The Train to Nowhere

by MayMarlow

Summary

In a world where Voldemort's victory brought forth the golden age of pureblood supremacy, young Harry - an average Durmstrang student - grows surrounded by the same propaganda that has become the gospel truth of the Wizarding World. Injustice is a norm and racism is not only accepted, but actively encouraged. Embracing the status quo becomes harder when Harry finds himself in a train station where the living should not dwell, and a dangerous friend who goes by the name "Tom".
"Why is mum always so strict anyway?" Harry Potter, 8 years old, asked sullenly.

"She's just worried about you," James Potter, Harry's 31 year old father and current jailor, replied evasively. "You shouldn’t have told Arthur’s son that there’s a spider in his hair. You know he’s afraid of spiders. It was mean."

"But you laughed," Harry said knowingly. "I saw you. Uncle Sirius laughed too. And loudly. Besides, Ron said that I cheated in chess. And even if I did, it still doesn't mean that he should accuse me. Mum is being unreasonable. How is grounding me going to help?"

"Harry," James said, fighting down the urge to smile. "In this life, you can't go on making enemies. Why can't you and Ronald just play nicely?"

"We do."

"Only when the Snide Sisterhood is here for you to gang up on Junior."

"Mum doesn't like it when you call the Malfoys that," Harry pointed out. "It's because they're a respectable pureblood family. Which we're not." James sighed heavily, feeling both sad and frustrated.

"Harry," he said. "Lily is a tad sensitive about the fact that she isn't, well, a pureblood. Her parents were Muggles, as you know. But that doesn't mean that you are any less of a wizard than Draco Malfoy or Ronald Weasley."

James fully believed in what he said, and he could only hope that someday Lily would come to see things this way as well. It was unlikely however, as even though he himself had never been one to think much of blood purity, most people thought of it far too much. Their world, their society, was built on power, fortune and purity of blood. And while the Potters had power and fortune enough to rival the oldest Families, James's choice to marry Lily had taken away their status as a solely Pureblood family.

The Dark Lord, their supreme ruler, had been the one to establish their society as it was. People adapted to live accordingly, but there were still some rebels roaming the grounds, speaking of unity with Muggles and calling the Dark Lord a murderer. Which he was, but, well... after the war and the still ongoing battles... who wasn't?

"I didn't mean to make Ron cry," Harry admitted after a long moment of silence, "Not really."

"So you'll say sorry," James said, relieved to solve the problem this easily.

"No," Harry denied with a shake of his head, "I'm being punished. It's either I say sorry or get punished. You can't have both, Daddy."

"Right," James muttered, unsure of what to do. Lily was so much better than him at this 'negotiating with Harry' business. "How about you have a nap now, and—"

"Mum says I can't have naps anymore because then I'll stay up all night," Harry said wisely, "And it's not even six yet."

"Your son is a smartass," a new voice declared, and the two Potters turned to see Sirius Black
standing in the doorway of Harry's bedroom. The man's black robes were dirty with mud and the white mask he was holding was cracked.

"You look like you got caught up in a battle," James noted, standing up, "Are you okay?"

"Bruised, but nothing more," Sirius replied, grinning at Harry. "Hi, Harry!"

"Hi, Uncle Sirius," Harry said. "What's smartass?"

"How about we go to the library and you'll tell me what sort of fight you were caught in?" James rushed to cut in; Lily would kill him if she came back home from work only to find out that their young child had learned something she would definitely dislike. "Harry..."

"I'll stay here," Harry lied, wide green eyes staring up at his father innocently. "I'll take a book and read."

"Good boy," James approved and left the room with Sirius trailing right behind him. Harry waited for a few long minutes before sneaking after them.

Harry, the only child of the Potters, wasn’t a particularly special child. Most people tended to forget him as soon as they weren’t looking at him. It used to be slightly upsetting, but Harry had learned to accept it – it gave him the freedom to do what he wanted most of the time. The only person who seemed to be constantly aware of Harry’s movements was his mother, whom Harry was sure, had eyes in the back of her head.

Harry's father was an Auror – an occupation that was not as glamorous as Harry had thought at first. From what he had heard, it included mostly travelling around the world doing something that made his mother look increasingly worried every day. Lily, Harry's mother, was a healer specializing in spell-induced serious muscle injuries. It was gross and Harry hadn’t wanted to know anything about it beyond that. Being a healer was a job that kept her busy most days and even some nights, but Harry didn't really mind. He used to miss his parents a lot, but now he was pretty used to this.

Silently the boy crept through the hallways towards the library room, and slipped in, quickly hiding behind the shelves.

"...said that all Mudbloods should be killed, but that's just insanity," Sirius was saying, "So we duelled a bit and that's it."

"Carrow was always a bit off," James said in response. "Just don't tell Lily about this, she's overly sensitive about her blood. You know how she is."

"Yeah. You know, I can't say I like muggles. They're like an unknown species to me. But man, a witch is a witch in my book, heritage be damned. Lily is one of the best witches I've ever known!"

"Thanks. I'm just worried about Harry, though."

"How so?" Sirius asked, sounding concerned. "He's okay, isn't he?"

"Sometimes, I just feel that he's... I don't know. Like Lily, feeling inferior due to his blood," James admitted hesitantly, and in his hiding place Harry flushed with shame.

"Harry's got nothing to worry about," Sirius scoffed, "Being a half-blood is the thing nowadays, considering that the Dark Lord himself is one. The beau monde approves and adores... at least on the surface."
"People don't talk about that!" James hissed, "Honestly, Sirius! For a Death Eater, your lack of respect is ridiculous. Nobody talks about the Dark Lord's past, you know that!"

"Calm down, James, I'm not going to join the rebels even if I crack a joke every now and then." Harry could then hear the sound of a smack and a pained groan, followed by a short bark of a laugh.

"There's so much going on nowadays," James said after a short moment of silence. "Politics, economy... ten years ago, everything was so different!"

"Don't think of the past," Sirius advised. "Just focus on your family and make the most out of this life. And steer away from the rebels. They're nasty. The more we capture, the more insane they seem to have become."

"They see Dark wizards everywhere," James agreed gloomily, "and refuse to listen to common sense. The Dark Lord is right to demand their deaths."

"It's not really a matter of right or wrong," Sirius said with a shrug. "The Dark Lord ordered it, so it'll happen. Right and wrong are just labels attached afterwards."

"Some would curse you for your words."

"But not you."

"No," James admitted quietly, "Not me."

Harry remained sitting in his hiding place behind the shelves long after his father and godfather had left. The library was dark and rather cold, and the stone floor wasn't comfortable for Harry to sit on, but he simply didn't have the will to move right then. He was feeling restless. Anxious. As if something bad was about to happen and he'd be in trouble.

But most of all, he was feeling lonely. It wasn't that Harry didn't have any friends, he did. Ron Weasley, the youngest son of the Weasley Family, was a good friend even if he was quite annoying at times. Draco Malfoy was a ponce, but a nice ponce sometimes and his snide remarks were always priceless. The occasional arguments aside, Harry considered them both to be friends of his.

So no, the loneliness didn't come from not having friends at all. Rather, it was the absence of a certain type of friends that made him feel lonely. He wanted a best friend. Like his dad has uncle Sirius and Draco has Theo Nott.

'I guess I'm more like mum,' Harry thought then. Lily didn't have friends. Lily didn't seem to want or need friends. She was friendly, yes, but also a bit distant with everyone excluding her husband and son. 'I don't think she has a best friend either.'

Sighing tiredly, Harry finally stood up to leave. With any luck his dad still thought that he was reading, and would let Harry fly for a little bit today, even though it was quite late already. Feeling hopeful, Harry turned to head towards the door, when something caught his eye.

A book.

It was partly hidden by several other dusty books, and yet somehow it seemed to stand out on its own. Harry pulled the book off the shelf to see it better, and grimaced at the sight of the worn and
blotchy leather covers that carried neither a title nor an author’s name.

"Master Harry," a slightly squeaky voice said behind him, startling the boy. Harry hastily shoved the book back into where it had been before turning to see a house-elf staring at him. “Master James is requesting Master Harry be in Master Harry’s room.”

"Thank you for the reminder, Vurney," Harry said, wondering what his father would want from him now. "I'll go. Did dad seem angry?"

"No, Master Harry," the house-elf replied, and Harry felt a wave of relief. He then dismissed the house-elf before leaving the library and making his way towards his bedroom, where he saw his father. Despite what the house-elf had said, the man did look a little bit annoyed.

"Where were you?" James asked as soon as Harry entered the room. "Didn't you say that you had a book you wanted to read?"

"I was bored," Harry replied, sitting down on his bed and not elaborating further on where he had been. "Did Uncle Sirius leave?"

"Yes. He has... work. It's getting late, are you hungry? You should be in bed and asleep already. Lily will be home tomorrow morning, so let’s both sleep now and wake up early to welcome her back.

"Not hungry. Not sleepy," Harry claimed and ended up a moment later hiding a yawn behind his hand. James smiled fondly and moved to pull out Harry's pyjamas. “I want to say welcome to mum when she comes back.”

"You will. Now, change into these and brush your teeth. Do you want a bedtime story?" James asked, watching over Harry while the boy did as told.

"Unh," Harry nodded, "Something cool. Draco says that his father has seen the Dark Lord. Have you seen him too? Did he say anything to you? What does he look like?"

"Anything related to the Dark Lord hardly counts as a bedtime story," James said dryly, "You should stop listening to what Draco says, Harry."

"Tell me about Hogwarts, then," Harry ordered, "I'll be going there in a few years, won't I?"

"Maybe," James replied, "Hogwarts is probably the most beautiful place I have ever seen"

"Uncle Sirius says that snivellus is a blemish in Hogwarts," Harry cut in, blinking sleepily, "What's a snivellus?"

"Snivellus is, er, a nickname. Of a person. A man. His actual name is Severus Snape."

"Is he a Death Eater too? Are you?"

"He is, I’m not," James sighed. "All those who carry the Dark Mark – a sign of loyalty gained during the Great Purge – are Death Eaters. Very few are marked nowadays. Exceptional people. People who achieve great things on the battlefield."

"Like heroes? War heroes?" Harry mumbled, eyes already closed. James swallowed and his lips twisted into a bitter smile.

"Yeah," James said. "Heroes."
Harry woke up to the sensation of someone running their fingers through his hair. He could smell the faint scent of lavender and knew that it was his mother, sitting by his bed. With a smile, eyes still closed, Harry rolled closer to where she was sitting.

"You're home," the boy sighed happily.

"Did you miss me?" Lily asked fondly. "Come on, sweetheart. It's time to wake up and start the day. Did you do anything productive yesterday?"

"Not really."

"Then how about you go with me later on to the library? We'll pick good books to read and have a nice evening together."

"I was supposed to wake up before you came back, but I couldn't," Harry pouted, finally blinking his eyes open. He looked up at his mother whose hair was redder than he had remembered and eyes as green as his own. "And which book would I read? I don't want anything boring. Can't we go out instead? To Diagon Alley or something? And buy new books?"

"Some other day," Lily promised. "I have a bit of paperwork to do. If you don't want to get something from the library, we could find you something else. I received a collection of essays from a friend and one of those essays is about Hogwarts—"

"What're the others about?"

"It's rude to interrupt, Harry. Don't do it again."

"Sorry," Harry muttered, peering up at his mother warily, before speaking again. "What're the other essays about if only one is about Hogwarts?"

"Other schools," Lily replied. "Salem, Durmstrang, Beauxbatons... There are about a dozen magical schools in the world."

"I've heard of Durmstrang," Harry said. "Draco says it's the best school and that he wants to go there but that his mum wants him to attend Hogwarts. Why is Durmstrang better than Hogwarts? Why did you and dad go to Hogwarts if Durmstrang is better?"

"Durmstrang has the reputation of teaching Dark Arts, and it does not admit Muggle-born students," Lily explained quietly. "It's also said to be the school the Dark Lord occasionally visits and picks up potential Death Eaters from."

"Can I go there?" Harry asked, "To Durmstrang, I mean. Is it pretty? Dad says that Hogwarts is the prettiest school."

"I have never been there," Lily said gently. "If you attend Durmstrang, baby, won't you be lonely? As far as I know, all your other friends will be going to Hogwarts."

"But if Durmstrang is better..."

"It's too early, either way, for you to think of school."

"But!"

"When you turn ten," Lily said, "I will... James will take you to see Durmstrang and a few other schools, and then you'll get to pick which one you want to enrol into. How does that sound?"
"That's too far away," Harry pouted, and his mother snorted before giving her only son a loving look.

Back then, things were perfect.

Back then, things were normal.

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By the time Harry turned ten he had forgotten all about his mother's promise. His birthday party wasn't extravagant and he hadn't asked for other children to be invited - his friendship with Draco and Ron had mellowed out during the two years and it had been months since he had even left the house.

James and Lily were slightly worried, but they couldn't exactly force him to spend time with other children if that made him unbearably uncomfortable. The only one to be invited was Sirius who, despite his loud and obnoxious entrance and the pile of brightly wrapped gifts that he levitated behind him, was just as worried.

"He's lonely," Sirius whispered to James later on. "I can see it, James."

"There really isn't much I can do," James sighed in response. "He doesn't want to spend time with other kids. We've tried to make him, but he just… it doesn't go well at all."

"Maybe you should sign him up for a hobby?" Sirius suggested.

"Like what? All he does is read and fly when the weather is good."

"Read? He's not becoming a Lily-clone, is he?"


"I remember that book," Sirius smiled. "I loved it – still do, actually. The Tales of Beedle the Bard. I used to transfigure the covers to look like Charms text books."

"Good old days," James said, "Remember Dumbledore?"

"Who doesn't?"

"He used to be against the Dark Lord. We all thought he had a chance of defeating him, in the beginning."

"You know," Sirius sighed with a contemplative expression on his face. "This world could very well be different had Dumbledore not died at the end of our fifth year."

"He was a good man," James said. "Idealistic and foolish, perhaps, but also powerful and kind."

"I didn't much talk with him," Sirius said. "Once, when we went to talk to him about— well, remember that werewolf boy we discovered in our third year? What do you think happened to him?"

"Probably dead. I still can't believe that Dumbledore let a werewolf live in Hogwarts and pretend to be a human."

"Well, he let Snivellus in, too, and there's no way that slimeball is all human. There's got to be a bit of a slug in his ancestry."
"That's too disturbing for me to think about," James declared, though he couldn't quite keep a straight face. "Although I can't really say that I disagree."

"Do you actually know what happened to him?"

"Snape?"

"No, you idiot. The werewolf. Do you really think he's dead?"

"If he's lucky, then yes. If not, then he was probably sent to one of those werewolf humanization camps."

"What did you give to Harry?" Sirius asked then, after a moment of silence while watching his godson at the other side of the room. "Wish I could give him a friend. I bought him pretty much everything else instead."

"Lily said that she wants Harry to go to Durmstrang if it's possible," James said quietly, seriously. "Said he suggested it first and she ended up liking the idea. Maybe he'll find kids there he can connect with. I would really have wanted him to go to Hogwarts, though. I should have known that Lily would want Durmstrang for Harry, if only to emphasize the fact that Harry isn't a— That Harry isn't like her."

"Durmstrang has its reputation," Sirius said with a nod. "It'd help Harry immensely in the future if he's a Durmstrang student. I heard, however, that they have an entrance examination of sorts."

"Of course they do."

"What are you going to do about that?"

"I need to talk with Harry and I might get him his wand early."

"You're going to train him?"

"Not much, but at least the basic spells that any other pureblood child would or should know."

"I can give him some lessons too, if you want," Sirius offered. "Or we could get him a tutor."

"A tutor would be great, actually," James said, looking excited. "I'm sure that Lily will love the idea!"

"I'll love what?" Lily said, appearing suddenly while holding a tray on which there was a slice of cake and a cup of milk. "I'm taking this to Harry first and then you'll tell me."

"Yes, ma'am!"

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"A tutor," Lily breathed, eyes wide after James and Sirius had told her of their discussion, "I can't believe I hadn't thought of that yet! This is fantastic! Do you have anyone in mind?"

"I'll ask around at work," James said. "Employing tutors is a fairly common practice. I'll ask for recommendations and see where that takes us."

"This is brilliant," Sirius grinned. "Will you tell Harry now or later?"

"I'll tell him," Lily offered, standing up and walking towards her son, who was still immersed in
reading the book on his lap. Lily sat next to him and wrapped her arm around his shoulders.

"Harry darling, I have important news for you. It’s about something you’ve really been looking forward to."

"My own library?" Harry asked, looking up with an excited expression. "Or, or, we’re going to watch a real Quidditch match?"

"Not quite," Lily replied with a fond smile. "You’re already ten, sweetheart, and school is not so far away anymore. Do you remember us talking about our options before? Hogwarts and Durmstrang?"

"Yeeecees," Harry said hesitantly, not exactly sure if he remembered whatever his mum was talking about, but unwilling to have her repeat what could possibly end up as a long lecture.

"We decided to enrol you into Durmstrang. There will be an entrance exam that you must pass, but don’t worry, it won’t be too tough for you," Lily told him gently. "Part of success lies in preparation, and that is why your dad and I have decided to buy you your wand as soon as possible, as well as find you a tutor who will help you prepare for the exam."

"My wand," Harry breathed, excited. "Yes, mum! I want my wand! When are we going?"

"You have to be responsible and careful with it," Lily instructed. "No independent attempts at magic until you’re older, is that clear?"

"Yes, yes," Harry agreed immediately. "When will we go? Can we drop by Flotts too?"

"Flourish and Blotts, Harry, not Flotts. But yes, if you wish, we can go and buy you a new book. Adventure this time?"

"I'll see what Flott- Flourish and Blotts has on their recommendation list. The lady who makes that list every month is a genius."

On the other side of the room, James and Sirius were watching the two talk, feeling rather satisfied with the new development. "I'll go and have a talk with Igor," Sirius said. "Igor Karkaroff. He's the Headmaster of Durmstrang and a Death Eater, so I know him somewhat. I'll be back tomorrow to tell you what news I've got."

"You're going now?" James asked, and his best friend nodded.

"A lot has been going on in the warfront," Sirius replied quietly. "I'm actually really busy, but I couldn't just not drop by on Harry's birthday, you know?"

"Thank you," James said, walking Sirius towards the fireplace. "Take care, all right?"

"Always," Sirius grinned, before hollering his goodbyes loud enough for Harry and Lily to hear, and then leaving.

"Where is Durmstrang, anyway?" James heard Harry ask as he walked closer.

"It's Unplottable," Lily replied, "But most likely somewhere in Sweden."

"Sweden? What language do they speak there?"

"Well, Swedish, of course."

"Do I have to learn Swedish?"
"Unlikely," James told him, sitting down on the couch nearby. "Overall, there are about two dozen – well, could be more but who really knows – schools in the world that teach magic. Four of them are in Europe. Hogwarts is the only one that has limited its student to only those who live in Great Britain and it's also the only school that sends invitations to its students without having them pass any kind of test. The other three schools accept students worldwide, but only after a test. The language requirements depend on the institutions, of course, but in Europe the only required language is English."

"What are the other three schools?"

"There's Beauxbatons Academy of Magic in France. It's said to be a great school, although its curriculum emphasizes arts and etiquette over, say, duelling. Then there's Hogwarts, which you know already. The third school – and currently the number one choice of every Pureblood family with a shred of ambition – is Durmstrang Institute."

"What's the fourth school?" Harry asked, curious.

"Flora Charm's School of Magic. It's for witches and wizards with special needs," Lily explained. "You have two great options: Hogwarts and Durmstrang. Although, of course, Durmstrang would be better."

"When will we go get my wand?" Harry repeated his earlier question, unsure of which school he would want to pick.

"Why not today," James said with a shrug. "The day is still young and we've got no reason to wait."

"We'll go to Ollivander's, of course," Lily smiled. "All right, let's get ready!"

Diagon Alley was always crowded and noisy, which tended to make Harry slightly dizzy - he simply wasn't used to seeing and hearing so much at once. Being surrounded by people was strangely draining.

"Stay close to me, Harry," Lily said, hand on his shoulder. "Don't wander away from me. We'll head first to get your wand."

"Will I get my own owl too at some point?" Harry wanted to know as they walked past Eeylops Owl Emporium, "Can I get one; may I get one?"

"Did I just hear a comma splice?" Lily asked him, smiling slightly, "But yes, fine, you'll get one. Not yet... though if you pass the entrance exam, I'll buy you whichever owl you want."

"Promise?"

"I promise. Now, here we are."

The shop they had stopped in front of was rather narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters painted over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion behind the dusty glass of the display window. A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny, tiny place – barely able to fit them all at once.

"Good afternoon," said a soft voice, and an old man appeared from the back of the shop, looking at them with his wide, pale eyes that shone like moons through the gloom of the shop. The old man was unnerving, and reminded Harry of the tricksters in his fairy tales.
"The Potters," said the man, then, "A bit early, but not overly so. Indeed, not overly so. Mrs. Potter – nice to see you again. It seems only yesterday that you were here yourself, buying your first wand. Ten and a quarter inches long, swishy, made of willow. Nice for charm work."

"Yes, Mr. Ollivander," Lily replied evenly, "It has served me well."

"Glad to hear that. Glad indeed. And James Potter! Mahogany wand, wasn't it? Eleven inches. Pliable. A little more power and excellent for transfiguration."

"Yes," James said awkwardly. "We're here today for my son's wand, however. Shall we, um, proceed?"

"Of course. Let me see, young Mr. Potter," Ollivander said and pulled a long tape measure with silver markings out of his pocket. "Which is your wand arm?"

"Right."

"Hold out that arm then. That's it." He measured Harry from shoulder to finger, then wrist to elbow, shoulder to floor, knee to armpit and round his head. As he measured, he said, "Every Ollivander wand has a core of a powerful magical substance, Mr. Potter. We use unicorn hairs, phoenix tail feathers, and the heartstrings of dragons. No two Ollivander wands are the same, just as no two unicorns, dragons, or phoenixes are quite the same. And of course, you will never get such good results with another wizard's wand."

"Is that set in stone?" Harry asked, as Ollivander stopped measuring him and stepped back.

"Perhaps not," the old man said evasively, before reaching for a box, "Right then, Mr. Potter. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Just take it and give it a wave." Harry did, and instead of shooting sparkles like he knew it should, the wand's tip exploded with a small bang. Ollivander blinked a few times rapidly, before shaking his head.

"Wand was too weak, eh. Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches. Quite whippy. Try." Harry tried, but he had hardly raised the wand when it burst up in flames, making him yelp and drop it just as a bowl of water was thrown on the burning stick. Ollivander frowned again and turned away for a moment, before pulling out yet another wand.

"Will that one be safe?" Lily asked warily, "I don't want my son injured."

"Here," Ollivander said, handing the wand to Harry, "Ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy. Go on, go on, try it out." Harry tried. And tried. And tried some more, with more or less destructive results. The pile of tried wands was mounting higher and higher on the spindly chair, but the more wands Mr. Ollivander pulled from the shelves, the more interested he seemed to become.

"Tricky customer, eh? Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match here somewhere."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked, "Do I have to try all of these wands?"

"When you reach for the wand, what do you feel?" Ollivander asked, and Harry shrugged, not quite understanding why the question was being asked.

"Nothing, really," he replied, "I feel nothing."

"Your wand will be the one you feel yourself pulled to," Lily explained softly, and Ollivander nodded.
"Walk around there," the old man said, gesturing to the back of the store and the corridor between towering shelves full of wands, "and try to feel which wand would be... appealing." Harry wasn't sure what exactly he was supposed to do, but went to walk between the shelves anyway. He had an odd feeling though. An odd feeling that he couldn't quite place. As if... as if...

And suddenly Harry remembered a book he had never opened. A book that had no title. The half-hidden, dusty book with dirty brown covers that Harry had seen years ago and forgotten. Why was he remembering it now? It couldn't be useful, now, could it? Except that remembering the stillness of time when he had seen that book reminded him of what he was doing now, and suddenly there was a pull, and, blindly and without hesitation, Harry reached for a red box that seemed to jump into his hand.

He stood there for a long moment, clutching the box, before hesitantly making his way back to the front of the store.

"Found it, have you?" Ollivander said with a smile. "Let me see, young ma— Oh, Merlin." The man's reaction, the abrupt change in his voice and attitude when he saw the wand, made Harry both worried and self-conscious.

"Is there a problem?" Lily asked, gesturing for Harry to come and stand next to her, which he did. Ollivander looked up from the wand and gave Harry a long stare, as if he was seeing the boy for the first time.

"Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple. This is your wand."

"Y-yes? And?"

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather – just one other. Yes, thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, never forget that."

"I'm not sure I understand," Lily sighed, "You're shocked because Harry's wand's brother is in the possession of someone already?"

"No," Ollivander said. "While indeed brother wands are not common, that is not the reason for my... awe, Mrs. Potter."

"Then what is the reason?"

"The one who own the other wand, of course."

"And who might that be?" James asked, curiously. Ollivander looked at Harry again, eyes gleaming oddly.

"The Dark Lord, Mr. Potter. The Dark Lord himself."

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"We cannot speak of this to anyone until Harry learns how to defend himself. If even then," Lily declared as soon as the three were back home. Harry was clutching his wand, wondering why everything had to always be so complicated. "The Dark Lord has enemies and if this became public knowledge, Harry will be thrust into the spotlight and people will make assumptions."

"Yes," James said, nodding. "We don't want or need the attention. Remember that, Harry, and never
tell anyone of your wand. All right?"

"Okay," Harry promised. He was still thinking of the untitled book that he had seen years ago, and wondered if he could still find it. Maybe he should ask help from a house-elf? "Will you tell Uncle Sirius, though?"

"He'll be the only one told," James told him, "I'm so glad that Ollivander swore to not speak of this to anyone."

"Tell me about it," Lily agreed, "Imagine Skeeter smelling this scoop."

"Would’ve had to kill her to keep her quiet." James said with a grimace. "Not something I think I could do, honestly. Ah, I'm tired. I think I'll take a nap."

"Are you tired, birthday-boy?" Lily asked, and Harry shook his head.

"I want to go the library room, actually," Harry said, "We didn't go to Flotts after all."

"Have you read Pride and Prejudice yet?" Lily wanted to know, and her son made a disgusted face.

"I read a bit. It's so lame."

"It's romantic, that's what it is. But I suppose you want adventure and fantasy? There's the Lord of the Rings trilogy. I think you'll love the books."

"Wasn't that the series written by a squib?" James asked.

"Yes, James. Doesn't make the books worse, I assure you."

Harry left his parents to talk with each other and made his way towards the library. He didn't quite remember where he had seen the book, but since he had been spying on his father and godfather back then, it must have been near the chairs.

'Reclaiming Magic, Redemption and Traditions, Resolutions and How To Keep Them... these aren't fiction. Pity. Maybe I won't want to even read the book after I find it? What if I— there!'

Eagerly, Harry pulled out the ugly notebook and felt yet again the odd tingle of magic at the contact. The book itself looked just like Harry remembered: old and uninteresting. His fingers pressed against the soft leather of the cover, and he carefully wiped off the dust on the book.

After a few minutes of hesitation, Harry opened the book to look at the first page, and squinted at the almost illegible writing he found there. He couldn't quite make out the date written, but the text below it was somewhat readable.

I do not know what will be said of me in the future, if anything. I've heard them calling me Haines the Foul when they think I do not hear them. Foul, they say, as if ambition is something to shirk away from.

"Is this a diary?" Harry muttered aloud, frowning. Why would they have a stranger’s diary in their personal library?

I grew in the shadow of those whose powers manifested well before mine. My brothers, each one more successful than the other, were considered of far greater value than mine. Belittled, my ambition was set aflame by desperation. I went to lengths I shouldn't have even thought of.
Harry stopped reading and browsed through the rest of the book, noticing a reoccurring signature. It took him a moment to read the name: Haines Potter.

‘A relative of mine? I’ve never heard of him before,’ Harry thought. Then again, researching his own family history had never been one of Harry’s interests.

Deciding to take the diary with him, the boy held the book against his chest as he made his way out. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to read it quite yet – he had already three other books he was only halfway into – but preferred to keep the book in his room anyway. Just in case.

Tomorrow, Sirius would come and tell them about Durmstrang and whether or not he managed to find a tutor for Harry. What would his tutor teach him anyway? Would he make Harry read about magical theory and history like his mum did sometimes?

‘I hope it’s not some strict aunty,’ Harry thought, entering his room. ‘I don't think so. Surely Uncle Sirius isn't going to doom me like that.’

Absently Harry wondered if Ron or Draco had tutors, or if they were going to get any at all. It had been quite a while since he had last seen either one of them, and sometimes Harry wondered whether or not the other two boys even thought of him anymore.

Probably not.

Maybe they even forgot him. People always seemed forget Harry easily.

‘I wonder if everyone will be like that at Durmstrang, too,’ the boy thought, feeling a little bit upset by the possibility. His dream of having a best friend was still living in his heart, but Harry feared that perhaps he simply wasn’t interesting enough for that to actually happen.

He wondered if that was ever going to change.

* * *

The following day, Harry woke up to someone sitting down on his bed. He opened his eyes only to see his godfather looking down at him with a serious expression.

"It's half past ten," Sirius said, "Aren't you going to wake up?"

"But it's so comfortable here," Harry replied, and yawned, burrowing further into his warm blankets.

"Your parents told me about your wand," Sirius then continued, moving his hand to rest on Harry's head, "They have... told you already to not talk about it, right?"

"Yeah."

"They're worried."

"But," Harry started, "isn't it sort of cool that I have the Dark Lord's brother wand?"

"It'd bring the attention upon you," Sirius explained softly, "and the Dark Lord's attention is a heavy burden to bear. He would consider your wand his own, and, if you were to be unworthy in his eyes, he would kill you to get it back."

"Really?" Harry whispered, eyes widening while a cold feeling settled inside. He didn’t feel sleepy anymore, and the blankets weren’t enough to keep him warm all of a sudden. "He would?"
"He would," Sirius confirmed, "and, even if he would let you be, his Death Eaters – the ones that are actively still fighting for him, fighting against anyone and everyone, even their own – wouldn't leave you alone."

"Just because I have that wand?"

"The smallest of things can bring the biggest of problems."

"That's why mum and dad are worried."

"Yeah."

"I'll keep it a secret," Harry promised, "I'll be so secretive that no one will know."

"That's the spirit," Sirius said, and finally smiled. "Brush your teeth, wash your face and get changed, kid, and then come down. There's breakfast ready and I'll tell you about Durmstrang."

"You went there?" Harry asked, sliding off his bed and rushing to the bathroom to wash his face and teeth. Sirius followed him and stood in the doorway.

"I attended Hogwarts, so all the information is provided by Igor Karkaroff, who's the headmaster there. But I did visit Durmstrang yesterday, yes."

"What is it like?"

"The building is smaller than Hogwarts. Uglier too. But their curriculum is better and for now there are more students attending."

"But how come Hogwarts is bigger if Durmstrang has more students?" Harry asked, voice muffled by the toothbrush in his mouth. Sirius grinned at the adorable sight, before answering the question.

"Hogwarts has many unused classrooms. Durmstrang's school building is only four stories, and it's all classrooms. The dorms are in separate buildings. The grounds, though, are far more extensive due to their three Quidditch pitches and two open-air duelling arenas. The student count, however, is set to be cut down to a fraction of what it is now – I'm not yet sure why or how, but that's what Igor told me."

"Duelling arenas?" Harry repeated with disbelief, after finishing washing his mouth, "Are you serious? Do they really duel there?"

"Duelling is actually a course that starts during the third year of education," Sirius said, "Karkaroff said that it's very advanced there. And you know that the Dark Lord occasionally tests the seventh year students himself, don't you?"

"I didn't know that," Harry said, "Will the Dark Lord recognize my wand if he sees it?"

"We're not sure," Sirius told him, while leading the boy towards the kitchen where they'd eat their breakfast, "but there's always a risk. That's why, Harry, when you start attending Durmstrang..."

"We want you to come across as mediocre," Lily said, finishing Sirius's sentence when the two entered the kitchen; she had obviously heard them talking. "Of course I want you to do well, but don't give others a reason to single you out."

"You're making me sound like a secret agent," Harry grinned and sat down next to James, who set down a muffin in front of his son.
"Here," the man said, "Treat!"

"Cereal first!" Lily said, grabbing the muffin before Harry could, setting instead a bowl of cereal in front of him. "There."

"Oh, mum."

"What did Karkaroff say about the entrance exam?" James asked, and Sirius, who was now sitting in front of him, grinned.

"I signed Harry in. Next July he'll sit through the exam. If all goes well he'll start school September the first, next year."

"Did you ask him what kind of exam it is? Practical, theoretical?"

"Actually, they're just going to test his magic's compatibility to certain spells and materials. It's nothing he could really study for. Having a tutor, however, will help him prepare to what comes after he gets in."

"Did you see what the dorms are like?"

"Yes, they're very different from how Hogwarts was," Sirius said with a nod. "They're cutting down the student number and changing the accommodation system completely. The dormitories are newly built and will be taken into use once the student body has been cut down. The Seven Towers is what Igor called the dormitories, and that's what they really are. Seven apartment complexed with one studio flat on each floor."

"How many floors will there be?" Lily asked, curious.

"Ten, I believe. There will be a total of seventy students once the new changes have been made."

"That is so few," James said, clearly surprised. "How much do they have now, six hundred?"

"Just about, yes," Sirius replied. "They've been preparing for this for quite a while now, and there are many partner school willing to accept the students who'll be kicked out after the cut."

"That is cruel," Lily murmured. "What is the reason, do you know?"

"Nothing for sure," Sirius admitted. "I did take a look at the apartments, however. They're really nice, let me tell you. If Harry gets in, he'll have his own bathroom and a small kitchen. Apparently the students have a choice between eating in the main hall the food made by the house-elves or making their own food in their apartments."

"Maybe we should sign Harry up for cooking lessons," Lily suggested. "Even if he's too young to cook now, he'll surely find a use for that skill later on in life."

"Mum!" Harry all but shrieked, "I can't cook! That's—"

"Girly stuff," Sirius continued, "Baking cookies is what girls do for their boyfriends."

"There's nothing effeminate in butchering a chicken for dinner," Lily snapped, "There's nothing girly in using sharp, big knives to cut and slice and dice. And honestly, you two, it's cooking. How on earth is cooking related to gender? What, is eating feminine too?"

"She's got a point," James said with a grin, "By the way, did you find a tutor for Harry?"
"Asked a friend, she recommended this guy," Sirius started, "His name is Gilderoy Lockhart. Apparently, he's some sort of a genius? A hero? I'm not too sure, but he's won Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award five times in a row."

"I know him!" Lily exclaimed, delighted, "Such a handsome, charming man! Oh, James, we're definitely going to hire him!"

"Just for smiling?"

"He also has an Order of Merlin, Third Class, and is an honorary member of the Dark Force League! Not to mention that he has written so many books about, well, everything!" Lily explained rapidly, eyes shining, "He wrote Wandering with Werewolves and Voyages with Vampires, for example. He's incredibly popular!"

"Mum," Harry started with disbelief. He, his father and godfather were all staring at Lily with surprise. "Are you a fan of his?"

"No!" Lily exclaimed, blushing. "I just, well, he's courageous and said to be powerful and has achieved so much, and—"

"And won Witch Weekly's Most-Charming-Smile Award five times in a row," James cut in, repeating Sirius's earlier words, "Fine, if he agrees, we'll hire him to tutor Harry. You said you haven't met the guy personally?"

"I haven't," Sirius said, "I've got no idea what he looks like, but I'll ask Sinistra to schedule a meeting. An interview."

"I can take care of the interview, since I have read his books and know what I'm dealing with," Lily offered, "I'm sure that he'll be a fantastic teacher for Harry."

"Hurray," Harry muttered into his cereal, "Can't wait."

* *

It was three days later that Harry finally was to meet his tutor. The Potter Manor had been cleaned and Harry was wearing a new set of uncomfortable robes. He was sitting in the living room next to Sirius who was trying to make him feel anxious.

"What is he going to teach me anyway?" Harry asked, "And do I always have to be dressed like this?"

"You know Harry," Sirius chuckled, "I've noticed that more than half of your sentences are questions. You're one curious baby stag, aren't you?"

"I'm ten. Not a baby."

"Of course not."

"He'll be here soon," James said, entering the living room, "Best behaviour, yeah?"

"When have I ever been rude to guests?" Harry asked, and his father grinned.

"I meant Sirius, actually, not you."

"Hey!" Sirius exclaimed indignantly, "I'm always at my best behaviour!"
"Merlin save us, then," James replied cheerfully just as they heard the floo activating. Soon enough Lily stepped into the room with a bright smile on her face, followed by Harry's future tutor. He was a tall man with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes. A smile showed straight, shiny white teeth and dimples.

He was also dressed in bright purple robes.

"Hello, hello," the man said, shaking hands with James, then Sirius, and lastly with Harry. "I am, as you without a doubt know, Gilderoy Lockhart. Or Professor Lockhart in this case, heh. Beautiful home, Mrs. Potter. Absolutely delightful."

"Oh please, call me Lily," Lily said with a smile, "And thank you. Um, please sit down. Would you like some tea, coffee?"

"Spring water, please," Lockhart requested with another blinding smile, "I don't really drink tea or coffee – they're bad for my teeth you see."

'Really? This is the tutor?' Harry thought with disbelief, eyeing ghastly purple robes. 'This guy?'

"He sounds incompetent," Sirius whispered, and after making sure that Lily wouldn't notice. James nodded with a pained expression as they watched the interview go on.

"He doesn't sound too convincing to me," James hissed, "but Lily clearly likes him and if I don't hire him, she'll be mad at me."

"Whipped."

"Married."

"Dad, am I seriously going to be that guy's student?" Harry asked quietly, "I mean, not that I think that his skull is full of nothing, but I don't really think that he'll be able to teach me anything."

"He could teach you how you shouldn't be like," Sirius replied with a grin. Harry scowled, and shot him a glare.

“You’re the one who found him,” Harry said. “Uncle Sirius, I hate you right now.”

He really wasn't looking forward to his future lessons. Not anymore.
Chapter 2

It didn't take long for Harry to decide that the only subject Gilderoy "call me Gildy" Lockhart was the master of, was the subject of himself. It was, more often than not, frustrating. How his mother had come let this guy— Oh, right, she was a fan, no matter how much she wanted to deny that fact. Harry wasn't sure how he felt about the new revelation concerning his dear mother.

At the manor, the house-elves had prepared a study for Harry, wherein Lockhart would tutor him every weekday for two hours. Usually the tutoring sessions went along the lines of Lockhart giving Harry something to read, Harry choosing to read something else, and Lockhart talking about himself, seemingly unaware of what Harry was doing.

The arrangement worked just fine.

"—now, trust me, any other wizard would have fled the scene if they'd been there! Ten, no, actually, I think it was almost twenty werewolves that were running towards me, clearly intending on ending my life. But hah, they didn't know who they were up against! I, of course, managed to defeat them all—"

'I can't believe that he hasn't been assassinated yet,' Harry thought, after finishing the third chapter of The Green Witch by Susan Cooper.

"Tell me, Harry," Lockhart said suddenly, leaning forward, "Have you considered peacock-patterned robes? The colours would be so fantastic on you! All I see you wearing is black, and while that is a great colour and easy to match with anything, it just isn’t enough."

