riddle, avoid Black, and just carry on with your life, there’ll be nothing bad happening to any of us."

"You’re right," Marchosias said, sighing heavily. She was right, but... he couldn’t help but feel that something bad was about to happen, whether he wanted it or not.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: At first the chapter title was So Long, East Dulwich, but then I actually checked the phrase So Long, and its origins don't fit the ITTR setting:

So the internet says: So Long comes from the ghettoes of New York where irish, italian Jewish and Arab immigrants mixed together. Jews and Arabs always greet and say goodbye to each other by saying Shalom, Shalom, or Salaam, Salaam. These words were corrupted into solong, solong. Ultimately folks believed that it meant that it had been so long since you had seen someone. Not so.

TBH I don't know much about how fast slang can travel from US to UK in the 40s, but I'm going with the assumption that not very fast.
In Matters of Murder

Chapter Notes

Happy birthday, June!

1940

Arcturus had slowly but surely grown to *despise* travelling to Germany.

He had nothing against the country itself, really, but rather the purpose that always brought him there: a call from Grindelwald. What had in the beginning seemed like an alliance between two equals resembled now more a relationship between a Dark Lord and a servant. And Arcturus was no servant. The way the German wizard kept ordering him to come to Germany, yet never stepping a foot on English soil was inconvenient and irritating – who was *he* to command Arcturus anyway?

*I’ll change this eventually,*’ Arcturus thought, heading to the location that the Dark Lord had given him. He arrived there just in time to see one of the Knights leaving with a clearly displeased huff, followed by two more, who didn’t pause to so much as greet Arcturus.

Vermin, the lot of them.

Inside the house an elderly woman led him to a basement, where he found the Dark Lord sitting and drinking a glass of what appeared to be wine. Arcturus wasn’t impressed – in fact, he was quite surprised that someone who claimed to have as much influence as Grindelwald did, was hiding in the basement of an ordinary house, rather than a properly warded fortress.

"There you are,” Grindelwald said the moment he saw Arcturus approach. "Take a seat, my friend. Would you like something to drink?"

"I’ll pass,” Arcturus replied, too suspicious to accept anything at the moment. "Thank you. And congratulations – I recognized your handiwork in the explosion that took place in Wien last week. I trust that the rest of your plans have been going nicely as well?”

"Quite so,” Grindelwald said. The smile on his face was polished to perfection and entirely unconvincing when he continued: "I didn’t expect you to notice my attacks among everything else that has been going on in here lately. Quite the eyes you’ve got there.”

"It was a surprise to me,” Arcturus replied. "I wasn’t aware that I was being excluded from your campaign to the point of receiving no information whatsoever. Is there a reason for that?”

The look in Grindelwald’s eyes was calm and cold, and Arcturus knew he was treading on thin ice when the man replied: "Caution.”

Still, he pressed on. "I doubt there’s a risk in telling me of attacks that are meant to happen. It’s not as if any of them are happening in England, although I do wonder why *that* hasn’t happened yet. I’d prefer for my involvement to go beyond a few measly assassinations.”

"There’s a threat in England,” Grindelwald said, leaning back on his chair and thinking of a man he once knew. A man who could’ve been here with him, even now, if things hadn’t gone so wrong
years ago. "A wizard whose capabilities rival mine."

"Really," Arcturus said, not sure if this was an excuse of some sort, or a prelude to another mission. "And who could this wizard be?"

"His name is Albus Dumbledore," Grindelwald said. "You needn’t mind him, however. In fact, stay as far away from him as possible. I’m not quite sure what he would do in order to stop you, but I have no doubt that he would do something. I will eventually handle him personally. Meanwhile, however, you’ll have to simply enjoy the few missions that I can give you. Have you located either one of your targets yet?"

"Hermann Löcke was easy to find," Arcturus said with a shrug. "I’ll take care of him within a week. As for the other one – Riddle, you said his name was – I haven’t had much luck."

"Hm. Perhaps I should take care of Riddle myself, then," Grindelwald murmured. He had been very patient with the wand issue, but if a confrontation with Dumbledore was going to happen, he’d have to have the full command over the Elder Wand at that time. Who was Riddle anyway? Why had the Elder Wand even reacted to him? Perhaps he should ask Black to bring him the man alive?

"How about you let me look for Riddle first," Arcturus suggested. "After I deal with Löcke, that is. It shouldn’t be too hard - the ministry doesn’t know to be cautious quite yet, and Löcke’s security is far from, well, secure."

He wasn’t going to kill Riddle, Arcturus decided. At least, not yet. Not for Grindelwald, and not without having his way with Riddle at least once. And if the opportunity arose to keep Riddle’s body after his death, well... Arcturus would be able to enjoy him for a little bit still, before having to dispose of him. Because when it came to choosing between pleasure and obeying the Dark Lord, Arcturus’s priority would always be his own pleasure. Grindelwald would just have to get used to that.

"Make sure to leave no way for any Aurors to connect Löcke’s death to us,” Grindelwald said. "In fact, do try to pin it on the Irish. A little bit of internal conflict could help us in the long run."

"I doubt it matters to the people if the killer was found to be Irish or not," Arcturus said. "Especially if the victim is a German. No, it would be much better to focus on shifting the blame on a Mudblood, and then use that to illustrate how savage and out of control they are. That would give the papers something to write about for weeks. It would also make the general public sympathize with our cause more."

"Not join?"

"Not necessarily. Those who plan on joining will join anyway, and those who do not wish to do so will not be swayed by this,” Arcturus explained. "But what will happen is that people who would have opposed the cause before, start sympathizing, as I said. They will look the other way, pretend to be uninvolved. The silent majority will work in our favour, if we simply... guide it a little bit. Guide it through actions such as these."

"You seem to have a plan of action already,” Grindelwald said, pleased. "Do what you wish. I’ll expect the best results soon."

"Of course."

As if he would do anything but his best.
"I wish we would have moved sooner," Tom said, throwing a few books into his trunk. "I didn’t have enough time to get to know the area. There are so many small businesses here, and they all look nice. No wonder everyone likes coming to Vertic Alley."

"It’s all right," Harry said looking at the mess of books and quills and clothes in the living room. "We’ll be staying here for quite some time, still, so you’ll get to explore once you come back from Hogwarts. We won’t be returning to East Dulwich until the war is over."

"It could be over whenever," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "Everyone says it’s nothing to be taken seriously. That war should be over before the summer. At most it might carry on until Christmas."

"Everyone isn’t always right," Harry reminded him gently. "I hope you’ll be cleaning all this up before you go, by the way."

"I’m planning on taking all of this with me," Tom said. "You know... according to the British Broadcasting Channel the war is a big deal in the Continent, and even the muggle papers here talk about it a lot. But as far as I’m aware, nobody here has said anything. Not the Daily Prophet or any other paper. It’s kind of strange, isn’t it?"

"I’m not particularly surprised, to be quite honest," Harry admitted. "There’s... a huge disconnection between the magical and muggle societies. If you’ve grown only among magic, surrounded by witches and wizards, your access to any news from the muggle world will be very limited. Chances are that people don’t know what’s happening."

"But it’s not as if there are no muggleborns or half-bloods in the publishing industry," Tom pointed out. "There has to be someone!"

"Sure, there probably is," Harry said, "but do you think – you know what kind of society this is – do you think that any wizarding paper is going to allow muggle news on it?"

"See, I understand the prejudice and all that nonsense," Tom said, a scowl appearing on his face. "But these news aren’t just about muggles, are they? Even if the war is a muggle war, it affects everyone. So talking about it wouldn’t be a matter of catering to an audience that the rich and powerful hate, but rather... informing everyone of the danger."

"They’re not particularly logical when it comes to certain matters," Harry told him. "Wizards, I mean. Unfortunately some might find the thought of muggles being in a war with each other a reason for celebration, not realizing how easily that war could affect our lives too."

"It’s ridiculous," Tom muttered sullenly. "I’ve noticed it before, you know. These people ignore so many potentially beneficial opportunities just because those opportunities involve muggles somehow! I read an article in Global Galleons about a pureblood who was well on his way to become a millionaire. A millionaire, Harry! But he didn’t, because the best suppliers of whatever raw materials he needed were all muggles! And can you guess his reaction to that?"

"Uh-huh."

"He chose sub-standard materials and failed! This is what senseless prejudice does, Harry. It blinds people. They make bad choices and end up poor."

"The horror," Harry said dryly. "Set your alarm to wake you up around eight, all right? We won’t be apparating this time – there’s a Floo-connected fireplace on the ground floor, and we can use that to go to the train station. It’s a little bit more of a hassle than apparating, but I enjoy that method of travelling a lot more."
"Noted," Tom said. "Do you have anything planned aside from work? Please don’t tell me you’re going to try and find a second job again."

"That depends," Harry replied. "I don’t know people, and working as a Witness is a solitary job. Finding some other place to work at brings me much needed human interaction."

"You could just make friends, you know," Tom said, although the expression on his face wasn’t entirely pleased. "Casual friends, though, don’t overdo it. Don’t get too involved."

"Sure," Harry grinned. "Between the two of us, you’re the social butterfly anyway."

"The social— I am not!" Tom’s scandalized tone only added to Harry’s amusement. "I told you! I’m barely friends with those people! Prince is good at studying! Avery doesn’t leave! Mulciber sleeps all the time!"

"There’s nothing wrong with having friends, you know," Harry said. "It’s healthy."

"I love hearing that from the guy who has none," Tom shot back. "It’s not as if your work as a Witness keeps you that busy. Even though it has been getting busier than usual lately, hasn’t it?"

"A lot is happening in the world right now," Harry said. "Don’t worry about it. Besides, I already told you that I’ll be working on it."

"You keep telling me not to worry, but it never sounds convincing. Will you be safe?"

"Of course. Witnesses are protected really well whenever we go on missions."

From what Harry had read and been told, Witnesses rarely died on missions. No, a bigger risk came in the form of being specifically targeted by people who had their own agendas, and for some reason or another ended up wanting the Witness dead. Harry wasn’t going to tell Tom that, however, and doubted that anything of that kind would be happening to him. After all, as long as he stayed out of Grindelwald’s way, he had nothing to fear.

'Merlin, I can’t wait until Dumbledore defeats him,' Harry thought suddenly. 'If only the wand hadn’t reacted to me the way it did, I’d feel much safer now.' It was rather odd, however, that Grindelwald hadn’t come for him the way he had threatened to do. What was he waiting for? Harry couldn’t count on being impossible to track down, which left the option that there was something else going on.

'What if the reason why he hasn’t done anything yet, is because he’s too busy doing something else?' Harry thought suddenly. 'He is a Dark Lord after all, and from what I remember he didn’t even start with England.' Was Grindelwald up to something in the Continent? And if he was, then how long would it keep him too busy to come for Harry?

*I*

"I thought I told you to, you know, not get involved," Madeleine said. It was one of the better days, and she had been able to sit up and walk to her brother’s study with only a few breaks in between. "Is this you not getting involved?"

Marchosias was surrounded by piles of newspapers, several maps, and ripped pieces of parchment with each one covered in notes. His hair, usually neatly tied back, was now held together loosely by a band that barely managed to do its job. He looked distracted, tired, but excited and enthusiastic. It had been years since Madeleine had last seen him like this.
"I’m not getting involved if nobody knows I’m doing this,” Marchosias said. "But look – come, take a look at this map. I was wondering what on earth could that Dark Lord be wasting his time on if we haven’t yet heard so much as a peep from him, but, you see, he has been doing things. Attacks, cleverly disguised as attacks by muggles that just so happened to take place on wizarding territory."

"How did you figure that one out?" Madeleine asked. "How can you tell if it’s an attack disguised to look like it’s a muggle thing or if it’s, well, an attack by this Dark Lord?"

"Several small things that just add up,” Marchosias replied, pushing one of the maps aside and waving his wand to arrange his scattered notes into some sort of order. "You know I’ve been involved in that new proposal regarding a trace placed on underage wizards and witches, right? To test it, we have these – well, I can’t tell you too much – but we have these sensors that we use to measure a default detection limit-"

"Can you at least explain what that is?" Madeleine asked, pushing a few parchments off the couch and sitting down. "Just so I can keep up with the rest of your explanation."

"Yes, of course,” Marchosias replied. "Different spells require different levels of input in terms of magical force, you see. For example, casting an alohomora or a wingardium leviosa will require less magic than casting, say, the patronus charm. The level of magic used sends out, well, let’s call it a signal. It sends out a signal, and the strength of that signal depends on the level of the magic performed. You with me so far?"

"I think so. Casting a patronus charm would give a stronger signal than casting a levitation charm, right?"

"Yes, exactly. Some magic - usually the kind of accidental magic that manifests in children before the age of eleven, barring a few unfortunate cases - sends signals that are even weaker than those of first-year spells."

"Hold on," Madeleine said. "I thought that accidental magic would send out stronger signals? We’ve seen what accidental magic can do. Abraxas once levitated an entire table and chucked it out of the balcony because he didn’t want to finish his dinner."

"Yes, but see,” Marchosias said, and Merlin, he sounded so excited to talk about these things. Madeleine smiled fondly and kept listening. "It’s all about the way magic is channeled. With a wand the signal is amplified because it’s centered. When accidental magic occurs, it’s without a wand which makes the signal very hard to detect. It’s scattered. Wandless magic is like that too. So what we’re trying to do about the sensors is set them on a level where they succeed in catching even the weakest signals that are made by wand, without alerting us to every bit of accidental magic that goes on."

"All right. I get it. I think? How did this help you figure out the attacks?"

"Uh, you see,” Marchosias said, and was that a guilty expression on his face? "When we first test these detectors, we don’t test them in Britain. We have the Continent for that. I... I may have taken a few liberties independently and used the sensors to scan the magical areas that came under attack, and found several magical signatures that shouldn’t have been there according to my calculations."

"Calculations?"

"Oh, you know... density of population. Regional activities at that given time. Things like that."

"Right,” Madeleine muttered. "So you’re sure that these magical attacks were engineered by the
"Yes," Marchosias said. "At least seven of the attacks. But the thing is... I’m not sure what to do with this information."

"Going to Riddle with it is out of question?" Madeleine asked. "Unless he knows this already?"

"I don’t know if he knows," Marchosias replied. "But honestly, what could he do? As long as none of these things happen on British soil, the most we can do is simply be aware of the danger and prepare. Besides it would be hard to convince people that Arcturus is involved in any of this. Riddle already knows this, of course, but... as important as Witnesses are, he doesn’t have the kind of influence needed to do anything about this situation. Or anything about Black at all."

"So you’ll just... hold on to this information?"

"Until it’s needed, yes."

"All right," Madeleine said, standing up again. "I’ll leave you to your research, then. If you decide to try and involve anyone - be it Riddle or anyone else - please warn me beforehand. This is the kind of a thing that could easily bring trouble to our doorstep."

"Of course," Marchosias said. "Don’t worry, I will."

*  

Amidst the first waves of war it was easy to forget that not every disaster could be attributed to it. Harry received yet another reminder of that when he, a bit over a week after Tom left for Hogwarts, was sent to witness an explosion at the Royal Gunpowder Mills in Waltham Abbey.

The area that had been somewhat peaceful descended into utter chaos when the explosion punched its way through windows and walls, the blast reaching as far as the East End of London. People were screaming, and at first Harry wondered if it was a German bomb of some sort, or an actual accident. While it did turn out to be the latter, the death of five men didn’t make it any easier to bear.

When Harry finally returned home, he was exhausted and miserable, and he wanted nothing more than to soak in a bath for hours. He felt helpless and frustrated and angry, and knowing that things would only get worse for the next few years before getting better didn’t particularly help. The emptiness of the house made him even *more* depressed, and he wished for Tom to be there with his grumpy attitude and amusing snark.

‘He’s right, I need to get out and meet people,’ Harry thought, sitting down on one of the couches after his bath, with a mug of hot chocolate in hand. ‘I can’t depend on Tom’s presence like this. I think by this point I’ve done quite well in preventing Voldemort from ever happening. Keeping Tom as the only purpose of my life can backfire, and I don’t want that.’

He could go out later and see what kind of inns and pubs there were nearby. If there was a place anything like the Leaky Cauldron, wouldn’t it be a *great* place to meet new people? Easy conversation, good food and a few drinks – Harry had *missed* the few moments that he had been able to indulge in moments like those. Hermione had rarely wanted to join him and Ron and their other friends from Hogwarts whenever they went out for drinks, and—

The doorbell rang, snapping Harry out of his memories.

He put his drink down and took a hold of his wand before quietly heading towards the door. Harry didn’t expect anyone to visit, but the people from the ministry rarely announced themselves
beforehand, did they? It could be Duvall, coming to update him on one thing or another in regards to Witness protocols. And while Harry didn’t dislike the man, he could talk for a long, long time without breaks. It was mind numbing at times.

However, standing on the other side of the door wasn’t Duvall.

It was Black.

Harry held his breath as he took a few steps away from the door, considering his options. He didn’t know how Black had found out where he lived, but if these were Ministry-owned houses, then surely Black had a contact or two who could provide him with the information he wanted. This, however, left Harry with several questions: why did Black want to know about him? What was the source of the man’s interest in Harry, and what did he want from him now? Why was he here?

Was it to attack Harry? If he opened the door, he’d have to do it at a certain angle to not make himself vulnerable to a quick attack by Black - Harry couldn’t trust the man to not do anything. The only good thing about this entire situation was that Tom was already at Hogwarts. If there was to be a fight, at least Harry wouldn’t have to worry about Tom’s safety.

The doorbell rang again. Black wasn’t leaving.

Harry unlocked the door and smiled politely, ready to duel in case that was what Black had come there for. Much to his surprise, however, the man stood still for a few moments, his hands clearly visible. He wasn’t smiling, but neither was he sneering or expressing any kind of contempt. Instead the expression on his face was thoughtful, and a little bit tired.

"Mr. Riddle," Black said. "I hate to make such a sudden visit, but there is something of great importance that I feel you ought to know. Would you mind inviting me inside?" There was nothing alarming in the way he spoke, and if this had been their first meeting, Harry would’ve been quick to dismiss his worries. He did, however, know enough of Black to be wary. Melania had told him that he was a patient man and an excellent actor, and if he could fool his wife, it wouldn’t take much effort from him to put up a convincing show for Harry.

"Sure," Harry said, moving to the side and allowing the man to enter his house. He was still holding on to his wand, and though a part of him rebelled against the thought of being rude, a bigger part didn’t consider it an issue important enough for him to risk his life for. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Tea would be lovely," Black said, his tone remaining neutral and steady. Once seated with a cup of steaming hot tea in front of him, he finally spoke again. "I’m sure you must be surprised to see me here."

"I am," Harry replied bluntly. "We’ve spoken only a few times in the past. I wasn’t aware that there’s anything you would want from me."

"I don’t, Mr. Riddle," Black said. "Do you mind if I call you Harry? No? See, Harry, I’m not here to ask for anything at all. What I came here for is simply to warn you."

"Warn me," Harry repeated. "Of what?"

"Have you heard of Gellert Grindelwald?" Black asked, and something about Harry’s expression must have given him away. A small smile appeared on Black’s face as he continued: "I have heard from reliable sources that Grindelwald is looking to harm you. I do not know why or how exactly, but I do know that he has recently approached a few of my acquaintances with questions about you."
"I don’t know much about him," Harry said carefully, wondering if this was one of Black’s traps or if the man was actually giving him real information. Were’t Black and Grindelwald allies? "Only that he is a self-proclaimed Dark Lord, and now I found out that he has something against me. Are you more familiar with him?"

"I am," Black said. "Would you like to hear about him?"

The difference between Avery and Mulciber was that whenever Mulciber decided to sleep, he did so quietly.

"Avery, for Merlin’s sake, this is a library," Prince hissed. "Stop yawning so loudly."

"I just don’t understand why we have to be here already," Avery said, and yawned again. "It’s not even February yet. School has barely started."

"You didn’t have to come if you wanted to do something else," Prince snapped. "You could’ve taken a nap in your own bed, for example, not here where we’re trying to study."

"Mum said that if I don’t score at least three Es, I’ll be on shopping probation," Pucey said sadly. "Just my luck. There’s a new boutique set to open in Vertic Alley, and I’ve been to the same boutique in Paris before, but now I won’t be able to even go there if I don’t study hard enough."

"Ugh, I love Vertic Alley," Prince said. "It’s such a beautiful, idyllic place. It’s so clean and well kept."

"Harry and I live in Vertic Alley now," Tom said casually, not looking up from his book. "It’s nice. Say, don’t you guys think there’s a missing element in the explanation about spell structure in the magical theory books?"

"What?" Pucey said. "Wait, what did you say?"

"It’s just... if I send a cutting curse at someone, and it hits them, they will be cut," Tom said with a frown on his face. "Only they will be cut. Not the person next to them and not the person behind them. The curse hits them, and limits itself to that specific target. But why? Does it lose power or is it a single-target kind of a spell? And if it is, then can it be turned into something that won’t stop until it hits more targets?"

"Wait, that’s not what I was asking about," Pucey hurried to say. "I mean – you live in Vertic Alley now? Tom! You must invite us to visit!"

"I want to visit too, but I also want to hear more about this spell thing," Prince said. "What do you think is wrong with the explanation?"

"Not necessarily wrong, just missing," Tom said. "Is any physical object enough to stop a spell? What if I want to cut through three walls? Do I cast three cutting curses? Why does the cutting curse stop? It’s a cutting curse, it cuts through its target, and in theory it should be able to at least chip at whatever is standing behind the target. Unless the spell isn’t actually advancing like a sword or something."

"Oh, the actual movement of magic when the spell takes hold, you mean," Prince said, her eyes shining. "I hadn’t even thought of that!"

"And I don’t want either one of you to think about that now," Pucey insisted. "Tom? Why are you
"Harry had us move there for security reasons," Tom explained. "We live by the river, in one of the Ministry-owned houses. It’s nice."

"I bet," Pucey sighed. "And by the river! How wonderful!"

"It really does sound wonderful," Prince agreed. "Although I think Lestrange’s family has a summer house in that area, so you might bump into him during the summer break."

"Must you ruin his happiness, Eileen?" Avery asked. "Really? This is why we can’t have nice things, someone like you will somehow ruin it anyway."

"I was just saying," Prince snapped. "I didn’t ruin anything! Better he hears it from me than suddenly just running into Lestrange all of a sudden! I would want to be fore warned!"

"You two do realize that this is a library?" Mulciber said, blinking his eyes open and looking at Avery and Prince with a slightly disapproving expression. "What happened to being quiet?"

"You’re so relaxed," Pucey said. "Don’t your parents worry about your grades?"

"All of my grades are As and above," Mulciber said. "I’m happy with that."

"It’s a miracle you’re even getting As," Prince muttered. "I’ve never seen you conscious in class."

"I listen with my eyes closed."

"Really now."

"I can’t believe that we’re on the latter half of our second year already," Pucey suddenly said. "Soon we’ll be selecting the electives we want to take for next year! Have you guys thought about your preferences yet? I mean, you did read the list of electives Professor Slughorn gave us, right?"

"Of course," Prince said. "I’m considering Arithmancy and Muggle Studies."


"I didn’t like any of the options," Tom admitted. "None of them seemed interesting enough. Harry told me a little bit about runes so I guess I’ll go with Ancient Runes. And maybe Care of Magical Creatures."

"I didn’t know you liked animals."

"I don’t. But I think it’s more useful than some of the other options."

"I wish they taught dueling," Avery sighed. "Can you imagine? Flinging hexes and curses and destroying your enemies? Wouldn’t that be neat?"

"It’d be important for self defense also," Tom said. "Considering the war and all."

"War?" Pucey asked, alarmed. "What war?"

"I think he means the one in the Muggle world," Prince said, and nodded. "It’s horrible."

"It’s none of our business, really," Avery said. "I mean, it’s not going to get to us, so who cares? Muggles die in their own wars all the time, I bet."
"Our worlds aren’t *that* separate, you know,” Tom said. "If you don’t value them as people, then at least recognize the resources that are going down the drain even as we speak."

"Fair point,” Prince agreed. "That should sound valid even to people who don’t care about Muggles dying. People like Avery here, apparently.”

"Can we not talk about this?” Pucey begged. "It’s making me uncomfortable.”

"People are *dying,*” Prince countered. "*That’s* making me uncomfortable.”

"You people talking all the time is making me uncomfortable,” Mulciber said. "By the way, Al, are you going to try out for the Quidditch team next year? Half the team will be graduating, and some will probably quit to be able to focus on their NEWTs.”

"Not Captain Carrow, though. If I could convince him somehow to consider me, I wouldn’t mind being a beater,” Avery said. "We should go watch our team’s practices sometimes. Quidditch is important and we should pay more attention to it.”

Tom thought of Nott and said: "No thank you."

"I'm not going to sacrifice my library time just to go watch a bunch of sweaty boys on brooms,” Prince said. "Try again with a better incentive, Avery. Until then, don’t talk to me.”

Tom tried to refocus on homework, but the realization of how little the people around him cared about people dying was on his mind. It wasn’t as if Tom himself was particularly sympathetic - but it was an angle he could use eventually. He’d just... have to find the opportunity to do so.
When Harry had left the flat for a quick walk in the neighbourhood, he hadn’t expected to end up reading or seeing anything particularly alarming. He had wanted nothing more than a simple afternoon stroll through the beautiful streets of Vertic Alley, enjoying the peaceful atmosphere there. Now, however, his plans were... while not exactly ruined, they were most certainly compromised.

He had just bought a copy of the Daily Prophet, and was now standing in front of the Babbitty Rabbitty’s Breakroom inn, contemplating whether or not he ought to read the article there, or go back home. In the end he chose to go in and order a drink - after all, he was quite tired of being alone at home all the time. Besides, although Babbitty Rabbitty’s Breakroom wasn’t quite as pleasant as the Three Broomsticks, it was still far better than most of the other inns and pubs Harry had seen in his life so far.

Inside, the inn was crowded and noisy, and it had been quite a while since Harry had been in a place as loud as this one. One floating sign informed the customers of a new kind of firewhiskey, while another advertised three kinds of pie on sale that night. In the corner, a jovial man was singing and playing some musical instrument that Harry couldn’t make sense of, but enjoyed the sound nonetheless.

"Hello,” Harry said as soon as he reached the counter. "Got some butterbeer?"

"Of course we do,” the pretty barmaid said, with a bright and friendly smile. She flicked her dark hair back, and something about that reminded Harry strongly of someone, though he couldn’t, for the life of him, remember who. "A pint for one?"

"Yes, thank you,” Harry said, digging out a handful of sickles. He then moved to take a seat by the counter, not feeling a particular need to go find a table for himself. It was unlikely that he could even find one, what with how crowded the inn was at this hour. Instead he finally refocused his attention on the Daily Prophet, and the article about Grindelwald. The man hadn’t been named, but who else could it be?

'Merlin, I sincerely hope there are no other, unexpected Dark Lords popping around,' Harry thought, skimming through the part that had been printed on the front page, before he skipped to the main article on page 5. 'I wonder how deeply Black is involved in this.’

"Sounds terrible, doesn’t it,” Harry heard, and looked up from the paper to see the barmaid setting down a mug of butterbeer in front of him on the counter. "A Dark Lord! In this modern day! Ridiculous, isn’t it?”

"Merlin, I sincerely hope there are no other, unexpected Dark Lords popping around,’ Harry thought, skimming through the part that had been printed on the front page, before he skipped to the main article on page 5. 'I wonder how deeply Black is involved in this.’

"Sounds terrible, doesn’t it,” Harry heard, and looked up from the paper to see the barmaid setting down a mug of butterbeer in front of him on the counter. "A Dark Lord! In this modern day! Ridiculous, isn’t it?”
"Yes, absolutely," Harry agreed wholeheartedly. "I wonder what he has done so far to lay claim on a title such as that. From what I read here, it’s mostly speculation about a few explosions. I hope that’s the extent of it, and nothing worse."

"Oh, Merlin, haven’t you heard?" the barmaid said, her eyes wide with excitement. "Well, I suppose the news haven’t been printed yet, but I have a friend who works at the Ministry, and let me be the first to tell you - the German ambassador was found dead in his room! Foul play is suspected, and word on the street is that it’s this Dark Lord who orchestrated it!"

"What," Harry said, completely lost. Had he heard that right? He wasn’t going to ask anything about any possible murders, because he knew that it would be only a matter of time before he got involved somehow if he went on asking questions about it. And Harry was done with getting involved in trouble. Especially the kind of trouble that came with dead bodies.

"Nothing has been proven yet," said the man sitting to Harry’s right, joining their conversation. "Stephen Brown, Auror," he then introduced himself.

"Harry Riddle," Harry said. "Witness."

"Oh, I’m Lavinia," the barmaid said. "Lavinia McGill. Auror Brown, would you like a refill?"

"Sure," Brown nodded, before turning back to Harry. "Hermann Löcke. He was a good man, a good ambassador. So far we have no reason to truly suspect the Dark Lord’s involvement in his... untimely passing."

"What happened to him?" Harry asked. "People don’t just drop dead for no reason."

"True," Brown agreed. "And though there’s not much I can reveal at this point, it was definitely a homicide. I’m not looking forward to the Daily Prophet’s article on the issue, especially since we haven’t got a single suspect yet. Merlin knows those journalists are vultures."

"Tell me about it," Harry muttered, remembering Rita Skeeter. "Quite the shock it must have been, for the ambassador to be... you know."

"Absolutely," Brown sighed heavily. "But I doubt it’s the most shocking thing you’ve ever heard of, eh? A Witness, after all! You must have seen quite a few things."

Harry looked down at his drink, thought of bombs and dead people and grief and war, and mustered up a humourless smile. "Quite a few things I wish I’d never seen, to be quite honest with you."

Brown looked at him for a moment with a sympathetic expression. "I can only imagine. I’ve got my own share of that."

"Here’s your drink, Auror Brown," Lavinia said, reappearing to hand the man his drink. "And what’s this? I disappear for a moment and it’s doom and gloom here! Cheer up, lads! Have a drink, go dance! The night is still young!"

"Oh, I didn’t actually come to dance," Harry admitted. "I’ve been so cooped up in my apartment that I decided to go out tonight. Merlin knows I’ll lose my mind with nothing to do most of the time."

"Well, you’ll always be welcome here," Lavinia told him. "It’s pretty quiet in the mornings, but we open at nine already. We even serve breakfast here."

Harry wasn’t sure if Lavinia’s invitation was made out of politeness or if he was truly wanted, but he decided to keep it in mind regardless. He had enjoyed the company of both Auror Brown and
Lavinia, and wouldn’t mind spending more time with them in the future. Besides - who knew what this could lead to? Harry wouldn’t mind making new friends.

Tom was making his way towards the common room, returning from the Owlery where he had gone to check on the bird Harry had bought him and send the man a letter. He hadn’t yet even reached the dungeons when he stopped, noticing a group of older students from Ravenclaw and Gryffindor engaged in a heated argument.

‘They’re noisy,’ Tom thought, watching the students from a safe distance, hidden behind one of the armours decorating that corridor. ‘I don’t want to walk past them.’ There was always the risk of being hit by a stray spell when these kinds of arguments took place in a narrow area. Tom didn’t fancy going to the Slytherin common room covered in boils or with a huge pair of buck teeth, the way some other students had done before promptly being marched to the hospital wing by one of the prefects.

At times like those, Tom had been curious about the concept of hexing others. He wasn’t confrontational by nature, and usually preferred words and tricks over spells, but there was a part of him that wanted nothing more than to try his hand at hexing someone. Anyone, really.

‘I know the theory behind some hexes,’ Tom thought, still watching the older students from his hiding place, absently reaching for his wand. ‘I’ve never cast any before, though.’

Should he? Probably not. Was he going to? Maybe.

He’d have to make sure that they wouldn’t see him. There wasn’t much to worry about regarding that; the arguing students seemed to become only noisier and more aggressive, too absorbed in their little bubble to even notice that Tom was there.

‘If I want to do something, I should try before someone calls a teacher,’ the boy decided. It was lucky that none of his classmates were with him right then: he wouldn’t want to try this with witnesses around. ‘So what would it be? A stinging hex? It’s pretty advanced but I know the theory at least. Or pepper breath hex. That one would be funny to see.’

After a moment of contemplation, Tom sent a stinging hex towards the group, not really concerned over which one it would hit. Much to Tom’s dissatisfaction, however, it seemed that the spell was too weak to actually do anything even when it hit its target.

‘I did it right, though,’ Tom thought, scowling down at his wand. ‘I know I did it right. Maybe it’s because I haven’t cast it before? Should I practice hexes and jinxes the same way I practice charms and other spells? Hmm...’

That would make sense, wouldn’t it? It was doubly lucky that nobody had seen him doing this, then; no one would get him into trouble for trying to hex another student, and no one had seen him fail at it. If someone like Lestrange or Nott had seen him - or even if Avery had seen him, Tom had no doubt that such a misstep would haunt him for a long time. He wasn’t going to let anyone see his failures. As far as people knew, he never failed. At anything.

‘Well, might as well try to go through another route to the common room,’ Tom thought then, tucking his wand back into his pocket, and stepping out of his hiding place and walking away from the place of the argument. It would be only a matter of time before someone would call the teachers, and Tom didn’t want to be anywhere near them when that happened. While most of the teachers at Hogwarts were fair and nice, there were a few who didn’t like Tom, or didn’t like Slytherins at all,
and quite enjoyed finding reasons to get him into trouble.

He wasn’t going to tell Harry that, though.

"Oh, there you are," Avery said as soon as he saw Tom entering the common room. "We need to stop Prince. She’s up to no good again."

"I’m being productive," Prince said, scowling at the boy. "The exams may still be a few months away, but this year I’ll start my preparations early."

"Wait, you’re already preparing for the exams?" Tom asked, reluctantly impressed. "It’s not even March yet!"

"Oh, I haven’t started the intensive studying yet, no," Prince replied. "We haven’t even gone through all the materials in class. What I am doing, however, is creating a study schedule to keep me organized and ready to start the preparations soon."

"Are you doing that because you want to," Pucey asked, "or because you hate losing to Ravenclaws?"

"Ravenclaws are overrated," Prince declared in response, and Tom somehow got the feeling that there was a story of some kind behind Prince’s new dislike towards Ravenclaws. "The teachers have a very different disposition towards them than they do to other students! They expect excellence and good grades from Ravenclaws, and that makes it easier for the teachers to give them better grades even if they don’t deserve them!"

"Uh, I’m not sure that’s how it works," Avery said, but Prince shook her head.

"No, listen," she said. "I’m sure about this. It’s something psychological, no doubt. It’s easier to give them Es and Os for A-level work because they’re Ravenclaws, and excellent school performance is expected to the point where teachers make it happen regardless of whether it’s accurate or not. They’re blinded by pre-constructed misconceptions!"

"That sounds a bit radical," Avery said, and turned to Tom. "Opinions?"

"I’m not familiar with the grades of Ravenclaws," Tom said. "Or their work in general." As long as nobody got better grades than he did, he didn’t care.

"I don’t care either," Mulciber joined the conversation. "In case anyone’s interested in knowing my opinion, for once."

"I’d ask you for your opinions more if I actually saw you awake for longer than two minutes at a time," Avery said. "Honestly, do you need a pepper-up potion or something?"

"No," Mulciber replied. "I just enjoy sleeping. Mum calls it a condition. Tom is productive enough for me to live vicariously through him."

"How does that even—you know what, I don’t want to know," Avery muttered, shaking his head. "Anyway, back to Prince’s stupid schedules..."

The thing that Arcturus didn’t like about fantasies was that they tended to evolve, somehow. The acts that would’ve satisfied him months ago were now barely worth the effort, and the only way he could get closer to that feeling of euphoria was by deviating further and further away from the things
his late wife would’ve deemed appropriate. Not that it mattered, really. He certainly didn’t mind indulging in his own deviations and she wasn’t here to judge him anymore.

It was strange, perhaps, but Arcturus didn’t like to dwell on that. Especially not now, with irritation making him itch despite the man sucking his cock like his life depended on it. Which, well, it did. Yet another whore from Mortlake’s collection had blindly, stupidly, fallen for his lies as Abel Meredith. The poor thing had thought it would leave the house in one piece, wealthier than it had been in a while. It hadn’t expected the bruises and the wounds and the, well, everything. Anything. It hadn’t expected any of what Arcturus had planned.

In the end it wouldn’t leave the house. Arcturus wasn’t about to allow that, and his guest would realize that, too, soon enough.

Mortlake had tried to ask him about the disappearances of a few of his boys, but a handful of galleons had satisfied his curiosity quite well. Besides - Arcturus was certain of this - most of the people working for Mortlake weren’t doing so voluntarily. The other man had his own list of crimes to take care of, and wouldn’t dig too deep into the things his well-paying, loyal client Meredith did.

‘This is frustrating,’ Arcturus thought, and suddenly kicked the whore off him, before sending a quick hex its way. His cock wasn’t even hard anymore, which annoyed him even more. The whore’s face was bruised and one of its ankles had been broken quite some time ago. For the first half hour Arcturus had made it look like Harry just enough to make it appealing, but the illusion didn’t last for long. In a fit of rage - one of many - Arcturus had beaten the thing to a weeping mess, and even now it obeyed only in hopes for a quick, eventual death. Something disobedience wouldn’t make possible.

If Melania had been there, she wouldn’t have been horrified. She would’ve looked at him disapprovingly and told him to not break his things so fast.

‘That’s not quite true, though, is it?’ Arcturus thought staring absently at the whore still crying quietly. ‘She hated the thought of me fucking a man. Ah, if Melania had been a man, we would have been glorious together.’

Melania wasn’t there, however, and she would never be there again. By now Arcturus preferred to think of her death more as a result of circumstances, rather than something he had caused out of his own will. He killed her because he had to.

‘I only wish I would’ve fucked Riddle while she was still alive,’ Arcturus sighed, imagining a scenario that was quickly making him hard again. Melania, bound and gagged but very much alive and awake and angry - Merlin, she had been glorious in her fury, hadn’t she? - lying on one side of the bed. On the other, Arcturus would have had Harry - naked and drowsy, barely conscious - ready for him. The man would be soft and warm and pliant, loving and tender in ways Melania had never been.

It was such a pity that he could never make that happen. But really, Harry was proving quite difficult to charm. He wasn’t an easy man to impress or read, and though Arcturus was sure he had made a move in the right direction by telling him about Grindelwald... it wasn’t enough. He’d need another reason to contact Harry, and better yet - he needed a reason to contact him regularly without the man questioning his motives. Talking about the Dark Lord’s work was a rather limited subject, and it would be worryingly easy to slip up and reveal too much. That in turn would bring up questions about the level of Arcturus’s involvement in these things.

‘Becoming a suspect is the last thing I want,’ he thought, leaning back on his chair and stretching his legs to rest them on the now still and silent body of his latest entertainer. ‘What if I brought up
someone else for Riddle to suspect?’ It could work, really. If he arranged for another meeting with Harry and expressed his suspicions about someone. No outright accusations, simply implications at first. There was no need to start too strong.

Who would he single out, though? Someone Harry knew only in passing. Not close enough to ever sit down for a chat over a cup of coffee with, but knew enough about to be aware of their views on Mudbloods.

And oh, wasn’t Arcturus lucky enough to know someone who’d fit this role perfectly? He had wanted to pay Malfoy back, after all.

A few days later found Harry back at Babbitty’s, sharing drinks with Auror Brown - Stephen, as the man had insisted on being referred to - and the barmaid Lavinia. The inn was even busier and noisier than it had been last time, and it reminded Harry a little bit of the lively evenings he had spent at the Gryffindor dorms.

"Didn’t see either one of you here yesterday," Lavinia said with a teasing smile on her face. "While Harry, I can only imagine how busy being a Witness can make you, I know for a fact that Stephen here isn’t half as productive with his time."

'If only you knew,' Harry thought, reluctant to dwell on the long days of doing nothing while waiting for a new mission. "I’m sure being an Auror keeps him busy, right?"

"Ah, well," Stephen said. "Sure it does. I was on bodyguard duty yesterday. The prime minister - yes, the Muggle one - sent in a request for a competent bodyguard. Apparently the unrest in the Muggle areas is becoming worse by the day, and even the higher-ups who know about our world—"

"Wait, how does that even work," Lavinia cut in. "Why does the muggle prime minister know about us?"

"It’s a question of practicality," Stephen said dismissively. "The King knows, as well as a few other key figures in the country’s government. They’re sworn to secrecy, of course. After retirement some are obliviated. It’s not interesting at all, really. Quite boring, in fact."

"I have a boring life and am entertained by boring things," Lavinia replied with a roll of her eyes. "What’s interesting to you, Mr. Auror?"

"She thinks her attitude is charming," Stephen told Harry, and it was clear that despite his words, the man was very much charmed by her. "You know what’s interesting, though? The mess that’s been going on in the Continent. Do you listen to any of the muggle radio stations? The, what was it called again, the British Broadcast radio channel. Completely owned and operated by muggles, but a great source of information for what’s going on in the world."

"I listen to it here in the mornings," Lavinia said. "But I have to turn it off after six, since that’s when people start drinking and you’d be surprised by how many folks get aggressive when they’re subjected to anything muggle while drunk."

"I can imagine," Stephen sighed. "Anyway, Chamberlain - that’s the minister, by the way - thinks Germany has already missed its opportunity when it comes to warring with Britain, but that doesn’t change the fact that the Continent is in chaos."

"It’s going to get worse before it gets better," Harry said, trying to not think of the horrors that would be happening in a matter of years. "Germany isn’t going to sit back and ignore Britain. There’ve
already been a few attacks, and they will only get worse as time goes by.”

“I agree,” Stephen said with a nod. “It’s quite evident, and I suspect Chamberlain knows it as well. Whether or not he’ll ever admit it is a different matter altogether, of course.”

“But will their war touch us?” Lavinia asked. “I mean, I sympathize with their plight and would help if I could, but even if the Germans attack the Muggle regions, it has nothing to do with us, does it? Their Muggle war couldn’t possibly get through our wards!”

“It would eventually,” Harry replied. “We can only hope that that’s the sole problem we’ll be facing.” Stephen nodded again and downed the rest of his drink, before leaning forward and lowering his voice.

“You’ve read about the self-proclaimed Dark Lord in the Continent, haven’t you?” the Auror asked. “As if the Muggle war isn’t hard enough to deal with, there’ve been several attacks on magical ministries in the Continent and it’s suspected that the Dark Lord - whoever he is - uses Hitler’s mayhem to mask his own.”

“Wait, who’s Hitler?” Lavinia asked. “I barely know of Chamberlain. Who’s this Hitler fellow?”

“He’s the muggle chief currently in charge of the war Germany is waging against the world,” Stephen explained, before he continued: “The IAB - that’s International Auror Bureau, in case you didn’t know - have issued a statement that the attacks that hit the magical ministries and some politicians aren’t quite in line with the way muggles conduct their attacks. And with a Dark Lord allegedly on the move, well... that’s their first clue, or whatever.”

“How do you know these things? You don’t work for the IAB, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” Stephen admitted. “But the thing about non-confidential information is that everyone will eventually know it. People like to gossip. Even if they’re Aurors.”

“Well, Aurors shouldn’t spread speculations like that,” Lavinia said with a frown. “Confuses people even more, that’s what it does. Let the IAB deal with these things, and let us focus on our own lives, right? What happened to petty crime, Stephen? You used to complain every day about illegal broom races or profanities painted on walls of ministry properties.”

“That’s still happening,” Stephen said, rolling his eyes. “But I like to stay informed. Wouldn’t you prefer the same, Harry?”

“Absolutely,” Harry agreed. Privately, he couldn’t help but think of the things Arcturus Black had told him when he had dropped by a few weeks ago. While there was no telling which parts of what he had said were lies or truths, Black’s information fit quite nicely with what Stephen was saying. ‘So Black is working with Grindelwald... or at least has a serious connection to him.’ Where would that connection take the man, in the end? And what if he tried to involve Harry in some way?

‘He doesn’t know me,’ Harry thought. ‘He doesn’t know what I can do. If push comes to shove, I know I can take him. Probably.’ Harry did, after all, have plenty of experience battling Dark Wizards. He didn’t want to fight anybody, he wasn’t here for that, but if he needed to...

Well... .

*I

“I can’t believe it,” Mulciber breathed, looking at the sky in wide-eyed wonder. “This is... I almost forgot what it looks like.”
"Wait, I can actually see the colour of your eyes," Prince observed, tucking some stray strands of her hair behind her ear. "I've never seen them this open before."

"It’s the sun," Mulciber continued, as if he hadn’t heard the girl. He then took a deep breath and looked at the now snowless ground. The expression on his face was contemplative, and Tom could already guess what the boy was thinking about. "Spring is here. Do you know what this means? Outdoor naps, that’s what it means."

"And studying by the lake," Prince said with a nod. Avery sighed, annoyance clearly expressed on his face.

"All we ever do is study," the boy complained. "Where’s the fun part of our Hogwarts days?"

"It’s as if we’re in school, huh," Pucey said, and rolled her eyes. "Besides, we don’t study all the time. I mean, granted, we study a lot, but my grades are even better than anyone at home expected. I’m doing better than my brother ever did!"

"Delighted for you," Avery muttered, before he perked up suddenly. Tom turned his head to see what had made the other boy so attentive all of a sudden, and noticed the Slytherin Quidditch Team returning from one of their practices. Nott was there, and Tom held back a grimace - while he hadn’t spent much time with the boy this year so far, every moment he did spend in his presence only made Tom dislike him more. He wasn’t even sure why exactly - Nott didn’t insult him the way Lestrange or Rosier did. There was just... something about him and the way he treated Tom.

What caught Tom’s attention next, however, was another boy on the team. He was tall, with sharp blue eyes and dark hair neatly combed back. Orion Black, Tom knew. Avery had once told him that Black was set to become the next captain of their quidditch team. Not that Tom cared, but he disliked the boy’s father greatly, which made him wonder whether or not the boy was anything like his father.