"Peacock robes?" Harry repeated, feeling unsure of how to even react. "Um, no. I mean, really, no. No peacock robes. Please. Say, what were the incantations you used to defeat the werewolves?"

"You're too young to know them," Lockhart said dismissively, "But how about I tell you of the time I saved two maidens from a boggart, hmm? I was in Zimbabwe, from where I bought an orange set of robes that I will show you tomorrow, when a boggart— well, it was actually more than one boggart. It was more like a pack of boggarts..."

Harry stared at the man for a few moments, before sighing and deciding to resume reading his book. If he wanted to learn something, he'd obviously have to study on his own. Lockhart was clearly uninterested in doing anything but wasting his time.

His mum had told him that the man used to be from Ravenclaw House at Hogwarts that was supposedly for those of keen mind... but Harry found that very hard to believe.

'I can't just waste away like this,' Harry thought miserably, holding back a yawn. 'I really do need to study. Something useful. Mum wants me to get into Durmstrang – what if I fail because I didn’t prepare well enough?'

Harry knew that, in Durmstrang, the heirs of some of the most infamous Dark families would be studying. Other kids were bound to know Dark spells and they would know how to defend themselves, if nothing else. How was Harry supposed to impress anyone when compared to people like that? He couldn't afford wasting time like this.

Harry had been listening to everything Sirius had been telling his parents about Durmstrang. Apparently the student admission methods were now harder than ever, and the accepted amount of students had been cut to a fraction to what it used to be. While his mum had become more
determined than ever to get Harry into Durmstrang, Harry himself couldn't help but wonder if that would be possible.

And even if he did get in, how would he survive? What kind of changes had happened, really? Why change the amount of the accepted students so abruptly, going as far as to relocate the ones who weren’t allowed to remain at Durmstrang from now on?

Harry didn't like studying - not really - but he knew that he'd have to do a lot of it in order to somehow survive.

"Professor Lockhart?"

"I told you, Harry darling, my friends call me Gildy."

"Will I get the chance to practice spells?" Harry asked, "I mean, learning theory is nice, but I want to do practical work as well."

"There’s no need to hurry in regards to that," Lockhart said dismissively, "You're still—"

"I'll be going to Durmstrang," Harry cut in seriously, fear forcing his words, "I will end up studying with kids who've all been taught by their Death Eater parents. I can't waste my days listening to you talking about fictional heroics while knowing that the school I will start attending is one known for its Dark magic."

"Harry, darling," Lockhart started, but got interrupted again.

"I need a teacher," Harry insisted, horrified to realize that tears weren’t that far away from falling, "Not a... I don’t know, whatever you are. A babysitter? I need to learn how to survive, not how to sit here bored out of my mind. I can't afford being even average. I've got no one to protect me there. I need to protect myself. I need to learn how."

Lockhart stared at Harry with an oddly blank expression for a moment. It looked almost frighteningly out of place on his face.

"Are you sure?" Lockhart asked, "Because when you learn some things, you can never unlearn them. The knowledge can be a burden. And the more you know, the harder it becomes to forgive those who don't know."

"Can you teach me?" Harry wanted to know, feeling hopeful at the seriousness of the man’s voice. "Who even are you, really? A fighter? A storyteller?"

"I am me," Lockhart told him. "I love the way I am now, and that gives me a very real sense of identity. There are plenty of mind-altering spells that do not work on me, simply because I know exactly who I am."

"..."

"There is power in being individual," Lockhart continued, flicking imaginary dust off the feathers on his cape, "People don't understand those who are unlike them. And people cannot predict what they cannot understand."

"What will you teach me?" Harry asked hesitantly. Lockhart gave him a brilliant smile and waved his bright fuchsia quill at the young boy.

"I'll teach you what's useful," the man promised, "Starting from body language to body disposal. But first, your clothes need a colour-change."
“Gildy is so strange,” Harry declared at the dinner table later on. “He’s so different from anyone else I’ve ever known.”

“Well, he has to be something, all right, to have you calling him Gildy,” James stated. “Did you learn anything useful?”

"Not yet, not really. Waste of time if you ask me." At least, so far. Harry had a feeling, however, that after the day’s discussion with the man, things would change for the better.

"Oh come on," Lily sighed, "You've been through, what, five lessons so far? Give him time. Teaching new students is always challenging in the beginning. He doesn't know how much you know and what he should be teaching you."

"He says that I should stop wearing black all the time. He wants to dress me up in rainbow colours and peacock patterns!" Harry would rather

"That'd be a sight," James muttered, "You do have green robes too, though. And blue."

"Blue isn't really Harry's colour," Lily noted, "Green, grey, black, silver... I'd say those colours suit you the best, little man."

"Can we focus on what's relevant?" Harry asked, "You're not going to make your only child dress up in rainbow colours, are you?"

"Might be a good experience for you," Lily teased, making her son throw his hands up in frustration before leaving the kitchen, where his parents were trying to not laugh too loudly. Stomping up the stairs, feeling like the whole world was against him, Harry wasn't exactly in the mood of sitting down with a good story and enjoying his existence.

Ever since Harry had been told about Durmstrang and the possibility of him studying there, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. Would he... could he make new friends there? That was admittedly his biggest concern, because while Harry did feel uncomfortable with other children, he still felt very lonely. But what if they all were like Draco? Not that Draco was exactly a bad guy – just incredibly self-centred and boring.

'I should probably get used to that,' Harry thought, 'I'm being tutored by another incredibly self-centred idiot after all.' Except that he wasn't so sure anymore of whether or not Lockhart really was as much of an idiot. It was all so confusing – just what kind of man was he?

Sighing, Harry decided to stop thinking of the issue for now and reached for the diary he had found in the library. Maybe it was the time to read it? With any luck, it'd have an incantation of a spell or two somewhere.

"Haines Potter," Harry muttered, aloud, squinting at the badly written signature. Merlin, how could anyone’s handwriting be so lousy, he didn’t understand. "I wonder how long ago he wrote this." The pages of the journal were slightly brown already, but it didn't seem that the papers had suffered nearly as much as the covers. The diary wasn’t fiction, however, and didn’t hold his interest for long.

'Maybe Gildy will be able to teach me properly once I start wearing less black,' Harry thought
reluctantly, 'He did seem serious for a moment when he spoke.'

The man's words from earlier that day about being an individual and being unpredictable made Harry feel as if he was holding all parts of a puzzle that he just didn't know how to connect. It was a stupid feeling - he wasn't in the middle of a mystery, after all.

Would it yield any results if Harry made a list of things he wanted to be taught? Would Lockhart ignore the list or actually consider it? Harry had studied enough theory already – he wanted something that would actually be useful. Something he could use his wand for.

Slowly, Harry moved from where he was sitting on the bed and stared for a short moment at the red box that had his wand in it. Nervously, he opened the box to see the wand inside. Eleven inches, made of Holly. Phoenix feather inside. To think, this wand that looked so harmless was the brother of the Dark Lord’s wand.

It was astounding, and Harry couldn't deny the slight thrill he could feel. He had something in common with the Dark Lord himself. How cool was that?

The Dark Lord Voldemort was the official ruler of the British Wizarding World, and the unofficial leader of the European Wizarding Societies. From what Harry had found out, the Dark Lord rose into power after the mysterious death of Albus Dumbledore well over a decade ago, and had led them all to a new age of prosperity and peace. Harry had read enough stories to be wary of anything that blindly praised the people in power, but he didn’t dare to speak his mind on the issue.

Politics. The mere word was enough to make Harry’s skin crawl. Everything was far more complicated than it should when one added politics into the mix. Harry was just glad that his family wasn't one of those that were in the middle of the political circles. Draco’s dad was heavily involved, and so was Sirius. Then again… both were high ranking Death Eaters.

Harry would make sure that he would follow his parents’ footsteps and never get involved in politics. No matter what.

Weeks passed and life remained mostly unchanging. Harry still had to sit through the ‘tutoring sessions’ five days a week, much to his annoyance. His flashy, flamboyant teacher wasn't as annoying as he was in the beginning, though, and at times taught Harry a few quite useful spells.

Not that Harry got to actually use those spells outside the tutoring sessions.

"I have a question," Harry said one day, interrupting Gildy's chatter. Despite all his oddities and how damn annoying the man sometimes was, Harry had recently come to the shocking realization that he didn’t actually dislike Gildy.

“Ask away, my dear,” the older wizard said. “I am here to shed light on your ignorance, after all.”

"Thanks," Harry said flatly, "If Hogwarts is for British students only, and Durmstrang admits so few now, and Beauxbatons doesn’t accept much more than Hogwarts, and Flora Charm's School is for those with special needs... then what about the rest? Where do the rest go?"

"Schools elsewhere, in other continents," Gildy said, "Or homeschooled. It's very common in small
villages for the locals to gather all the children and make classes where the parents each teach a subject they're good at. It happens."

"I've never heard of that," Harry muttered.

"Well, I can't expect everyone to be as educated as me," Gildy said with a shrug, "I'm used to it, don't worry."

'And I'm used to you,' Harry thought when he noticed that he couldn't muster up the annoyance he used to feel for the man.

"And that's why I'm here," Gildy continued gently, "To save you from stupidity and ignorance that aren't your fault, dear child. We can't all be born geniuses like me."

Forget it. Now he could.

"Mum mentioned that you talked to her about a field trip of sorts?" Harry asked, changing the subject, "Is that true?"

"Yes, actually. I find your social awkwardness rather tragic. You need to be more outgoing. Like me."

"I don't think I could be like you."

"Oh, Harry," Gildy chuckled, "You need to have more confidence."

"No, really," Harry insisted dryly, "I couldn't. Where we'll be going? When's the trip anyway? It's not a fashion exhibition or anything, is it? Because if it is, I'm not going."

"Oh come on, Harry dear. Don't be such a bore."

"It is! What could seeing a bunch of clothes do for me?"

"A world of good," Gildy said with a tone that was a smidge away from judgmental, "You'll learn a lot about fabrics: which ones will protect you from fire, the price of dragonhide boots, which will make you unable to drown – or dive, for that matter. Not to mention that my good friend Peppita Peppino will show you her Edition Electra dressrobe line that I have been waiting for since last Christmas. Also, we might get you something that is not black."

"And my opinion—"

"I listen to what your soul yearns for, not what your mouth is saying. We're going tomorrow. Don't wear black, or I'll make you wear orange."

And that was why and how Harry Potter, ten years old and dressed in dark green robes, found himself in Rome the next day. His teacher, dressed in golden robes, fluttered around in a crowd that he seemed to know very well. Harry was dragged along and his cheeks had been pinched - for being cute - too many times for him to count, but certainly enough to make his cheeks ache.

"And this, Gildy-darling, has augurey feathers on it! Look!" a woman with her dark hair tied up in what looked like a very complicated hairdo involving gold and ribbons was saying in heavily accented English, "They repel ink and oil and generally don't stain. See, I designed this cape to have them on the shoulders and arms because this way - they repel water too, as you know - you'll be safe
from rain while wearing this! Fabulous, isn't it?"

"Peppita you are a genius," Lockhart said admiringly, "This is a masterpiece! Harry, come on, Harry! Look at this."

"This is your... son?" Peppita asked, looking at Harry, "A lovely child. Very pretty, well done."

"He's my student," Gildy hurried to correct, "I was hoping we'd find a souvenir here for him. Poor child, almost always wears black."

"But that is dreadful!" Peppita gasped. "No worries, none anymore! Peppita will take care of you, young man. How old is he, Gildy-darling?"

"Ten, and will be starting school soon."

"Oh, delightful! How about boots? Genuine leather! And not just any leather, no. Peppita doesn't design boots to be made of normal leather." The woman shook her head with a smug smile on her face, before continuing. "Clabbert skin! Smooth and hairless and green. Green suits you, young man. Suits you so well."

"I was actually hoping for something more... specific," Gilderoy said slyly, and Harry blinked with surprise at the change of his tone. He was clearly up to something. "Harry here may very well be going to Durmstrang."

"Ah," Peppita said, and it seemed that some kind of realization dawned. Harry wasn't sure what exactly was going on, but he just hoped that it wouldn't be too damaging for his pride. "Invisibility cloak? We found a few demiguises and managed to make two capes."

"No," Gilderoy said, shaking his head, "That is so, well, not ordinary, but achievable by others."

"Then how about a diricawl-feather coat?" Peppita asked, before turning to Harry, "The diricawls are remarkable for their method of escaping danger: a diricawl can vanish in a puff of feathers and reappear elsewhere. To a lesser degree, the coat allows you to do the same."

"That'd be like Apparating, which he's going to learn eventually anyway."

"How about erumpent-skin jacket? It repels most curses."

"Hm," Gildy pursed his lips and thought for a few long moments before shaking his head, "I'm sorry, doll, but I've got to say no. There're specific spells to cause harm when one's wearing erumpent skin and I don't want to subject Harry to that."

"Understandable," Peppita nodded, "Don't worry, dear, we'll come up with something eventually. You know, a few days ago a fraud tried to sell me what he called nundu fur. Nundu! Ha! Fifty wizards together cannot kill a nundu to get its fur!"

"Fabric scammers are shameless," Gildy agreed, "Listen, I've wanted to ask you all evening... that gown you're wearing, could it possibly be Pogrebin?"

"Good for camouflage," Peppita confirmed with a smile, "People notice me only when I want them to."

Harry stood, bored out of his mind, watching the exchange between the two. Admittedly, the properties of the different skins and scales used for clothes were interesting, but Harry knew that the most common fabrics were still the basic ones: cotton, silk, wool and the other 'normal' sort like that.
Besides, his mother was quite against animals being killed for things like clothes.

"For Harry, I'd want something subtle, even if it's not on this season's collection. As I told you, he's going to Durmstrang, and I want him to be protected without other people knowing." Suddenly, the designer drew in a sharp breath and grabbed Gilderoy's arm. Harry tensed, not sure of what had changed.

"I have just the thing for you," Peppita whispered, "But it's expensive and dangerous to smuggle around, Gilderoy Lockhart. I keep it in the backroom, in a safe that only I can access. If you want it, we can go immediately to get it, but the boy must wear it right away - that's the safest way he could carry it around. Peppita knows, Gilderoy, that if anyone knew he has it, they would love to kill him to get it."

"And what would that be?" the man asked, and Harry half-expected the woman to suggest yet again something outrageous.

"A manticore, what do you Englishmen call it, undershirt," Peppita replied in a voice that was even quieter than before, "Manticore skin repels almost all known charms and curses regardless of how thin it is. He'll wear the undershirt beneath whatever else he's wearing, and his torso will be protected. The material stretches quite a bit, so he can use it for a few years, depending on how much he grows."

"You, my lady," Gilderoy breathed, deeply impressed, "are a gem."

"I know," the woman said with a nod, "I am Peppita Peppino after all!"

"Hear that, Harry?" the man said with a wide smile, hand on Harry's shoulder. "Aren't you glad now that I am your teacher, no one else? Aren't you glad I brought you here? Peppita darling, additionally, I want to get him that jacket there," Gildy said, pointing at a shining silver jacket that seemed to be made of scales, "Genuine leather?"

"Moke skin," Peppita confirmed, "A good jacket, one of my best. Mokes have this ability to shrink and grow depending on what they want - that means that clothes made of moke readjust their size as the one who wears them grows."

"And it looks good," Gilderoy muttered, "Come on, Harry, let's go check it out."

'So this trip wasn't for nothing after all,' Harry thought, following the man to where the designer was leading them, 'Maybe he's a good g-

"Harry-dear," Gilderoy said, turning to the boy, "Now that you have something to shield you, you don't need to learn incantations, right?"

A few months passed, bringing change with them.

The situation with the Rebels – a worldwide group that opposed the Dark Lord Voldemort and wanted to put an end to his regime – was becoming worse, which led his parents working longer hours than before. Even Sirius, who was a high-ranking Death Eater, was busy with is duties.
This led to the unfortunate result of Harry spending even more time with the man he had to call ‘Gildy’.

"It's not long till the examination day," Gildy said one rainy Monday, "How are you feeling, Harry-darling?"

"I don't know," Harry grunted, not looking up from the book he was reading. Gildy looked at him for a few moments, before sighing and turning to readjust the hat he was wearing, vowing to never wear red again. It just wasn't his colour.

"If you get in, it'll bring a lot of prestige to your family. And to me, of course, since I'm your tutor. Not that I don't have enough prestige to my own name already. I am, after all, the hero Gilderoy Lockhart."

"If you're such a hero, why aren't you fighting the rebels?"

"To take care of you. I'm sacrificing all of my future Order of Merlins just to make sure that you're not lonely."

"Your absence won't be a source of sorrow."

"Ah, absence," Gildy sighed, "Thou art gone from my gaze like a beautiful dream. And I seek then in vain by the meadow and stream."

"What?" Harry asked, frowning. The blond man winked at him and offered a wide smile.

"George Linley. Girls dig it."

'I wonder what kind of woman would have a relationship with him,' Harry wondered, before shaking his head and returning to his book. Gildy frowned, feeling bored and in the mood for sharing his worldly wisdom about, well, anything and everything.

"You always read stories," the blond man said, "They're not even facts. Stories are, some people have claimed, completely void of benefit."

"Some stories are true that never happened," Harry replied, not looking up from his book. "Imagination and fiction make up more than three-quarters of our real life."

"You're... quoting people at me," Gildy said, surprised, "Then how about this? He who has imagination without learning has wings but no feet. Joseph Joubert. You know him?"

"No."

"Well, he was a squib. One of the most famous squibs, but still a squib."

"I see."

"Ah, you're getting snippy. Is it because my knowledge is making you feel inferior? Harry darling, don't worry - I have more than 20 years of experience more than you."

"Experience on what?" Harry asked.

"Life," Gildy replied, "Being a hero. A celebrity. It teaches me to live my life differently. Unlike you, I have enemies out there. You have none."

"For now," Harry corrected, "Dad says that every man with an opinion has an enemy. And mum
Harry had waited for July to come for what seemed like a lifetime. And now that the month had finally started, he didn't know what to do. The entrance examination of Durmstrang would be in three days and Harry was too nervous to even study.

'What if I fail to get in?' the boy thought, 'Well, of course there's always Hogwarts, but still.'

Deciding to go for a bit of a walk before going to sleep, he exited the room only to stop when he heard his mother's voice talking.

"Only ten students get accepted," Lily was saying nervously, "I wonder why the system was changed."

"Rumour has it that the Dark Lord wants to turn Durmstrang into a military school," Sirius replied, "Apparently, the Rebels are becoming dangerous and they want to start scouting for the army early on."

"The Rebels," James sighed, rubbing his eyes, "How I wish they'd give up already... Why are they even fighting? What are they fighting for?"

"Mudblood supremacy," Lily said sharply, and a part of Harry flinched, hating his mother for saying what she said with the knowledge that she herself was a 'Mudblood' in the eyes of many others.

"Lils..."

"What? That's what they—"

"You don't need to use that word," James said softly, "There's nothing wrong in not being a Pureblood. You know it better than most - there's no need to compensate for anything."

"I."

"I don't think that Harry will fail," Sirius hurried to cut in, "I mean, Karkaroff knows Harry's my godson. The thing is, are you sure you want Harry in Durmstrang, knowing that it could potentially be turned into a military school? What if all the times the Dark Lord has visited Durmstrang till now was for this purpose? Actually, Merlin, how could I have been so blind? That'd totally make sense!"

"Harry is going to be a Death Eater no matter which school he attends," Lily pointed out, "So yes, I'm sure that Durmstrang will be the best for him."
"Yeah," James echoed, less sure of himself, "It's just that everything is so unpredictable nowadays."

"Life is unpredictable," Sirius said with a shrug, "So don't even try."

"My biggest concern is about someone finding out about Harry's wand," Lily admitted, "What kind of test did Sirius say it was?"

"Well, he was told that it'd be some sort of magic compatibility test, but I'm not so sure since so much has been changed already," James replied, "What do you think, Sirius?"

"I don't know what to think," the man admitted, "I just feel like suddenly everything is confusing, and I don't know how much has changed and why. I don't even know if the rumoured plans for Durmstrang are really going to be true. Why would the Dark Lord need a special squad of Death Eaters? Why does he suddenly—Does he need a special squad? Surely the Rebels aren't that dangerous?"

"You think," Lily breathed, leaning forward, "That something concerning the Rebels is being hidden from us? Something big?"

"I don't know. I'm a Lieutenant General, there isn't much that I don't know. If the Rebels are a worse issue than we thought before, then I most certainly should be made aware of it."

"With students so few in number the risk of Harry standing out in ways we don't want will be greater."

"Not only that," Sirius said, "But if Harry gets in and is only average and shows no particular ambition— it's going to be noticed. And not in a good way."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there," James decided, "All we can do is to tell Harry to be careful and avoid drawing attention to himself if possible. He's rather good at that, though. People always seem to... forget him. Not notice him."

"That will change if people become aware of him for some reason or another," Lily pointed out, "All because of one wand!"

"It's not any wand," Sirius reminded her, "Although I admit to being curious as to why Harry got the brother wand of the Dark Lord. Could there be a connection?"

"Don't say that!" Lily exclaimed, thinking of the possibilities of what could happen if there truly was some kind of connection between the Dark Lord and her son, "Harry is normal. He is ordinary."

"We know," James assured her.

"For now," Sirius added.

Despite it being early July, the examination day was cold and windy.

"You're not coming down with anything, are you?" James asked with a concerned frown when he saw his son shivering.
"He's just nervous," Lily said, "Happens to me too, that. Feeling cold and shivering when nervous. Similar."

"Is the portkey ready?" Sirius asked from where he was readjusting his collar, "Because we ought to get going."

"Yes. Is everyone ready to go? Harry, this is it now. Do you have your wand with you?"

"Yeeees," Harry said, feeling sick already. So many things could go wrong, and the only things that gave him any comfort were his father's words of crossing bridges when they'd get there. It wasn't as if he had any other options. His hand was sweaty when he gripped the portkey, and by the time they arrived, he was feeling nauseated enough to almost throw up. Lily's cool hand on his forehead and a murmured spell made him feel slightly better, though. Good enough to go forward, at least.

The Durmstrang school building was exactly how Sirius had described it and it did not look inviting at all. Harry's godfather led them through the crowd; there were so many other families there, each escorting their child for the examination hall and saying the final 'good luck's."

"There has to be at least a thousand kids here," James whispered, reluctantly impressed.

"That's Durmstrang's attraction for you," Sirius said with a shrug, "Only ten will pass, though. One of which will be our Harry. Come on, kiddo! We'll get you to the examination hall soon enough. How are you feeling?"

"I'm alright," Harry replied hesitantly, just as they entered the building. The whole place seemed to be made of an odd combination of stone, wood and glass, and while, from the outside, the building had looked plain, on the inside, it was impressive and a bit ominous.

Sirius spoke to a dark-haired man whose smile was too wide to be entirely normal. Harry shivered, getting a bad feeling from this guy. Suddenly, Sirius turned and gestured for Harry to go to him. Lily gripped James's arm, and the two stayed back when their son went to his godfather.

"This is Harry Potter," Sirius said, "Harry, this is Igor Karkaroff, the Headmaster of Durmstrang."

"It's an honour to meet you, sir," Harry said nervously, and Karkaroff's eyes gleamed with something Harry couldn't quite identify.

"Likewise, young Potter. Eager to be a student here, are you?"

"Quite, sir."

"Disciplined and polite," Karkaroff muttered, "I like that. Come on. I will personally escort you to the examination hall. Sirius, you can wait here with the boy's parents." Feeling increasingly nervous, Harry didn't get the opportunity to even look at his godfather before he was pulled away, having to run to keep up with the long strides of the Headmaster.

'I wonder what kind of exam it's going to be,' Harry thought, 'I feel like I know nothing.'

"You're eleven, are you not?" Karkaroff asked suddenly.

"Ten," Harry replied, "I'll be turning eleven in a few weeks, though."

"The steps you need to take during the exam will be explained here," Karkaroff said just as they stepped into a spacious auditorium that already was almost full, "The number of applicants for admission this year exceeds one thousand, and we had to employ more than one auditorium to ensure
that everyone would have a place. Are you prepared?"

"I don't know," Harry answered honestly, and the wide grin of the Headmaster turned into a tight-lipped smile that, while it wasn't as cheerful, seemed to be far more honest.

"Good answer," he said, "Sirius, your godfather, is a very good friend of mine. He wants you to get in and he has assured me that you have the talent to become an outstanding wizard. I am yet to be convinced of that fact, but then again I do not know you. Succeed and prove him right."

"I'll try, sir," Harry replied warily.

"Now take a seat and wait for Professor Lyuben to start talking." After saying that, Karkaroff didn't stick around for any longer. Harry was left there alone and uncertain. There were countless other people trying to get into Durmstrang... how could Harry be one of the top ten? It seemed like an impossible feat!

'We won't be tested individually, so it has to be some sort of a mass-elimination process,' Harry thought, trying to calm down. Losing confidence now would be a grave mistake. 'Uncle Sirius said it's not a written exam, and the tables are empty, but...'

The loud sound of the hall's door closing startled Harry out of his thoughts. He looked around and saw hundreds of other boys and girls of his age sitting and waiting nervously. At the front stood a tall, old man with a thick grey beard and his equally grey hair tied into a short braid. A pair of glasses was balancing on his nose, and he stood with the easy confidence of a wizard who clearly knew where he belonged.

"I am Thomas Lyuben," he started, tired voice carrying over the huge auditorium easily. "I am the Deputy Headmaster of Durmstrang and also the Professor of History of Magic. You are here to try to get yourselves accepted into Durmstrang, and whether or not you succeed will be determined by the results of the entrance examination today."

'Here we go,' Harry thought, taking a deep breath.

"Since you are not in school yet, we assume that you know no spells. However, you all have your wands. Above your heads, you will see a quill and a piece of paper hovering - your first task is to use a spell to bring them to you. I will show you the spell and the wand-movement. If you succeed, you'll get the paper and answer the questions, after which you'll stand up. An assistant will then approach you and take you to your next stop."

'It has to be a summoning spell, the one he'll show us,' Harry thought, 'I wonder how many here know it already.' Harry knew the incantation and the wand movement - his both parents used the spell often enough - but he wasn't sure whether or not he'd be able to cast it correctly.

"The incantation is Accio," Professor Lyuben said, "Direct the wand on the thing that has to be summoned or name the object. You have one hour to complete this part of the examination. You may begin."

'Concentration is the key,' Harry told himself, looking up at the purple quill and the rolled paper waiting for him. He could hear a girl's voice behind him repeat the incantation a few times with frustration and he tried to block her voice out. His wand was warm in his grip and he could feel it in a way that made him think of the twin brother he never had. He trusted his wand more than he trusted himself.

Harry could hear the sound of papers shuffling and quills either dropping down or bumping into
something or even a few exploding. He could hear the hissed curses of those around and he could hear his own steady breathing when he finally lifted his wand and said the spell.

The rolled paper and the purple quill floated down and settled onto the table in front of him. Knowing that the first part of the test was only halfway done, Harry didn't let himself feel happy quite yet. Nervously, he undid the seal that kept the paper rolled and read the few questions there.

Where do you see yourself seven years from today?

What courses in Durmstrang's curriculum interest you the most?

How aware of the current politics are you?

Do you choose obeying orders over doing what you think is right?

‘It's like a survey,' Harry realized, writing down vague answers that he'd most probably forget by the time they actually became relevant, 'I wonder what for. It's not like these questions will really determine whether or not we're good enough to become students here, right? I wonder how many passed this part of the test.'

Finishing quickly, Harry stood then up, looking around him. There were only three boys and one girl standing up aside from him, and in a few minutes they were approached by whom Harry could guess to be the assistants. He, too, felt a hand on his shoulder and allowed himself to be led out of the hall.

"Well done," the person leading him said, and stopped to turn Harry around. The young man was a tall, blue-eyed brunet with a freckled face dressed in black robes. "I'm Felix. A prefect here, starting my seventh year after the holiday. Well done indeed back there... the summoning spell might sound easy but it's rather tricky. Um, are you nervous?"

"What was that survey about?" Harry asked him instead of answering, "I mean, it seemed pretty pointless."

"Character evaluation," Felix replied, starting to walk again, "They'll be relevant only in the final selection."

"What's the next step? How many prefects are here? How many students?"

"A lot has changed between last year and the next. The number of students was cut down insanely, although you probably already know that."

"Where are you taking me?" Harry asked.

"Not many kids go past the first step, but there're still too many. The next part will eliminate even more, and only the top ten will remain— why am I tell you this? It's like, I don't know, talking to myself." Felix said with a frown and shook his head before finally stopping in front of a doorway, "We're here. In you go." Harry nodded, swallowing nervously. He took a deep breath and opened the door.

And then everything went black.
The first thing Harry became aware of was the damp coldness surrounding him. And then, the hard wood he was laying on. The sound of bypassing trains was oddly comforting, but still strange. Harry finally opened his eyes and sat up, taking in the sight of the almost empty train station he was in right now.

'It's cold,' Harry thought, rubbing his arms, 'Where am I?' It felt like he was in a dream... there seemed to be a light fog over the place, and how had he ended up at a train station alone at night anyway?

"And... why are you here?" a voice asked, and, startled, Harry turned to see an old man standing next to the bench he was sitting on. The man was tall and thin, with long silver hair and a long beard. Brilliant blue eyes twinkled in a way that Harry had never believed to be quite possible.

"Who are you?" Harry asked warily.

"A dead man," the old man replied calmly, "Just one of many. It's rare that I see any of you young ones here, though."

"You can't be dead," Harry said, "I'm not! I'm— Oh God! The exam! I was at Durmstrang doing the entrance exam! What am I doing here? Why am I here! Is this... Where am I?"

"This station is on no map," the old man said and sat down, "Entrance exam, you say."

"Yes," Harry confirmed, standing up and looking around him with increasing panic, "I should be doing the second part now, not be here! My mum and dad..."

"Maybe you are," the man noted kindly. He said something else, too, but the sound of a bypassing train drowned the words with its noise. Harry looked around again, forcing himself to stay calm. If he failed to get into Durmstrang, then he'd just go to Hogwarts. No panic. Really, no reason to panic.

"Where do these trains go?" he asked suddenly, "Can one take me home?"

"These trains?" the old man chuckled, "No. They go... nowhere."

"That's silly," Harry said, "It can't be. If they leave here, they go somewhere else. Not nowhere!"

"Perhaps I phrased it wrongly. They go to Nowhere. At least some of them. Some others go elsewhere."

"I don't understand."

"Not many do. That is fine."

"Who are you?" Harry demanded to know, "How do I get back to where I was?" The old man smiled at him wistfully and sighed.

"Young ones. Always so impatient."

"Where do I go from here?" Harry asked, "Help me, please."

"But you don't need any help," the man said, clearly surprised, "You came here on your own, and you can leave on your own."

"But how?"

"How did you come here?"
"I don't know!"

"My boy, calm down first," the old man said soothingly, "Your magic led you here, and it will lead you back if you allow it to."

"But the exam..."

"This could be a part of it. Durmstrang was known for its trickery back when I was alive too."

"You went there?" Harry asked, curiously. The old man shook his head.

"No, no. I was a Hogwarts student back in the day. But a... former close friend of mine attended Durmstrang."

"Who?"

"I doubt that you'd know him," the old man said, blue eyes dimming slightly, "It has been so long."

"You said that this could be a part of the exam. How?" Harry asked.

"Who knows," the man replied, and Harry could see him talking, but suddenly he couldn't hear. It was as if he had gone deaf or something. A strange pull was twisting his insides, and it felt like he was using a portkey and—

Harry woke up gasping for breath. He sat up, feeling sick.

"Number three!" a female voice called, "We have number three here! Woke up third."

"Congratulations, Mr. Potter," a man was saying, and Harry could hardly understand him, "You have passed the second test."

"What?" Harry asked faintly, frowning and trying to ease the throbbing in his head, "What's going on?"

"When you entered the room, you were stunned," the man explained, "All of the students were stunned when they arrived 'til all of you who passed the first test were finally here. Then we lifted the stunners and cast a sleeping spell. The ten who could work out the way to wake up first would pass this exam."

"Sleeping spell?" Harry asked, "I was asleep?" So did that mean that the train station was a dream? But it had felt so... real.

"Yes," the man said, pulling Harry to stand up, "You were the third one to wake up. Congratulations. Now, we go find your parents, do a bit of paperwork, and the next time you come here will be in September."

"Thank you," Harry said dazedly, following the man out.

He had succeeded. He had really succeeded.
This was it. He was really going to Durmstrang.

"Alright, I checked your trunk - you have all your books," Lily said, hurrying past him carrying a pile of clothes, "Do you have enough underwear?"

"I have everything I need," Harry replied, "All the books, all the equipment, all the clothes. The studio flat comes furnished."

"I don't really like the idea of you living there alone," Lily sighed, "You're just a baby. Maybe I should send a house-elf with you."

"Mum!" Harry shrieked, flushing with embarrassment, "Mum, it's a dorm room of sorts. I won't be alone. And I am not a baby!"

"You better make some friends, buddy," Sirius said, walking past the two, "Did James give you his cloak? The invisibility cloak?"

"He's not giving it to Harry," Lily declared, "Merlin knows what kind of trouble the boy would get into if he could turn invisible whenever he wants."

"As much as I hate to say this - and I hate it plenty - I don't think Harry should pull any pranks there," James said, walking into the room. At the sight of Sirius’s horrified expression, he rolled his eyes. "At least not yet. We don't know what kind of punishments they dish out. If it's a military school, I doubt that they'll stick to detentions and trophy-polishing the way Hogwarts did."

"I don't think that they'll start right away with the hard bits," Sirius said, "I mean, rumoured military school or not, they're still just kids and the Dark Lord cannot be that desperate!"

"Speaking of desperate," Lily sighed and glared at Harry, "Did you really think that I wouldn't see you smuggling a broom to school? They've specifically said that first years have to pass the flying course before they can bring their own brooms."

“Oh, did they really,” Harry said evasively, before hiding his face behind a book.

"Did you see their curriculum books?" Sirius asked, and James nodded with wide eyes.

"When will you even have the time to read all that junk?"

"Junk!" Lily gasped, outraged, "Did you just refer to a valuable source of knowledge as junk!"

"Oops," James offered unapologetically, making his wife glare. "It's just, are they going to just study there?"

"Since when did people go to school to study?" Sirius wanted to know, "I never did! It doesn't make sense to me! Harry will drown in a sea of science and he'll become a bookworm!"

"He already is," Lily stated flatly, and the three adults turned to look at the young boy who was too focused on the book he was reading to pay attention to them. Lily smirked at the two men who had pained expressions on their faces. "See? Bookworm and the pride of his mum!"

"I tried my best," James sniffled, and Sirius laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.
"There, there. I'm sure he'll be cured one day."

"Grow up," Lily said with a smile, "And I think that you had a gift for Harry, didn't you? Harry! I know the book is interesting, but it's time to stop reading now."

"Why?" Harry asked, sighing and looking up at his mother, "I already did everything you told me to do."

"Remember when we went to get your wand," James started while gesturing for Sirius to get the gift Lily had mentioned, "And we promised you something if you'd get into Durmstrang?"

"You promised me an owl," Harry said, "I've yet to get it."

"You're getting it now," Sirius said, walking back into the room, carrying a large cage that held a beautiful snowy owl, fast asleep with her head under her wing. Harry couldn't stop staring at it, feeling like he had just gotten the most beautiful owl in the world. "Snowy Owl. The owner called her Hedwig. Said she's a bit snobby for an owl, probably believes herself to be as much of a queen as her namesake."

"Hedwig," Harry muttered, "Wicked cool."

"I picked her," Sirius said proudly, "The owner said that she was reserved already for someone else, but I made him see the error of his ways."

"That's your godfather, increasing his criminal record for your sake," Lily remarked, making Harry laugh, "I'm going to pack some snacks with you tomorrow morning."

"Like what?" Harry asked just as his mother left the room.

"James, we can't let her do that," Sirius whispered, "She'll pack some salad, maybe some fruits and a cereal bar if we don't interfere!"

"That actually sounds good," James replied, "I want a cereal bar."

"God, she corrupted you! Tomorrow, you'll tell me that you've given up on pasta and cake!"

"Harry," Lily called, making a reappearance at the doorway, "Have you already picked out what you will wear tomorrow?"

"Um... the school uniform?" And the manticore shirt, but Harry wasn't going to tell his parents about that; he had a feeling that they'd either get angry or insist on paying it back to Gildy. Or worse - make Harry give the shirt away. Harry liked the shirt. It was very smooth and cool against his skin and felt really comfortable.

"Gilderoy sent you a set of lovely robes," Lily said, "I thought you'd be..."

"No," Harry, Sirius and James said simultaneously.

"How do I go to Durmstrang this time?"

"A portkey will take you - and only you - to a meeting place at school," James explained, "while your trunk will be sent separately and it'll wait for you in the flat they've decided to give you. I'm not sure of what else you'll be doing, though. You're not nervous, though, are you?"

"No," Harry lied, "I'm not nervous at all."
The following day, Harry was awake and drinking apple juice in the kitchen at half past six, even though the portkey that'd take him to Durmstrang wouldn’t activate until nine. He just... couldn't sleep. A part of him was happy that finally he was going, but another part of him was afraid of the change. He could handle being friendless... but what if the teachers would hate his guts too?

'I wonder if I can change schools if I don't like it there,' Harry though, before another realization dawned on him: 'If it's the Dark Lord's military school, then does that mean that I’ll get to see the Dark Lord? Will he be there?' Then again, even if he was... it wasn't as if he'd notice Harry. Nobody did, except for his parents and godfather, and oddly enough Gildy.

He had gotten a sparkly letter of congratulations from the eccentric man who claimed that his sixth sense had told him that Harry would succeed. Harry wouldn't be surprised if Gildy would one day claim to be a seer of some kind and demand to be declared a saint patron of something or other.

"You're awake," Lily said, appearing at the doorway before moving to sit in front of him. The expression on her tired face was gentle and proud, and it made Harry feel a little bit better. "How are you feeling?"

"Anxious," he confessed, smiling weakly, "What if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing will," Lily assured him, "Harry, just be yourself. Exceed expectations or not, don't pretend to be someone you're not. I talked with James about this, and we decided that the best way to keep you from seeming suspicious, is to have you simply act normal. You have nothing to hide."

"But what about-"

"Even if, some day, someone was to find out about your wand, it's not exactly your fault, now is it? Just don't flaunt it. Even if you're the best, never make a fuss over that. You're good at not being noticed, baby. I want you to use that to your advantage."

"I'll try," Harry promised quietly, "Anything else?"

"Just be careful who you associate with, there," Lily said, "Friends may come and go, but enemies accumulate. You don't want to end up being hated by people who could destroy you. And... even if something goes wrong, don't let that bring you down. Things go wrong all the time, and the best thing you can do is deal with it swiftly and logically."

"All right," Harry promised easily. "I'll write to you as often as I can."

"Focus on your studies there. Most of the day, you'll be spending in classrooms, and the free time you have is better spent revising."

"Oh, come on."

"Harry," Lily said quietly, seriously, "Your father didn't want me to tell you this, but to make you understand how important it is for you to acquire as much knowledge as possible, I think you're better off knowing."

"Knowing what?" Harry asked, feeling worried.

"We suspect that the Rebels might be becoming a greater threat than anticipated," Lily explained, her voice calm and steady. "The more you learn, the better your chances of survival are, even if you were to meet a Rebel at some point."
"Do you think that I will meet one?" Harry asked curiously. The whole idea of him meeting a Rebel seemed to be a paranoid nightmare of his mum's. Like a distant, dangerous possibility.

"I'd rather have you be ready than sorry," Lily replied, "For all I know, you could spend your whole lifetime not meeting a single Rebel. That's unlikely, but could happen."

"What do they do? The Rebels, I mean."

"They blame the Dark Lord and accuse him of terrible things. Harry... The Dark Lord is not a kind man. On the contrary, he's cruel and some say he's downright evil. But he has done a world of good to our society. Never forget that."

"I won't," Harry said, before finishing his drink and slipping off the chair, "How will you send my trunk to school?"

"The school sent a specific portkey for the luggage," Lily revealed, "So we'll be able to send it very easily, don't worry."

"I'm not worried."

"Uh-huh."

"I'll be going to shower and brush my teeth again," Harry said, "Are you sure I can't take my broom with me?"

"I am certain, dear."

"Alright then," Harry sighed with resignation.

* * *

"Are you ready, Harry?" James asked, "Five minutes 'til the portkey activates. We already sent your trunk."

"I'm ready," Harry said, heart beating rapidly. He was dressed in his Durmstrang uniform: brown trousers, a white shirt, a brown tie, and a brown jacket. The shoes, too, were brown. Harry didn't mind the colour. Actually, he liked it quite a bit.

"Take care of yourself," Lily said, beautiful face full of concern, "If anything bad happens, just come back home."

"If anyone gives you a tough time, just tell me," Sirius piped in. He had arrived half an hour ago to spend few more minutes with his godson before Harry left for Durmstrang. "I'll kick their sorry asses—"

"Sirius Black!"

"What? I'd do it!"

"It's activating!" Harry exclaimed suddenly, his voice high with nervousness. He cast a wide-eyed look at his parents and godfather before the portkey whisked him away, before he could even yell out one last goodbye.

Generally speaking, Harry hated portkeys. They always left him with that dizzy, nauseated feeling, and this time was no different. He could hardly feel the grass beneath his feet for the first few moments it took him to compose himself.
"Harry Potter?" a voice said, and Harry looked up to see the Deputy Headmaster who had introduced himself during the first exam. "I am Professor Lyuben. Welcome to Durmstrang."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Harry said, scrambling up. He saw five other students already there – three boys and two girls – and wondered whether or not his future friends were amongst those five. The boys were wearing the exact same uniform as he, while the girls wore a brown knee-length dress with a brown jacket that had the Durmstrang insignia on it.

"We'll wait for the other students to arrive before proceeding to a location more suitable for the orientation session," Professor Lyuben said. "There you will be given your schedules, assigned housing quarters and introduced to the rules of this institute. For now, however, do wait with the others."

Silently, Harry obeyed, moving hesitantly closer to where the five were standing. Nobody spoke, and with some relief Harry realized that perhaps everyone else was just as nervous as he was.

It didn't take long for the other four students to arrive, after which the group of ten was led to what looked like a meeting room furnished with a long table made of dark wood and black leather chairs surrounding it.

"Take a seat, everyone," Professor Lyuben commanded, heading towards the door after making sure that everyone was present. "Your homeroom teacher, Professor Dietmar, will arrive shortly to begin the orientation. Wait patiently." The old man then shut the door, leaving then children to sit alone.

'This feels awkward,' Harry thought, 'I'm surrounded by strangers.'

"Only the ten of us passed?" a brown-haired boy with round face and even more freckles than Ron Weasley asked, "There were over a thousand other students who tried!"

"Yes, well, the point of the entrance exam was to weed out the trash," another boy, a blond one with bright grey eyes retorted bluntly, "Out of all other participants, we're - arguably - the best."

"You don't think we are," a girl spoke up, and something in the way she spoke made Harry think of Peppita Peppino, "At least, you don't think that all of us deserve to be here."

"Luckily, it wasn't for either one of you two to choose, eh?" the boy who had first spoken up said with a sneer, "Who are you, anyway?"

"Clemens Marvin," the blond boy said coolly, "And you?"

"Nikolai. Nikolai Rolan."

'I wonder if they are going to be friends now,' Harry thought. He then heard the door of the room opening and a man in his mid-forties, dressed in a fur-trimmed teal set of robes, entered. Was that perhaps Professor Dietmar whom the Deputy Headmaster had mentioned?

"Alright, new kids," the man said, before straightening up and smiling at them. The smile didn’t look even accidentally sincere, 'I'm your homeroom teacher, Artur Dietmar. Call me Professor Dietmar since I'm also your Herbology professor. This room is our very own meeting room, and we'll meet here once every week unless stated otherwise. Once I give you your schedules, you'll see when."

'He doesn't seem to be scary,' Harry thought, relieved.

"I was thinking of making you introduce yourselves but we're short on time so you can do that later on your own. Firstly, I'll explain a bit about Durmstrang, the school system and the changes that have
taken place here this summer. I'll also tell you the rules and give you your schedules and finally show you your dorm rooms. Well, flats.” Professor Dietmar smiled again at the ten children before continuing.

"Out of nearly a thousand hopeful applicants, only you ten got in," the man said, "It has nothing to do with how good you are, the amount of spells you know, or how strong you are physically. What we seek here in Durmstrang is potential... and you have it. The first test showed us that you can learn a spell quickly and the second spell showed us how quickly your magic reacts independently, a trait that says a lot about its quality. You ten... are special.

During the past summer - and party last year too - huge changes have been made not only concerning the curriculum and the number of students allowed in, but also regarding our expectations of you. Do you have any questions at this point?"

"Is it true that even the upperclassmen went through a test?" a girl asked. Professor Dietmar nodded.

"Yes. Only ten students of each year remain."

"But why?" the girl who reminded Harry of Peppita Peppin asked, "Why such drastic reduction?"

"To better concentrate on the students that we have."

"I heard that we'll be trained to be the best of Death Eaters," a boy sitting to Harry’s left suddenly said, "Is that true?"

"In time you'll know," was all Professor Dietmar said, "There are few rules in Durmstrang, and breaking them will lead to detention on first offence, suspension on second and expulsion on third. Yes, we're strict. The rules exist for good reasons and are all written in a handbook. A copy of that book is in each apartment, make sure to read it carefully. The most important rules to follow are: no skipping lessons, no fights in the hallways, no destroying school property, and no talking back to teachers. You are to never be late and never to be ill mannered. We expect your academic success to be remarkable."

'Blimey! They have more rules than mum and are stricter, too,' Harry thought with amazement, 'I guess dad was right. I'm sorry, Uncle Sirius. Your legacy just died.'

"Here are your schedules," Professor Dietmar continued, and Harry's eyes widened when he got his own, "As you can see, most of the time will be spent in classrooms. Sundays are free. As you can see, every day starts at eight. Lunch is at one o'clock."

"Sports," a boy read aloud, "We have sports on Monday. Does that mean Quidditch?"

"Flying, swimming, horse riding, and fencing among other things. Three hours a week."

"How do we find the right classrooms?" someone else asked.

"For that, I'll give you these," Professor Dietmar said, setting ten rings on the table, "Take your own. These rings have a navigation charm on them. All you need to do is to tell them where you need to go, and you'll be led there."

"Even outside the school building?"

"As long as it is on Durmstrang grounds, the charm can lead you.” Harry reached for a ring and stared at it for a short while; it was a simple golden brand with the Durmstrang insignia and motto engraved into it - before deciding to wear it on his right hand's middle finger.
"Oderint, dum metuant," Professor Dietmar said, "Let them hate, so long as they fear. That is the motto of Durmstrang. You all will grow up to be individuals with power and influence. People will envy you and hate you. And most importantly... they will fear you."

"Doesn't that sound ominous," the boy sitting next to Harry said, "Sounds a bit like brainwashing.

"We give you the means," Professor Dietmar said with a gleam in his eyes, "To reach an end that is beyond the reach of others. Now, I think we're done here. Let's proceed to the apartment complex reserved for you ten. Follow me, please."

'I don't think that coming to Durmstrang was such a good idea after all,' Harry thought nervously, following the others out. 'I want to talk with mum about this... I wonder how Ron is doing at Hogwarts. I bet he's in Gryffindor.' Although, Harry did admit that Durmstrang could offer more to him than Hogwarts. Not only with better living arrangements and a more advanced curriculum, but after graduation - anyone would prefer a student of Durmstrang over anyone else.

Then again, if they were really meant to become powerful Death Eaters... wouldn't that mean a life full of politics? Joining the army early on and climbing up the ranks as well as they could? The mere thought of that made Harry cringe.

"We used to have girls' dormitory separate," Professor Dietmar explained, stopping in front of a tall white building, "But then we decided to separate students by year only, since you all will have your own flats anyway. It's easier this way. There are ten apartments in this building - one for each student. It's the place where you will live until you graduate, so take care of it. If your parents give you the permission, you can live in your flat even through the summer."

"Are they connected to the Floo Network?" a blond boy asked.

"You have a fireplace for Firecalling, but the Floo Network has been locked," Professor Dietmar said, "Now, when I call your name, you come forward. I'll hand you a key with the number of your apartment, and you go settle down, refresh, do whatever you need to do. Today, at six in the evening, you are to wear your uniforms again and make your way towards the Main Hall where the Headmaster will officially welcome you. Any questions?"

No one spoke.

"Well then, let's begin with Petronella Albin." The girl with hair as red Harry's mum's stepped forward, and as soon as she got her key, slipped into the apartment complex.

"Jakob Eckart." A boy with light brown hair moved to get his key, and Harry couldn't help but think that there was something sneaky about him. Maybe it was the smug expression?

"Heidi Jöran." The girl behind Harry walked past him, and the boy wondered absently whether or not his turn would ever come. What if this all was a mistake, and after reading the list and not finding his name there, he'd be sent home? While he did think that Durmstrang was scary and he maybe wanted to go home, he hadn't been completely serious about it!

"Truls Kettil." The boy who had asked about sports lessons, the one with curly golden brown hair and bright blue eyes pushed past the two people standing in front of him and accepted his key.

"Björn Lennart, Clemens Marvin, Filippa Peppino, Harry Potter." Finally hearing his own name, Harry moved forward hoping that he wouldn't trip or stumble. Professor Dietmar smiled briefly at him before calling for the next of the remaining two boys.
Harry stepped into apartment number three, unsure of what to expect. What he found was a pleasantly decorated flat with a small living room to his left and a kitchenette behind it. The door to his right led to a surprisingly spacious bathroom, with a bedroom right next to it.

Overall, it was better than he had expected.

The flat's wooden floor and colours of beige and brown made the whole place seem homely. His trunk was in the bedroom, and though Harry knew that he should start unpacking, he decided to Firecall home first. He had never been particularly fond of this way of contacting people, but he didn't exactly have any other options.

"Harry?" Lily's face appeared in the flames. "How are you, love? Did you settle down yet?"

"I just got into the apartment," Harry said, "Just needed to see you."

"Is it nice? Do you need anything? I was actually just packing a few snacks for you, I was planning on sending them to you soon. Are you hungry? The owl will be there in three or two hours if I send it now."

"Not really. I'm just nervous."

"I'm sending it anyway. Tell me if you need anything else, love."

"Sure. Is dad there?" Harry asked curiously, and his mother shook her head.

"No, an urgent message arrived. He and Sirius left for a mission. Apparently- oh well, no use talking about this. Did you make any friends yet?"

"No. They all are... I don't know."

"As soon as you settle down with a routine, everything will seem better," Lily assured him, "It's Thursday tomorrow. Two days of school and then you have the weekend-"

"We have school on Saturdays. Only the Sundays are free," Harry told her, "We have time today to settle down and wander around, I guess. Tomorrow, it's slaving away."

"Make me proud, baby!"

"Not a baby," Harry said, "I'll try."

* * *

Dear Harry,

I heard from your darling mother that you're now in Durmstrang. I also heard that your uniform is brown. I'm so sorry to hear that, I really am. If you wish, I can talk to the headmaster and send you a set of golden robes. I'm sure that they will allow you that. No one says no to me! I'm Gilderoy Lockhart!

On better news: I heard that Peppita's niece is also in Durmstrang! Bad news is that she is apparently a very strict young woman who wears only one colour at a time. Dreadful, isn't it? Either way, it'd be good to make friends with her. Connections, you see, rule politics. Connections are what bring influence to individuals - no one is influential without connections.

To ease your concerns about me, I have been alright. Fabulous, actually. I got a new haircut and am thinking of launching my own fragrance line, Lock of Hearts. I must admit that the name alone
makes my heart speed up - I cannot wait to see fans from all over the world buying it!

How are you, Harry? Tell me everything about your life there. Your studies, your friends, your Dueling Instructor... I do not have a crush on him, I'll have you know! It's ridiculous, Harry-dear, don't even suggest it. If I was to have a crush - no, actually, I don't do crushes! Crushes are for teenagers. And even if - and I said IF - I happened to have a crush on him - or anyone at all - I could easily ask them out. So there.

Anyway, just take care of yourself, try to get out of this silly obligation to wear brown (although I heard that during winters there's some fur involved in this uniform somehow. I approve.) and brush your teeth three times a day - a sparkling smile revealing sparkly teeth can save your life one day.

Hugs and kisses,
your mentor Gildy

Written on a light blue scented paper with dark purple ink, the letter that had been carried by a weird sparkly owl-swan hybrid was impressive in a way that it shouldn't have been. Luckily, the flashy creature had left as soon as it had finished its business and hadn't waited for a response, and Harry could only hope that no one had seen it.

The boy stared at the letter after he had finished reading it for a few long moments, before shaking his head and putting it down on the living room's table. He could ignore this. He really could. Except that maybe he should quickly tell Gildy to forget about the golden robes.

Who wore golden robes anyway!

Aside from Gildy himself, of course.

Harry yawned, and resisted the urge to go to sleep. Although the huge bed looked very inviting, Harry didn’t wish to risk sleeping past their intended meeting time in a few hours and make a bad impression on everyone in the Main Hall.

'Luckily, Thursday seems to be the shortest school day,' Harry thought, inspecting the schedule, 'Charms double period, Herbology double period and one hour of History of Magic. Doesn't sound too bad. Who the heck is this Duelling Instructor anyway? I don't have duelling in my schedule and I think Sirius once said that it comes later.'

Harry moved to finally unpack his trunk, and was almost done when he heard a tap from the window. He turned to see the familiar Eagle Owl of his mother's, hovering outside, carrying what looked like a small basket. Eagerly Harry pushed the window open and took the basket of food that his mother had said she'd send him, not minding the bird that hit his head with its wing before flying away.

He began eating as soon as he had finished feeding Hedwig, and read through his schedule yet again.

Tomorrow, if he woke up at half past six, he'd have plenty of time to shower and eat and then find his way to the classroom. The first period would start at eight o'clock. Charms. The Way of Charms I by Leo Lippidi was a rather thick and heavy book, and Harry didn't much look forward to having to read it all.

But before that, the welcoming feast. At six.

He couldn't wait.
The Main Hall was huge. There were seven round tables reserved for students, and it was clear that classmates were to sit together, no exceptions allowed. Harry ended up sitting between two girls, both of whom were silent as they sat there, waiting for the Headmaster to make a speech.

"I believe that no one is ignorant of the changes that took place recently," Karkaroff started, "Right now, Durmstrang has only seventy students. Out of the countless young wizards and witches who wanted in, you were the ones to succeed. Congratulations."

'Why do I get the feeling that he's going to give us a speech similar to the one we got from Professor Dietmar?' Harry thought, 'I wonder if this really is a military school.'

"Your days here will not be easy," Karkaroff continued, "You will receive the best education that can be produced. You will receive training and knowledge. And when the time comes, you will graduate and serve the Dark Lord as you should."

'Yep. Sounds like it.'

"There are a few notes I wish to make known before I allow for the dinner to start."

'Oh dear.'

"Firstly, while every apartment has its own kitchen, you are strongly encouraged to dine here in the Main Hall. All the announcements that will be made, will be made here at dinnertime. Secondly, seventh year students are to start preparing their apprenticeship papers as soon as possible - they are to be ready by the end of October. Thirdly... no pets are allowed into the school building. If you have any pets, you either keep them in your apartment or outside somewhere."

'Alright, wasn't too bad. Then again, even if the Dark Lord was to turn this into a military school, I doubt that they'd announce it.'

"We live to serve the Dark Lord."

'Oh come on. Really?'

"And to fight the Rebels. Never forget that."

'Seriously."

"Once again, welcome to Durmstrang, and may you make us all proud. You may now begin the feast." The man had barely finished the sentence when the tables were suddenly filled with all kinds of food. Harry, still thinking of the possible meanings of what the Headmaster had said, stared at his empty plate till he felt someone elbowing him.

"You need to eat," the girl next to him said. Harry offered her a nervous smile, unsure of what to say. Luckily, she didn't seem to expect him to talk, considering that she turned away to focus on her own meal.

"You're mothering him already?" a boy sneered, and the girl narrowed her eyes at him.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"Well, no—"

"Let's keep it that way." Harry blinked, his mouth slightly ajar. Did all people here talk like that?
So... sharp? Mean? Sneering? And there was something strongly familiar about this girl.

"Peppino," Harry exclaimed, and the girl turned abruptly to stare at him.

"What?" she snapped.

"I mean, er... are you related to Peppita Peppino?" Harry asked, flushing slightly. "I, um, met her and was told that her niece—"

"The designer Peppino?" one of the other girls gasped, eyes wide.

"Attends Durmstrang?" the girl Harry had spoken to scowled, "Yes, that's me."

―wears one colour at a time," Harry finished hesitantly, and the girl blinked at him with surprise, her eyebrows rising high.

"So you really have met her. She always keeps complaining about that, even if it's not entirely true."

"My tutor is a friend of hers."

"Your tutor?"

"Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Oh Merlin, is he really?" the girl sitting on Harry's other side exclaimed, making him turn to her, "I'm Heidi Jöran, by the way, and I'm a fan on Mr. Lockhart! Oh, he's so mysterious and handsome!"

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry said, "Please call me Harry. And Gildy isn't exactly someone I'd describe mysterious and handsome." Flamboyant, loud, stupid, strange, alien... all that was far more accurate than 'mysterious and handsome'.

"I'm Filippa," Peppita Peppino's niece said, brushing her dark fringe to the side, pitch black eyes glaring at Harry, "How would you describe Mr. Lockhart? I have read all his books and have to say that he is indeed impressive."

"For the sake of your life, don't answer her question," said the boy with short brown hair, sharp brown eyes and freckles. "I have two sisters and I know how girls are regarding Lockhart. You say anything bad about him and they're ready to hex you to death."

"But why?" Harry asked with a frown "He's my tutor and most of what he does consists of telling me what to wear and what the newest fashion is."

"Dreamy," Heidi sighed, and Harry stared at her with disbelief, finding no traces of sarcasm no matter how hard he tried to find some. He cast a panicked wide-eyed look at the boy who had spoken.

"I'm Nikolai Rolan," the boy said, and even though he smiled politely, he did not manage to come across as friendly. Harry remembered him from earlier.

"What do you and Mr. Gilderoy talk about?" Heidi asked, "Does he tell you about his heroics?"

"Sometimes. Say, who's the Duelling Instructor here?"

"Two seats to the left from where the Headmaster is sitting," a boy with messy, slightly curly golden brown hair said, "Bartemius Crouch Junior. We don't start his lessons till third year, though. That's
what my dad told me."

"You're Kettil, aren't you?" Heidi asked, "I think I've seen you before. Tor Kettil?"

"Truls," the boy corrected, "My name is Truls Kettil."

"Close enough," Heidi said, waving her hand dismissively, "Tomorrow's the first lesson. How about we form a study group? There're just ten of us and—"

'I wonder if I could call them friends, now,' Harry thought. He felt anxious and worried, even though everything so far had gone perfectly.

There was just... something wrong. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he couldn’t quite relax yet.

* *

"If the Dark Lord doesn't change his approach, a war is inevitable," Sirius muttered, dodging a spell shot at him by a Rebel. "The fact that I've been sent out with a team of Aurors is strange, too. Why not just a team or two? Hell, even an entire platoon. I'm a Lieutenant General, for Merlin’s sake."

"What do you call this, then?" James asked, sending a blood-boiling curse at a woman nearby and choosing to ignore the rest of what Sirius had said. "Not a war quite yet?"

"This is just a battle. I meant a full war. Two sides, casualties, armies..."

"From where would the Rebels get an army?"

"Alliances from aboard," Sirius said, "I know for a fact that the French aren't too fond of the Dark Lord. Their minister detests him."

"Any wars that happen, we will win," James said, "Have no doubt of that."

"But at what cost will it be? Wars with so many strong, resourceful and cunning people fighting each other... it could be years till we win."

"What brought this on?"

"You know I'm part of the Inner Circle—"

"Hello, Captain Obvious."

"Shut up, wanker. What I'm getting at is that people, well, talk."

"Uh, let me get this straight, Siri..."

"Listen," Sirius sighed, grabbing James's arm and hauling him behind a tree for a moment of safety to explain what was on his mind, "if this war lasts for longer than seven years, chances are that Harry will end up fighting."

"Fuck," James hissed, finally realizing the problem, "But hey, there's no war yet, but even if there will be—"

"There will be."

"How can you be so sure?"
"I told you, people talk," Sirius said. "Bellatrix especially is fond of sharing her conclusions, and as much as I hate it— she's usually right."

"And she says that there's a war coming?" James asked.

"She says that the Rebels are growing in numbers. And that they're forming an army. Do you remember the short war that took place when the Dark Lord came to power? Remember the times of terror when black letters were a daily occurrence?"

"There's nothing we can do about it, though, is there? If war starts, we'll be just pawns, you know."

"I know," Sirius sighed tiredly, "I'm just... worried about Harry, you know. If the rumours about Durmstrang are true, that means that eventually he'll be where I am now."

"What?" James asked, completely caught off guard. "You... he what? What the hell are you talking about!"

"I did tell you that there're rumours about Durmstrang being turned into a military school?" Sirius started, just when a cutting curse hit a branch nearby. The man frowned and shot a killing curse back. "It's true."

"True! You mean... Oh Merlin."

"Rumour has it that the Dark Lord occasionally disguises himself and goes to test the older students personally. That's something he used to do, and I doubt that he'd change that just because the system changed at Durmstrang."

"Older students? How old?"

"Sixth and seventh years. Harry's safe, of course. He's too young to be noticed yet. Besides, he's always been a bit of a hard to notice, yeah?"

"I'm not too sure about that," James said hesitantly, "There will be only ten students in each year. It's impossible to vanish into the crowd if there is no crowd."

"Especially if Lockhart really starts forcing Harry to wear glittery robes," Sirius grinned, "Imagine that!"

"Lockhart," James grimaced, "What a joke, that one. We should get Harry another tutor, really. If only I could make Lily agree with me on that!"

*\*

That evening, Harry found himself sitting on Filippa Peppino's couch, watching Heidi paint Petronella Albin's - the third girl of their 'generation' - nails green. The colour supposedly went well with her pale green eyes. In all honesty, Harry wasn't sure exactly why he had been invited. Surely, they wouldn't spend all the time asking him about Gildy, right?

"I want to be a designer like my aunt one day," Filippa said, tying her long black hair into a bun, "I want to design and sew clothes, and I want you to model for me."

"Um..."

"Look," Petronella started, "She could ask you, but I think she'd just wear you down in time and you'd agree anyway. You're just saving some time."
"Why me?" Harry asked, honestly curious. He couldn’t quite muster up the courage to ask how she knew that about the Italian girl already.

"Because the other boys are pricks," Filippa declared, "Besides, it's sad that there are only three girls out of ten students. You'll even out the number."

"I'm not a girl," Harry said, "I'm not even girly."

"Granted," Heidi said, "That Italian guy on the other hand..."

"Lorenzo Tancredi," Filippa cut in, "And just because his hair is rather long doesn't make him girly at all."

"Why does their chatter remind me of how mum and Mrs. Weasley sometimes talk?" Harry thought, 'I need to get out of here.'

"I'm feeling a bit sleepy," Harry said, standing up, "I'll see you all tomorrow."

"Half past six pick me up, yes?" Filippa called after him, "We'll go have breakfast together!"

"Why so early?"

"Just in case."

"Alright," Harry replied, "See you."

Filippa's apartment was a floor above his own, and in a matter of seconds Harry was in his own flat, finally getting the opportunity to relax. After a quick shower and a change of clothes, Harry crawled into his bed, feeling exhausted but content.

His first day had been pretty good - he had made a few friends and no enemies. The schedule seemed reasonable even if there were lessons on Saturdays as well.

Overall, Harry was happy.

And this is how his life in Durmstrang began and continued for quite a while: peacefully. Even though Harry had been raised surrounded by magic, there just seemed to be so much that he didn't know, and time passed by fast when he was busy nearly every day.

Charms class with Professor Elis was most probably Harry's favourite - the subject was enjoyable and somewhat easy. Even reading the school books and doing homework was fun for him when the subject was charms. Potions, on the other hand... much to Filippa's devastation, Harry absolutely sucked at potions.

"It'd be funny if it wasn't so sad," Nikolai once remarked, "And unexplainable. How did you make a diluted calming draught explode anyway? It's almost all water!"

"Talent manifests in many ways," Harry had replied evenly, unfazed. Professor Bertham had stared at the melting vials and then closed his eyes, making a strange sound that reminded Harry of a kicked mouse.

Dark Arts lessons were perhaps the most interesting. Professor Ulrich Dietmar - the brother of their homeroom teacher - was a man full of hero-worship towards the Dark Lord and was always willing to retell a tale of the 'good old days' when he had fought in the short war when the Dark Lord had first risen to power.
He told them about the incantations, the shields used, the tactics and strategies... and while he taught them only the most basic of spells, Harry wasn't disappointed. It made him curious, though, to know that the man who had achieved all that was the one whose wand's brother was currently in Harry's hand.

"There is so much of the will involved in a spell," Professor Ulrich had said, "Emotion fuels the spell. Never think that you have to stop feeling emotions. I'm telling you this now because, in the future, you'll be told to not feel. That is wrong. Rage, joy, love, grief... different spells become stronger through different emotions."

"Such as?" Jakob Eckart, a boy who seemed to have a small knowing smile fixed permanently on his face, asked, "Any examples?"

"Healing spells," Professor Ulrich said, "The Killing Curse. The Curciatus Curse. It's not just a matter of focusing and spitting out the incantation. You have to feel."

What gave Harry a bit of a tough time, aside from potions, was transfiguration. It wasn't that the subject was tough, no. He could do his homework just fine on his own, actually, and he didn't have trouble understanding the book. The teacher, Professor Kay, however, was a bit bad at explaining things. Maybe it was only he who found it hard to understand the man – the others seemed to understand him well enough.

The class that Harry absolutely loved was sports. He adored flying and swimming, and even though he had never tried horse riding or archery before, he did well enough to enjoy the activities.

Life went on in Durmstrang and weeks passed. All ten first year students were growing rather close, although Harry mostly spent time either with the girls or Nikolai. The Russian boy was a complicated person and he seemed to find reasons to make fun of everyone within sight.

Things didn't change till the end of November, two weeks before the start of the Christmas holiday.

"Look," Truls Kettil said, "It's just a flying competition. Just to see who's the fastest. It'll be fair since all the brooms school lends to us are the same."

"It's Sunday, and I know that you've already finished your homework," Harry continued, looking at Nikolai, who scowled.

"I don't fly."

"Pansy," Lorenzo Tancredi said dismissively, "Count me in, though. I'll make you cry uncle."

"Like you could," Truls shot back.

"What's the point of this competition?" Petronella asked, "It's not like any of you can try out for the Quidditch team yet anyway!"

"It's for our own enjoyment," Clemens Marvin said, "Better fly on Sundays than rewrite the potions essay for the seventh time."

"Seventh?" Harry gaped, and the blond shrugged, not offering any explanations.

"Look," Filippa cut in, scowling, "All this testosterone is irritating me. Be macho somewhere else."
"You just can't stand being in a crowd where you're not the centre of attention," Truls stated, "You-

"I'm reading Basic Hexes for the Busy and Vexed," Filippa interrupted.

"That means: think twice before finishing what you were about to say," Harry explained with a grin, "Either way, let's just go. We can't spend the whole day convincing others."

"Right you are, Harry," Björn Lennart, whose hair was as red as Ron's and eyes of almost the same shade, said.

"I thought you didn't like flying," Lorenzo said, looking at Björn, who shrugged.

"I like watching," the boy replied, "Much safer. Besides, I like betting even more."

"Shall we get going, then?" Truls asked, "Fifth years have practice in two hours."

"How do you know that?" Clemens asked as the group started to move towards one of the Quidditch pitches, "Upperclassmen don't generally speaking talk with us."

"Truls Kettil here," Truls replied, "Nobody ignores me."

"You just reminded me of Gildy," Harry shuddered, "Lockhart, I mean."

"Why do you call him Gildy?" Truls asked.

"Used to it, I guess. He pestered me all summer and wouldn't respond if I didn't call him that. Guess the habit stuck."

"What a bad habit."

The boys had finally reached the broom storage, and eagerly each grabbed a Nimbus before racing to the Quidditch pitch.

"Pity we can't play a game," Clemens said.

"How's the school's Quidditch team kept in shape?" Harry asked, "I mean, there aren't really that many who can play, are there?"

"The school's team plays against other schools' teams and sometimes even small official teams," Truls explained, "They've been doing well - they got last year a new seeker. Viktor Krum. They say he's a real talent."

"Isn't he a third year?"

"Yeah."

"He got in when he was a second year?"

"Yeah."

"Come on guys," Lorenzo called, "Less talk more flying!"

"Prepare to lose," Clemens said, and Harry grinned. It felt weird - but awesome - to be with the other boys and feel like they were really friends. They noticed him. Maybe they were like Ron and Draco who noticed Harry only when he was present. Maybe the other boys would forget about Harry if he wasn't there to remind them of his existence... but right now, they were with him. Noticed him. And
it felt amazing.

Flying with friends was different from flying with his dad or with Sirius. It was more... free. Wild and less controlled. It was thrilling.

"Careful, Truls," Björn called from the ground, "You don't want to end up falling of your broom dodging birds, yeah?"

"I'm going to be alright," Truls replied with a grin, spinning upside down on his broom again. Harry, flying nearby, shook his head.

"Be careful."

"I'm alwa— whoa!"

Later on, Harry couldn't remember what exactly had happened, in which order, and how much time it took. All he remembered was that Truls's grip on the broom had faltered, and that it had taken Harry an instant to realize that if the other boy was to fall from that height, he could die. Harry vaguely remembered angling his own broom, remembered flying so fast that the wind seemed cutting, and he somewhat remembered colliding with the falling boy. He remembered the panicked screams of his fellow classmates and desperately hoped that he had managed to at least slow down Truls's fall with his own body.

After that, there was pain and darkness.

* 

There was a sense of deja vu when Harry woke up. As if he had felt that damp coldness before, as if he had seen this empty train station...

He had.

Eyes widening, Harry sat up, looking around him. Yes, he was indeed in that same strange train station that he had ended up in during the entrance exam over half a year ago. And it was exactly just as dark, cold and damp as he remembered. Had it been raining or something?

"Ah, you're back," a familiar voice said, and Harry turned abruptly to see the old man again, "Didn't expect to see you again for a very long time."

"I don't know what happened," Harry said, deciding to keep his cool. There was no need to panic and act like a fool twice in front of the same person, now was there? "Who did you say you were?"

"I didn't," the old man replied, blue eyes twinkling, "My name is Albus."

"I'm Harry," Harry said, "Can you tell me what this place is?"

"It's a train station," Albus said, "There have been more trains coming and going through, lately. You wouldn't know the reason?"

"Um, like what?"

"Is there a war, where you come from?"

"No," Harry said, "There isn't. But some people think that there'll be soon."

"Terrible," Albus muttered, "Wars never bring anything but grief to everyone involved."
"You know about wars?"

"I was in a few."

"What were they like?" Harry asked, curiously, "All we're told about wars is that they were glorious."

"There is no glory in wars with no noble cause," Albus replied, the twinkle in his eyes dimming. "Tell me, my boy, who is the current Minister of Magic?"

"Well, no one really," Harry said, "All is ruled by the Dark Lord."

"What?" There was evident shock in the exclamation, and Harry felt a twinge of nervous fear when he saw the old man's expression. "The Dark Lord?"

"The Dark Lord Voldemort," Harry clarified hesitantly.

"What year is it there?" Albus asked, an odd look on his face.

"Nineteen ninety-one."

"Good grief." The words were full of emotion – disbelief, sorrow, shock. Horror. Harry could see the old man becoming, if possible, older in an instant. "So long."

"W-well..."

"And Tom took over. Of course, with no one to stop him. He was always a resourceful one, he was."

"Tom?" Harry asked hesitantly. Albus gave him a look that was void of all mirth and twinkle.

"That Lord Voldemort of yours. His name is Tom Riddle."

"Tom?" Harry repeated, baffled, "But that's... that's a cat's name or something!" A small reluctant smile returned to Albus's face, and the old man sighed.

"What has he done? Are there any Muggles alive?" he asked.

"Plenty," Harry replied, "Billions, in fact. They're just kept separate from the Wizarding world, and most schools don't allow muggleborns in anymore. I heard they used to. My mum's a muggleborn, you see."

"You're...?"

"A half-blood. Much like the Dark Lord."

"You know of his blood?" Albus asked, surprised, "And yet people still follow him?"

"I think there's more than just blood to it," Harry replied slowly, "I mean, I don't think that most of them really care about blood that much. As long as the person has power and money, they can look past the heritage."

"And you said that there might be a war coming?"

"It's just a rumour, though. I heard my parents talking about it. The Rebels - they're a group of people still fighting the Dark Lord's Death Eaters - are, I don't know, becoming more of a danger I guess."
"And your parents are on which side?"

"Dark Lord's side, of course. My dad is an Auror in the service of the Dark Lord."

"The world has changed," Albus said, shaking his head. After that he fell silent, and stayed quiet for a very long time. Harry, after few minutes of waiting for the old man to speak, decided to walk around in the train station. He wondered how he could go back. Last time it had just happened... would now be the same?

Another train went past Harry, and the boy shivered, looking after the vehicle. Had it been empty? He hadn't really seen anyone, and yet there was the feeling that it wasn't completely void of... people. Maybe he should check one from the inside?

"You don't want to do that," Albus said as soon as Harry approached one of the trains. "They're not there just for fun."

"Where do they go?" Harry asked.

"I told you, didn't I? Nowhere. The most of them go to Nowhere."

"Where is nowhere?"

"Elsewhere." The cheerful reply made Harry give up his questions - he really wasn't in the mood for this. He wanted to go—

And suddenly, Harry remembered why he was unconscious in the first place. He had fallen off his broom somehow! Oh yes, to save Truls. What happened? Did he succeed? He'd have to wake up... he couldn't spend all his time at the train station, now could he? However, he was yet to figure out how to leave.

"Are you sure that none of these trains will take me back?" Harry asked, and Albus nodded.

"None of them will take you where you want to go."

"Where would they take me, then?"

"That's a tale for another day," the old man said and smiled tiredly, "Your reflection is wavering, young Harry. Soon, it will be your time to go again."

"Does anyone else ever visit?" Harry asked, "Don't you get lonely?"

But again, much like last time, he suddenly could only see and not hear, and he couldn't see either. *

Pain. That's what Harry felt when he woke up. And then he felt someone gripping his hand.

"Wha-?"

"Harry?" a vaguely familiar voice said urgently, "Harry? Are you awake? NURSE! NURSE! NURSE!"


"ESTER! NURSE ESTER! Harry's awake!"

"Sort of."
"He's alive!"

"He's not comatose!"

"Move aside," a female voice ordered and Harry, eyes still closed tightly, could hear his friends shuffling aside. The nurse's hands were cold and her wand was sharp as she poked and prodded and muttered incantations to check on him. "He seems to be alright. Mr. Potter, can you hear me?"

"Yeeesh."

"Tell me what you're feeling right now."

"Dizzy," Harry mumbled, finally trying to open his eyes, "Head hurts. Chest hurts. Shoulders too."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"Mmm? Truls?"

"Yes, you saved Mr. Kettil. He has been healed already. By colliding into him while still somewhat hanging onto your broom, you managed to slow down the fall. You both broke a few bones although the initial impact hit you, not him. Either way, you'll both be right as rain soon enough. And let this be a lesson to you two!"

"Trains?" Harry mumbled, not quite listening to what the woman was saying. There seemed to be something else, something important in his mind; a memory trying to push its way through the haze of dizziness and confusion. "Station...." Yes, there had been a station... and emptiness... and cold...

"Harry?" a voice Harry now recognized to be Heidi's said, and with a groan Harry finally managed to keep his eyes open long enough to look at his friends. The person holding his hand was Truls, who was pale and wide-eyed, staring at Harry with concern.

"I'm alright," Harry rasped, "Are you? Is everything okay? What time is it?"

"Still Sunday," Filippa said, "Half past six." Harry nodded, and glanced at Truls who was still staring at him anxiously. He then looked around, taking in the sight of the hospital wing wherein he was.

"We'll leave now," Björn said suddenly, "If Truls wants to say thank you, I know he'd rather do that alone. Take care, you two."

"What you did was really brave, Harry," Petronella said softly, letting her small delicate hand rest on Harry's shoulder for a few moments, "Stupid, but brave. See you soon."

"We've got sports tomorrow," Lorenzo said, "Maybe you should ask Nurse Ester to give you a pass to skip that?"

"Just get out," Truls snapped, scowling at the loitering friends "We'll catch up with you guys.-"

"And girls," Heidi added.

"-and girls later." Still feeling slightly out of it Harry watched how his other classmates left the hospital wing, leaving him alone with Truls. The boy in question looked at Harry for a few seconds before returning to sit by the bed again.

"Are you really alright?" Harry asked.
"I am," Truls replied, the usually bright cerulean eyes looking dark with guilt, "Why did you do it?"

"You almost died," Harry said, "Look, I knew what I was doing, sort of. Better the two of us injured than one dead. Right? At least now we will both be eventually fine."

"I owe you my life."

"Oh come on..."

"An honest-to-God life debt," Truls said, tugging nervously at his golden brown curls, "Thank you, Harry."

"It's... er... well... you're welcome," Harry muttered, flushing. Truls's hand found his again, and Harry wondered if now, after these few months, he could finally call someone a best friend.

Elsewhere, the Dark Lord Voldemort had just entered a wand shop in search of a second wand.
Chapter 4

Ollivander looked up from the floor he was sweeping when he heard the door of his shop opening. When he saw the tall, dark-haired man who had just stepped into his shop, the old wandmaker held back a reaction of surprise and bowed deeply instead.

"My Lord," Ollivander said warily, "How can I be of help?" It wasn't unusual for the Dark Lord to go wandering alone—he was fond of solitude, that much was known. And while everyone was wary of his magical prowess and intelligence, it was the unpredictable personality that truly made his mere presence dangerous. No one could tell whether or not he was about to murder someone or promote them in his ranks.

Then again, not many would actually recognize their commander unless he so allowed. The man knew of magic Ollivander himself couldn't begin to imagine, and hiding his identity in ways that defied logic was hardly a feat to him.

"No retelling me what kind of wand I have? As far as I know, you're yet to end that habit," the man said, voice a mixture between boredom and amusement, "I'm seeking a second wand, Ollivander."