"Hi Opaline," one of the boys on the team - Daniel Bulstrode, if Tom remembered correctly - said. Pucey glowered in return. "You, uh, look lovely today."

A few of his teammates laughed, and Pucey turned away, her lips pressed into a tight line. Tom didn’t know if Bulstrode had meant to tease her or if his compliment was genuine, but it was clear that Pucey didn’t appreciate it.

"Riddle," Nott said, surprising Tom and putting him instantly on alert. Circe, just hearing Nott’s voice and seeing his face gave Tom the urge to practice his hexes on him. "You don’t play quidditch at all, do you?"

"No," Tom replied. Much to his - and clearly Nott’s, too - surprise, Black turned to him as well.

"Riddle," Black said, the look in his eyes slightly less haughty than before. "Any relation to Harry Riddle?"

"Yes," Tom said, but didn’t elaborate. Instead he narrowed his eyes and was about to ask how Black even knew about Harry, when the older boy continued:

"My mother spoke well of him," Black said, and Tom could see the surprised look on Nott’s face. Hadn’t expected that, had he? Perhaps Black was fine after all. Except... how did Harry even know about Black’s mother? Harry had mysteriously known about Tom’s mother, too, hadn’t he? What was it with Harry knowing everybody’s mothers all of a sudden? "Send him my regards."

"I’ll do so," Tom said. 'And I’ll ask Harry about this, too.'
The moment Orion, Nott, and the others left, Avery grabbed Tom’s arm and pulled him closer. "Your guardian was friends with Lady Black? How on earth did that happen? I thought you told me you were both half-bloods!"

"We are," Tom said. "Why?"

"Blacks don’t associate with, uh, with people who aren’t pureblood," Pucey said. "So it’s curious that Lady Black would consider Mr. Riddle important enough to speak well of him to her children, I think."

"Isn’t it because he’s a Witness?" Tom asked, and Pucey shrugged.

"Maybe," she said, but didn’t sound convinced. "Are you sure he’s a half-blood?"

'Am I sure about anything, really?' Tom thought. 'I only know for certain that I’m the most important person to Harry. Everything else doesn’t matter as much as that does.' He would, however, ask the man about his newly discovered friendship with the dead Lady Black.

"That’s good, though," Mulciber said. "If you’re friends with Orion and Lucretia Black, then Lestrange and the others are less likely to bother you. Nobody wants to get on Orion’s bad side, that’s for sure. His sister isn’t much to be wary of, but he’s got a quick wand for mean hexes."

"Lucretia has a lot of friends in Hufflepuff, I’ve heard," Pucey said. "Not that there’s anything wrong with Hufflepuffs."

"That aside," Tom said, determined to change the subject. "What was that moment you had with Bulstrode?"

"I didn’t have a moment with him," Pucey instantly said, a scowl appearing on her face. "Our parents have been discussing ridiculous things together during Christmas and he liked it a tad too much. I don’t like him at all. He doesn’t even comb his hair right."

Tom, who hadn’t been aware that there was a right and a wrong way to comb one’s hair, wondered if it was something he ought to pay attention to. He decided that no, his hair was perfectly fine the way it was. He didn’t care about what girls thought of it, and Harry had never complained. Not that Harry could even afford complaining, with his hair being the mess that it was.

"We still have two hours to go before dinnertime," Mulciber suddenly pointed out. "I’m going to nap under that tree there. You all are welcome to join me."

"I don’t want to nap," Tom said. "But I don’t mind reading out there. Let’s go."

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for this chapter (As always, someone will probably complain about warnings being in the end notes, so: yes, there was a note about this in the beginning. I always use both note spaces for warnings):

Arcturus-related: sexual assault, physical assault not involved in sexual assault, kidnapping. These aren't explicitly described.
Dear Harry,

Orion Black greeted me a while ago, and said to send you his regards. Apparently, you knew his mother. I’d like to know how that happened.

Hogwarts is still great, but I do look forward to coming back home in the summer.

Tom.
"—the Gryffindor Quidditch team talking about their strategies for the final matches of the season. Bits and pieces, of course, but would you believe it.” Avery’s voice rose and he shook his head in anger. "They consider Ravenclaw to be their main competition. Ravenclaw! In fact, Slytherin isn’t considered a challenge at all! We didn’t climb our way to the top of the food chain, only to be bested by people whose hobbies include creating coffee flavoured bacon!"

"I still don’t care,” Tom said, pulling a book from under his pillow and preparing to read it. ”This doesn’t involve me, and I’ve decided to not comment on any ongoing Ravenclaw experiments.”

"Wrong!” Avery said, diving forward to grab the book out of Tom’s hands, and then throwing it onto the bed with a dramatic gesture. ”Listen to me, Tom! Elliot! This is all about reputation, my friend! If Slytherin keeps losing, those losses will be tied to you, even if you’re not involved!”

"That’s not logical at all.”

”Of course it’s not, but that’s how people are when it comes to Quidditch and the House Cup!”

"Then go to Nott with that information,” Mulciber suggested. ”Neither one of us has any influence on the quidditch team and its practices.”

"No, you two don’t understand,” Avery said, and made a show of looking around to ensure their privacy, before continuing, ”I think we have to do something.”

"I don’t like this, and I’m not going to,” Mulciber said promptly, but Tom... was intrigued. It wasn’t that he disliked Gryffindors – not more than he disliked people in general – but mischief always came with unexpected opportunities to try out new hexes.

"Why would we risk detention for something we don’t really care about?” Tom asked, just to see if Avery had something to offer. ”The reputation issue doesn’t bother me, really. I know how to handle that.”

"Fine,” Avery sighed. ”Then join me just to make Gryffindors lose points.”

"See, that’s the way to do it,” Mulciber said, finally sitting up. Tom, too, nodded in agreement. ”Do you have a plan?”

"No,” Avery admitted. ”Nothing beyond making them lose every match. Even the one against Hufflepuff.”

"What do you know about the Gryffindor team?” Tom asked. ”I know that ours is ridiculously competitive and the players are ready to fight each other at the drop of a hat. If I wanted to do something about our team, I’d make sure to give them reasons to argue, and not play well together.”

"The brooms are always checked before the match, so we can’t hex those,” Avery said. ”And I think that hexing the players’ equipment may be going a bit too far.”

"Depends on the hex,” Tom said. ”We don’t need anything big and flashy, on the contrary – a very subtle hex is all we need. We want them to lose in a realistic way, without making anyone suspicious enough to look further into their loss.”

"I don’t know any subtle hexes,” Avery confessed. ”I like the ones with a bit more... flair to them.”

"We’ve noticed,” Mulciber said dryly, and sighed deeply before standing up. ”Well then. In the name of solidarity and for the sake of winning, there’s one thing we should begin with.”
"Merlin be blessed, are you engaging in an activity?" Avery interrupted, stunned. "I thought you’d just... flop around and voice an opinion sometimes."

"I’m not particularly interested in upholding or polishing the reputation of our House," Mulciber admitted. "But Gryffindors are very annoying. Anyway, as I was saying, there’s one thing we should begin with."

"Go on," Tom said, still surprised and suspicious of the sudden bout of initiative that’s motivating Mulciber to move. "Do tell."

"We investigate," Mulciber said. "And by investigate, I mean spy."

"I’m so proud of you," Avery sniffed.

"If we end up in detention, I’ll blame the two of you," Tom sighed. "Fine. We plan first, and then we pick a good time."

"—and then he asked why his drink cost more than his friend’s, and I told him that he had ordered firewhiskey while his friend just wanted some butterbeer, and Merlin be damned he just couldn’t accept that," Lavinia explained while wiping the countertop of the bar. Harry, nursing a pint of butterbeer himself, shook his head in amazement.

"Sounds like some nights are quite, uh... fun."

"Tell me about it," Lavinia sighed. "Don’t get me wrong, mind you, I do like working here at Babbitty’s. It’s the closest I’ve ever come to owning my own place, you see."

"You’ve thought about that?" Harry asked, interested. "Opening your own inn, I mean."

"Well, not an inn exactly," Lavinia admitted. "But a simple tea house. A nice, clean place free of drunkards, with beautiful pastries and delicious teas. But, you know, I haven’t got the means for that, and there are plenty worse places to work at than here."

She was right; even now, crowded and loud as it was, Babbitty’s was pleasant and warm and free of brawls or aggressive arguments. The quiet buzz of the radio almost drowning under the loud noise of everything else kept Harry’s mind occupied whenever Lavinia was serving customers. However, despite the fact that he enjoyed dropping by Babbitty’s, Harry wasn’t particularly saddened by the thought of not being able to visit as frequently once Tom came back home. Tom’s letters were fun to read, but Merlin, Harry missed the boy so much.

'The summer break is about a month away,' Harry thought. 'Should I buy him a welcome home gift? Or am I spoiling him?'

Harry was pulled out of his thoughts when Stephen appeared, Lavinia’s expression brightening up in delight at the sight of him. Stephen, however, appeared drained and worried about something, and barely managed to muster up a grateful smile when Lavinia set a pint of Ogden's in front of him.

"On the house," she said. "Tough day?"

"It’s about to get a lot worse," Stephen sighed, and turned to Harry. "How well do you keep up with muggle news?"

"Fairly well," Harry replied. "Are you referring to something specific?"
"Unfortunately yes," Stephen said, rubbing his eyes and then taking a generous gulp of his drink. "Lavinia, if you have no need for the radio, could you bring it here?"

"Of course!" Lavinia replied, and set the radio on the counter in front of the two wizards before moving to clean tables elsewhere. Stephen fiddled with the radio, clearly looking for a specific channel. Harry, feeling dread pooling at the pit of his stomach, took a deep breath before asking, "Did something happen?"

"Yes," Stephen replied. "And news of the incident will be broadcast tonight at the British Broadcasting Channel. That particular speech may have begun already. Oh, here we go. Bloody hell, that took a minute."

[I sought the audience of the King this evening...] a familiar voice said, and Harry instantly recognized the voice of Neville Chamberlain.

"He has been under quite a bit of pressure lately," Stephen explained. "We were – us Aurors, I mean – informed of this already around noon today. To some, this didn’t come as a surprise, but... Merlin, the situation is alarming."

[...and handed to him my resignation...]

"Chamberlain resigned," Harry whispered, unsure of what to feel. On one hand, he had known that this would happen, and that Britain would survive in the end. Living it with everyone around him, however, made the situation terrifying and uncertain.

"The press will be presenting it as a matter of age and illness," Stephen said quietly. "He’s in his seventies, and has some muggle disease. Some will, of course, accuse him of incompetence."

[...which his majesty has been pleased to accept.]

"Some have already accused him of that," Harry said tiredly. "In the end, I believe that most people will focus on what will happen from now on, rather than what has already happened."

"Hitler has been gaining allies all across Europe," Stephen said. "Even the Soviet have that Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with him, and it’s unlikely that Stalin will be in a hurry to break it. Several other countries are perfectly fine with Germany’s actions, as well. I do not understand how."

"Propaganda distorts people’s views on ethnic and religious groups they do not understand," Harry said. "They take every wrong action that individuals from those minority groups do, and exaggerate it to the point of making it a rule rather than an exception."

"And people just believe it?"

"I... I don’t know. I guess so."

[His majesty has now entrusted to my friend and colleague, Mr. Winston Churchill...]

"Do you know Churchill?" Stephen asked.

"Not much," Harry replied. "He’s said to be quite the character. Rude, petulant, and capricious."

"They won’t keep him for long, then," Stephen said. "Not unless he can secure a series of victories and capitalize on them. And how likely is that to happen?"

[...the task of forming a new administration on a national basis.]
"I hope he will," Harry said, trying to remember when the tide of the war had turned. "Not because I like him—I don’t. However, the sooner the war is over, the better. I feel like we haven’t even seen the worst of what will happen, and that frightens me."

"Thousands have already moved up north and to other countries," Stephen said. "The smartest moved out of Germany as soon as talks of segregation, second class citizenships, and internment camps began. The rest of those who are targeted need to leave, too."

"If they can," Harry sighed. "He mainly targets Jewish people, and blames them for everything. But how can everyone move when the rest of Europe is doing its hardest to close their borders and abuse the Jewish people who did manage to get in? I’ve heard that even in America Jewish people aren’t particularly welcome."

"That’s how people are," Stephen said with a grimace. "Always targeting people they don’t understand. Today it is the Jews, seventy years from today it could be the Muslims, and a hundred years ahead it could be the Buddhists. As long as misinformation is weaponized, any action of injustice and inhumanity can be weaponized."

[...And in this task I have no doubt he will be successful...]

Harry sighed, now more exhausted than he had been in quite a while. Churchill becoming the Prime Minister was a sign even he, with his lacking knowledge of the Second World War, could recognize.

The real war was about to begin.

"It’s already been days, and the final matches are mere weeks away," Avery hissed. "What’s the plan? Tom?"

"Why do I have to—Merlin, fine," Tom huffed, annoyed to have been once again interrupted while reading. Mulciber, whose uncharacteristic enthusiasm to cause Gryffindors some grief was still somewhat surprising, was quick to join them at the secluded couch in the common room. "But we have to either do it tomorrow or just forget about it. And nobody can find out, is that clear?"

"In other words, this isn’t something you can use to let Carrow accept you as a beater, Al,” Mulciber muttered. Avery rolled his eyes.

"I know, I know," he said, "I don’t even care, all I want is for Gryffindor to lose."

"I want Gryffindor to lose, too," a familiar voice said, instantly souring Tom’s mood. Nott sat down on the couch with them, and for once he seemed far too annoyed to bother Tom with his long stares and unsettling comments. "I bumped into Bertie Higgs on my way back here, and Circe, he’s the most annoying Gryffindor I’ve ever had the displeasure of speaking with."

"Higgs is their Seeker, isn’t he?" Avery said. "Hmm ..."

"No," Mulciber suddenly said, narrowing his eyes at Avery. "No."

"I’m just thinking," Avery drawled, "we do need someone who’s actually knowledgeable on these matters..." Tom sighed, knowing already where this was going.

"The less people who get involved, the better," Mulciber argued. "It’s for his own good."

"Let him be the judge of that," Avery said, and turned to Nott. "We’re going to sabotage the Gryf—"
"I’m in," Nott cut in instantly. "Forget hexing them, I can be first in line to punch Higgs right in the —"

"Good," Mulciber interrupted. "You two can take care of distracting the team right after practice tomorrow, while Tom and I sneak into their locker rooms to do some hexwork."

"Why at that time?" Tom asked. "Wouldn’t it be better to do that at a time when the team is not practicing?"

"The locker rooms stay closed unless the teams are on the field," Nott explained, and leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Don’t hold back on the hexes when you’re in there. A few broken bones are normal in Quidditch."

"I’m not going to do anything that can get me expelled," Tom replied, instantly thinking of Harry’s possible reaction. "If you want broken bones, you can make that happen yourself."

"Fine," Nott said, eyeing Tom with no small amount of disdain. "But do remember to use something better than a tickling jinx."

"Tomorrow morning is our window of opportunity," Avery said. "Everyone must be awake and ready to do their part at eight in the morning. Elliot?"

"I’ll be awake, don’t worry," Mulciber promised. "Bright and early."

"I’ll believe it when I see it," Avery said.

The following morning Mulciber had indeed proven them all wrong, and Tom was reluctantly impressed.

"If only you had this energy for your studies," Tom said, and Mulciber grimaced.

"You sound like my mum," he said. "Don’t expect this to happen again."

"Not unless we’re out to make Gryffindors miserable, you mean," Avery said. Mulciber shrugged.

"We all have the little things that make us happy," he said. "Should we get going now? Their practice time will be over in twenty minutes."

'I didn’t know that Mulciber’s dislike of Gryffindors is such a motivator for him," Tom thought, holding back his urge to smile. While he did consider Mulciber to be his best friend at Hogwarts, it was always good to know what made people tick. With Mulciber, finding his tick had been harder than expected.

"There they are," Nott said as soon as they reached the edge of the Quidditch pitch. He was scowling, and what was it with Gryffindors bringing out such reactions from Slytherins? Tom found it interesting, but hard to understand. He didn’t hate Gryffindors.

"Tom and I will head towards their locker room," Mulciber said, pulling Tom away from Avery and Nott. "You two, do your thing."

"I’m going to fistfight somebody," Nott said, and began heading towards the Gryffindor team that had just now come back to the ground, presumably for more instructions of some sort. Avery, suddenly looking rather alarmed, ran after him.

"We have to be fast," Mulciber said. "You know what to do, right?"
"Of course," Tom replied. He would have contributed with his ideas earlier but... he didn’t quite trust any of his three partners in crime to not put the blame on him, should they be caught, if he had taken a leading role in this... mission. Now, at least, he could argue a lesser punishment for himself if it ever came down to that. "Let’s go, and be fast."

And quick they were, working as fast as they could. Subtle hexes on the benches that would make anyone sitting there feel physically heavier and heavier, resulting in slow reflexes and sluggish movements. Another hex to make anyone going in through the door feel sleepy and distracted. Tom wasn’t sure for how long his hexes would last, but this was the first time he had the opportunity to practice any of them, and enjoyed the experience immensely.

"Are you done?" Mulciber asked, rising from a crouching position he had taken while fiddling with something in the showers. "Let’s get out of here, who knows when they will turn up."

Tom had thought that they would head straight back to the Slytherin common room but realized that instead, Mulciber was leading them to where Nott and Avery were still arguing with the Gryffindor team. Interestingly, two Gryffindors were holding one of their team mates back, whereas Nott was sporting a bloody nose.

"Now do your thing," Mulciber whispered, slowing down to let Tom walk in front of him. "The diplomatic thing, I mean. Get us out of this."

Perhaps Mulciber thought that it wasn’t a fun task, but for Tom, this was exactly what he wanted to do. Being known as the peacekeeper would make it easier for him to gain foothold in the other Houses and establish a reputation independent of the reputation of the Slytherin House. He, simply put, would rise above such definitions.

Just like he wanted.

* 

Three days after Chamberlain’s resignation, Harry found himself at the House of Commons, wearing his Witness robes and watching Winston Churchill prepare to give his first official speech as a Prime Minister. Harry could hear the people around him talking; some were anticipating Churchill’s speech with optimism, while others were upset by the resignation of Chamberlain. But when Churchill began speaking, everyone fell silent.

"I beg to move," Churchill began, "that this House welcomes the formation of a Government representing the united and inflexible resolve of the nation to prosecute the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion."

"It’ll take a lot before we reach that point," Harry thought, shaking his head. 'Merlin... I’ll never stop being thankful for being here with Tom.' Just the thought of the boy having to somehow survive the trauma of war without anyone to support him made Harry feel sick.

"On Friday evening last, I received His Majesty's commission to form a new Administration," Churchill continued. "It is the evident wish and will of Parliament and the nation that this should be conceived on the broadest possible basis and that it should include all parties, both those who supported the late Government and also the parties of the Opposition. I have completed the most important part of this task."

"How inclusive of him," someone nearby murmured, receiving a snort of contempt in return.

"Which part?" someone else hissed in response. "That continental sense of style or actually
"A War Cabinet has been formed of five Members, representing, with the Opposition Liberals, the unity of the nation. The three party leaders have agreed to serve, either in the War Cabinet or in high executive office. The three Fighting Services have been filled. It was necessary that this should be done in one single day, on account of the extreme urgency and rigour of events. A number of other positions, key positions, were filled yesterday, and I am submitting a further list to His Majesty tonight. I hope to complete the appointment of the principal Ministers during to-morrow. The appointment of the other Ministers usually takes a little longer, but I trust that, when Parliament meets again, this part of my task will be completed, and that the administration will be complete in all respects. I considered it in the public interest to suggest that the House should be summoned to meet today."

'It's a pity that Stephen isn't here,' Harry thought. 'I wonder if this speech is being broadcasted. If so, I'll make sure to discuss it with him later. I don't know anything about the party leaders or the War Cabinet.' The little that Hermione had made him read years ago had been long forgotten.

"Mr. Speaker agreed, and took the necessary steps, in accordance with the powers conferred upon him by the Resolution of the House. At the end of the proceedings today, the Adjournment of the House will be proposed until Tuesday, 21st May, with, of course, provision for earlier meeting, if need be. The business to be considered during that week will be notified to Members at the earliest opportunity. I now invite the House, by the Motion which stands in my name, to record its approval of the steps taken and to declare its confidence in the new Government."

Oh, Merlin. Hermione. And Ron. He still missed them regularly, but time had made that separation easier to bear. Not to mention that by now Harry really couldn’t imagine his life without little Tom in it. In the beginning, so long ago, Harry had wondered if he had been mad to give up his friends and his life for this mission. But ultimately, even if he had never grown to care for Tom the way he did, his motivation boiled down to a simple fact: he would do anything, even give up on his existing relationships with his friends, if it meant preventing Voldemort from happening.

“To form an Administration of this scale and complexity is a serious undertaking in itself, but it must be remembered that we are in the preliminary stage of one of the greatest battles in history, that we are in action at many other points in Norway and in Holland, that we have to be prepared in the Mediterranean, that the air battle is continuous and that many preparations, such as have been indicated by my hon. Friend below the Gangway, have to be made here at home. In this crisis I hope I may be pardoned if I do not address the House at any length today. I hope that any of my friends and colleagues, or former colleagues, who are affected by the political reconstruction, will make allowance, all allowance, for any lack of ceremony with which it has been necessary to act.”

Churchill paused, then, and took a moment to look at the people attending his speech. He then continued, his voice steady, "I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this government: I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat.”

Harry knew that he should try and figure out what Grindelwald was up to, and do his best to avoid being distracted by the Muggle war. In the end, he never did find out whether or not Grindelwald had had an impact on Tom’s desire to become a Dark Lord.

He couldn’t just… ignore Grindelwald completely. Sure, he wasn’t about to do anything – he’d
leave that for Dumbledore – but he wanted to know more about the Dark Lord’s movements. Especially since the older wizard had expressed clear interest in the Elder Wand.

"We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.”

‘And then Black’s involvement in all this,’ Harry thought, sighing in frustration. If there was one factor he suspected he’d eventually have to do something about, it was Black. The man was dangerous and unpredictable, and Harry wasn’t about to allow him skulk around and be a possible threat to Tom’s safety.

"Let that be realised; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, come then, let us go forward together with our united strength.”

One wrong move from Black, and Harry would do something about him. For Tom’s sake.

* *

Abraxas Malfoy was comfortable in his small hiding spot in his father’s office. Tucked away in a hollow space behind a portrait, the boy had curled up with an animated book of the Goblin Wars without even his father knowing where he was. It was fine, really. Aunt Madeleine was too sick to spend time with him today, and his mother was being fitted for a new collection of robes by Florentia Pembroke herself. His father, busy with some kind of work that Abraxas didn’t care to find out about, had been working silently for nearly two hours now.

And then, a house-elf popped in.

"Master Malfoy,” the thing squeaked. ”Master Black is here to see Master Malfoy. Master Black says it’s very, very important.”

Abraxas didn’t know the Blacks well, and the little that he did know about them didn’t make him interested in finding out more. Mrs. Black – Lady Black, as his mother had insisted on calling her – had been a terrifying woman. Lord Black was simply unpleasant. Orion and Lucretia, whom Abraxas had had to spend some time with, were boring and didn’t much care about reading, or history, or interesting war tales.

"Why in Circe’s name would he be here,” Abraxas’s father muttered, clearly displeased. ”Well then, lead him in.”

Abraxas knew that he should have taken that opportunity to make his presence known and leave the office, but the risk of bumping into Lord Black was too great. Therefore, he stayed put, quiet as a mouse.

"Marchosias,” Lord Black said, stepping into the office. ”Kind of you to meet me on such short
"Well, you did come all the way here," Abraxas’s father said dryly. "Sit down. What can I help you with?"

Lord Black sat down on one of the creakier chairs and sighed heavily. "Well, my friend, I did promise to visit you again to discuss certain political movements one ought to support."

"Arcturus," the boy’s father said sharply. "I’ve told you – several times by now – that I have no interest in getting involved. That Dark Lord and his activities are of little interest to me."

"Can you honestly tell me – look at me, and be honest – that you’re perfectly fine with the flood of mudbloods entering our society?"

"I’m _not_. I don’t care for their kind, and I _do not_ want to see them as anything more than street sweepers or shop assistants. But I also have no interest in getting involved in any of the business you’ve spoken to me about."

"You’re betraying everything your ancestors believed in," Lord Black said, his voice angrier than Abraxas had ever heard it before. " _You_ will be part of the reason why this society falls, why their kind will rise to power and turn _us_ into their servants."

"I don’t think so," his father replied, sounding surprisingly confident in the face of confrontation. "Arcturus, you’ve spoken of systematic killing. Of murder. Of crimes that could land us both in Azkaban."

"In ordinary times, those would be extraordinary measures," Lord Black said. "But these are no ordinary times, and the Dark Lord Grindelwald is no ordinary wizard. Not taking the right kind of action now can lead to devastation in the future, and who will you blame then? Who will you blame when your wife will be bedded by mudbloods, your son sodomized by their kind?"

" _Arcturus!_ " Abraxas’s father was angry. So very clearly angry, and even though Abraxas hadn’t really understood what Lord Black had meant by his words, he knew that it must have been bad. " _Get out_. You’ve crossed too many lines for me to welcome you here anymore."

"You’re a _fool, _" Lord Black snapped. "Weak willed and a coward with no vision. Your sympathy for their kind will come and haunt you, Marchosias."

Abraxas grimaced, his dislike towards Lord Black intensifying from earlier. His father, however, seemed to be in control of his anger when he replied, " _Is that a threat, Arcturus? _"

"Consider it a warning. In matters of war you can either stand with us, or stand with the enemy. When our kind is being attacked—"

"There are no attacks, for Circe’s sake!"

"—and invaded, anyone standing on the side-lines will not be considered a friend worth saving."

Silence fell upon the office room for a few moments before Abraxas’s father took a deep sigh, and spoke again with a considerably calmer voice.

"If that was all, Arcturus, I advise you to leave. Do not come back."

"I’m disappointed in you," Lord Black said, as if he had _any right_ to feel disappointed. Abraxas could hear him stand up, and move closer to the door. "I’ve warned you, time and time again. Know
that you will not find a friend in me once you’re left to face the reality of what you have willingly walked into.”

”I think I’ll take my chances.”

“If that is your play, then so be it.”

When Lord Black left, Abraxas, still in his hiding place, wasn’t sure of what to do. His father took a deep sigh and sat silently for a few moments, before cursing quietly.

Whatever he had witnessed clearly hadn’t been good.

He just didn’t know how bad it was, either.
Taking Shape

1940

Tom wasn’t exactly seeking out opportunities to establish a better foothold in Slytherin— okay, yes, he was. But he hadn’t arranged for anything to happen, or even schemed to trick other people into making anything happen either. Therefore, when an opportunity surfaced all on its own to help Tom ahead, wouldn’t it have been a crime to let it go by unutilized?

And Harry damn well hadn’t raised a criminal.

’Intentionally,’ Tom amended a moment later. Harry hadn’t intentionally raised a criminal. Besides, it wasn’t as if Tom was actually a criminal - you weren’t a criminal unless you had a record. And even if he was one - or were to ever become one - it was something he had pursued independently, without Harry’s involvement. And, really, it wasn’t a problem unless Harry found out about it, and Tom wasn’t planning on letting that ever happen.

He had left Avery and Mulciber - and, ugh, Nott - after he had managed to extract them from the clutches of the Gryffindor Quidditch team without any bloodshed. He didn’t know where they were now, but it was likely that Mulciber would make his way back to the common room soon enough for another one of his naps. Tom had decided to not wait for them and returned to the common room alone to read one of his many books. Except, less than five minutes ago, an older Slytherin girl sat down on one of the couches nearby, with a snake on her lap. The small snake was hissing in contentment, and the witch - a Diggory, if Tom remembered right - was petting its tiny, scaly head with her fingertips.

"Say,” Tom started, catching the girl’s attention. "What does it mean when you can converse with snakes?"

"Converse?” Diggory repeated questioningly. "You mean speak to them? Or understand them?"

’What can you infer from the word with?‘ Tom thought sourly, before saying: "Understand them. When they hiss, and you can understand what they’re saying, and then when you talk, you also hiss, and they understand you. Is that a spell or something?"

"No, no.” Diggory shook her head, and leaned forward as she began to explain: "That’s called being a Parselmouth. The language is called Parseltongue. It’s a hereditary attribute that belongs to the Slytherin lineage. Basically, only those who are descendants of Salazar Slytherin himself can speak to snakes like that.”

That wasn’t quite as good of an explanation as the one Harry had given him, but it was easy to appear ignorant and surprised. And, most importantly, secretive.

"Oh,” was all that Tom said in response. "I see. Thank you.”

"You’re welcome,” the witch replied, and allowed the silence to return. However, even as he bowed his head down to read the book he had, Tom was aware of the girl’s curious glances. It was only a matter of time before Diggory spoke again:

"Do you... know anyone... or is this for a homework assignment?”

"It’s homework,” Tom said, deliberately too fast to sound convincing. It was so easy to lie to people by pretending to be a bad liar. Funny, too. "I’m... I don’t speak to snakes.” Talk a bit too fast, slip up
and brush it off, deliver the lie in parts. Feed them assumptions that they hadn’t even said - the girl had never accused him of being able to speak to snakes. But now it was in her mind, wasn’t it? Tom knew exactly what to do, and he loved every bit of it.

"Which class?" Diggory asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Defense," Tom replied, pretending to focus on his book again. Defense was a believably bad lie. "I was just curious."

"I don’t remember needing to learn about Parseltongue when I was in third year," Diggory said next. Tom snapped his book shut, and stood up. He shrugged, glanced at the snake the witch was still holding on to, and said in an overly dismissive tone:

"It’s just something I got curious about while working on my homework. Of course I’m not a Parselmouth. I’m a half-blood, remember?" He then left the common room, not allowing Diggory to ask him any more questions.

Before this, he hadn’t known yet how he’d let people find out about him being a Parselmouth. Tom wanted the status that would come with being known to have that skill, but he didn’t want to go through the humiliation of having to prove it to people like Nott and Lestrange. Not to mention that revealing it by means of a declaration would make him seem desperate for attention, and leave him open to many uncomfortable scenarios.

Using the rumour mill to send the word out, however, would be much better. If he hadn’t been the one to say it, then no one could accuse him of lying about it. Rather than needing to prove it, people would try to trick him into doing something by accident that would confirm their suspicions, leaving him free of the burden of proof. He didn’t need to prove anything, because he hadn’t been the one to make any claims.

But oh, he’d let them find out all right.

He didn’t know Diggory personally, and doubted that she was a gossip of some sort. However, even those who didn’t engage in gossip by habit tended to do so when they had particularly interesting information in their hands. All he needed for the word to get out was for Diggory to share her suspicions with one or two people. And if she didn’t do even that, well... then Tom would simply have to wait for the next opportunity.

Because what mattered even more than getting the information out, was getting it out the right way.

There was much for Arcturus to be upset about, and on the top of that list was Grindelwald. The man was insufferable, and though Arcturus supported his cause wholeheartedly, he wasn’t enjoying the kind of involvement he had in the movement. Every meeting he had with the Dark Lord made the alliance with him less and less appealing. It didn’t particularly help that Grindelwald was the kind of a man who thought of the ones around him as followers and not allies. And while others may very well be followers, Arcturus sure wasn’t. Not like them.

Men like Grindelwald didn’t know that initial loyalty wasn’t lasting. They could entice someone to join them and swear loyalty with full conviction, but they’d forget that they needed to reinforce that loyalty. That even the most loyal soldiers needed reasons to remain so. A handful of lousy missions -errands, really - that were far below his level of skill were more of an insult than anything else.

'I wonder when Grindelwald will ask me about Harry again,' Arcturus suddenly thought. The Dark
Lord did have some sort of designs for the younger wizard, after all. Unlikely to be similar to those that Arcturus himself had, but designs nonetheless. Perhaps if Harry proved to be difficult, or decided to misbehave, Arcturus would complete his mission. For now, though, Grindelwald would just have to wait.

He still lacked a reason to maintain a regular contact with Harry. Sharing more information about Grindelwald was tempting, but there wasn’t much that he could safely share. Unless, of course, he went ahead with implicating the Malfoys.

‘Marchosias’s involvement in a purge movement would sound realistic to someone who only know the Malfoys by reputation,’ Arcturus thought, feeling immensely gleeful at the thought of ruining Marchosias’s standing for something the man had refused to do. What did it matter if the fool had chosen to not get involved? He was a Malfoy! People would think that he was involved regardless!

His last meeting with Marchosias had not gone the way he’d wanted, and the way the man had spoken to Arcturus had been nothing short of insulting. Despite their ups and downs throughout the years, this was the first time Marchosias had so decisively refused a recommendation from the House of Black. And that was the problem with families like the Malfoys, wasn’t it? People keep regarding them so highly, that they forget their French roots and begin to believe in their own hubris.

They’d do well with a setback, wouldn’t they? Certainly, they’d learn some humility. And perhaps once humbled, they’d see reason.

It was very satisfying, Tom noticed, when people believed in the impression he had constructed for them of himself. When the rudeness that usually went hand in hand with House rivalries didn’t touch him, as people didn’t quite know how to treat him. A collection of contradictory details and small but significant clauses, Mulciber had said a while ago.

"You’re like the small print in a contract,” Pucey had pitched in with. "You’re a Slytherin, but a half-blood. You’re not mean, but you’re not approachable either. You’re clearly not friends with Lestrange, but he’s not bothering you anymore. People don’t know what to take from that.”

That was good. That was exactly how Tom wanted it, because there was nothing better than being known as the decent one in a group of reluctantly respected individuals. People wouldn’t be suspicious of him, but neither would they approach him with requests that would test his feigned altruism. He wanted to establish a reputation as the finest and most socially accepted Slytherin that had ever crawled out of the dungeons, and if it meant needing to occasionally trample on the reputations of his fellow Slytherins, then, well... not exactly his problem, now was it?

It was for the purpose of maintaining this careful practice of impression management that caused Tom to stop his trek towards the library when he saw a familiar Ravenclaw sitting on her own in an alcove. Juliet? Julia? Jill? Something-or-other Landley? No, Landry. One of the two Ravenclaw girls he had met a while ago in the library. She had been comforting her downtrodden friend then, but now it seemed that trouble had found her, too.

Most importantly, however, she was a Pureblood. And Tom needed to collect all the Purebloods that he could, without making it seem like he was doing any collecting at all.

"Landley,” he said, approaching the witch. "You look troubled.”

The witch startled, and turned to look at him with a surprised expression, before she recognized him. "Riddle. Hi.”
"Hello."

"Eliza’s family is still safe, if you were wondering,” Landley said, and it took Tom a second to remember who on earth this Eliza was: it was Dewitt, the other Ravenclaw he had met with Landley. He hadn’t been wondering about her at all, to be honest, but why correct Landley’s assumptions?

"That’s good to know,” Tom said, “but I doubt you’re moping here on your own for the sake of Dewitt’s family.”

"My troubles are significantly less severe than hers,” Landey pointed out, before she sighed, and slumped down again. "It’s just... stuff. As a muggle-born in Slytherin, I think you can guess what I mean when I say that.”

"You’re a pureblood,” Tom pointed out, again not bothering to correct the girl’s assumption about him. She’d hear it from someone else, soon enough, that he was a half-blood. Emphasizing it now to her would make it look like Tom cared about the difference too much, which wouldn’t fit into the image that he was working hard on building.

Well, maybe not working hard yet, but... he was working on it.

"I’m a witch,” Landley said. "And I want to work in the ministry. But, you know, that’s not... a socially acceptable career path for a witch in this day and age, I suppose. It’s frustrating that even America allows witches to hold positions in the government – their president is a woman, for Morgana’s sake! And yet the ministry here doesn’t want witches working at any important government positions. You’d think that since England does have a crown princess, that the situation would be different. Princess Elizabeth will be a queen some day! But no! Rather than allow witches in, they’ll keep hiring their sons, and their friends’ sons, not particularly caring about whether they would be competent or not. And then people wonder why we end up with incompetent buffoons in the ministry. They would rather keep hexing their own behinds than admit that a witch can do the jobs they’re desperately holding on to.”

"That’s very...” Tom paused, searching for the right word, before settling for ”counterproductive. Do they officially exclude women, or is it an unwritten rule?”

"It’s a bit of both, really,” Landley sniffed. "Witches can apply for ministry positions, but in order to qualify, everyone must have an apprenticeship license for political and governmental studies. However, apprenticeship contracts are very outdated - not that everyone agrees - and witches are considered unfit for government or military apprenticeships. There are some exceptions, but... those witches had incredibly strong connections and recommendations. Which I don’t have in that field. Everyone in my family is a healer or a potioneer.”

"That sounds like a loss of potential resources for the ministry,” Tom said, not entirely surprised by what he was being told. It wasn’t as if he was concerned about women’s rights out of personal interest - he wasn’t a woman, and neither was Harry, so it wasn’t exactly his problem. However, there was no denying that witches and wizards were not inherently unequal, and matters such as competencies and capabilities had nothing to do with gender, and everything to do with the individual. Therefore, excluding witches seemed like a terrible waste of resources.

And that was something Tom didn’t like.

"The other witches that managed to get into the ministry,” Tom said. "Have you contacted any of them to ask for an apprenticeship?”

"Witches in the government don’t take apprentices,” Landley replied immediately.
"Haven’t done so yet, you mean,” Tom said pointedly. Landley looked both hopeful and hesitant, before she nodded.

"I’ll... owl them,” she decided. "I’ll ask. At this point, I have nothing to lose. Right?"

"Right,” Tom said, thrilled at the prospect of having someone in the ministry who owed him something. "Tell me how it goes."

"I will,” Landley promised, and smiled down at the boy. "Thanks, Riddle. I won’t forget this."

’You better not,’ Tom thought as he watched the witch leave. ’Because some day I will come back to collect my dues for all these favours, and you best be ready for it.’

*

Meeting Stephen and Lavinia for breakfast at Babbitty’s had been the right thing to do, Harry decided once he had actually sat down to eat. He hadn’t realized how much he needed people around him before, and how much the company of others - or the absence of it - could affect him.

"I’ve been listening more to the muggle radio channel,” Lavinia said, leaning over the counter and looking at Stephen and Harry. "It’s all doom and gloom, apparently.”

"Well, that’s war,” Stephen replied. "Have you heard anything in regards to Dunkirk? The evacuation is set to begin on the twenty-sixth. That’s less than a week away.”

"Not really,” Lavinia said. "But it’s good news, right?"

"Absolutely,” Harry agreed. "But it also means that we’ll be allocating desperately needed defense forces to pull it off. That puts a strain on us here.”

"The wizarding areas are adequately protected,” Stephen continued, "but the muggle ones? Not nearly well enough. And if the rumours of a Dark Lord are true – well, they are, but if the rumours of him having plans for us – striking Britain now would be... ideal, to some. London will definitely be targeted.”

"Other cities will be safe?” Lavinia asked, surprised. "Are you sure?"

"No, no, that is not at all what I meant,” Stephen hurried to explain. "With the resources that Germany has, no area is off-limits.”

"Muggle weaponry has evolved, too,” Harry said. "And Germany has strong allies.”

"It's not looking good,” Stephen agreed tiredly, frowning. "The Germans won the Battle of Zeeland, and Amiens in France is under German rule as well. Not to mention that Belgium is definitely going to surrender to them soon.”

"There are some good news that I've heard in the radio,” Lavinia pointed out. "I specifically make sure to keep those in mind. Maybe Belgium will hold on! Our troops will leave Norway soon, right? And Iceland is secured now, too.”

Harry, who hadn't even known that there were British troops in Norway, or that they were invading Iceland, sighed into his drink. Then again, didn’t the retreat of the British troops mean that Norway would be left for the Germans? "Good news is something that we definitely need to keep an ear out for. Merlin knows that the longer this goes on, the more precious these good news will become.”
"I'll remind you two, then," Lavinia promised with a warm smile. "Whenever I hear something good and uplifting, I'll share it."

"Much appreciated," Stephen said, giving Lavinia a look that Harry didn’t know how to decipher, but felt awkward because of it nonetheless. Lavinia ducked her head, and Harry could see her ears turning red. When she turned to tend to another customer for a moment, there was a bright smile on her face.

"Do you really think that the Dark Lord will be involved in the war?" Harry asked. "What about the British wizards and witches that sympathize with him?"

"Oh Merlin, *those*," Stephen sneered. "There’s no doubt that the Dark Lord will be involved. We just don’t know how, and as long as he isn’t here on the island, there’s very little that we can do."

"You haven’t considered putting together a team and sending them after him?"

"Unfortunately I do not have the authority to do such a thing, even if we did have the resources. However," Stephen said, "when it comes to those who sympathize with the Dark Lord - we are looking to... keep an eye on them. Unfortunately sympathizing with him isn’t a crime, but we might find something useful out through them."

"Makes sense," Harry said with a nod, just as Lavinia returned.

"Poor Mr. Doyle," she sighed, leaning against the counter and nodding at the customer she had just handed an entire pint of firewhisky to. "His bookkeeper has been threatening to quit for weeks, and it’s looking more and more likely that he’ll go through with it. Mr. Doyle is very bad with numbers, but you can’t trust just anyone with a job like that."

"Why would he quit?" Harry asked, confused. Was working for Doyle really that bad? Was he a shop-owner? Harry was sure he had seen the man tending to a sports equipment store nearby. Lavinia shrugged and shook her head.

"He’s French," she replied. "The bookkeeper, I mean. He was nervous about the war back home, I guess."

"Is he going to go back to France, then? Surely staying here would be safer!"

"Besides," Stephen said, "no matter the dangers ahead, it’s surprising that someone is in such a rush to leave England."

"It’s hard to imagine that there’s a war happening," Lavinia confessed sheepishly. "I mean, I know of it, of course. I hear news about it, and you two talk about it too, but... everything is so peaceful here, it’s odd to think that it wouldn’t just continue like this until the end."

"It’s unlikely that Vertic Alley will suffer," Stephen told her. "This place is as well protected as Diagon Alley, what with the housings of government officials and other important people in this area. Other towns, however? They might end up with a worse deal eventually."

"Let’s hope for the best, regardless of what we fear," Lavinia insisted. "It’s not as if we will be attacked tomorrow, right?"

"No," Stephen agreed. "Not tomorrow."

Not in England, at least.
It took nearly a week for something to happen in regards to the Diggory situation. It started with Avery, shifting nervously around Tom for nearly the whole seven days. Nott kept giving him odd looks, and Lestrang kept more of a distance than ever before. Tom expected Mulciber to start acting differently too, but instead of acting anything like Avery, Mulciber simply sat down next to Tom in the common room at the end of the seventh day and said:

"There’s a rumour that you’re a Parselmouth."

"Oh, Merlin," Avery moaned, wringing his hands in distress. "I told you that’s not how you’re supposed to go about finding things out."

"Why?" Mulciber asked, but then continued, clearly not interested enough to actually hear Avery’s response: "So. Parselmouth. Yes or no?"

Tom looked at the two quietly for a few moments, before carefully marking the page he was on, and setting his book aside. He was very aware of the people around them trying to listen in on this conversation, while pretending to be doing something else. Which, good. Tom needed that curiosity, even if he wasn’t going to admit anything in public like this.

"I don’t appreciate rumours like that," Tom replied, standing up, and heading towards their shared dorm room. "I want to read in peace. Which isn’t happening here, if you two insist on asking me questions I do not wish to answer." As expected, both Avery and Mulciber followed him eagerly - he hadn’t, after all, answered Mulciber’s question.

"Sorry," Mulciber said, not sounding sorry at all, as soon as they entered the dorm room, "I probably shouldn’t have asked you that in the common room."

"Why did you, then?" Tom asked, curious. Mulciber smiled, and Tom couldn’t, for the life of him, remember the last time he had seen that ugly little twist of a smile. It reminded him of why this particular pureblood, rather than anyone else, was his best friend. On some days Tom suspected that if he were to cast an unforgivable in front of Mulciber, the other boy wouldn’t bat an eye. It was… delightful. Liberating. And he was so clever, Mulciber was.

"If you had wanted to get rid of that rumour, you could have done it then," Mulciber replied. "The fact that you didn’t deny it, means that you didn’t want to discourage the rumour."

"And what does that tell you?" Tom wanted to know. Mulciber shrugged, narrowing his eyes.

"Just that you didn’t want to discourage the rumour," the other boy repeated. "But not whether or not it’s actually true."

"You wouldn’t happen to have a snake at hand, would you?" Tom asked then. Avery squeaked, shocked.

"You mean you can? You are a Parselmouth?"

"I’m not going to say yes or no before proving it to you guys," Tom said. "So, bring me a snake and I’ll show you."

"That’s such a hassle," Mulciber sighed. "Al, go borrow Diggory’s snake. She’s the one who started this whole thing anyway."

"Don’t tell her what it’s for," Tom said.
"I mean, she’s going to guess," Avery said, heading towards the door. "Everyone is."

"They can guess all they want," Tom sneered. "Enjoy being one of the few who actually know for sure." This, for whatever reason, seemed to appeal to Avery. The boy was smiling brightly as he left to find Diggory.

"He’s so simple," Mulciber sighed, sounding almost fond. "Like an animal."

"Thank you," Tom said suddenly, looking at the boy. "For giving me the option to end the rumours. I appreciate the gesture."

"It’s not just being a good friend from my part, you know," Mulciber admitted, sitting down on his bed and leaning back against the numerous pillows he had. "I can tell you’re doing something. I don’t know what, but you are. And whatever it is, I want to see it happen. You’re always up to interesting things, even if Al never realizes any of it."

"You’re not bothered by not knowing what I plan on doing?" Tom said. It wasn’t as if he actually would tell Mulciber anything, really. He wasn’t yet sure of what his goal was in the end. "You’re content to just sit and watch?"

"Life is so boring I can barely stay awake for it," Mulciber admitted with a shrug. "That makes me appreciate whatever small surprises come my way."

"I thought you had some sort of a sleeping disorder," Tom said. "Not that you’re falling asleep everywhere because you’re bored."