Had it been any other person, the wandmaker would have asked for reasons—the request was rather unusual. But one didn't ask the Dark Lord about his reasons. It just wasn't done. "A specific wand?"

"Decades ago," the Dark Lord started, "when I bought my first wand. Remember what you told me?"

"That it was made of—"

"That it has a brother wand."

"Ah," Ollivander said, a troubled expression making an appearance.

"I trust that you will be giving me that wand now," the Dark Lord said, "For out of all wands, only it can work as well as the one I have now."

"My Lord," Ollivander started hesitantly, "There is a slight problem."

"And what would that be?" the Dark Lord asked, red eyes darkening with sudden surge of anger, "Bring the wand. I'm sure it will work."

"I do not doubt that, my Lord," Ollivander replied, "The wand would indeed work. Alas, you see, the wand is… gone."

"Gone? Sold? You mean to tell me," the Dark Lord hissed, stepping closer towards the wandmaker who shuddered and resisted the urge to flee, "You mean to tell me that out there, someone has the brother of my wand? My wand?"

"Y-yes, my Lord."

"Who?"

"M-my Lord…"

"Who?"
"He's eleven years old, my Lord," Ollivander said in a shaky voice, "He's just a child."

"The only reason why I am yet to take action against you and your insolence, Ollivander, is due to your superior wand making abilities," the Dark Lord said silkily, "That does not, however, make you an exception in my book. Continue this insubordination and I shall have to… do something about it. The name. Now."

"The Potter heir," Ollivander finally revealed, "Harry Potter."

* *

It was odd how, even with the piles of homework that had previously seemed so unconquerable, Harry still managed to finish them in one evening and still have the time to think too much. He had managed to get the permission to leave the Hospital Wing, but Nurse Ester had insisted on giving him a note to excuse him from sports on Monday. Harry didn't want that– he didn't want to have free time, because free time made him think, and all he could think about was war. And the train station. And Albus.

Could it be that it wasn't a dream? But what else could it be? A vision? Hardly!

He wouldn't be in this situation had he bothered to wear the manticore skin undershirt. No, really. Had he put it on, even a fall like that wouldn't have hurt him as much as it did. Maybe. Possibly. Then again, if he had put it on and been alright after a fall like that, the others would have asked questions and Harry would have had to give them some kind of answers. And all this… friendship thing and the warm feelings it brought with it aside… Harry wasn't fond of the idea of telling anyone about the manticore shirt.

It was a simple precaution, really. Not that he didn't trust his friends. He was just being careful.

Maybe he should just keep wearing it and play dumb if someone figured it out? Not to say that Durmstrang wasn't safe– it was, really. The fights between students that happened were always between the older students and Harry's classmates tended to stay out of them. Well, with the exception of Björn who found it hard to resist betting on anything even remotely interesting.

Tomorrow, the day would start with History of Magic. Harry didn't mind history as a subject– he liked it quite a lot, actually. There was more to history than just Goblin wars and house-elf rebellions. There was more than Merlin's legend and the history of spells. It was the story of Europe – the forging of the magical Europe. And yet every attempt to read a bit ahead in the history book ended up with Harry thinking about the train station.

'I wonder if I can find any information about it in the library,' Harry thought. He could also ask his parents– his mother might know– but he didn't want to. What if it really was just a reoccurring dream and he'd end up making a fool out of himself by asking about it? Surely he wasn't going to let a simple dream scare him? Besides, it had happened only twice. Even though the dreams were realistic, they were hardly anything to get worried about.

The following day Harry got something else to worry about.

His… friends. There seemed to be a slight change in dynamics of the group, and Harry wasn't sure what to think of it. It wasn't that their behaviour had changed, not exactly. There just seemed to be some sort of distance growing between them, and it reminded Harry quite painfully of how he had grown apart from Ron and Draco, who probably didn't even remember Harry anymore at all. It made Harry yearn for his story-books again, if only to chase away the awful feeling he was getting.
Truls sat by his side all the time and yet hardly spoke two words to him, and Harry felt ridiculous for thinking that saving the other boy's life could have made them best friends. It had seemed like it in the beginning– they all had been there for him in the Hospital Wing... So what had changed overnight? Could it be that his classmates had talked with each other and decided to ignore him? But they weren't really ignoring him, were they? Maybe they had just decided that Harry wasn't worth being friends with? But why? He saved Truls's life! And the initial aftermath had gone well enough! So why this kind of behaviour now?

Plagued with such thoughts, Harry couldn't bring himself to even attempt starting a conversation. It was odd how he could hang out for months with the same people, and think that he knew them, but then suddenly realize that they were strangers. That was why, after showing the sports instructor– Madam Wieland– the pass excusing him from the lesson, Harry didn't stick around. He didn't feel like returning to his flat either, and so he headed towards the library instead.

Durmstrang's library was perhaps his favourite place in the entire school. It was clean and quiet, with an air of stillness that made Harry's heart beat faster with delight. The librarian looked up from her desk, didn't smile at Harry– only stared– 'til the boy walked past her and headed towards his favourite corner after grabbing a few books. Eventually he settled down there to read Beauty and the Beast, determined to forget everything surrounding him.

The Dark Lord Voldemort was curious.

How could he not be? Someone-- some child out there– had been chosen by the brother of his wand. What kind of child was Harry Potter? Of course Voldemort knew of the existence of a Potter family, but as far as he could tell, the patriarch of that household wasn't a high-ranking Death Eater and, therefore, not really worth being noticed. It didn't take the Dark Lord long to find out that the boy was studying at Durmstrang of all places– Durmstrang. The thought was strangely pleasing; at least the child must have some potential.

He didn't inform Igor of his visit to the school. Why should he? He had the right to go wherever he wanted to, and if someone had a differing opinion, they were welcome to express it... and then suffer the consequences, of course.

"Point me," the Dark Lord whispered, holding his wand at the tip of his fingers. It twirled twice before finally stopping, pointing at the direction where this Harry Potter would be.

Voldemort was yet to decide what he was actually going to do once he found the boy. He could get rid of him, but he didn't think that he'd do that. The Dark Lord wasn't against killing children, but doing so at school grounds with no reason wasn't good considering his public image– an act such as murdering an heir of a pureblood family just so he could get his wand would surely make some people betray him, and he really couldn't afford that right now.

Perhaps later.

For now, he'd just see what kind of creature was actually worthy of a wand equal to his own. Was the child exceptionally talented? Was his magical signature stronger than average? Was he unusually intelligent? The Dark Lord entered the library, not minding the librarian who paled and hastily stood up to bow deeply – she recognized him; everyone at Durmstrang should – as he made his way to where his wand was pointing him to. Finally, he reached a corner where he saw the boy that must be this… Harry Potter.

The child was rather scrawny, with thick, messy black hair and pale skin. He was curled up on a sofa
with a book on his lap and seemed to be completely focused on it. Why wasn't the boy in class? Was he skipping? Why was he so small anyway; surely not all first years were that tiny? The hunched back didn't speak of confidence and the messy hair didn't show signs of proper grooming. Was this... help really deserving of his wand?

The Dark Lord was displeased. He stood silently; taking in the sight of the boy he was already deeming to be careless and weak. Perhaps his intelligence could make up for it? Except that the book he was holding wasn't even an educational one, but a fairytale. Did this Harry Potter have even one redeeming quality? Why should the Dark Lord spare him after all? Surely no one would miss this little ghostly creature.

And then the boy looked up, and the Dark Lord almost took a step back– the vivid green eyes reminded him of the Killing Curse, and the look was so intense that, suddenly, the man was certain that there weren't many who could look this boy in the eyes for longer than a few seconds.

"How can I help you?" Potter asked softly, and the Dark Lord realized with disbelief that the foolish child didn't even recognize him.

"I was merely observing," he replied evenly from where he was standing, "You're reading... a fairytale. How come you're not in class?"

"Sports. Nurse told me to not go today."

"Why not use the time beneficially, then?"

"I don't understand," the boy said, appearing suddenly rather bored. It irritated the Dark Lord– no one looked bored in his presence. He wasn't boring! "I like fairytales. They keep me happy. Stories in general are enjoyable. Far more pleasant than people."

"Not a social person, then?" the Dark Lord asked, wondering why he was even talking to this brat anymore, "I see no benefit in reading fiction. Surely something else is not only enjoyable but also useful." Come on. One tiny redeeming quality in the brat's personality so the Dark Lord could give himself a reason to let the boy live.

"Does it matter?" Potter shot back, before shaking his head and looking down at his book, fringe hiding his face almost completely, "You never do anything that is enjoyable that doesn't have an academic value of some kind? Like, some people drink two cups of coffee in the morning. Why two? Because they're thirsty? They could drink water for that. To stay awake thanks to the caffeine? There're pepper up potions available. So why coffee? Because they desire it even though it's not particularly beneficial."

"And your desire is to waste time reading stories?" Voldemort asked with disbelief, yet feeling reluctantly fascinated. It had been a while since someone hadn't known who he was, and therefore talked back to him. Not that he enjoyed people talking back to him– actually, he hated it. And yet, coming from this child, it wasn't quite as annoying. Perhaps it was because the boy wasn't really talking back to him as much as just involving himself in a conversation where he had a differing opinion. "Is that wise?"

"Is that wise?"

Harry stared at the stranger, wondering how anyone could ever think that stories were a waste of time. Oh sure, he had heard it before, but this man seemed to be completely... not understanding it.
As if he honestly couldn't comprehend why anyone would want to read a fictional story that didn't provide any facts.

"Who are you?" Harry finally asked, and the red-eyed man rolled his eyes before shooting him an irritated glare.

"Right now, that's irrelevant," he replied, and Harry couldn't help but shake his head at what he thought to be childishness. The man appeared to be around his thirties– why did he act like a brat? "Now answer my question."

"A spoiled pureblood brat," Harry muttered aloud, shaking his head.

"What?" the man asked, rising an eyebrow, "Do tell what that was about."

"Just thought that you remind me of someone. He's a pureblood, and a bit… spoiled," Harry said reluctantly, unsure of what the man's reaction could be. Would he be angry? But no, while the man did, indeed, narrow his eyes and glare, he didn't really seem angry.

"And you're not a spoiled pureblood brat, then?"

"Half-blood," Harry admitted, knowing that his mother would cringe at him confessing his blood status to a stranger, "And I'm pretty sure I'm not spoiled. To answer your question, though, I think it's just as wise as doing anything else at this point. It's half past twelve, my next lesson starts at two. Even if I had any homework I'm yet to do– and I don't have– I could do it later."

"This conversation is boring me," the man said suddenly, apparently losing all interest, "You tire me."

"You're free to go," Harry replied sharply, "Your absence will not be a source of grief for me. Actually, if you leave, I could just return to my reading."

"You're terribly rude," the man observed, "What if I was to… hurt you? What if your rudeness would make me angry and I—"

"That's a hypothetical situation," Harry cut in, "And I don't think that you'd do that. Not now, at least. You don't even have your wand out. Besides, you were being just as rude, if not ruder. Who tells someone else that they're boring?"

"I do."

"Well, yes. My point."

"I fail to see your point," the man said neutrally, "You're strange."

"And you are giving me a headache," Harry snapped. Heavens, this man was worse than Uncle Sirius on a bad day! "So what did you want again?"

"I said," the man sighed, "that I was merely observing."

"Why would you observe me?" Harry asked with a frown, "Who are you anyway?"

"That's irrele—"

"You tell me your name or I'll give you one."

"You can't just give people names," the man said and Harry was strongly reminded of Draco when
the blond had been four and Harry had told him that no, Harry's birthday didn't mean that Draco Malfoy had the right to do what he wanted. "Look, I'm probably older than—"

"You don't act like it," Harry cut in again with a displeased expression, "You don't act like an adult at all. I'll call you... I think I'll call you Tom." Where had that name come from? It was as if someone had mentioned the name 'Tom' to Harry before, but the boy couldn't really remember. Either way, the red-eyed stranger's eyes widened, and he tilted his head to the side with a very peculiar expression.

"Why?" the man asked. "Why... Tom?"

"You look like a Tom," Harry claimed, "And until you tell me your real name, that's what I'm going to call you."

There had to be something about this brat. There had to be. There were simply too many little things that the Dark Lord had noticed, and he didn't really believe in coincidences.

He could have, eventually, moved on and perhaps even forgotten about the brother wand issue. He could have forgotten about the eyes that were so vividly reminding him of the Killing Curse. He could have ignored the boy's reluctantly refreshing— and annoying—manners and possibly even the fact that the boy had named him Tom. Which was, coincidentally, his real name. The one no one was supposed to know.

But all of these little signs together? No. There had to be something. And that's why he couldn't kill the brat yet— he was like a tiny, remotely interesting puzzle.

"Did you fall asleep on your feet?" the boy asked, "My godfather does that sometimes. Mum says it's because he's a head case. Listen, if you're a bit slow, that's alright. Just sit down. Don't think on your feet or you'll fall down and injure yourself."

'Slo— what?' Voldemort wasn't a man easily surprised. He was the one who surprised others — usually with a curse of some kind. But here he was now, starting to feel like a fool in front of a child that couldn't possibly be any more brilliant than he had been decades ago. "What if I cursed you now, for your insolence?"

"I'd rat on you," Potter replied promptly.

"Ah, but what if I told you that I'm the Dark Lord?" Voldemort asked, with a small smile twisting his lips, "What would you do then?"

"I wouldn't believe you," Potter said calmly, "I mean, come on. Why would the Dark Lord himself be suddenly sneaking into the library of Durmstrang to have a conversation with a first year student about stories? It just doesn't make sense. He's probably out there doing something about the war."

"The war?" the Dark Lord hissed sharply while deciding reluctantly to not inform the boy of his identity, "What do you know of that?"

"It's just a feeling I've got," Potter replied, "And maybe I've heard rumours. There's a war coming, supposedly."

"What kind of rumours have you heard?"

"Just that the Rebels are gathering an army and that it means war, eventually."
"War would have been inevitable no matter what," Voldemort said, straightening up and looking down at the child with a sneer, "Get a hobby. Thinking about politics at your age is unhealthy."

"You think I like politics?" Potter exclaimed, "Look, I told you I don't like people. And politics is all about people."

"You're boring me again. I think I shall leave."

"Then go. I'll try to not cry– since I obviously will be devastated. That's how much I liked you."

"Are you always this rude?" the Dark Lord snapped. Potter smiled at him sweetly, face bordering angelic in its innocence.

"No," the boy admitted, "You're just special."

Harry watched as the man – Tom – growled and turned and left. He didn't know what it was about this person but Harry felt almost compelled to be as terrible as possible. Tom's behaviour didn't encourage Harry to treat him like he'd treat other adults.

It was strange. It was more than just strange– Harry, generally speaking, was almost fearful of behaving rudely towards others. Shy, is what his mother would say. And yet with Tom, he had acted so unlike himself that it, frankly, confused Harry. Should he just forget this strange man? It was unlikely that they were going to meet again.

Either way, it was time for lunch now anyway– the time was almost one o'clock. The others would be now either showering or already making their way towards the dining hall– Harry didn't think that anyone really had the time to cook for themselves. Besides, the elves made delicious meals.

Harry wasn't sure how he'd behave with the others now that he had picked up on the change of atmosphere. He still didn't understand why it had happened, but he wasn't going to ask. So at lunch, he sat quietly between Filippa and Heidi again, listening to the others talking about one thing or another while feeling like an outsider.

'Actually, the most fun I had today was when reading, before Tom appeared,' Harry thought bitterly. Not bearing to be where he was anymore, he stood up abruptly, startling the others. Not looking at anyone, Harry grabbed his bag and headed out of the dining hall. The classroom of Transfiguration, where he was heading now, wasn't that far away, and so Harry arrived there in a matter of few minutes. It wasn't long after that he heard the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps.

"Why did you leave?" Truls asked, trying to catch his breath. He sat down next to Harry and focused on calming down.

"I didn't feel comfortable there," Harry replied warily, "Why did you follow?" His question made Truls tense, and after a few long moments of silence, the boy spoke again.

"The others said that we need to talk."

"Not really."

"But yes. Don't you see? Harry, I owe you my life."

"I know," Harry replied, heart beating rapidly, "I know that you do."
"I haven't told my parents about it," Truls admitted, "They won't be pleased."

"Is it really a big thing?" Harry asked, "Ever since this morning, I feel like everything has changed. As if I'm not… included anymore."

"No!" Truls exclaimed, eyes wide, "That's not! I mean, yes, it is something big, and everything—well, not really everything– has changed. But you're definitely not excluded from anything!"

"Then what? Why are you guys, I don't know, behaving like you can hardly look at me."

"I owe you my life," Truls repeated again, "I basically owe myself to you. Which pretty much makes me… well, it makes you my owner. And that means that—"

"Ignore it," Harry interrupted, "I don't want to own anyone. I just want to have friends, Truls."

"But—"

"Look, one day I might need your help or something. And you'll help me. 'Til then, we'll both pretend that you owe me nothing. You don't even need to tell your parents."

"That's very kind of you," a new voice joined in, and Petronella sat down next to Harry, making the boy only now aware of the fact that the others had arrived, "Usually when someone owes someone else a Life Debt, the person it's owed to likes to brag. Especially if a Pureblood owes them."

"Well, I don't care about stuff like that," Harry said with a scowl, "But why would you suddenly behave differently?"

"You really don't get it?" Nikolai asked, eyes wide, "Look, we all used to be equal. Owed nothing to anyone and no one owed anything to us. Now Truls owes you his life, and—"

"But what does it change?"

"Look," Filippa started, "I'll be the one to offer the short, brutal and honest answer. All groups have a hierarchy, whether or not they're aware of it. We used to be equal. Now we're not. Why? Because you own a human life, and that– even if no one but us knows– puts you above us in hierarchy simply because now you have something that the rest of us don't."

"That's stupid."

"No, it—"

"It is," Harry insisted, "What happened between Truls and I is in no way anyone else's business, so I don't understand why everyone else should even have an opinion on the matter. There's no reason for it to affect anyone else but the two directly involved."

"For a pureblood, your thoughts are weird," Nikolai said, shaking his head. Harry was already opening his mouth to tell the others that he was, in fact, a half-blood, when he decided against that. He wasn't ashamed of being what he was, but there was still that new kind of reluctance.

"I don't care if you all think I'm weird," Harry said, and he knew that he wasn't completely honest when he said that. He did care. Actually, he cared quite a lot. He didn't want to be considered weird, an oddity.

"How long are your Transfiguration essays?" Clemens suddenly asked, changing the subject, "The deadline was today, right?"
"When else?"

"Well, we do have Transfiguration first thing in the morning tomorrow. Could be then."

"Wishful thinking, buddy."

"Hey," Truls said quietly, side pressed against Harry, face tilted down for the boy to hide behind the curtain of golden brown curls, "Thank you. I'm not saying this about the life debt. Just... thank you. I can't imagine being dead."

"Where do the dead go?" Lorenzo suddenly mused, "I've always wondered. I mean, religions aside—where do you think they go?"

"Nowhere," Jakob replied promptly, "The dead go nowhere."

And suddenly Harry felt chilly, as if he was on the verge of understanding something he really didn't want to know. Nowhere. Nowhere. He had never realized how ominous that word actually was.

* *

"We have gained new information regarding their whereabouts. Those filthy blood-traitors have allied themselves with the French!"

Araminta Meliflua was old as England and thrice as English. She wore hats of oddest designs, insisted on making Muggle-hunting legal, seemed to have a cup of tea attached permanently into her hand, and hated anything foreign or different—even dialects and accents. She refused to leave her country even for any reason— including holidays— and strongly disapproved of those who did.

She also hated the French with fury that impressed even the Dark Lord himself.

 Granted, he thought she was a tad obsessive about the issue, but it was entertaining to watch so why not just let her keep at it?

Araminta Meliflua was also, much to a certain Death Eater's misery, the cousin of Sirius's mother.

Sirius rarely enjoyed the strict and stuffy meetings of Dark Lord’s Army’s highest officials, as they often tended to go on forever. Sirius tiredly listened to his Aunt Araminta arguing in defence of some point or another, wondering if she knew that almost nobody was really listening. The perspective she was providing was interesting, certainly, but not really important. Sirius watched carefully the bored expression of the Dark Lord.

It was hard to believe that he was who he was and had achieved what he had.

Lord Voldemort was very handsome and charming, and didn't look a day over thirty. Sirius knew that the man was said to be immortal, but somehow—regardless of the evidence— he just couldn't wrap his mind around that fact. No one could be immortal.

"I have also acquired new information," the Dark Lord said suddenly, his voice silky and dangerous. Sirius tensed, knowing that whatever the man had found out, it certainly wasn't good. "Do you remember what I told you of the... war? Of the Rebels? Do you? Bellatrix?"

"O-of course my Lord," said Bellatrix Lestrange the Defence General of the Dark Lord’s army, bowing deeply with eyes wide in a way that didn't appear completely natural, "To keep it hush hush."
"And yet," Lord Voldemort snarled, red eyes almost glowing with anger, "And yet, I find that there are rumours. Of the war. Tell me, Antonin, how can that be if everyone really was quiet about the issue?"

"I… I don't know, my Lord."

"What do you think happened, Bartemius?"

"Someone talked, my Lord," Durmstrang's Duelling Instructor and one of the Lieutenant Generals, said. Sirius tensed, knowing that he was one of those who had talked rather carelessly of the matter – but only to James and Lily! And they wouldn't actually say it to anyone else. It had to be someone else.

"Any suspicions on who might have…talked, Lucius?"

Of course, the Dark Lord wouldn't be getting any real answers– no one was stupid enough to reveal that they had done what he had specifically told them not to. Sirius knew, however, that this tactic of using their names was to make them feel threatened and more aware of their status and duties. And it worked– he saw from Bellatrix's cowed expression that she wouldn't be mentioning her predictions of the eventual war to anyone anytime soon again.

"My dear sister-in-law has been rather vocal on her… opinions, my Lord," Lucius Malfoy said, and Sirius heard someone behind him scoff. Of course Malfoy would rat out someone – anyone – if only to avoid being punished. It didn’t help that Bellatrix outranked him.

"Lies!" Bellatrix shrieked, "No, my Lord, I haven't—"

"Crucio."

It was strange, Sirius mused, how the Dark Lord could look completely at ease while torturing others. As if it really didn't matter to him. No, he hadn't expected hesitation, of course, but even the cruelest Death Eaters showed some emotion– even if it was just enjoyment.

Lord Voldemort was a complicated man. Sirius had thought that just defining him as a psychopath would have said enough of the man's personality, but there was more to that than just words. Actually, Sirius could vaguely remember Lily once saying that the Dark Lord might not necessarily even be a psychopath, but a sociopath. Personally Sirius didn't really know what the difference was, but, then again, it was none of his business anyway.

Maybe Sirius should tell Harry, though. Just in case. He didn't know if the kid knew anything about the rumours– but there was a chance that he could have overheard something. So just in case, Sirius was going to send him a short letter with a bit of advice… and maybe some chocolate frogs too.

* *

On Wednesday, Harry woke up to the sound of an owl trying to blast its way through the window. Yawning, he scrambled off his bed, wondering who in their right mind would send him a letter this early. It couldn't be his mother– she would just firecall unless there was an actual package that she wanted to send.

Harry recognized the small brown owl to be his godfather's, and with curiosity – and delight – dug into the box of chocolate frogs before sitting down to read the short letter.

_Harrykins!_
I'm well. All's well. I know I haven't been all that good at this whole letter writing business, but rest assured— I still think of you every day. Usually when I do something your mother wouldn't approve of.

Cheery small talk aside, my sweet little godson, I actually wrote for a reason. Not only to remind you of my own existence, but also to ask whether or not you have overheard anything your parents might have mentioned about a possible war against the Rebels.

The thing is, Harry, it was supposed to be a secret. It was supposed to be private and yet people talked, and the Dark Lord found out. Someone overheard the gossip and told him. I know you have nothing to do with it, but I decided to take the opportunity to just remind you to be careful— don't talk about politics with anyone, and burn this letter.

Yours,

Sirius

Harry folded the letter, trying to smother the feeling of guilt inside him. Why should he even feel guilty? He hadn't talked about the—

"Why would the Dark Lord himself be suddenly sneaking in the library of Durmstrang having a conversation with a first year about stories? It just doesn't make sense. He's probably out there doing something about the war."

"The war? What do you know of that?"

"It's just a feeling I've got. And maybe I've heard rumours. There's a war coming, supposedly."

"What kind of rumours have you heard?"

"Just that the Rebels are gathering an army and that it means war, eventually."

Harry exhaled slowly, feeling sick as he remembered the conversation he had had with the mysterious Tom. It must have been Tom who had told the Dark Lord. So it really was Harry's fault. Or perhaps it was really Tom's. That good for nothing bastard. Harry had known that there was something horribly wrong with the man.

'I swear, if I ever see him again, I'm going to... well, I can't really say anything, can I? If he knows that I know, he'll wonder from where I found out that the Dark Lord knows. And Uncle Sirius doesn't hide the fact that he's my godfather."

Harry was still thinking about the issue when he finally headed towards the first lesson of the day after a quick breakfast, Care of Magical Creatures— known better as just 'Creatures'. The lessons were more often than not held outside, and the students would see either the animals they were supposed to study or just holograms of them.

"What do we have after this?" Lorenzo whispered next to Harry.

"Herbology," Filippa replied, "Then Transfiguration."

"How come we always have Transfiguration?" Harry scowled, and Heidi giggled next to him.
"Not always. Just three times a week."

"Oh, now there are some creatures I want to study," Petronella suddenly said, both Heidi and Filippa nodded appreciatively at the sight of the 4th year boys having their sports lesson nearby.

"Speaking of finer specimens," Heidi started, and Harry decided that it was high time to tune the girls out. That, however, made him refocus on his thoughts about Tom instead of the ongoing Care of Magical Creatures lecture. It was strange, actually, how much he thought about the man. What was his real name anyway? Maybe he should ask Sirius? Describe him and…

No. Because then Sirius would ask from where he knew the man, and Harry didn't really feel like explaining why he didn't go to sports on that day– the tale would eventually find its way to his mother, and Harry honestly wasn't fond of the thought of his mother finding out.

She'd either assassinate him– and save himself the trouble of getting himself accidentally killed– or decide to home school him. And being home schooled meant more Gilderoy Lockhart in his life. Uh, no. The man's letters were more than enough torment.

Harry was carefully avoiding thinking of the bizarre, massive crush his self-declared 'mentor' had on the Duelling Instructor, often referred to as Crouch Junior.

"These unfortunate mishaps notwithstanding, we wizards may congratulate ourselves on a job well done," the professor was saying, "There can be no doubt that the overwhelming majority of present-day Muggles refuse to believe in the magical beasts their ancestors so feared. Even those Muggles who do notice Porlock droppings or Streeler trails– it would be foolish to suppose that all traces of these creatures can be hidden– appear satisfied with the flimsiest non-magical explanation. Now tell me... Mr. Lennart! To read a fascinating examination of this fortunate tendency of Muggles, which book would you consult? We talked about this last time!"

"The Philosophy of the Mundane: Why the Muggles Prefer Not to Know," Björn drawled, "I read it once. Awfully dull."

"Who wrote it? Miss Albin?"

"Professor Mordicus Egg," Petronella said promptly, and Harry wondered if he should have also read the book in questions. But how could he, when there were so many other– far more interesting– books available?

"Think we'll get to play Quidditch soon?" Truls whispered, and Harry shrugged.

"I doubt it," he said. "Not with how busy they're keeping us."

"Sucks."

Harry met Tom again on Sunday. This time outside, while Harry was having a walk in the Garden of Grindelwald– a huge labyrinth that Harry found absolutely irresistible. For some strange reasons no one else liked it half as much as he did.

"Is it possible that you have become even shorter?" Tom asked, speaking to him with the familiarity of someone who had known Harry for years. Harry himself didn't feel as if this was their second meeting at all, which was rather curious. "You're doing something wrong if your growth is reversed."
"Why are you here?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"Giving a guest appearance and testing some of the older students," the man replied.

"Are you a teacher at some other school?"

"I teach lessons, yes. Daily. How old are you again?"

"Eleven," Harry said, resisting the temptation of asking the man his age, "I'm a first year here."

"Ah yes. I hate children," Tom said, looking at a strangely shaped bush nearby, "So… useless."

"Why do you work as a teacher then, if you're not fond of children?" Harry asked incredulously,
"Besides, why do you even talk to me? Last time we met—"

"Look," Tom cut in, "I'm a busy man."

"Could have fooled me," Harry muttered.

"I don't have much entertainment in my life, I'm afraid. Right now, you're the funniest thing I've stumbled upon for the past… very… many years."

"The funniest?"

"Granted, the most irritating as well. And strangest. You are rather odd."

"You're one to talk," Harry said slowly, staring at the man, feeling suddenly irritated. "Who the hell are you?"

"You're eleven. You're not supposed to talk like that."

"Look, I'm pretty sure you're not my mum."

"What a disturbing mental image you're giving me. I'm definitely not your mother."

"Why are you still here?"

"I wonder that too," Tom said, "But then I realize that this is the most fun I have had in a while. And then, I realize that you're just a kid, and it makes me feel disappointed that you can entertain me better than any of the people surrounding me at… hm, work." Harry eyed the man warily, before shrugging. He really didn't know what he was supposed to do or how he was supposed to react. Ever since he had arrived in Durmstrang, it seemed as if everything was gradually changing. People appeared to see Harry, now, and the boy couldn't help but wonder what had changed in him to make that happen.

Tom… was unexplainable. This was the second time Harry met him and he knew nothing about the man… and yet there seemed to be this strange something between them. It made Harry speak his mind– the thoughts he usually left unvoiced.

"What do you think of war?" Tom asked suddenly.

"Someone once told me that there are no winners in a war," Harry replied, and the man scoffed.

"Hypocritical naïve little pacifist," Tom said, "Probably a vegan and an animal rights activist as well. You're suddenly getting on my nerves again. Get lost."
"You were the one who approached me! Besides, there's nothing wrong in being—"

"I'm currently trying to think of the reasons why I haven't cursed you yet."

"That's because you know you have no real reason to," Harry snapped, "It'd also make you question your own maturity."

"If only you knew," Tom said, shaking his head, "I shall be taking my leave now, Perry—"

"Harry."

"Do try to improve your personality by the next time we cross paths, mm?"

Then the man was gone and Harry was left standing alone, wondering why he would even want to see Tom ever again. The Christmas holiday would start the following week and was going to last 'til the seventh of January, after which Harry doubted that he'd have the chance to wander around—the exams would surely keep him busy.

And no, he didn't feel disappointed.

"Wanna bet on who gets more gifts?"

"I'll send you a card, I promise!"

"See you in a few weeks!"

"Firecall me, yeah?"

James blinked with surprise at how much noise ten little children were capable of making without really even shouting. It warmed his heart, however, to see how well his son was interacting with others. Actually, all ten of them seemed to be rather close, hugging each other and talking animatedly. Finally, after over ten minutes of 'bye bye's, Harry finally reached him, and James could apparate them back home.

"Mum!" Harry flung himself at his mother, without bothering to take off his coat or shoes, "I missed you two so much!"

"Even if I didn't get a hug, I'll believe you," James laughed.

"How have you been, baby?" Lily cooed, "Firecalling just isn't enough. You've grown taller!"

"I'm still almost the shortest guy, though," Harry revealed, "I wish I can be as tall as Clemens or Truls. Mum, did you buy me any gifts?"

"Of course—"

"Because Björn's got a betting pool going on about who'll be getting most gifts. I think Petronella will, because her parents are super rich and they spoil her rotten. Where's Uncle Sirius?"

"Change your clothes first, dear," Lily said, "The house-elves will unpack your bag. Then you'll come down again for a bit of cookies and milk and you'll tell me all there is to tell. Alright?"

"I'll be right back!" Harry declared, and rushed away. James chuckled quietly, coming to stand next to her.
"I've never seen him this energetic before," Lily admitted.

"You didn't see him with the other kids. Trust me, they're all good friends," James told her, "It was… heart-warming to watch."

"I'm glad," Lily whispered. "I was worried about him. Always so lonely. So alone. Were there any girls he was close to?"

"What? Lily, he's eleven!"

"Oh trust me– even girls of eleven can tell if a guy is worth their time."

"You hated me when we were eleven."

"Oh trust me– even girls of eleven can tell if a guy is worth their time."

"You hated me when we were eleven."

"You were rather terrible."

"You are terrible," James accused, wrapping his arms around Lily, "Terribly beautiful. And amazing. And talented. And I love you so much—"

"Oh, yuck," a scandalized groan came from the doorway, and the two adults turned to see Harry staring at them with a disgusted expression. "I didn't want to hear that."

"Stomp louder on the stairs next time," James suggested, "We might even hear you."

"Look, dad, you're about four hundred years old—"

"I am not—!"

"You shouldn't do stuff like that!" Harry sounded so adorably disapproving while James looked gravely insulted that Lily couldn't contain her laughter any longer.

"I'm not even forty yet!"

"Forty. Four hundred. One zero here or there. Doesn't matter."

"It does!"

"Come on, boys," Lily giggled, green eyes twinkling, "Let's just sit down for a snack. I need to tell Harry a bit about our plans for this year's Christmas."

"Will we be going to that dreadful Malfoy Christmas party again this year?"

"Yes, well, it's tradition. You'll see Draco again. Don't you miss him?"

"Honestly?" said Harry, "No. I don't. And I don't think he misses me either."

"You've changed," Lily muttered, "You're more… outspoken. I'm glad."

"A lot has happened," Harry told her, "Is Uncle Sirius going to visit today?"

"Sirius is on a mission," James said, "He'll visit when he comes back. And no, I don't know when exactly. How are the lessons at Durmstrang? Tell me about your friends."

"Challenging," Harry replied, "The lessons, I mean. And my friends are cool. Will we go meet the Weasleys, too? I don't really miss Ron either, but at least he's more fun to hang around than Draco."

"Sure. Maybe you'll talk with Ginevra too," Lily said cheerfully, "I saw her and Molly last week."
That girl will be one beautiful woman, one day."

"...why would it matter to me?" Harry asked, confused, "I've never played with Ginny before."

"Let's call it investing early," his mother smiled. James snorted, and then shook his head.

"Don't..."

Harry wondered why all adults in his life were weird.

*

The Malfoy Manor was just as extravagantly, dreadfully flashy as Harry remembered it to be. His parents and godfather were all with him as they made their way inside, where the numerous guests were already mingling.

Harry couldn't stand it.

There was just that something in the pretentious atmosphere that made him shudder inside. People pretending to be close friends while in truth they couldn't wait to stomp on each other to boost their own reputation.

"Sirius, James," Lucius Malfoy said, approaching them, "And Lily, of course. Hello, Harry. Draco is in the grey lounge as always. All of the visiting children will be meeting there. If you need anything, just call for a house-elf."

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy," the boy muttered and after smiling hesitantly, left their company.

'Bet he picks the grey because it makes his eyes look good,' Harry thought while making his way through the familiar hallways to where the other boy would surely be waiting with his friends, 'He's so... Gilderoyish sometimes.'

"Hi Draco," Harry said, and the blond turned with an expression of delighted surprise on his pointed face. He really hadn't changed much at all.

"Harry!" Draco exclaimed and then waved towards his friends, pointing at each one of them in turn, "I'm so glad you came! You remember Pansy and Blaise and Theo, right?"

"Yes," Harry lied with a smile, "How have you all been?"

"Quite well, Potter," Pansy drawled, eyes fixed on someone else. Probably some other girl whose dress was better than her own. "Pleased to meet you... again."

"Heard you got into Durmstrang," Theodore Nott said, "How is it there?"

"Pretty good," Harry replied with a shrug, "How's Hogwarts?"

"Easy," Draco said, "It's almost pathetic, really. At least I'm in Slytherin."

"We all are," Pansy hurried to say, finally turning to look at Harry, "Have you met anyone interesting in Durmstrang? I heard that both Anthony Lestrange and Cassius Meliflua study there-- have you seen them?"

'Who and who?' Harry wondered, but didn't voice his questions. "We don't really mix with the upperclassmen. We prefer to stay with our own."
"Your own, huh," Draco repeated, "Made any new friends there?"

"Quite a few, yes," Harry said, starting to feel bored already. If only he could make the others focus on something else for a few moments, Harry was sure he could just sneak away and hide somewhere 'til it was time to go home. Or perhaps he should just— "I think I see someone familiar there. Do excuse me."

Harry hadn't, of course, seen anyone familiar. He just couldn't resist the chance to leave; slip out of the door and into a huge hall wherein the more important guests were talking and dancing. Locating one of the balconies easily, Harry finally reached the place that would guarantee him some solitude amongst all this terrifying socializing.

The sun was starting to set outside as Harry entered the balcony and closed the door before moving to sit a bit to the side, as to remain unseen by anyone inside. Through the glass, he could hear the music to which all the people danced.

Admittedly, had it not been for his hate towards this sort of events, Harry would have readily admitted that the Malfoys had outdone themselves. Now, he just reluctantly accepted that fact, wondering whether or not there was a reason for this kind of fuss.

He was so comfortable in his hiding place, almost dozing off eventually.

It wasn't 'til he heard the door of the balcony slam shut again that he was startled awake, and it still took him a few moments to realize that someone was kneeling in front of him. Blinking his suddenly tired eyes open, he almost shrieked with surprise when he met the gaze of the person in front of him.

She was a beautiful woman with long, thick, shining black hair. Thin red lips were twisted into a curious smile and heavy-lidded eyes were a tad too intense for Harry's liking. They were both silently staring at each other just as the first melodies of what Harry recognized to be one of Mozart's compositions floated through the thin glass of the door.

"Who is she?" Harry wondered, the beating of his heart calming finally down. The woman didn't move at all– just kneeled there, staring, looking scary and imposing somehow, her black robes making her resemble a dark queen of some kind.

She was beautiful.

"Thank you," the woman said, her voice lighter than what Harry would have assumed it to be.

"I didn't say that aloud," Harry said, thinking of how regardless of the words, the woman didn't sound grateful at all.

"You didn't have to," the woman replied. "Harry Potter. Here hiding from ickle little Draco and his friends."

"How—"

"It's all in your mind, boy. People don't stare at anyone's eyes just because they're beautiful. Even if yours are exquisite."

"Wait," Harry said, mind working rapidly. He had read about something that involved eye-contact to read minds. Something called... "You used legilimency on me?"

"You know the term," the woman said, smiling again, "Impressive."
"I study at Durmstrang," Harry replied warily, back still pressed against the wall behind him, "Our materials are very... extensive."

"So you'll be a fine, fine Death Eater one day," the woman almost sang, "Serving our Lord. Faithfully, yes. You should feel honoured, boy. Honoured. You are predestined to be one of his best. Finest. To follow in my footsteps. I'm his most faithful, you see. Most faithful." And suddenly, Harry knew who she was. His blood seemed to freeze in his veins as fear returned in one, almost overwhelming rush.

"Bellatrix Lestrange," he whispered, and the woman's eyes widened as she let out a short, delighted laugh that was little more than an exhale.

"Had you asked who I was," she hissed, leaning even closer, "I would have killed you here, little one."

Harry didn't doubt her words. He was still shaking when the woman stood up and left to seek entertainment elsewhere.

* *

It was half past two at night when the Potters finally returned home. Harry had stayed quiet most of the time, hiding and avoiding everyone—especially Bellatrix Lestrange—and was exhausted by the time he found his parents and left for home. His mother had tucked him in and told him that he could sleep in the next day, and then wake up to open his gifts.