"That too," Mulciber said. "Hypersomnia, one of my mum’s healers said. I’m not bothered by it."

Malciber wasn’t bothered, and Tom didn’t care enough to be bothered on his behalf either. "Okay."

"I’m back," Avery said, arriving with Diggory’s snake in his clutches. He pointedly kicked the dorm room’s door shut with enough power to make it slam loudly. "Nott wanted to follow. Asked if you’re going to talk to the snake, and that he wanted to see it. I know you don’t really like Nott, so I told him that he’s probably needed somewhere else."

'That nosy git,' Tom thought sourly, annoyed at Nott for even trying to push his way into their company once again. "I’m surprised he gave up."

"He’s probably going to lurk behind the door," Mulciber muttered quietly. "So whatever you prove here will be known to the general public soon enough."

"That’s fine," Tom said, pleased.

"Why not do this in the common room, then?" Avery asked, confused. "If it doesn’t matter that everyone will find out?"

"It’s not showing off if people find out on their own," Mulciber replied on Tom’s behalf. "He’ll still get to pretend that he doesn’t care about impressing people, while he’s actually impressing people."

"Who cares about Nott," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "Hand me that snake, Avery, and listen up."

It was… ideal. This situation that he had managed to get himself into, could become something very beneficial indeed. And if impressing a bunch of nosy Slytherins was something Tom needed to do to get a better standing in his House, then impress them he would.
Them, and everyone else.
Mussolini to Marshal Badoglio (the Armed Forces Chief), regarding Italy's involvement in the WW2:

"I only need a few thousand dead so that I can sit at the peace conference as a man who has fought."

*

1940

In less than a week, Tom would be coming back home for the summer. Merlin, moments like these made Harry marvel at how fast time went by. There was plenty of trouble that he knew was still ahead: everything relating to the Muggle war, and Grindelwald, and even Arcturus... not to mention the delicate task of steering Tom towards an intellectually and financially satisfying career, void of any murders of governmental conspiracies.

'Didn’t Doyle need a bookkeeper?’ Harry thought suddenly. Was it appropriate to ask Tom if he wanted a summer job of some sort? The boy loved numbers, and perhaps Doyle would allow him short hours. Tom was young still, after all. ‘Then again, Lavinia made it sound as if Doyle was in a desperate need for help. If we manage to convince him that Tom is competent, surely he would just be happy that someone was willing to do the job?’

Harry didn’t doubt that Tom would be interested. Whenever Tom sent him a letter that wasn’t focused on a specific subject or a question, he tended to ramble on about the shortcomings of the financial management systems of the wizarding world, and their lack of respect for accounting and banking creeds. Tom also – still, as this wasn’t the first time the boy had expressed these opinions – wholeheartedly disapproved of leaving the banking entirely for the goblins to handle: allowing such an important sector to remain under the control of a race that wasn’t subject to the same legal expectations as the people Tom could win over, wasn’t something he would ever accept. Harry wasn’t sure if Tom knew that Harry had figured out his actual reasoning behind his arguments, but decided that even if Tom didn’t know, there was no need to tell him. The boy really seemed to enjoy the thought of pulling one over Harry.

It was kind of funny. And kind of cute, too. Besides, if these were the worst kind of thoughts that Tom had, then wasn’t that already miles better than what could have been? At least Tom wasn’t out there absorbing the beliefs of blood purists such as Black.

Harry grimaced, and firmly pushed any thoughts of Arcturus Black aside.

Despite Britain being officially in a war, the Wizarding community largely didn’t seem to care. Those who didn’t think of Muggles, clearly felt that the Muggle war was something that would never reach them. Harry knew better. Luckily, it seemed like he wasn’t the only one who was aware of how false the sense of security was: Stephen had made it known that the Ministry - or at least the Aurors - were well aware of the ongoing battles and were concerned. People like Lavinia, also, who had gotten into the habit of listening to Muggle radio channels, had a decent idea of what was happening.

Curiously enough, most of Harry’s Witness missions for the past few months had been far away from the European war front and focused more on people than events. Trelawney’s messages were always short, and he didn’t know if she was deliberately keeping him away from war-related missions, or if this was just a coincidence.
'Why would she?' Harry thought then. It wasn’t as if Witness missions were selectively handed out: you went where your Seer sent you, and that was it. Was Trelawney holding back after Harry’s incident with Grindelwald? Hopefully not, it wasn’t even bad. Well, not bad in comparison to everything else that Harry had gone through. It was also at times worrying how infrequent his missions were. Even now he would be going back to Babbitty’s to spend time with Stephen and Lavinia, rather than prepare for a mission. Because, again, there were no missions lined up for him.

'Should I owl Trelawney and ask her about it?' Harry thought as he finished washing the dishes he had used for lunch earlier. 'This sounds like a potentially sensitive topic.' Perhaps he could ask the others for their opinions. Lavinia especially was unsettlingly good at understanding people.

However, when Harry arrived at Babbitty’s later on that day, any plans of asking for their opinions on Trelawney’s lack of communication were forgotten. The atmosphere was gloomy, and even people who hadn’t appeared to care much for Muggle news, were much quieter than usual. The sound of the radio was loud, but Harry recognized the melody to be one of those used between news broadcasts.

"What’s going on?" Harry asked, taking a seat next to Stephen. "I haven’t had the chance to catch up to the latest events yet. Did something bad happen?"

"Some things certainly did happen," Stephen said, his voice bitter. "Norway has officially surrendered to Germany. Malta is under siege. And Italy declared a war on Britain. Great things happen in threes, don’t they?"

"Um," said Harry. "Italy did what, now?"

"It’s that bloody Mussolini," Stephen said, visibly upset. "The fool thinks that he has what it takes to even look at us. He can barely handle Libya – actually, no, he can’t. They’re running circles around him from Zawya to Susa – and now he wants to declare a war on us!"

"Is he moving on that Hitler fellow’s orders, do you think?" Lavinia asked.

"He’s certainly keen to appeal to Hitler," Stephen replied, "but no, I don’t think the Germans are particularly interested in whatever’s going on in Africa. They’ve got their hands full with their current fronts. No, this is something that little shithead Mussolini came up with all on his own. The little rat."

"Have you met him?" Harry asked, surprised by the vehemence of Stephen’s dislike towards the Italian dictator. Stephen nodded, scowling.

"Once in person," he replied. "And a million times in action, as everything he does seems to somehow cause more problems to the IAB."

"Oh, that reminds me," Lavinia started. "What’s the difference between the International Auror Association, and the International Auror Bureau? I’ve heard people use both terms."

"IAA is the old term," Stephen told her. "It was changed last year to IAB when new regulations were put into place. People are just slow to catch up."

"If Mussolini is known to be such a troubling person to the IAB," Harry said, steering the conversation back to the war. "Then wasn’t it kind of expected that he’d eventually do this? I mean, he has very publicly allied himself with Hitler, after all. Declaring a war on Britain was kind of… inevitable, for him."

"I guess," Stephen said, sighing tiredly. "I just hope that this won’t get worse. The way things are
going. Britain will be alone fighting against the whole of Nazi Europe.”

"Let’s hope not," Harry said, though the knowledge of how much worse the situation would become in the future, weighed heavily on his heart.

"The semester just ended, and I’m already dreading September,” Avery said, throwing a sock into his trunk. "I barely passed Charms this year - what will I do when it gets tougher?"

"You could always consider studying,” Rosier said, rolling his eyes. The boy had finished packing, and was waiting for Lestrange to be done before leaving. "Considering the company you keep, I’d have thought you already do plenty of that.”

"The company he keeps isn’t responsible for his academic performance,” Mulciber pointed out, tone mild. "Al, hurry up. If we end up not finding a compartment and end up with everyone else in one of the bigger cars, I will hex you.”

"I’m done, I’m done,” Avery said, jumping onto his trunk to close it. "Also, the company I keep can make your own snake bite you, Chad, so beware. If you had a snake, that was.”

"I have no involvement in that statement,” Tom said, his desire to have a snake bite Rosier nonexistent at the moment. "Stop saying things like that.”

"I haven’t yet heard you say a word to a snake,” Nott pointed out. "Can you really do it?” Tom, who had during the past few weeks deliberately pretended to slip up and use Parseltongue around people who weren’t his friends - Lestrange, for example - knew he had nothing to prove, and no need to respond to anything Nott implied.

"Rather than worry about that, shouldn’t you be thinking of what to do next year?” Tom said. "I mean, we didn’t even win the Quidditch cup. Despite everyone’s best efforts.”

"I performed well in the games,” Nott snapped, and oh, wonderful, had Tom finally found an easy way to get under his skin? Good. "Our problem wasn’t us chasers. Our problem was Bulstrode, who shouldn’t even be a seeker, for Circe’s sake!”

"I could be a seeker next year,” Avery said suddenly. "Carrow is leaving the team, right? Since seventh year students can’t play. With any luck, whoever becomes captain next, won’t hate me.”

"He doesn’t hate you,” Nott argued. "He just knows that you’re not a good seeker. You’re also way too small to be a beater. Try chaser instead. There’ll be a free spot for that.”

"I’ve lost interest in this entire conversation,” Mulciber said suddenly, dragging his trunk behind him as he came to stand next to Tom by the door. "Actually, that’s a lie. I never had any interest in it to begin with. I’m hungry, sleepy, and annoyed. I’m going.”

"Usually you’re the last one done,” Tom said, as he and Mulciber left the Slytherin dorms. "And it’s rare to see you this snappy. Is everything all right?”

"I’ve just been getting more easily annoyed lately,” Mulciber admitted with some reluctance. "I don’t know why. Maybe I need to sleep more.”

"Your sleep hasn’t decreased notably from before,” Tom pointed out. "Maybe you just need a break from people.”
"Oh, that’s definitely something to look forward to," Mulciber agreed.

They were among the first to reach the train, making it easy for them to find an empty compartment. Mulciber was quick to settle down for a nap, leaving Tom to his thoughts. He missed Harry, and couldn’t wait to see him, but he had to sort out what to tell the man about his shenanigans at Hogwarts. Luckily, it wasn’t as if Harry had any other sources to get information from - certainly not the Blacks, despite Harry’s alleged friendship with their deceased mother.

It was then that Tom was hit with a rather unfortunate realization: he had a choice to make.

Orion Black would be an immensely useful ally to pursue. Tom wanted more from life than what society would think it appropriate for someone with his background. He wanted the jobs that were reserved for heirs of prominent families. He wanted the money that came to these people, he wanted the influence and power, if only to make his own life so much easier. He had experienced enough of being in a disadvantaged position, and Tom wasn’t keen on letting that state of affairs continue for any longer than necessary.

Meeting that Ravenclaw girl... Landley? Something like that. Meeting her had reminded Tom of the things that he, too, would need to worry about in the future. Finding the kind of employment that he wanted wouldn’t be as easy for him as it would be for his peers. He was young - too young - for many things. He knew, however, that Rosier for example was already set to accompany his father in his office during the summer break. Lestrange had been receiving training to take care of the family business for years, if he was to be believed. Even Avery wasn’t entirely ignorant of how one went about managing a fortune. Tom, despite everything that Harry had given him, was lagging behind.

Which took him back to the choice he’d have to make: if he began to actively nurture alliances with people who would be useful for him in the future - such as the Blacks - it meant bringing Harry closer to the attentions of people who weren’t necessarily good for him. Lord Black certainly wasn’t someone Tom wanted anywhere near Harry, but if he spent time with Orion, bringing Lord Black into their lives would be very likely.

"But if I don’t take that risk," Tom thought, "I might end up losing something valuable." Being friends with Orion Black would surely do wonders to his career opportunities.

"Oh, thank Merlin, here you are," Avery said, sliding the door of the compartment open and startling Tom out of his thoughts. "I can’t believe you guys just left me! I had to walk here with Nott, and then I had to figure out how to lose him before finding you two, because I know that Tom hates him. And he kept asking me about the Parseltongue thing the whole way. Anyway, that was stressful, but here I am. Oh, Elliott’s asleep? Groovy. Hey Tom, guess what Chad said after you left—"

Surely, surely, he could also benefit from Avery, somehow? If Tom had to put up with the other boy’s constant chatter, he desperately wanted something out of it.

Waiting for Tom at King’s Cross was always something that Harry couldn’t help but find enjoyable. It reminded him of his own Hogwarts years, despite how different everything was. Now, more than ever, seeing Tom healthy and happy would bring him some peace. Watching Tom work on his school assignments and read up on things that interested him - harmless things like financial theories and what not - was something that always made Harry feel calm, no matter the disasters of the world around them.

And, Merlin, what disasters they were. Wars were disasters. Man-made calamities that people didn’t understand the true devastation of, unless they observed them firsthand. Last week in northern
France over ten thousand British soldiers had been captured, Paris was occupied by German troops, and three hours ago the Soviet Union gave Latvia and Estonia an eight-hour ultimatum to surrender. Lithuania had received a similar offer yesterday. The world was changing so fast that leaving the radio for any amount of time made Harry anxious: anything could happen. And though Harry had thought that he had studied the second world war well enough, it was clear now that there was so much more going on than what he had ever read about.

‘How much of what’s happening will make it to the history books, anyway?’ he thought, before shaking his head and deciding to not hold on to such gloomy thoughts today. Not when Tom was just about to arrive.

When the Hogwarts Express finally stopped at the station, and the doors opened with students pouring out, Harry stood up. There was a bubbling feeling of happiness inside of him, and he didn’t hold back his smile when he saw Tom finally emerge with two of his friends right behind him. Tom, as per usual, left the other two behind without so much as a goodbye, heading straight towards Harry the moment he saw him.

“You’re taller,” Harry said, pulling Tom into a quick hug. It would be a few years still before Tom would reach Harry’s height, but it was clear already that he was now much taller than what Harry had been at his age. Voldemort had been a tall man, although it was impossible to tell how true to his genetics the height of his second body was.

‘Voldemort doesn’t exist. There’s no point to think of him anymore, in any way.’

“You smell good,” Tom replied, leaning against Harry for a moment, before pulling the man towards the closest fireplace. “Let’s go home. I can’t wait to be away from all these people.” And even though the home they went to wasn’t their real home in Dulwich, it was still a place that Tom had clearly gotten used to.

As soon as they reached the apartment, the boy kicked his shoes off and ambled towards the bathroom for a shower, all the while telling Harry about his year. “By the way,” the boy hollered from the bathroom. “There’s something I want to ask you about!”

"Shouldn’t you wait until you’re actually here and not there?” Harry yelled back, undeniably amused as he set the table. He had prepared a quick lunch for himself and Tom, knowing how hungry the boy would be after the train trip. "I can barely hear you!".

'It’s so much nicer here when Tom’s home,’ Harry thought, smiling to himself. ‘Living alone isn’t bad, but living with Tom is better.’ Even if it meant that the time he spent with Stephen and Lavinia would be cut much shorter, he didn’t mind.

"Okay, so,” Tom said as soon as he returned from his quick shower. He eyed the food with a satisfied expression, before sitting down and digging in. ”Mulciber and Avery found out about my Parseltongue thing. I remember that you didn’t really know about my parents much, but is there a way to find out more about them?”

"Uh, wait, what?” Of all the things he had expected to be asked about, this wasn’t it. Then again, shouldn’t he have expected the question? ”Your parents?”

"Yes. The Gaunts, or whatever you called them. And the muggles too, I guess.”

Harry didn’t know what Tom would do if he ever met his father, but he genuinely doubted that Tom would kill him in this lifetime. And as much as he didn’t want Tom to find out who his parents were, concealing that information would likely upset the boy if he eventually found out. It was one of those
things that Harry just didn’t want to take a risk with. Which was why he decided to tell him something that as close to the truth as possible, without revealing too much. "I don’t know if your father is alive, or if there are any relatives of your mother who are still around. However, there are ways to trace your heritage, and sometimes it’s possible to identify living family members that way.”

There. Nothing revealed, really, but also no lies told.

"I don’t know if I want to meet them,” Tom said after a moment, pushing a piece of broccoli around his plate. "I just want to know more than I do now.”

"I think it’s perfectly normal to want to learn more,” Harry assured him, despite his own apprehension. "I would personally like it if you were a bit older before looking into any lost relatives, but whatever you choose to do, I’ll help you with it.”

Tom’s head snapped up, and he gave Harry a look that... wasn’t easy to understand. A sharp look that seemed to go straight through him, and for a moment the boy’s features appeared almost... reptilian. Stony and unmoving, almost like a statue. The expression was gone as soon as Harry saw it, however, and a moment later Tom turned back to his place, a smile flitting over his face.

"You really mean that, huh,” he said.

"I do,” Harry promised.

Tom was, after all, his reason for being here. It was easy to forget, most of the time, but Harry couldn’t help but feel that Voldemort was a few wrong choices away. And he was desperately afraid of making those wrong choices.

* *

Hadn’t Harry just bemoaned the lack of war-related missions assigned to him? It wasn’t that he was eager to be involved in the war, but the lack of missions related to it had been odd. Now, however, he was being sent out to the House of Commons, to attend one of Churchill’s many rousing speeches. The morning following Tom’s arrival, of course.

"I don’t know when I will be back,” Harry told Tom, adjusting the collar of his Witness robes, ”but I doubt I’ll be out for longer than a few hours.”

"I think I’ll manage, somehow,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. ”Stay safe.”

"Will do,” Harry promised, before apparating straight to the Westminster Palace. The House of Commons was an easy place for him to do his job: at no point would he be in danger, and the chamber was rarely so full that he wouldn’t find a place to sit. Even now most people were kept outside, and Harry was already waiting and ready when Churchill entered.

"I spoke the other day,” Churchill began, not even looking at the papers he presumably had written his speech on, ”of the colossal military disaster which occurred when the French High Command failed to withdraw the northern Armies from Belgium at the moment when they knew that the French front was decisively broken at Sedan and on the Meuse.”

It had been a terrible, terrible loss. And as Churchill continued with his speech, Harry couldn’t help but imagine the suffering of the people who didn’t know how the war would end. For him, at least, no matter how worrisome the situation would get, he knew that in the end Britain would emerge victorious. But for all these people that future was uncertain, and all they knew now was that Hitler had pretty much all of Europe under his control.
“I am not reciting these facts for the purpose of recrimination,” Churchill said after describing the situation in France. “That I judge to be utterly futile and even harmful. We cannot afford it. I recite them in order to explain why it was we did not have, as we could have had, between twelve and fourteen British divisions fighting in the line in this great battle instead of only three. Now I put all this aside. I put it on the shelf, from which the historians, when they have time, will select their documents to tell their stories. We have to think of the future and not of the past.” He then went on to discuss the divisions in the parliament, and the counterproductivity of such divisions. The entire chamber, as noisy as its guests often were, was silent as Churchill spoke.

“The disastrous military events which have happened during the past fortnight have not come to me with any sense of surprise. Indeed, I indicated a fortnight ago as clearly as I could to the House that the worst possibilities were open; and I made it perfectly clear then that whatever happened in France would make no difference to the resolve of Britain and the British Empire to fight on. If necessary: for years. If necessary: alone.”

There was something... deeply moving in those words. Despite the fear, despite the possibility of fighting alone, those words instilled a defiance that Harry remembered from his battles against Voldemort. The resolution to fight to the very end, no matter what.

“We have in this Island today a very large and powerful military force,” Churchill said. “This force comprises all our best-trained and our finest troops, including scores of thousands of those who have already measured their quality against the Germans and found themselves at no disadvantage. We have under arms at the present time in this Island over a million and a quarter men.”

The more Churchill described the armed forces in Britain, and particularly the British Navy, the more hope Harry could see reflected on the faces of the attendees. He, too, felt more at ease. He didn’t remember how much Britain had been hit during the second world war exactly - he knew there had been some hits, but not how many - and wondered if there had been a reason for him to worry as much as he had so far.

'Don’t be stupid,’ Harry reminded himself, then. Lulling himself into a false sense of security was too easy, even with the knowledge of how awful things would become. He knew how much Britain would suffer, even if he didn’t know how many cities would be hit.

"During the first four years of the last war the Allies experienced nothing but disaster and disappointment. That was our constant fear: one blow after another, terrible losses, frightful dangers. Everything miscarried. And yet at the end of those four years the morale of the Allies was higher than that of the Germans, who had moved from one aggressive triumph to another, and who stood everywhere triumphant invaders of the lands into which they had broken. During that war we repeatedly asked ourselves the question: How are we going to win? and no one was able ever to answer it with much precision, until at the end, quite suddenly, quite unexpectedly, our terrible foe collapsed before us, and we were so glutted with victory that in our folly we threw it away.”

It was then that another man entered quietly from one of the side doors, and quietly made his way towards one of Churchill’s assistants. Harry, curious to know what that was about, moved closer. As Churchill continued his speech undisturbed, not spending a moment’s attention on the newcomer, Harry was close enough to hear the man in question whisper to the assistant: "Once you can, please inform the Prime Minister that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have just declared occupation by the Soviet Union.”

'How do things happen so fast?’ Harry thought, unsure of how to react as he watched the utter exhaustion and resignation on the man’s face. The entirety of Europe was at war, and the borders were changing too fast for anyone to keep up. How had the European countries managed to stop
warring after the world war?

"We abate nothing of our just demands; not one jot or tittle do we recede. Czechs, Poles, Norwegians, Dutch, Belgians have joined their causes to our own. All these shall be restored," Churchill declared, his voice unwaveringly certain. "What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin."

It was the fear of that upcoming battle that had chased people away from London and England altogether. People like Doyle’s book keeper. He hadn’t yet found the time to tell Tom about the possible opportunity to have him work on numbers and make money, but even the thought of it now felt almost tasteless. How could he think of finding a summer job for Tom, when the whole country was gearing up for war?

Then again, there would be life still afterwards. Did he not have the duty to invest into that life, for Tom’s sake?

"The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say: this was their finest hour."

Even though witnessing Churchill’s speech at the House of Commons wasn’t physically taxing, Harry felt exhausted when he finally returned home. He quickly moved the memories into a pensieve, and felt glad that his job didn’t require written reports. Tom, bless his heart, seemed to realize that something was amiss, and by the time Harry had sent the pensieve, showered, and collected himself, there was a cup of tea waiting for him on the table.

"Do you, uh, want to talk about it?" Tom asked, though he looked uncomfortable. He loved Harry, he really did, but heart-to-hearts just weren’t his thing. "You don’t seem injured."

"There was no fighting," Harry replied, and sighed. "It just... so much is happening, and sometimes it’s difficult to realize how big of a mess the world is in right now."

"Not much you can do about it, though, is there?" Tom said. "I mean, you’re already doing your best to fix whatever little things you can."

"I suppose," Harry agreed, and ruffled Tom’s hair. "I’m sorry, I’ve been too busy to ask, but how was your time at Hogwarts? I know you wrote most of it in your letters, but I love hearing you talk about it. Has Lestrange given you any more trouble?"

"Lestrange wishes he could still give me trouble," Tom sneered, and rolled his eyes. "He knows now, though, that nobody will side with him against me. Except Nott, maybe, because Nott is suspicious, untrustworthy, slimy, and just overall unpleasant. I really don’t like him."

"I figured," Harry said, remembering the few instances in the letters in which Tom had expressed his dislike towards the other Slytherin boy. "Is he... doing anything?"

"Nothing I could get him for," Tom huffed sullenly. "He never outright says or does anything, but he
Harry, who remembered Mulciber’s reputation from another lifetime, held back a grimace. "What do you think is making him more... vicious?"

"I don’t know," Tom said, clearly not particularly interested in knowing the reason, either. "But it’s funny."

Was this a puberty thing? Hermione had told him that sometimes certain personality traits manifest and strengthen during puberty, but did that include violent traits and tendency for cruelty? Was *that* why Tom got along so well with Mulciber? Why hadn’t he mentioned it before?

Except, he wouldn’t, Harry realized. Tom didn’t think that cruelty was noteworthy.

Harry loved the kid, he truly did. Much more than he had ever thought that he would. But he also knew better than to forget about his potential for monstrosities. This, if anything, was what he needed to focus on: not the war, not Grindelwald, not even the battle for Britain. He was here for Tom, and for the purpose of preventing Voldemort from happening. Succeeding in that would save countless lives.

Besides, bad news were bound to stop eventually, right? Harry didn’t know when the turning point would come, but how much worse the situation in Europe could still get?

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A week later, France surrendered to the Germans.
"Do you plan on meeting any of your friends during the break?" Harry asked, opening the kitchen window to let some fresh air in. "Wouldn’t spending the whole day - or the whole summer, really - indoors be a waste?"

"No plans," Tom replied, not looking up from what he was working on. Something to do with numbers and charts, from what Harry could see. "None that involve other people, at least. I like doing what I’m doing. Besides, I have to see them enough at Hogwarts."

Harry opened his mouth to argue - just a little bit, to encourage Tom to arrange at least some meetings with his friends - when a small grey owl flew onto the windowsill. The bird crooned and dropped an envelope it had been carrying.

"If that’s from Avery, I’m not home," Tom said immediately. "In fact, I’m spelunking in Vietnam. Which, funny enough, is still less exhausting than Avery’s company."

"That’s a believable story," Harry said, amused. His amusement drained quickly, however, when he opened the envelope and pulled out a card with a few lines of writing on it: it was a dinner invitation. From Arcturus Black. "Uh oh."

"What?" Tom finally looked up from his papers, and raised an eyebrow when he saw Harry reading whatever had just arrived with a frown on his face.

"Black wants us to dine with him next Friday," Harry said, and Tom instantly scowled. Surely Harry wouldn’t accept! Why was Black still sending him invitations anyway? Hadn’t Harry refused them strongly enough in the past? What needed to be done for that man to finally leave them alone?

"Then again,‘ he thought, ‘wouldn’t this help put me into a better standing?’ He had already decided to allow himself to associate with Orion, regardless of the risk the boy’s father posed to Harry. Tom knew it was selfish, but he didn’t want to give up one of his few chances to make useful connections for something that might not happen at all. Or might happen anyway. "Are you considering it?" Tom ended up asking.

"I don’t think so," Harry huffed, reaching for a quill to write a quick response. "He’s not the kind of a person I’d like to have a dinner with."

"His children will be there too, right?" Tom pointed out, the words slipping out before he even realized. "Orion’s been nice to me."

At this, Harry’s hand stopped, the tip of the quill mere inches away from the parchment. He looked at Tom with a surprised expression, before hesitantly saying: "You mean you think we should... accept?"

"I mean that Black is clearly not going to give up," Tom said, mind working fast to justify his stance on this, without outright saying that it was for the social capital he’d be gaining. "Why not run along with it to find out what he really wants, and then just... figure out how to make him lose interest. Because obviously what you’ve been doing so far hasn’t worked."

Harry bit his lip, and looked contemplative. Tom didn’t want to appear too interested or concerned, and decided to look down at his economic projections instead, despite how nervous he was feeling.
Finally, after nearly a minute of silence, Harry sighed.

"You might have a point," he said reluctantly. "I don’t like it, but I doubt Black will stop even if I reject him now. Very well. I can’t believe we’re doing this, but here we go. I’ll tell him that we will join him on Friday."

"This doesn’t mean that you should spend any time with him on your own," Tom hurried to remind him. "And don’t hesitate to hex him if he acts out of line." A cutting curse to the throat would work nicely, though Tom didn’t feel like Harry would appreciate that piece of advice. Didn’t make it any less useful, however.

"You’re that worried, and yet you want us to go?" Harry asked, pushing his response into the envelope the invitation had arrived in, before handing it to the owl. "Really?"

"It’s not that I want to go," Tom said. "I just think it might be necessary, this one time, to go for it and see if something can be done about him."

"I guess," Harry muttered, and watched the owl fly away. There was a feeling of dread sweeping into him, and he feared what the dinner might bring with it. What if Black took it as encouragement, and invited Harry again? That was much more likely than Tom seemed to realize. Speaking of which: was the boy’s sudden acceptance of others’ presence around Harry a sign for the better? He had barely managed to learn to tolerate Stephen and Lavinia, and had never encouraged Harry to seek the presence of other people the way he had done now. Perhaps attending Hogwarts had finally made him realize the importance of the company of others?

Somehow Harry doubted that.

He adored Tom, but knew better than to forget what kind of a person he was. It was likely that the boy had his own plans afoot, and for whatever reason, these plans required their presence at Grimmauld Place. Or was it the company of Orion Black, that Tom was after? He had mentioned the other boy, after all.

'Twice. I did promise Melania to look after her two children,' Harry thought, unable to deny the twinge of guilt he had for not holding up his end of the promise. 'I held back, in fear of putting Tom in the line of fire. But if he wants to associate with the Blacks anyway, I might as well do my part.'

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. If Harry was going to get into this farce of a friendship, he might as well look into the oath that Melania had told him about before her death. And maybe, like Tom seemed to think, something good would come out of it.

Merlin, dealing with Grindelwald was becoming increasingly unpleasant. As much as Arcturus cared for the cause that the Dark Lord strove for, it wasn’t worth dealing with the man as often as he did. Every time Arcturus’s presence was requested, and he made the trip to Germany, it ended up being nothing but a waste of time for him.

"You still haven’t found Riddle?" Grindelwald asked, tone full of contempt. He didn’t sound upset, but rather amused and condescending at the same time. As if he found Arcturus’s perceived subpar performance disappointing, yet unsurprising. It made Arcturus’s blood boil. At the end of the day, he was a Black. And Grindelwald? A Dark Lord or not, he didn’t come from the same noble blood as Arcturus did. And though it was tempting to admit that he not only had found Riddle, but was interacting with him, he held back. One didn’t win battles by following wounded pride.
"How hard can finding him be?" Grindelwald continued. "I found him instantly when I was in England, and I wasn’t even looking for him."

"Fortune does favour the bold, my lord," Arcturus replied, barely holding back a sneer. The German wizard sighed, and gestured for a maid to refill his glass of wine. Not even a house-elf, that one. And the wine was not one Arcturus recognized, which meant it was either cheap, or a muggle one. Neither one of the options indicated anything but that Grindelwald was a man without the refined tastes of a pureblood from a distinguished background. As such, whether or not he was worthy of blind obedience was becoming increasingly questionable.

Which was a problem, wasn’t it? Arcutur had come into this cause with such hope, impressed by the power of the wizard before him, and yet felt each meeting chip away at any possibility of a true alliance with him. If only the Dark Lord had been English, surely he would have been much more suitable. Much more refined, at the very least.

"I will need you to be more fortunate, then," Grindelwald said. "I am not endlessly patient, my friend." The threat of what failure would bring was unsaid, but there nonetheless. This time, Arcturus didn’t bother holding back his sneer as he replied:

"I do hope that your patience will stretch to accommodate the things done as favours, friend," he said, ready to activate his precautionary emergency portkey at a moment’s notice.

"Favour, Arcturus?" Grindelwald said, his voice smooth and dangerous. It did nothing but irritate Arcturus more.

"Of course," he said, feigning surprised amusement. "After all, am I not Lord Black by birthright? Am I not here, aiding you, despite benefitting nothing from it? Is my participation in your plans anything but voluntary?" Perhaps some time ago he would have hesitated to address the Dark Lord with such disrespect, but now he did it with the freedom of a man who knew that not only was he Grindelwald’s only English agent with good standing, but that he could leave the Dark Lord’s ranks without much trouble. The man wouldn’t send anyone after him in England, and even if he did, he didn’t have a duelist as good as Arcturus. Even now, with his portkey ready to get him out of danger, he had nothing to fear.

Reminding Grindelwald that he wasn’t a lord by birthright was just... for fun. Perhaps soothing his wounded pride was for the better, after all.

"I see," the Dark Lord murmured, leaning back on his seat with a sigh. "I apologize, Lord Black. I did not mean to look down on your favour, no matter how... much time it requires. You must understand, however, that I’m used to a different working schedule. When I tell one of my men to complete a mission, they tend to complete it within a few days, not a few... months."

"Yes, their competence is exemplary," Arcturus replied immediately. "However, I’m sure that much of it can be credited to their availability. I, being who I am, have my own duties in England. And as much as I care about the cause, I cannot put my work aside entirely for the sake of it. Despite that, I’m certain that as a man with a mind for finance, you appreciate the contributions that I have made so far."

"Indeed," Grindelwald replied, appearing entirely unbothered by their conversation. However, from the agitated shifting of the other people in the room, Arcturus could tell that his disrespect hadn’t been missed. Good. Because it wouldn’t do for anyone to forget who he was, and what was his position in this world. Melania had always told him that pride would be his downfall. She had been wrong. Pride had steeled his spine before Grindelwald, and had lifted him up from where he had been before.
"I will continue my search for Riddle," Arcturus then said, standing up in a clear indication of his planned departure. "And once I have found him, I’ll be sure complete my mission as instructed.” Grindelwald looked at him, before nodding slowly. The man’s expression remained pleasant, as it always was. Arcturus wished desperately that he knew any of the mind arts that could have given him a glimpse into what the Dark Lord was thinking. Alas, he did not, and would have to simply deal with his curiosity.

When Arcturus returned home, he thought nothing could possibly make his day better. However, when one of his house-elves brought him Harry’s positive response to his dinner invitation, the earlier success seemed more like an appetizer. This was what he wanted. This was what he would remember from today.

It felt like a sign.

Visiting Grimmauld Place was off-putting. It held so many memories that were hard for Harry to revisit: the war, Sirius, the Order meetings… all the worries and arguments he had had there, and the stressful days he had spent hiding from Voldemort in the dark, abandoned rooms of the house. It was odd to not see the portrait of Sirius’s mother when he entered, and in fact, the whole house seemed much lighter than Harry had ever seen it before. He remembered the first time he had visited the place, and remembered thinking of how grand it must have looked during its heydays. Well, it seemed that these were those heydays indeed.

While Arcturus Black didn’t seem to favour jewelry, he did have an appreciation for sparkling crystals and gold, and the lights that made them shine even brighter. There were large oil paintings with gilded frames hanging on the walls, and the carpets covering the floor were thick and soft. The rails on each side of the wide staircase were nothing like the blackened metal bars Harry remembered: they were silver, with fish-shaped emeralds swimming on the surface.

Amidst all this luxury, Harry was happy that he and Tom had chosen to wear their most formal robes for the dinner: it was clearly what the likes of Arcturus expected from his dinner guests. Arcturus, on his end, was visibly pleased by Harry’s quiet awe, and was downright pleasant when he led Harry to the drawing room.

"Father,” Orion said then. "Lucretia and I would like to show Tom around a bit. Could we be excused?” Though the boy had already been tall the last time Harry had seen him, he was even taller now. His dark hair had also grown a bit, and was now held at the nape of his neck with a tie of some sort. Meanwhile Lucretia - who looked so much like her mother - hadn’t grown much at all in height. The look in her eyes, however, reminded Harry a bit of Ginny. Gone was the teary-eyed exhaustion, replaced by quiet defiance. He almost expected to be faced with hostility from the girl, and was surprised when she smiled instead.

Merlin, he screwed up, didn’t he? He should have been here for these two despite his apprehension towards their father. He could handle Arcturus. Harry didn’t like fighting, honestly, but he knew that it was one of the things he was particularly good at. He knew that any direct confrontation would likely end up in his favour. And yet he had still held back, afraid of bringing Tom close to a wizard like Arcturus.

"Yes, that is acceptable,” Arcturus replied. "You will be called for dinner soon, so be mindful of your activities.”

"I haven’t yet thanked you for your invitation,” Harry said, as soon as the children left. "Tom tends to isolate himself during the summers, and it’s good for him to meet friends from time to time.”
"Your company delights me," Arcturus replied, not indicating yet how much. "However, I must admit that I do have some concerns I’d like to discuss with you. Or rather, I’d like to continue our earlier discussion regarding the Dark Lord, and Malfoy’s involvement with him."

Hermione had once told him, a long time ago, that the problem with clever people was that they were sometimes fooled by their own cleverness. The thought of being so much smarter than everyone around them, blinded them to the reality of other people. That was, to Harry, the only logical explanation as to why Arcturus still thought that his framing of Malfoy was somehow working.

"You being a Witness, your mere word would work wonders in warning people about him," Arcturus continued. "Of course, I wouldn’t ask for such a thing from you, without providing you with proof of his... standing, in regards to the Dark Lord’s cause."

"At the moment, sympathizing with Grindelwald is not a crime," Harry pointed out. "He’d have to have done something that can be directly linked to a criminal activity for it to mean anything in a court of law. Unless, of course, a law prohibiting public sympathizing with Grindelwald is passed."

"Indeed," Arcturus said, sounding suddenly very contemplative. When they, then, were informed that dinner was ready, the man remained quiet until they were all seated. Harry looked at Tom, whose expression was schooled into a practiced look of general indifference. Soon, however, the boy was drawn into another conversation with Orion, allowing Harry to focus on Arcturus again.

"Your words have merit," the man finally said. "Although to pass such a law, an irrefutable proof of the danger of Grindelwald’s activities would need to be presented."

"He’s a wanted criminal in most countries," Harry pointed out. "That shouldn’t be difficult."

"To some people the criminality of his activities are of little concern," Arcturus said. "It doesn’t matter that he’s a criminal, if it’s for the right reasons. To them, I mean."

"Right reasons?" Harry repeated. "Such as?"

"His cause," Arcturus said. "Many believe in it, and thus they justify any feelings of sympathy towards it." Harry thought of people who, even after knowing everything that was to be known about Nazis, would glorify their atrocities and downplay their crimes. He knew that what Arcturus was telling him was true: there would be people who’d oppose the mere idea of legally condemning discrimination.

As much as Harry would have liked to continue discussing Malfoy’s alleged involvement with Grindelwald, after dinner he knew there was something more important for him to do. He had studied the verae amicitiae for the past few days and was prepared to take the leap. He worried, however, that Arcturus would somehow be able to stop him. Or that something would go wrong. Or that they would be interrupted. It was lucky that with vows such as this one, the intent mattered more than the wording, and so he wouldn’t need to worry too much about the consequences of screwing up anything he was about to say.

When they moved back to the drawing room, Harry took a deep breath, and set his glass of wine aside. Arcturus looked more than mildly interested when Harry reached to take a hold of his left wrist.

"I know you are a very capable man," Harry began, "and that your children are well-behaved and outstanding. But no one should go through the loss of a spouse on their own, and considering everything you have told me about Malfoy and his involvement with Grindelwald, I know now that you are a good man. A man that I hope to call a good friend, as well. So, Arcturus Black, know that
for the next three years, if not my entire life, I will always be a friend and stand by your side as such. By nature of true friends.”

Arcturus looked at Harry with wide, stunned eyes, even as the vow curled its tendrils around them, establishing itself. He looked at Harry as if he was now seeing him for the first time, and when the other man let go of him, he took a step back. Unable to speak in his shocked state, he merely stared at Harry longer, disappointment and failed plans burning inside of him. There was uncertainty, also, in his thoughts. Did Harry do this to intentionally ruin his plans, or was he truly that taken by Arcturus? Did he really think that friendship was all that Arcturus wanted?

What else could he do but accept? Vows such as these weren’t easily rebuffed, and Arcturus didn’t want to risk alienating Harry at this point. This would set his plans regarding Harry back at least three years, and who knew where either one of them would be at that point?

Merlin, what a mess.

"You did something," Tom said as soon as they returned home. "You were not that happy before."

"Nonsense," Harry replied cheerfully. He couldn’t believe how lucky he had been to pull off the vow. Merlin, Black’s face has been a sight to see! The man had been unusually subdued when Harry and Tom had finally taken their leave. "You seemed to enjoy the company of Orion and Lucretia quite a bit."

"They’re okay," Tom admitted. "Almost as tolerable as Mulciber." Ah, Mulciber. Harry really wanted to meet the little boy who had managed to become Tom’s standard for how people should behave. It would, hopefully, make him stop thinking of the terrifying Death Eater with his own plethora of devastating curses, who had caused so much suffering to Harry and his friends.

"Did you guys find common interests to talk about?" Harry asked, curious to know. Both of the Black children were older than Tom, but Tom was a bit more mature than his own peers anyway.

"Orion knows a lot about politics," Tom replied. "So he talks about that a lot. Lucretia was quiet most of the time. I think she would have talked about Quidditch, but I don’t like Quidditch, so we didn’t."

"You couldn’t fake it just a little bit, to include her?"

"Isn’t honesty a virtue in this household?"

That wasn’t a discussion Harry was going to get into. "Well, I’m glad you found something interesting about Orion, then, because we’ll likely be spending more time with the Blacks from now on."

"Why?" Tom asked, narrowing his eyes. He didn’t want to worry, but Harry was very reckless sometimes. "What did you do?"

"Without boring you with the details," Harry started, "let’s just say that Arcturus Black won’t be a problem for the next three years."

"No, please do dore me with the details," Tom said. "I insist." In response Harry only laughed as he walked into his room to change out of the formal robes. Tom took a few calming breaths before he, too, did the same. He’d have to trick Harry into telling him what he had done later, when the man didn’t expect it.
Despite Harry’s odd behaviour, the evening had gone well. Orion wasn’t particularly interesting, but he had great knowledge of the inner workings of the ministry, and he liked to show off how much he knew. Tom would only need a few more visits like this, before he could count on Orion approaching him regularly at Hogwarts as well. And what a boost would that be to him! Not only did people know that he was a Parselmouth - and oh, how beautifully that had worked out - but any association with a Black would make him virtually untouchable by the likes of Lestrange and Nott.

He still worried about leaving Harry alone with Orion’s father, but it seemed like Harry had managed to handle himself well enough. Somehow.

Tom brushed his teeth, folded his clothes onto a chair, and climbed into bed. He was tired, and relaxing into the soft warmth around him was easy. The world outside seemed to be at peace, and his continued successes had put his mind at ease.

He was about to drift off to sleep, when he was startled by the sound of someone pounding on the door. Not knocking. Pounding. Tom sat up, and listened as he heard Harry run out of his room to open the door. A familiar voice - Auror Brown, by the sound of it - was saying something, his words jumbled and nearly unintelligible. Tom quietly left his bed and pressed his ear against the door of his room, to hear better.

"Calm down," Harry was saying. "I didn’t understand any of what you just said. What’s happening?"

"Cardiff," Auror Brown said after a few loud breaths, audibly shaken and shocked. "Cardiff’s been hit by the Germans. St. Mungo’s wants to take in injured muggleborn children set for Hogwarts in the area, but we need a Witness to stand by and mark down the statistics of incoming and outgoing patients. Could you—Merlin, nobody knows what happened to the Witness that was in Cardiff. Nobody’s been able to find him yet. But we need—"

"Yes, yes, of course," Harry was saying. "Just a second, I’ll wear my robes and tell Tom."

'Didn’t Witnesses have their own security systems?' Tom thought as he moved away from the door, to sit on his bed. How damaging were those bombs, if they managed to get to the Witness? Then again, it didn’t have to be the bomb directly. Did their wards protect them from falling debris and imploding ground?

"Tom," Harry said, opening the bedroom door and peeking in. "You heard, I take it?" He was wearing his Witness robes already, and leaned heavily on the doorway as he put on his boots.

"Be careful," Tom told him. "I’ll see you tomorrow."

"Try to get some sleep," Harry said, and Tom nodded obediently, though he knew that there was no chance of that. When Harry and Auror Brown left, the apartment felt emptier than it had ever been before. Tom moved to sit on the couch in the living room area instead, curling up there to wait for Harry’s return.

He couldn’t imagine what the affected areas in Cardiff looked like, and wondered how long would it take before London was hit like that, too.

When Harry returned in the morning, he found Tom asleep on the couch. He felt grimy and tired, and the sight of Tom - unharmed and safe, so unlike the children he had seen at St. Mungo’s - was enough to make him fall on his knees on the soft carpet. He touched Tom’s cheek gently with his
knuckles, before standing up to get a pepper-up potion. He knew that he ought to go to bed and sleep off the exhaustion, but he had agreed to meet Stephen at Babbitty’s in a few hours, to discuss the events that had transpired last night, and hopefully get an update on the missing Witness.

After showering - Merlin, did that feel good - Harry returned to the living room area, and found Tom sitting up. His hair was tousled, and he leaned against the pillows, watching Harry quietly.

"Hey," Harry said, reaching to pet Tom’s head, and smooth his hair down. "Decided to not go to bed after all, huh?"

"Couldn’t," Tom replied. "Shouldn’t you sleep now?"

"I took a potion, I’ll sleep later,” Harry said. "I’m going to Babbitty’s after breakfast. Want to come with?"

"Yes,” Tom said. "Why are we eating breakfast here, though? Doesn’t Babbitty’s have a decent one?"

"It’s a bit to the greasy side, and greasy food tends to make me queasy after a pepper up potion,” Harry admitted. "I’ll make us something light. We’re not in a rush, so you can still sleep for a bit longer."

"Nah,” Tom said, finally leaving the couch. "I’m done sleeping. What happened in Cardiff?"

"The Luftwaffe,” Harry sighed, and shook his head. "Well, at least now the Ministry is finally taking notice. I suppose St. Mungo’s pressured them into it."

"The hospital has that kind of power?” Tom asked, surprised.

"Well, in situations like these, yes. It’s not that there aren’t other healing facilities for witches and wizards in Britain, but St. Mungo’s is the largest and most influential one. So if majority of healers working there and their board of directors decide to do something like taking in muggleborns who haven’t been admitted to Hogwarts yet, starting their introduction to our world early, the Ministry can’t really put a stop to it. Because ultimately St. Mungo’s exists primarily for the people it serves, not the government,” Harry explained.

"I’m surprised that works,” Tom said. "I mean, it’s surprising that no politician has tried to pressure them into obedience or something."

"They might be afraid of the backlash that could come their way if they tried,” Harry said. "But who knows, really."

"I’d like to learn more about how the ministry works,” Tom sighed, and frowned. "But I don’t know if any books outline it adequately enough."

"You’d be spending even more time indoors than you do now,” Harry said, before remembering something he had wanted to discuss with Tom, in relation to his summer activities. "Say, would you be interested in some bookkeeping? Mr. Doyle who owns the sporting goods store down the street is in desperate need for someone to lend him a hand, and I thought that you might want to have some money all for yourself."

"Would that be okay?” Tom asked, feeling suddenly more awake than before. "He doesn’t think I’m too young?"

"Lavinia asked him,” Harry replied with a smile. "He said that you’ll need to read up on the tax
system, and if you pass an exam of some sort that isn’t about the tax system, you’ll be working for a few hours every day. Apparently, it’s not a difficult job, but needs some time to get used to, and may be boring in the long run.”

“Is there anything specific I need to study for the exam?” Tom wanted to know, interested, and entirely ignoring the last part of what Harry had said. Tom knew he’d have a lot to prove, considering his age, but Circe, if he started already now getting work experience he’d be miles ahead of everyone else by the time they graduated!

“Lav said that there’re two books that she’ll borrow from a friend of hers,” Harry said. “I’m not entirely sure how difficult you’ll find the study material, though.”

“I’ll be fine,” Tom said confidently. He had no doubt that there weren’t mathematic equations in bookkeeping and accounting guides that would stump him. He had already done plenty of exercises already on his own, out of pure interest, and this would be no different. On the contrary – the thought of earning money while doing what he already did for fun was incredibly exciting.

Was this what Quidditch players felt? If so, then perhaps Tom could spare a moment to feel happy for them, too.

Except for Nott, if he ever became a professional Quidditch player. Nott didn’t deserve happiness.

“Well then,” Harry said, finally finishing the breakfast preparations. “Did you brush your teeth? Wash your face and hands, too, then come have some food. We’re not in a hurry to leave, but if you want, we can drop by Doyle’s for introductions before going to Babbitty’s.”

“Sure,” Tom said, and was quick to make his way to his bathroom. Earning some money was great, but even more important was the chance to learn about how the wizarding world handled its money. Because that was something Tom truly needed to know.

He had plans, after all.
"Aachen," Grindelwald said, looking at the young German wizard sitting across of him. "Do you know why I’ve called you here?"

"Presumably for a mission, sir," the man replied.

"Black has proven to be unreliable," Grindelwald said then, his latest meeting with the British wizard still souring his mood. "And even worse, his arrogance seems to be getting the best of him."

"Am I to eliminate Black, then?" Aachen asked, ready to do so at a moment’s notice. Much to his surprise, however, the Dark Lord shook his head.

"No," Grindelwald said, and levitated a sealed envelope towards the man. "I want you to go to England, and search for Harry Riddle. In this envelope you’ll find all the information I have on your target. Find Riddle and eliminate him."

"Yes sir," Aachen said. He then continued, unable the resist: "What of Black, sir? Should something be done about him? Should we seek a replacement?"

"No need for that," Grindelwald said, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. "We have no need for Britain right now, anyway. Their wizards are weak, and their ministry is too afraid of change to be of any use. We will focus on other countries first, and once the English see how the tide of the world has changed, they will follow with no resistance. As for Black... he will be dealt with, eventually. For the time being, he is useful – as hard as it is to believe, since he does provide an abundance of resources that would be hard to acquire otherwise. So long as he remains useful, we will humour him. Regardless, you needn’t focus on Black. Your assignment is Riddle."

"Of course, sir," Aachen said instantly. This wouldn’t be his first assassination, but this would be his first visit to England. Hopefully not his last, however.

When he retreated to his own apartment after his meeting with the Dark Lord, Aachen sat down to familiarize himself with the material collected on the target. Harry Riddle, age unknown, but likely in his early or mid-twenties. A parent of one. Dark hair, unusually green eyes, and a Witness by trade. There was no indication that he was a particularly skilled wizard, or that he was related to anyone important. Why did the Dark Lord want this individual eliminated? What about him was dangerous?

Well, it wasn’t Aachen’s place to question the Dark Lord’s orders. He’d just go to England, find this man, and kill him.

'What of the child?'

Now, the child was... strange. Aachen didn’t know who had collected all this data on his target, but the target’s ward - Tom Riddle - was a fair bit different from his... uh... older brother? Uncle? There was no way that Harry Riddle was actually this one’s father. They looked slightly alike, but there was sharpness in Tom Riddle’s eyes that wasn’t usually seen in children.

'Except the screwed up ones,' Aachen though, looking down at a picture of Tom Riddle. Anyone could try to kill another person, but this Tom fellow looked like he actually would do it. He just had that sort of a face. The sly, fox-like. How old was he? Fifteen? No, thirteen. Way too young to have murder in his mind, no matter what some people said. Aachen knew that if he wanted to wrap up the
Riddle issue neatly, he’d have to get rid of the child too. Kids like Tom Riddle were exactly the ones that would grow up with vengeance on their minds. And while Aachen didn’t have a problem with dueling anyone who hunted him, he didn’t like the thought of leaving loose ends, no matter how young they were. So, unfortunately for the kid, he’d have to go too.

Aachen read through the papers slowly, taking his time with each piece of information that he needed to memorize. Then, he set a date.

He knew that with cases such as these, waiting for a long time wouldn’t be beneficial. This needed to be done quickly and efficiently, and there was no doubt in his mind that that was exactly what would happen. Witnesses weren’t known for being particularly good in battle, and if he got rid of the wild-eyed child first, there would be no one who could do so much as slow him down.

‘Pity, really,’ Aachen sighed, looking at a picture of Harry Riddle. ‘It would have been great to have a Witness in our ranks.’ They could’ve used him as a messenger, a reliable ambassador of the Dark Lord, whose words would be considered credible simply because Riddle was a Witness. Why couldn’t he be their man in England? Why did it have to be Arcturus Black? There was something about Black that repulsed Aachen - and many others as well, if rumours were to be believed - though he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was. It wasn’t just his unreliability and generally smarmy disposition. It was something else. Something that ran deeper than that.

Not that Aachen was the man to judge.

Well, Black wasn’t his problem. Riddle was. And he was going to deal with that problem before the month was over.

★

In hindsight, Harry felt stupid for having worried so much. Tom passed Doyle’s exam with flying colours, and began his job within two weeks, earning nearly five sickles a week. At first Doyle had only expected Tom to record all transactions that his store processed, carefully count the incoming cash, and finally check all orders and bills for errors. Tom, being who he was, took it five steps further by not only voluntarily preparing financial statements whenever required, but also by writing brief analyses of the financial records, writing deposit slips, and even writing checks that Doyle could use to pay his store’s bills.

Harry – knowing how capable Voldemort had been – didn’t think that Tom would ever exceed his expectations and surprise him, but Merlin, even he didn’t know how to do half of these things.

"Doyle’s just about ready to declare your boy a king,” Lavinia said, amused. "I didn’t think he’d learn everything in the books I gave him. Does he really enjoy that stuff? I don’t mind paying taxes, but I hate the paperwork it requires sometimes.”

"Trust me, I’m just as amazed as you are,” Harry said. "Then again, I suppose it would come easy to him, considering that that’s what he does for fun. I wonder if he wants to make a career out of it, eventually.”

"Well, if he does, he’s on the right path,” Lavinia said cheerfully. "You never know for sure, though. He could surprise you and decide to become an Auror instead.”

Harry tried to imagine it. "That would be... unexpected, yes.”

"Speaking of Aurors,” Lavinia said, and Harry tried not to smile at how obvious she was being. "Do you know if Stephen will be dropping by today? He’s been quite busy for the past few days.”
"I don’t know if he will, honestly,” Harry admitted. "The Ministry is going through a lot, and suddenly there aren’t enough Aurors to do everything that needs to be done.”

"Oh, like those old fools at the Wizengamot actually need protecting,” Lavinia huffed, rolling her eyes. "It’s not like Grindelwald will try to have a go at them, will he?"

"I doubt it,” Harry said. "He seems to be keeping himself busy enough outside of Britain.”

"You know, I heard he used to be a student at that Eastern European school, Durmstrang—”

"Is it Eastern European? I thought Durmstrang was Scandinavian?”

"Who knows, really?” Lavinia said, her tone indicating that she didn’t particularly care about that detail either. "Wherever it is, it’s said that they teach Dark Arts. As part of the curriculum! No wonder he became so crooked, if that’s what he was being taught!”

"Considering how many graduates Durmstrang has, I doubt the curriculum is to blame for what Grindelwald became,” Harry pointed out, thinking of Viktor Krum. "Otherwise we’d have heard of them before, right?"

"Maybe,” Lavinia said. "But really, every day it feels more and more like the world has gone mad. As if wars everywhere weren’t enough, somebody had to go and become a Dark Lord! Couldn’t he wait with that?"

"I suppose he thought he could take advantage of the situation,” Harry said, the thought of someone scheduling their Dark Lordship to a better time making him smile. "Here’s to hoping that his ideals will not gain a foothold in England. We don’t need people who support his cause making important decisions.”

"Oh, you know some pureblood families are eating up his ideas of segregation and all that,” Lavinia said, sighing. "But at least no one in the ministry is outright supporting him. In fact, I’ve heard that Minister Fawley is planning on taking a stricter stance in regard to Grindelwald. I don’t know what that means, exactly, and no one has figured out what being strict entails in this scenario, but we’re all for it.”

"That’s unexpected of Fawley,” Harry said, surprised. Minister Fawley wasn’t a bad man, exactly, and he was much more competent than Fudge had ever been, but for him to take a stance against Grindelwald this early on was surprising.

"He’s been spending time with the Italian Minister of Magic,” Lavinia said, eager to share what she knew. "Di Maria, I think his name was. Apparently, he’s a tough guy, and really dislikes Grindelwald. I suppose we’re lucky that Fawley’s got him around as an example to follow. Honestly, we’re lucky that the Dark Lord that decided to make a nuisance of himself right now isn’t British. Can you imagine Grindelwald being our problem? Thank Merlin that’s not the case!”

"Tell me about it,” Harry muttered, reaching for his drink. "We’re having enough trouble as it is. Cardiff has been hit three times, now. After the first time, we thought that was it - that the Germans were done with Cardiff. But no, they keep coming back. Everyone there is terrified of when the next attack will come.”

"I heard,” Lavinia said, sighing heavily. "I hadn’t even realized that Cardiff wasn’t as protected as London. I’m certain our wards here will hold off the worst if the Germans attacked us here.”

Harry, who knew that London would get its share of bombing eventually, couldn’t quite manage to muster up a smile. Instead, he sighed heavily, and finished his drink. "I guess it’s frustrating... how
little we can do.” The international peace agreement, however, prohibited intervention to prevent escalation. During muggle conflicts the magical communities were allowed to defend only, and even then they still had to adhere to the secrecy laws.

"It sure is,” Lavinia agreed. "Hey, my shift ends in ten minutes. What do you think about moving from here to get a proper lunch elsewhere? I’m starting to hate the smell of firewhisky and butterbeer, and I’d kill for a cup of tea elsewhere.”

"Sure,” Harry said. Tom would be working for a few hours still, and he had nothing better to do anyway. Some tea would do him good.

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John Fawley enjoyed luxury. Luxury, to him, was a product of wealth. Wealth, in turn, accumulated through investments. Investments were most reliable and profitable during steady political and economic times. When something happened to disturb the economic and political times, Fawley’s assets were threatened. And while there wasn’t much that would send him off on a warpath, a threat to his assets was one of those few things.

Grindelwald was a threat.

Fawley hadn’t become the Minister of Magic to seek power, really, but rather to be the person who could control the economic climate of the magical community: control it and keep it in his favour. Now, however, Grindelwald’s actions were slowly eating away at his carefully built system, and there was no doubt that if the Dark Lord were to begin his operations in Britain, it would affect Fawley’s personal wealth.

Rufus Copplestone, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, had just arrived to Fawley’s home for a private visit. Copplestone had first wanted to bring Head Auror Davis with him, but Fawley had advised him not to: some ideas were better pitched to one person at a time, first. Besides, Davis’s performance in investigating Grindelwald had been concerning.

"You never did elaborate on what about Davis you find so suspicious,” Copplestone said, trying to be discreet as he looked at the room around him. The rococo style of the room was nearly overwhelming, with elaborate frescos, golden stucco carvings and detailing, statues, and numerous mirrors. The chairs were bright yellow and white wood, with colourful creatures embroidered into the fabric. The tables were of white marble, and the glasses of wine sparkled in ways no ordinary glass possibly could. Copplestone had never been in such a place before, and he doubted that he’d ever come near such wealth again.

"Davis was tasked with collecting information on Grindelwald,” Fawley said, gesturing for Copplestone to sit down. He did so carefully, painfully aware of the seat likely costing more than his entire house. "Not only has his information been lacking, but I have also sensed a reluctance from him. It concerns me. Do you know what he thinks of Grindelwald?”

"Surely nothing good,” Copplestone said, accepting the glass of wine floating his way. "He might sympathize with his cause, however. Many do. Muggleborns haven’t caused any problems, but plenty of people would rather have them excluded anyway.”

"Well, that’s a pipedream,” Fawley said dismissively. "However, sympathizing with Grindelwald’s cause is a risk factor, and it must be dealt with.”

"How?” Copplestone asked, frowning. "You can’t stop people from feeling sympathetic to something.”
"It’s a bit more complex than that," Fawley started. "We will prohibit any positive portrayal of Grindelwald’s ideals."

"You can’t... prohibit... political opinions," Copplestone croaked, struggling with each word.

"Mass murder and racial profiling aren’t mere political opinions," Fawley stated calmly. "They’re stances against human dignity. Adhering to morality isn’t a slight against freedom. And if someone thinks that a law that prohibits damaging behaviour limits their freedom, perhaps they ought to reconsider their behaviour."

"I do agree," Copplestone said, "but forbidding those opinions will not erase them."

"Of course not," Fawley said, "but it will make public approval of such ideals prosecutable, and that’s almost as good. Eventually, people will learn that supporting such profiling is bad. And those who do not learn, will reveal themselves as people incapable of living in modern society. The worst thing we can do is normalize such ideas: that will give those people the impression that they are entitled to spreading their damaging ideology, and there will be always enough feeble-minded fools who will fall for it. And that will bring more conflict into our society than we need."

"That’s..." Copplestone fell silent for a moment, unsure of what to say and how to continue. He understood what Fawley wanted to do, and he didn’t disagree entirely with it. He didn’t know, however, if this was the right way to go about it. "How will you make that happen? What’s your first step, and what’s my role in this?"

"I’m glad you asked," Fawley said, pleased. "I will work on proposing this new law to the Wizengamot. I want your active, vocal support. Not just during the discussion before the voting, but starting from today. Whenever it feels natural, I want you to remark on how sympathizing with Grindelwald should be prohibited in the law. After discussing him during a meeting, or when dealing with one of his stray soldiers in the Continent. I want you to make the thought of it spread among the ranks in the most natural way possible."

"I... I can try, but I’m not—"

"You can enlist your wife, if you must."

"Oh. Oh, well. I... very well." Copplestone’s hands shook a bit as he drank some of the wine he had been served. His thoughts, however, weighed so heavily on him, he couldn’t even remember what the wine tasted like. "You do know that this will make you an unpopular man among those who currently support him in secret?"

"Those people will need to worry more about their popularity in my eyes than the other way around," Fawley said. "And the existence of people like that only underlines the importance of taking action now."

"Very well, then," Copplestone relented. He then took another sip of the wine, and thought of how to control the resistance that the new proposed law would doubtlessly garner. As terrible as it sounded, he needed Grindelwald to do something damaging to England. Or to an English wizard. Hell, a British witch or wizard. "When do you plan on proposing the new law to the Wizengamot?" How much time did he have to optimize the climate?

"Two months," Fawley said. "I will research it and prepare it myself. No one else but you and I will know about this, until the law is passed. Your job is to make sure that by the time it does, people will wonder why it wasn’t a law already. You can do that, right?"
Well, that wasn’t really a question, and Copplestone knew better than to take it as such.

He nodded.

There was something about dinners on summery evenings like this one, that Tom knew he would remember forever. Tom had a good work day behind him, he had showered and was now clean and comfortably dressed. The large windows were open, letting in the warm evening air and the sound of life outside. The light dinner had been set nicely as always, with the plates and utensils and everything else in a very precise order. For whatever reason, Harry had a specific pattern of how dinner was supposed to be set - a pattern that he followed almost unconsciously. What was funny, however, was that sometimes he stared at the set table as if it was somehow a surprise, and then deliberately changed something about it, to make it less perfect.

"How’s work?” Harry asked as he sat down across of him. "Still enjoying working for Doyle?”

"He’s so easily impressed,” Tom said in response, rolling his eyes. "I don’t think he realizes that bookkeeping doesn’t require complicated math. In fact, the toughest art is remembering how to fill in some forms, and even that becomes easy once you do it several times a day for a while.”

"Not that complicated math has ever deterred you,” Harry grinned. "I bumped into him yesterday at Babbitty’s, and apparently you’ve been saving him a lot of money.”

"I just suggested we changed suppliers for some of the products,” Tom explained. "I know that with the war, the supply chains will start facing complications if we continue relying on suppliers who – Merlin knows why – still use trains for transportation. Complications mean that the expenses will go up. I asked if he knows anyone who uses portkeys in some way, and turns out there is a witch in Albania who specializes in making Snitches, and she uses portkey couriers. Cheaper and much faster than relying on trains and unsophisticated supply chains.”

"I suppose that’s the foresight that he really hired you for,” Harry said, proud of the boy. "You’re right, there’s no telling how difficult it will be to get anything into the country once the war escalates.”

Tom was silent for a few moments, before he said: "You think it will escalate even more? Didn’t Hitler make an appeal for peace a few days ago?”

"He did,” Harry said with a nod. "Or well, tried to. You see, one of the key components of what motivates Nazis to go through with this war, is the Versailles agreement. Or the Treaty of Versailles, as some call it. After the first world war France – well, everyone, but France more than the others – imposed heavy restrictions on Germany. The Germans have claimed, ever since, that the restrictions are degrading and too harsh. This is the argument used most of the time to justify their current military activities. Even in his appeal for a peace treaty two days ago, Hitler called the Treaty of Versailles intolerable and humiliating, and that it deprived the entire German Nation of its rights. Actually, you know what, he went even further than that, dismissing the ongoing war as simply an attempt to convince Europe to revise the Treaty of Versailles.”

"That doesn’t make sense,” Tom said with a frown. "So his latest appeal was for, what, peace? For us to stop warring?”

"He called it an appeal to reason,” Harry said, remembering Hitler’s address much too vividly. The appeal had, chillingly, ended with Hitler writing: Possibly Mr. Churchill will again brush aside this statement of mine by saying that it is merely of fear and doubt in our final victory. In that case, I
shall have relieved my conscience in regard to the things to come.

There was something about those words that made Harry shudder. How could Hitler speak of a conscience?

"It was rejected, wasn’t it?” Tom wanted to know, though he knew that that must have been the case. Harry nodded.

"Yes. I doubt that everyone will be happy about it, but I believe that rejecting an alliance with Nazi Germany was the right thing to do.”

"Orion will probably hate it,” Tom said, surprising Harry. "When we talked that time during dinner, he told me he liked how organized Germany seems, despite the fact that most Nazis are muggles. Thinks they’re a nation with a purpose. I think he’d like to be allied to them.”

Well. That right there was a problem that Harry did not want to have. He was ready to be available for Melania’s children, but how on earth could he handle any sympathetic dispositions towards Nazism?

‘Then again, should I deal with it?’ Harry thought. He knew that in the future Orion would marry Walburga, and that Sirius would be the result of that union. Sirius had told him enough of his homelife for Harry to suspect that Orion admiring Nazis – no matter in what capacity – was fairly expected of him. He just hoped that Tom would well and truly stay away from those thoughts.

"Did you discuss Nazism with him?” Harry couldn’t resist asking. Tom shook his head.

"Not really. It’s not something that interests me,” he said. ”I don’t know if he’ll bring it up next time we meet, however. If we will meet, that is.”

"In all likelihood, yes,” Harry told him. ”Orion and Lucretia might appreciate having an adult in their lives who isn’t, uh...”

"Their creepy father?”

"Don’t go repeating that, please.”

"I won’t,” Tom promised, and rolled his eyes. ”Although, if Black wants someone to take care of Orion and Lucretia, why won’t he remarry? Avery says that’s what old men do when their wives die. His father has had four wives, and they just keep dying.”

Harry decided to not dwell on Avery’s family’s mortality rate. He wasn’t an Auror, he wasn’t going to dig into it. "Sometimes people love their late partner too much to wish to move on.” Whether or not that was the case with Arcturus, Harry wasn’t going to tell Tom about it.

Tom fell silent for a few long moments, trying to imagine what he would do in a similar situation. Marrying anew seemed like the most practical course of action, and he couldn’t find a reason for why Black wouldn’t do exactly that. Merlin knew the man himself had clearly no interest in his children. But when Tom voiced his thoughts aloud to Harry, he shook his head.

"It’s not that easy,” Harry said. ”I’m not saying that it doesn’t happen, but people tend to want more out of a relationship than convenience. A relationship is a bit more than the sum of its parts.”

Yeah, no. Tom wasn’t going to go along with that nonsense. ”This is why math is better than people, you know.”
"Sure," Harry replied with a laugh. "To each his own. I’m happy you’re enjoying your thing, but please tell me as soon as you want to stop, okay?"

"I will," Tom said, though he doubted that he’d want to stop before going back to Hogwarts. Everything about having this particular job was great, from the tasks to the money he now earned. Certainly, the pay wasn’t much, but it was more than enough for someone who didn’t have any steady expenses he needed to budget for.

If he could work like this every summer from now on, he just might get to where he wanted to be sooner than he thought he would.

The ministry was mostly empty and dark this late in the evening, with only a handful of people scattered in their offices, still working on one thing or another. John Fawley had dismissed his secretary hours ago, and was planning on leaving as soon as he finished the second draft of his proposal to the Wizengamot. His day had been long and tiresome, and it was only his stubborn nature that still kept him working.

Suddenly, his fireplace lit up, indicating an incoming call.

'Who’d be calling this late?' Minister Fawley thought with a frown, and approached the fireplace cautiously. As far as he knew, no one was aware of him still being in his office. When he decided to accept the call, he was surprised by the person at the other end.

"I apologize for disturbing you so late," Achille Di Maria, the Minister of Magic of Italy, said. "I called your residence at first, but I was informed that you were still working. I wouldn’t have bothered you, but there is something urgent I’d like to discuss."

"I’m all ears," Fawley said, leaning further into the fireplace. He had worked with Di Maria before, and knew the man to be reliable, if a bit rough around the edges. Unmovable and not one to play the typical political games, but fair and held the trust of his people. Whatever he had to say, especially if it was urgent, was sure to be of great importance.

He wasn’t wrong.

"My ambassador in Austria," Di Maria said, "Giuliano - you’ve met him - was portkeyed into my office two hours ago in four separate boxes. Each box had Grindelwald’s insignia on it."

That was unexpected, and extremely alarming. "That’s unusual of him," Fawley said. "Grindelwald doesn’t seem the type to do... that. The bodies he sends back tend to be... intact. Either way, I’m surprised he isn’t trying to forge an alliance."

"He knows we’re nothing like Mussolini," Di Maria said, and then sighed. "I suspect that this is an intimidation tactic that Grindelwald intends to capitalize on further. Once the newspapers publish this tomorrow, I believe - it’ll be chaos here. I would advise you to call back any ambassadors you have in Austria - or indeed in any of the Nazi-occupied countries - until he has been stopped. Whenever that happens."

"Do you mind if I share the news of what happened to Giuliano with the Wizengamot?" Fawley asked, his mind drifting back to the proposal he was working on. "I will tell you this in confidence, but I am planning on prohibiting any support to Grindelwald. I want no one who sides with him to feel safe in this country."

"Good," Di Maria said. "That’s the only way to get rid of people like that. If it goes well, we will
follow your example. Inform your Wizengamot of Giuliani’s demise, and of Grindelwald’s part in it. I will owl a brief report on what happened to you immediately, and it should reach you by tomorrow morning."

"That would be helpful, thank you,“ Fawley said, pleased with Di Maria’s contribution. “I will provide you with a copy of the proposal that I have, once I finish it. After that, regardless of what happens with the Wizengamot, we ought to arrange a proper meeting. Grindelwald will not stop his activities unless he is stopped, and we won’t be able to do that unless we work together.”

"I agree,” Di Maria said. "But any forming of an allied taskforce will require for laws such as the one you referred to earlier to be in place. We do that first, and then go full steam ahead with eliminating Grindelwald."

"Yes, that sound reasonable,” Fawley agreed, before hesitantly adding: "My condolences about Giuliani. He was a good man.” It was hard to see from the fireplace what kind of an expression Di Maria had, but Fawley could imagine how upset he was: losing an employee in such a gruesome way wasn’t easy to deal with.

"Thank you,” was all Di Maria responded with in the end. "I’ll be in touch with you soon again, Minister Fawley. I appreciate your time and help."

"Likewise,“ Fawley replied, and disconnected the call. Slowly, he moved away from the fireplace, and sat down on his chair. There was, mixed with the satisfaction he was feeling, a twinge of guilt. Giuliani had been a good man, and appreciating the convenient timing of his murder wasn’t exactly appropriate. There was no denying, however, that this would help him immensely with his argument. Furthermore, this was something Copplestone could use, as well.

Besides, nothing was off-limits when it came to taking down Grindelwald. Not anymore.
It was an unusually cold August night, and Tom didn’t at first know what had woken him up. One of his windows was open, as he had left it, and for a moment he drowsily thought that he had heard something outside. A moment later he realized that no, the noise wasn’t coming from outside. The noise - whatever it was - came from the living room area.

Quietly Tom left his bed and made his way towards the doorway. Opening the door was too risky, but he knew that noise carried on better near the bottom of the door, where there was a gap between the door and the floor. He lay down on his stomach and listened intently. Quickly he realized that what he was hearing was the sound of the radio.

"Why do they keep referring to it as a midland town?" an unfamiliar voice asked quietly. "Why not just tell us where the Germans are? What if they’re above London?" Tom held his breath, afraid of missing anything that would help him figure out what was happening.

"Wartime censorship." Ah, that was Harry. "It’s not Cardiff anymore, that’s for sure."

"It’s Birmingham," another voice, also unfamiliar, said. "They’re bombing Birmingham. I don’t know how the broadcast is getting its news this fresh, but Merlin, muggles got this information flow down."

"Radio activity is one of those things we still have to work on," said a voice Tom recognized to be Auror Brown’s. "But at least Harry’s got a decent radio."

So, Birmingham was being bombed by the Nazis. But why were there people here, at this hour?

A few hours ago, Harry had been sitting alone in the living room area, drinking some green tea and absently listening to the radio. When the evening news briefing had been interrupted by incoming information concerning a new Luftwaffe attack, he had sent a quick owl to Stephen about it. For whatever reason – well, it wasn’t that surprising – most people didn’t have radios with access to muggle channels, Stephen suggested a meeting at Harry’s place instead of the pub. Babbitty’s was sure to be open, but also sure to be too loud to hear anything from the radio. With that in mind, Harry had agreed.

With him, Stephen brought three other Aurors, one of whom brought food with him.

"Thought if we’re going to stay up the night listening to news, we might as well eat," he said. "Merlin knows I’ll definitely need the comfort."

"Good thinking, Morris," Stephen said. Harry nodded, already enjoying the company of Stephen’s friends. There was something in the easy comradery between them that he really missed. "How do Muggle broadcasters get information this fast? Do they have someone on the scene?"

"Even if they have someone there," said the Auror who had introduced himself earlier as Alistair Montague. "How fast do they get that information to the broadcasters? Dewey, your wife is a muggle, right? How does this work?"

"How would I know?" Dewey, the third Auror, said incredulously. "My wife doesn’t work at a radio station. Muggles aren’t inherently aware of how every other muggle functions. Maybe they do have a Witness system, I don’t know!"
"Or, believe it or not," Morris said, tone indicating how little he thought of Dewey and Montague’s exchange, "perhaps they have someone in Birmingham who has an actual telephone."

"What’s that?" Montague asked, curious. He then turned to grin at Harry, who couldn’t help but notice some similarities to the Slytherin Montague that had attended Hogwarts while Harry had been there as well. "I don’t know much about muggles. Wouldn’t know a thing if Dewey here hadn’t married one."

"A telephone is their way to firecall," Morris explained. "I don’t know more than that, but then again, do you need to know more?"

"It would explain how they get information so fast from Birmingham to wherever the broadcast company is based," Dewey said. "Makes more sense than them having a Witness system. How do Witnesses work, anyway?"

"I go to places, put memories of whatever I witnessed into a pensieve, and send it to the ministry," Harry explained. "But it’s for the purpose of recording history, not for relaying news. Much of what I go out to see isn’t actually relevant to Britain at all." Despite how light and easy the conversation was, no one had managed to truly relax. The news coming from the radio were scarce, and there hadn’t been an official mention of Birmingham at all. All that was known was that six people were injured, and one had died.

"The problem with attacking Birmingham," Stephen said suddenly, "is that it puts so much of muggle manufacturing at risk. If the manufacturers are eliminated, the economic recovery will face considerable difficulties after the war. And that will affect us as well."

"Why can’t we ward them off?" Montague asked. "Just set up some protective wards, and the factories will be safe."

"How’d you explain that one to the masses?" Morris shot back. "The city goes through a serious bombing, but not a single manufacturer loses anything? A bit much to pass off as a miracle, don’t you think?"

"Not everything, then," Montague replied. "Just some. Surely it’d be doable?"

"It’s risky," Stephen said. "Might not seem like it right now, but it’s one of those things that someone will eventually wonder about, and we just can’t take the risk of them looking into something we can’t pass off as a coincidence. Especially if the factories are specifically targeted - how can you explain that a bomb dropped directly above them, caused no harm? It’s unfortunate, but we have to let things play out the way they would without us."

Morris yawned, and leaned back in his seat on the couch. "Merlin, this is exhausting," he said. "Waiting for news. Next time we do this, I’ll make sure to take a nap first."

Next time. Because, they all knew, this was just the beginning.

* A week later found Harry hosting another late evening meeting with the Aurors. This time there were no fresh news coming from the radio, but there was plenty else to discuss. Tom, who was awake this time, had retreated back to his room after a round of introductions. Harry couldn’t help but feel that the boy approved of this company much more than of Black’s. Which was funny, since he had been the one to convince Harry to accept Black’s dinner invitation in the first place.

"Dewey couldn’t come," Montague said. "He’s married, if you remember, and apparently has to
"Actually spend time with his family."

"That’s what people with families usually want to do,” Morris said. "If I had a wife, mate, I wouldn’t be here either. No offense, Harry. All I’ve got is a dog, and even he’s with my sister for now."

"None taken,” Harry replied with a smile.

"To be fair,” Stephen said, "with how long our work days are these days, he really should take advantage of every free hour he has. Alistair, how is your mother?"

"Can we not,” Montague huffed. "She’s well. Still sucks the life out of everyone around her to keep on living."

"Still trying to convince you to settle down?" Morris asked, letting out a cackle. "Merlin, I’m glad I don’t have to put up with that.

"I’m twenty-nine,” Montague said, rolling his eyes. "Still young. Who gets married at twenty-nine, anyway?"

"Dewey did,” Stephen grinned, before turning to Harry. "You’re... twenty-three, right?"

"Twenty-four,” Harry said. His birthday had passed quietly, and the day celebrating with Tom only.

"So young,” Montague sighed, reaching to tug at Harry’s hair. "Watch out, soon enough you’ll be greying like us old men."

"Didn’t you just say you’re young?” Morris asked, rolling his eyes. "On other news, has anyone noticed the tension between Davis and Copplestone?"

"Copplestone’s the Head of Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Davis is the Head Auror,” Stephen told Harry, before nodding at Morris. "I’ve noticed, but I cannot imagine what could have caused it."

"Copplestone’s been expressing opinions lately,” Morris said, leaning forward. "Saying that sympathizing with Grindelwald should be outlawed."

"Why’d that be upsetting Davis?" Montague asked. "Merlin knows he’s got no fond feelings for people who haven’t been English for at least seven centuries and a thousand generations.” This was an unexpected thing to hear, for Harry. Did Black have something to do with this, or was it a coincidence? Harry doubted that the man would really go this far just to set Malfoy up.

As the evening continued, and the conversation carried on, drifting from one subject to another, Harry couldn’t stop thinking of what he had heard. He wasn’t particularly familiar with anyone in the Ministry who wasn’t connected to his Witnessing job in one way or another, and so it was impossible to tell if the idea was something that could be considered in character for Copplestone to propose. Even after his visitors left, and he made sure that Tom had gone to bed, Harry couldn’t focus on much else.

The following morning found him drinking his cup of tea by an open window, enjoying the light summer breeze of the early hours and feeling hopeful over the possible outlawing of any sympathy towards Grindelwald and his cause. Tom, who had woken up shortly after Harry, was grimacing at something or other written in the Daily Prophet. His hair was combed neatly to the side, and he was more or less dressed ready for work already. Harry would never say it aloud, but Tom’s breakfast routine was almost comical: he would get his cup of tea, a slice of bread with cheese on it, and then bury himself behind a newspaper, like an old family man in the body of a young boy.
As he was sitting by the window, he saw the owl long before it reached him. For a while he wasn’t even sure if the owl was heading for him - not until the bird landed on the windowsill and dropped an envelope right in front of him. It had the Ministry’s seal on it.

"Is it a mission?" Tom asked, finally looking up from the paper.

"Perhaps," Harry replied, opening up the envelope and reading the letter inside. It was a mission, but not one assigned to him by Trelawney. Another Witness had gone missing after the Birmingham bombing, and someone needed to take over a mission that had been assigned to them. He’d need to head to the Parliament and attend a speech in two hours.

"Am I imagining it, or have there been quite a few Witnesses disappearing lately," Tom said after Harry relayed the contents of the letter to him. "I mean, isn’t this the second or third one? All within the span of a few weeks? Not even a full month, really."

"Yes," Harry said, unwilling to discuss that particular subject with Tom. "The Parliament isn’t in a risk area right now," he ended up saying. "Besides, I’ll have my wards up."

"Didn’t the other Witnesses?" Tom asked. Harry didn’t know what to say to that, after all... didn’t they? Or had something gotten to them despite their wards? Either way, unlike some of his previous missions, this one wasn’t going to be dangerous. Attending speeches tended to be the safest of missions to Witness, as important political figures rarely held their speeches in dangerous situations.

And he was right.

Harry stood once again close enough to Churchill to hear him speak clearly, but far enough to not accidentally be in the way of someone. There were journalists in abundance present, and people from the BBC had set up their equipment as well, to ensure that everyone in the nation could listen to what Churchill had to say.

"This war is only a continuation of the last," Churchill began, "but very great differences in its character are apparent."

Harry had always assumed that Voldemort had been inspired by Grindelwald. However, now, as he thought of the differences between not only the two world wars of the muggle world, but also the wars led by Grindelwald and Voldemort... he realized that it wasn’t so. Voldemort had been much more like Hitler, and wasn’t that a painful thought. Luckily this time around Tom didn’t seem to think much of the German dictator, or the concept of genetic supremacy overall.

"More than a quarter of the year has passed since the new government came into power in this country" Churchill was saying. "What a cataract of disaster has poured out upon us since then!"

Oh, how Harry could relate. Then again, even so, at least now the people had the comfort of a unified government, fighting for everyone’s freedom, and everyone’s right to live. During Voldemort’s wars the Order of the Phoenix had often appeared to be fighting alone, against all odds, often dreading whatever the Ministry would enable next. At the end of the second war the entire ministry had been under Voldemort’s control, making everything worse than ever before. There were still some nights when Harry woke up, his heart beating hard in his chest, sick with the urge to flee from the Ministry. The desperate effort he had put into reaching a fireplace before it closed, and then Ron’s injury after he had been splinched.

He didn’t want to, ever again, end up in a situation like that.

"The trustful Dutch overwhelmed - their beloved and respected Sovereign driven into exile - the
peaceful city of Rotterdam the scene of a massacre as hideous and brutal as anything in the Thirty Years War."

The new relationship he had now with Black was something Harry couldn’t bring himself to feel good about. He knew that if Black was involved in Grindelwald’s shenanigans - and he was, Harry knew that - it would be a matter of time before trouble came to Harry’s doorstep. He only hoped that the trouble would wait until Tom went back to Hogwarts. Harry didn’t doubt his ability to protect Tom, but he didn’t want to alarm the boy by showing him the kind of spells he could use in a duel.

"The great air battle which has been in progress over this island for the last few weeks has recently attained a high intensity. It is too soon to attempt to assign limits either to its scale or to its duration. We must certainly expect that greater efforts will be made by the enemy than any he has so far put forth."

Then again, alarm wasn’t what Tom would likely be feeling. The real risk was in somehow preventing him from learning them at the age of thirteen. No matter what Tom was planning on doing in his future, he didn’t need to know battle spells for it. Not yet at least.

Besides, Tom’s happiness at getting a job had exceeded Harry’s expectations. He still felt a bit odd knowing that a thirteen-year-old boy had an actual job, but it wasn’t as uncommon as it would’ve been in the nineties. These days it was almost expected of young boys to have some sort of a job in the summer, and for once Harry felt like he was ahead of the curve in this parenting business.

Parenting. Ha.

"The gratitude of every home in our island,” Churchill said, his voice raising a bit, capturing everyone’s attention once again. "In our Empire, and indeed throughout the world except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unweakened by their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of world war by their prowess and their devotion.” People began to clap, and Harry felt moved as well. He could see a journalist in the first row wiping his tears with the hem of his jacket, before taking a picture.

"Never,” Churchill said next, "in the field of human conflict... was so much owed by so many to so few.”

The cheering that erupted was deafening. Those who had been sitting were now standing up, clapping. Harry himself couldn’t help but clap as well, thinking of the people who didn’t know the fate of the world the way he did. People who didn’t know that the war would be over eventually, who still held on to hope despite the dangers ahead. Harry knew very well how difficult it was. How exhausting it was to live in an uncertain world, trying every day to keep his faith in a better tomorrow.

"Even if the Nazi legions stood triumphant on the Black Sea,” Churchill said, his voice steady as he spoke. "Or indeed upon the Caspian, even if Hitler was at the gates of India, it would profit him nothing if at the same time the entire economic and scientific apparatus of German war power lay shattered and pulverized at home.”

When Harry returned home, he was surprised to see Tom there.

"Did Doyle give you a free day?” Harry asked. Tom shook his head.

"After you left, another letter came in,” he said, and something in his voice told Harry that whatever
the other letter had been about, it wasn’t good. "So I went to Doyle’s, did only what needed to be done today, and excused myself early. I wanted to be here when you saw it.” He then handed Harry a black envelope. The seal on the envelope wasn’t the Ministry’s, but that of the Department of Divination. Before he even opened it, Harry knew what it was about.

He sat down, earlier jubilation caused by Churchill’s speech gone. Funny enough, feelings of apprehension and dread were also yet to come crashing on him. In fact, everything felt suddenly distant, as if reality was mundane and unreal in its predictability.

"Three Witnesses were found dead,” Harry said after a moment. "Their funerals will be held in a few days. My attendance will be expected.” He heard Tom exhale, before the boy moved to lean against his side. Bony but warm, Tom wouldn’t likely realize how much of a comfort his mere presence was.

"Was it accidental?” Tom asked. "Three at once?”

Harry hadn’t even thought about there being foul play involved. "I don’t know.”

"If there was anything suspicious about their deaths,” Tom then continued. "Would your supervisors tell you?”

"I don’t know,” Harry said again. He frowned, still looking at the letter. "Why would anyone target Witnesses? We don’t contribute to any of the battles. The information we collect cannot be used for anything, including to back any political arguments. In fact, the data we collect isn’t even accessible to most people.”

"Grindelwald,” Tom said suddenly, surprising Harry. "He wants to become some sort of a wizarding overlord, right? That’s what people at Hogwarts speculate, anyway. He could be the one targeting Witnesses.”

"But why?” Harry asked with a sigh. It wasn’t as if Grindelwald could benefit from anything that the Witnesses recorded - the missions were unpredictable, and there was no way to tell whether the information a Witness was sent to collect would be useful at all. Harry had attended numerous events that provided the kind of information that was simply just... recorded. For no apparent reason.

"Think long term,” Tom said. "If you plan on ruling for a century - which isn’t unlikely, considering the average age span of a wizard - then that will end up including several generations of new people entering the society. If the recorded history has been censored, then you can justify any action your people have taken in the past. This includes any atrocities that put you into power. How can you argue against someone in that position, when you don’t know the circumstances from which they emerged? It’d be really difficult.”

"You use the absence of refuting information as a way to manipulate people,” Harry realized, before turning to give Tom a sharp look. "That’s one hell of an idea you’ve got there.”

"It’s what I would do,” Tom admitted easily, not noticing the fleeting expression of wariness that flashed across Harry’s face. "You need to start being more careful from now on.”

Harry sighed, feeling even more drained than before. It seemed that no matter how much effort he put into not getting into trouble, he still ended up hounded by people he didn’t want to have anything to do with. This was yet another thing that he would have to worry about, and there was no telling when the situation would be resolved. It didn’t help that no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t remember a single mention of a Witness during his time at Hogwarts, or even in the few years following that. It was as if there had been no Witnesses, which meant that something had happened
to end that practice.

Which meant that the danger to his employment - if not life - was very real indeed.

It didn’t help that despite Tom’s very logical analysis of the possible circumstances surrounding the demise of the Witnesses, it just didn’t seem like something linked to Grindelwald. If he had deliberately targeted Witnesses, wouldn’t that have been mentioned at some point in any of the history books that Hermione had cited? Would it not have been made into something that students would have been taught about?

In fact, why wasn’t there any mention of Witnesses in any of the books Harry had encountered? Even during career counselling, there had been nothing about it - not a single, passing mention. During the Divination lessons there were a few opportunities to discuss possible careers in the field, and yet Witnesses were never mentioned. It was as if the whole job avenue had disappeared.

That kind of erasure didn’t happen because of a Dark Lord that never even rose to power in Britain. Harry knew, from experience, that that kind of erasure came straight from the Ministry.

Fawley knew he had his flaws, but fear of battle wasn’t one of them.

He knew that there would be people in the Wizengamot who would fight tooth and nail against his proposal. Luckily, Copplestone had done his job excellently, and for a few days now several politicians had expressed their approval of anything that could limit Grindelwald’s impact on the British. Despite this, however, Fawley knew better than to assume that everything would go smoothly: he had no doubt that there were people who had already chosen to side with Grindelwald, no matter how discreetly. And it was now up to him, and him alone, to convince the majority to cut the wings of such people.

Entertaining such traitorous, selfish desires as the ones that led people to follow Grindelwald, would only bring ruin and dissent into Britain.

Despite being the Minister of Magic, Fawley had no real control over the Wizengamot. What he could do, however, was request a meeting in which he would present his proposal. A week before this presentation he had sent the written version of the proposal to all stakeholders involved in discussing and passing - or rejecting - a new law. After his proposal, the members of the Wizengamot would vote whether or not the proposal would become a new law. Had Fawley been anyone else but who he was, this procedure would have taken months, if not an entire year. He, with his influence and close connections to many members of the Wizengamot, could make it happen in a week, provided that no one influential opposed it.

When he entered the hall in which the hearing of the proposal was to be held, Fawley noted immediately who was in attendance. He was pleased to see several of his allies in their seats, trusting that they would vote in his favour, despite not having discussed this issue with them beforehand. Copplestone was there as well, of course.

"This is a closed Wizengamot hearing, accessible only to those who are legally and magically in holding of a right to a seat, and capable of bearing all responsibilities that such holding entails," Zachariyah Selwyn, the Secretary of the Wizengamot, began. "All members are present in sound mind and body, free of all tampering or influencing that may be considered coercive or non-consensual by nature. This hearing is presided over by the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Bertram Ravensdale, on the twenty-fourth of August, nineteen-forty. This hearing has been requested by one John Lawrence Fawley, serving as the democratically elected Minister of Magic of
the British Isles. The purpose of the hearing is to discuss, and vote, for a law that Minister Fawley believes to be an urgent contribution to the defence measures of our nation. Minister Fawley, you have been granted thirty minutes of uninterrupted time to present the initial proposal."

Thirty minutes had been a more generous allocation of time than Fawley had dared to hope for. He nodded, took a measured step forward and began by showcasing several photographs of the damaging things that Grindelwald and his troops had done. This included, of course, the material Di Maria had sent him. Though shocking, the imagery wasn’t surprising.

"Gellert Grindelwald," Fawley began, "is a German wizard who has declared himself a Dark Lord. His destructive actions reflect his desire to claim that title well and truly, and countless brave wizards and witches have been hurt, or even killed, by him. The threat he poses to the stability of our society is significant, and highlighted in the following observations." Determined to make the risks involved in allowing any kind of support or sympathy for Grindelwald, Fawley carried on describing in great detail some of Grindelwald’s most heinous acts, including the recent murder of Di Maria’s ambassador. The task wasn’t too difficult, as outright support for Grindelwald had been outlawed already; taking it a step further seemed like natural progression.

The first question he received after his presentation was a predictable one: "Where shall we draw the line?" Tiberius Ogden asked. "Are one’s own thoughts no longer free?"

"When thoughts lay a ground for crimes, should they not be taught better?" Fawley shot back. "Is it not a practice of a decent man to shun, rather than sympathize with practices such as the ones Grindelwald engages in? Tolerance of evil isn’t an act of freedom, it is complicity."

"But when have we gone too far?" Griselda Marchbanks asked. "With what right do we dictate what people aren’t allowed to sympathize with?"

"Do we not already prohibit approval of immoralities, such as crimes against the defenceless among us?" Fawley asked. "Ladies and gentlemen, we should not be a parent fearful of disciplining an unruly child. Boundaries of decency must be established, as is common practice in any good family. Those who do not seek to cross those boundaries of human decency will not be hindered by their existence. And those who do, must be indeed held accountable for the immoralities that they enable, if not facilitate."

"And how do you propose to enforce this law?" Arcturus Black asked, sounding surprisingly pleasant for who he was. "Sympathy without action is hard to identify. Not to mention the ambiguity of what could be considered sympathy, as opposed to simple absence of antipathy."