Harry, regardless of his exhaustion, couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, he remembered his meeting with the Bellatrix Lestrange.

The woman was legendary.

She was one of the Dark Lord's finest—or worst, depending on the point of view. There had been so many tales about her, and thanks to Draco and Ron, Harry had ended up hearing every single one of them. The woman of his nightmares. The cruel, powerful Death Eater who was said to be so mad that even the Dementors knew to stay away. One of the two Generals of the Dark Lord's army. Her authority was second only to the Dark Lord's.

And now she seemed to have... noticed Harry.

Was this some kind of punishment? No one had noticed Harry before, and now suddenly it seems that crazy people like her noticed him a bit too easily? Was Tom crazy too? What should he do? He couldn't tell his parents; that was certain. What was left? He'd have to learn how to protect himself. He would have to. Or was he being paranoid? Was he overreacting? Maybe Bellatrix had forgotten him already? Would he dare to count on that?

Harry wasn't by nature an ambitious child. All he yearned for was to read more stories in peace. But he knew that stories wouldn't keep him safe if Bellatrix decided to come up with another reason just to kill him. Why did she hate him anyway?

'Maybe she doesn't hate me. People like her,' Harry suddenly realized with dread, 'they don't need a reason to kill somebody. All they need is the opportunity to do so.'

It was almost four in the morning when Harry rolled off his bed and fell onto the floor with a thud. It hurt a little bit, but the carpet was rather comfortable and it certainly offered a change of scenery.
Harry sighed and pulled himself up, before noticing the vaguely familiar old notebook on his desk, exactly where he had left it before.

And suddenly, all traces of exhaustion vanished with the appearance of new hope. A whisper of a memory, bringing hope with it, made him reach for the old notebook and look at it seriously for the first time. The thought of his wand suddenly surged forward in his mind, as if by force, and he didn't think twice before reaching for the notebook and his wand.

He stood there, in the darkness, for a few moments with both the notebook and his wand in his hands. There seemed to be magic– different kind of magic– that went through him. Or perhaps it wasn't magic at all– maybe it was just feelings. Hope. Determination. Fear. Courage. Something else. Whatever it was, it made Harry switch the light on, sit down on his bed, and open the notebook once more.

He skipped the pages that he had already read, and went on to look for anything that could be a useful spell or a rune. He found none of that. The writer, Haines Potter, seemed to have written more of a manifesto than a series of actual lessons for Harry to learn from.

*It is often said that a man should not hope for something outside his reach. Humbug, I say. One must always reach for what is previously thought too grand for him – that is how he grows. What make a man’s influence, however, are the allies he can count on. The network that maps out his presence.*

Harry wasn’t sure if whatever Haines Potter had written about would actually be useful in the long run, but he set aside all doubts for now. The mere memory of the eyes of Bellatrix Lestrange, her words, her soft tone, and the absolute fear she had made him feel wasn’t something to sneer at. He had never felt quite like that before, even though he knew that Draco’s father was almost as highly ranked as Bellatrix.

And yet, Lucius Malfoy didn't have the same atmosphere of darkness around him.

Maybe he just wasn't unpredictable enough? Sirius had often called his cousin insane, but Harry had never really thought that he had actually meant it. What if he *did*? What if Bellatrix really was somehow insane? Could someone’s unpredictability be seen as a sign of madness or was that simply ignorance? She certainly didn't come across as an ordinary person, but that didn’t mean that she wasn’t of sound mind.

Harry hated the idea of being targeted by someone. He hated not being *sure* about that even more. He *really* couldn't tell whether or not Bellatrix was really a threat to him. Maybe she really *wasn’t*? Maybe the threat was just a one-time thing? Maybe she had forgotten already about Harry?

Would he dare to count on that?

*It is rare for stars to be so aligned as to grant a man success without him working for it. For those of us who aren’t so fortunate, success is something we must deliberately seek. How far a person is willing to go and what they are willing to do is what will define their chances of achieving success.*

*I have realized that in the face of desperation and ambition, honour and morality and good and evil are mere words with no meaning.*

*It does not matter who or what one seek alliance with, so long as they will enable the fulfilment of ambition. Allying oneself with powerful families and people – even creatures, in some occasions – is a practice old as time. It is the base of marriages and...*
friendships and at times even procreation. Seeking and gaining the right allies is of utmost importance.

First Tom and now Bellatrix.

How the hell could the Death Eaters be so deprived of entertainment that they would start considering an eleven-year old boy as the next best thing? Shouldn’t they be busy fighting the Rebels? Did the Dark Lord know that his finest were gallivanting around threatening children instead of doing their jobs?

No wonder the Rebels were becoming such a threat if all the adults were so incompetent.

Either way, Harry needed to find a good way to protect himself. He knew that there were no real shortcuts to power— he knew that even if he found out how to gain power, it could take years before he actually achieved that.

But he was willing to try. He didn't know yet how far he could go, didn't know what he would be able to eventually sacrifice for the sake of achieving what he wanted. Harry didn't want to end up like the men in stories that died and had their families killed just because they weren't prepared, but he also didn’t want to end up like the men who gave up too much and lost their purpose for seeking strength in the first place.

Maybe he was overreacting. Maybe not. But the mere thought of meeting Bellatrix again was enough for Harry to yearn for the power to protect himself, no matter the price.

My search for the right allies led me to places no mind can imagine. Should I describe it in words, I would find myself incapable of finding the right language to use. There were many that were worthy, but their pre-existing alliances with other parties are the kind of ties that I seek no involvement in.

I found my answers in the simplest inevitability of human life: death itself.

And in death, I found the Gone Tribe.
He didn’t understand.

The Gone Tribe? Harry had never even heard of anything like that, and he had read quite a lot. As far as names went, the Gone Tribe didn’t sound interesting, let alone cool enough to indicate any merit through association. Going by the context, however, Haines had found them to be quite useful. Would Harry?

It wasn’t that Harry was feeling threatened at that moment, but… he knew that having some other form of defence alongside the manticore shirt would at least help him sleep better at night. The shirt would protect his upper body, but what about his head and neck and arms and— well, the rest of his body as well.

Old tales speak of a race long gone – a tribe of vicious creatures that drive a hard bargain. But oh, glory to the man who allies himself with their kind. The Gone Tribe are, well, gone. They’re gone, until the moment they’re not, and that is when one must learn to battle nightmares in the waking hours.

Perhaps Harry, too, ought to look into what information he could find about this new, strange tribe. If it turned out to be dangerous, he wouldn’t really use the knowledge. He could just keep the knowledge as some sort of a backup plan. A security measure.

‘But then again,’ the boy thought, ‘why waste my time on this at all?’ Harry wanted something he could use to defend himself with. Learning things he would never use would just be a waste of time.

And yet… why did he have this feeling of unease that made him almost sick? If Bellatrix turned out to really be a threat, here he had the solution. Or rather, the possibility of a solution. He wasn’t yet sure if what Haines had found – this Gone Tribe – would even be useful, but what if.

What had brought Bellatrix out to the balcony in the first place? Had she seen him go there? Why would she chase after him?

Harry closed the notebook and rubbed his eyes, knowing that it would be morning soon. The imminent feeling of fear Bellatrix had inspired was slowly vanishing, leaving behind anxiety and confusion. Harry looked down at the notebook again and knew that with it, if he wanted to, he could defend himself. Maybe.

If he wanted to.

‘I need to talk with someone,’ Harry thought, ‘but who?’ He needed advice. Advice that was not only good but also wouldn’t reach the ears of his parents. But who would give him that kind of advice? Gildy? Hardly! While Harry did not think of the man as an ignorant, uneducated fraud anymore, he didn’t think that the ability to survive the wrath of Bellatrix Lestrange was a craft the glittery socialite knew anything about.

Strangely enough, Harry felt as if there was someone he was forgetting. As if he was on the verge of remembering a name that would make him gasp ‘but of course!’ and feel stupid for not remembering them sooner. Sighing, he readjusted his pillow before deciding to sleep, leaving the heavy thoughts for the morning.

Wait.
Sleep?

...unconsciousness...

There was a memory. A vague memory. A familiar memory of a train station... and cold, wet grey weather, trains, an old man—

Oh.

Albus.

Suddenly fully awake, Harry sat up and switched the lights on. His fears and thoughts of Bellatrix and the Gone Tribe were pushed away by the dawning realization that his dreams might not be just dreams after all. Could it really be? If it was a dream, then could he really remember the coldness and wetness and—

'Both times I had that dream, I was knocked out by something or someone else,' Harry thought, 'Maybe I need to knock myself out to get there? But what if I don't succeed?'

Oh well, he had been planning on practicing stunning spells anyway. Might as well practice on himself.

It didn't take Harry long to find the spell needed— it was in a book not his own, but an old defence book that belonged to his mother when she was a third year student in Hogwarts. He was already pointing his wand at himself, ready to say the incantation when he started wondering whether it would knock him out or just petrify him.

'Why is nothing easy in my life?' Harry thought bitterly, 'A guy wants to knock himself out and even that is being hindered. I wonder what exactly the spell was that they used on me at the entrance exam.' Then again, the second time it hadn't been a spell, but an accident. However, Harry doubted that his mother would really approve of deliberate attempts at passing out by jumping through the window.

So did that really leave just Gildy for him to talk with?

Good grief.

*

Harry had eventually fallen asleep, and didn't wake up until half past twelve.

And when he finally, around one o'clock, made it to the living room, he was greeted by a sight that made him almost return back to bed. His parents were there, as well as Sirius. And Gildy. Was this some sort of a message? A nudge from a higher power?

"Harry!" the man exclaimed, beaming, "I came personally to tell you—"

"Yes, yes," Harry cut in, making Sirius and James snicker while Lily looked appalled, "Merry Christmas and all that. Why are you dressed in red and orange? Wouldn't green be more... into the theme?"

"Green isn't really my colour," Gildy sighed, pouting, "It makes me look rather sickly. I didn't want to risk it in case we bumped into your Duelling Instructor."

"Wha— Why would you bump into him here?" Harry asked, feeling indescribable amounts of
confusion at that moment. "And why are you even prepared to bump into him in the first place?"

Harry hadn’t yet bumped into the man in question anywhere, and likely wouldn’t until he started his duelling classes in the future.

"Well—"

"No. I don't want to know."

"You got a letter," James said, changing the subject, "We put it with your gifts. Go on, Harry, it's gift-opening time! Rip those papers to shreds!" Hesitantly, Harry made his way towards the neatly wrapped gifts while his mother left towards the kitchen, saying that she'd bring the food, and James make yourself useful and help me, for Merlin's sake.

"By James, she means the two of us," Harry's father told Sirius, who snorted, but allowed himself to be pulled away. Harry was about to open the first gift when Gildy sat down on the floor next to him and stared at Harry with a serious expression for a long moment.

"Is something wrong?" the man asked finally, "You don't look radiant at all."

"There's just been a lot on my mind," Harry admitted hesitantly, setting down the gift he had been holding, unopened, "I'm confused."

"Maybe talking will help. Sometimes, it really does."

"It's hard to explain."

"Try."

"If you were in danger, or if there was a threat," Harry started, looking at his self-appointed mentor warily, "and the best way to protect yourself would be by doing something you maybe shouldn't. Like, it could be risky and could go against your morals, sort of. What do you do then? Beside seek other alternatives? Because the way that exists is the easiest and probably the strongest, just a bit dangerous."

"You know, Harry," Gildy started with a sigh. "The problem in defence is how far you can go without destroying from within what you are trying to defend from. If you want to protect yourself… do you really have to compromise who you really are to do so? Because if it's harmful—"

"It's not really harmful. Not to me. I think," Harry stuttered, looking lost. It would have been easier to decide if he knew actually what the Gone Tribe was, exactly. "But… it might involve… others. And it'd be for a good cause. I mean, well… I have a really good reason, you know."

"Just because you have a good excuse," Gildy said gently, appearing uncharacteristically sensible and smart, and, fleetingly, Harry wondered if someone had polyjuiced themselves to impersonate the man and give wise advice, "does not make it right. Justification does not make a right out of a wrong, even if it provides an excuse that in turn would allow you forgiveness."

"What do I do, then?" Harry asked.

"What kind of problem is it? A threat, you said?" Harry was about to answer— say something, anything, he wasn't sure what exactly— when he heard his parents and godfather returning.

"I have never quite understood why women love cats," his father was saying, "Cats are independent, they don't listen to orders, don't come in when they're called, they want to spend the whole night out, and when they do come back home, they want to be alone and sleep. In other words: all the things
women hate in men, they love in cats."

"Well, yes, but women aren't out to marry cats, now are they?" Lily shot back, carrying a tray of drinks, "It's the men who have their cat-girl fetishes, am I right?"

"Cat-girls?" Sirius exclaimed with a disgusted expression, "Yuck!"

"You're a dog, Padfoot."

"Why do I have to listen to this?" Harry asked, traumatized, "Wait, why are you people even talking about this?"

"There's nothing appealing about cat-girls," Gildy agreed, "Speaking of appealing… not that I find him appealing in any shape or form—of course not— but does your Duelling Instructor—"

"I have never talked to the man," Harry cut in, "Look, why don't you just corner him or something, if you're so curious about him? Are you a fan of his?"

"Um," Gildy said, blue eyes suddenly fixed on something behind Harry, and with disbelief the boy witnessed a flush making its way up the man's neck, spreading all over his face. Yes, the flamboyant idiot— who was probably not that much of an idiot, actually—was officially blushing.

"Merlin," said Harry and decided that he didn't want to pursue that topic. Ever.

"It's not what you think," Gildy insisted.

"Look," Harry groaned, "I'm eleven. I don't care. Now hand me those tacos and leave me alone."

* *

There was something different about Harry.

Lily had noticed it before—after the entrance exam of Durmstrang, for example. Since then, Harry had gradually, almost unnoticeably, changed in ways that weren't really alarming as much as just confusing. He had seemed to achieve a kind of presence, if it could be called that. As if he was a painting that had only recently gained its colours. He was more outgoing, more confident… and while, indeed, people seemed to notice him much more nowadays, there still was something… almost transparent about him.

Which was ridiculous, since he really wasn't. He was solid, there, sitting and eating tacos while sneering at Gilderoy Lockhart with all his might. And yet, Lily couldn't shake off the feeling… the fear of Harry vanishing suddenly.

"Looking focused, Lily," James said, and she smiled tenderly at her husband.

"Thinking about Harry," she replied, and Sirius grinned.

"He's doing great, isn't he?" the man said, "Makes me proud, he does. Even if he seems to actually like that fraud."

"Gilderoy is a great man," Lily snapped, "Why are you so against him anyway?"

"You know he's queer," Sirius pointed out, and the woman groaned, shaking her head.

"What, don't tell me that you think homosexuality is contagious, you moron," she asked, "Don't be stupid."
"But he might get influenced," Sirius insisted, and Lily hesitated before shrugging. James frowned at the two.

"Would it matter?" he asked, "If Harry turned out gay, I mean. Well, right now, he's not interested in anyone, of course, since he's too young. But eventually, when he grows up. Would it really matter even if he brought in a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend?"

"You need an heir to the Potter line," Sirius reminded him, and James shrugged.

"What I need is to see Harry happy, Siri. You know I've never really given a damn about whether or not the actual Pureblood Potter line continues. If he settles down with a man, he can adopt. Merlin knows there're enough kids out there with no families."

"I understand your point," Sirius insisted, "And I don't have anything against queers in general, but you have to know that if Harry rises up in Death Eater ranks and then gets a male… partner, it will definitely be a scandal. A minor one, but still—"

"Not really," James cut in, "If Harry's influential and high-ranked, and if his partner is high-ranked as well, people will accept it. Catering to power, that's what they do. Hate them when they're weak, love them when they're strong. Sexualities don't matter a whit, and you know that. On the contrary, people will be delighted. That's less one competing pureblood family to them."

"I think the time for this conversation isn't now," Lily said suddenly, forcing a smile, "As you said, James, Harry is still a child, just eleven years old. We don't know what his choices will be. Maybe he'll get to know Ginny Weasley and—"

"You just said that he's still a child," James cut in, feeling suddenly irritated, "Come on, Lily. No matchmaking."

"Look at the time," Gilderoy suddenly exclaimed, standing up, "I must be going now. Thank you for the invitation, dear Lily and James."

"We're glad you could come," Lily said, relieved to find a way out of her current conversation, "You'll be visiting us soon again, yes?"

"I shall try," the man said, shaking her hand before heading towards the fireplace, "I'll see you soon, Harry! Remember what I said, yes? Goodbye!"

'I think he might be good influence on Harry, actually,' Lily admitted to herself, watching her son stand up and grab his gifts— and the letter he got— before heading to his room, 'Harry could learn to be a bit friendlier.'

As soon as Harry closed his room's door behind his back, he dropped the gifts onto the floor and ripped open the envelope of the letter he had received. He had recognized the handwriting and knew it to be from Filippa. Question was, why would she send him a letter? Quickly scanning the words written neatly onto the piece of parchment, Harry couldn't help but gasp, heart skipping a beat. This was not good. Not good at all.

Harry,

I received a message from Heidi two days ago. I don't know what is going on, but it seems that Bellatrix Lestrange has for some reason or another approached Björn, Nikolai, Heidi, Jakob and Truls. She might seek you out as well. She might seek out the
rest of us for some reason or another. I already talked with Lorenzo, who says that Clemens might know something. However, all of my messages have been ignored. As I said, I don't know what's going on, but keep your wand nearby.

Take care, Harry, and see you in a few weeks.

Filippa

"What the hell is going on," he whispered. So Bellatrix had sought out his other friends too? Why? He needed to talk with Filippa. He needed to send her a letter pronto. But an owl wouldn't reach her for a few days, if she was currently in Italy. Would he really have to wait till the holiday ended before talking about this— whatever this was— with his friends?

But if it was true, if Bellatrix had really sought out all of them… would that increase the danger on Harry or decrease it? Why would one of the Dark Lord's finest seek out a bunch of kids? Granted, they were Durmstrang students and the first generation to enter after the change of system there… Could that be the reason? Maybe he should send a message to Filippa and tell her about his theory?

Yes, he could do that.

Scrambling quickly to get a piece of parchment and a quill, Harry scribbled down a short message.

F,

She cornered me too. Could look for all of us. Maybe because we're the true first generation of Durmstrang's new system? Could be dangerous. Be careful. See you.

H.

Harry then hurried out of his room towards the owlery of the Potter Manor, to seek out Hedwig. The snowy owl hooted at him and pecked him once before taking off to where Harry instructed her to go. The boy stared after the bird for a while, before the cold up there became too unbearable for him. He didn't know how long it would take for Hedwig to reach Filippa, but he didn't care. If he was right and the situation turned out to be dangerous, then he might have to end up using the Book of Allies. It'd be—

"Justification does not make a right out of a wrong."

— justified.

Damn you, Gilderoy Lockhart.

So caught up in his thoughts, Harry was, that he missed a step on his way out of the owlery, stumbling at the stairs and falling down, hitting his head and effectively knocking himself out.

* 

The train station was just as grey, wet and depressing as Harry had remembered. Unlike the two previous visits, however, he now knew— or strongly suspected anyway— that this place wasn't a dream, and that Albus wasn't a person his subconscious mind had created during idle hours.

"I want to know," Harry said as soon as he saw the old man, "I want to know if this really is a dream."

"A dream?" Albus said, blue eyes twinkling with delight, "No. goodness, no. This was never a
dream. But then again, a part of you knew that, yes?"


"Most things are," Albus agreed, and Harry shuddered when a bypassing train caused a strong gust of cold wind to hit him.

"I wanted to talk with you," Harry said, "I guess I really did know that you're not a dream. Otherwise, that would have been like asking advice from my mind."

"You'd be surprised by how much your mind actually knows," Albus told him, "It just never tells you. What did you want to talk about with me, my boy?"

"What is this place?" Harry asked, finally sitting down on the bench next to the old man, "I mean, really."

"I told you already, my boy, didn't I? During the first visit, I believe. This is a… stop of sorts. You die, you come here."

"Why am I here then? I'm not dead. At least I don't think I am."

"An interesting question. I do not know the answer, I'm sorry to say."

"But…"

"I believe, however, that you had something you wanted to talk about? Is it truly this?"

"Oh, no," Harry said, returning to his original topic, "I need advice."

"I shall try my best, young man," Albus replied pleasantly.

"What do you know of the Gone Tribe?" Harry asked, and the twinkle in the man's eyes suddenly vanished.

"You must not talk of them here," he said, shaking his head. "You must not talk of them anywhere in fact. They can hear you and could think that you're calling for them. And I assure you, my boy, that you do not want to have them called.

"But it – they – could save my friends and me!" Harry exclaimed, making Albus give him a long, hard stare.

"Why don't you start from the beginning?" the old man asked, "Tell me everything."

And Harry did.

He told Albus about his parents, about the Death Eaters, about the world outside. He told Albus about the brother wand, about Bellatrix, about Durmstrang, and about the rumoured future plans. He even revealed everything about the notebook. After he was done, the old man was quiet for a long time.

"Am I a coward?" Harry asked finally, "Being so hesitant about this all the time…"

"It's not cowardice that stops you from doing this," Albus replied, "I believe it to be common sense and self-preservation. Traits that are rather admirable, indeed."

"I just feel like I'm stuck between should and shouldn't."
"Nobody grows old merely by living a number of years, my boy. We grow old by deserting our ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up your ideals and morals wrinkles the soul," Albus said, and Harry vaguely remembered the quote from a book he had read months ago, "Do you know how that relates to what you're going through?"

"You think that by calling the Go— calling them, researching them, relying on them... I'd be deserting my ideals," Harry said, unsure of what his ideals even were.

"Is that what I think or what we both think?"

"...I don't know. We... Both of us, maybe?"

"It's so easy," Albus started gently, a wrinkly hand resting on Harry's shoulder, "to accept any shortcut when you're in a time of need."

"Someone... well, he's not a friend, really, but let's call him that for now," Harry started, "told me that having a good excuse doesn't mean it's right."

"A wise friend you have there."

"Uh, right. Wise." Gilderoy Lockhart, wise? Well alright, maybe sometimes.

"The hardest thing to learn in life is which bridges to cross and which to burn. You might think right now that sacrificing something great to achieve what you want is worth it, but is it really? Will you be able to live with your choices in the long run?"

"But what other way is there?" Harry asked, "Bellatrix can snap her fingers and skin me alive if I so much as blink in a way that she would consider disrespectful. Or something. I've heard stories about her."

"And you think that solution is found in Dark magic?" Albus asked.

"Where else?"

"Light magic, of course.

"But—" Harry started with a frown, and shook his head. Albus sighed, before explaining.

"Bellatrix, if you have described her accurately, must know most of what there is to know of Dark magic. And yet, there is a common mistake that Dark wizards and witches make— they ignore Light magic, a magic with equal potential and strength."

Harry bit his lip, thinking. He wasn't convinced— he had never really heard people talking of Light magic's power. Sure, it's noble and complimented and commendable, but nobody calls it powerful.

"Say," he then started, changing the subject momentarily to satisfy his curiosity, "Why is this place always so empty, if it's where the dead go before departing to wherever they go?"

"Empty?" Albus said, clearly surprised. "But it is not, my boy. It's actually quite crowded here. Why, can't you see them?"

*I*

"I just found him there," Lily sobbed, sitting next to her son's bed, where Harry was lying, unconscious, "Why isn't he awake yet!"
"He must have hit his head on the way down," Healer Jones said, pulling back from hovering over her patient, "Might have a concussion. Don't worry, though. I'm sure that he'll be alright."

"Is there anything we can do to make him get better sooner?" James asked from the doorway, a troubled expression on his face. Healer Jones shook her head with a small smile.

"It's not serious, Mr. Potter. Your son will be right as rain soon enough. I already did some checking and can assure you that aside from the bump on his head and possible concussion there is nothing wrong with him."

"But concussion is still a brain injury!" Lily exclaimed.

"A mild brain injury," Healer Jones corrected, "Rest is all he needs, Mrs. Potter. I can guarantee that he isn't the first patient with a concussion that I have treated during my career. Now, I believe it is time for me to leave."

"I'll show you the way out," James said, and Lily grimaced after the healer left. Her baby was hurt and so pale and it broke her heart to see him like that. Healer Jones clearly didn't understand the situation– Lily hated seeing even a simple bruise on Harry.

Sighing, she moved to kiss her son's forehead, only to blink with surprise when she saw how… damp his skin was. Harry wasn't usually a sweaty person, which made this slightly odd– besides, his skin was cold. Not to mention that there was this strange smell; it made Lily think of mud and stone, maybe rain and smoke as well.

As if Harry had spent the past moments in a cold, wet place instead of at home, in his room, on his bed.

Could it be that he had fallen down in the Owlery as well, not just the stairs? Being an owlery, it had no glass in the windows and therefore snow must have gotten in. She should see about that– there definitely were charms to keep the snow away while allowing the owls to come and go. What if Harry caught a cold because of this? And what a timing, too! He hadn't even opened his presents yet!

"He's still unconscious?" James asked, and Lily looked up to see him holding on his arm what looked like black robes.

"You have a mission?" she asked in return, and her husband grimaced.

"Note arrived seconds after Healer Jones left. Apparently they've found a werewolf camp that might be willing to start cooperating. I don't know how long this will take."

"Werewolves," Lily repeated with dread, "Take care, James. Be very careful."

"Don't worry love, I won't be alone."

"Alone or not– be very careful. Werewolves are said to be temperamental and physically quick and strong."

"I won't be in the front line," James promised, "Take care of him, yeah?"

"Of course," Lily replied, wondering why her holiday had to be ruined like this.
"But," Harry said, "I see no one! Why can I see you but not them?"

"Perhaps because I'm not going anywhere yet," Albus replied.

"Why aren't you?"

"I'm waiting."

"For who?"

"A dear friend of mine," Albus said wistfully in a way that made Harry feel a bit bad, without knowing why exactly, "Returning to what's troubling you, my boy…"

"Everything is troubling me," Harry sulked, "Everything."

"I'm sure it's not quite that bad."

"It's worse."

"Now, my boy," Albus said and Harry had the suspicion that the man was holding back a chuckle, "Light magic depends strongly on positive emotions such as hope and belief in what is good."

"Are there wizards who can be both?" Harry asked suddenly, "I mean, both Dark and Light."

"Yes. I believe they're called Grey wizards. Neutral ones. They're very rare to find— most people tend to go one way or another, it's simply easier that way."

"Were you Light?"

"Yes."

"And the Dark Lord is, well, Dark of course."

"Indeed."

"And you say that Light can be just as strong as Dark?"

"Yes. You have no need for that tribe, Harry. Give yourself the time and opportunity to learn Light spells— you might find yourself surprised."

"I'll think about it," Harry said hesitantly, and the old man smiled. He didn't say anything, and yet Harry was suddenly sure that even if he would have, Harry wouldn't have heard him. Because once again he was being pulled away and—

— suddenly Harry was awake.

It took him a few moments to open his eyes and see his mother sitting by his side.

"How are you feeling, baby?" she asked him, and the boy groaned in pain when the headache made itself known.

"Head hurts," he replied, "I slipped? Fell down the stairs…"

"And hit your head, yes. Healer Jones said that you'll be alright with enough bed rest. Are you thirsty? Do you need anything?"

"No," Harry croaked, feeling dizzy and just about ready to pass out again. "Just… sleep."
Eventually, it was time to go back to school, and Harry couldn't have been happier. The atmosphere at home was becoming increasingly tense, what with his father being included in a project that seemed to involve werewolves. James was often gone, working from very early till late hours, sometimes staying overnight. From what Harry had understood, the negotiations included making some werewolves learn how to live in wizarding societies, and if a werewolf was to step into the Potter household at any point, Harry definitely wanted to be elsewhere at the time.

Going to school again and meeting his friends was definitely a better alternative. All ten of them had portkeyed to the area in front of their apartment complex, and Harry's heart almost skipped a beat with happiness as he was surrounded by his friends.

"I designed a few clothes for you," Filippa said, hugging him when she saw him, "You'll have to try them on later. The green tie especially."

"You didn't reply to my message," Harry said in response, and the girl offered him a tired smile.

"Didn't know what to say. Talked with Lorenzo about it, though."

"Harry!" Truls exclaimed, pulling the shorter boy from Filippa's arms into his own, hugging him tightly, "How are you?"

"Pretty good, Truls. And you?"

"People!" Heidi called, voice rising above the noise, "We've all got bags to unpack and what not. How about we all go to our flats for now and in an hour or so meet, um—"

"At my place," Petronella offered, "I've got some snacks with me."

"So do I," Jakob said, "I'll bring mine along."

"Sounds good," Heidi grinned with delight as they made their way together towards the dorm building, "I've missed you guys so much!"

"Truls," Harry started quietly, catching the taller boy's attention, "Have you… I mean, I was told that Bellatrix Lestrange—"

"Yeah," the blond boy sighed, "She didn't do much, though. Just stood and stared at that one party I was attending with my sister. It was pretty creepy."

"She… didn't talk with you?"

"No. Maybe she didn't get the chance. Why?"

"I'll tell you later," Harry promised when they reached his apartment, "See you in an hour."

Inside his flat, Harry couldn't resist making a quick check—opening doors of the closets and cupboards, checking under the bed and tables and chairs… He didn't know what exactly it was that he was looking for… but he just had to do it.

*I'm not paranoid,*' the boy told himself while changing into a more casual wear—while he had been wearing the school uniform earlier, there really was no need to do so. School would start tomorrow on Tuesday, and Harry couldn't help but feel slightly disheartened about that—Tuesdays were the longest school days and included two hours of Transfiguration.
Harry stood in the middle of his apartment, feeling cold and wondering whether or not life would have been easier had he decided to go to Hogwarts. Then again, he couldn't imagine hanging out with Draco or Ron instead of Truls and the others. There was just that connection.

Knowing that it wasn't he alone who had been cornered by Bellatrix did make him feel better–surely, together they would be able to find an explanation to what was going on? Now, he would just have to know if he was the only one she actually talked to.

That was still on his mind when he finally made his way to Petronella's place, carrying with him the pumpkin pastries and tuna breads that his mother had packed for him.

"How was your holiday?" Heidi asked, hugging Harry again when he arrived. She, Petronella, Nikolai and Björn were already there.

"Surprising," Harry replied, "But I trust that we'll talk about that later."

"You too, huh," Heidi said, gesturing for Harry to sit down after leaving the snacks on the table.

"I suspect that all of us were… confronted," Harry told her, and sat down between Nikolai and Björn who made space for him just as Filippa and Lorenzo entered the flat.

"Just leave the door open," Petronella instructed, "No one but us is in the building anyway."

"I met your Lockhart," Filippa said, squeezing herself between Harry and Björn, "He's absolutely stunning!"

"He's not my Lockhart!" Harry exclaimed, "And stunning wouldn't be my first choice of word on how to describe him. Besides, you can't have a crush on him."

"Why not?" Filippa asked, looking slightly offended.

"He's definitely gay," Harry told her, but didn't reveal who the man had a crush on.

"Oh, that absolutely blows," the Italian girl exclaimed. "Well, as long as he’s happy, I suppose."

"What?" Clemens, who just walked in with the rest of their group, said, "Blows what? Who?"

"Nothing!" Filippa snapped, "Look, it's a saying! No one is blowing anyone."

"Aww, her heart broke," Jakob mocked and got slapped for his attempt at humour.

"Alright people, if everyone's here then come on and gather around the table," Petronella suddenly declared, clearly enjoying her role as the host, "Come on."

"We have a lot to discuss," Heidi said, closing the flat's door before taking her seat and pulling a glass of water closer, "Order in the court!"

"Yes ma'am," Nikolai said, bowing mockingly, "We'll shut up."

"I'll get directly to the point," Heidi stated, "Those who have been in contact with Bellatrix Lestrange, hands up!"

"More accurately," Harry cut in, "If there's anyone who hasn't been approached by her yet, hands up." Harry couldn't bring himself to even feign surprise when no one moved.

"You were right," Filippa said, before turning to the others, "I got a message from Harry few weeks
ago suggesting that Bellatrix would probably approach all of us."

"But why?" Petronella asked.

"Could be because we're the first generation of Durmstrang's new system," Harry said, "Also, I recall being told that the Dark Lord occasionally tests the upper years. What if Bellatrix has been assigned for us?"

"That would make sense," Truls said, nodding, "But we won't know for sure unless she approaches us at school again." A silence fell over the group and Harry couldn't help but feel warm inside at how comfortable and familial it was. He felt as if he belonged.

"I'm scared," Petronella suddenly whispered, "I mean, we're just first years, but eventually we'll become Death Eaters. And because we're who we are—Durmstrang students, I mean—one day, we'll be out there fighting people who might be even stronger than Bellatrix." Harry, knowing the truth in her words, felt chilled and didn't even notice when Truls's hand had started to grip his own under the table.

"We're together in this," Clemens said, brushing his blond fringe to the side, "All of us. If we train hard, even if we can't defeat people as strong as her on our own, together we'll definitely be able to do so. Father used to say that individually, we are one drop and together, we are an ocean."

"That actually sounds encouraging," Heidi said, her hand resting on Petronella's shoulder comfortingly, "We shouldn't be hasty, though. Perhaps she wanted to just see what we look like for future references?"

"She didn't talk to you?" Harry asked, and the others turned to him.

"No," Heidi replied, "Did she talk to you?"

"Yeah," Harry said nervously, noting that he seemed to be the only one the woman had talked to.

"What did she say?" Truls asked curiously, hand still holding Harry's own comfortingly.

"Threatened to kill me," Harry responded immediately, "Said my eyes are exquisite. Then, she said that I'll make a good Death Eater one day, and that I'll follow in her footsteps to become his most faithful. Or something like that."


"Wish I'd know," Harry said anxiously, "Everything is suddenly complicated in my life."

"You're not the only one thinking that," Jakob said, "But I think we're worrying a bit too early, yeah? Nothing happened yet, and for all we know, nothing might end up happening. So let's just focus on our studies and work hard—no matter what happens, it's bound to be the most rewarding course of action in the long run."

"Because we'll end up on the field anyway," Heidi muttered, "We might have to kill people."

"I wish I could say don't be stupid," Filippa sighed, "but I know you're right."

And Harry, once again, thought of the Gone Tribe.

* 

The next time Harry met Tom was on the fifth of March.
The past few months had flown by as Harry and his friends did their best to focus solely on studying, and, eventually, Bellatrix was mostly forgotten – or at least not the most pressing worry. That didn’t mean, however, that all was well. At school, the sixth and seventh years had started a vigorous training program, and rumours of battles in England and beyond became part of their everyday lives, which in turn made even the youngest students aware of what was going on. Harry, as worried as he was, kept receiving reassuring letters from his mother.

"They say that there's a Rebels camp in Italy, too," Lorenzo once said on their way to a Charms lesson, "My sister is a journalist and our parents are afraid that she'll be sent to report on what's going on in that area."

"It's so weird," Clemens had sighed in response, "Feels like the battles are happening all over the world, not just the UK. Think a war will really start?"

That short exchange was on Harry's mind on that day as he was making his way from his flat towards the Garden of Grindelwald. As much as he enjoyed being with his friends, Harry valued his Sunday mornings as a time of solitude and a rest from all the socializing, and found the garden to be the ideal place for that. This time, however, he had barely stepped into the labyrinth when he saw Tom standing there, staring into nothing with a blank expression.

Stopping few feet away from the man, Harry took in the signs of exhaustion that were visible regardless of how well-groomed Tom was. The man didn't look at him, but Harry knew that he knew that Harry was standing there.

"You look terrible," the boy said eventually, warily. It was strange how he feared Bellatrix so much, and yet, this man who was probably equally ranked didn't omit such aura of madness. The logical part of Harry's mind knew that perhaps this seeming harmlessness was what made this man possibly even more dangerous. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a good place to think," Tom told him, "And you sure don't do that flattery thing, huh?"

"What are you thinking about?" Harry asked, ignoring the second part of what the man had said.

"Oh, the usual," Tom replied dismissively, "The idiocy of some individuals, torture, gore… And why the hell do people mourn for each other even after almost fifteen years?"

"When people care, that's what happens," Harry said, sitting down on a bench not two steps away, "You miss someone?"

"Hardly," Tom scoffed, "The Rebels… I have to understand what makes them fight in the name of someone long dead."

"Like who?"

"An old man. A fool. You wouldn't know him. There has been an unwritten rule against saying his name aloud in England."

"The Dark Lord hated him, then?" Harry asked softly, and Tom looked at him oddly and there was a strange, almost lost look in his eyes.

"The Dark Lord probably hates everyone," Tom finally said, "Even if he doesn't always act like it. Yes. All he really enjoys is causing others pain, and why not? If people are inferior to you, then why should you concern yourself with their petty emotions? They're so fickle anyway."

"Is he evil?" The suddenly blurted question made Tom pause, sigh and stare at the blooming bushes.
for a long time before answering.

"Voldemort doesn’t… believe in good or evil... because there is no good or evil. Not really. There's only power, and those too weak to grasp it."

"That sounds like a villainous catchphrase," Harry remarked, "'There's no good or evil', 'I'll win next time', 'what doesn't kill you makes you the villain', 'brush your teeth'— no, wait, that one was Gildy's."

"Gildy?"

"Gilderoy Lockhart. He's my, uh, mentor."

"Oh. No wonder you're so strange, then."

"Excuse me?" Harry snapped, appalled to the core, "Did you just compare me to— look, the guy wears purple and has a secret crush on Professor Crouch—" The outburst of laughter that cut off his starting rant caught Harry off guard, and he stared wide-eyed at Tom who didn't seem to be able to stop cackling.

And this guy called him weird.

_Ha._ Like he could afford saying that.

"It's not that funny," Harry said, "It's traumatizing."

"You're too young," Tom finally managed to get out, forcibly calming himself down, "To understand."

"It's not like they'll ever meet."

"I wouldn't bet on that."

"Look," Harry said. "You're being weird today. What's wrong with you?" All the amusement drained from Tom, whose face once again showed only boredom.

"It's time for me to go now, I suppose," he said, turning away and starting to walk away, "It was nice seeing you again after so long, Harry."

"You're not going to tell me who it was?" Harry called after him, "The old man? His name?"

"Albus," Tom replied, not turning to look at Harry as he kept walking away, "Albus Dumbledore."

* There couldn't be many men named 'Albus Dumbledore' in history, right? And yet, Harry couldn't find a single thing about the wizard, no matter how much he searched. It was strange. He hadn't dared to ask his parents directly, but had gone and borrowed the book 'Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century' and yet, there wasn't even a mention of the man. Could it be that he wasn't great after all? But if he wasn't that great, why would the Rebels follow his ideals even after death?

No, there had to be something in the equation that Harry was missing.

Right now, Harry was still browsing through that book, sitting on his couch while Filippa and Heidi baked something.
"I still don't understand why you do that here," Truls, who was sitting next to Harry, said to the girls.

"Why not?" Filippa asked, "It's not like Harry ever does anything with this kitchen. I think we all should sign up for cooking lessons. Would you like a raspberry muffin, Truls? Your favourites, I believe. We just finished a batch."

"Are they poisoned?" Truls asked with evident suspicion. Heidi picked one up and took a small bite.

"No," she said, "I promise, they're not."

"No thanks."

"Look," Harry said suddenly, looking up from his book, "That sounds like you would have taken them had they been poisoned."