"The preliminary guideline would define it as the deliberate positive portrayal of Grindelwald’s actions,” Fawley said, "as well as any written or spoken justifications of the actions that have resulted in destruction and casualties. The law would be open for amendments whenever necessary.” There were other issues of similar nature brought up, and the discussion went on for longer than Fawley had expected. Eventually, however, Ravensdale called for silence to contemplate the proposal, clearly unwilling to entertain pointless back-and-forth arguing for long.

There were some hushed discussions happening, before Ravensdale called for silence again - this time more firmly. Then, the voting began.

Fawley knew that even if the law passed now, there would still be much work to be done in terms of adjusting it and making it applicable and efficient. Passing the law would, however, give him an immediate advantage, and strengthen his alliance with Di Maria. The alliance would leave him with enough economic influence internationally even when he’d eventually retire. The only thing that worried him was that unlike him, many wizards weren’t as aware of the need to maintain economic
stability. They allowed themselves to be ruled by their greed, not realizing that amassing a fortune slowly and steadily while ensuring that everyone else was satisfied, was much better in the long term than taking everything they wanted in a short period of time. What would happen if the Minister than came into power after him was of that unwise, greedy sort?

The root of the problem laid in Hogwarts. They left many important things out of their curriculum, and that included economics. Fawley didn’t have the time to interact with Hogwarts, really, but if he managed to get this law passed, and if he had time after the amendments and other proceedings, then perhaps he could reach out to Headmaster Dippet and figure something out.

"The vote of the Wizengamot for the passing of John Lawrence Fawley’s proposed law has now been concluded," Ravensdale said, pulling Fawley out of his thoughts. "Of the twenty-eight attendees three have chosen to abstain, eleven have voted in opposition, and fourteen have voted in favour. Therefore, John Fawley’s law will go forward. A second hearing to discuss amendments and practicalities will take place on the third of September, at nine in the morning, in this very same hall. I hereby declare this hearing closed. Thank you to the members of the Wizengamot for your respectful participation. You are dismissed."

Fawley hadn’t realized how tense he had been, how worried he had felt, until he heard the results of the hearing. His legs felt numb and he almost staggered, barely managing to maintain his composure. He didn’t want to dwell on what a close call it had been. What he needed to do next was prepare himself to protect his new law from any amendments that would render it useless.

And after that, perhaps, he could owl Dippet.
It wasn't the first time that Harry attended a funeral for more than one person at once. The last time, however, it had happened right after the war and Voldemort's downfall. The atmosphere now was different than then - now a sense of confusion and uncertainty lingered, tainting even the deepest moments of grief. How was anyone supposed to move on when they didn't know what had resulted in the deaths of their loved ones?

The graveyard and the funeral home were different from the ones where Melania Black had been buried. There were more people here than there had been there, and Harry, as a Witness, had a seat with Tom quite close to the front. He wished he hadn't been assigned a seat there: he didn't know the people who had died, and he was sure that there were people in the crowd behind him who were more deserving of the seat he occupied.

He saw Trelawney sitting with a few other people he identified as Seers further up front. She, like everyone who was somehow associated with the Department of Divination, was dressed in a Ministry-assigned uniform. Harry hadn't seen it on her before, and wondered if the rules for her were more lax than they were for him.

'Is this the time to think about things like that?' he then thought, annoyed at himself. People were grieving, and the situation would undoubtedly become a problem for him too, at some point in the future. And yet here he was, thinking of unimportant, irrelevant things.

The families of the three Witnesses were easy to recognize, but even after the ceremony Harry couldn't bring himself to approach them on his own. What could he say, anyway? He wouldn't have known the names of the deceased if they hadn't been written on the letter he had received. And yet, it would be awfully rude if he did's even try to say a word of comfort. He had to go.

"Riddle, right?" someone said, and Harry turned to see a vaguely familiar Witness standing behind him. He couldn't, for the life of him, remember the man's name.

"Yes," Harry said. "How do you do?"

"Well, it's always upsetting when this kind of a thing happens," the man said, and he didn't sound particularly affected by the event. "It's tragic that we rarely meet other Witnesses outside of funerals. I've proposed it to the Department a few times, you see. Proposed that we have regular meetings of some sort, if only to know who we work with. I haven't been taken up on my offer to host such meetings yet, sadly enough."

"I see," Harry said in response, trying to figure out a way to leave the man's company, without upsetting him. Somehow, he didn't think that he needed any more enemies than the ones he probably already somehow had. He didn't know this stranger, and the way he so easily moved from how upset he was, to discussing some sort of social engagements reminded Harry too much of Malfoy – Draco, not Marchosias – for him to want to get to know him, either. "Well, yes, it would be nice, I suppose. To meet other Witnesses more often"

"Harry," Tom said, appearing by his side and smiling politely at the stranger. "We must give our condolences to the families affected by this, remember? Let's go."

'What would I do without him?' Harry thought suddenly, feeling both fond and afraid. What would
happen to Tom if Harry ended up similarly disposed of as the three Witnesses here? Tom would blame Grindelwald, thought Harry was still fairly sure it had been someone in the Ministry. Either way, Tom would most certainly do something reckless. Not to mention - where would he go? He was only thirteen. They would send him to an orphanage, and the mere thought of that made Harry feel sick. No, he wasn't going to die. He couldn't let anyone best him in a battle, even if such a loss would help keep him under the radar. He just couldn't take the risk.

Tom walked by Harry's side towards the families of the dead Witnesses, and then stopped to observe Harry's socializing from a safe distance. He knew it was terrible, what had happened to the Witnesses, but he didn't have the energy needed to feel sorry for their families right now.

Death was always talked about as if it was a necessity of life. As if it was a natural ending of all, and sure, it was. But since when did wizards care for what was natural? How could they have so much magic at their disposal, and yet somehow still end up dead like this? Was there no magic that could protect them from death? It didn't make any sense.

It was sobering: this realization of the limits that magic had.

'Then again,' Tom thought suddenly. 'Is it magic that has limitations, or is those who practice it?'

What if there were ways to not die, but people were simply too inadequate in their mastery of magic to practice it properly? Tom knew already from experience that people were often woefully lacking when it came to their understanding of the power they could wield, but did that truly apply on everyone?

What else, aside from death, had wizards neglected to explore? What other spells and theories were out there, what other possibilities were left unutilized, just because people didn't recognize an opportunity when they saw one?

And what could Tom do about it? He knew that Harry wasn't particularly fond of Tom's... exploratory nature, but he could practice his spells at Hogwarts. He had done so already several times, hadn't he? Not to mention that if he started out with theory, how could anyone detect him? How could anyone know what he was up to? Making notes wasn't forbidden, after all.

If there was a way to stop death, then Tom wanted to know it. He didn't think that Harry would be too happy about it at first, but surely, after all these deaths, he would come to appreciate the safety net that Tom wanted to create for him? No matter how upset he would be in the beginning, Tom knew that it would really be only a matter of time before Harry saw the wisdom behind Tom's actions.

All Tom needed to do was just... not let Harry know anything until everything was ready. Who knew how long it’d take, after all. Probably years – Tom didn’t know what was out there, and what he could even do. Hell, he didn’t even know for sure what it was that he wanted.

There was something about King's Cross station that Harry would always love. Perhaps it was the memories of his own experiences, of every first of September that he had spent in that station, waiting to be taken to Hogwarts. His happiness was overshadowed, however, by the knowledge that only a few hours earlier Germany had passed a law that required for all Jewish people to wear yellow stars for identification. It was one of those things that he knew to be turning points in a nation’s history. What already begun with segregation, was spiraling now out of control.
What Harry didn’t know then, was that ironically, seventy-eight years later Israel would also attempt passing a law that segregated its Arab population to certain areas.

The summer break had gone by fast, and when the time came for Tom to return to Hogwarts for his third year, Harry had barely remembered that they’d need to go and buy new books for the upcoming year. Tom had offered to go alone to Diagon Alley, but Harry had assured him that it wasn’t something he’d need to do on his own. It wasn’t as if he was busy, after all.

Harry had been contacted by Cassandra Trelawney earlier, in order for the Seer to arrange a meeting between them. He didn’t know why they’d need to meet up now, but suspected it had something to do with the numerous Witnesses that had died in mysterious circumstances. All he could be grateful for was that the meeting was set for after Tom’s departure. This way Harry wouldn’t need to come up with excuses or explanations.

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to owl me, okay?" Harry said, just as the Hogwarts Express opened its doors to let in the students that had arrived early.

"Of course," Tom replied. He was torn between the excitement of going back to a place where he could practice magic without Harry's supervision, and the fact that he'd be away from Harry again. It also felt odd to know that there'd be no more bookkeeping for him to do; Doyle had been almost teary-eyed when Tom had left, and promised to write him a recommendation letter whenever the boy would need it.

However, as much as he wanted to remain with Harry, Tom wanted to be among the first to board the train in order to find a compartment all for himself. He hugged Harry quickly, told him sternly to be careful, and headed towards the train with his trunk levitating behind him. Harry grinned, watching him go.

Merlin, he'd miss that kid. No matter how much time they had spent together during the summer, it just never felt enough.

"Mr. Riddle," someone said, and Harry turned abruptly, recognizing the voice immediately. Marchosias Malfoy walked towards him, with someone who could only be his son trailing behind him. A house-elf was carrying a heavy-looking trunk on its back, waddling after the boy.

"Mr. Malfoy," Harry replied, finding it easier to interact with him than with Black. Malfoy, despite his shortcomings, didn’t seem to be much like Black at all. In fact, going by what Arcturus has been telling Harry about Malfoy, the two men didn’t seem to be on good terms. And someone not being on good terms with Arcturus Black made them immediately a better person in Harry’s eyes.

"Here to see off your ward, I presume?" Malfoy said, before pushing his son forward a bit. "This is Abraxas. Son, this is Harry Riddle, a Witness."

"Hello," Harry said, and smiled at the boy. Abraxas was nothing like Draco Malfoy had been, and nothing about the way he carried himself resembled Lucius either. He wasn’t haughty, and he stood with the steady confidence of someone who, even at that age, felt no need to impress anybody.

"Hello Mr. Riddle," Abraxas said, quietly, but not shyly. "Pleased to meet you." "Likewise," Harry replied, kneeling down. "Excited to go to Hogwarts?"

"Sure," Abraxas said, though he didn’t sound particularly enthused. "I know some people in Slytherin."

"My Tom is also in Slytherin," Harry said with a grin. "He’s very smart. If you need anything, ask
him.” The boy nodded, his white blond mop of hair twitching with the movement. When the boy eventually said his goodbyes to his father and headed towards the train, Harry couldn’t help but wonder what kind of a man Lucius’s father would eventually grow up to be like. He then sighed, banishing the thoughts of that sort from his mind, and turned to Malfoy.

"Remember last time we spoke?” Harry asked suddenly, watching more people board the train. Abraxas had already disappeared into the masses, yet Malfoy seemed hesitant to leave.

"Yes,” the man replied.

"I told you then that Black and I did not interact much,” Harry said. "You also asked me if Black was the sort to engage in domestic terrorism. I don’t quite remember what I replied to you with then, but I’d like to continue that discussion with you now.”

Malfoy looked at him for a moment, clearly caught off guard, before nodding. "Of course. Here?”

"Sure,” Harry said. He knew the kind of risk he was taking by initiating this conversation here, but he also knew that meeting up with Malfoy elsewhere would certainly be noticed by more people. Now they were just two parents who had coincidentally bumped into each other: an undeniable truth of what had happened. Harry wasn’t, however, going to let this opportunity slip.

"When you asked me about Black’s involvement in anything suspicious, you sounded like you expected that to be the case,” Harry said. "I say this to you in full confidentiality, but I do believe you to be right.”

"I know I’m right,” Malfoy instantly replied. "Arcturus has been attempting to recruit me, and undoubtedly other people as well, into Grindelwald’s army. Which makes it all the more surprising that he ended up voting affirmatively for the new law.”

"New law?”

"Minister Fawley has managed to successfully propose and push through a law that criminalizes sympathizing with the Dark Lord,” Malfoy explained, and frowned when he saw the expression on Harry’s face. "Do you... know something about that?”

"It’s a conversation I had with Black a while ago,” Harry said. "Or, well, it’s an ongoing conversation. According to him, you have been working with Grindelwald for months.”

Malfoy was physically startled, and when Harry glanced at him, his face showed both shock and outrage. "I would never!” Malfoy snapped. "He’s the one who— He— How dare he!”

"You can’t possibly be surprised by his antics,” Harry said dryly. "From what I understood, you’ve managed to offend him somehow. To retaliate, he’s decided to frame you, and somehow use me to... I don’t know... make it stick? I’m not sure why he thinks I’d have any say in anything in the Ministry.”

"You underestimate your value, then,” Malfoy said, face still pale. "As a Witness, your word is highly credible. I’d be investigated at the very least, and I have no doubt that Arcturus has enough people in the Ministry to make something stick.”

"Is that why someone in the Ministry has been trying to get rid of Witnesses?” Harry asked, taking a gamble with his daring suggestion. He didn’t know for sure if the Ministry was behind it, but if he sounded confident enough, then perhaps someone would let something slip. Miraculously, he managed to keep his voice even and steady, despite the anxiety he was drowning under. His palms were sweaty and his heart was beating hard. His question startled Malfoy, whose eyes were wide as
he looked at Harry. Clearly, whatever was happening, Malfoy didn’t know about it.

"Mr. Riddle," Malfoy then said, voice almost faint. "Perhaps we should continue this conversation elsewhere, after all?"

Something odd was going on, and Tom didn't like it one bit.

Since the moment he had stepped into the train, and all the way until he found himself an empty compartment to hide in, people kept—greeting him. Not in an overly invasive way, with handshakes or hugs— all were things he had seen other people do— but just... calling his name, asking how his summer went, and ending that up with a "see you!". Why on earth would they meet up later? Who were these people?

Tom locked the door of the compartment, knowing that eventually his friends would undo the lock and join him there. Until then, however, he'd have some silence and peace to think of the weirdness of the situation. Eventually when one of his friend did join him, he couldn't help but share his confusion.

"It’s because they think you're nice," Prince said, digging a book out of her bag. "They think you're the only decent Slytherin to ever grace the halls of Hogwarts."

Okay, so, Tom had aimed to develop that kind of an image. He just hadn't expected it to work so well already. "They weren't like this at the end of last years," the boy pointed out. "Are you sure that's the reason?"

"There's that one Ravenclaw you apparently helped," Prince said. "Her family lives near mine, and I have to spend some time around her, unfortunately. When her friends were visiting, she mentioned that I was your friend. Then they got talking about you."

"What did they say?" Tom asked, curious to know more. Would the people still greet him nicely if they knew he was a Parselmouth? Everyone in Slytherin knew, but perhaps the news hadn’t reached the other Houses yet? "Do you remember?"

"Merlin, I'm not sure," Prince sighed, clearly annoyed by now. "I don't really enjoy spending time with Landley and her friends, and listening to her talk can be even more tedious. She thinks you're very helpful, and that she thinks you should be treated nicely in return. How that turned into so many people saying hi to you, apparently, I don't know. Maybe it's gossip. You know people talk more than you do."

Tom did know that. He just hadn't expected to reap any benefits already.

He knew that he should be feeling satisfied with what was going on, but a part of him was very suspicious. What if it was some sort of a trap? Or a prank? He didn't know what these people were really like, and he didn't trust anyone at Hogwarts. Not even Mulciber, despite being his best friend. And most certainly of all, Tom didn't trust anything that seemed like a lucky break.

"Hello, my friends!" Avery shrieked, entering the compartment. Tom was startled by how tall the boy had gotten, appearing even thinner than before. His smile was almost comically big when compared to the rest of his face, and his hair had been cut shorter than ever before. "So good to see you. Eileen, you look lovely. Tom, three girls have asked me about you so far, and I don't like that one bit. How have you two been? Where's Elliot? Also, I saw Eugene somewhere there earlier, and he might join us eventually. Just a heads up for Tom, I know you like being warned about people."
"I like being warned about you," Tom sighed, and gestured for the boy to sit down. "Why are you always so noisy? I've been well, thanks for asking. I had an eventful and a productive summer. What about you?"

"Productive?" Prince perked up, looking at Tom with an interested expression on her face. "How so?"

"I worked at a sports equipment shop in Vertic Alley," Tom replied. "I did some bookkeeping and general financing."

"At Doyle's?" Avery asked, and whistled, impressed. "That old man? Merlin, he's been alive since forever. Dad thinks he's older than Ollivander."

"I've been learning new languages," Prince said then, replying to Avery's earlier question. "Although the only classes that teach German in Spinner's End are held by this Squib lady, whose son doesn't know anything about magic."

"So he's practically a muggle," Avery said, grimacing. "Is he a bother? And why are you learning German, anyway?"

"His name is Tobias," Prince said, and shrugged. "He's okay, although he likes playing rough with the other boys. It's fine, he never comes near me anyway. And I'm learning German because it's an interesting language, and it might be... useful to learn it. You know, considering the war."

"Oh yes," Avery said then, nodding. "The Second Muggle War, as if the world of muggles has only ever seen two of them. So interesting."

"You don't know anything about it, do you," Tom asked, looking at the boy and recognizing the clueless look in his eyes immediately. "Merlin, Avery, just because you don't interact with muggles doesn't mean that their war doesn't concern us. Or that there isn't a reason why every war of theirs isn't called a world war."

"See, that's the thing that's making the older Ravenclaw girls talk," Prince said suddenly, leaning forward towards Tom. "When you act all concerned about muggles. They know you're a half-blood, and they think that makes you some sort of a... muggleborn ambassador at Slytherin."

"I'm not sure how to take that," Tom said, rolling his eyes. "You sound as if you think that they're wrong. I act concerned because I am concerned. Harry's a Witness, and he's the one who gets sent out to observe whatever explosions happen in England and beyond. Not to mention that it's hard to not care when you know that eventually the Germans will bomb London as well. And who knows where else the bombs will hit. I'm not pretending to care."

"I didn't mean to say that you're pretending," Prince hurried to said, sounding almost defensive. "That wasn't my intention. I'm just saying that they have an idea of what they think you're like, which makes you appear more approachable and likable to them."

"Well, it's not like it matters," Avery joined in, figuring out the conversation easily enough. "Older Ravenclaw girls are still older. Admiring Tom the way Ravenclaws admire anything doesn't mean shit, so don't get smug about getting attention from the ladies now, okay? They probably think you're a particularly interesting test subject, or something."

'Merlin,' Tom thought, feeling exhausted already. 'I wish I could just skip this train trip. Mulciber, where are you?'
Fawley hadn't been sure at first if this meeting ought to be held in his home, or if his office would be sufficient. His victory over the Wizengamot, however, convinced him to hold the meeting in his office. After all what would it matter anyway, at this point, if anyone wondered about the necessity of calling several Aurors for a quick meeting? For all they knew, he could be assigning them a new mission. There certainly wasn't a shortage of *that*.

Besides, well, he *was* assigning them a mission. Of sorts.

"Gentlemen," Fawley said, looking at the Aurors that Copplestone had personally recommended for this. Davis was notably not among them. "Thank you for agreeing to this meeting at such a short notice."

Copplestone, who had likely known to anticipate this kind of a meeting, smiled tersely. He clearly didn't enjoy being here but knew that his presence was very much required. With him he had brought five Aurors, all of whom had revealed enough of themselves to assure him that they were in no way affiliated with Grindelwald.

"I trust that you have heard of the new law by now," Fawley began. "However, a law is a mere formality unless it is enforced. The task that I am about to entrust you with is of utmost importance, but also requires your discretion. We will likely step on the toes of many powerful individuals, and that will put you at risk. Regardless, I'd like to ask you to persist, and carry out the mission the way you have carried out all your other missions in the past: with honour and diligence."

Fawley paused, knowing that while he *could* technically force the Aurors to take this mission, forced allegiance was far too risky. This wasn’t something that could survive despite the reluctance of his agents – on the contrary: the Aurors’ willingness to do their job was of vital importance, and he wanted them to take it to heart. "You task will be to identify those within the Ministry, or in its political sphere, that have in any shape or form expressed approval of Grindelwald’s ideology," Fawley said. "They pose a risk. They are individuals who might, should they be given the right incentives, betray our society to him, and work alongside Grindelwald to provide him with a steady foothold in Britain as well. *That must not happen.*"

It was a relief to see the approving nods from his audience. He had known beforehand that at least Aurors Dewy and Buckley would agree to this: Dewey because he had some sort of a… muggle or a muggleborn woman for a wife, and Buckley because his support to Fawley had been unwavering since the beginning. Auror Brown, a friend of Dewey, had also been a safe bet, as his own mother had been a half-blood witch.

“Once you identify those who sympathize with him, do not approach them yet,” Fawley continued. “Rather, I urge you to collect evidence of their misdemeanors and compile a file of them. Once you’ve collected what you, in your expert opinion, deem to be sufficient evidence, bring the file to me. If I approve of it, we’ll then – and only then – approach the suspect. The less people know about this, the more headway we can make before anyone decides to make things difficult for us.”

“What of Head Auror Davis, sir?” Auror Clearwater said suddenly. “Should he not be here among us?”

“Consider everyone who is not here to be a potential suspect,” Fawley responded with, and tried not to enjoy the surprise on the man’s face too much. Curtis Clearwater had been initially a surprise addition by Copplestone, but soon enough Fawley understood the benefit of including him in this: if anything were to happen to Davis, Clearwater would be the next Head Auror. Including him in this mission meant that not only would Fawley benefit from instilling loyalty into a possible future Head Auror, but also Clearwater would consider himself favoured over Davis.
“I trust that you will not be sharing any information of this task with anyone at all,” Fawley continued. “No one outside this room should even know that this kind of a mission is underfoot.” If anyone were to suspect that a mission was ongoing, then so be it, but it was important for no one to confirm such a thing.

“What of the working hours, sir?” Bones asked. “We already have our shifts for protection details and open cases set in stone. What do we do about those?”

Flavius Bones was the only Pureblood from a distinguished family with no vested interest in preventing Grindelwald’s invasion. He had been selected for no other reason than his character: the man strove to do the right thing, whether he himself liked it or not. He was one of the few whose understanding of the bigger picture instilled a sense of peace in Fawley.

“You will work on your cases as you have so far,” Fawley said. “But your protection detail duties will be gradually decreased as to not arouse suspicion. This will put a strain on you, but again, I am confident that all of you will pull through.”

“I would like to add to this,” Copplestone suddenly said, “that while at the end of this meeting you will be provided with a written summary of the mission, you must burn the file after you’ve read it. We do not want it falling into the hands of someone who could warn any potential targets. Generally, Minister Fawley and I expect you to show us the extent of your competence. Please do not disappoint us. You in particular, Clearwater. For reasons I’m sure you know yourself.”

“Of course,” Clearwater replied immediately. Getting rid of Davis would provide him with a way up in the hierarchy of the Ministry, and he wasn’t about to let that slide. Whether Davis did sympathize with Grindelwald or not, he clearly wasn’t clear enough on his stance. Which was why he wasn’t here.

“Now,” Fawley said, reaching to push a pile of neatly wrapped scrolls forward on his desk. “Take one of these, each one of you, and make sure to read it carefully. Thank you for your commitment. You’re dismissed.”

* * *

There was something undeniably strange about being able to see the interior of one’s entire house while still standing by their front door. A living room - of sorts - was practically in the same space as the kitchen. The kitchen that, as Marchosias couldn’t help but notice, didn’t have a single house-elf in it. There were bedrooms on both sides of the living room area - one bedroom on each side. That was, more or less, it for the house. *Merlin*, even his holiday cabin in Switzerland was bigger than this.

"Tea?" Riddle - or Harry, as he insisted on being called - said, walking further into the house. Marchosias, after a moment of hesitation, and with great reluctance, followed. "Please feel free to sit down wherever." Sitting down *wherever* was precisely one of those things that Marchosias wasn’t in the habit of doing, but he made his way towards one of the chairs around an interestingly small dining table.

Well, at least everything appeared to be new and clean.

"So," Riddle said, while serving tea and biscuits. "Someone’s been trying to get rid of Witnesses. Know anything about that?"

"Going by how little information I have, I think everything’s linked,” Marchosias said, taking a careful sip of his cup of tea. Surprisingly, it was great. "Arcturus’s shenanigans, this new law,
someone apparently offing Witnesses - how did you conclude it’s the Ministry behind it, anyway?

"Do you disagree with that?" Harry asked, not knowing how to explain that conclusion. It was, after all, mainly based on his knowledge of the future. Not to mention that he didn’t have any proof, really.

"I don’t," Marchosias admitted, before hesitantly elaborating: "The information that Witnesses record is so unpredictable, and many Pureblood families have felt uncomfortable with the knowledge that their secrets may be recorded and stored at the Ministry, without them having a say in it. And when many pureblood families agree on something, the Ministry tends to... indulge."

"Why kill them, then?" Harry asked. How something could be both unbelievable and utterly predictable, he didn’t know. But what he was hearing was exactly that. "Why not just... disband the department and shelf the career option?"

"I must tell you that I do not know anything for certain," Marchosias said. "None of what I’m telling you is something I could prove in a court of law. However, if I had to guess, I’d say that demanding for the disbandment of the Witnessing system would bring up questions for those seeking it: what are you hiding? Why are you hiding it? And when the public considers your entire family suspicious and untrustworthy, it will eat away at your credibility and influence."

"Why did you say that everything is linked?" Harry asked then. "I mean, Black, Grindelwald, this...?"

"I’ve known Arcturus for a very long time," Marchosias replied. "Despite our recent falling out, and whatever he’s planning now... I’ve known him since our Hogwarts days, despite him being a bit older in age. What experience has taught me is that if there is something sinister in the works, he’s somehow - no matter how indirectly - tied to it. Your involvement with him, however, makes me question the accuracy of that."

"I’m not particularly involved with him," Harry said instantly. "I’m simply holding up my end of the bargain, and looking after Orion and Lucretia."

"Noble of you," Marchosias said, although it was clear from the way he said it that he didn’t think much of Harry’s role in the lives of the Black siblings. "Though perhaps unwise. I myself have decided to... distance myself from Arcturus. His involvement in whatever Grindelwald is planning is a mystery to me, and I have little interest in becoming a target of his. I have a child, a wife, and a sister."

"Of course," Harry said, and nodded. "I fully agree with your plan to distance yourself. However, question remains, will he let you? I don’t think he’ll stop whatever he’s planning even if you stop associating with him."

"If he proceeds with what he has apparently planned," Marchosias said, "which is implicate me with the help of this new law and your vote of confidence, I could make sure that my lawyer is informed the moment I would be called in for questioning."

"Or you could just take some veritaserum, and sort it out once and for all," Harry pointed out. Marchosias gave him a startled look, before nodding slowly.

"That is a very... unorthodox way to solve the situation," he said. "But I suppose it would put the matter to rest for good and erase all suspicion."

"Also, if he doesn’t think you’ll be ready to go that far, he won’t know to take it into account in his
planning,” Harry said. “I’m fairly sure that if he’s been trying to convince me of your guilt for months, and went as far as vote for a law that poses a direct risk to him just to be able to trap you somehow, he hasn’t neglected to take care of your lawyer either.”

"Justus has served my family’s legal needs for three generations, now,” Marchosias said disapprovingly. "Arcturus couldn’t possibly sway him. Besides, Justus a Meliflua by blood - he’s far too good to associate with the likes of Arcturus Black. Who, despite his wealth and name, is... well... hardly a sophisticated man of intellect, no matter how much he believes he is."

"I think it boils down to this,” Harry said, looking at Marchosias sharply. "Would Meliflua find Grindelwald’s ideology appealing? Because if yes, then even though he wouldn’t sell you out for another pureblood, he could be convinced to turn against you for an ideology that you oppose. Closer friends have fallen apart for less."

Marchosias was about to respond, instinctively ready to deny and disagree with whatever Harry was telling him, before the realization of what Harry was actually saying sunk in. He snapped his mouth shut, and looked at Harry for a few long, silent moments. He couldn’t fool himself into believing that Justus’s loyalty was unshakeable, but the thought of his betrayal was alarming.

If even Justus turned against him, who else did Marchosias really have?
The Iron Birds

1940

Aachen wasn't particularly happy with his life right now.

When he had received his mission from the Dark Lord – the mission to eliminate Riddle – everything had appeared simple and clear. He knew what he was meant to do, and had sorted out when and how and where he would be doing it. Had been ready to get going and deal with the issue, too, when a new message from the Dark Lord had reached him.

Apparently, according to one of the Dark Lord's contacts, the local ministry was up to something that would potentially make carrying out the mission unexpectedly difficult. A new law of some sort had been passed, and was now being implemented with unfortunate enthusiasm, too. It would, from what he understood, make attacking someone in public much more difficult, what with Aurors flitting around and looking for anything suspicious to focus on. Attacking Riddle in private would have been just as difficult, what with the protective wards the man had around his little apartment. This, too, just made everything unnecessarily complicated. Aachen wasn't clear on the details of this law, but knew for certain that he didn't like any of it - not Riddle's wards, nor the Aurors' new habit of patrolling the streets with more vigilance than before. What they were looking for, anyway? Were they spying on their own people? Either way, the result was that the Dark Lord told him to lay low and not make a move against Riddle until he was given the all clear.

Which was fine for the first week, but now it's been almost two months. Riddle's kid had already left for Hogwarts, which made it impossible for Aachen to get rid of him as well. He would have to wait until Christmas, now, and hope that the boy returned home. And if he didn't, he'd have to either wait until the summer, or just... commence without killing the boy.

It wasn't that Aachen was particularly thrilled about killing children. He just... the thought of leaving unfinished business made his skin feel tight, and there'd be a sense of anxiety and restlessness inside of him until he wrapped up that unfinished business. If he got rid of Riddle now, he'd be suffering with that anxiety for months, until he'd get to kill the boy, too. Anxiety wasn't fun. It made it difficult to sort out his thoughts, and some days he felt like he could barely function if there was something he felt he ought to have wrapped up, but hadn't. He hated loose ends.

It seemed, much to his misery and according to the few messages he had received from the Dark Lord, that that was what would be happening. The Dark Lord didn't particularly care about whether something gave anyone anxiety or not. Aachen knew that in fact most people didn't even know what anxiety was, unless they had it. He still remembered his dear, late, fiancée, who had been the nicest girl in town and an angel on earth, who had then once told him that anxiety must have been a matter of willpower, as having mental conditions was utterly improper.

Well, he would have separated from her then, but he didn't like loose ends, after all. So he wrapped up that loose end right there on the spot.

It was kind of funny, in a way. Perhaps not appropriate, but funny, that the anxiety that his beloved Elaine had dismissed as lack of willpower, had been in the end what had caused her untimely demise. Aachen missed her greatly, and he would never love another woman the way he had loved her.

Which, speaking of women. Riddle didn't seem to know a single one of those.
He had followed Riddle a bit around the town, just to know a bit more about his habits and his social circle. But the only woman Riddle seemed to associate with was a barmaid, who was clearly smitten with the Auror. Which left Aachen’s target all by his lonesome.

It was a bit strange, wasn't it? Unless Riddle used the Floo to meet up with women secretly; Aachen didn't know how to follow someone if they were using the Floo system, especially if it was the British network. Perhaps that was it, then? Riddle used the Floo to meet his women?

Unless... no. Aachen had heard of some wizards with strange predilections, but jumping into conclusions like that wasn't appropriate. Then again, murder wasn't appropriate, and he really couldn't say he wasn't proficient at doing that, now could he? Which meant that he was free to allow his mind to jump to a likely conclusion: perhaps Riddle was a homosexual.

Did it matter? It was kind of disgusting, because Aachen really loved women, and he couldn't imagine wanting to bed a man, but... well, Riddle would be dead soon, so did it matter who the dead wanted to bed when they were alive? Not to him. All he cared about was finishing this mission and ensuring the Dark Lord's favour.

Riddle was, even now, in that pub with his few friends. He didn't seem to be drinking, and Aachen wondered if he ought to attack now. It would have been ideal, if not for his orders to lay low and wait. Not to mention that even though Riddle - who hadn't indicated any competencies that would help him in battle - would likely be an easy target, the Aurors with him definitely wouldn’t be.

Aachen knew law enforcement, and how wartimes such as the days of now made them worse. Or, well, better. Depended on which end of a mission one was, didn't it?

Which was why, despite how much he wanted to go in there and finish the mission, Aachen took a deep breath, and turned to walk away. He could wait. Just... a little while longer. He didn't know what the Dark Lord was waiting for, but he hoped that whatever it was, it would come to pass soon. He would then deal with Riddle swiftly, and return to Germany. In the summer - or perhaps Riddle's funeral, if the opportunity arose - he'd come back for the boy.

Because he really, really hated loose ends.

* *

Harry was both sad and happy over how fast the weeks and months went by. On one hand, the faster time flew, the sooner he'd be able to see Tom again. On the other hand, however... it was already November, and Harry could barely remember what he had spent his time on since Tom left.

Except, well. London had been hit by the Germans in late September. It would have been surprising, had he not been expecting it from the very first day. Countless people had been evacuated, which was a luxury most people in other cities targeted by the Germans didn’t get.

"I swear I'll age without even realizing it," Harry sighed, thinking of Tom again. His own birthday had passed almost unnoticed. "I can't believe this. November. Merlin, this is ridiculous."

"There, there, old man," Lavinia said cheerfully, setting down a pint of Butterbeer in front of him. "Drink up! Do you want me to bring the radio closer so you can at least keep yourself entertained while I'm busy?"

"I'm not a child," Harry huffed, but then said: "Yes please, I do want the radio. I dread anything the BBC says these days, but bloody hell I can't just stop listening to it."

"For a good reason, too," Stephen said, having just entered the pub, and catching the last part of
Harry's sentence, just as the radio floated gently towards them. With him he had Aurors Morris and Montague. "The moment you step away from the radio - Muggle news in particular - somehow half of England is on fire, and the other half under sea."

"Well, it's not *that* terrible," Montague said, sitting down. "Ah, I think I'll skip the butterbeer and go for Odgen's! Treat us, Stephen! I'm toeing the poverty line."

"You are not, and never will be, toeing the poverty line," Stephen said, rolling his eyes. He then turned to where Lavinia was serving drinks to a group of witches, and a smile overtook his face. Honestly, it was like being with Ron and Hermione all over again, and it put Harry into a nostalgic mood.

"I think we should have something like the BBC in our community as well," Morris said, sitting down with a heavy groan, and then taking off his heavy coat. "I can't believe how cold this November's been. It usually doesn't drop to this temperature until December."

"How many people have radio channels, though," Montague asked. "Most people just stick to reading newspapers, and whenever they want fresh news, they head to a pub."

"That's something I never understood," Stephen admitted. "It's not like radios are expensive."

"It's not about the price, mate, it's about the *image*," Montague said. "You're not a proper Wizard if you've got Muggle scraps in your household."

"Merlin, that it ridiculous," Harry said, shaking his head. "I can't imagine living through these times without a radio at home."

"You're telling me." Morris nodded. "So much keeps happening and changing, I can barely keep up. Hi Lavinia."

"Hello, gentlemen," Lavinia said, arriving with everyone's drinks; including a new one for Harry as well. "I hope everyone's doing well here?"

"We could be doing better," Stephen said with a smile. "Can you join us, or are you busy?"

"It's a bit busy now," Lavinia said apologetically. "But I'll join you lads as soon as it calms down here a bit. Enjoy your drinks, and don't wait to call for more!"

Harry sighed happily, leaning further back into his chair, enjoying the warmth of the pub and the cold drink he had in front of him. The company of the people around him was pleasant, and the contentment he was feeling now was miles away from the feelings of dread and anxiety he had when he was with Black, or even Malfoy.

The evening was so pleasant, that it made the incoming news even more jarring than they perhaps would have otherwise been. The radio crackled loudly, and the soothing voice of the radio host who had been talking about some safety policies with a smooth cello playing in the background, was cut off. It was replaced by the voice of Owen Marsh - the muggle presenter who seemed to be most active when it came to reporting war news.

"It has come to our knowledge," he said, his low and smooth voice sounding more stressed than Harry had ever heard it before, "that Coventry is currently under vicious Nazi attack."

"Merlin, what," Morris hissed, reaching to turn the volume up. "Coventry? Why for Circe's sake would they attack Coventry?"
The news didn't reach the others in the pub, and though Harry felt momentarily bad for hogging the radio with his companions, he couldn't very well interrupt everyone else's evenings, just to share news they couldn't do anything about. They'd hear about it soon enough anyway, likely as soon as the attack would stop. Which was, going by the previous attacks, going to happen in about an hour.

Except that... didn't happen. The bombing didn't stop.

They sat around the table, with Lavinia joining them from time to time, listening to every word Owen Marsh managed to report. They waited for an hour, but the bombing kept going. Two hours, and there was still no end in sight. The pub had less and less people in it, and eventually, when the last stragglers left around three in the morning, Lavinia decided to close the doors. It was only her, Harry, Stephen, Morris, and Montague left. Them, and the radio, and Owen Marsh's voice telling them that Coventry was still under fire.

"When is it going to stop?" Montague whispered, when clock neared five, and the attack was still ongoing. "Just how many bombs do they have? How fast can Muggles build bombs, anyway? Why do they have so many? How many of those... what do Muggles call them... the metal, flying things... how many of those do they have?"

"Planes," Harry said. "Although the German air force is called the Luftwaffe."

"A bloody stupid name, that, if you ask me," Montague said with a grimace. "Merlin, I can't wait to go to work again in a few hours."

"You could go home and rest," Morris said. "We'll tell you what you missed at the office."

"Not bloody likely, with that still going on," Montague huffed. "Merlin, how could anyone sleep, knowing that—it's still going on! It's been hours! It's almost six, now!"

"I could whip up some breakfast," Lavinia offered. "Might as well, at this hour. We're supposed to serve breakfast from half past six anyway."

"I could help you," Stephen offered, standing up. Harry heard Montague stifle a laugh as Lavinia blushed, before allowing Stephen to follow her into the kitchen area.

"It's things like that that make everything a bit more bearable," Morris said suddenly. "You know, when everything else looks like it's going to shit, and then you get reminded that even then there're some things that won't end with this war."

At six, no planes were to be sighted above Coventry anymore. The all-clear was signaled at six fifteen. Owen Marsh sounded tired as he spoke, reporting what was given to him as soon as he received the news: "We cannot guarantee that any of these numbers are right at present time, and clarifications and confirmations will follow later on. Now, however, I'm told that the Luftwaffe that targeted Coventry consisted of over four hundred bombers, and well over a hundred parachute mines. Most buildings in the entire city have been demolished, and we can so far confirm two hundred and eighty-two fatalities, with more expected."

"Wasn't it less than a hundred just an hour ago?" Montague asked.

"They probably were still looking for bodies then," Morris replied. "As well as they could, what with the bombing being still active, then. Don't be surprised if the number doubles by the end of the day."

"As the sky clears above Coventry," Marsh said, and Harry could swear the man sounded tearful. "The survivors emerge to see fire and destruction around them. Homes and factories have been eradicated, and-- Jesus, John, I cannot... I..." The usually so unflappable reporter fumbled with his
words as someone else was clearly relaying more news and details to him. After a shuddering breath, Marsh continued: "The smell of burning flesh fills the air, and countless mutilated bodies lay across the streets. Ladies and gentlemen, what I'm telling you is nothing but the horrific truth of what the Nazis have done to us. A survivor... John, our reporter calling in from Coventry, has reached out to a survivor. A girl. A fourteen-year-old girl, who should have had an ordinary morning, survived to see the streets of her hometown covered in bodies, and— *Jesus, John, no... Jesus... Christ...*

"I've never heard him struggle like this," Morris said quietly, leaning closer to the radio. "I do admire his dedication to his job, however. His and John Samuel's. Imagine being in Coventry, and somehow keeping a cool head and reporting as much as you can? Merlin, I don't think I could do it."

"Some good sort, those Muggles," Montague observed, before falling silent again when Marsh continued:

"She, a fourteen-year-old girl, said that among the first things she saw, was a dog running down the street with a child's arm in its mouth. Citizens of Britain, how can anyone hear of Coventry, and not bow their head in grief at what has happened? Firemen from neighbouring cities are being sent there, but the flames will be hard to deal with. There’s chaos, there's hysteria, but more than anything else, there's death."

They sat quietly, the three of them. Stephen and Lavinia were still in the kitchen, and Harry was happy that they hadn't heard Marsh's words. He could barely stomach what he had heard.

"How long is this war going to be?" Montague asked, his voice much more subdued than earlier. "How much more of that will he be going through?"

"A lot more," Morris said grimly. "Whatever is going to pull Europe out of this mess, I do not know. But Merlin, it'll have to be one hell of a miracle."

"Here's for a heads-up, sir," Auror Clearwater said, stepping into Minister Fawley's office.

"A heads-up?" Fawley repeated, looking up from his work. "Go on."

"We've had a steady stream of reports and tips about Malfoy," Clearwater said. "Apparently he's got a bit more going on than just good feelings for Grindelwald. Doesn't surprise me, to be honest. He's always been partial to some of the policies that the Germans are now tossing around."

Malfoy. Fawley resisted the urge to express his displeasure, as he doubted that Clearwater would be able to remain partial if he knew what Fawley thought of Malfoys in general. He was right, however, that Malfoy supporting Grindelwald wouldn't be... surprising. Not one bit.

"Be careful about approaching him," Fawley said. "You know how influential he is, and the last thing we need is dissent among our ranks, just because he has somehow managed to buy half the Wizengamot."

"Surely he hasn't," Clearwater blurted, stunned and aghast. "He couldn't, right?"

"Merlin knows," Fawley said evasively, unwilling to continue that particular conversation with Clearwater. "Malfoys are also publicly regarded as an exemplary family, in good standing both financially and politically. If we approach this in a way that somehow offends them, we will end up dealing with unnecessary backlash from the public." He knew how crafty some people were, and the last thing he wanted was someone inciting demonstrations of how the ministry went around arresting good civilians without proper proof.
Then again, plenty of people were increasingly desperate due to the muggle war. Fawley had heard of what happened in Coventry, and of the over five hundred fatalities that had been discovered. A few days ago there had been another attack in central England, targeting Birmingham, West Bromwich, and Dudley. Continuous, merciless air raids. And what did it matter if the people were muggles, if there were witches and wizards among them? There weren't many residential areas that could be warded from bombing without risking exposure of their world, which left many of their own in areas that could - and likely would - be attacked by the Germans.

Such stress, anxiety, worry and uncertainty was bound to change how people tolerated certain procedures implemented by the Ministry. Perhaps they would forgive them for arresting Malfoy without sufficient proof, but such risks were best avoided.

"You must have clear evidence to arrest him," Fawley said. "The last thing we need is your fellow Aurors thinking they can arrest anyone they consider mildly suspicious."

"What if I didn't arrest him?" Clearwater asked then. "What if I only requested his presence for some questioning? Surely that cannot be as big of a risk. We could even present it as being concerned about some his... less favoured associates."

Fawley thought about this for a few moments, before he nodded slowly. "That could work. Just... come up with a reason that will justify your decision when you are questioned about it." He had no doubt that if they managed to somehow drag Malfoy before the Wizengamot, half of them would be questioning Clearwater, seeking any errors that would allow them to throw Malfoy's case.

"Anonymous tips wouldn't work?" Clearwater asked. "We've investigated cases based on anonymous tips before."

"It wouldn't work in this context," Fawley replied. "An anonymous tip does not justify an arrest. At most, it can explain why you'd take a second look at someone or something. It could nudge you to a direction, but it is not evidence, and cannot be treated as such. What you may wish to do is simply write down anything those anonymous tips of yours have accused Malfoy of, and then attempt to disprove each one. The ones that you cannot disprove within a week, you must follow up on and investigate in more depth. Can you do that?"

"Of course, sir!" Clearwater said. "Thank you. I'll do as you suggested."

When the Auror left, Fawley sighed heavily, and wondered if he was really the only person who could replace Davis, if Davis was to be replaced. Sure, Clearwater was loyal - to the Ministry, and to the country - but he wasn't as bright and experienced as Davis was. Simply put, he wasn't as good of an Auror as Davis was.

And yet, Fawley couldn't involve Davis in any of this, unless he was cleared of suspicion. Unfortunately, however, that didn't seem to be likely - Copplestone himself had looked into Davis's activities, and had then visited Fawley again for a lengthy discussion. The Head Auror hadn't exactly done anything. He just... there were small things, barely noticeable things, such as not participating in discussions concerning Grindelwald, occasionally bringing up concerns about Muggle development, and how their role in society ought to be controlled and managed better.

Fawley didn't want a dictatorship. He didn't particularly care for Muggles, but Merlin, did none of those fools realize how much work controlling so many people was? Grindelwald, whose self-assigned role as a Dark Lord ought to have given him some perspective - clearly had never spent a day governing an actual corner of society yet. Leading a group of rogue criminals wasn't governing, and that was something the likes of him didn't understand. It wasn't all about leading wars and segregating people - most of the work consisted of arguing about tax percentages, the permissible
amount of toxic lethifold blood in ink, and whether or not Potions stores were allowed to sell love potions. Things that didn't interest Fawley personally, but needed to be sorted out because that was his damn job.

It wasn’t just... building a personal utopia. There ought to be nothing personal in the way one ruled people.

'But will people like Grindelwald - or Davis- ever realize that?' Fawley thought, sighing heavily. He doubted that they ever would, and to be honest - he didn't want to give them the opportunity to learn, either. Because sometimes one had to accept that teaching a person something wasn't worth the price everyone around them would have to pay for it.

And that was the reality of the greater good.

* 

Ten days after what became known as the Coventry Blitz, Bristol was hit. Southampton had been hit the day before. Harry laid on his bed, looking at the ceiling, and listened to the radio all alone. He didn't know how to feel beyond the grief he was already weighed by, and even reminders of how the war would eventually end didn't cheer him up. Not now, when the worst was yet to come.

When an owl flew at his window, knocking the glass with the tip of its beak, he entertained the option of not responding. He didn't know who could be sending him mail right now, and wasn't sure he wanted to know, either. Unless it was Tom, the news weren't likely to be anything good.

Eventually he sighed, and sat up. The owl peered at him through the glass, clearly expecting him to move faster, which Harry did. When he finally took the envelope the owl carried, he was surprised to see that while it was from Trelawney, it wasn't a mission assignment.

It was an invitation.

To tea.

In fifteen minutes.

Merlin, couldn't she have sent it to him earlier?

There was no question of whether or not he would go. He couldn't waste time hesitating. Somehow Trelawney didn't strike him as the kind of a person he wanted to keep waiting, let alone whose invitation he'd reject. In fifteen minutes Harry had managed to change into something better, and while he hadn't quite gotten around to brushing his hair, he did run his hand through it to make sure it didn't stick out too badly. Not that it would matter - his hair was always a mess whenever the Floo spat him out.

Cassandra Trelawney's house was just as he remembered it. Full of things he couldn't imagine on his own, with colours and constant movement. The Seer herself was nowhere to be seen, but he could hear someone moving in the kitchen.

"Come here and sit down," the woman called, and Harry obeyed. They hadn't met often after she had recruited him, and perhaps that was why Harry could see how much she had aged during the past few years.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" he asked, sitting down on a chair by the dining table. The woman snorted, and walked to take a seat as well, with a tea set floating behind her. The cup of tea that poured itself for Harry smelled of pumpkin and cinnamon.
"This isn't easy to say," the Seer began, her steely and confident demeanor wilting slightly. "But one more Witness has been found dead, alongside her Seer."

The news were horrific, and Harry hated himself for not feeling surprised.

"Why are you telling me in person?" he asked. He had, after all, received all the other notifications by mail. Trelawney sighed again, clearly uncomfortable and upset.

"This job isn't getting any easier," she admitted. "Once the war is over, I will retire, and that is when you would have been provided with the choice of either retiring as well or becoming a reserve Witness for whenever someone needs additional assistance. However... you've undoubtedly noticed that more and more Witnesses have been targeted. Some have quit, out of fear. It is my duty to inform you that should you choose to do so, you... can also quit. I would allow it."

Quit, and lose the government-issued house? Quit, and lose the ridiculous salary that Harry knew he needed in order to take care of Tom? Not bloody likely.

"I don't want to quit," Harry said. "Not yet." Trelawney let another sigh, this one of relief. She sipped her tea, and remained silent for a few moments, before speaking up again:

"The job has become more dangerous than you signed up for."

"I'm a lot better at defending myself than most people know."

"What of your ward?" Trelawney asked then. "He will also be at risk."

"He can spend his Christmas at Hogwarts for now," Harry replied immediately, upset, but knowing that it was the safest place for Tom to be. Besides, he had already planned on making that happen - he couldn't bring Tom home when the war was at such an unpredictable state.

Trelawney looked at him, and the wrinkles on her face appeared deeper than ever. "You know that the deaths haven't been accidents."

"Someone is deliberately hunting Witnesses," Harry said, nodding. "Someone who wants to abolish the entire Witnessing system, I presume. I have my sus—"

"It's the ministry," Trelawney said, bitter. "Someone - I don't know who, but at least one of the Selwyns - doesn't want impartial history to be recorded. We always knew that this would be a possibility, but we thought that the order of disbandment would be put forward through legal pathways. That we would simply receive a cease and desist order of sorts."

"Why murders, then, if that would have been an option?" Harry asked, surprised.

"It means that Fawley doesn't know about this," Trelawney replied. "And that's our one and only shot: if we convince Fawley that this isn't a series of unfortunate accidents, he might spare us a few Aurors to start an investigation."

"How do we do that?" Harry said, eager to go along with this plan. He didn't know Fawley, but he seemed very different from Fudge. Besides, Stephen had plenty of good things to say about the man, and that was a judgement Harry could trust.

"I can handle talking to Fawley," Trelawney decided. "Meanwhile, your workload will be... increasing, unfortunately. With so many Witnesses gone, it is likely that you will end up covering for Seers who have recently lost their own, but who do not wish to retire quite yet. Can you do that?"
"Sure," Harry said. More work meant he had less time to worry about Coventry and Bristol, and every other city in Britain.

"And please," Trelawney said, "make sure that you will always have an escape plan. A portkey, if nothing else. Just... be careful. Whoever Selwyn is sending out to handle his dirty work, isn't an easy enemy to handle."

"Don't worry," Harry said, feeling a sudden, distantly familiar urge to take a hold of his wand and fight. A thrill for battle he hadn't felt in years made itself known again. "I promise... I'm pretty okay at defense."

Fawley was not having a good day. In fact, whatever the opposite of a good day was, he was having it.

On his desk in front of him laid a copy of the Daily Prophet, and a Greek version of it. The Minister of Magic of Greece, Belen Anastas, had been murdered.

Fawley knew it had to be Grindelwald.

Knowing it was Grindelwald didn't give them one bit of an advantage. The man so far had aimed for politicians, wealthy civilians, and ambassadors who opposed him. Now he had targeted a Minister of Magic. That would signal to his followers that Ministers were fair game.

That Fawley was fair game.

"Sir," his secretary said, knocking at the door and opening it slightly, "Madame Trelawney is here to see you. She doesn't have an appointment."

Why was a known Seer visiting him? Had she seen an attack targeting him? Was she here to warn him? "Let her in."

Trelawney was an old woman, though despite her apparent fragility, there were many rumours of her prowess in battle. She walked into the room like she owned it and looked at Fawley as if she saw a mere child on his seat. It wasn't a good feeling.

"I'll get directly to the point, shall I?" the witch said, sitting down. "Since the beginning of the year, eight Witnesses have been murdered."

Fawley had heard of the deaths, and their frequency had unsettled him. However, his resources were limited, and dealing with Grindelwald took priority, especially since the deaths of the Witnesses could be chalked up as accidents at work. "Is there proof of crime? You said murdered. Can you prove it was murder?"

"That's what I'm here to ask help for," Trelawney said. "An Auror, just one, to investigate the matter properly. I know it's a matter of murders, and more Witnesses - and Seers - will die if... the people behind this aren't stopped."

"This is an unusual way to approach this kind of a crime," Fawley said. "You ought to go to the front desk of the Auror department, and file a report. People don't usually come to the Minister with these crimes, no matter how--"

"Someone in the Ministry is behind it," Trelawney interrupted, looking much too calm for someone who was bringing so much stress into Fawley's already bad day. "I know it, my Witness knows it.
And if it is someone - although it's unlikely to be just one person - with plenty of money and influence, it'd be too much for an ordinary Auror to handle."

It was then that a strike of genius hit Fawley. This mission was clearly important, dealing with Witnesses as it was. It would be time-consuming and demanding, and whoever would be assigned to handle it needed to be a competent, independent man with no interest in the politics of history. Luckily for Trelawney and her Witness, Fawley had a moderately suspicious Head Auror he needed to keep busy.

"I will need you to file in a report, regardless," he ended up saying, but continued before Trelawney could argue: "That is to avoid neglecting any formalities that could take your case forward. Once you have submitted the report, I will personally assign it to Tim Davis."

"The Head Auror?"

"Yes, the Head Auror."

"Hm." Trelawney pursed her lips the way Fawley's Nan used to do whenever she felt particularly inconvenienced by other people depriving her of the option to feel dissatisfied with something. "I've met him. His wife is a Parkinson, isn't she? Very well. He will do."

"I cannot guarantee you results, you do know that," Fawley felt obligated to remind her. "Your concerns regarding the Auror's ability to deal with political pressure may still hold true. If what you say turns out to be what is actually happening, and there is someone - or indeed, more than one person - involved in the systemic murder of Witnesses, that... that is a big... problem."

"To say the least," Trelawney said dryly.

"Dealing with a problem of that scale will require plenty of time and resources. You will be likely burdened with the duty of taking stand before the Wizengamot, and you will be cross-examined by numerous extremely clever lawyers."

"I know."

"The press will attempt to discredit you."

"I know that, too," Trelawney said, slowly standing and putting her hat on. Now that she had gotten what she came here for, she felt ready to leave. "But what am I supposed to do, Minister? Sit and let my young Witness get killed because I'm too afraid of lawyers and journalists? I'm old. I'll die soon and what can the lawyers then get me with?"

What could one say to that?

When Trelawney finally left, Fawley let out a sigh of relief. He did not like dealing with that woman in person. Circe. What a day. Screw being sensitive, Clearwater's idea of bringing Malfoy in for questioning was good enough. It wasn't as if Malfoy had anything stressing him out, surely. He could deal with being the receiving end of some ire, for Merlin's sake.
What the Bird Sang

1940

Fawley didn't often interrogate people personally. When he did, however, he was always reminded of the good old days when he used to work as an Auror himself, travelling the world and hunting criminals. Back then he'd always needed to confirm his target by way of confession, and getting those confessions had been something he had excelled in.

These days such behaviour wasn't suitable for a Minister. However, as only Clearwater knew of Malfoy being questioned - and Fawley wasn't ashamed of thinking that he was far better at interrogation than Clearwater - their options were limited.

"This is illegal, and you'll pay for this," Malfoy said, in a manner very typical to him. "How dare you—"

"We haven't arrested you, Lord Malfoy," Fawley said, smiling pleasantly. "We have simply brought you here to ask you a few questions. It is our duty as men of the law to ensure safety for all. Surely you agree? I only require a few answers, and then you will be free to leave."

Malfoy sighed, and looked almost regretful for a moment. He then leaned forward, looked Fawley straight in the eyes, and for a moment the Minister expected some sort of an immediate confession. Instead, what Malfoy said was: "No."

A shocked squawk from behind him made Fawley think even less of Clearwater's suitability for the position of Head Auror than before. Truly, the more he interacted with the Auror, the better Davis looked in comparison.

"I can ship you off to Azkaban to think a bit longer about that response," Fawley replied, maintaining the eye-contact. "Whoever you're protecting better be worth those hours you'll be spending with Dementors."

"I'd like to call my lawyer," Malfoy said then, and leaned back. "You know that is my right, no matter what."

Bloody hell. Okay. Fawley could only imagine what kind of a bastard Malfoy's lawyer was, but that had been a fairly predictable move on his part. Fawley knew how to handle lawyers, despite how much he disliked doing so. "Fine."

"I require an owl, and writing tools, as I'm sure you can tell," Malfoy said then. Fawley resisted the urge to shove a quill in through one of Malfoy's creepy eyes, and gestured for Clearwater to do as the man requested. Soon enough a small brown owl was flying out of the Ministry, heading towards the office of Justus Meliflua.

"He should be here soon," Malfoy said haughtily, and leaned back on his chair again. "Once this is sorted out, Minister, you and I will have a very different conversation."

"I don't know why we would," Fawley said, keeping his tone mild. "I'm not asking more from you than what I would ask from any other citizen. I know you're a well-connected man. I merely would like to have your input on people who may have confided in you with information that we need. Information that would identify Grindelwald supporters."

“"I know nothing.”
“See, I’m not sure I believe that.”

“And you think that this farce of an interrogation will make me come up with—”

“No, no. This isn’t even an interrogation, Mister Malfoy. You needn’t consider this even a questioning – rather, consider this a consultation. I’m seeking your valuable input.”

“I do not wish to be involved in this discourse,” Malfoy said, and then fell silent. He didn’t speak for the following fifteen minutes, during which the two of them remained seated, watching out for any move the other may make. Eventually, Malfoy became impatient, and visibly worried. Soon after, he turned to Fawley again: "My lawyer hasn't arrived yet?"

"Clearly not, since he hasn't been brought here," Fawley replied, wondering what was going on, and if this was something that Malfoy had plotted to save his skin. "Clearwater, go and check the lobby. If Mr. Meliflua isn't there, please Firecall his office."

"Yes, sir," Clearwater said, and left in a hurry, the sound of his footsteps fading into the distance. Fawley sighed and looked at Malfoy again.

"You claimed earlier that you wouldn't support Grindelwald," he said. "Why?"

"I have no interest in such messy situations," Malfoy replied. "I know what I'm doing with my life, and I like the security of it. I have absolutely no desire to change anything about the way I live my life now. I see no happiness for myself or my family in chasing after Grindelwald's pipedreams."

"If this is what you think, then why not give up his supporters?" Fawley pressed. "Why cover for them?"

"I don't know any," Malfoy insisted, but Fawley knew better. The man must have known of at least few people who were sympathetic towards Grindelwald. With the company he kept, there was no way everyone he knew was innocent.

Another silence, this one charged with animosity and anxiety, took over. Time seemed to pass slowly, and when Clearwater returned, Fawley was ready to welcome not only him, but Meliflua as well.

Except... Clearwater had returned alone.

"Where's Justus?" Malfoy asked immediately, alarmed. "What have you done to him?"

"Nothing," Clearwater replied, looking very awkward. Rather than further explain, he dug out an envelope and set it on the table. It wasn't a howler, thankfully, but Fawley recognized it to be another kind of message that relayed spoken words, rather than written ones. He personally had never been particularly fond of that invention, and didn’t understand why people could just write what they wanted to say. How lazy could some people be?

"What's this?" Malfoy asked, and opened the envelope unprompted, activating the auditory message contained within.

"Please inform Mister Malfoy that my services are suspended for today," a voice said. Unfamiliar, but clearly that of Justus Meliflua. "I humbly apologize, but I cannot provide my services today at such a short notice—"

"He was right," Malfoy suddenly said, eyes wide, clearly shocked by a realization of some sort. Fawley was confused, not knowing why on earth would Malfoy's own lawyer abandon him like this.
"They set me up," Malfoy then murmured, before a sneer appeared on his face. He then pocketed the message, silencing it before Meliflua’s apologetic words were even finished, and turned to Fawley again. Something had changed, and Malfoy had clearly made a decision of some sort. Fawley desperately wanted to know what this was about, but didn’t know where to start asking.

"Minister," Malfoy said, voice almost pleasant. "I'm aware of how unusual this situation is, but I wish to talk to you about a man that I know. Arcturus Black? I'm sure you've heard of him."

Black? Yes, Fawley knew the man. Rotten to the core. A slippery bastard that ought to have been thrown into Azkaban years ago. "Yes, I know of him."

"Well then," Malfoy said. "I'd like to request… no, I'd like to give you my formal consent to question me under the influence of Veritaserum. The things I'd like to tell you about Black, and my related suspicions about my own lawyer... I'd like to provide you with the undeniable truth of what I know, rather than waste our time here due to skepticism and suspicion."

* 

Sometimes things fell so well into place that Tom got a bit worried. Everything he had been planning was going well: his standing in Slytherin after being seemingly unwillingly revealed as a Parselmouth, as well as his reputation at Hogwarts overall after all the strategic socializing he had done. He had even gone so far as to smile more often, making Mulciber cackle gleefully with how dishonest it was, and Avery fret over how much nicer it made Tom appear.

"I feel like I can trust you with all my secrets," Avery had said, wringing his hands in distress. "I don't like that."

Lestrange and Rosier haven’t bothered him in a long time, and though Nott was just as annoying as ever, he didn't spend as much time with them anymore. Even the teachers seemed to be increasingly fond of him, some of them giving Tom points for the smallest contributions.

Everything was falling into place the way he wanted. And that was... slightly worrisome.

Tom knew that while his successes could partially be credited to the stupidity and naivety of the people around him, he would always have to be ready for the moment when something would go wrong. Eventually the situation would change, and whether or not he survived that change intact, would affect his reputation greatly.

And reputation, Tom had figured out, was his key to the future he wanted.

It was this knowledge that made him prefer studying at the library rather than in the dorms. He wanted to be seen, which worked well enough when he'd be out and about, showcasing his diligence and the resulting excellence. Interacting with people was still incredibly irritating - they were slow, and somehow people's ability to infer anything was severely lacking - but helping them every now and then was yet another thing he needed to do for the sake of the person he wanted to portray.

He knew now how good it felt, being employed and getting paid. He wasn't going to accept anything less than that if he could help it. His momentary discomfort was a small price to pay, if it meant that he'd get the career he wanted eventually.

"I don't understand why we have to memorize all these creatures," Avery huffed, pushing one of his books away and looking sadly at his Care of Magical Creatures homework. They were working on various assignments together, with the exception of Mulciber who had opened a book, covered his
"Usually I'd disagree," Prince said, "because memorizing things is important, but I agree that there shouldn't be a reason for us to memorize mythical creatures native to Australia. There are so many other things I think we ought to learn in this class instead. Like how to actually take care of the magical creatures that people generally interact with."

"At least it's not a difficult class," Pucey said, not looking up from her homework, quill moving fast as she wrote. "I mean, it's boring and useless, but at least it's an easy pass."

"It just... it would be nice to have some hands-on experience," Avery sighed. "Like, we could actually interact with some of the more domesticated creatures. Reading everything from paper, without actually seeing any animals... that's boring."

"Which is why Elliot here is sleeping," Prince said disapprovingly, looking at Mulciber. "I ought to wake him up."

"Why?" Tom asked, unbothered by Mulciber's lack of activity. "Chances are that he's already done his homework. He does pretty well for himself academically, you know. If someone has everything under control, then I don't see a need to interfere."

"Why can't you be this understanding when I'm the one resting?" Avery sulked. "When I nap, you never stop Eileen from bothering me."

"That's because you have very little under control," Tom replied, rolling his eyes. "You barely passed Charms last year. Charms, for Merlin's sake."

"It's a tough course!" Avery protested, before turning to Pucey. "Right?"

"I don't remember," Pucey replied absently, reaching for a book that Tom had been reading. "Does this one have anything about the Pioial? I sweat to Merlin, I can't find anything about it in any of my other books."

"Chapter seven," Tom told her. "There isn't much there, but it's enough to complete this assignment with."

"I can't wait for the Christmas break," Avery groaned, slumping onto the table. "Sweet freedom. I hate homework. I wish I could tell a house-elf to do it on my behalf."

"If I ever catch you negotiating with a house-elf, I will owl your mother," Pucey said without missing a beat. "Do you even have plans for Christmas, or is it just sleeping again?"

"Sleeping is enough plans for me," Avery replied. "Taking a page out of Elliot's book here. What about you?"

"I have no plans," Prince said. "But I don't think I'll be wasting the free time."

"I'll be going to Switzerland with my parents," Pucey said. "It'll be lovely."

"I'm probably going to stay here at Hogwarts," Tom said. "Harry said in his latest letter that considering how much work he has, and how much safer Hogwarts is than the rest of the country right now, I should stay here. So, I suppose I'll be aiming to use my time productively as well."

"Oh, that makes sense," Prince said, and looked contemplative for a moment. "I wish I could stay as well, to be honest, but I suppose that spending time with my family is important as well."
"Gracious of you to think so," Pucey said dryly, before shaking her head with clear amusement. "Tom, you're already performing outstandingly. How could you be more productive than you are now, anyway? Working during the summer, and doing as well as you have during the school year... you need to be careful, or the Ministry will recruit you before you even graduate."

"You make it sound like a bad thing," Tom said. "Maybe I do want that."

"I mean, if you want it, then you'll definitely get it easily," Pucey said, blinking at him with a surprised expression. "Most people spend a bit of... time... between working and graduating. A year after graduation or so."

"Is that what you're planning?" Tom asked, frowning. He didn't quite understand the concept of wasting an entire year, but supposed that if one had grown up with the privilege of having that option, their perspective on the matter would differ.

"Merlin, no," Pucey said with a laugh. "I plan on finding myself a handsome and a successful husband, and he can work."

"Sounds like Tom, doesn't it?" Avery teased, before sighing loudly once again and declaring that he was in dire need for some food. "It's almost dinner time anyway!"

Tom relented, feeling somehow alarmed, all of a sudden. Pucey was looking at him with her head tilted, a look of uncharacteristic concentration on her face. He didn't like that look. It reminded him of something, but he couldn't remember what it was exactly. All he knew for certain was that it wasn't good.

* "Find Copplestone, and send him to my office," Fawley told Clearwater as soon as he had sorted out the written notes of Malfoy’s testimony. Clearwater nodded, and rushed away, something about his demeanor once again making Fawley doubt his suitability for Head Aurorship. He was just... too young, too eager. Too quick to obey orders.

He would need to put the memories of what had transpired into a pensieve, as showing Copplestone everything would be much more informative than telling him, or having him read the notes. The man was sharp, and perhaps he'd see importance in things Fawley couldn't. Not to mention that though Copplestone wasn't friends with Malfoy, he was fairly well acquaintanced with the man as they had been dorm mates at Hogwarts.

Fawley entered his office, but left his door ajar. Knowing Copplestone, he'd dismiss Clearwater before coming, which would be for the best. The man knew the value of confidentiality as much as Fawley himself, and while Clearwater wasn't a man of too many words either, Fawley just didn't know him well enough to entrust him with more information than necessary.

Well, regardless of Clearwater’s shortcomings, this was an unexpected and a very welcome development. Though Malfoy had seemed like an obvious target, getting Black and Meliflua instead was a good trade.

"Minister," Copplestone said, entering the office and closing the door behind him. Before saying anything, Fawley just pointed at the pensieve. After a moment of hesitation, Copplestone made his way to it, and bowed down to review the memories Fawley had prepared for him.

When he emerged a few minutes later, he remained leaning against the rim of the pensieve, as if to support himself. Eventually he let out a heavy sigh, and slowly turned towards the Minister.
"I could've told you that Marchosias wouldn't be involved," Copplestone finally said. "He's...he's not a coward, but he's far too soft. It's his sister, poor Madeleine, who was always ready raise hell and fight the system."

"Do you think she's involved, then?"

"No. She would never forge an alliance with Black, even if the world's survival depended on it. Proud as a woman can be, but also very, very ill. She doesn't leave the Malfoy Manor for much else beside her appointments at St. Mungos, and even then only to do whatever a privately hired Healer cannot do for her at home."

"We digress," Fawley said, having lost interest in Lady Malfoy the moment Copplestone denied her involvement. "Black, however."

"Arcturus Black is a piece of work," Copplestone said. "Meliflua is a bit of a surprise, but honestly... with that stunt he pulled earlier? Abandoning Malfoy like that? Suspicious, to say the least."

"Malfoy made it sound like Black is Grindelwald's main operator. We cannot assume that his efforts to recruit people to join Grindelwald's cause went as badly as they did with Malfoy."

"If we end up pulling Black in for questioning," Copplestone said, "it will be very difficult to pin anything on him. Malfoy may have spoken under the effect of Veritaserum, but the court will only accept that as a proof of Marchosias's innocence, not of Black's guilt. And Black will not take Veritaserum under any circumstances. Men like him never do."

"I know," Fawley sighed, frustrated. "I was surprised when Malfoy offered to take the potion, but I suppose after Meliflua's stunt, he panicked."

"How are we going to question Black?" Copplestone asked. "He'll give us nothing. No, worse, he'll start throwing his weight around to make things more difficult for us."

"He still has that many friends?"

"It's less about him having friends, and more about people not wanting to make an enemy out of him. He's not a good man, Minister. And people do not want to start wars with men like him."

"Well," Fawley said, not liking one bit what he was hearing about Black. It wasn't something he hadn't suspected before, but he also didn't take much notice of Black to be bothered by how the man conducted his political games. Now, however, those political games of his were becoming a problem. "It is the ministry's duty to do what common people can't. I want him in for questioning. Feel free to rough him up a little when you fetch him."

Copplestone startled, looking suddenly nervous. "Rough him up, sir?"

"Yes," Fawley confirmed. "Rough him up. Confiscate his wand and talk to him about Azkaban. Knock his face on a couple of surfaces on the way, if you would. Just enough bruises for it to be evident to the casual viewer that someone has had a few words with him. It'll do people good, to see someone like him in a position like that. It'll remind them that he's not invincible, and that alliances with him aren't destined to succeed."

"But sir," Copplestone said, still nervous and clearly not liking the idea. "What will I do once we let him go? And we will have to let him go, I know that already. We cannot keep him under arrest without a cause, and as we discussed earlier, Malfoy's confession isn't sufficient for that."

"You don't need to worry about a retaliation from Black," Fawley said. "I will be giving him a better
target to direct his rage at. And if we're lucky, they'll end up taking each other down, leaving us with plenty room to change how the wind blows in the Wizengamot."

Tom didn't really get much time for himself. Not in total privacy, anyway. Not the way he wanted.

Living with Harry left him with many hours of freedom, but not enough privacy for him to practice spells without potentially arousing suspicion. At Hogwarts he was always surrounded by people, and even when he wasn't, he would still often have to have an explanation that didn't let people in on what he was trying to do with his free time: learn charms and hexes that weren't part of the curriculum.

So, when Harry had first suggested in a letter than he'd stay at Hogwarts over the Christmas break, Tom had immediately thought that now he would have his chance to focus on doing then things he wanted to do, without the pressure of accountability.

Besides, it's not like he wouldn't see Harry until the summer. Harry had promised to celebrate Tom's birthday with him at Hogsmeade, which suited Tom quite well.

The best part of living in the dungeons was that not only were the numerous unused classrooms, but also that they were safe for him to practice in: the sturdy stone walls could easily handle a cutting curse or two, and flinging a bombarda at a chair did little more than leave a scratch on the floor. The chair, however, was destroyed. As intended.

It was great. Tom loved every minute he spent practicing his spells, sometimes even staying overnight - who could tell, after all? Unlike the other Houses that had numerous students remaining for the holidays in fear of the war, only three other Slytherins had stayed: two fifth-year girls that Tom couldn't remember ever seeing before, and Saul Carrow, the former captain of the Quidditch team, who was in his seventh year now. Tom didn't concern himself with the activities of the other Slytherins, and didn't feel the need to seek their company. Then again, he didn't feel a particular need to seek anyone's company, and was enjoying the peace he had now.

Sadly enough, it only took three days before a gaggle of nosy third and fourth year students from the other Houses ruined it for him. Annoyingly, it wasn't that they did something that would given him the excuse to retaliate. They didn't try to bully him, on the contrary: they surrounded him during lunch, introduced themselves, and proceeded to just... talk. They were loud, friendly, and Tom broke out in cold sweat when he realized that he was essentially surrounded by seven non-Slytherin Averys.

"My mum's a healer," Desmond Putt, a third year Gryffindor, said, pouring so much gravy onto his plate that the rest of his food swam in it. "That's why I had to stay here. With the war going the way it has so far, there's no way she'd want to let me stay on my own at home while she works."

Well, that was the one thing that kept Tom in his current company. Unlike his peers from Slytherin, these ones seemed to be well informed of the ongoing war, and didn't shy away from discussing it. It was, strangely enough, satisfying.

"We're all muggleborns here, by the way," Joseph Clancy, a fourth year Hufflepuff, told Tom. "Except Dempsey here's a half-blood."

"Who knows for sure, though," Putt said cheerfully. "Dad fucked off before I was born, and mum never quite figured out if he was really a muggle or not. Seemed to disappear a bit too fast and too well to be a common muggle, if you know what I mean."
"If I remember right, you're a half-blood as well, right?" Linda Ainsley, another third year Gryffindor, said. "Wasn't that why Lestrange was on your case in the beginning?"

"Yes," Tom replied, and carried on to say: "though I didn't know either one of my parents. I lived at an orphanage first, then I was adopted. My guardian is a half-blood as well." This was something he would have felt uncomfortable sharing with his Slytherin peers, even though he knew they already knew that about him. With this crowd, however, he knew that rather than condescension, he'd only receive sympathy and perhaps a bit of pity. Tom didn't mind pity when it was something he could turn into profit eventually.

"Is Slytherin all right for you?" Ainsley asked, curiously. "I mean, quite a few of them seem a bit... mean, I suppose. And I know Rosier has always been very aggressive towards most people who don't fit into his idea of how people should be."

"Rosier and Lestrange ganged up on you once, didn't they?" Putt asked, before getting elbowed by the boy sitting next to him. Henry Carter, a third year student, was the only Ravenclaw in their group. Putt looked apologetic for a moment, but Tom waved the awkwardness of the situation away. Besides, Ainsley had brought up Lestrange’s treatment of Tom once already.

"They certainly tried," he said. "But even if they combined their efforts, it's not like they can do anything to me. I'm smarter and stronger, and that's really what bothers them the most."

"You know creepy Nott as well, right?" Ainsley asked, and that's when Tom perked up. Creepy Nott? When had that guy earned such a moniker?

"Why creepy?" Tom asked. "Not that I disagree with you."

"Oh, it's... it's something pretty much all girls call him," Ainsley said, and glanced at Birgitte Dempsey sitting next to her. The fourth year Hufflepuff nodded.

"He... stares," Dempsey tried to explain. "At girls. Inappropriately."

Merlin, staying at Hogwarts was a bloody blessing. Tom had never thought that he'd be eager to hear gossip, until this very day. He put on his best sympathetic face, leaned forward, and said:

"If you want, I can talk to him?" he offered. "I'll need to know a bit more about what is it that he does, though. I've noticed that he's fairly odd and unpleasant, but so far no Slytherin girls have complained about him." As far as he knew, anyway. He should ask Pucey. She knew everything.

"He wouldn't do it to Slytherin girls," Dempsey said. "Or Pureblood witches, I think. But other girls? Well..."

* 

On the twentieth of December, Liverpool was hit. Two days later, it was Manchester.

Harry had laid in his bed at first, feeling overwhelmed. How much horror could a person feel before becoming numb to it? How long could someone sustain hope, if they didn't know how the war would end? People had no idea for how long this war would last, and to many, that wouldn't matter anyway - they had already lost everything.

Eventually, he decided to head to St. Mungo's, and offer some help. He wasn't a healer by any means, but he knew that sometimes the best thing a volunteer could do, was take care of the simple, menial tasks that anyone could do, in order to ensure that the trained healers and mediwitches and wizards wouldn't need to waste their time on doing them. Bringing bandages, keeping places clean,
supporting whoever needed support. And he was right: the moment he stepped into the hospital, he could already see a handful of people who weren't dressed in St. Mungo's uniform, cleaning wounds, calming down people, ensuring that there was enough water for everyone, and just keeping everything as organized as possible. When Harry walked to one of them, his offer to join the volunteers was met with relief and gratitude.

"We have things under control now," the witch who handed him a vest identifying him as a volunteer, said, "but we get waves of incoming people unexpectedly. I'm Zenobia Fittleworth, by the way. I'm a mediwitch, and also the person taking care of all the volunteers."

"Harry Riddle," Harry said. "I'm a Witness, but sometimes I go days without a mission, so I thought my time was better spent doing something helpful." It felt a bit off to introduce himself as a Witness, what with what was going on. He had received a letter earlier from Trelawney, and she hadn't sounded particularly satisfied by her meeting with Minister Fawley.

"That is genuinely appreciated," Zenobia said. "Our Healers and Medicorps are trying to take care of incoming patients as well and as fast as possible, but obviously we're swamped, and the corridors, waiting lounges, and even the canteen fill up faster than we can manage. That's why our volunteers are so important: you guys make sure that everything is as organized as possible, and minimize the complications that very easily can pop up. Volunteers with green vests deal with the Muggles that we have chosen to temporarily take in. Those with blue vests deal with children, red vests with men, and yellow vests with women."

Harry, who was wearing a red vest, nodded. He was relieved that he wouldn't need to take care of children: he didn't think he would be particularly good at it.

"You will have two main tasks," Zenobia continued. "Well, three, actually. First, you go to the canteen, where all wizards have been directed. Our Healers will fetch them one by one from there, but that's not your concern. Your concern is to ensure that everyone has water, and that no one is dying - if you think someone is deteriorating fast, alert a healer - and that no fights will break out. Focus only on those three things. Other volunteers will take care of other tasks. How long can you stay?"

"For as long as I'm needed," Harry said. "Until I need rest myself, of course, but I'm used to working long hours."

"Bless you," Zenobia sighed, patting him on the shoulder. "You know where the canteen is?"

Harry did know where the canteen was, and after an encouraging smile from Zenobia, he made his way there. The place wasn't as full as he thought it would be, but then again, most wizards could perhaps be able to protect themselves from German attacks. He didn't know where the Muggles were held, and suspected that they were much more in numbers than what he saw here.

Regardless, it wasn't as if this was a normal state either. Usually there would be no need to turn the canteen into a waiting area, and the number of injured people was greater than it usually was.

'Then again,' Harry thought, watching a man whose hands had turned into roses, 'not all injuries were caused by the Germans.'

Eventually, Harry's thoughts drifted back to the letter he had received from Trelawney. She had, after meeting Minister Fawley, been instructed to submit a report. She had then been contacted by Head Auror Tim Davis. According to her Tim Davis was highly competent, but also highly skeptical of her words – and his skepticism was bound to affect the way he handled the case. She didn't yet know how to convince the man, but wrote in length of how she'd have him doing his best anyway.
Somehow. She had then finished her letter by telling Harry to stay safe and be careful, and that she’d keep dealing with the Ministry.

Harry couldn’t stop worrying. Mainly because the way things were going now, when considered alongside the Witness situation in the future, led to a very clear conclusion: that the Witnesses would eventually disappear, and that no amount of involvement from the Head Auror himself would change that fact. And it wasn’t as if Harry was concerned about changing the future – he was already changing it by steering Tom away from becoming a Dark Lord. Rather, the events that were currently ongoing, were the ones that likely led to the disappearance of Witnesses the first time around. The only variable that was different in this situation was Harry. He was the disruption. Did that mean if something was to change, he’d have to be involved in it somehow?

Wasn’t he already, though? What if he hadn’t travelled back in time? What if Trelawney had been left without a Witness? What would have happened then? Harry didn’t know, and was faced with the realizations that due to Trelawney’s involvement - well, his indirect involvement - he didn’t really know if the Witnesses would disappear this time around. There was a chance that because of what he and Trelawney were doing, that was changing as well. Maybe Harry didn’t need to worry as much as he was. Maybe things would turn out well in the end.

Right?
Arcturus Black sat in the interrogation room, his hands folded atop the table. Fawley stood outside the room, watching and listening to the proceedings inside through a charmed mirror that Black had no idea about. Last time Fawley had been in the room with Malfoy. Now, facing Black, was Copplestone. Black's face was pale and gave away nothing but anger and contempt of what he must have been feeling. There was no sign of fear, and Fawley looked forward to seeing Copplestone draw that out of the man.

"You've been informed of why your presence was requested," Copplestone began. Black sneered, and said:

"No, I haven't. You merely contacted my lawyer and informed him that you needed to ask me a few questions. Questions that I do not know if I'll be able to answer."

"It's fine if you can't," Copplestone said lightly, appearing entirely unbothered. "All you need to do is be truthful, and answer what you can, okay?"

"Don't have a choice, do I?" Black snapped. Copplestone smiled pleasantly, and started with:

"When did you begin working together with Gellert Grindelwald?"

'Oh, wonderful first question,' Fawley thought watching Black's face for any signs. The man merely raised his brows and curled his lips with distaste.

"I do not associate with the likes of Grindelwald," he said. "He's hardly from a respectable family, and has no involvement in anything that interest me. I have never met the man, and I have no interest in meeting him either."

"That's funny," Copplestone said. "Because someone said - under veritaserum, mind you - that you've been working with Grindelwald. Now, I'll be honest with you, my friend... I think you might be lying to me."

"Other people have always had their own perceptions of me," Black replied instantly. "Whatever they falsely believe of me is not my sin to pay for."

"You've been visiting Germany quite a lot," Copplestone said then, his tone still casual. "Got a holiday home there?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Black said. "Though I have no staff there that could vouch for my presence, in case you were thinking of seeking out the premises for investigative purposes."

"Don't worry, we've already done that," Copplestone lied smoothly, and it was then that Fawley saw the first sign of nervousness in Black. The man began sweating more when Copplestone continued: "We had one of our men watching the place, and would you believe it, his eyesight must be going bad. He didn't see you once."

"Perhaps you could advise him in matters of healthcare, then," Black said. "Now, what else can I help you with?"

"Quite a lot, actually," Copplestone told him. "You still haven't convinced me that your 'I didn't do it'
is more reliable than what our informant has told us. Because as far as we know, you've been working for Grindelwald, recruiting wizards for him or some such. Interesting activities, to say the least."

"Your speculations have no foothold," Black said. "I will not ask for proof, as I know there will be none. I am, and never will be, working with the likes of Grindelwald."

"Wise of you," Copplestone said agreeably. "Sympathizing with him comes with a steep price these days."

"I know," Black said, ice cold. "I voted in order to pass the law."

"Clever of you," Copplestone praised, and somehow managed to not smile when Black's hands clenched into tight fists. "Say, if you're not involved, then who? We know there's someone in your vicinity that is involved with Grindelwald. So, you know what? I'll cut you a deal. You tell me if you have any suspects you'd like us to question, and I'll consider that a point in your favour."

Black relaxed slightly, feeling perhaps that he was no longer assumed guilty. "Malfoy," he said immediately. "He's a friend, and it pains me to say this, but he has certainly been talking about Grindelwald in a rather admiring tone."

"That's very interesting," Copplestone said, widening his eyes and leaning forward. He had discussed this with Fawley, who had been quite willing to take risks in order to win. "You see, Malfoy's the one who told us about you. Took veritaserum for it, too. Voluntarily."

For as long as he'd live, Fawley would never forget the expression on Black's face. The shock, flash of panic, horror, and then... rage. He had thought that he'd seen Black angry before, but Merlin... that quiet, cold rage was something else. It was something that he had wanted to see on Black's face since the moment he was led into the interrogation room, but it also alarmed him, and made him wonder what actions such rage could lead to.

Because it would lead to actions.

"Well, that is most certainly interesting," Black agreed. "Now, I do not wish to rush you, but I hope I've answered all of your questions. I was persuaded to arrive for questioning due to my lawyer's advice, but as I am not under arrest, I'd like to take my leave now."

"If you're sure that there's nothing else you wish to tell us, then you can, yes," Copplestone agreed. He knew they didn't have enough to justify holding Black for longer, and part of what he and the Minister had planned depended on Black leaving the interrogation room thinking that he had managed to fool them. This was why he didn't protest when Black stood up to leave.

Copplestone opened the door of the interrogation room, and led Black outside. Once the other man was gone, he finally relaxed, letting out a heavy sigh. A moment later he could hear Fawley exiting the observation room, and coming to stand right by his side.

"You're sure about this?" Copplestone asked quietly. Fawley nodded, watching the empty corridor that led to the exit that Black had just stepped out of.

"He's definitely involved. He was uncharacteristically wordy when claiming to not approve of Grindelwald," the Minister said. "Furthermore, he implicated Malfoy the moment he could."

"And this... telling him about Malfoy? Think he'll actually do something?"

"He and Malfoy will be focusing on each other from now on," Fawley predicted. "A political tussle
that will end up with one of them out of the Wizengamot, and in Azkaban. And whoever remains? Well... we'll deal with that when it's time for it."

Arcturus couldn't remember when he had last experienced feelings this intense. It wasn't as if he didn't have feelings, or even that he didn't feel anger, no. In fact, he was often angry. It just... was never this intense. He had never quite understood why blind rage was described as blind, but after hearing that Marchosias had attempted to have him arrested, it had become much clearer. He was shaking in rage when he finally returned home, blood boiling inside of him like a rabid beast, and the moment he stepped out of the fireplace, he summoned a house-elf.

When one of the pitiful things appeared, Arcturus grabbed it by the back of its head, and hit its skull several times against the mantlepiece of the fireplace with all the energy he had. With every hit, he could feel the tension inside of him easing. He eventually heard the thing's skull crack, hit it then a few times more, before throwing the house-elf on the floor. Some things could only be soother by means of physical activity, and this was both easy and practical. The house-elf on the floor was twitching, whining in pain and clearly dying. It looked repulsive, and was it not only right that ugly creatures perished?

He left the convulsing house-elf behind as he made his way towards his office. He was glad that Lucretia and Orion were visiting his sister Lycoris, who didn't have children of her own, and always welcomed the two into her home. Arcturus had little interest in seeing her - the woman had hated him and Melania for as long as he could remember, and he didn't care enough to change her views on him even after Melania had died. Circe, no matter how much he had hated his wife, he also missed her. If only she had been a man – or willing to indulge him by becoming one – they would have been amazing together.

In his office, Arcturus poured himself a glass of Odgen's, and sat down to think. Marchosias had dared to try and get him into trouble. That was an unexpected move from the man, and wholly unacceptable. Who did he think he was? There would never be a day when a Malfoy amounted to half as much as a Black, despite what they thought. Generally, Malfoys as a whole needed to be taught a lesson or two, if only to remind them of their own insignificance. They could have been great - not equal, but better than most other families - had Marchosias listened to Arcturus. But the man hadn't, opting instead to do the worst possible thing. The audacity of him to think that the ministry could arrest him!

Arcturus hadn't enjoyed any part of the questioning, and while he didn't like Copplestone, he thought that the man's questions hadn't been particularly invasive or clever. Clearly Copplestone didn't actually think that Arcturus was guilty, and if the Head of the entire department of Magical Law Enforcement thought he was innocent, then there wasn't much Marchosias could do about it, now was there?

What if Marchosias had been the real suspect all along? Copplestone had told him that they had interrogated the man earlier. What if the goal hadn't been to find incriminating evidence about Arcturus, but about Marchosias?

"I should have talked more," Arcturus muttered, and refilled his glass. Him not being in danger from the Ministry didn't mean, however, that this stunt could go unpunished. He'd have to deal with Marchosias in a way that would be remembered. Not recklessly, in a fit of rage - it wouldn't benefit him one bit if he rushed into the task of avenging himself with a flimsy plan. No, he needed something better. Most importantly, he wasn't going to let Marchosias so much as suspect that Arcturus knew what he had done - there was no reason to assume that Copplestone would tell him
who had named him, after all. It wasn't usual protocol, and now in hindsight, was only yet another sign of how Copplestone couldn't possibly have thought him guilty anyway.

For such a smart man, he was a bit of a fool, wasn't he? Well, Arcturus couldn't hold that against him, really. As smart and competent Copplestone was, Arcturus was just... smarter and better. Should he convince the man of Marchosias's guilt? Wouldn't that be glorious? Oh, Merlin, the Malfoy name would be forever in the gutter, where it belonged. He could strike fast and convince the Wizengamot that perhaps the Malfoy name ought to be erased from history, after such a betrayal.

The idea had merit, but as much as Arcturus enjoyed winning in the political sphere, he wanted to do something that would satisfy him on a personal level, and erase this feeling of... humiliation that had struck at the indignity of being even questioned. Brought to a room and interrogated like a common criminal! As satisfying as it would be, erasing the Malfoys from history wouldn't leave him as vindicated as he wanted to be. Perhaps he could push for an Azkaban sentence? Wasn't it perfectly reasonable to want a traitor to receive a Dementor's Kiss?

Then again, would that leave him some sort of a glorified hero in the eyes of those who truly did support the Dark Lord's cause, and didn't know that Arcturus had so brilliant set Malfoy up? Revealing him to be innocent afterwards would only turn him into a martyr of some sort. No, what he'd do wouldn't involve turning Marchosias into someone anyone would respect or hold in high regard. Rather, he could simply focus on making Marchosias suffer as much as possible, and disregard the larger impact: after all, it had been Marchosias who had crossed him, and not the rest of his family.

Perhaps it was time he called in a favour from the Dark Lord, for a change.

He had an idea of what he could do, but detailed planning required him to be able to focus properly. He was too tense for that, too angry still. He would likely need to visit Mortlake's again, for a boy to help him sort out his feelings tonight. And, well, he did find the activities following sex often inspiring. Who knew what he could come up with for Marchosias, really?

As bizzare and unbelievable as it sounded, Harry didn't always know when London was being hit. Sometimes an attack could pass and he'd wake up in the morning to news about it. Sometimes it felt as if everything was just one long continuous attack on the capital that simply took breaks every now and then.

What began on the twenty-ninth of December, however, was different. At half past six Harry had been home, wrapping a birthday gift he had bought for Tom, and thinking of where he'd take the boy for birthday dinner at Hogsmeade. He was then startled when someone knocked on his door, in a way that indicated a sense of urgency. When he opened the door, he was surprised to see a pale and clearly distressed Lavinia there.

"London's on fire," she said, her voice thick with the tears she was holding back. "I'm on my way to St. Mungo's. I think they'll be needing more volunteers than before, if what you've told me holds true still."

"Merlin," Harry breathed, dread pooling at the pit of his stomach. He gestured for the witch to step in while he changed quickly, and offered to make her a cup of tea to soothe her nerves.

"I can make a cup for us both while you get dressed," Lavinia said, making Harry sigh in relief. "I know we shouldn't be panicking and upset when we're the ones who're supposed to provide help and support. I wish to just go and start working, but I need to get my hands to stop shaking first.

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"Have you volunteered often?" Harry asked, raising his voice to be heard through the door of his room. "I've only recently started."

"I've started recently as well," Lavinia replied, steeping the tea and pouring then two cupfuls of it. She handed Harry his when he emerged from his room, now properly dressed and almost ready to go. "It's just... it's hard to stay still and be calm when the world is going to hell around you."

"Tell me about it," Harry muttered, not daring to imagine the chaos that must be going on at St. Mungo's now. London, on fire? Was it anything like what had happened in Coventry? Surely it couldn't be... Hundreds of people had died in Coventry – there was still dispute over how many – and while the raids on London had been devastating, they hadn't been as shocking as in some other areas. Surely, no matter the fire, it couldn't be as bad as that.

Harry was right, in all the wrong ways.

This latest raid on London wasn't like the one on Coventry. Or Manchester. Or Liverpool. It was much, much worse. The devastation that was left, and the fire that ate away at the city, was indescribable.

"Oh, thank Merlin," Zenobia said, the moment she saw Harry enter St. Mungo's reception hall with Lavinia. "McGill, I know you're good with bandages, so head to the third floor and help out with that. Riddle, go to the canteen and help the Healer on duty. I think it's Gloriana Parkinson. Hurry, please." Harry and Lavinia parted ways without so much as a goodbye, and each rushed to where they were needed. Harry found Gloriana Parkinson easily, her being the only Healer on duty in a large canteen filled to the brim with wounded people. A handful of volunteers and a few mediwitches and wizards were flitting around, clearly overwhelmed by the number of people that needed them.