"I don't trust those girls to not poison me," the Swedish boy replied defensively, "Filippa especially. She would if she could! I mean, look at her glares!"

"I'd rather not. I could die."

"My point exactly!"

"You guys are so childish," Heidi declared, pulling forward a chair to stand on for better access, "I can't wait till I grow up. I want to be tall."

"Growing up means we'll get to go to the parties of grown-ups," Filippa agreed with a grin, "The dresses! Harry, you're going to be my partner in future balls, yes?"

"Why not Nikolai?" Heidi whispered, "I think he likes you." The Italian girl shook her head, but smiled anyway. Harry sighed, feeling utterly bored all of a sudden.

"Shall we go fly?" Truls suggested, "We can leave the girls here."

"Alright," Harry said and stood up, "I miss flying. It's such a pity that we can't play Quidditch properly. Damn those stuck-up second year morons."

The weather outside was just as pleasant as it had been in the morning, if a little bit chillier. The closest Quidditch pitch was, however, occupied by Durmstrang's official Quidditch team and the second string.

"We can walk to the other pitch," Harry said.

"Or watch them play," Truls replied, before pointing out a player who had just pulled off what seemed to be a rather complicated feint, "That's the third year everyone's been talking about. Viktor Krum."

"Lucky sod," Harry muttered, "He can play proper Quidditch whenever he wants to."

"They say he's special," Truls said, "I can believe that. Just watch him fly."

And Harry watched, wishing that he could be where Krum was now. Flying without a care in the world, not worrying about the future and his family and just enjoying his time being a student. Harry couldn't help but think that had he been in Hogwarts right now, what would he be doing? Certainly not be standing next to Truls watching an admittedly excellent Quidditch team practicing.

"Truls," Harry started, still looking at the flying form of Viktor Krum, "If a war starts, what will
"Nothing, I think," Truls replied, "I mean, we'll be here, studying, and it'd take years before they'd make us go fight. And I don't think that the war would last that long."

"What about our families?" Harry asked, "Aren't you worried?"

"I don't want to think about it," Truls admitted, "My family lives in Sweden and will most likely stay safe."

"The future is scary," Harry sighed.

"In more ways than one," Truls agreed.

It was already June— the last of school months— when Harry received a rather worrisome letter from his mother.

My dear son,

I do not know how to tell you this and make it sound less terrible. However, I trust you to behave maturely and accept the situation as it is. You've always been very mature for your age, and right now I truly appreciate that.

Perhaps you remember when your father returned from his first mission regarding the werewolves, during that Christmas break of yours? How his task was to go with a team to investigate werewolf camps and see who were faithful and potentially useful, and then to be trained by wizards? We were told of the possibility of a werewolf being taken in temporarily by a wizarding family, to be taught manners and our way of life.

Our family was chosen to be one of the families that are to take in a werewolf.

Trust me when I say that the werewolf— Remus Lupin is his name— has been made harmless. During the full moon, there are potions and a cage to keep him restricted, and otherwise, there is a collar around his neck that will make him harmless in case he turns out to be a threat. However, I remember Lupin from our school years at Hogwarts— he is a polite, nice man, and had he not been a werewolf, I would have readily called him a friend.

When you come back from school, he will already be here. We have given him lodgings in the basement, where he will stay during the day when James and I are away. You needn't worry, Harry— you will never be in his presence without James, Sirius or I accompanying you, just in case.

I cannot wait to see you again, dearest.

Your loving mother,

Lily

Harry set down the letter numbly, feeling as if his insides had just frozen. He stared blankly through the window at the setting sun and absently thought of how in the world he was supposed to sleep early after receiving this kind of message. Tomorrow would be Friday and he couldn't possibly be anything less than 100% focused since the exams were less than a week away.
But a werewolf.

Harry had never even seen a werewolf, and now he was supposed to live with one?

'Then again, mum did say he's polite and nice,' Harry thought, 'Which can't be said about some humans. I wonder what he will look like. Will he be tall and hairy and with huge teeth?' And suddenly, a memory of the Beauty and the Beast surfaced. The story of seeing beyond the monstrosity that was on the surface. And sure, while the werewolf surely wasn't like the Beast, who's to say that he was a monster?

'That's something I should tell Tom,' Harry suddenly thought, and grinned, 'That the fairytales he sees no point in have taught me to not think of every beast as a monster.' He'd surprise his parents and godfather and try to, well, not make friends with the werewolf, but perhaps to be polite to him. Friendly, even.

Thinking like that made him feel slightly better, and Harry smiled, relaxing slightly. Should he send a response to his mother? Perhaps later— or maybe just wait till he went home. The 31st of July wasn't that many weeks away after all.

The first year at Durmstrang was almost over, and Harry could hardly believe how much had happened and how much he, as a person, had changed. It was rather strange and he wondered if Draco or Ron would notice a difference.

Sometimes, Harry found it funny how his family was regularly associating with families that were a word away from starting a feud. The Weasleys were friends of his parents— truly friends, with similar ideals and hopes. The Malfoys had been introduced through Sirius whose cousin was Lady Malfoy.

He wondered what kind of reactions the two families would have about the werewolf. Maybe the Malfoys had one too?

'I have to ask mum about that, then,' Harry thought while switching off the lights and walking towards his bed, 'I wonder what the werewolf looks like.'

It was three weeks and two days later that he met Remus Lupin.
Chapter 6

Harry had been so prepared to see a monster, that, when he first saw Remus Lupin, he felt almost cheated.

The werewolf was tall—very tall— but also very, very thin. Harry didn't know the man’s age, but there was an odd blend of old and young in him, as though he was young in years but old in everything else. There were a few lines on his face, and his hair was closer to grey than light brown. There were also scars on his face, and his robes were shabby at best. The only thing that actually hinted at him not being human was the pair of golden eyes that seemed to be rather blank. Or maybe tired.

"Are you sure he's a werewolf?" Harry asked sceptically, still dressed in his Durmstrang robes– he had arrived less than five minutes ago and had immediately wanted to at least see their newest houseguest. "Looks pretty normal to me."

"You should see him during full moon, then," Sirius said cheerfully, and didn't seem to notice the flinch of the werewolf at the words. "Shouldn't you get changed and then come tell us about your amazing school year?"

"Changing can wait," Harry said, still staring at Lupin, insides burning with curiosity. "They told us during history lessons that quite a few werewolves were specifically created during the first war to —"

"Harry!" Lily exclaimed, appalled. "The past is past. Let it be."

"Yeah, sure. War makes thieves and peace hangs them," Harry replied, not sure why exactly he was suddenly feeling agitated. Perhaps the Beauty and the Beast had left him with an impression far stronger than he had initially thought? But he couldn't just ignore the feeling of wrongness in this whole thing, especially if that bit of history was really true.

There was an odd expression on James's face as he watched his previously shy son reply to Lily in such manner. Harry's green eyes shone with the same determination that James had seen in Lily's eyes when she had defended Snape from him and Sirius years and years ago. But surely Harry wasn't defending— What was he defending the werewolf from, anyway? The boy hadn't even talked with the creature yet! Was this some power of werewolves? No, impossible. Couldn't be, otherwise it'd have been made known already.

"Go change your clothes and then come to the lounge," Lily said, her voice calm and controlled, "and then we'll introduce you to… him."

"And when you introduce us, will you actually use his name? It's not like I don't know it already," Harry said, heading towards the stairs, not waiting for his mother's reply. There was just something about the situation that didn't sit well with him; it just oozed this sense of wrongness.

"Honestly," Lily huffed as they made their way towards the lounge, "why is he acting like this? He's usually so… not like that. I told him to accept the situation maturely!"

"Maybe it's the shock," Sirius suggested. "It's not every day that a kid returns home to see a werewolf inside."

"I doubt that was the reason, Sirius," Lily sighed, sitting down next to James, who gestured for Lupin to take a seat on the armchair nearby.
"You studied at Hogwarts with us, weren't you?" James suddenly asked, already knowing that he was right. "Which house was it?"

"Yes, sir," Lupin replied, his voice a soft, tired, wary rumble. "Gryffindor."

"Ah, yes. I, er, almost remembered that. Um, well, that was Harry. The boy, I mean. My son," James stammered awkwardly, feeling rather out of his element. He really wasn't cut out for this sort of speeches. "He, er, is…"

"You're not to stay with him in the same room unsupervised," Sirius took over. "He's a curious little fellow, but not stupid. You won't be able to fool him." Sirius might have continued, but the appearance of his godson put a stop to the starting lecture.

"One of the first things they taught as in the Dark Arts lessons," Harry said, entering the room dressed in dark green trousers and a black shirt, "was to never mistreat an ally needlessly."

"Why are you so agitated?" Sirius asked. "I mean, honestly, Harry. Few minutes at home and you're trying to start an argument?"

"I'm not starting an argument," Harry replied evenly, hands clenched into tight fists behind his back. "I just—"

"Dear," Lily said calmly, "sit down. The house-elves will bring you something to eat soon enough. How were your last few days at school?"

"Good," Harry replied, a smile appearing on his face. "There's this guy at school– Viktor Krum. Mum, he flies like an eagle! Truls says he's so going to get scouted once he turns fifteen, and I wouldn't be surprised."

"That good, huh?" Lily asked with an amused smile. "Any best friends we should know about?"

"Truls, I guess," Harry said dismissively. "He's the closest, you know. Then there's Filippa whose life ambition is to become my wardrobe supervisor or something. Mum, you should see the outfits she makes me wear sometimes! I mean, I get that she wants to be a designer, but there was this one purple-pink shirt and I couldn't just tell her no, you know. The girls are scary when one of them cries and says that her feelings have been hurt. Once, Clemens said that Petronella looks a bit like Björn, and it's true, you know, since they both have this really orange hair… but then, Petronella almost cried, and Heidi slapped Clemens and said that girls don't look like guys. Clemens couldn't even snap back at her because Nikolai was there, and everybody knows that Nikolai has a crush on Heidi, and Nikolai is bloody good at fighting."

"Preteen drama," Sirius grinned with delight. "What about you, my favourite godson? Any girls you have a crush on?"

"I don't have time for girls," Harry replied promptly, thinking of all the troubles in his life. "I mean, seriously. No time."

"Your studies are that time-consuming?" Lily wanted to know, and Harry nodded quickly.

"Six days out of seven were spent in classes. Although Björn said– and he should be right, I think one of his uncles is in the school board– that next year we'll have fewer hours even though we'll get Divination to add into the schedule. He said it's because all the basics were already focused on when it comes to Herbology, Creatures and History, so they've lessened those classes a bit. Not by much, though, just that we have only three hours a week Herbology, for example. Unfortunately, we still have Transfiguration thousand hours a week."
"Transfiguration can't be that bad," James protested with a laugh, before returning to the very first, original subject. "Harry, I know your mother wrote to you about this already, and you did see him briefly few minutes ago, but I'd like to introduce the two of you to each other. Lupin, as you know, this is my son Harry James Potter. Harry, this is Remus Lupin. He'll live in the basement, and whenever Lily and I are out, he'll stay there. From now on, that place is off limits to you. Alright?"

"Sure," Harry replied, smiling hesitantly at the golden-eyed man who just eyed him warily, as if suspecting the smile to turn into something else.

His mother had said that the man had been polite and nice… but years in a werewolf camp could change a person even if they had been saints in the beginning. However, Harry swore to himself, just like the Beast had turned out to be no monster, he wasn't going to declare Lupin as one, either.

Not yet, at least.

During the following weeks, Harry didn't see Lupin almost at all. In fact, he hardly saw anyone-- his parents were constantly working, and his godfather seemed to be rushing from one mission to another. The letters from his friends were entertaining, but didn't really fill his days. He had already finished most of the summer homework, and flying alone wasn't that much fun anymore.

This boredom was perhaps the reason as to why Harry didn't pretend to be asleep when Gildy flooed in.

"Harry!" the man shrieked, barging into Harry's room and flinging himself onto the bed, almost squishing Harry under him. "You won't believe what happened! It's time to party!"

"I'm sure you'll tell me," Harry replied, taking in the sight of the messy hair and slightly wrinkly robes. "What's wrong with you?"

"The Defence Against the Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts is gone!" Gildy exclaimed, beaming happily. "And when I say gone, I mean dead."

"You have a party because someone died! Look, start backing away from me right now or I swear I'll start screaming."

"Oh, darling, you're so silly sometimes. Of course I'm grieving because Professor Squirrel-- I think that was his name, or if it isn't, then close enough at least-- died regardless of his relatively young age…"

"Yes. You do look so very grieving," Harry muttered.

"But, as you know, I always look for what is positive," Gildy crowed gleefully, blue eyes sparkling. "I didn't even apply, and yet, I received an invitation to start teaching there! Yes, I, Gilderoy Marshall Hippolyte Lockhart, am going to be an official Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor!"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts? Wait, hold on, Hippolyte?"

"It's a bit like the Dark Arts taught at some other schools, only this one is a bit more into defence than attack," Gilderoy explained, ignoring the second part of Harry's input.

"And you got an invitation…?" Harry asked with disbelief. "Why?"

"Well, who'd be a better option? When Headmaster Yaxley told me of the new position… oh, I was
"Well," Harry said unsurely, "congratulations, I guess."

"Thank you," the man breathed with a blissful smile. "Now, I can ask advice from Bartemius."

"Uh, he's just the Duelling Instructor. The Dark Arts teacher is Ulrich Dietmar and—"

"I don't want to come across as racist, but I'd rather ask an Englishman."

"If Crouch wasn't English, you'd suddenly require some intercultural advice, wouldn't you."

"One day," Gildy said gently, "you will fall in love. When that happens—"

"I'm not going to tell you," Harry deadpanned. "Besides, do you really think that Professor Crouch is going to help you just like that? Reality calling, hello, we got your contact information, classified as Most Urgent—"

"Haven't you always said that practical politics consists in ignoring facts?" Gildy asked, waving his hand dismissively. "And love, my dear Harry, is all about politics. Only that the circles are a bit different. And the rules too. I'll nail him down."

"Coming from you, that sounds alarming. Stop it. And don't stalk him."

"It's not stalking. It's called dedicated observation."

"How did you even get the job?" Harry asked. "I mean, if you didn't apply…"

"Headmaster Yaxley said that he got a recommendation from someone rather influential," Gildy replied. "I wonder if it's that bloke I saw in his office. Very handsome, if a little bit creepy with his odd red eyes."

'No,' Harry suddenly thought when a suspicion attacked his mind. 'He wouldn't. Couldn't.'

"Did this stranger, perhaps, have brown hair as well? A bit taller than you, very pale, very well dressed, and seems to be constantly smirking at something mockingly?"

"Yes," Gildy said, blinking rapidly with surprise, "you know him?"

"No," Harry lied, "just a lucky guess. Work at Hogwarts, huh? Do you already know any teachers there?"

"Well, there's Sybil– she's an old friend. A delightful, if a bit eccentric, woman. Always thought that someone would drop dead and wasn't hesitant in telling them so. Why, I remember when she helped me write Seers and Sirens, she—"

Harry yawned, pressing his face against his pillow, dead set on ignoring the colourful chatterbox in his room.

And eventually, he dozed off.

* *

Pain, confusion, fear. It's cold, he's freezing. The ground is wet, dirty. He is just as filthy.

He's hungry. He's so hungry that he thinks that his stomach will start eating itself somehow.
He wonders if he could buy socks. Warm socks. Thick socks that would at least make his feet less... less like the way they are now.

In the basement, Remus Lupin was trying to ignore the ache of his bones. He was so tired. His body felt heavy and cold, and all he wanted to do was just lay down somewhere and forget everything, including what the hell he was doing here.

He wasn't being mistreated by the Potters, Remus knew that, and he was grateful. He wasn't so naïve as to think that the other werewolves that had been 'relocated' were as lucky as he was. The basement he was in had been cleaned and equipped with a bed, a closet, a table, and a cage he'd crawl into every full moon. He even had his own bathroom. The doorway of the basement was two-layered—first a wooden door that when opened would reveal a set of bars, behind which Remus's room was. House-elves popped in and out four times a day to feed him, and the Potters had even bought him new clothes.

He was hunting. He hates hunting. Hates the aftertaste of blood and raw meat in his mouth after he's done. Hates the memory of a rabbit struggling beneath his hand. Hates the sound of the neck when it breaks.

Hates being a predator.

Yes, he was living now in a condition much superior to the one he had left behind. But at the same time... he didn't see the point in him being here, under an unofficial house arrest, in the guise of being taught how to behave. The Potters— and Sirius Black— ignored him most of the time. Sometimes, Lily Potter would send books on Wizarding traditions for him to read. Books such as The Beast Within by Doug Umbridge, How To Be a Human by Betty Brown, and Humans And The Rest— How To Coexist by Marcus Meliflua.

He hadn't touched those books.

He couldn't.

What he could do, however, was guess what kind of advice the books held within their tasteless covers. It was painful to think of such wounding words being printed to be read by thousands of people. Wrong beliefs that would worm their ways into the hearts of the young, undoing the hard work of Dumbledore who had spoken in favour of acceptance and equal rights. With prejudice, there would be no peace— that he was sure of.

This world, this strange and unfair society, was something Remus couldn't bring himself to accept. He had tried to adapt, once; he had tried so hard. But how can you adapt when the people surrounding you didn't want to give you the chance to do so? Or if the only way they would let you into their world was if you were to take the role of a slave, a creature that was allowed to live only due to their non-existent, whimsical mockery of mercy.

Sometimes he regrets being born.

Sometimes he hates others for making him feel like that.

Hurt, he feels always.

The Dark Lord had created this world, and sometimes, Remus wondered whether or not the man was satisfied with his kingdom. Remus had personally never met the wizard; hell, he hadn't even seen him. It was surprising, really, how most of the wizarding population didn't even know what
their ruler looked like. The Dark Lord had forbidden the papers from publishing any pictures they had of him— if they had any— and at public celebrations, he wore a hooded cape. It was strange, and Remus couldn't understand why, but then again, there was a lot about these power-hungry purebloods that he didn't understand.

‘And yet,’ he thought, ‘the one who baffles me the most is Harry Potter, a half-blood.’

When Remus had been told that he'd stay with the Potters, he got to hear quite a few things of the family that seemed to be full of controversies. The Potter line had been pureblood till James Potter married a Muggleborn witch, who seemed to know more of pureblood traditions and etiquette than her husband. The family was considered to be close to the Malfoys and the Weasleys, which was a whole another level of strange. And their son, their son who has been raised in a well-off household, brought up to pureblood manners and beliefs and attended Durmstrang of all schools… that very same boy didn't seem to hold an ounce of hostility or disgust towards him, a werewolf.

Eyes that glare. Eyes that show pity. Eyes that show disgust. Eyes that show fear.

And eyes that show nothing at all, because they're not looking at him. Will never look at him. Sneers and scoffs and jeers and curses. Hurled words, each one weighing a ton.

He used to have a place. Now he doesn't.

Then again, Remus had hardly seen the boy ever since he arrived. Looked like a perfect mix of his parents— father's hair, mother's eyes, average in height for his age, and a bit to the thin side. Sometimes, Remus could smell the scent of something… something that reminded him of the cold, wet caves he had sometimes had to live in, lingering around the boy. It was the scent of dirty rain and… and something else Remus couldn't quite recognize.

The boy, Harry, had been right, though. During the war, many people had been purposefully turned into werewolves, simply because they were a better weapon to fight with. Stronger, more resilient, faster, easier to control by Dark curses. And far more 'affordable' to lose. But why would an eleven-year old child be taught that, already? Or was making the students jaded as soon as possible a part of Durmstrang's curriculum? What else were children taught to be, nowadays?

'If only Dumbledore had won,' Remus thought bitterly, sitting on his bed, with his back against the stony wall. 'I bet things would have been vastly different.'

It was a few days later when Remus was startled out of his nap by the sound of footsteps approaching. These footsteps, however, weren't those of an adult, and thus, Remus was only slightly surprised when he saw Harry Potter pulling the wooden door open and staring at him from behind the solid, silver bars.

"You shouldn't be here," Remus said, and the boy nodded.

"I know," he replied and shrugged. "I know I shouldn't be here."

"Why are you here, then?" Remus asked gently, sitting on his bed, resisting the temptation of moving.

"I'm not sure," the boy, Harry, said. "I might be curious. And bored. Aren't you bored here?"

"I'm being well taken care of," Remus said carefully. "I am grateful."
"Being grateful doesn't really answer anything, you know," Harry said, leaning his forehead against the bars. "I saw the books mum's been sending you."

"They are educational, for sure."

"Biased material is never the best source of education. The best way to get educated is to learn from a neutral source and form your own opinions."

"That's a smart thing to say," Remus said quietly. "Is there anything I could help you with?"

"Not really," Harry replied. "I just wanted to see you. I have never met a werewolf before. I want to understand."

"Understand what?" Remus asked, honestly curious.

"Have you read the Beauty and the Beast?" the dark-haired boy asked suddenly, and Remus shook his head wondering whether or not the boy had changed the subject or if this had something to do with it.

"I haven't."

"It's a story about a man who looked like a monster," Harry explained, "and he really did look like one. Everyone who'd see him would think of him as a monster. But he wasn't, not really. He was just cursed, against his will, to look like one. I know that being a werewolf is something beyond your control, sort of like that curse. I just want to know if there's more to you than that. I want to understand if you can be a werewolf without being a monster."

Harry would never perhaps find out how much his words meant to Remus, right at that moment. The feeling of tightness in his chest, contractions, giving birth to hope. Tears waiting to fall, disbelief waiting to turn into realization.

"Thank you," Remus breathed, sweaty palms pressed against the cotton fabric of the grey robes he was wearing. The words felt so inadequate in a way they hadn't ever before. Not even when the boy's parents took him in, clothed him and fed him. And when Harry had to leave a few minutes later, lest his parents catch him talking with the werewolf, Remus allowed his tears to fall.

He didn't know what exactly he was crying about.

*

"How's Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

It was the day after he had talked secretly with Remus Lupin, and Harry was at the Weasleys, talking with Ron. His mother had had enough of him moping around the house and promptly sent him to 'reconnect' with Ron Weasley. And reconnect they did. It was much easier to get along with Ron than it was with Draco, for example. Right now, they were sitting in Ron's room, eating home-made cupcakes and drinking tea.

"Hogwarts is neat!" Ron exclaimed. "I'm a Gryffindor, of course. Thank Merlin. Wouldn't know how to live if I was in Slytherin."

"Draco's in Slytherin."

"Yeah, well. Malfoy. One of the many reasons why the house just isn't for me, you know."
"I know," Harry nodded. "He'd probably drive you nuts."

"Doesn't help that some professors favour him," Ron said, managing to almost swallow a cupcake whole. "There's Snape. Malfoy gets away with anything during that greasy git's lessons. Snape's the Head of House of Slytherin, so I guess that could be the reason."

"Severus Snape?" Harry asked and, at Ron's nod, continued, " Snape is mum's friend. Dad and Sirius hate him, though, and he hates them just as much. I don't really know why."

"I can guess," Ron muttered. "Anyone sane would hate the man."

"But my mum does like him."

"Mums are like that. My mum thinks he's a good man, too. I don't know why all mums think like that."

"Maybe they think all he needs is a hug," Harry giggled suddenly, and Ron grinned, eyes sparkling with amusement.

"I'd get detention for life if I was to tell him that. But oh, maybe we should tell Fred and George! They've been pulling these awesome pranks! Bloody hell, you should have seen this one where they charmed the pumpkin juice to turn into bubbles whenever anyone tried to drink! It was brilliant!"

"And they didn't get expelled?"

"No. Headmaster Yaxley just sort of curled his lip like he'd just stepped on shit and said that he'd rather see such fantastic spell work used on something useful. Then he gave detention and docked points off. But it was worth it."

"I wish I'd seen it."

"Don't you pull any pranks in Durmstrang?" Ron asked, brushing his red fringe to the side. "None at all?"

"None," Harry replied, "we'd get probably cursed for that, there. It's a bit strict and the curriculum is killing me. I mean, we don't even have weekends off, only Sundays!"

"Bloody hell!" Ron exclaimed, torn between disgust and pity. "I'm sorry to hear that, mate! What do they teach you there, to need so much time? Hey, wait, I heard that you've got Dark Arts! What're they like?"

"I heard that you've got Defence Against the Dark Arts," Harry asked, just as curiously, "tell me about that?"

"You tell me first about Dark Arts and then I'll tell you about DADA," Ron replied, standing up and grabbing the empty cupcake tray, "but first I'll go refill this– don't want to run out of snacks while talking."

Yes, Harry decided, he really did prefer Ron's company over Draco's. Not that he'd ever tell Draco or Ron about that.

"Durmstrang is turning out to be just as you planned, my Lord," Igor Karkaroff said. The Dark Lord was sitting on his throne, trying to not look as bored as he felt.
"Of course," Lord Voldemort murmured, "I wouldn't have it any other way, Igor. Any specific outstanding talents I should be aware of? I have duelled with your seventh years, the ones that graduated recently. And I have to say that, while they are indeed talented, none are outstandingly so. I hope that the next group of students will be better."

"Yes, yes, my Lord," Karkaroff said quickly, bowing, "The seventh years were still taught by the old system, even if their numbers were cut. I have high hopes for the first years that'll be starting their second year soon. They are our true product, my Lord. The first generation of real Durmstrang students who are being properly educated since the very beginning. Each individual will become an outstanding wizard– or witch– to support our cause. Durmstrang, unlike other schools—"

"If that's another jab about Hogwarts," Yaxley cut in sharply, "then I shall ask our Lord to give me the permission to formally challenge you to a duel."

'Might be entertaining to watch,' the Dark Lord thought, but waved his hand dismissively, "We do not have the time for your hurt pride to be soothed, Yaxley. Karkaroff, do I have to remind you that I graduated from Hogwarts?"

"M-my Lord—"

"Instead of punishing you," Lord Voldemort said, and the spark in his red eyes promised nothing good, indeed, "I have decided that you two are going to volunteer yourselves to go to Italy and give me a report on how the front is dealing there regarding the rebels. Two weeks will be enough, yes? You'll still be returning early enough to keep running your schools."

'That's not really what volunteering means,' his subconscious mind, that was sounding alarmingly lot like a certain Potter boy, said. But if Voldemort can bend and break rules, then he can just as easily bend and break words and their meanings, damn it. Besides, he hadn't seen the boy– Harry– for months, and he refused to listen to a voice that resembled his. Perhaps he should do something to remind the boy of his existence? Yes, he'd pass along a signal of some kind through one of his followers– someone was bound to know the Potters, after all.

"As you wish, my Lord," Yaxley said with a bow, Karkaroff following his example quickly.

"I trust that you have managed to make at least some of the prisoners speak, Mulciber?" the Dark Lord said then. "I will be most displeased if that's not the case."

"My Lord," Mulciber started warily, "there are several things preventing them from speaking, even if they would want to do so. There are oaths and curses and sometimes something as simple as a language barrier is what's—"

“Crucio,” Lord Voldemort said, and sighed while watching one of his oldest Death Eaters shudder and scream under the curse. By the time the Dark Lord had lifted the curse, Mulciber was twitching on the floor, incapable of moving, let alone standing up for the next few minutes.

"The thing is," Lord Voldemort started, voice deceivingly pleasant, "that I hate incompetence. We don't get things done when incompetent people mingle amongst us, hindering our progress, assuming that their lack of competence will go unpunished. We can't have that, now, can we?"

"Of course not, my Lord," Bellatrix Lestrange declared, her voice breathy with delight. "He must be punished. Please, my Lord, let me do it! I can, for you I can do it, and I would do it so well, my Lord! He would never again dare to fail you, I—"

"You, Bellatrix, will be taking over the interrogation," the Dark Lord said softly, and the woman let
out a strangled gasp, full of pleasure. Lord Voldemort then let his gaze linger on one of his most trusted, and a wicked smile twisted his lips. Bartemius Crouch Junior—although after his father's death over a decade ago nobody really bothered with the ‘Junior’ part anymore—stood silently, staring at Mulciber with a disgusted expression.

"Mulgiber, you will take over Crouch's duties as the Duelling Instructor in Durmstrang for the next year," The Dark Lord suddenly decided, and saw Crouch's eyes widening with surprise.

"M-my Lord?" the man started, bewildered. "What shall I do, then?"

"I have assigned a new defence teacher to teach at Hogwarts," the Dark Lord said easily. "Your task will be to… assist him. Perhaps with your help, the quality of Hogwarts education will rise." And even if that didn't happen, it'd be hilarious to see that glittering fraud harassing Crouch.

"Is that not a punishment to Crouch, my Lord?" Karkaroff asked warily.

"Hardly," Lord Voldemort replied. "It'll be just for a year, after which Crouch will resume his job at Durmstrang. He will be rewarded greatly, after his task."

"I live to serve you, my Lord," said Crouch.

"Yes," his Lord said. "Otherwise, you wouldn't live at all. Now, moving on…"

*

"Your birthday is in three days," Lily said while watching her son eat his breakfast, "Is there anything specific that you want?"

"No party," Harry told her, "I know my friends from school wouldn’t probably be able to make it, and I don't want Ron to stress himself to death because of a gift. I also don't want Gildy to take me to another fashion exhibition."

"What do you want, then?"

"There's this book series," Harry started, "The Dark is Rising Sequence. I want it. I borrowed a copy of the second book from Petronella and I want to read the rest of it. I know that I'll like it."

"Who wrote it?" Lily asked, not recognizing the book.

"Susan Cooper," Harry said with practiced nonchalance. "She's a Muggle."

"Why does a friend of yours have a Muggle book? The are no Muggleborns at Durmstrang."

"She got it as a prank from a cousin. She never read it, but mum, I don't care if a Muggle wrote it. The second book was so good. Please?"

"Do you expect me to go to a Muggle-made bookstore just for a story, Harry?" Lily asked, displeased and troubled. "Or, well, a book series?"

"I don't understand why you even have a problem with it," Harry said with a scowl. "Your parents were Muggles. What's wrong with Muggles?"

"Harry," his mother said sternly, "I am not going to discuss this subject with you."

"But why?" Harry wanted to know. "I don't get it, mum. You—"
"Harry," Lily's voice was sharp and her glare was piercing, "when I said that I refuse to talk about this subject with you, I meant it. When you're older, you will understand."

"The Countess of Blessington once said," Harry started, "that prejudices are the chains forged by ignorance to keep people apart. Why shouldn't we mingle with Muggles if we don't tell them about magic? It's not like they can see from our appearances that we're magical, as long as we wear proper clothes that don't stand out in Muggle society."

"Quoting wisdom doesn't make you wise," Lily pointed out. "Now finish your breakfast and tell me what you want for your birthday."

"Mum…"

"Harry, I understand that you are going through this, oh, I don't know what to call it… social justice phase? I'm sure that you've opened your eyes to see the world around you and now think of it terribly prejudiced and narrow-minded, and you think that everything should change and be more… accepting and friendly. But son, the world doesn't work that way," Lily explained. "If we show our magic to Muggles they'll either hate us right away or start depending on us to do everything. Eventually, someone will start a research on how to distribute magic amongst muggles, and who knows how much we will suffer from that? Or perhaps they'll start hunting us with their mass-destructive weapons."

"Fine," Harry snapped. "I didn't say that we should share our world with Muggles. I just don't see why we should mistreat others and think less of them simply because they were born without magic. It's just as absurd as hating someone just because they were born in another country. It's baseless. It's like a story with a bad plot."

"Darling…"

"Look, I know you think that the stories I read are useless, but that's not true. Just because storybooks teach different things from what schoolbooks do, doesn't mean that they're any less educational."

"How long have you waited to get the chance to tell me that?" Lily asked.

"Quite a while," Harry admitted. "Doesn't mean I'm not right, though."

"Honey, you're eleven—"

"Might as well be twelve, mum."

"Fine, twelve. You're twelve. There's so much you still don't know. When you grow up—"

"Sometimes," Harry cut in, feeling strangely disappointed and angry, "I think that you're so focused on thinking of who I'll become tomorrow that you forget who I am today."

"Harry," Lily sighed sadly, feeling helpless. She didn't know what to say, how to make him understand that while she did love the idea of everyone living equally in this world, she also knew that it couldn't happen. Naïve dreams were a part of the stories her son loved but didn't have a place in reality. Any signs of being Muggle-friendly could lead to personal disasters, and Lily didn't want that to happen.

She couldn't say any of that, though. She didn't know how.
The morning of Harry's birthday was rainy.

He was still uneasy with his mother, his father was in a meeting with some other people who were housing werewolves, and Sirius was on yet another mission. Harry didn't get any gifts, and while he knew that it would probably be compensated for later on, it didn't make him feel any less miserable. A bit after half past twelve o'clock, his mother received an urgent call from the hospital, and after a few words to Harry and the house-elves, she, too, left the house.

So, overall, it sucked.

Harry had said that he didn’t want any people visiting, but… perhaps he shouldn’t have said that.

He couldn't even count on Gildy dropping by– the man had visited yesterday, cheerfully telling Harry about how Barty-darling was helping him prepare a teaching schedule, and Harry couldn't believe that Tom was probably playing matchmaker. Just how high-ranked was the man, to be able to pull this off? Because it definitely had to be his handiwork.

'Maybe I'd be able to find out, but I don't even know his real name,' Harry thought. 'I wonder what his views on Muggles are. Probably terrible, considering that he's most likely a very important Death Eater. Does he hate werewolves, though?'

"What a way to spend a birthday," Harry muttered aloud, standing up. Maybe he should go talk with Lupin? It had been quite long since he saw the werewolf, and he couldn't really form an opinion on him if he didn't spend time with him, right? Should he take something for the man to eat? What about books? Harry couldn't imagine it to be too entertaining to be locked in the basement most of the time, especially if the only books he had were the sort his mum picked.

'Maybe I should take a book down with me,' Harry thought. 'But no– if mum sees it, she'll figure out that I gave it to him and I don't know what'll happen. Nothing good, that's for sure.' For all he knew, his mother could decide to punish Harry or request for Lupin to be moved away. And somehow, the thought of Lupin being shipped off to someone who could possibly abuse him made Harry feel really troubled. This, in turn, led to Harry not carrying anything at all with him when he went to see the werewolf.

Lupin was a miserable sight.

He was pale, sickly, and appeared to be in physical pain. There seemed to be bruises all over his body– well, the parts Harry could see, anyway– and there was a new wound near the man's left ear. His amber eyes looked tired and bloodshot when he saw Harry, and yet, he managed to muster up a smile.

"Full moon last night," he croaked, and Harry understood, holding back a shudder.

"Do you need anything?" Harry asked warily. "Anything to eat?"

"No, thank you," Lupin replied. "I was fed recently. What brings you here?"

"I was feeling lonely," Harry replied, and then continued, saying what he perhaps should not have said, "My parents are away and I've been having lots of arguments with mum."

"Do you want to talk about it?" How could a werewolf's voice sound so gentle? Harry didn't get it. Werewolves howled and growled, and, and, and didn't sound that gentle. Suddenly, Harry found himself crying, and he didn't even understand why. Tears came out of nowhere. Or maybe they came from the same place where the words, the words that were suddenly tumbling out of his mouth came from.
It's my birthday and nobody is here and I don't have gifts and my dad and Uncle Sirius are going more and more often on missions and I've heard so many rumours about the upcoming war and my mother works overtime at the hospital and—" Harry's voice wavered then, and he pressed his lips into a tight line in an attempt to prevent a sob from escaping. It didn't work.

He hadn't even realized that he was that upset about not getting gifts. For heaven's sake, he wasn't a kid anymore. But somehow, for some reason, it mattered. Harry wanted to tell Lupin about Tom and Albus and his mother and Muggles and the stories he adored, but he couldn't. He wanted to somehow talk away the pressure in his chest, to tell all his secrets and let an adult fix them because he didn't want to deal with them. He wanted to ask if it was normal for him to feel like his parents were strangers and were doing things that he couldn't accept. It hurt; it hurt so much when Harry had realized that his parents held beliefs that he could never have. He didn't know whether or not he was wrong or his parents, and he couldn't understand why his views were so hard for his mother to accept.

"I hate war," Harry said, voice a mixture of a whisper and a sob, "I hate fighting. I don't want to fight. I don't want my parents to fight. I hate prejudice too, and I... I just want to live in a world where people are judged by what they do, not by who they are."

"The Rebels believe in that," Lupin told him quietly, and Harry shook his head.

"You cannot prevent and prepare for war at the same time," Harry replied sharply, wiping his tears. "You need at least two sides to be able to have a war, and the Rebels are just as much at fault for this war as Death Eaters. And... and I just wish that we'll get to see the day when a war is declared and no one shows up to fight."

"That would be ideal," Lupin sighed.

"But, like mum, you don't believe that it could happen," Harry said.

"I can't tell you. I don't know what the future looks like."

"Neither does my mum but she still doesn't believe in it. Says it's not realistic."

"You shouldn't involve yourself in an inevitable war," Lupin said, and Harry scoffed.

"I'm Harry Potter," the raven-haired boy replied. "My godfather is in the Dark Lord's inner circle. My mother is a hypocritical Pureblood supremacist despite being actually a Muggleborn, and my father is a Death Eater. I've been told by Bellatrix Lestrange to follow in her footsteps. I attend Durmstrang, the military school with the sole purpose of producing perfect Death Eaters. I will be involved in the war when it starts-- and that's a matter of time-- regardless of what I want."

"Are you sure?" Lupin asked, and his tone wasn't gentle or soft or kind anymore. It was sharp, and Harry felt as if he was truly being asked. As if Lupin wanted him to think before answering, and that's why Harry paused for a few long moments before replying.

"I think so."

"So you're not going to work for your dream?"

"It's not the sort of dream I can fulfil on my own," Harry said.

"But you can start it," Lupin said. "If you think that both Rebels and Death Eaters are wrong, then talk to the people who are neither. If you don't think that war is the answer, then make people share your opinion. Put your future in good hands, Harry. Your own."
"I'm just Harry, you know," Harry whispered, suddenly breath less. "Beneath all the big talk, I'm really nobody. I'm, yeah, I'm just Harry."

"Or Harry the Just," Lupin pointed out with a smile that made his amber eyes sparkle mischievously. "How often in life do we complete a task that was beyond the capability of the person we were when we started it. We learn plenty by trying."

"But this is more than just passing an exam," Harry replied, and while he knew that the idea he was entertaining was impossible, his heartbeat still sped up with excitement, and something in him, in his heart, in his mind, shifted, "and I don't want to take over the world."

"You don't need to take over the world to change it," Lupin told him. "Change the people, and with them, the world will change."

"But if I can't even make my parents understand that their prejudices are stupid, then how can I change the world as you say?" Harry said, and the moment during which he believed that he could change the world passed, as if he had never felt so hopeful and magnificent. He was again just one random kid in his parent's basement talking with a down-on-his-luck werewolf. "I'll be going now. I'll be going now. I think I might need to revise a bit– school starts in a month after all."

"All big things started out as an absurd dream," Lupin called after him, still taking care to not stand too close to the silver bars, as Harry made his way out of the basement. "That Dark Lord of yours, for example, couldn't have been born a Dark Lord."

Harry shut the door of the basement behind him and wondered if he could spend the next summer holed up in his flat at Durmstrang.

Probably not.

Two days before his second year at Durmstrang was to start, Harry was woken up by his mother shaking him awake.

"Get dressed quickly and come down to the floo fireplace," she whispered, and there was something almost pained in her expression.