"The worst is the damage to the lungs," Parkinson was telling a mediwizard. "And burns, obviously. Go to the seventh floor and request more salve for those, and blood replenishing potions – as many as you can possibly get." She then turned to Harry, and sighed. "Please tell me you're a volunteer and not a patient."

"I'm a volunteer," Harry said. "Harry Riddle. With a bit of experience in giving emergency treatment."

"Thank Merlin," Parkinson said, and gestured for him to follow her. People, groaning and moaning in pain all around them, made it hard to move from one place to another. "I'm Healer Parkinson. To get straight to the point, we deal here with burns more than anything else. Unfortunately, most of the cases we have here are third degree burns," Parkinson said. "Fortunately, however, we know how to treat those. In third degree burns the underlying blood vessels have been destroyed, and are or already have coagulated. When that happens, nerve endings are destroyed. What Smith is bringing us now is salve to first undo the coagulation and control infection and inflammation. As it's a simple and a straightforward thing to do, all the volunteers have been tasked with applying the salve on burns. After the salve has absorbed, a mediwitch or a mediwizard will work on reviving blood vessels. The final step is the most complicated one, as it aims to fix the nerve endings, and will be performed by me."

"That's... a lot of work for you," Harry said, thinking that while everyone else could share their workload, Parkinson was alone in her capabilities. The Healer, however, didn't seem bothered.
"Thanks to the salve, that stage isn't an urgent one," she explained, just as Smith returned with a cart full of salves and potions. "Wonderful! All right, get to work. If you find someone who has something that is not burns or blood loss, come and find me. Pick someone and get started."

Harry had either experienced, or seen on others, a great variety of injuries. During the war, of course, but also during his studies at Hogwarts, whenever someone had coincidentally dropped by the Hospital Wing while he was there. What none of that had prepared him for, however, was the smell. The stench that came with being surrounded by people with such severe injuries was heavy, metallic, and nauseating. The salves helped, though - whoever had made them, had mixed enough mint to cover the bad smell to make it tolerable.

Some of the people he put salve on were barely conscious. Some were conscious enough to feel the sting of having something applied on them. One, however, was not only awake, but also recognized Harry, and greeted with a wide smile.

"Finally, someone with something good for me," Montague said, both of his arms hanging limply by his sides. Harry held back a grimace - it wasn't difficult to tell how painful that must've been. "I keep asking for firewhisky, but apparently they haven't got any here. Ridiculous, if you ask me."

"Get better and maybe I'll buy you a drink at Babbitty's," Harry said, kneeling down and uncorking the jar of salve. "Brace yourself. I'll be as gentle as possible, but going by experience, that doesn't make much of a difference."

"Don't worry, I can handle it," Montague promised, though he didn't seem too convinced of that. "Distract me, will you? What have you been up to? What got you into volunteering?"

"For whatever reason, I'm not sent out to Witness much of anything these days," Harry said, still unsure of what was truly the reason for that. "I had too much free time, and decided to start using it wisely."

"No partner to keep yourself occupied?" Montague asked nonchalantly. "You're pretty, it's hard to believe you're single."

Harry flushed red, sternly reminding himself of how inappropriate and pathetic of him it was to feel giddy over a small compliment. "Thank you," he ended up saying, too aware of how hot and red his face was. Montague was peering at him with his dark brown eyes, short blonde hair combed back and slicked to stick. He had freckles, and Harry wanted to stop noticing these things right about now.

"I'm single too," Montague said, though Harry hadn't asked. "My brother got married to an Avery, but let me tell you - witches aren't up my alley, really. I mean, Jasmine is great and all, but you know. Tits."

"Okay," Harry said. Had Montague hit his head, or something? The man had always come across as rather impulsive, but he hadn't yet talked much with Harry. Every time they had met, they had been surrounded by friends and colleagues, and there had been something to keep them both occupied. This kind of interest that Montague was suddenly expressing was new and unexpected.

Not entirely unwelcome, though.

Harry finished spreading the salve, and began wiping his hands in order to close the jar and move on to the next patient. Montague leaned close, still not moving his hands, and smiled again. Harry's blush had been slowly receding, but returned in full force when he realized how close Montague's face was. Merlin, this was embarrassing. He didn't even have a crush, honestly. He just wasn't used to someone being that close, or talking to him the way Montague was doing.
"Hey," Montague said. "Once I'm out of here, let's meet up at Babbitty's, okay? For drinks?"

"I did promise to buy you a drink, didn't I?" Harry replied. He stood up, and got ready to leave. "Owl me a few days in advance, so I know that I won't have any work to do on that day. We can invite the others to join us, as well."

"Sure," Montague replied, winking. "I'll see you soon, Harry!"

Harry didn't... hate the thought of that.

Harry woke up on the day of Tom's birthday, feeling guilty and relieved about not planning on going to the hospital. As much as he wanted to be there and help as much as he possibly could, it was terribly draining, and fairly lonely. He didn't want to consider Tom's birthday an excuse to not go there, but he couldn't help feeling grateful for the break anyway. Besides, he really missed the boy.

The only thing that Harry was worried about was whether or not Tom would like his birthday gift: a book discussing the economic history of magical Britain. It would have been a boring book for anyone else, perhaps, but it seemed like something Tom would enjoy. And hopefully the nice dinner that Harry had reserved for them at Merrythought's Merry Tarts - a restaurant that Harry didn't remember from his own visits to Hogsmeade as a student. Either way, when he had tried the place out a few weeks ago, it had appeared cozy, but of slightly higher standard than the other places that Harry had been to.

The plan was to meet up with Tom on the road that led to Hogwarts, as it was a simple and straightforward street. Harry was glad, however, that he had arrived first - the wind was blowing strongly around him, and the snow was twirling, pushed up and around by the strong gusts. The visibility was fairly bad, and Harry didn't want to imagine having Tom stand in wait for him in this kind of a weather, no matter how appropriately dressed the boy was. Harry, at least, could cast a warming charm.

'Maybe I should teach him that one,' Harry thought, just as he saw a familiar figure emerging from what could very well later develop into an actual snowstorm. "Tom!"

Tom had a pleased expression on his face, despite being clearly cold. Harry hugged him tightly for a brief moment, before hurrying up to Merrythought's. There was no use trying to say anything outside, as being heard over the loud wind was unlikely without shouting.

Merrythought's was truly nice, without being uncomfortable. It was warm, with large leather chairs and sturdy wooden tables. Every table had an arrangement of candles in the middle, surrounded by an ever-green wreath. "I've never been here before," Tom said as soon as they were seated at one of the tables near the front of the restaurant. He then looked at Harry and huffed: "How have you been? You look exhausted."

"I've been volunteering at St. Mungo's for the past few days," Harry explained. "You've heard of the raid on London, and the fire following it? The Second Great Fire of London, they're calling it. And Merlin, what a mess it has left in its wake. Thankfully most injuries are treatable."

"I bet you meet all kinds of weird people," Tom said, just as one of the waitresses brought them their food. "Usually when large groups of people are gathered in one place, at least a handful are a bit funny."

"I suppose," Harry said, though the only person he really knew had been Montague. Somehow,
however, he felt reluctant to talk about the man in question. "Anyway, there's nothing new on my end. How have you been? Fourteen already, eh? Merlin, you grow up so fast."

"Not faster than anyone else," Tom pointed out dryly. He was curious about his gift, but could see the wrapped package, and could tell it was a book. He couldn't wait to read it. "There aren't many Slytherins now, though, so I've been spending a lot of time with people from other Houses. Mostly muggleborns, too, which is interesting."

"Interesting, how?"

"They've got... a lot more awareness, you could say. Of what's happening out there, you know. The purebloods I know can barely tell there's a war going, let alone if London's on fire or not."

"Well, that's good then, isn't it?" Harry said, smiling at Tom. "Making friends with students from the other Houses is great."

"I also noticed that summer jobs are a lot more common among muggleborns than purebloods," Tom said. "Which reminds me - I really want to do it again. Working at Doyle's was great."

"I'm certain that he'll hire you again next summer," Harry said, but Tom shrugged, clearly not interested in pursuing that particular position anymore. There were so many thoughts flitting through his mind, it was difficult for the boy to focus on one specific issue to discuss at length.

"I know he would," Tom agreed. "But I was thinking of maybe something a little bit more demanding. Maybe a bigger store or a different kind of business." In all honesty, Tom wanted to find some sort of a way to work at the Ministry. Get his foot in, or something. Make sure that he'd have a future there, down the line. He didn't think, however, that finding employment at the Ministry - even the lowly assisting kind - at the age of fourteen was possible. Not without the kind of connections that he simply didn't have.

Well, no use in dwelling on that kind of thoughts now. Not when he was enjoying a nice dinner with Harry, on his birthday. It wasn't quite as good as spending the whole holiday together, but Tom knew that sometimes necessity demanded sacrifices, and he still had plenty of things he wanted to do with his freedom.

"Oh, hey Tom." And, shit. So much for spending the day alone with Harry. Tom glanced to his left, and saw Mulciber standing there, hands in his pockets. His light brown hair was a mess, and his eyes were barely open, as per usual.

"Hey," Tom replied. "How come you're here?"

"Grandma wanted company," Mulciber said with a shrug. "But then she met a friend of hers and told me to wait for her here. So here I am." Mulciber may have been his favourite friend, but Tom really didn't want the boy's company right now. Not when he had Harry.

Harry, of course, didn't seem to understand this.

"Well then," Harry said, smiling cheerfully. "Would you like to join us while we wait for your grandmother?"

Mulciber then turned to look at Harry, and Tom saw something he had seen only once before: Mulciber's eyes opening properly, and focusing on something with great intensity. This would have been interesting and all, if that something wasn't Harry. Why on earth would Mulciber focus on Harry like that? Tom didn't like it when other people focused on Harry the way Mulciber was doing right then. Surely this wasn't because Harry was a halfblood? Tom was a halfblood too, and that had
never seemed to bother the other boy.

"We wouldn't want to impose," Tom said, trying to convey his displeasure well enough to undo this situation. Mulciber, who had been quietly staring at Harry still, suddenly straightened up and smiled - *smiled!* - before saying:

"Thank you, Harry."

"His name is Riddle," Tom said.

"But my grandmother has her personal table here on the second floor," Mulciber continued, not even glancing at Tom. Forget about being friends, Tom would've preferred even Nott's company to what was happening here. Mulciber *smiled!* Who knew he even could *do* that with his face? "I'd love to join you and Tom some other time, however."

"We don't eat out often," Tom said, before Harry could respond. It was only then that Mulciber glanced at him, and had the audacity to look amused. "But we'll keep that in mind. See you."

"Tom, that was rude," Harry said quietly, the moment Mulciber left. "I'm sure your friend was happy to see you."

"He's a snake," Tom said, re-evaluating his entire friendship with the other boy. "And he never says anything interesting. You don't want to spend time with him, trust me. Anyway, I really like this place, how did you find it?"

"Lavinia recommended it," Harry said, allowing Tom to steer the conversation elsewhere. His dealings with his friends weren't really Harry's business anyway. "Although to be honest with you, I think she recommended it loudly at the pub just because Stephen was there, and she was hoping that he'd ask her out."

Tom, who approved of friends who had interests that weren't Harry, nodded. "Maybe she should be the one to ask him out."

"I don't know if she has the nerve for that quite yet," Harry said with a laugh. He fell then silent for a few moments, and just looked at Tom: his familiar, dear face and neatly combed dark hair. The restaurant was warm, the food was good, and all the horrors of war seemed to be so distant. Merlin, moments like these were truly the best.

This was the life Harry wanted to live.
1941

It was, in no shape or form, a date. Rather, it was just another meeting with a new friend - not unlike the meetings Harry had with Lavinia and Stephen. In fact, he’d be having tea with Tom, if Tom wasn’t at Hogwarts. The fact that the person he was drinking tea with at one of Diagon Alley's tea rooms was Montague, didn’t change that fact.

It wasn't that Montague wasn't attractive - Merlin, he really was. And it was incredibly flattering and refreshing to be at the receiving end of such attention from someone who didn't come across as an absolute creep. Montague was funny, wasn't too pushy, and was kept busy enough by his own life and duties as to not require much commitment from Harry. The attraction, especially as it went unaddressed, didn't make their meetings dates, though. And Harry wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"My arms are still sore," Montague sighed. "One of the Healers - I have no idea which one - told me that it's normal. I recovered as expected, but apparently new skin is going to be sensitive for a while, still."

"Poor you," Harry said, and grinned. "I can only imagine how much you miss writing reports on every move you make."

"I do love writing reports," Montague replied with an exaggerated look of wistfulness. "Sitting behind the desk for eight hours, trying to figure out if I should go with a comma and proper grammar like Davis wants, or go with a period and start another short sentence for clarity's sake? That's the reason why I became an Auror in the first place, you know. All that…," he clenched his fist, "writing."

Harry, giggled - giggled! For Merlin's sake, when did he ever giggle? - and tried to then smother his laughter into his cup of tea. "What were your other options? Professor at Hogwarts?"

"Merlin, yes. Chasing criminals is only a dissatisfying substitute to chasing the mistakes of students in hundreds of doubtlessly well-written essays," Montague said, before then shaking his head. "In all seriousness, me becoming an Auror was already a bit of a tough potion to swallow for my family. My brother and I were expected to follow in our father's footsteps, and go into business. I rebelled, and here I am."

"A bit of rebellion isn't bad, when it's reasonable," Harry said, thinking of the things he had done. There was no way he could ever tell anyone about his own little acts of rebellion, though. Choosing a different career path - or rather, going from one respectable career path to another, equally respectable career path was a far cry from breaking out of Gringotts on the back of a dragon.

"Well, I suppose," Montague agreed. "Though there's much else that I'm yet to live up to. Settling down with a witch just doesn't seem like an option for me." This wasn't the first time Montague had said something like this, and every time Harry couldn't help but feel that there was a specific response Montague wanted from him. Harry didn't know what that could be, and so couldn't do anything about it.

"Well," Harry said. "With the times being what they are, who knows what will happen to any of us
in the future? For all you know, you might meet the love of your life tomorrow, and get married in a rushed, mysterious ceremony in rural Wales."

"I aspire to experience all of that," was Montague's immediate response. "Rural Wales is where I fulfill all of my social needs. You should try it, sometime."

"I'm sure it's much wilder than Babbitty's," Harry said. "That's where I go to fulfill my social needs. I don't go out much, to be honest. I mostly spend time with Lavinia there, and sometimes Stephen."

"Oh, that must be fun," Montague grinned. "How much does she sigh over Stephen? Merlin knows every time he plans on going to Babbitty's, the rest of us end up hearing about it for hours beforehand. He still thinks he's being subtle, bless his heart."

"Subtle enough for Lavinia to not have caught on yet," Harry said. "She's convinced it's one-sided."

"I guess that's the thing about love, or even attraction that you have some emotional investment in," Montague said. "You become so afraid of assuming and making a fool out of yourself, that you convince yourself that even the most obvious signs are just... gestured of friendship."

"I think that's what it is," Harry said, thinking of Ron and Hermione. "Stephen visits so often, and talks quite a lot with Lavinia, but do you think he should ask her out for coffee elsewhere? Perhaps meeting at Babbitty's all the time is throwing them both off."

"Hopefully that will sort itself out eventually," Montague said. "Sometimes you ask a guy for tea at a nice place in Diagon Alley, and he still thinks it's not a date."

"Wow," Harry said. "Does that really happen?"

Montague bit his lip, clearly fighting the urge to laugh. Harry felt like there was a joke that he hadn't managed to catch, and though he was curious, he didn't want to ask for clarifications: jokes weren't funny when explained, usually. "Yeah," Montague said in the end. "But I guess that's what can make the person a bit cute, too. If they spend time with you, without any ulterior motives, it just means that they genuinely enjoy your company. And isn't that a great compliment already?"

Harry nodded. It really was. The memories he had of spending hours with Ron and Hermione - be it at the Gryffindor common room by the fire, at Grimmauld Place, and especially the Burrow - were some of his favourites. There had been no need for any particular conversation, either. Just... each one of them doing their own thing and enjoying the simple presence of the others.

When Harry returned home later on, he couldn't get the smile off his face. The meeting with Montague had gone well and left him feeling more positive than he had in a while. This friendship - if it was a friendship - was new and exciting, and didn't come with any of the dangers and responsibilities that revolved around people like Black and Malfoy.

He really looked forward to the next meeting.

* *

"Uh," Dorian Lestrange said, stopping by the doorway of his shared dormitory. Inside, something was happening. Mulciber and Riddle were standing up, facing each other in a gesture more aggressive than he had seen either one of them display ever before. Avery was flitting around them, wringing his hands, clearly confused.

"What's going on?" Dorian asked. Avery looked at him, and shook his head. The one who spoke, instead, was Riddle.
"Yes, Elliot. What's going on?" Riddle's tone reminded Dorian of his sisters: it made what he said sound like it wasn't really a question, but more of an accusation. Dorian wasn't scared of Riddle, but he didn't think he wanted to get involved when someone was that upset. Besides, surely Mulciber could handle himself. Not to mention that Mulciber had picked Riddle's company over Dorian's, so Dorian owed him nothing.

"I'm the one who's upset, you know," Mulciber said, though he sounded gleeful. Dorian grimaced, remembering the only other time he had heard that tone from Mulciber: the boy had, at the age of eight, set fire to Dorian's favourite house-elf, then looked him straight in the face and said that no one would believe it if Dorian tried to tell on him. Mulciber hadn't even been upset then, from what Dorian could remember – he just had had some sort of a point to prove. Either way, Dorian had been pretty annoyed at the loss of a house-elf, and it had taken him nearly a week to ask for another one from his parents.

Yeah, Dorian wasn't going to get between an argument between these two. They deserved each other. The only person who maybe deserved some pity was Avery, who clearly hadn't realized what kind of freaks he spent his days with.

"You are the one who's upset?" Riddle repeated. "Go on, explain that one."

"You've talked about your guardian a few times," Mulciber said, a smirk - a smirk! Who was he? - appearing on his face. Did someone make him drink a potion of some sort, or what had made him act like this? "Not once did you tell me he was that pretty."

Um. What?

Also: Avery looked really funny when his face tried to convey both disbelief and concern.

"That's not important," Riddle snapped. "I've figured out what you're up to, and I forbid it. You're staying away from Harry."

"You can't marry someone named Harry," Avery said, doing the worst thing he possibly could, and focusing on the least relevant part of the conversation. "That is so mundane! Your mother would never allow it!"

"He's not," Riddle instantly said. "Harry isn't short of anything. He's just Harry. Besides, you're saying she would approve of you marrying a man? I read the paper regularly, you know. I know how homosexuals are viewed. Your mother would not approve."

Oh wait. Oh no. Dorian knew what Mulciber was like when he wanted something. He had once poisoned an entire well just to show his parents that giving him the permission to sleep till noon was a safer option for everyone. It had been easy to forget, because the guy barely ever bothered to do anything anymore, but he was vicious when he wanted something. It's just... he had never wanted a whole person before. Was this what Mulciber's version of puberty was? Why couldn't he just pick a girl and like her, the way everybody else did?

Yeah, no way – Dorian was not getting into the middle of that. His sisters had told him all about growing up, and the things he would need to watch out for. The warped mating habits of his dormmates were not included in the list of things he could survive. He was going to stay away and observe this fight, though, because anything that disrupted the friendship between Riddle and his cronies was bound to be entertaining. No matter how freaking weird the discussion was. Or how freaking weird they all were.
"When you're rich, you can do anything," Mulciber said. "People will find it eccentric, if you're not too weird or too public about it. We'll be fine."

"Lestrange!" Riddle barked, startling Dorian. The boy's usually calm and contained composure had crumbled into nothing, and Dorian was living for it. Merlin, this was wonderful. This was all the gifts he deserved but never got, rolled into one beautiful moment. "Put some sense into him!"

Being pulled into this drama seemed unavoidable, and while the thought of two guys - Mulciber being one of them - together made Dorian feel a bit uneasy and slightly nauseated, he wasn't going to say anything that would make Riddle's day better. If Riddle was so against Mulciber marrying his guardian or whatever, then Circe bless him, Dorian was going to make sure it happened, even if he had to campaign for ten years in order to allow men to get married.

"He's not wrong," he ended up saying, putting minimal effort into sounding consoling. Well, at least he didn't laugh. "If you're rich and likable, you can do anything. Marry a guy if you want to. Elliot's family is rich, and while he's not exactly likable, at least no one hates him."

"I don't care about Mulciber marrying a guy," Riddle said, pale with anger. Even his hair was a mess. Merlin, Dorian was going to have to give Mulciber a gift of some sort, just for making this happen. "I do care when he's putting design on Harry." Riddle then rounded back to Mulciber, still glaring. "You've met him only once!"

"Twice," Avery said, once again talking before his survival instincts could stop him, “at the train sta — you know what? Yeah, that time doesn’t count. You’re right. Only once. Please don’t kill me.”

"Sometimes, Tom, once is all it takes for love to blossom," Mulciber said, lifting his hands in a placating gesture. His smile shone with the insincerity of someone who wanted nothing but to see the world descend into chaos. "You meet people that make it worth your time and effort to stay awake. Besides, you know he looks pretty. And I like pretty things." Following this, Dorian was treated to a sight he would forever cherish: Riddle letting out an enraged scream, and flinging himself at Mulciber. Avery was screaming as well, for whatever reason. Shock, probably. Or just going with the flow, like he usually did. The spineless wench.

If this was how entertaining Riddle's company was, though, then maybe Dorian could understand why he had so many people around him. Hell, maybe Dorian too could stick around for a while, just to get more of whatever this was. He hadn't had this much fun in ages.

* *

Bumping into Arcturus Black outside of Gringotts was perhaps the one thing Marchosias did not want to experience. After following Riddle's advice and revealing the connection Arturus and Grindelwald had to the Aurors, Marchosias was left feeling perpetually paranoid, waiting for the moment Arcturus would track him down and fight him. He knew that it wasn't possible that the Aurors would have told him who had pointed them his way - if they had even done anything - as it went against their protocol, but it didn't make him feel any less worried. Not to mention that he knew already that Arcturus was working to get him into trouble, somehow. To think that he'd go as far as get Marchosias's lawyer into his pocket... he truly wasn't holding back, was he? At least the confrontation with Justus had gone smoothly: the old lawyer had appeared genuinely apologetic, and even more so after Marchosias had had a word or two with some of his other clients as well.

That was as much as he could do, and he was happy with it.

Now, however, happiness was far from what he was feeling. The last time he had actually seen Arcturus, they hadn't parted on good terms. Surprisingly, however, the man appeared entirely at ease,
and was alarmingly pleasant when he asked about how Marchosias and his family were doing.

"We're doing well, thank you. You as well, I hope?"

"Well," Arcturus said, hesitating slightly before continuing: "to be honest with you, I might be in need of a holiday. You see, recently something rather upsetting happened, and since the children are already back at Hogwarts, I thought I might as well travel to the Continent for a bit of... you know, change of scenery, relaxation, and resting."

"That sounds wonderful," Marchosias said, the feeling of wariness not easing up one bit. Arcturus was up to something - he had to be. "You had a summer cottage somewhere, didn't you? Belgium?"

"Germany," Arcturus said. "Unfortunately it's not a safe area right now, I'll have to look for a better place, no matter how temporarily. Say, your family has a lodge in Switzerland, don't you?"

'Ooh, no,' Marchosias thought, starting to feel sick. "Yes, we do."

"Are you planning on using it sometime soon?" Arcturus asked then, not noticing - or pretending not to notice - how uncomfortable with this subject Marchosias was. "If not, I could borrow it for a few weeks. From the first of March to the fifteenth."

There was no way that Marchosias was going to let that happen. He could easily imagine why Arcturus wanted the lodge for his use: planting more evidence so that the Ministry would be convinced of Marchosias's guilt. Perhaps he'd even go so far as to invite Grindelwald and some of his allies there, compromising the entire location.

No. Not happening.

"Oh, goodness, what a coincidence," Marchosias said, feigning surprise. "My wife has already made plans for us to spend all of March there. We usually go to Paris, but as you said - the Muggles are getting a bit too bothersome with their squabbles, and it's simply safer to go to Switzerland. I apologize, Arcturus, I truly do."

Surprisingly, rather than anger, Arcturus waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal, and sounded almost jovial when he said: "No matter, my friend! I completely understand. Good old Britain is a great place to live, but we do need a bit of a break every now and then, don't we? The lodge is in the middle of a town, isn't it? I'm sure your son loves it."

"No, actually," Marchosias replied, allowing himself to relax just a little bit, when faced with information Arcturus clearly didn't know. "It's quite secluded, and far away from the town. Abraxas doesn't particularly care for the place, as he doesn't have much to do there, and it is rather cold. Which is why going now, while he's at Hogwarts, is such a good choice."

"I agree," Arcturus said, maintaining the pleasant tone effortlessly. "And your sister, dearest Madeleine, will be going with you as well? I imagine it'll be rather lonely for her to remain behind."

Who knew what his stubborn sister decided to do? Marchosias certainly didn't. Regardless, he nodded and said: "Oh yes. She loves the lodge. The air there does her good, and she enjoys how removed the place is."

"I'd imagine so, yes. I do think that if one means to rest away from the things that bother him at home, he might as well take a step further into temporary solitude," Arcturus said, nodding. "Well, while I do find my unfortunate timing a setback for me, I hope that you'll enjoy your holiday. Merlin knows how much work there will be waiting for you when you come back."
'Was that a threat? Is he implying something?' Marchosias thought, suddenly worried again. What if this was a threat of some sort? What if Arcturus had a back-up plan? If he couldn't plant evidence in the lodge, he'd do something else instead, so that the moment Marchosias and his family returned, they'd be caught up in some sort of trouble? There was no way he could plant his evidence at the Malfoy Manor - the place was protected from its very foundations to the tips of the highest towers.

"Thank you," Marchosias ended up saying. He couldn't very well accuse Arcturus of anything, after all. Perhaps he should seek Riddle again and consult him - the man did have a good head on his shoulders when it came to dealing with strange problems like this. "Hopefully the unrest in the continent will ease up soon so that you as well will get to enjoy your own summer house."

To this, Arcturus only smiled in response, before excusing himself and leaving. His departure was abrupt, and left Marchosias feeling as if he had been somehow cut off, even though… he hadn’t. The man stood rooted to the spot for a few long moments, felt like something had just gone really, really wrong.

If only he could figure out what it was.

* * *

"You look upset," Madeleine Malfoy said when she saw her brother. Marchosias sighed, and sat down next to her on the couch.

"I bumped into Arcturus."

Madeleine made a face, and put down the book she had been reading earlier. "Did he say something?"

"He asked me about the lodge in Switzerland," Marchosias said. "Asked to borrow it. Isn't that—"

"Suspicious? Yes," Madeleine interrupted. "You told him no, right?"

"I said that we plan on going there in March, so I couldn't possibly allow him to be there, then," Marchosias said. "He accepted it easily enough, but now I'm wondering if he's planning on something else."

"Like what?"

"Like... whatever he did to land me in Minister custody and convince Justus to not aid me."

"I still can't believe Justus did that," Madeleine muttered, clearly very much upset by the actions of their lawyer. Justus had been with the Malfoys for years, and to think that Arcturus could so easily sway him away... in such an obvious way, as well... it was unbelievable. "Now we'll have to go through the process of finding a new lawyer who doesn't associate with the Blacks."

"I just worry that if Arcturus was ready to go that far just to punish me for not joining his cause, what else is he willing to do?" Marchosias asked. "I keep worrying about him planting some evidence that would convince the Wizengamot and have me sentenced to Azkaban under the new law. Who knows how many times the Veritaserum is going to help me?"

"Speaking of which," Madeleine, who had been told all the details of her brother's interrogation experience, "what gave you the veritaserum idea to begin with? It was brilliant, but so very unlike you." Unlike any of them, honestly. Most people whose families were involved in politics, no matter how indirectly, were taught early on to be wary of anything that prevented them from speaking freely. Veritaserum left them much more vulnerable to self-incrimination than anyone wanted to be.
"Remember Harry Riddle?"

"Remind me."

"That half-blood Witness I told you about? The one who first suggested that Arcturus may have had a rather active hand in the death of his wife?"

"Oh yes, I remember now," Madeleine said. "The one you told me Black has some odd interest in. What, was this his idea? When and why do you two spend time together, anyway?"

"It's never planned, and not much or often," Marchosias immediately said. "We just bump into each other and share some news every now and then. It's proven to be useful so far. He's the one who warned me about Arcturus to begin with."

"And look where that got you," Madeleine said. "Can't you just stop getting involved?"

"No, you don't understand," Marchosias said. "I'm not in this trouble because of Riddle. Arcturus tried to recruit me from the beginning, and it's because of my refusal that he decided to target us. Well, target me specifically. Riddle wasn't the reason this issue started, but he has had some helpful advice for me on how to deal with Arcturus's shenanigans."

"Then why haven't you invited him to a proper dinner yet? If he's that helpful, I want to meet him."

Marchosias was about to reject the suggestion - he still didn't think much of half-bloods, and didn't see the need to invite one into the Malfoy Manor. However, Riddle was a rather unusual half-blood.

"Perhaps. I could do that after the trip to the lodge," he ended up saying. "With Abraxas at Hogwarts, we might as well use the chance to go there."

"I'll be staying here, thank you," Madeleine replied, before she continued: "I think you should focus less on whatever Black is trying to do. You have your own things that keep you busy, don't you? That trace thing you've been working on for ages, for example. How's that going?"

"Quite well, actually," Marchosias said, perking up when the conversation moved to something he actually enjoyed. "The thing is, the way to trace underage magic - or magic used by students when they're not at Hogwarts - in place now won't change on the surface. The students will not know a difference. However, those in the Ministry who are responsible for locating the source of the trace, will have a more precise system in place for making that happen. Furthermore, to digress a bit from that, remember when I told you about my own, uh, independent research?"

"You mean using Ministry resources to differentiate between Muggle and Magical attacks?"

Madeleine asked, her lips quirking into a smile. "Sure I do."

Marchosias rolled his eyes, before carrying on: "I forwarded that information to Copplestone several months ago - he's the head of law enforcement, and is in direct contact with Minister Fawley regularly. I proposed that the system I developed could be used to identify accidents and attacks domestically as well."

"Have you heard anything from the Minister regarding that?"

"No," Marchosias said, sighing heavily. "But after that questioning he did, I doubt he'll be considering anything I do in a particularly favourable light. He did it personally, did I tell you? Merlin, I'm glad I don't actually work at the Ministry officially. I wouldn't want to answer to him after what happened. It's already terribly awkward."

"It could've been worse," Madeleine said. "Imagine if Riddle hadn't given you the idea to use
Veritaserum? Can you imagine any other way they would have been convinced by anything you said? You might have ended up arrested, and that would have been a scandal and a half. The Daily Prophet can't wait for a disaster to happen."

"Vultures," Marchosias muttered with a frown, thinking of journalists. "Hmm. Perhaps I'll approach Fawley personally after we come back from Switzerland. Hopefully by then he'll consider me in a more positive light."

"Especially if Black has made a move of any sort," Madeleine said. "In fact, rather than dread it, maybe you should look forward to it. Because anything Black does to help Grindelwald, is something you can use against him."

*

"Hey there."

Harry stopped in his tracks, and turned to see Montague jogging towards him. He had left his apartment a few minutes ago, and was on his way to Babbitty's. Considering that Montague was in Vertic Alley as well, despite not living in the area, Harry assumed that the Auror was also on his way there.

"Hi," Harry replied, standing still as he waited for Montague to reach him. "I wasn't expecting to see you today. Did you have an appointment with Stephen?"

"No, actually, I came here to see you," Montague said. "Remember when we discussed the Muggle radio thing? Actually, you know what, let's wait until we get to Babbitty's, and then I'll tell everyone about this at the same time."

"Okay," Harry said, wondering if the other man had heard something interesting on the radio that he wanted to discuss. A week ago another German bombing killed fifty-seven people outside the Bank of England, collapsing the Underground beneath it. Two days after that, the Luftwaffe attacked Plymouth. Sometimes it felt as if there wasn't a square inch in Britain left untouched by the Nazis - that's how frequent and devastating the German attacks appeared to be.

When they entered Babbitty's, they found not only Stephen and Lavinia already there, but Aurors Morris and Dewey as well.

"Good of you two to join us," Dewey said, waving with a broad smile on his face. "Riddle! Haven't seen you in a minute!"

"He's been busy volunteering," Stephen said. "At St. Mungo's with Lavinia."

"Different areas, though," Harry said, sitting down. "Any news? I feel like I've missed so much lately."

"Not much, really," Morris said. "Although who knows what kind of information Muggles are missing out on."

"Speaking of which," Montague piped in, leaning forward with an eager expression on his face. "Have you heard of Theopolos and Imogen Turpin?"

"No," Stephen replied. Harry also shook his head, though he did feel as if the name Turpin was somehow familiar.

"Well," Montague said, "they're a couple from St. Clanaghan, a few miles south of Leeds. And
they're doing us all a favour by setting up what they're calling the Wireless Wizard Network. Basically, we're finally learning from Muggles, and soon we too will have our own radio station!" Harry startled, recognizing that name: the WWN had been a popular radio station among witches and wizards, but he hadn't known when it had been launched. To think that something that was considered very common - Ron, for example, had grown up listening to the WWN - was only now becoming a reality to the people of this era.

"That's marvelous!" Lavinia said, clapping her hands together. "When will it be launched, do you know?"

"Sometime in late February," Montague said. "I only know this because one of the Parkinsons - Tamara, I think her name was - is going to be a presenter of some sort, there, and that family always makes sure that their business is everyone else's business as well."

"I like how career-oriented the Parkinson women are," Lavinia sighed, before shaking her head. "But Merlin, you wouldn't catch one of them dead anywhere near a place like this. Not because it's a pub, mind you, but because we don't have those ridiculous rules that allow only purebloods to enter."

"Yeah, they're separatists," Montague said, rolling his eyes. "You'd think that since everyone else is allowed in their world, that they wouldn't care about blood, but no. That's where they draw the line."

"Are all of them like that?" Harry asked. "Because Gloriana Parkinson was the Healer I worked with, and she didn't appear to be hostile towards me at all."

"Well," Montague said, "not everyone is vocal about it, but they certainly won't argue against it if segregation was to be enforced between purebloods and everyone else. They're very professional, though, so I'm sure that this Tamara won't let her views show when she works at the network."

"What will they report?" Dewey asked, sounding apprehensive. "Will they also focus on the Muggle war, or will we end up listening to some political talk in which the likes of Selwyn and Malfoy compare how rich they are, and complain how much richer they could be if they didn't have to give to charity?"

"Merlin, that's... no," Morris said instantly, though it was clear that he was holding back a laugh. "Honestly, I've told you before: if you're not careful with what you say about these powerful politicians, you'll end up in trouble sooner rather than later."

"Not so long as Fawley's in office," Dewey argued confidently. "He's got them all in a leash."

"That's true," Montague agreed. "He has them in a leash, and has us on missions most of the time. Don't get me wrong - I'm loving the pay - but Merlin, it's as if I've got a crisis to handle every day."

"Like you don't enjoy it," Morris teased. "Running off, fighting people. You don't know this, Riddle, but Montague here is ready to jump off a cliff if it meant finding adventure. Every time we send him out on his own, we wonder which body part is going to be returned to us in a box. Once he was tasked with locating a suspect, and next thing we know, he duelled and detained the bloody bastard!"

That was sweet and all, and Harry smiled, amused by what he was being told. He reminded himself that thankfully, not everyone's definition of adventure included basilisks and trolls and horcruxes. It wasn't as if Montague wasn't impressive, it was just... Harry wasn't easily impressed. It made him feel slightly guilty, but it wasn't as if he could force himself to be impressed. The best he could do was smile and nod, and pretend that his own past consisted of nothing even remotely similar to what he was hearing.
He couldn't quite shake off the feeling of strange dissatisfaction, though, that was creeping into him. He… he enjoyed his peaceful life, and… it had been so hard-earned. He had done unbelievable things to be able to live in peace now. It was just… sometimes… Harry wondered if a peaceful existence was all he wanted in life.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so, I'll be as brief about this as possible: super slow updates in all of my fics because I’m exhausted, drained, and demotivated. I’m working on a PhD right now, and it’s very, very tough, and after hours and hours every day in such a critical environment, the last thing I want to do is write a fic and have people dissect every bit of it. I’m so exhausted. I know that y’all are eager to point out whatever etymological mistakes I make, and on my good days I can appreciate them, and am thankful and happy for your help. But on the bad days I just can’t. On the bad days when I’m already drained to the bone and feel like shit about all my shortcomings, I feel bitter about not being allowed to take even fic-writing lightly. I have to double and triple check everything, and there’ll still be someone who’ll treat this fic like it’s something to be written a serious critical review about. I don’t care anymore. I’m just tired. Please let me just write whatever crappy thing this is.

Other authors who want to publish stories would love the critical feedback the way I used to, I have no doubt. But I don’t plan on doing that anymore. I don’t want to publish a good story. I just want to publish whatever story this ends up being. And I want to share it with you, because I think some of us could enjoy this story together. But I’m tired. I’m really, really tired, and I really, really need this as an outlet. Please stop treating it like a literature assignment meant to be graded.
“You disgust me,” Tom said, looking at Mulciber. The other boy shrugged, clearly unaffected, before nearly slumping into his breakfast. “No, you know what? I hate you.”

Despite Tom’s words, their friendship – much to Lestrange’s annoyance and the wary amazement of those who knew what had happened – hadn’t been truly affected by the events revolving around Mulciber’s encounter with Harry. Even now, during breakfast, they were sitting together as if nothing had happened.

Well, aside from Tom’s constant scowling.

"No, you don’t," Mulciber said, hauling himself to an upright position again. There was porridge on the tip of his nose, which he wiped off only after Pucey nearly punched him with a napkin. "You’d have woken me up at six if you did."

“Don’t consider that a favour, I just didn’t want to put up with your whining,” Tom snapped, scowling again. He wanted nothing more than to believe that Mulciber had simply seized the opportunity to be a nuisance, but Lestrange’s defence of his claims was worrisome. What if— No, it didn’t matter. Tom wasn’t going to allow Harry anywhere near Mulciber.

Friends truly weren’t to be trusted.

There was, however, something that had been said that was of great interest to Tom: both Mulciber and Lestrange had more or less stated that the vices of the poor were merely quirks of the wealthy. To the point that a man marrying another man – something that would be swiftly punished among regular people – was much more… permissible to those with money. It wasn’t an issue that Tom otherwise would have spent much time thinking about, but it did make him think of Black. The brief instances he had spent in the presence of the man, Tom had noticed how people behaved around him – in hindsight, eccentricities certainly didn’t appear to be as tolerated as Mulciber and Lestrange made it seem. Besides, Tom couldn’t recall seeing a single homosexual person at Hogwarts. If such things were acceptable, then how come no one was outspokenly expressing it?

"You have your thinking face on," Avery said. "What's on your mind?"

"Mind you, it's a stupid face," Lestrange piped in. Tom looked at him and sneered.

"Why are you here with us, anyway? You usually sit at the other end of the table. Did Rosier upgrade you for Malfoy, and now you're stuck all alone? Get lost and find another poor soul to latch on to."

Lestrange flushed, clearly offended. "Chad's trying to finish his Charms homework before class. And why would he spend time with Malfoy?"

"Uh, why wouldn't he?" Pucey asked. "Who wouldn't anyway. It's a Malfoy."

"I like how he's not even a person to you, but an it," Avery observed. "I suppose you might be right, though. I heard some kids call him a snowman earlier."
"Snowman," Tom snorted. "Really, that's all they can do? The only people who should find that embarrassing are the ones that came up with it. So, what's their problem with him? Their own general incompetence, and his clear superiority to them?"

"Wow," Lestrange said. "I didn't know you knew Malfoy. A fan, are you?"

"Harry knows his father," Tom said, remembering the few times Harry had mentioned Marchosias Malfoy to him. The man was miles above Black, and that was good enough for Tom. "Harry's a Witness, you see, so I'll just take his word when he says that someone is worthy of respect."

"It's not like Malfoy is getting bullied or anything," Pucey said. "I mean, I repeat: the kid's a Malfoy. I don't think bullying him is even possible."

They then heard a book slam shut not too far away, and every person in their group instinctively turned their heads to see what had caused the sound. Abraxas Malfoy sat there, looking at them in contempt.

"Perhaps if you concerned yourself less with my family, Pucey, you might be able to represent your own the way you should," the boy said, making Pucey flinch and hunch her shoulders, before she caught herself and straightened up again. Abraxas then looked at the rest of them, before he turned on his heels, and left the Great Hall.

"Well, that was... something," Avery muttered. "I didn't even know he was there!"

"I knew," Prince said.

"Why didn't you say anything!?"

"Not my business."

"Merlin, I feel terrible," Pucey said, sighing heavily and rubbing her eyes. "My life is a mess, and everything I touch dies."

"I love that for you," Avery said, absent-minded, still watching the spot where Abraxas had been sitting. "He's an angry little thing, huh? My mum says that he's a lot more like his aunt Madeleine, than either one of his parents. I guess that's what she meant, because I've heard that his father is fairly mellow."

"What an interesting conversation," Lestrange said then, rolling his eyes. "Is this all you people do? Talk about other people?"

"We study a lot," Prince said, and she genuinely sounded as if that was a selling point of some sort. Lestrange looked at her in disgust for a few moments, before turning away.

"Your grades aren't good enough to justify that face," Tom pointed out, before narrowing his eyes and continuing: "but do find your own study group, if you will. I'm sure Rosier will need it as well, considering where he is at the moment."

"You know what, Riddle? You can study all you want, but in the end I'll still end up being your superior, wherever we end up," Lestrange said, his face twisting into an ugly grimace. "Because in the end you're just a mudblood from a family nobody knows—"

"But that's not true, is it?" Mulciber said, almost cheerfully. "Come on, Dorian, you know it too even if nobody's saying it. There are no Parselmouths from unknown families." It seemed that these words reminded not only Lestrange, but the others around them, of Tom's ability. And those who
hadn't managed to infer anything yet, surely did now.

"Have you considered taking a potion to investigate your heritage in more detail?" Prince asked, turning to Tom with an eager expression. "The potion is—"

"What makes you think I haven't?" interrupted Tom, who hadn't been aware of such a potion. He then turned to look at Mulciber, and nodded his head towards the exit. "The class is going to start soon. Let's go."

And when Mulciber, without complaining or yawning, stood up to follow him, Tom couldn't help but think that while he definitely didn't want Mulciber to even look at Harry again, staying friends with him was something Tom definitely wanted. Hearing Avery and the others scuttle behind them brought him and additional ounce of satisfaction.

He really liked being obeyed like this.

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SEERS MISSING: TRELAWNEY'S BOLD TALES

Harry stared at the words the Daily Prophet had printed on their front page, feeling almost sick. He hadn't been in touch much with Trelawney, as she had told him in a letter to not do so outside of mission-related issues. For his safety, she had clarified. She then hadn't proceeded to tell him anything about the ongoing Witness investigation, and Harry had more or less been left entirely in the dark.

And now... this.

What he was seeing reminded him so much of the times when the Daily Prophet had slandered him and Dumbledore and, well, anyone, really. Anyone who did something the Ministry didn't like. Was this proof of the Ministry being behind the murders of the Witnesses? Why else were they trying to discredit a seer whose reputation had been – and still was, despite this – unquestionable. Surely no one would think that the great Seer Cassandra was a liar?

Unfortunately, Harry knew though that it was only a matter of time before the people would turn on Trelawney, just as they had turned on people before (or after?) due to the Daily Prophet's articles. The only good thing Harry could think of was that at least now he knew for sure that someone in the Ministry was behind this. According to the article, Trelawney was blaming the Ministry for the deaths of the Witnesses. The reporter – whose name hadn't been included in the publication, oddly enough – claimed that such an ungrateful move completely neglected to acknowledge everything the Ministry had done for the Witnesses, and started by pointing out how much the Witnessed were being paid.

It's true that money was easier to come by in this profession, and even now Harry had much more money than he knew what do with: certainly, more than he'd be able to spend in the next few years, if the course of the Galleon remained where it was. Regardless, the thought of people knowing how much he was being paid made him uncomfortable, and he hoped that no one would bring it up to him when he went to Babbitty's later on.

Luck was on his side, it seemed, as all his Auror friends were kept busy at work, and none of them had been able to make it to their sort-of regular evening meetings. Harry sat alone by the bar, and was greeted by a delighted Lavinia.

"I'm sure you wish it was Stephen here instead, huh," Harry teased, making the woman roll her eyes and stifle her smile.
"Not to change the subject or anything," Lavinia said, leaning close as she put a pint of butterbeer in front of Harry. "But have you noticed anything about Montague? And by something I mean... everything he does around you?"

"No," Harry denied, flushing at what she was implying. He did feel like there was something going on there, but it was so hard to be sure of it. Montague was often very friendly and affectionate, even, and focused on Harry with great intensity. However, he was also very friendly with everyone else. Besides, he was a handsome man from a wealthy family, and as much as Harry hated to take that into account, he knew that in this day and age, it definitely played a part in how popular Montague must be with everyone.

"Really now," Lavinia said, grinning. "You didn't notice how, whenever you talk, he just sits there looking at you? Hand on his cheek, stars in his eyes? He always sits next to you, and let me tell you, that hasn't been a coincidence for a long time."

"I have to admit I'm confused about something," Harry said, lowering his voice. "I thought that such relationships – and I'm not saying that Montague and I have one, or ever will have one – are frowned upon? I know some... people in, uh, certain circles, genuinely are disgusted by such... tendencies."

"Well, it's a bit complicated," Lavinia said. "It's seen as a bit of a lifestyle choice, and you must be a certain kind of person to be able to pull it off, you know? Not married, not an heir to one of the old families, but still wealthy enough to... you know, because people will kind of assume that that's an oddity that you can afford to have, and they won't have to make space for it in their own reality. It's... it's kind of tricky to explain, really."

"So... you can have that kind of a relationship publicly only if you're wealthy and fill all those other requirements?" Harry asked, confused. "But it's not like... people's... people can't choose to not be the way they are, just because they're too poor to afford it."

"I know," Lavinia sighed, and shook her head. "There are people who aren't wealthy, who're still... like that. They just tend to keep it very private. I have a few friends who are, and... I mean, they're doing well, but everything just thinks they live together. I only know because, well, that's not important. But, what I mean to say is, I'm fairly sure that so long as you're with Montague, you'll be fine."

"And if it ends and we go our separate ways?" Harry asked, not feeling good at all about the situation. "He will carry on being untouchable, and I will... bear the burnt of it?"

"I'm fairly sure he wants something permanent with you," Lavinia said, likely believing her words to be reassuring. "If that's the case, then you don't need to worry about it. His family might grumble a little bit, but since you're a Witness, they'll eventually love it too. Besides, he could do much worse!"

This was not something Harry wanted to partake in. The occasional meeting at Diagon Alley for coffee or tea, the talks that were more flirting than not, and just the overall good feeling Harry got whenever he was with Montague were not, honestly, worth it if what Lavinia was saying was true. Besides, even if Montague wanted some sort of a long-term relationship, Harry hadn't been thinking of one at all. He just... he had his priorities. Romance wasn't one of them.

Although it... it would be nice, wouldn't it? To have someone to love?

Marchosias leaned back on his chair, and let out a small groan as he stretched his arms. He didn’t know how many hours he had spent hunched over his papers, but he was now finished with the first
draft of the latest update to the trace. He’d rest a bit, and join his family for dinner, before rereading everything and then sending it to his secretary. With this task done and out of the way, he could truly allow himself to take a few weeks off to rejuvenate. Luckily for him, he was set to leave soon and do exactly that.

What had started out as an excuse to not allow Arcturus into his lodge in Switzerland, ended up becoming an eagerly-awaited break from the everyday stress that weighed on him constantly. His wife, Elenor, had been thrilled by the idea of leaving England for a while. And with France being more or less unavailable to them in the current climate, Switzerland, and its gorgeous little village of Soglio, seemed like a natural choice. They already had a house there, and a handful of house-elves had been sent a week in advance to make sure that everything was as it should.

Madeleine had refused to come with them, claiming that though the fresh air there was something she'd miss, she had too many appointments at St. Mungo's to comfortably leave England. There was no telling, after all, if the muggle war or any of Grindelwald's activities were going to affect the International Floo Network. With the times being what they were, it was simply best to not take that risk.

"Besides," Madeleine said, when Marchosias brought the issue up again during dinner, "it's good to have someone here just in case. I don't like it when the Manor is empty for long periods of time. With me here, I can make sure that the wards remain undisturbed."

"Fine," Marchosias relented. "But if anything happens - anything at all - promise that you will call me immediately. If there's a single suspicious activity, no matter how small and insignificant, you'll call me."

"As if you haven't told your house-elves here to do that," Madeleine said, rolling her eyes. She knew, however, that he had a point: with her being as ill as she was, she likely wouldn't be able to duel a child, let alone someone like Arcturus Black. Not that she thought that he'd break in through the wards to attack her – that was Marchosias's fear. Her brother feared that Arcturus was deliberately attempting to lure him out of the country, in order to attack the manor in some way.

"Just make sure you do, as well," Marchosias said. "And if you can't get a hold of me fast enough, contact someone else. Someone trustworthy."

"After what happened with Justus, who is trustworthy?" Madeleine asked. "We thought he'd never betray us – especially to someone like Black – but that's what happened. Who else is there? Morag Goyle? Englantine Duvall? I don't think so!"

Marchosias wished desperately that he could name any of his friends, but Madeleine was right: if Justus had betrayed them, who was to say that the others hadn't? Perhaps not all – Arcturus wasn't that persuasive – but it only needed to be one wrong choice for Madeleine to get hurt.

That was when Elenor, who had been quiet so far, spoke up and said: "What of this Witness you've spent time with? Is he not trustworthy?"

"Riddle?" Marchosias said, and realized instantly, with great relief, the merit in his wife's suggestion. He turned back to Madeleine, now enthusiastic again. "Harry Riddle! He is definitely not someone Arcturus had managed to sway. On the contrary, if there's someone who's more likely to be targeted by him than us, it's Riddle. If you cannot get a hold of me immediately after anything suspicious happens, please contact him."

"You think he'd help?" Madeleine asked, skeptical. "Just because you've sat down and drank tea together once or twice, doesn't mean that he'd help me if something was to happen."
"He's the sort that would," Marchosias replied, absolutely certain of what he was saying. He may not be particularly close to Riddle, but every conversation he had had with the man made him reveal more and more of his... in the lack of a better description, Gryffindor personality. Riddle was also entirely unbothered by the concept of Arcturus attacking him - Marchosias didn't know if the man had meant to be so obvious about it, but it was as if Riddle didn't really consider Arcturus the kind of a threat that could harm him physically. It was the kind of trust in one’s own abilities that spoke of either confidence or stupidity, and Riddle didn’t seem stupid. "Trust me. Just... just start by telling him that Arcturus is behind it, even if you're not entirely sure."

"Fine," Madeleine agreed. "I'll do as you say, though I think it won't come to pass. Besides, if you end up feeling uncomfortable in Switzerland due to all this worrying, you can come back whenever. Elenor, I trust you to speak sense to him if he ends up being too nervous to actually enjoy his vacation."

"Of course," Elenor said with a smile. “Though you know your brother – he only hears what he wants to.”

Madeleine felt at ease when she thought of her sister-in-law, and how well she suited Marchosias. She was soft-spoken, and disliked confrontations as much as he did. It was a trait that had only partially been carried on to their son: while Abraxas didn't like confrontations either, he also didn't shy away from one if he thought it necessary. It was something that Madeleine approved of, as at times Marchosias's tendency for peace-keeping was frustrating to her. She couldn't help but feel that it was that tendency to quietly avoid confrontations that made him a viable target to Black – if only he had been a bit more aggressive and intimidating, then perhaps Black would have deemed him someone too difficult to deal with.

This trouble that Black was bringing to their doorstep was truly unnecessary, and Madeleine resented it. If Black really went ahead and attacked the manor, it would definitely be the end of her. Then again, who knew – perhaps her illness would expire her before anyone else could. It was good that Marchosias had married a woman like Elenor, as she would be of great comfort to him when Madeleine eventually – likely not too far in the future – died.

'It's not right to think that way,' the witch reminded herself sternly, as she refocused on what her brother was saying. 'He does his best. He always does. It's not the fault of good people that there are those who want to hurt them. As for me, I'll just...try to live as well as I can, and make sure that by the time I die, Marchosias will know it's not the end of his world.'

"It's as if he doesn't realize the mistake he's making," Grindelwald mused aloud, folding the letter he had received from Arcturus Black, and handing it to Klaus Breith. "Take a look if you wish, or just throw it away. Or better yet, just leave it on the table - we might find another use for it, eventually."

Klaus, one of Grindelwald's favoured Knights, read the short message, and looked back at the Dark Lord. "He doesn't know that he has no bargaining power with us, does he?" It wasn't entirely surprising, really. There was a distinct lack of self-awareness that sometimes shone through Black's words and mannerisms. This was just another example of it.

The letter that Black had sent them was brief, and went straight to the point of asking for a favour. Though, true to his nature, he didn't phrase it as a favour that he was requesting, as that would place him in a position of being indebted. Instead, he made it sound as if he was merely performing his duty to the cause, and giving valuable advice by revealing that a highly respected politician would be vacationing in Switzerland for at least a month. He had also made sure to mention that should anything happen to that man, it would certainly demand international attention. Black also implied in
his letter that perhaps this unlikely politician had been sent there, to such a strategic location, to keep an eye out for any suspicious activities.

"No, he doesn't," Grindelwald responded. "His last visit, the way he got himself out of here, has left him with the impression that he's... of equal footing."

"Do you know who this politician is?" Klaus asked then, putting the letter down onto a table nearby. "Black hasn't mentioned any names, for some reason."

"It's Malfoy," Grindelwald said, sounding bored more than anything. "I've kept track on Marchosias Malfoy the moment he left Britain. He and his wife are currently at their lodge in Soglio. Black is apparently finally giving up on recruiting him, and wants us to do the dirty work. He doesn't realize how much of a hold this gives us over him." Black was so enamoured with the idea of wielding power that he didn't realize how vulnerable such requests made him to blackmail. Though Grindelwald had no interest in revealing Black's involvement in his cause to the British Ministry of Magic, it didn't mean that he wouldn't make Black eventually worry himself sick over it.

"What do you want us to do?" Klaus asked, then, unsure of how to proceed. He didn't know Malfoy, and hurting someone who was apparently of such significance to the British Ministry did seem like a useful thing to do. However, the mere thought of giving Black even the illusion of obedience made him irritated.

"We play this game a little bit longer," Grindelwald decided. "Take a team and drop by the Malfoys for a visit. Provide him with the opportunity to join us, and if he declines, well... show him how unwise that would be."

"Of course, sir," Klaus said, resisting the urge to ask about the necessity of indulging Black's requests - the man was already unbearable, but after this, he was sure to become even worse. "Should I do that right away?"

"That's up to you," Grindelwald said. "Though you might wish to leave Black to wait a bit. Learning some patience will only do him good."

Gellert didn't allow himself to visibly express his annoyance until Klaus had left him. He knew how much perceptions of control were affected by his behaviour, and he wasn't about allow any cracks to show, no matter how small. There was no need to discuss the issue further with Klaus, either, considering that the man clearly didn't understand why Gellert wanted to keep Black under his control for a while longer: Black was generous with his money, but would also make a great distraction if ever needed.

Besides, he just liked having power over people who, in turn, had plenty of power themselves. Black, despite his failures, wasn't an insignificant character in his own right. Which was perhaps what made his failures come across as his own lack of desire to succeed at certain things, rather than any kind of inability to do so. This, to be specific, meant the mission to eliminate Riddle that Gellert had given him eons ago. Which was why he had had to bring in Aachen, to get the job done.

'Speaking of Aachen, I've made him wait for a while now, haven't I?' Gellert thought, remembering that the Knight in question was still stuck in England, waiting for the permission to move. Gellert had told him that he wouldn't need to target Riddle's child - what could a child do, anyway? Children were dull little things, unable to face the realities of war and power. Rash in their assumptions, and crippled with their inability to infer anything useful from what was around them. Riddle's brat couldn't possibly pose a risk to him, even if he was left alive. Which meant that there was no reason to wait any longer, really.
Gellert thought of the wand he'd be using soon again, and felt pleased. The Elder Wand was always kept securely close to him, but ever since it had stopped working properly, he'd had to rely on a secondary wand for everything he wanted to do. Soon, finally, this would change. Gellert would no longer be forced to use a wand that had been made for a common man.

He summoned a quill and parchment, in order to write his next instructions to Aachen. It was time to handle Riddle, as the battles were picking up, and there was more and more chance of him getting involved directly in various confrontations. There was also the inevitability of an encounter with Albus looming ahead of him: someday, somewhere. If only for that, he truly needed his Elder Wand working as it should.

It was unfortunate for Riddle, but sacrifices were necessary.

* *

After his last talk with Laivinia, meetings with Montague made Harry feel a bit worried, and even anxious at times. He wanted to put it out there that he didn't have expectations towards a relationship, but how could he just bring that up, when Montague himself hadn't really done anything? Maybe Harry was the one who had misunderstood their friendship, and how awkward would it be then if he just... suddenly said that he wasn't interested in a relationship? He'd sound like a presumptuous prick, and rightfully so!

It didn't seem as if Montague wanted to do anything more than flirt, anyway, so maybe Harry could just ignore it? Wait and see what would happen? After all, it wasn't as if they were running short on things to talk about. Even now, as they were drinking tea in one of Vertic Alley's many tea houses, with almost no one else with them in there, the discussion resembled the talks he'd had with Ron, rather than anything he'd had with Ginny.

"It's kind of funny," Montague was saying, "how despite the war and the stress, Quidditch is just... its own bubble, you know? The games continue, and so does the whole circus around them, entirely unaffected by anything that happens outside the world of sports."

"To be fair, people need something else to focus on, sometimes," Harry pointed out. "It's important to have a breather removed from everything that brings you grief, if only to avoid the fatigue that comes with worrying all the time."

"You're not wrong," Montague admitted. "But you know that there are too many people in that world that just think they're above the petty concerns of commoners." He then carried on to name a few famous players and team owners, and proceeded to explain in great detail how much their lack on involvement in bettering their society annoyed him. Harry listened intently, until he... didn't.

It was only instincts that Harry had though he didn't have anymore, that made him notice the man right away, as soon as he entered the tea house. He was tall, with fair skin and light hair. What struck Harry as unnerving, though, was the wide-eyed vacant stare that the man cast around him. Notably, the man didn't sit down. He remained standing for a moment, before he snapped his head nearly one-eighty degrees from left to right.

A moment later - again, driven by instincts - Harry rolled out of his seat, narrowly avoiding a curse of some sort that flung the chair he had been on several feet away. Montague was on his feet instantly, wand in his hand, as the few people who had been at the tea-house with them fled the place screaming. The man didn't acknowledge any of them, allowing the people to simply leave unintercepted.

"Riddle," the man said, confirming Harry's fears. He had a slight German accent, which made it easy
to guess who had sent him here. Merlin, Grindelwald really was a patient man, huh? "I am Aachen. I'm here to kill you."

"I love it when they do that," Montague said, coming to stand in front of Harry, but still talking to him over his shoulder. "Name and purpose. Makes everything neater. Well, Aachen, I'd ask you to put your wand down and surrender, but somehow I don't think you'll be doing that."

The man – Aachen, as he had introduced himself as – looked at Montague for a few moments. His face hadn't changed one bit, and he didn't seem to consider Montague a threat at all. Harry had a bad feeling about this. He didn't know what the protocol was for situations such as these, and if he should ask for reinforcements. He didn't even know if he ought to get involved right away, or if he should allow Montague the chance to take care of the situation.

He was proven right when the very first curse the stranger cast cut through Montague's protego, and hit the Auror with enough force to make him stagger a few feet back. Luckily, there didn't seem to be more damage done than that, with the shield having absorbed actual effects of the curse. Montague responded with an *expelliarmus*, attempting to disarm first.

Harry supposed that that was where he had learned to differ from Aurors: in battles with hostile unknowns, he couldn't afford to hesitate. He rarely went straight for a blasting curse, but a *sectumsempra* to the legs had often been all that he had needed: it incapacitated, but didn't kill if the wounds were treated fast enough. Then again, he couldn't blame Montague - he hadn't gone through a war yet.

Watching the two duel, Harry couldn't shake off the unnerving feeling he got from the attacker. His eyes were still open wide, and he rarely blinked. There was something almost childlike in how straightforward his attacks and words were, which made Harry shudder when the man turned his head - again, only his head, not his body - towards him.

"I apologize for disturbing your lunch," Aachen said, and bizarrely, he sounded sincerely sorry. "I ought to have waited. However, I got excited. I've been waiting a long time to kill you, Mr. Riddle."

He then flicked his wand almost lazily in an unusual gesture, and suddenly Montague let out a pained gasp, before crumpling on the floor with a loud groan. Harry knew then that there was no point in holding back or keeping a low profile anymore. He could explain himself somehow later, if explanations were needed. He didn't know how strong his opponent truly was, and he couldn't afford to go easy on him.

It was funny how Harry had thought throughout all these years he had spent with Tom cultivating a peaceful life, that there was nothing about his old life that he missed aside from his friends. Now, with sudden but undeniable clarity, he realized how wrong he was: he had missed the feel of his wand during a battle. The way his blood pumped when he had to think quickly on his feet and decide on which spells to use and how. The excitement of meeting a new opponent with a new duelling style and new spells of their own.

Harry, not wanting to draw the duel out, started out with a cutting curse, followed by a *bombarda* at Aachen’s feet and an *expelliarmus*, all in quick succession. He wanted to stop and take a look at Montague, but also knew that he needed to focus on this fight before doing anything else. All he could do was move the fight away from the Auror.

"You're stronger than I assumed," Aachen said, his voice strained after another cutting curse - not *sectumsempra*, Harry wasn’t sure if he ought to use a spell that wasn’t yet invented - caused his protective shields to crumble yet again. "No, I think you’re stronger than anyone has assumed."

Harry looked at him, still feeling slightly put off. The man, despite attacking him with clear intention
to cause harm, just didn't appear as evil as the likes of Black. “You’re one of Grindelwald’s men, aren’t you?”

“Proudly so,” Aachen confirmed, and let out an involuntary yelp when the lamp above his head was cut off its holder by one of Harry’s hexes, and swung down, almost falling. Harry used the momentary distraction to his advantage, and hit Aachen with a leg-locking curse, causing the man to stumble and nearly drop his wand. His hold on it faltered enough, however, that he couldn’t raise another protective shield in time when the last strings holding the lamp finally broke, and it came crashing down on him.

Harry’s fist clenched around his wand as he tried to see enough of his opponent to know if he was still a threat of some sort. Aachen’s wand was in Harry’s hand now as well, so unless he had a back-up, there wasn’t much he could do. Besides, the Aurors would surely show up soon to sort out this encounter, and he needed to take Montague to the hospital to make sure that whatever curse had hit him wasn’t fatal.

“Why is Grindelwald trying to kill me?” Harry asked, wanting to know if this stunt had something to do with Black, or if it was purely due to the Grindelwald’s issues with the Elder Wand. Aachen, face pale with pain, let out a laugh. Then he did… something, Harry didn’t know what exactly, but the wizard’s head suddenly snapped to the side so fast - as if an invisible hand had bent his neck into a ninety-degree angle - that Harry almost missed the sound of a faint crunch.

“What the…,” Harry hissed, stumbling back. He could hear the sounds of Aurors apparating in, and just as he turned to take a look at Montague, Dewey walked in with his wand raised.

“Harry?”

“Thank Merlin you’re here,” Harry said, levitating Montague’s unconscious body as gently as he could. “That one over there is dead. He’s a German wizard, from what we gathered. Could we do the rest of the questioning in the hospital, though? I really think we should have a healer take a look at whatever hit Montague.”

“Yes, of course,” Dewey agreed, before turning towards Aachen’s corpse and gesturing for a few Aurors to head towards it. Harry took a deep breath, and tried to pretend that the feeling welling inside of him was nervousness and not excitement. He had truly done his best to stay out of trouble, but when trouble took it upon itself to find him, well… Harry did have a boy to protect, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so, so much. After my note in the previous chapter I’ve received so much support, and so many kind comments, that I thought it necessary to reflect on my own attitude as well. I’m by nature a very anxious person, and I tend to focus on the negative aspects a lot, which I realize now is just not fair to everyone who has been nothing but positive and helpful towards me. So, going forward, I’ll also do my best in focusing on the good energy out there, and overlook unnecessary negativity. Thank you!

BTW Ramadan Kareem to those that celebrate it!
“It must have been a really traumatizing experience,” Lavinia said, entirely sympathetic as she handed Harry a mug of warm tea. “If you need to talk about it, I’m here.”

“Oh, yes,” Harry said, doing his best to sound distressed by the attack. “Traumatizing. For sure.”

“Even in these terrible times, seeing someone die just like that is shocking,” Stephen said earnestly, and Harry wasn’t sure how to tell his concerned friends that the duel - and the subsequent death of the German wizard attacking him - hadn’t been even slightly stressful. Or, at least, not for the reasons they thought. Harry should have known that Grindelwald’s cronies would have some sort of a back-up plan to keep his secrets in case they were ever captured, but he hadn’t expected Aachen to kill himself just to avoid interrogation.

‘I should have known that Grindelwald would eventually lose his patience and come after me,’ Harry thought, sighing heavily. ‘He did tell me that the Elder Wand is misbehaving. Honestly, it’s a wonder he hasn’t done anything before.’

“Montague will be all right,” Stephen said, patting Harry on the shoulder. “His pride is the most wounded bit of him, to be quite honest with you. Can’t even remember how he knocked the other guy out.”

‘And he didn’t even fleetingly think that I could have done it?’ Harry thought, trying to not feel annoyed about that. He could expect Montague to know anything about Harry’s dueling capabilities, after all. It’s just… surely he didn’t come across as helpless, right? Because… well, just because Harry had been holding back from participating in anything exci— anything dangerous, it didn’t mean that he was helpless. He was just a peaceful man, who appreciated being left alone.

Or, well. He did miss breaking out of Gringotts while riding on the back of a dragon.

And just. Generally. He missed doing things. Being active. Being a Witness was interesting, but it wasn’t as fulfilling as… other things.

“You were questioned in the hospital, weren’t you?” Stephen asked. “I heard that went well, right?”

“Dewey was the one asking questions,” Harry replied. “He was very understanding to my, uh, shock.” It had been painfully clear that the lessons Aurors had learned from the first and second Wizarding Wars in Britain were yet to occur. Dewey had asked a handful of easy questions, and Harry had been able to wrap up the brief chat quite quickly. He sincerely hoped that there were better interrogators than Dewey working for the Ministry.

“I read Montague’s report about it,” Stephen then continued. “He specifically said he was there to attack you.”

“I was confused at first,” Harry said, repeating the believable excuse he had given Dewey earlier. “I mean, honestly, why would Grindelwald even know me well enough to want me dead? But then I realized that it’s not me specifically that he had something against, but probably all Witnesses.”

“The disappearances!” Lavinia gasped. “Oh Merlin, I had almost forgotten!”

“Yes, that would explain it,” Stephen said, nodding his head. “I suppose that’s that mystery solved.
He’ll probably send more people after you, then.”

“I expect so,” Harry thought. Grindelwald was likely to continue hounding him until Dumbledore finally made his move. That would, however, put the Elder Wand into Dumbledore’s hands, and the last thing Harry wanted was to catch the man’s attention when he couldn’t get the wand working either. The only solution he could think of, however, was risky - he’d have to somehow draw Grindelwald into a duel and get the Elder Wand himself before Dumbledore made a move.

Which was pretty much impossible, wasn’t it? It wasn’t as if Grindelwald was just going to turn up in England, right?

‘Besides, I’m not going to go out of my way to duel a Dark Lord,’ Harry thought. ‘The days of dueling Dark Lords are over for me. I’m a man of peace, now.’

“You’ll perhaps need to take some dueling lessons, for your own safety,” Stephen said. “I remember you told me you could duel, but it’s always good to brush up on your skills if you haven’t done anything in a while.”

“I’ll think about it,” Harry said. How would he even practice, really? He had never properly practiced duelling, he had always just… ended up in situations that required quick reflexes and strong magic, and lucky for him - he had both. Perhaps practicing was a good idea. If he ever ended up encountering Grindelwald - which he wasn’t going to go out of his way to do, but just… consider from time to time - it was better to be prepared.

“If there’s an upside to this,” Lavinia said suddenly, “it is that this didn’t happen during the summer. Could you imagine poor Tom caught in the middle of this? The darling boy would be in such distress!”

‘Oh, Circe, Tom,’ Harry thought, realizing all of a sudden that Tom could never, ever hear about this. Not because he’d be distressed - it was almost charming how misguided people were about his boy - but because knowing Tom, the boy would retaliate in some way. Send Grindelwald a self-detonating owl under the guise of a correspondence attempt. And then spend the next ten years lecturing Harry about recklessness, as if Harry was to blame for being targeted.

‘I don’t think Tom would buy the Witness excuse, however,’ Harry thought. He couldn’t quite remember, but was fairly certain that he had discussed his concerns about Ministry’s involvement in the Witness disappearances in front of the boy before. Hadn’t he? Merlin, he couldn’t remember. Either way, he needed to be careful to not let Tom find out about anything that could inspire his revenge-seeking tendencies - Merlin knew Tom had plenty of those, and Harry wasn’t ready to manage that disaster.

“You’re right,” Harry said finally. “He’s very young, and I think it would be very distracting for him to hear about this. Besides, nothing bad happened, so it would be quite pointless to alarm him with this, right?”

“Merlin, that Grindelwald is really causing trouble in every possible way,” Stephen sighed. “Until when, I wonder?”

“Who knows,” Lavinia said, her mouth pursed into a sad little pout. “I just hope no one gets hurt, but… I know how unlikely that is.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed quietly, before falling silent and allowing his thoughts to drift. Someone was going to get hurt eventually, no matter what. And sometimes not doing anything in fear of doing the wrong thing was exactly what caused the most damage. So maybe, just maybe, Harry was going to
do as Stephen had suggested, and brush up on his dueling skills.

Just in case, right?

Soglio was a place of beauty, especially in March. At night when the skies were clear enough to
drown in the vastness of space, the weather was warm and the world was quiet, existence was
nothing short of a blessing. Marchosias wouldn’t admit this to anyone - not even Madeleine or
Elenor - but there must have been some kind of magic in moments like those. The memories of
looking up at an endless sky dotted with stars as far as the eye could see were the ones Marchosias
used the few times he’d needed to cast a patronus, because *Merlin*, there was *nothing* that could
compare to the feeling of the universe around him.

This time, however, everything was different.

Just the thought of Arcturus Black and his people coming to a place like this made Marchosias’s skin
itch. And yet if he had allowed the man to come here, Marchosias wouldn’t have had to worry now
about being tricked to leave his home. The more he thought about it, the more certain he was of
Arcturus deliberately luring him out of the Malfoy Manor. What was he going to do? Plant
something the Ministry could use to arrest him?

“You need to stop worrying,” Elenor said softly, coming to stand on the porch by his side.
“Madeleine will be fine on her own.”

‘*Not if someone attacks,*’ Marchosias thought, but didn’t wish to ruin his wife’s mood with his
gloominess. “I know. I just… I would have liked for her to join us.”

“Yes,” Elenor murmured. “This weather would have been good for her lungs. Abraxas would have
appreciated the peace here, as well. That boy does love his solitude.”

“He can’t have much of that at Hogwarts,” Marchosias said. “Unless he becomes a Head Boy.
Perhaps I should advise him on that.”

“That’s still a long time away,” Elenor said, laughing quietly. Marchosias had always enjoyed the
way she laughed - a quiet, warm little chuckle that spoke of contentment. “Come on, dear, let’s go
inside. We’ve had a long day, and deserve all the rest we can get.”

Marchosias relented, though he was reluctant to push thoughts of Madeleine out of his mind. She
knew what to do, however, if something happened. Madeleine had a portkey, and could find her
way out if Arcturus did something. Marchosias just had to trust that no matter what, the Malfoy
Manor would always be safe and loyal to the family that built it.

“Hogsmeade!” Avery hollered, as if he had never been let out into a town before. “With exams
looming ahead, you guys *know* what this means, right?”

“I need more ink and parchment,” Prince said, nodding.

“*Study snacks,* is what I’m talking about, you wet blanket,” Avery huffed, clearly annoyed. “Come
on, how boring can you be?”

“She’s not boring, she’s responsible,” Pucey snapped, before turning to Riddle. “Right, Tom?”
Dorian Lestrange held back a sneer, watching Riddle’s smug little face as he shrugged, clearly not caring about anything that was going on around him. How and why did these people want his company, Dorian didn’t understand. Sure, Riddle was clever and pretty good with spells, but he wasn’t someone who could open any doors for anyone. Besides, he was a mudblood. No matter what Elliot said, the boy was a mudblood, and Dorian didn’t want that sort around him.

“I wouldn’t mind snacks,” Nott said, and honestly, why was that guy even there with them?

“Why are you even here?” Riddle asked, voice bordering on annoyed.

“Everyone else was going to Hogsmeade, so I thought - why be the odd man out, right? If even Lestrange and Rosier can come—”

“What do you mean even Lestrange?” Dorian snapped, but went ignored.

“—I thought that I might as well join you guys. We don’t spend much time together.”

“I wonder why,” Riddle said, packing so much contempt into three neutrally spoken words that Dorian couldn’t help but think of his mother. “There’s no Quidditch practice this weekend, I take it?”

“No,” Nott said. “It’s upsetting that no one but me in our year is on the team.”

“I suppose the rest of us just have better things to do,” Dorian said. Nott knew that he had tried out for the Quidditch team, and hadn’t been selected. Same with Avery and Chad. The rat-faced bastard was just rubbing it in, wasn’t he?

“Such as?” Nott asked. “Studying?”

“Something you should consider doing,” Riddle cut in. “I heard Slughorn warn you, you know. You’re failing Herbology, Charms, and Transfiguration.”

“How you’re bad at so many subjects is kind of amazing,” Dorian carried on, enjoying Nott’s souring expression. “But I understand - your talents lie in… broomstick riding, I suppose?”

“He can make a career out of it somehow,” Riddle said, lips curling into a smirk. “If Quidditch doesn’t pan out, I’m sure he’ll ride broomsticks elsewhere.” The sheer audacity, the meanness of what Riddle was implying made Dorian let out a loud laugh. Nott was pale, biting his lip, with his fists clenched tight. Served the little shit right.

“Sh-should we just go get some candy now?” Pucey suggested, her voice almost shaky.

“You know, Eugene,” Mulciber said suddenly, looking at Nott with a nearly pleasant expression, “you can’t alienate all your peers on a quest to be favoured by older students, and then be surprised when no one has your back later on.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think everyone here hated me that much,” Nott snapped, but there was a waver in his voice, and Dorian knew that if he just pushed hard enough, he could probably make the other boy cry. The thought almost made him smile, and he really didn’t even dislike Nott. Watching other people fall apart and cry was just so satisfying that he couldn’t help causing it.

“We don’t,” Riddle said suddenly, which must have been a lie because for sure Riddle disliked Nott. Everyone knew that. But the way he said it - his voice suddenly so soft and understanding, almost sympathetic - made Dorian almost believe him for a second there. “We just wish you wouldn’t have looked at other people and preferred their company over ours. Everyone here spends time together, but you rarely join us. It’s upsetting.”
That had to be a lie, too. Riddle had never been upset about Nott not spending time with him. Surely Nott wasn’t going to believe this drivel?

“Lestrange and Rosier don’t spend time with you either,” Nott said, and as he said that, Dorian and Riddle’s eyes met. They could have backed up now, let this matter go and continue as they had, but there was something about pulling someone into a lie that was just… undeniably exciting. And Dorian knew - Riddle could handle it. Riddle would do his part just as well as Dorian could, and they could move Nott whichever way they wanted to.

“That’s not true at all,” Dorian said, and mustered up a smile as he saw Riddle nod. “Tom and I sorted out our differences a while ago.”

“Dorian and I value loyalty to our peers very highly,” Riddle said. Avery’s mouth was hanging open, while Mulciber’s eyes were sparkling. Dorian didn’t even know what kind of a face Chad was making, but he hoped to Merlin that his expression wouldn’t give them away. “It’s why your distance has been so hard on us.”

“Yes,” Mulciber agreed. “But you know, we’re all happy you decided to join us today. We can get to know each other better.”

“You already know me,” Nott said.

“I don’t,” Riddle pointed out, and he was smiling. A small little smile that was a bit too perfect on his face. Dorian let out a breath he had been holding, as he looked at Riddle and thought of the darkness that he couldn’t help but feel lurking somewhere beneath the polite facade that Riddle had built for himself.

Maybe Riddle was worth something, after all. Not for his blood - that would always be lacking, no matter what Mulciber said. But sometimes magic carried people beyond their birthrights, to shores of power others could only dream of, if they didn’t allow themselves to be held back by notions of Light and Dark magic. He didn’t know how far Riddle could go, but for now… there was no harm in watching him, right? Because so long as Dorian didn’t care about Riddle, he didn’t have anything to lose, either, even if Riddle ended up hurting himself.

For now, though, hurting other people with Riddle was fun enough.

* 

The first sign was the absence of house-elves.

The second was his inability to apparate out of the lodge.

Marchosias and Elenor had woken up fairly late on that day and spent the rest of the morning enjoying a drawn-out brunch. It wasn’t often that they had the chance to sit down and talk freely, as when in England they were both rather busy, and when travelling they tended to be accompanied by Abraxas who needn’t hear everything his parents had to say. Here in Soglio, however, it was just the two of them, and nothing to disturb the peace they felt around each other.

“We should do this more often,” Elenor sighed quietly, leaning back on her seat in the patio, the handwoven wicker creaking as she moved. “How many years until you retire, darling?”

“As if you’d want to move here before Abraxas graduates from Hogwarts and settles down with a witch of your choosing,” Marchosias said, smiling. “Perhaps we should get the fireplace connected to the Floo, however - we could then come here much more frequently.”
“I suggested that years ago, remember?” Elenor said, glancing at the now empty brunch dishes on the table. Why were they still there? “You told me the paperwork required for international Floo Network applications was much too tedious for you to bother with.”

“Well,” Marchosias started, but couldn’t quite find the words to defend himself with. It was, after all, true. Elenor laughed at him, then, before shaking her head in amusement.

“Poor darling,” she said, before looking at the used dishes on the table again. “How come these haven’t been collected yet? The house-elves are usually much more capable than this. Feeny!”

The realization that something was wrong was a strange, strange experience. That brief moment of silence after Elenor called for a house-elf, and then when the creature didn’t immediately appear, made Marchosias feel as if he had been doused by icy water. His eyes met Elenor’s as he scrambled up, hand reaching for his wand.

“Feeny!” he yelled, taking a hold of Elenor’s arm and pulling her inside the lodge. “Lippi! Trilly!” There was a feeling of dread that sunk deep into his bones when none of the house-elves appeared. When had they disappeared? Where did they go? They had been there to set up the brunch, but how soon after that did they vanish?

“What’s going on?” Elenor asked, her voice shaky.

“I don’t know,” Marchosias replied, “but we must leave. Apparate to the Floo Station we used to arrive, and I’ll follow right after you.” He then rushed to take a look outside from the front door, but there was nothing—no one. No one was there to explain what was going on, but the longer he thought about it, the more he suspected that Black was somehow behind this. He readjusted his grip on his wand and went back inside. Elenor was still there.

“Dear, you must apparate first,” Marchosias said, trying to not sound impatient. “The faster we leave, the safer we—”

“I can’t,” Elenor interrupted him, her face pale and voice tearful. She was starting to panic, he could see it even thought she was clearly trying to keep her composure. “I can’t apparate!”

“What do you mean you can’t—?” Marchosias took a hold of her arm again, and tried apparate the both of them away. He couldn’t. The moment he tried, there was a resistance of some sort that kept him contained where he was. “Wards. Someone put up anti-apparition wards. Fuck.”

“Why is this happening to us?” Elenor whispered, crying now. How much had changed in the span of a few short minutes. The happiness and contentment from before were gone for good. Marchosias took a few calming breaths and watched his wife as she headed further into the house, towards the kitchen.

“We can set up wards of our own,” Marchosias then decided. “Prevent anyone else from entering the house.”

“I don’t think that’s going to matter,” Elenor said, her voice strained. She had stopped by an open door, looking at something inside. Marchosias walked closer, and stopped to look at what had captured her attention. There, on the floor of one of the reading rooms, lay five dead house-elves.

“They’re already inside,” Marchosias breathed, and only fear for Elenor’s safety kept him from passing out. “Merlin, this… Listen, I’ll cause a distraction, and you just… you must run. On your feet. As far as you can, and apparate as soon as you’re outside the anti-apparition wards. You have to save yourself.”
“I’m not leaving you,” Elenor argued, turning to look at him.

“You must,” Marchosias argued quietly. “For Abraxas.”

Elenor fell silent then, before taking a few deep breaths and nodding her head. Marchosias looked at the tear tracks on her cheeks, the desperately hoping for this all to be a nightmare. The thought of his time with her running out now, in this way, was unbearable.

“I love you,” Elenor said.

“I love you more,” Marchosias replied. “Go, now. It’s risky, but you can run fast. I love you. I love you so much.”

“I love you,” Elenor repeated, now sobbing again. She then unlocked the front door of the lodge, and slipped out. Marchosias stood still in silence for a few moments, before heard the faint sound of footsteps coming from the floor above. Whoever was up there was likely to see Elenor fleeing.

It was his job to make sure they couldn’t chase after her.

He nervously readjusted his grip on his wand one more time, before taking a deep breath, and quietly heading to stand by the staircase. He thought of the worst spells he knew, and was ready to cast any of them at the first sight of a wizard heading down the stairs. But with his back turned to the rest of the hallway - and the room where the dead house-elves were - he didn’t see the man emerging from behind him.

Didn’t see the killing curse make its way to him, either.

* 

Tom didn’t know when the day had started to turn into something he hadn’t anticipated, but he wasn’t upset about it.

He still hated Nott, and he didn’t trust the other boy, but seeing his arrogance and contempt towards Tom unexpectedly crumble into something weak and almost tearful was nothing short of joyful. To have Lestrange pull the strings with him - with the occasional input from Mulciber - gave Tom visions of where he could get in life if he could have such coordinated attacks whenever he wanted to drive a point across.

He still hated Lestrange, though. There were quite a few scores that hadn’t been settled, and Tom wasn’t going to just forget about it all.

But maybe Lestrange didn’t need to know that.

“You could be so handsome,” Pucey suddenly said, her voice quiet as they all walked together back towards the school. “You could be so handsome if you weren’t so mean, Tom.”

“I’m handsome either way,” Tom told her, and realized only then how much lower he had to look if he wanted to see her face when they were standing so close. “Also, why are you so short?”

“You grew up fast,” Pucey snapped, expression souring quickly. “Also, I’m cute like this. Anyway, what you and Dorian did to Eugene was mean.”

“I did nothing that Nott didn’t deserve,” Tom hissed. “You know that Nott’s not an angel himself either. You said that he was a creep, didn’t you?”
“Well, he is,” Pucey admitted, and seemed to remember something she wishes she hadn’t. “A gross one, really. But it’s not fun, watching other people sad and hurt like that.”

“Noted,” Tom replied, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. Circe, sensitive people annoyed him to no end. Why would Pucey care about Nott’s feelings, anyway? If she liked him so much, why did she call him a creep? “Why don’t you just go ahead and keep him company, then? I doubt he wants to hear all about Prince’s thematic sorting of her Potions notes.”

“No, no, I’m sure he’s fine,” Pucey hurried to say. “I don’t want to spend time with him. I just don’t think you should be mean to him, either. You know?”

“Merlin, Pucey, you really nag about everything,” Lestrange said, having overheard the latter part of their conversation. “Just take it easy for once, yeah? Or are you going to keep whining about that all the way to the common room as well?”

“You know what, no,” Pucey snapped, somehow not stumbling even as her sharp heels knocked loudly against the cobblestones outside Hogwarts’s entrance. “It’s soon dinner, anyway, so I’ll just go directly to the Great Hall. I’ll see the rest of you there whenever you decide to join me.”

“Give me your coat,” Prince said then, turning away from Nott and towards Pucey. “I’ll take your coat and leave it on your trunk.”

‘Merlin, this is annoying,’ Tom thought, resisting the urge to roll his eyes as he walked past the girls and Nott, with Mulciber, Avery, Lestrange, and Rosier trailing right behind him. Despite his apparent truce with Lestrange, Rosier was yet to say a single thing to him directly. If Tom wanted to ensure that Lestrange wasn’t going to be a problem again in the future, he’d need to make sure that Rosier wouldn’t act out and make problems. Should he talk with Mulciber about this? He could just leave things be and see where they went, but the less effort he had to put into dealing with Lestrange’s jealousy and Rosier’s hostility, the better. He had better things to try and sort out, most important of which was keep Harry out of trouble in times when Black was still out and about.

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” Mulciber murmured the moment they reached their dorm room, and the others got distracted by preparing for dinner. “With Dorian. Do you know?”

“No,” Tom whispered back. “Any thoughts?”

“No,” Mulciber replied. “I don’t think even Dorian knows where this could go. So just… roll with it.”

“Like always,” Tom muttered. He still considered Mulciber’s words carefully and held his tongue even when Lestrange said ridiculous things on their way to dinner. ‘He’s not an idiot, he just says idiotic things. Sort of like Avery in the beginning.’

When they entered the Great Hall, the different atmosphere pulled Tom out of his thoughts, and he looked around curiously. Nothing seemed to be out of order, and yet… everyone was sort of… subdued.

“What’s going on?” he asked as he sat down next to Pucey. The girl turned to him and said, voice hushes in shock:

“It’s the Malfoys,” she said. “They’ve been killed.”
When Auror Briggs first arrived, Madeleine had expected to hear some ridiculous claim about her brother being in cahoots with Grindelwald again. Merlin knew some people were simply obsessed with that idea. What she hadn’t expected, however, was the pale-faced sympathy and sadness on the man’s round face. He was clutching his hat in his hands as he turned to her and said:

“Lady Malfoy? I… Perhaps this is best explained somewhere else. You… may want to sit down for this.”

“Very well,” Madeleine allowed, and led the Auror to the closest sitting room - there was no need to take him further than that, if all he wanted was to sit down. “Tea will be served in a moment. How may I help you, Auror Briggs?”

“This isn’t… Lady Malfoy,” Briggs said, his voice hesitant. “I must apologize, as I come bearing nothing but ill news.”

“I gathered,” Madeleine said, eyeing the man. What could it be? Had something happened to Abraxas?

“Your nephew,” Briggs said, as if he could read her thoughts, “is going to be brought here from Hogwarts as we speak. I…”

“What happened to him?” Madeleine snapped, alarmed and now angry. “If someone hurt him—”

“No, no, no. No, Lady Malfoy. Your nephew is unhurt. Your brother, on the other hand,” Auror Briggs paused, before pressing on, clearly with great reluctance. “Your brother and his wife were found dead in their lodge in Switzerland.”

Madeleine had been there for others when news such as these reached them. She had seen people cry and crumble, deny what they had just heard. Had seen some scream and fight, as if that would change what had happened. She… couldn’t. There was no denial to soften the blow of loss, and no screams to drown out the echo of what she had just heard. All she had to fall back on were the lessons she had learned from her life as a Malfoy - to hold her tears and see the world as clearly as she should.

“How,” Madeleine said, her face stony and words falling like rocks from her mouth. Her hands were shaking with barely contained rage.

“Your brother was found inside the lodge, he had been hit by a killing curse,” Auror Briggs said. “According to his wand, the last charm he had cast had been a locking one. We can only assume that he… hadn’t seen it coming fast enough to react.”

“And Elenor?”

“She was found outside.” Briggs sounded even more reluctant to speak now, if possible. “Her body was found a few hundred yards from the lodge. She died by a killing curse as well, but… either her wand had been used against her, which is unlikely as wands don’t turn against their owners to such an extent, or… she killed herself to avoid capture by whoever had attacked them.”

“Who,” Madeleine said then. “Grindelwald?”

“It’s impossible to tell,” Briggs said, sounding apologetic. “We’ll do our best to find out who’s behind this, but so far we cannot say for sure.”

‘You don’t have to,’ Madeleine thought, knowing that Arcturus Black had have his filthy little fingers involved in this somehow. Right then, she heard the Floo system activate, and her nephew’s voice
asking a house-elf of her whereabouts. Moments later the boy entered the room, and without a single
look towards the sitting Auror Briggs, said:

“Mum and Dad were killed, I was told. It was—”

“Yes,” Madeleine said, cutting him off. “Auror Briggs, thank you for your… help. Please keep us
informed of any new developments. Excuse my rudeness, but I’d like to spend a quiet moment with
my nephew now.”

“Of course, of course,” Auror Briggs stammered. He looked at Abraxas, who looked every bit like
the Malfoy his aunt knew him to be, with pity. The boy’s expression didn’t so much as twitch as he
stepped aside, allowing the Auror to be led back towards the fireplace. Only once the man had
Flooed away did he turn to Madeleine again.

“It was Black, wasn’t it?”

“Of course it was,” Madeleine replied, sighing tiredly. Tendrils of grief licked at her heart, but she
refused to give in. “We thought that Black would make a move against us here, but… that’s not what
happened.”

“They’re not coming back,” Abraxas then said, and it was the first time Madeleine had heard his
voice waver. She knew better than to take that for a sign of weakness however - her nephew had
always made her proud, even if his parents had been too soft to appreciate some aspects of his
personality. “They’re not coming back, and I don’t think the Aurors will even look Black’s way
regarding this. I heard dad talking about Black - he was worried already in the summer. He…”

“Grieve, but don’t worry,” Madeleine said, icy rage calming her heart and clearing her mind. She
wasn’t going to cry. There was a hole in her heart, but she’d be damned if she allowed a single tear
to escape. “Black will get what’s coming to him. We’re Malfoys, and we’ve never needed the laws
of commons to bring us justice.”

“You’ll do something?” Abraxas asked. “Because if you don’t, I’ll kill both of his children. I will,
don’t think I won’t.”

“I know of someone who knew your father,” Madeleine replied, ignoring his remark about Black’s
son and daughter. “Well, many people knew your father. This one was nearly a friend, I believe. He,
also, has a bone of some sort to pick with Black. I’ll arrange a meeting with him while sorting out the
funeral proceedings. You can rest in your—”

“I’m going back to Hogwarts,” Abraxas said, standing straight. “People expect me to hide away
now. Black thinks he’s crippled us. I don’t want my dad and mum’s story to end like this. I won’t let
it.”

Madeleine looked at the boy for a few long moments, before nodding slowly. She suspected that she
shouldn’t let in, but would it help the boy to stay home in all this silence and empty rooms to be
driven into a state by the devastation that had struck them? “Stay at least the night, we have much to
discuss. You’re young, and there’ll be much expected of you from now on, but I’m certain you’ll
live up to it, Abraxas.”

She was going to make sure that her nephew survived Black and his ilk. She wasn’t going to rest
before ensuring his safety, no matter what that meant for her own health. She was already dying -
there wasn’t much for her to lose, anymore.

Which meant that, pride aside, she was going to owl Harry Riddle.
End Notes

A Chinese translation of ITTR by o-mint is currently under work, and can be found here.

Works inspired by this one

[[Them's the Rules Cover [FAN ART] by Levinson]]

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