"What time is it?" Harry asked and yawned, cuddling the warm blankets around him. "Do I have to wake up?"

"It's half past four. I have set out your clothes for you," his mother replied, moving away. "If it will wake you up, then shower quickly and then get dressed, Harry. We don't have time." Her voice was still low as a whisper, and Harry yawned again, wondering why she was acting so strangely. He did, however, do as told and, in less than half an hour, was standing half-asleep, dressed in a set of black robes in front of the fireplace. He could hear his mother walking– her high-heeled shoes making a clacking sound against the wooden floor. Soon enough, she appeared in front of him wearing a black dress and a fitting hat that even had a black veil that, while it didn't hide her face, gave a rather mysterious impression.

"Where's dad?" Harry asked.

"He went already before us," Lily replied, brushing off imaginary dust from her son's shoulder. "Behave, alright? Be quiet unless you're spoken to."

"Where're we going? Is it a funeral?"
"No. It's not. I'll explain when we arrive."

And that's how Harry found himself flooing with his mother, her hand gripping his shoulder tightly enough to bruise. Only when Harry stumbled out of the fireplace on the other end, did he realize that perhaps his mother had a real reason to be so concerned. He was in a huge hall that he wasn't sure how exactly to describe—its walls seemed to be made of black stone and the torches floating above their heads weren't a good source of light. Everyone was dressed in black robes, and Harry could pick up the atmosphere—a mix of excitement, fear, disgust and glee.

'What's going on?,' he wondered and noticed that the people present were studiously avoiding what looked like a tall, thick tree with no branches. He also noticed that there were no other people even close to his age present. Feeling increasingly alarmed, Harry grabbed his mother's hand and pressed himself against her side.

"Lily," a familiar voice called, and Harry saw his father and Uncle Sirius walking towards them.

"James," Lily breathed, a sound full of misery, "does Harry really have to be here?"

"The Dark Lord specifically invited all three of you," Sirius whispered. "I do not know why—nobody does, I even asked Snape and Bella and Malfoy. I'm sorry. It came out of nowhere."

"Is this because we're housing a werewolf?"

"I don't think so. It doesn't relate to this at all."

"What is this?" Harry asked, and his father gave him a look that mirrored the one Lily had had when she woke him up. James kneeled in front of his son and grabbed his arms, trying to smile reassuringly.

"Everything will be all right," he said. "I promise you, Harry. Try to focus on something else, alright? List the ingredients of Veritaserum in your head or something."

'You're not exactly making me feel any better,' Harry thought, but kept quiet. James stood up, squaring his shoulders and, grabbing Lily's hand, turned to look at a balcony that Harry hadn't noticed before. Soon enough, the boy realized that it was not only his parents and godfather looking at the balcony but everyone else as well. Strangely, Harry felt an odd kind of pressure in the air long before the glass doors of the balcony opened, and a man wearing a hooded robe appeared. And then, suddenly, everyone was kneeling down. Harry, too, as he was pulled by his mother.

"Rise," the man commanded after a moment, his voice closer to a hiss than anything else. Harry felt his insides twist and blood run cold when the realization dawned. This man, this person who could make all these powerful witches and wizards kneel down like that… this couldn't be anyone else but the Dark Lord Voldemort himself.

"My faithful followers," the Dark Lord started, and Harry couldn't help but feel a nagging sense of familiarity all of a sudden, "thank you for arriving on this early hour to witness the execution of Marius Maucett, accused of treason for protecting Rebels and shielding them from our reach."

Execution.

Execution.

Harry flinched, turning to stare at the branchless tree again, only now realizing that it wasn't really a tree at all, but a stake. Was someone seriously going to be— No, impossible. Not in front of him. This kind of… something just didn't happen in front of him. Harry knew that if his parents could,
they would send him home. But they didn't have the authority— not even Sirius did. What about Tom? If Tom was there, maybe he could allow Harry to go home and not see—

An old man, short and thin and wrinkly and clearly in pain, was dragged by two men towards the stake. He was lifted by a spell to be tied high enough for everyone in the hall to see him, and Harry had to look down when one of the two men spelled seven torches to surround him while the other put up the wards protecting the witnesses from the fire. Harry was feeling increasingly nauseated and wished that he could pass out or just *vanish or wake up* and call this a nightmare. The screams he was hearing weren't his own, but those of the man who was slowly being burnt to death.

The scent of burning flesh filled the room, and Harry wondered why exactly this was happening. Had his parents done something to anger the Dark Lord for the whole family to be punished like this? He didn't want to *see*, he didn't want to *hear*, he didn't want to *smell*. He didn't want to *know*. Harry had so far thought that the captured Rebels were executed by a simple Killing Curse, not in this kind of terrible, inhumane way. To be burnt on the stake was… it was *wrong* in so many ways.

Harry was gripping his mother's hand again, trying to block out everything. He didn't know for how long they stood there— the man didn't die quickly, and most of Harry's thoughts went back and forth between 'I want to throw up' and 'just die already'. He wished he was elsewhere, *anywhere* else. He wished, he wished so hard.

And then, for an instant, everything changed. The scent of burning body changed into that of rain and smoke. The temperature dropped from slightly hot to quite cold. His mother's hand vanished from his grip, and he couldn't hear the convict's screams anymore. Just as soon as Harry had realized the change, everything turned back, and he was left dazed and unsure, trying to make sense of what was happening to him. By the time he came back to his senses, his mother was already pulling him towards the Floo, and Harry caught a glimpse of the Dark Lord staring at— not to sound arrogant or anything— but right at him, *Harry*, of all people.

Even if he was to live forever, Harry doubted that he'd ever forget the execution he had just witnessed. It wasn't right, it wasn't fair, it wasn't *humane*. If law condoned this sort of act, then *the law was wrong*.

But there was nothing Harry could do about it.
"Why, Sirius? Why were we invited?"

"I already told you, Lily, I don't know. I honestly don't know. I can't just march up to the Dark Lord and ask him why!"

From Harry's point of view, the time between the execution and school was spent in a daze.

He didn't feel like he had slept at all, and yet, he wasn't sure what he had done during the hours he was awake. He was vaguely aware of his parents and godfather sometimes trying to talk with him, but he couldn't focus.

How could he, with the scent of a burning human body still lingering around and the screams still ringing in his ears? It was all in his head—Harry knew that. He had showered five times and bathed twice during the past two days, and the clothes he had been wearing for the execution were tucked in a corner of his closet after being washed by the house-elves. There was no way that any scent could truly be so stuck on a person as to survive through all that.

A part of Harry’s mind also thought of the instant during which he had somehow slipped away—Where? To the train station?—but he couldn't wrap his mind around how that could have happened and therefore tried very hard to not think of it at all. Harry was tired of things that didn't make sense.

"What did the Dark Lord say? When he told you to invite us, I mean."

"He asked: who knows the Potters. He didn't give any reasons, and it's not like I could just ask. Then, half an hour before I was to attend the execution, he ordered me to fetch all three of you. He specifically told me to include Harry. He knows Harry's name. He said, *Don't forget Harry Potter.*"

"You don't think he knows about the wand, do you?"

"I… I don't know…"

There was a lot Harry couldn't stop thinking about. Not only the execution itself, but also the man who had ordered it to happen, the hooded man, the Dark Lord, had been there in person. Harry had seen him. Suddenly, having that man's wand's brother felt somehow different. Far more dangerous and risky, and Harry found himself staring at his wand with reluctant wariness. Every time he thought of lifting it and casting a spell, he thought of the Dark Lord's hand curling around his own wand and the Dark Lord's lips ordering the brutal execution.

Had Tom been there? Harry hadn't seen him, though, but he must have been. Perhaps he had been standing behind the Dark Lord or somewhere near him? What had he thought of the execution? Was it a normal occurrence? Did he approve of such events?

It was monstrous. Burning people on the stake. It was… it was… Harry couldn't find the words to describe how exactly it made him feel.

"Maybe it's good that school is starting. It could give him something else to think about."

"Yes… A change of environment could cheer him up. Maybe we should buy him a book? You know how he cheers up after reading a good story."

"He asked for a series of books… I didn't want to buy them because they're written by a Muggle, but
maybe I should get them anyway. James, I hate seeing Harry so sad. Why our baby?"

"He'll be alright, Lily. I promise you. We'll get those books and send them to him, and in no time he'll be alright again."

The execution wasn't something Harry wanted to talk about with his friends, especially if there was a risk of them asking for details about it. But at the same time it didn't feel like something he could just hide away— it'd mean keeping big secrets from his friends, and that didn't exactly make him feel comfortable, considering that he had already several secrets he was hiding. The wand, the train station… even Lupin, in a way, was a secret.

Why were secrets such a burden? It didn't make any sense why hiding some information felt so awful, especially since the information really didn't concern anyone but him. He'd just have to be careful to never mention anything about them, and eventually, he'd get used to it. Harry wished that he could go and talk with Lupin— the werewolf had a rather soothing presence— but with his parents and Sirius home, Harry couldn't do that. Not to mention that Harry's own portkey to Durmstrang would activate in less than three hours, and the likelihood of having the opportunity to sneak away for a chat was non-existent.

Harry wondered if Lupin had ever seen an execution. It was a possibility. How often did the Dark Lord have those executions anyway? How many times— is it a routine already? A tradition that reminds his strongest followers of what happens to people who cross him? Using fear to keep them grounded? Why had Harry been invited, then? Could it be that Tom—? No, no. Tom wouldn't—

"Harry," Sirius said, sitting next to his godson, interrupting his thoughts. "How are you feeling?"

"You don't need to act as if I'm sick or something," Harry replied, "because I'm not."

"Your parents have told me that you've had some nightmares."

"Once. I had only one nightmare."

"Do you want to, uh, talk about it?"

"Would there be any point?" Harry asked. "Have you ever read the Belgariad?"

"No," Sirius replied, wondering if it was a cult book or an introduction to a new religion. "What is it about?"

"It's a story," Harry started. "In that story, there's a god called Torak. His people sacrifice humans for his sake and serve him out of fear, not out of love. Eventually, Torak is defeated by the hero, who does what is right even when he's plagued by fear."

"I see," Sirius said, not really understanding what Harry was getting at. The boy continued after a fleeting smile.

"The Dark Lord uses the same tactic as Torak, even if the people he kills are his enemies," Harry said. "One day, people will get over their fear, and in the absence of fear, how would he control them?"

"You don't know what you're talking about, Harrykins," Sirius said, ruffling Harry's hair. "There's more to control than just fear. Either way, you're way too young to be thinking of such things, yeah? How about we go for a bit of flying before you have to go to school?"

"Alright," Harry agreed reluctantly. Maybe it would, indeed, do him some good.
"Harry!" Filippa shrieked before flinging herself at the boy, hugging him with surprising strength as soon as the portkey took him to the square in front of the apartment complex. "You're taller! Look at you—hey, hold on. Did you stop sleeping or something? Why do you look so—"

"Drop it," Harry said flatly. "Just don't ask. Please, Filippa."

"Are you alright?" the Italian girl asked, previous cheer vanishing, leaving concern in its wake. "Harry?"

"Are the others here yet?" Harry asked instead of replying. "How are you, Filippa?"

"Petronella, Nikolai and Lorenzo are in their flats," Filippa answered, "I had planned on waiting outside here to greet everyone, but I guess we'll see them tomorrow at the homeroom class. We have one already at nine o'clock, and Professor Dietmar will give us our schedules and stuff. And I'm alright, I suppose. Harry, are you sure you're…"

"Filippa," Harry interrupted. "Please."

"Fine," Filippa said. "For now. Fine. Let's go to your flat and I'll make some tea and we'll pretend that you're honestly alright, if that will make you feel better." Harry nodded, feeling relieved, and walked with her to his apartment where she indeed set out to make some tea while Harry went to check that his trunk had indeed arrived safely. He found it in the bedroom. Hedwig's cage was there as well and Harry set her out to fly for a few hours—he knew how much she hated being in a cage.

"What were you doing down there at the portkey square?" Harry asked, sitting down on a chair. "Were you really waiting for everyone to turn up?"

"Well, I just wanted to say hi to everyone as they arrive," Filippa replied. "Lorenzo's feeling a bit down and isn't much of a company. You see, there've been some political fights going on in Italy and rebel activities have been sighted, and since his family lives right in the midst of the Wizarding Rome where it all is happening, they're in a bit of danger. Not to mention that his sister is one of the reporters working on that."

"What about your family?"

"Oh, well, we're not into politics—we work with fashion, all of us, even though it's Aunt Peppita who's the most famous. Everyone knows we're neutral. Besides, my family's mansion is hidden in a muggle neighbourhood in Padua. I'll actually be the first person in my family to become a Death Eater."

"What about Petronella and Nikolai?"

"Petronella said that she forgot to finish one of the summer essays and is going to do that tonight even if it kills her."

"And Nikolai?"

"Well," Filippa started quietly, setting two cups of tea finally on the table and sitting down as well. "Harry, does Nikolai come across as a bit…odd?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked curiously. "I haven't spent that much time with him, to be honest. All I can say is that he's very smart and looks like he's up to something mischievous."
"Mischievous," Filippa repeated. "I don't think so, Harry. I mean, I've heard rumours of him doing pretty nasty stuff. Like burning dogs alive and drowning ca— Harry?" The girl's voice rose in alarm when Harry seemed to lose all colour in his face, his hand clenching the hot cup of tea tightly. Harry, for his part, was feeling suddenly overwhelmingly nauseated, and he didn't want to hear about burning, didn't want to hear about fire, didn't want to hear— Breathing was difficult, and Harry didn't understand why. He wasn't the one breathing smoke in, was he? And yet, he couldn't breathe and he could feel tears burning behind his eyelids and he could hear fire somewhere and—

"Harry," Filippa repeated, soothingly this time, not sure what had triggered such a reaction, moving to sit next to Harry instead of in front of him, gripping his shoulders and trying to make him focus on her. "Just breathe in and out. Come on, calmly. In. Out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Hold on, I'll bring you some water." No, no, he didn't want to be alone right now. Why was he suddenly feeling like this, as if he was back watching the execution again?

"Don't leave," Harry choked out, and suddenly— why was he crying anyway? If he was so terrified, so shocked, so traumatized, why had he waited till now to react? This didn't make any sense, but Harry felt as if nothing really did, and it all was so overwhelmingly awful.

"It's okay," Filippa said, voice wavering slightly. "You can cry. Come on, let it all out." Harry might have made a sound of some sort, before just pressing his face against her shoulder and sobbing loudly, his hands gripping the silky fabric of her shirt. Filippa ran her fingers through his soft hair gently, unsure of what to do to comfort one of her best friends.

Robin Hood had never cried. Had Belgarion? What about Gulliver? Peter Pan? No, his stories had never talked about heroes crying over things like this. Heroes weren't— heroes were so much braver than him. Heck, had even Snow White cried? Cinderella's step-sisters had brazenly cut parts of their body to try and fit their feet into a shoe of glass and probably never shed a tear. If even side characters can man up, then why not Harry, who wasn't a character at all, but a person?

But he just couldn't. These tears might have been waiting for the past few days to be let out, and now that Harry had started, he couldn't stop. He couldn't stop thinking of the execution hall, the fire, the victim… and the Dark Lord. Why had Harry been invited there? Really, why? He couldn't, for the life of him, come up with a sensible reason. Maybe he should ask Tom? If anyone knew, it'd have to be that guy. Maybe he could send a message to him? Would Hedwig be able to find Tom— no. Tom wasn't even his real name, and Harry wasn't sure of how Hedwig could even locate him. Maybe he could try, anyway?

"I'm sorry," Harry croaked, pulling away from Filippa after a while. "I know you don't need any more troubles."

"Don't be an idiot," Filippa replied. "You look exhausted, though. How about you go take a nap?"

"You're not going to ask me anything?"

"Maybe when you wake up, if you feel like you want me to ask about it."

"Are you going to tell the others?" Harry wanted to know, rubbing his eyes. "I mean…"

"If you don't mind, I'll only tell Truls," Filippa told him honestly, "because I know how much he cares for you. I'll bring him here in the evening and we'll catch up, yeah?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said again, "for, well, being like this."

"Don't apologize," Filippa said. "It's just… Harry, don't keep secrets from us if there's no absolute
need for it, all right? Because secrets build a wall around their carriers, separating them from the people around. Secrets can be isolating in a way solid walls can never be. Secrets can make people lonely. At least, that's what my papà used to say. And being lonely is sad."

"Then—" Harry started, but Filippa cut him off, shaking her head.

"I'm still not going to insist for you to tell me now. Go to sleep, Harry. When you wake up, Truls and I will be here. I'm borrowing your key."

"Thank you," Harry breathed, not sure of what else to say. Filippa smiled, and Harry felt that he didn't even have to say anything aloud for her to understand how grateful he was.

Harry woke up to see Truls lying next to him on the bed, reading a book. The only source of light was coming from the wand his friend was holding in his hand.

"What time is it?" Harry mumbled, before yawning and burying his face into the pillow. He felt as if he could sleep forever – it was warm and soft and comfortable and he had the nagging feeling that something was wrong, but he didn't quite remember what exactly that was, and he didn't want to remember, either.

"Half past eight in the evening," Truls replied, shutting his book and setting it on the floor before rolling to face Harry. "Filippa told me that you were crying."

"Oh…" Harry remembered, not only the execution, but also the embarrassing, tear-filled minutes during which he acted like an overgrown baby. What did Filippa think? Good grief, he had been crying! How humiliating.

"Want to talk about it?" Truls asked.

"Not here," Harry said. 'Not ever,' he thought, knowing already that that was one wish that wouldn't come true.

"I think here's the best," Truls told him. "We talk here, and then we move to get some tea and leave the bad thoughts behind."

"Is Filippa…?"

"No. Apparently, Lorenzo is going through some shit right now and she's comforting him. Do you want me to get her?"

"No need," Harry said quietly, and sighed, clenching his eyes shut. He wanted to talk, but wasn't sure from where to start.

"Come on," Truls said, pressing his body closer to Harry and wrapping his arms around his friend. "Don't go into that defensive turtle mode now." That brought out a chuckle from Harry, who then took a deep breath before starting.

"I witnessed an execution," Harry whispered, and instead of tensing, Truls rubbed Harry's back comfortingly, and for those moments it seemed as if only the two of them existed in Harry's world. To hear the heartbeat of someone, to feel their breath and warmth… It meant that they were alive, and that was exactly what Harry needed right then.

"When?"
"Two days ago. It was very early when my mum came to get me. They burnt a man alive. For supposedly helping the Rebels."

"And it makes you feel…?"

"Sick. Angry. Terrible. I don't know. It's just… wrong. I don't know what to tell you, Truls. I don't know how to make this go away."

"Is it just the execution that makes you feel like this?" Truls asked quietly, and Harry shifted, pushing himself up to look down at his friend, seeing only the clear blue eyes in the darkness.

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"The man who ordered that execution…"

"Is the Dark Lord."

"Yeah, and our parents serve the Dark Lord. Eventually we, too, will be servants of the man who ordered that execution," Truls said quietly. "And it's not the first and won't be the last execution that will take place. Actually, it might not be the last execution you'll have to witness. It's not a question of what is right and what is wrong… it's going to happen, Harry. You can't let it bring you down."

"But I can't accept it!" Harry exclaimed, and clenched his eyes shut again to hold back the tears while Truls just pulled him back into the hug.

"You don't have to," Truls told him. "Suck it up now, and when you can, change it."

"How can I stop an execution if it's ordered by the Dark Lord? No matter how influential I could become—"

"You might not be able to ever stop the executions, but you can change the way they're done."

"Oh," Harry said, and felt as if he was on the verge of realizing something great, but he couldn't quite grasp it. "That didn't… cross my mind."

"Yeah," Truls sighed, tugging playfully at his friend's fringe. "Instead of brutal, painful ways, you can order an execution to happen through an overdose of sleeping potion— it's painless, probably. Or the killing curse— it takes an instant. Trust me, my big brother's got a master's degree on killing methods. He studied in Svergies Nationella Magi Universitet, and it's pretty prestigious in its own right."

"Universi…tet?"

"It's basically more school after graduating from any of the normal institutions. It's like… if you want to specialize in something, get a master's degree to teach or anything, you go there to study for a few extra years to become an expert. I'm not clear on the details, though. I'm not planning on studying more after Durmstrang."

"Oh."

"How about we go get something to drink, now?" Truls suggested. "I don't think that tea will be good though— we don't want to stay up all night."

"I've got some herbal infusions," Harry said, sitting up and looking at his friend. "Thank you, Truls."

"You'd do the same for me," Truls told him, fingertips touching Harry's hand. "And you've already
done more."

"Are you doing this because I saved your life?" Harry asked, feeling something inside him twist. Truls shot him an insulted look and shook his head, sitting up as well.

"Of course not," he replied. "The life debt has nothing to do with this. We're friends, Harry. Right?"

"Right," Harry breathed, turning his hand and entwining his fingers with Truls's own. "Best friends."

The following day, everything seemed brighter, somehow clearer even though Harry knew that he'd never really forget the execution and it'd take him quite a while before he'd feel completely alright again. He didn't feel tired anymore, though, and there was an inkling of happiness inside him when he was walking towards the homeroom class with Truls. Certainly enough for Harry to muster up a smile when they entered and saw Filippa, making the girl beam back in response.

"Jakob and Björn are yet to arrive," Heidi sighed. "I hope they won't be late… Truls! Harry! How are you two?"

"Pretty good," Harry replied, sitting down. "And you?"

"I'm fabulous," the girl grinned brightly, her blue eyes sparkling with delight. "We're second years! Did you see any of the new first years yet? Oh gosh, I can't believe we're not the newbies anymore! We're veterans!"

"Well, I wouldn't say veterans," Clemens said, just as Jakob and Björn came in. "I just hope that no one will expect us to mingle with the new first years."

"Let's hope so," Petronella agreed. "Hi Jakob, Björn."

"I wonder what kind of schedule we'll have this year," Filippa sighed. "I can't wait."

"I doubt that it'll be anything good," Harry said gloomily. "Bet you we've still got millions of Transfiguration periods. Every day."

"Oh, Harry," Petronella laughed, leaning to pat his arm, "I'm sure it's not that bad."

"I can tutor you if there's anything difficult," Truls promised just as the classroom's door opened and Professor Dietmar entered. It was odd how that man never changed– always finely dressed and appearing both timid and strangely strong at the same time.

"Today is Tuesday," the man said as soon as he sat on his chair at the front. "Every Tuesday, at nine o'clock, you'll be in this classroom. It's our official homeroom period. I'll pass you your schedules and then address a few points."

'I hope nothing too bad,' Harry thought and couldn't wait to get to see his schedule. The first thing he did when he got the piece of paper was to count the Transfiguration periods– five hours every week. Why so many? Why couldn't they have more… Charms instead?

"As you can see, you'll be starting Divination this year," Professor Dietmar said. "Three hours of Divination by Professor Folke Benyamin. Also, you might notice that, for example, you'll have only four hours of Herbology every week, instead of five like last year. If there's anything unclear, you can just ask– I don't want to waste the whole hour talking about schedules."
'I wonder what we'll learn in Divination,' Harry mused silently. 'I hope it's actually something useful. It'd be so neat to be able to see the future before it happens.'

"You're now starting your second year at Durmstrang, and you will be expected to behave in a manner that brings no shame upon this institution. You are to set an example to all of the other students—old and new. Because you ten are the first generation of what Durmstrang is today. You are expected to keep your educational standards high and have an outstanding academic record…"

'Oh God, that sounds awful,' Harry thought, sighing and getting increasingly distracted. Eventually, he ended up staring at Lorenzo, wondering whether the other boy was thinking of his family. 'If I was in his situation, I probably would try to make a deal with the Gone Tribe to keep my family safe.'

But luckilly, Harry's family was safe. Ever since Lupin had been assigned to their care, Harry's father hadn't been called for any risky, time-consuming missions. His mother worked at the hospital, and Harry was certain that Sirius was strong enough to take care of himself. He couldn't help but feel sorry for Lorenzo, and he wondered if there was anything he'd be able to do to help the other boy. They weren't that close, though, and Harry trusted Filippa to do the job better.

'What about Truls' family, though?' Harry suddenly realized. 'They're into politics or something. Pretty high up. What if they are in danger, too? What if it's Truls who'll one day feel like he's alone? Would I be enough to help him? I wouldn't even know what to say!'

And then Harry remembered the feeling of Truls's hand in his, the comfort sweeping through their entwined fingers, and decided that sometimes words aren't needed as much as gestures.

The first few weeks of school passed quickly. Harry, much to his own surprise, didn't struggle much with Transfiguration so far, and while he would never enjoy the subject, he was no longer actively praying for its banishment from the curriculum.

It was a rainy Sunday evening that found him once again walking through Garden of Grindelwald, enjoying the weather and wondering if he could learn a charm that would keep him shielded from rain if he wanted to read a book outside. So deep in his thoughts he was, weighting theories and possibilities, that Harry at first didn't see the huge snake in the bushes. But when he did see it, Harry froze, feeling his breath catch in his throat and his heart skip a beat, mind trying to calculate whether or not he could run away or if the snake would be able to catch him.

'Maybe I could hex it,' Harry thought, swallowing and trying to stay calm. 'It's so big… I wonder how poisonous it is…'

"She's not going to attack you," a familiar voice said, and Harry was tempted to turn and glare at Tom—because of course it was him, who else would set a massive snake loose on school grounds, damn it— but he wasn't going to turn his back to this creature. Warily, he watched it and didn't relax until he felt Tom standing right behind him, with the man's hand on his shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, still staring at the snake. "Is it… she, he… yours?"

"She is Nagini," Tom replied, "the Dark Lord's pet. I find this garden to be exceptionally enjoyable and therefore decided to share my… enjoyment."

"With the Dark Lord's pet?" Harry said, finally turning his head to look at the man. "There're some things I want to talk about, with you."
"I'm certain," Tom drawled. "Let us go find a seat, unless you wish to stand here while talking. I'm not in the mood of standing still if I can sit."

"All benches are wet," Harry pointed out, allowing himself to be led towards one. With a scoff, Tom used a spell that made the chair dry, and Harry blinked, trying to not feel embarrassed by his error. "Alright, that works, I guess."

"You said you wanted to talk about something specific," Tom said, and his tone was… oddly anticipating.

"What brought you here?"

"Is that what you're curious about?"

"No," Harry admitted, feeling reluctant to get to the actual point and therefore deciding on another topic he wanted to know about. "You… made Gildy—Gilderoy Lockhart—teach at Hogwarts. Just… why? And how high-ranked are you, to be able to make that happen?"

"The school was in need for a Defence teacher, and I simply suggested one," Tom said with a shrug. "There's nothing suspicious about that. Really, none at all."

"You're not trying to play matchmaker, are you? Because now, Gildy has an excuse to harass Professor Crouch, and the thought of you trying to fix up those two is just wrong in so many ways."

"Oh, nonsense. Besides, wouldn't it be amusing to watch the two of them fumble around?"

"I don't trust your motives," Harry deadpanned. "Seriously."

"You're throwing out such accusations with ease," Tom said, smirking. "I'm hurt."

"I doubt it," Harry muttered, brushing his fringe to the side. "I know you have some ulterior motives, and I'm going to find out what. Also, stop avoiding my other question. How high ranked are you, exactly?" Tom shrugged with an amused smile that made Harry immediately sceptical.

"If I told you that I'm actually—," he started.

"Don't be stupid," Harry cut in, and the man's self-assured expression turned into a bewildered one.

"I didn't say anything yet!"

"You were about to say something absurd. Like, like…"

"Like what?"

"Like claim to be the Dark Lord himself, or something."

"That," Tom said, "is because I am."

"Don't be stupid," Harry sighed, casting a pitying glance at the man. "It's alright, though. You're cool even if you don't control half the world."

"This is so bizarre," Tom muttered. "Fine. Believe what you want, but I'm going to say I told you so when you realize the truth."

"If you're the Dark Lord," Harry said, suddenly feeling anxious and far less amused, the dulled feelings from the execution weeks ago surfacing again. "Then… why would you have invited me to
the… to see the… Right before school started. The execution.” Tom stared at Harry for a few long moments with an unreadable expression, before turning away.

"I saw you. You didn't enjoy it," the man finally said.

"Of course I didn't enjoy it," Harry exclaimed. "Why did the Dark Lord want me there? And if you saw me, then, why… why couldn't you… I don't know. I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to see it. It was terrible. Monstrous. Inhumane!"

"Really?" Tom asked, appearing to look honestly surprised. "I thought it was entertaining."

"Entertaining." Harry repeated, finding it suddenly difficult to breathe. "Entertaining?"

"Yes. It's… fascinating, really, to see how permanently a life can end. How some people can be robbed of their tomorrows by a simple order, reminding us that real life is merciless like that. Some people enjoy this by nature. To others, it's an acquired taste. I take it that you belong to the latter category."

"It was wrong, what was done to that man."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?" Harry demanded to know. "He was burnt alive. Didn't you hear his screams or were three weeks enough for you to forget them? Doing something like that to another human being is—"

"Stop," Tom hissed, and there was a tone in his voice that Harry had never heard before. The boy shut up, feeling as if he had just gotten himself into serious trouble, yet not understanding why exactly he was feeling so. "I did notice before, these… moral things you seem to have. I do not understand you. You seem to live in a world of stories you keep carrying around where right and wrong are as different as white and black, and you want to apply that on real life. It won't work. There are no noble knights who can win dirty battles, Harry Potter, and all battles are dirty. Maybe you should realize that there's a difference between real life and fairytales. You need to know that the world is full of ideals, but most of them cannot be applied."

"So what was the point of me seeing that execution?" Harry asked, convinced that Tom was wrong, but not knowing how to express himself well enough to get the message across.

"If it didn't serve as entertainment," Tom replied. "Then maybe it will serve as a lesson. It was a punishment to a Rebel supporter and a warning to others of the same mind-set, and the receiving end was a criminal. What does his life matter?"

"Every life matters."

"What a naïve statement. Next, you'll claim that people are equal— Oh, come on, don't look at me like that. People are not."

"Don't sneer at me," Harry said quietly, staring at Tom with a hurt expression. "People should be treated as equal as long as they haven't done anything to deserve else."

"Of course," Tom scoffed. "And when people become equal everywhere, eventually they start taking liberties. I have the right to do this; I have the right to do that. Then everyone has the right to do everything, because with everyone equal there's no one superior to set the rules of the playground. And you cannot count on the flimsy human morals."
Harry wanted, so desperately, to make Tom understand. But how could he? Harry had thought himself to be eloquent and articulate, and yet, right now, he couldn't find a single word he could use. Disappointed in himself, Harry glared at Tom, vowing silently to never again allow himself to feel this helpless during a discussion.

"You're going to be a Death Eater, not a saint," Tom said after a long moment of silence. "Saint Potter sounds ridiculous, anyway."

"Was it you?" Harry asked. "Who got me invited to the execution?"

"Perhaps."

"I'm not going to change my mind."

"I didn't think you would. You'd probably be a Gryffindor, if you were at Hogwarts." Harry shrugged, not really understanding what exactly being a Gryffindor mattered. "You're blind to the dangers of the irrationalism clouding your judgement."

"I don't understand you."

"That's because you refuse to understand that some people enjoy causing pain. Or rather– are indifferent to it. Also… you're just twelve, are you not? I admit to being disappointed, though. I thought that you'd be mature enough to accept the execution for what it was– instead you view it as a wrong deed and stubbornly refuse to accept the facts."

"What facts?"

"That it happens. And will happen again. That it's a necessity, not something that can be defined as wrong or right." Tom stared at Harry, red eyes narrowed, and the boy suddenly realized that he, in fact, didn't know anything about the man standing in front of him. Tom could be a mass-murdering criminal or a… a madman on the loose or something.

"I don't think we'll reach a point of agreement," Harry said.

"You need to grow up," Tom told him, standing up and reaching for the snake– Nagini– obviously intending on leaving. "Dreaming of ideals in a world that respects nothing but power will be the end of you."

Harry said nothing while watching the man leave.

Suddenly, he was missing Truls almost too much.

Tom, on his part, wondered why he bothered talking with this child whose morals were irritating him. But he was curious– the boy was strange, and as annoying as the boy's views were, Tom was still fascinated. But that wasn't the only thing.

The boy didn't mention it, and Tom hadn't expected him to. He didn't want to ask about it yet, either. Not until he got a confirmation on whether or not the boy had, for an instant during the execution, flickered away.

The following day, Harry was still thinking of Tom during the first period. He couldn't help but feel as if he had… made a mistake. He wasn't sure at which point, exactly, or if he was just being overly suspicious.
'I need to learn more about Tom,' he decided. 'I must. I won't return to the garden before I know at least who I'm dealing with.' But he didn't even know Tom's real name! How he wished that he could ask Sirius and simply describe Tom to him. But then his godfather would want to know how Harry had met the man, and the boy was a bit reluctant to do that.

"For homework," Professor Dietmar said, and Harry started packing his bag with relief. "I want a short essay on five water plants you think are most useful. Dismissed."

"We have Herbology tomorrow already," Petronella whined when they left the classroom. "I hope that we won't be getting any more essays to do today."

"Considering that we've got Dark Arts next, and Professor Dietmar's brother is teaching it, and they seem to share teaching tips, I think that getting another essay to do is very probable," Björn told her. "Wanna bet?"

"You need to control that betting of yours," Jakob said. "Seriously, man."

"Gambling is fun," Björn replied cheerfully. "I'm already starting my personal fortune!"

"Well done," Heidi drawled, making the boy scowl at hear.

"With you girls, it's easy enough to look pretty and snag a rich husband," Björn claimed. "But with us guys, it's different."

"That's right," Filippa suddenly said, although she didn’t sound as if she agreed. "When a woman is useless, it's kind of cute in the archaic circles. When a man is useless, he's just shit. Harry, these are…?"

"Double standards," Harry said, sounding like the term alone was a personal insult of some kind. He shook his head and noticed Nikolai standing a bit to the side, staring at nothing in particular. Ever since Filippa had let it slip that Nikolai enjoyed tormenting animals cruelly, Harry hadn't known quite how to act around the other boy, usually pretending to not know a thing. But sometimes, he couldn't help but remember and shudder, feeling unexplainable fear.

He hadn't noticed anyone else acting strangely around Nikolai, and Harry wondered if anyone but he and Filippa even knew. How had she found out anyway?

"You're quiet," Truls said, startling Harry out of his thoughts. "Is something wrong?"

"I was just thinking about something," Harry muttered. "I, er, think it's best to not talk about it where someone might hear."

"We've got Creatures and Divination after Dark Arts," Truls said. "And then we've got the lunch break. Let's go to my place, then."

"Alright," Harry agreed with a smile just as they entered the Dark Arts classroom.

"I wish we'd start duelling already," Filippa sighed, sitting in front of Harry and Truls.

"But didn't you hear?" Heidi asked, sitting next to her. "I heard that Professor Crouch was temporarily transferred to Hogwarts. Rumour has it that he's helping a professor there." Harry's eyes widened, his mouth falling open.

"What?" he exclaimed. "What?"
"Didn't you know?" Heidi asked, clearly surprised. "How come I know if you don't? I mean, you're Gilderoy Lockhart's pupil, right?"

"Wrong," Harry said. "I'm his nothing. He just occasionally barges into my room—"

"Oh, he can barge into my room any time."

"Filippa! Ew!"

"I read it in Hexogue," Heidi said. "He's got an article there… Harry, I don't want to ask weird questions, but is Lockhart, um, interested…?"

"I don't want to hear this!" Harry yelped. "Whom he's having an affair with isn't any of my business! 'No wonder he hasn't written a word to me yet— he's too busy hitting on Crouch!"

"Oh my God," Heidi gasped, grabbing Filippa's arm. "Lockhart is having an affair with a man! He's gay!"

"Maybe he's bisexual?" Filippa suggested.

"Can we change the subject?" Harry asked. "To something actually relevant?" Heidi smiled oddly, looking for a split-second at Truls.

"How about," she started, but the appearance of the Dark Arts professor Ulrich Dietmar saved Harry from hearing what kind of suggestion she had been about to make.

*Truls's flat was almost identical to Harry's, except that it was slightly tidier and its kitchen was fully stocked.

"My mother keeps sending a house-elf," Truls explained when he saw Harry's surprised expression. "Anyway, we've got two hours till Charms. Want to tell me what has been keeping you down lately?"

"Life in general," Harry replied, sitting down and setting his books on the table in front of him. "How about we work on our Herbology essays while we talk?"

"Alright, I'll just make us some tea. Are you hungry? I can make pancakes or something."

"Tea's enough, thank you. Say, Truls, what do you think of Nikolai?"

"Nikolai?" Truls said, narrowing his eyes. "Why?"

"Filippa told me something about him, and I haven't been able to stop worrying, sort of," Harry admitted. "She said he likes… hurting animals. And, well, is that true?"

"I don't know," Truls replied, relaxing. "Wouldn't surprise me, though. Nikolai's got a bit of a reputation."

"What do you mean? Why does everyone else know this but I don't?" Harry asked, scowling. "Who else but you and Filippa know?"

"I didn't know about him torturing animals, but Harry, Nikolai… Well, just look at him during lessons. He enjoys tormenting the animals during Creatures lessons, in Transfiguration, he asked once if a human can be killed by transforming half of him into something else, he soaks up every
single thing in Dark Arts, in Herbology it's slow poisons that he's interested in… He sets things on fire, is egocentric, isn't hesitant to use violence…"

"I didn't know any of that before."

"It takes time to notice– it's not like he does all that in a day, or even a month. And the issues are never big enough to really be noticed on their own. And Harry, in all honesty, you're not exactly the most observant guy out there."

"I'm dense?" Harry asked, honestly surprised. Truls smiled fondly and set down two cups of tea and a plateful of cookies on the table before sitting down.

"You're a bit dense," Truls replied. "I think it's because you've got your stories filling your head."

"But I know about Björn's budding gambling problem."

"Everyone knows about that. The guy's going to end up in debts before we graduate, I swear."

"Did Nikolai really do all that? You know… hurt animals and stuff. Why?"

"I don't know. I guess he likes it."

"But it's wrong," Harry said, frowning. "It's… it's like that execution. Wrong. Maybe it's a phase?"

"He's got a soft spot for Heidi," Truls said, reaching for a cookie. "If it's a phase, then she will eventually bring him out of it. Clemens says that Nikolai's got the right mindset for a Death Eater, though. He'd know, I guess– his mum has worked with some high-profile Death Eaters before, and apparently, her tales of those are gory."

"Death Eaters," Harry sighed. "Somehow that doesn't sound as neat as it used to."

"What do you mean?" Truls asked. "Is it because of the execution? Every side has that kind of stuff, you know. The Rebels are no better– at least we target criminals, not civilians."

"I don't know what I mean. I just feel so confused about this whole thing, and Truls, what if I have to kill someone, some day?"

"Then you do it."

"It's so easy for you to say that."

"No," Truls said. "It isn't. And right now, I know that neither you nor I would be able to kill anyone. But that's why we're here and not at any other school, Harry."

"Truls," Harry started hesitantly. "Is it wrong… that I want to do what I think is right?"

"I don't know," Truls replied. "But don't worry– even if it's wrong, I'll still stick by you. You're so oblivious that you need someone taking care of you." The Swedish boy smiled reassuringly. Harry felt his own smile falter and looked down at his barely-started Herbology essay.

"Truls?" he said after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah?"

"Would you… Hand me the ink, please."
"Sure?" Truls said, pushing the bottle of ink closer to Harry, even though it had been within his reach already. Harry offered a forced smile and returned to writing his essay, adding a paragraph on Gillyweed. The two sat silently for several minutes before Harry spoke again.

"Truls?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you… um, find this essay easy?"

"Yeah, it's pretty easy. Why? Do you find it difficult? You can copy from me—"

"Ah, no, no. I think it's easy enough, too. Thank you, though."

"Harry," Truls said, reaching to touch Harry's face and make him look at Truls. "What's wrong?"


"Harry."

"You'll… not like me anymore."

"Impossible for that to happen," Truls stated. "What's wrong?"

"There's something you don't know about me," Harry said, not believing that after all these months of keeping it a secret, he was actually going to say it. Truls stared at Harry for a few moments, before moving to sit right next to him and holding his both hands, and Harry continued, "And I just think that you need to know before you promise to support me in whatever I do."

"It's alright," Truls said. "You can tell me."

"Truls," Harry started quietly, nervously, knowing that even though to him it wasn't a big issue… if it was to Truls, he could lose a friend. "I'm a half-blood."

* *

"You're still thinking of him."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Nagini," Tom hissed back. He was alone in his study, browsing through reports about immigrant vampires and contemplating if some of Durmstrang's seventh year students could survive getting a bit of specialized training.

"You keep on making remarks about him," Nagini pointed out lazily. "He's—"

"Infuriating," Tom snarled. "That's what he is. Have you ever met anyone who's so Gryffindor? He thinks people are equal, and he doesn't understand the necessity of executions! He'd probably ban the cruciatus curse if he could!"

"And yet you keep returning to him and you think about him."

"He has the brother wand of mine. I thought that it would matter, but now, I can't help but think how? He's so different. I was never like that."

"If you don't like him, why do you keep thinking of him and visiting him?" Nagini hissed, and Tom got the vague impression that if she could roll her eyes at him, she would.
"I don't like anyone," he said. "I just don't understand him. Sometimes, I catch myself thinking of him as someone who… isn't like other people. As if he's… different? Extraordinary? Which is—"

"True."

"—ridiculous!" Tom blinked a few times in surprise, before turning to give the huge snake a glare. "What?"

"He smells dead and alive," Nagini told him. "As if he's sometimes dead, but humans can't really do that, can they? Die a few times and then wake up again. Because if other humans could do that, they'd smell like him, I'd say."

"What are you talking about?" Tom asked, now completely intrigued.

"The boy," Nagini clarified. "The boy who's got you so fascinated. This conversation is boring me. I want a sunny spot. I'm sleepy."

"The boy has the brother wand of mine which means that the cores of our magic are similar," Tom muttered, ignoring his pet. "What if there's some other connection? But why? How? How can someone die and return to life—Nagini, are you sure? And he did flicker away, vanish, in a place with anti-apparition wards. But he's too young to know how to apparate anyway."

"I'm hungry."

"I should abduct the boy and experiment on him, test his magic and blood and scan his brain, and maybe do the same to his parents."

"I want mice."

"But he wouldn't talk to me after that. Why is he so complicated?"

"Or rats. Fat rats."

"What if he has discovered some other way to become immortal?" Tom paused, frowning. "No, he's too morally correct to do that. He's so much like… Dumbledore…" Nagini looked up at the mention of the name she knew her Master hated.

"Dumbledore," Tom repeated. "Yes, the boy reminds me of Dumbledore a bit… doesn't he, my pet?"

"No," Nagini replied. "I don't remember that human. I remember the name, but not the human."

"So if we could understand certain things about Dumbledore, perhaps I could understand Potter's tiny little immature, idiot brain somehow?"

"Why is understanding him so important? If he's a bother, just get rid of him."

"I think we have to visit a certain someone," Tom decided, reaching for his hooded cape. "Come on, Nagini."

"Where we'll be going?"

"To Nurmengard."

"The term my mum likes to use is first generation pureblood, but I know it's not accurate," Harry
said. "I, er, think that you should know. Just, please, don't tell the others yet. I want to tell them on my own, eventually." Truls stared quietly at Harry for a few moments, during which Harry felt almost nauseous due to how nervous he was. Finally, Truls nodded, and smiled.

"You're still a Potter, though," he said. "And I— you're my friend. Besides, being a half-blood isn't too frowned at, you know. Actually, there've been claims that the Dark Lord himself is one."

"So you don't mind?"

"I don't mind."

"I'm glad," Harry breathed, closing his eyes. "I was scared. Thought that you might, I don't know, treat me differently."

"I won't," Truls promised. "And I'm sure that neither Filippa nor Lorenzo would, either. Or Björn—he doesn't care about blood purity, all he cares about is money. Heidi… wouldn't hate you, but would probably treat you like a child or something. You know, be really protective and think that you're somehow helpless. Nikolai… it's hard to tell, with him. The two who, I'm pretty sure, would feel freaked out are Clemens and Petronella. They both come from families that have really strong ties to Death Eaters for the past generations, and Clemens's parents used to attend the Muggle Hunt parties."

"I'll keep it a secret," Harry decided. "I just… didn't want to… you… well…"

"Thank you," Truls said quietly, and he was so close, closer than before. Harry could feel Truls's breath and could count his eyelashes— that's how close they were. "It makes me happy to know that you trust me."

"Thank you," Harry insisted. "For being… for not, you know…"

"Do you mind me asking… your mother is…?"

"She's a muggle born witch."

"Do you have any muggle things at home? Muggle traditions and the like?" Truls asked.

"No," Harry replied. "Mum is… very strict at keeping all things Muggle away. Dad thinks she's trying to, I don't know, compensate for something. I think it's stupid. Blood purity doesn't affect power and intelligence, so why all the prejudice? What is it based on?"

"Maybe you could ask your mother?"

"I've tried, but she always either changes the subject or scolds me for asking."

"Does she have any family in the Muggle world?" Truls asked. "Maybe if she does and never contacts them, it could be that she's trying to distance herself from anything that reminds her of them. That could be, if they never got along or had a really bad falling-out or something."

"I don't know if she has any Muggle relatives," Harry replied. "What if I have a bunch of Muggle cousins and never knew?"

"Are you going to find out?"

"How? Mum is definitely not going to tell me."

"All we need is a name," Truls said, suddenly grinning. "Then, come summer, the two of us will go
on an adventure to find your relatives. Wouldn't that be like in one of your stories."

"Oh, my God," Harry laughed. "Imagine us walking amongst Muggles!"

"Can't be that hard to deal with, right?"

"We don't know anything about Muggles, aside from that they don't have magic."

"We'll find out. Research."

"Would your parents let you just… do that?" Harry asked, not believing that he was starting to actually think about this. "My parents… I wouldn't be so sure."

"The school year has just started," Truls replied. "We'll figure out something. Anything."
Chapter 8

There were very few places in the world that Tom liked. One of them was Nurmengard.

The towering prison, the grim fortress, the place that, to Tom, signified irony at its finest– hadn't Grindelwald built it and been so proud of it, only to end up a prisoner there himself? Some people had foolishly thought that Lord Voldemort would let out the old man after he took control, but no. The world was too small for two Dark Lords. If Grindelwald wasn't so useful in terms of knowledge, Tom would have killed him decades ago.

Azkaban held his enemies. Nurmengard held the competition.

In all honesty, Tom liked death sentences far more than life sentences– leaving someone troublesome alive was potentially dangerous and could later on in life come and bother him. It was simply unfinished business. Unfortunately, though, it was sometimes necessary to leave an enemy alive, either to experiment on or to use them for their knowledge. And that's why he had such fine prisons in the first place.

"It's cold," Nagini said. "Why is it so cold? Do something; I don't like being cold."

"Be quiet or I'll transfigure you into a cat," Tom replied. "Then you'll have a fur to keep you warm."

"What's a cat again? I know mice because I eat them. Can I eat a cat? I can, right? I can eat anything I want."

Tom didn't bother replying as he had just arrived in front of the cell that held within it his favourite prisoner. Gellert Grindelwald, the man who had almost achieved what Tom had, was nothing but a frail skeletal figure with a skull-like face and sunken eyes.

"Gellert," Tom said, smiling politely, "glad to see you in… good health. Alive."

"Riddle," Grindelwald replied with practiced neutrality. "Who do I have to, ah, thank, for making you seek me out again? What is it that you need this time?"

"What have I ever needed from you?"

"Spells? Lessons in history? Or just someone who talks back to you? I know better than anyone how dull it becomes to be surrounded by groveling, sniveling psychophants all the time."

"I have found someone else who talks back to me, not that I like it, actually," Tom said. "Say, did you understand Dumbledore?"

"What?" Grindelwald hadn't expected that question– in fact, he hadn't expected to hear Albus Dumbledore's name ever again. What was Riddle playing at? What did he have to gain? The current Dark Lord didn't usually get directly to the point like this.

"His views," Tom clarified, annoyed at not being understood immediately. "Did you understand his views of wrong and right?"

"It has been years. I hardly even remember him," Grindelwald claimed, but Tom sneered at the obvious lie.

"He loved you. Doesn't that count for something?"
"What… is this about, really?"

"*Crucio.*" Ah, nothing worked as a better stress relief than causing someone else a bit of pain. Tom didn't like not understanding something, and what he hated even more was having to rephrase his questions just for the less intelligent people to be able to catch up. After lifting the curse, Tom stared at the shaking old man for a few minutes, before sighing. "I ask the questions. Not you. You just answer. Did you understand what made Dumbledore care for what is right and what is wrong?"

"No," Grindelwald croaked. "He just wanted to do the right thing."

"Like when he defeated you, the love of his life, for the *greater good.* Doesn't remembering that make you feel betrayed? And I'm not just talking about him using your own catchphrases against you."

"I never loved him. I cared for him, but I didn't love him. Not that you'd understand the difference."

"I don't believe you, but that's irrelevant anyway," Tom said dismissively. "What I want to understand is why someone would think that people are meant to be equal. It's not true—look at the world. You're there and I'm here, and yet, you once stood where I used to stand. Isn't that a proof of that people aren't *meant* to be equal? Only some achieve greatness and manage to keep it while others achieve greatness and then lose it all. Because unlike me, they weren't meant to lead the world."

"People define greatness in different ways," Grindelwald said, remembering a pair of bright blue eyes and wisdom that went beyond age. "You're what, seventy now? How come you're so *void* of wisdom?"

"Age and the passage of time are meaningless to me," Tom reminded the older man. "I am immortal."

"A fool, that's what you are."

"I'm the Dark Lord!"

"So? I was too, once."

"Yes, and we all know how *that* went."

"Why do you boys insist on acting like two hatchlings comparing their length," Nagini hissed. "Get to the point and then out of here. I'm cold."

"Bossy, that's what you are," Tom hissed in response before refocusing on Grindelwald again. "If you cannot be of any use to me regarding this—"

"You said earlier that you have already found someone who talks with you," Grindelwald cut in. "And now all these questions… Don't tell me… Could it be that the person you have found, is more like Albus than—"

"*Crucio.* This is getting old."

"You need a new favourite curse," Nagini agreed sleepily. "Not the green one, though. It's not fun when they die so quickly and don't even struggle."

"I was talking about having to curse this bastard at least five times every time I visit," Tom hissed, before lifting the curse and staring at the old man with a disgusted expression. To think, Grindelwald
used to be such a powerful wizard…

"He's rather persistent, isn't he?" Nagini hissed.

"There's no rage in my curses today which is why they're not as strong as usual," Tom replied to her. "I need my answers."

"So get them quickly and let's leave. I'm still hungry. Are you going to ask him how someone can be sometimes dead and then wake up?"

"I'll research that before asking anyone."

"Can we get some mice?" Nagini asked again, but her Master ignored her in favour of returning to his questioning.

"If I agreed with you," Tom told Grindelwald, leaning closer towards the bars separating them, "what would you say? What would your answer be?"

"If he is like Albus at all, then I know why you can't understand him," the former Dark Lord rasped, "why you will never understand him."

"And the reason is?"

"He has a heart. And you do not."

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Dear Harry,

It has been a while since my last letter, and I'm sorry about that. I have been very busy with work– there have been so many people injured, and most of us Healers are getting retrained to treat injuries that don't have anything to do with our field of expertise. I'm working overtime. It's terrible, and sometimes, I feel that no matter how many I heal, there are still more left.

I heard Healer Merrick– he's from my department– saying that soon some of us will be sent to the battle fronts to give assistance there. Even if I get picked, my son, do not worry. Mommy knows how to take care of herself.

How are you? I trust that you have been eating and sleeping and studying well? Are there any parent-teacher meetings I should know about? Do you need anything from home? Everyone at home is well. I talked a few times with Mr. Lupin, and he seems to be a decent fellow, regardless of his condition. James says that he has adapted well to life amongst wizards, and I quizzed him about some of the books I gave him– Wizarding traditions and such.

James admitted that if Mr. Lupin keeps up with his progress, he will be able to live alone and get a job by the time your summer break starts. Isn't that lovely? I can't imagine what kind of job he'd get, though.

I spoke with Mrs. Malfoy as well– Bellatrix Lestrange asked about you. How does she even know you? Have the two of you talked? Harry, Mrs. Lestrange is a dangerous, dangerous woman. If she ever approaches you, flee, my son. I admit to being very
concerned over this. What would Mrs. Lestrange want from you?

Mrs. Malfoy said that her sister merely asked how you were doing and whether or not you're as… lovely as she remembers. When did you meet her? I need to know, Harry, even if Mrs. Malfoy assured me that the interest was nothing alarming.

Christmas holiday is still months away, but I miss you so.

I love you.

Mum

PS. I also sent you some books. The ones you asked for. Dark is Rising sequence by Susan Cooper. I hope I remembered correctly. Have fun reading, but don't neglect your homework!

Harry set down the letter and stared at it for several long minutes. It was Friday morning and Harry was supposed to get dressed and hurry to the Transfiguration classroom, but the letter he had just received made him forget all about school and worry about Bellatrix instead. She still remembered him. Why did she still remember him? Maybe Tom had mentioned his name? Somehow, the thought of Tom and Bellatrix being good friends was troubling and made him feel uncomfortable.

And once again, like a wound that had already healed but was now ripped open again, Harry remembered Haines Potter and the Gone Tribe. If Bellatrix was to approach him again— Would he really—? What should he tell his mother anyway? Maybe he should ask Tom? Ah, no, he had already decided to not meet Tom again till he found out more about the man. Maybe he could go after classes to the library to see if there were any books on active Death Ea—

Hold on.

Classes?

"Shit!" Harry exclaimed aloud, rushing to pull on his uniform and deciding to skip breakfast. He had two minutes’ time to reach the classroom, and Harry could only guess what Professor Kay would do to him if he was late. Had Truls knocked? No, Harry was sure that his best friend hadn't tried to drop by. Which was odd. Generally, Truls had been behaving a bit strangely lately, sometimes even avoiding Harry and scowling whenever someone smirked at him.

"Maybe I could ask Ron if that kind of behaviour is normal," Harry thought, running towards the classroom as fast as he could. When he reached the room, he was surprised to see his classmates in their seats already, and yet. the teacher wasn't present.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, sitting next to Truls.

"Jakob fainted," the Swedish boy replied, and only now did Harry notice that, indeed, the German boy wasn't in the classroom. "Nobody knows why. I don't think he was hexed or anything."

"Maybe he's just stressed?" Heidi suggested. "Few badly slept nights, skipping meals, and trying to keep up with long hours of studying and tough sports lessons? That's begging for a dizzy spell, let me just say."

"Did Professor Kay check who're present before he left?" Harry asked quietly, and Truls shook his head.

"No. He was about to, but then Jakob fell off his chair. What were you doing to be this late?"
"You didn't drop by this morning."

"You wanted me to?" Truls asked and looked down at his hands. Harry frowned, not understanding the reason for the question.

"Of course. Why do you suddenly think else?"

"I just… wondered if, maybe, I've been bothering you."

"Nonsense," Harry replied, pulling out his homework. "Did you finish all the essays we should be working on?"

"I've still got Charms homework, but it's for tomorrow so I'll do it today after school. You've done it already?" Harry nodded and was about to give a verbal response when the classroom's door opened, and Professor Kay sauntered in to start the lesson.

'I wonder what's wrong with Jakob,' Harry thought. 'I don't really know him, though. Should I visit him in the hospital wing? I think he hangs out with Lorenzo and Filippa usually.' Zoning out while his teacher talked, Harry's thoughts returned to his mother's letter. She had ventured to a Muggle bookstore to get his books. What had made her change her mind? Was she still concerned about the execution's after-effects? Harry didn't feel shocked anymore—not really. He definitely didn't accept it but he wasn't going to let it bring him down.

When Bellatrix had been his age, had she been like him at all? Somehow Harry doubted that, thinking that she had most likely been similar to Nikolai. What had Bellatrix thought of the first execution she had witnessed? What about Tom?

'Then again, I don't really know her either. I have met her only once and the rest of what I know is based on rumours,' Harry thought. 'I need to forget about Death Eaters and the war and focus on my studies instead. Maybe I'll go fly today after the classes are over. I don't have a broom with me, but I think Clemens once said that the school lends brooms to students.'

Yeah, maybe he really should go flying and forget all about the rest of the world. Especially if Truls was going to be busy writing an essay. Harry was going to fly, close his eyes and enjoy the speed as he sailed through empty skies.

He couldn't wait.

* 

"You're brilliant!" Marlen Redoslav crowed, a huge grin almost splitting his face in half. Viktor Krum smiled awkwardly and shrugged, holding a snitch in one hand and a broom in another.

"It was nothing," Viktor said, his English slightly more accented than that of his friend.

"To you, it probably is," Redoslav nodded, before grinning at a few girls nearby. "You're so going to get scouted, man. Next year, as soon as you turn fifteen. I know it. No team would pass up having a seeker like you!" Viktor forced another smile, trying not to cower under the attention he was getting.

Viktor was a tall, thin, sallow young man with dark hair and eyes. He had a large, curved nose that he inherited from his father and a sharp profile. He wasn't graceful—actually, Redoslav had once commented on how weird it was that despite appearing graceful while flying on a broomstick, he was round-shouldered and duck-footed while on the ground.

Viktor also knew he wasn't particularly good looking. He liked flying, loved it, even. But he
honestly couldn't understand why would someone else care about how quick he was to catch a snitch outside a game, and why it would make him more popular amongst his peers.

"Oh boy," Redoslav sighed, still looking at the group of girls nearby. "If Mette Erling would smile at me like she smiles at you, I'd be a happy man."

"Who?" Viktor asked, and followed his friend's gaze to see a tall girl with sparkling blue eyes and long golden hair. She seemed to be bored more than anything else, and while she was very pretty indeed, Viktor didn't feel that being the receiving end of her smile would make him feel anything.

"Maybe I could escort her inside," Redoslav said, and Viktor shrugged.

"Go ahead. I'll fly for a little bit longer."

"Alright, man! See you later!"

Viktor pushed the snitch into one of his pockets before turning to fly to the opposite direction. He didn't fancy talking with anyone right then— there was something strangely exhausting in socializing with people. He'd rather practice the Plumpton Pass— it was a move considerably harder to make than one would initially think. Viktor felt, however, that if he wasn't capable of pulling that move off perfectly, he wouldn't be good enough to play Quidditch for a living.

He let go of the snitch, waited for a few moments for it to speed away, before he flew after it.

Flying like this, he could forget all about the political complications that seem to be muscling their way into the lives of everyone— even the people who honestly wanted nothing to do with Englishmen and their silly notions of grandeur. Although Viktor wasn't going to say that aloud to anyone— that would be a social suicide if not an actual one. It would cost him his place in the team and his friends, and he most likely would suddenly find himself facing too many enemies to count.

His own classmate Anthony Lestrange would definitely start causing him grief, and the infamous Cassius Meliflua from 6th year would most probably try to kill him either by challenging him to a public duel or by some sneaky, underhanded tactic. Then again, Viktor supposed that criticizing the Dark Lord might very well result to expulsion. It wouldn't surprise him.

Seeing the snitch vanishing behind the broom storage building, Viktor hurried after it, not even considering the possibility of anyone being there.

He had barely rounded the corner when he felt a body knocking against his own, brooms colliding, and only his strong hold on the broom kept him from falling. Whoever he had collided with, however, wasn't so lucky, and with varying degrees of panic, Viktor realized that the body that was falling towards the ground wasn't a hallucination. Panicked thoughts of 'Oh no' and 'Thank God we weren't flying high' short rapidly through his mind as he flew after the person he had collided with.

It was a boy, maybe a second year? Very thin and rather small, with skin so pale that Viktor had to wonder if he was a human at all. His hair, pitch black, was rather messy, and he was wearing casual clothes. His eyes were clenched shut.

"A-are you in pain?" Viktor asked, feeling stupid and guilty while kneeling next to the boy. Of course the boy would be in pain, for heaven's sake. "I'll take you to the hospital wing. I'm very sorry."

He didn't know if the boy was even conscious— what if his unnatural paleness was due to some damage caused by the fall? What if the boy had broken a bone or received some kind of internal injury? Nervously, Viktor used a levitation spell, before hurrying towards the hospital wing.
Harry heard the sound of trains before he felt the cold and smelt the scent he had come to associate with this place.

"You have grown," Albus said as soon as Harry opened his eyes and sat up, seeing the old man standing a few feet away. "I suppose more time has passed than I thought."

"Albus," Harry breathed, feeling strangely relieved to see the old man again, "I fell off my broom. That must have knocked me out. Albus... so much has happened."

"No summoning unknown beings, I hope?"

"No, no. I have, er, decided to not use that option for now. But there's so much else, and I don't know what to think and I feel like I don't really know anyone anymore and my family took in a werewolf and he's nice, but I don't know, my parents don't think so – well, I mean they think he’s nice, but not person kind of nice, more like pet kind of nice. And I saw an execution and I want to know who Tom really is and—"

"How about you start from the beginning?" Albus suggested with a smile. "I'm afraid I did not understand much of what you just said."

"My main concern is about this Death Eater," Harry started, after taking a few deep breaths. "I don't even know his name. I just call him Tom."

"Do you feel threatened by him?"

"No! No. I just... I mean, I know that he's a high-ranked Death Eater. But he's nice. He visits me sometimes– well okay, not really, we just find each other or something. But my point is that he's nice to talk with even if he doesn't seem to understand some very simple things."

"Such as?"

"He doesn't think that people were born to have equal rights. He, well, I saw an execution not too long ago and he doesn't understand why I didn't find it entertaining at all. In fact, I found it terrible, but he just doesn't understand that. It's like there's a bit in his brain that's missing– the part that can process certain kind of feelings. He talks about this current world like it's an ideal place, but ideal for who? Only specific kind of people can be free and happy and—"

"What will you do about it?" Albus cut in, an odd spark in his eyes. "You complain a lot about the world, Harry, but you do nothing."

"I can't change the world!" Harry exclaimed, bewildered and defensive. "Besides, I'm only twelve!"

"But you can change the people," Albus told him gently. "And for that you needn't be any older or younger. Talk to your friends, even this Death Eater friend of yours. If he doesn't understand, then teach him. But for that, Harry, you need to change as well."

"Change how? And... and I don't want to have anything to do with politics."

"Not politics, Harry. People. Like I said, my boy, just because you can't change the world, doesn't mean that you can't change people. And eventually, with enough people, a change will occur. Hopefully for the better."

"I can't— I mean, I'm just Harry, you know," Harry said, the idea of actually doing something
instead of holding his arguments back appearing completely befuddling.

"You biggest obstacle isn't other people, but your own hesitation," Albus said carefully. "That's one thing you must overcome. If you're not sure of your own beliefs, then how can you convince anyone else?"

"But I—"

"There's something wrong with the world, Harry. If you want it to be fixed, you have to fix it yourself."

"If I was to gather people," Harry started, rubbing his forehead. "I… what if… I don't want to start a war, Albus!"

"Why in the world did the idea of starting a war even occur to you?" Albus asked, surprised. "You cannot prepare for peace while preparing for war at the same time, Harry. There are no solutions in wars. Organized slaughter does not settle a dispute; it merely silences an argument."

"I know that," Harry said. "I know that."

"Know what you're fighting for, and what you're fighting against," Albus advised. "Even if you cannot talk to the people as a whole, talk to the few individuals that matter to you. That would be a start."

Harry stared mutely at the old man, feeling slightly overwhelmed. There had been so much else he had wanted to talk about, and yet, he couldn't remember a single thing. Why were they even talking about this? Change the world? Harry wasn't delusional. He couldn't even convince his mother that Muggleborns were just as cool as Pure-bloods— and she was one herself!

"I need to think," Harry said. "I need to… to… I don't know. I need to—"

"Run away?"

"No," Harry snapped, scowling. "Why are you… being so… I don't know. Bossy?"

"Harry," Albus sighed tiredly. "Have you not noticed that I haven't been able to move from where I am standing during this meeting at all?"

"I… er… No, he hadn't noticed, but now that the old man had mentioned it…

"Do you want to guess why?" Albus's voice was so gentle and tired and pitying when he continued when Harry nodded. "Right now this station is so crowded that there isn't enough space for me to walk to where you are. In fact, I can hardly see you– there are so many people between you and I."

"What do you mean?" Harry gasped, leaning back and feeling suddenly slightly scared. He saw no one but Albus there, and the thought of being surrounded by invisible dead people was chilling, to say the least.

"The numbers of those getting killed in the Wizarding World has risen," Albus said. "If this continues, who will be left?"

Harry woke up in the hospital wing, Albus's words still fresh in his mind. It took him a few moments to notice that he was staring into a pair of concerned, dark eyes. Memories of him going to fly– only
to end up crashing into someone and falling down—made him cringe and wonder if he could somehow prevent his mother from finding out what had happened. He could succeed in that if the damage wasn't too bad. Or maybe he should let her know to distract her from asking about Bellatrix?

Why was Harry's life so darn complicated anyway?

"Are you okay?" the vaguely familiar boy asked. "I'm sorry about—"

"It's probably my fault," Harry assured him. "I think I'm okay. Where's the nurse?" And what was her name again?

"I do not know where Madame Siegbert is," the boy said with a shrug, before offering Harry a tight-lipped, forced smile. "I'm Viktor, by the way. Viktor Krum. A fourth year student."

"I'm Harry Potter. Second year student."

"I wish you a swift recovery, Harry Potter, " Viktor said awkwardly, standing up. "I am sorry for causing you this pain."

"It's alright," Harry replied, watching the older boy leave. Barely a second after the hospital wing's door had swung shut, a rustling sound from the bed next to him caught Harry's attention. Jakob was looking at him with a tired smile and a slightly surprised expression.

"You're still here," Jakob said. "How're you feeling?"

"I've got a bit of a headache, but that's all," Harry told him. "And you?"

"Dizzy," Jakob admitted, closing his eyes and resting again against the pillows. "Weak. I keep dozing off, no matter how much I try to stay awake. The nurse says something's wrong with me. She's calling my parents right now to get my medical records sent to her in case there's something of relevance there."

"Oh," said Harry. He didn't know what else to say—was he supposed to comfort Jakob, and if so, then how? Luckily, he was saved from the situation by the arrival of his classmates.

"Harry," Truls breathed, rushing next to him, "are you okay? I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier, but —"

"Chill, Truls," Filippa cut in, rolling her eyes. "Hi Jakob, hi Harry. I'm not even going to ask how the two of you are feeling. Are you hungry, though?"

"Viktor Krum visited Harry," Jakob said suddenly. "The local Quidditch star—"

"Man, you spoke with Viktor Krum?" Clemens exclaimed, eyes wide. "Everyone says that he's going professional as soon as he turns fifteen! Did you get an autograph? Man, I'm so jealous!"

"I'm not," Björn said. "I won't get jealous since my beloved Mette Erling wasn't the one to visit Harry."

"Mette Erling?" Harry repeated. "Who's that?"

"That's Miss Mette Erling to you, my friend."

"One of Krum's fangirls," Petronella said patiently. "Björn's got a crush on her."

"She's perfect," Björn sighed dreamily. "She's so beautiful, isn't she, Truls?"
"Are you seriously asking Truls?" Filippa asked with an odd tone. Björn, Jakob, Clemens and Petronella seemed to smother their giggles while Truls scowled. Harry frowned, confused.

"Why wouldn't he ask Truls?" Harry wanted to know.

"Oh, Harry," Filippa sighed, while Petronella patted his arm. Truls flushed, glaring at the Italian girl.

"Are you going to make a move on Erling, Björn?" Jakob asked curiously. "She doesn't look like she's easily impressed."

"I'm going to confess my feelings to her in a way that is going to make a lasting impression, I assure you."

"Write her a poem," Filippa suggested suddenly. "It'd be such a sweet, romantic gesture!"

"Björn writing poetry," Truls said incredulously, his hand finding Harry's hand under the blanket. "Yeah right."

"I can be very poetic when I want to," Björn claimed. "I could say… Dear Mette, my day went from shit to sunshine the moment I saw you smile. Your laugh made my ill mood vanish like a gust of wind that takes away the scent of that shit."

"I think that's good," Clemens said approvingly. "Really metaphorical. Girls like that, right?"

"No," Filippa snarled. "Try again!"

"Dear Mette, you hit my heart like the Unforgivables. You make my heart twitch like a Cruciatus, you make me wish to obey you like an Imperius, and you take my breath away like an Avada Kedavra."

"I never realized, before this, how much love and the Unforgivables resemble each other," Jakob sniggered. "But she does have a nice smile, that Mette of yours."

"Yeah, but women don't always smile," Clemens said.

"They do to me," Björn replied with calm confidence. "Some even point and laugh."

"I think you're misunderstanding something," Filippa muttered, shaking her head.

"Anyway, I think you should give up on poetry for now, Björn," Petronella said, giggling. "Harry, did the nurse say when you can leave?"

"I haven't seen her yet," Harry admitted. "But that's okay. I'm sure I won't have to stay here overnight."

"Lucky bastard," Jakob sighed. "I'll definitely have to stay here overnight. I just know it."

'If staying overnight in the hospital wing is your worst problem,' Harry thought bitterly, 'then you're the lucky bastard here.'

There was just so much going on, and if Harry was to follow Albus's advice, then… his life would get even more complicated. Would he want that? Was he ready to go out of his way and challenge the Dark Lord's policy and rules? No, definitely not. Besides, he didn't even know from where to start. If he even wanted to start. Which he definitely didn't, because doing as Albus had advised him to do would be pure madness, without a doubt.
It could cause so much grief.

It could bring harm upon him and his family.

His friends would abandon him. Even Truls, probably.

He had thousands of reasons more for staying where he was, challenging no one, accepting the world for what it was.

Somehow, they all sounded more like excuses.

Harry felt like he was standing on the edge of a cliff, and his heart was telling him to jump, while his mind was telling him to turn back.

Harry found a… well, not a solution, exactly, but a way to avoid thinking of his issues. He reread all of the books he had brought with him from home, and it was so easy to forget the world when he was focused on what was happening to Gulliver or wishing that his adventures were more like those of the Peverell brothers. How neat was making deals with Death anyway? Super neat!

Between schoolwork and stories Harry really didn't give himself the time to think about anything even slightly rebellious.

Till the fourth of November, anyway.

When he woke up on that day, everything seemed innocent and normal. It was a pleasant Sunday morning and Harry had planned already to go to the Library to borrow a few interesting books for him to read. And that's what he did– he went to the library, returned the few books he had borrowed before, and then went to look for more.

Except that the usual shelves held nothing of interest– he had read most of the books in that section already, anyway, and Durmstrang unfortunately was severely lacking when it came to story-books– thus forcing him to go look elsewhere for entertainment.

It looked like a corridor like any other. And it was, maybe. Harry should have known that the amount of dust there was a clear sign of it being a not-so-popular place and that maybe there was a reason why people didn't go there. At the end of the corridor there was a door.

From where Harry got the idea that perhaps the door would lead him to something interesting, even he didn't know. The rusty lock of the door broke alarmingly easily when Harry twisted the doorknob with some force and he finally got to enter the room inside.

'Well, isn't this a cosy place,' Harry thought. 'If I didn't have my flat for myself already I'd readily make this my hideout.'

It was tiny, really. One table, one chair and a rather small bookshelf that couldn't possibly be holding more than a dozen books. Dust covered every corner of the room, but Harry didn't care about that. Curiously, he stepped closer to the bookshelf to read the titles. Perhaps he'd find an old fairytale book that he hadn't read yet?

The curious smile fell off Harry's face as soon as he read the first three books' titles. A feeling of fear crept over him and suddenly Harry got the feeling that was he not to turn and look at the empty doorway, he wouldn't see it empty anymore. So he kept his gaze fixed on the book titles, hoping for this unpleasant feeling to pass.
Harry felt very, very troubled. Actually, as he read on, he felt increasingly sick. What were books like this doing in Durmstrang? The amount of dust implied that the books were old, but that couldn't be the case—the books didn't look old.

Harry's expression was changing from a sceptical, disbelieving frown into something else as he read the titles of other books on the shelves. *Time For A Change* was yet another book on leadership. *The Black Book of Persuasion Skills* did seem like something a Durmstrang student would love to read, but who would throw in a book like *that* with books like *this*? And, and, and something just was wrong about this whole thing. Something was very wrong. Harry reluctantly, as if out of his own control, moved to read the next book's title.

*Beyond War— the human potential for peace* by Douglas P. Fry

This couldn't be a coincidence. This couldn't possibly be a coincidence.

He couldn't... it didn't make any sense. Why were books like this... Why did he find this kind of books? Why? It was as if he was being mocked by someone unknown, someone who knew his dilemmas and enjoyed seeing him torn between voice of reason and obligation of morals. Harry couldn't breathe, his heart was beating with absurd speed against his ribcage and right then, it happened again.

--that strange, sliding sensation that had happened during the execution. Cold swept into his body and the scent of rain and smoke washed over him in waves. He couldn't see the room anymore—instead he could see people. They were everywhere, crowding around him, running, yelling, and there was again the familiar sound of trains—

It lasted longer than an instant, this time. No longer than a few seconds, though, but to Harry they might as well have been hours. He stood shaking, back in the room, gulping air as if he had been drowning. He cast a frightened glance at the books before running out of the room, deciding to never enter the place again. It wasn't... something wasn't right. Something in his life was going very, very wrong and he didn't know what exactly the source of this problem was or how to fix it.

'I can't even die to escape this misery,' Harry thought. 'Somehow I feel as if... as if even if I died, it wouldn't be the end of this.'

How he wished to return back to the days that were void of all these complications. Worst of all— he didn't know who was to blame for this, or who could fix it.

But for now, he was going to forget all about this room and the books and the train station. If he could.

*"You're sulking. Stop it. It's annoying me."

"I am not sulking. I'm simply displeased."

"You've been skipping breakfast for weeks. You do that only when you're sulking. Even worse—*
"you've been forgetting to feed me!"

"It's not possible for me to forget to feed you, Nagini. You whine too much when you're hungry."

"Why are you sulking?"

"Why do you care?"

"If it affects my feeding schedule, I have to care."

"I am not sulking," Tom repeated, signing a document approving of some basic plans someone had drawn about a long-forgotten tournament of sorts. "As I told you— I am displeased."

"It's because of that dead-alive boy, isn't it?"

"I do not know whom you're talking about."

"Really?" Nagini hissed mockingly. "The human who—"

"Look," Tom snapped. "Just because Potter hasn't appeared in the garden for the past few weeks doesn't mean that he's avoiding me. And even if he was, I do not care. He's just one little wizard who's absolutely insignificant whereas I am the Dark Lord. I rule the world. Almost. I have everything already. I don't need the company of one little… child."

"But of course."

"I didn't even experiment on him! Why would he stop talking to me? I don't understand! He isn't my enemy and he isn't afraid of me, so what in the world— Why is he so complicated? He's like a… a little woman!"

"I'm sure he'd be flattered to know of the comparison you just made," Nagini hissed. "You... what do you humans call it? Ah. Chauvinistic pig."

"I'm not even going to ask where you heard those words, and I'm going to ignore you," Tom said icily, when he suddenly drew in a sharp breath and narrowed his eyes at his pet. He had a contemplative expression for a few long moments before starting to speak. "You annoyed me, so I decided to ignore you. Could it be that I annoyed him and he decided to ignore me? But what did I do? Should I curse him? I'm yet to encounter a problem I couldn't solve with a curse of some kind."

"I do not see any solutions here."

"Our last conversation was about the execution. He cannot possibly be still angry about that. Is he angry because I invited him? How was I to know that he'd take it so… like that. Was it my disagreement with his naïve, foolish belief regarding equal rights for all humans? I stand by what I said back then. I was right, he was wrong, end of story. Nagini, I can't find a single thing that would make him annoyed at me and lead to making him behave like this."

"You're acting like a hatchling in an adult's body."

"I need to kill someone or I'll be very upset soon."

"You could confront your dead-alive boy," Nagini suggested suddenly. "You could ask him."

"Of course not," Tom replied dismissively. "He'd think that I care."

"Why do you want to still talk with him, then, if you do not care?"
"I told you. He fascinates me. Do I really have to list all the reasons why I'm curious about him?" Tom sighed, and put down the green quill he had been holding all this time in a tight grip. "If I could ask him without him knowing it's me… or if I could just use Legilimency on him…"

"Pity he doesn't speak our language," Nagini noted carelessly. "Otherwise, I would have gone to ask him and spared you all this trouble and confusion." Tom turned to her abruptly, red eyes almost glowing with sudden delight.

"You're right!" he exclaimed. "I just need to figure out a way around the language barrier and—"

"No."

"—will send you to him!"

"This isn't going to end up well," Nagini hissed quietly, while her master rushed to find several books that could be useful. "You're rarely this rash, my human. Think about this. Reconsider. You don't want to send me flying with an owl all the way to where your human is. I hate heights, and it'll be cold. Too cold. And I'll get so hungry that I might thoughtlessly eat the owl and then I'd fall down to my own death. Because of you. Quit acting like a… a… what was that word again? Gruff-in-door? Gruffed-door? Gryffin… Griffin… Gryffindor?"

Secretly, she didn't mind, though. Her master was acting in entertaining ways – like an actual human – when it concerned that dead-alive-boy, keeping her boredom at bay. Not that Nagini particularly approved of human behaviour, but her Tom was. a human– arguably– and dead-alive boy had seemed like a person who wouldn't forget to feed her.

Maybe he'd even feed her rabbits; Nagini was getting sick of rats. If having Tom act more like a typical human would result in dead-alive boy being included in Nagini's life– which in turn would mean more food– she was going to root for it. A snake's gotta eat, after all.

That didn't mean, though, that she was going to allow herself to be sent flying to where the dead-alive boy was. Nagini hissed with displeasure when her Master returned.

"Why are you sulking? You told me last year that you wanted some plans for Christmas. This is it, isn’t it?"

* *

Clearly, Harry's life didn't have enough problems, no. Now Truls was acting oddly. Not that he hadn't been acting slightly weird lately anyway, but it had reached a very strange point that seemed to somehow result in Harry ending up with either Truls's hand holding his own, or Truls touching his hair, or shoulder, or they were sitting a bit closer than before… not to mention that he had started greeting Harry with friendly hugs and often kept his arm thrown over Harry's shoulders.

Few days before the Christmas break was to start, Harry decided to… seek help.

Confused and on the verge of developing a permanent headache, he explained his situation to Filippa.

"Sometimes, I wonder if there's something wrong with you," the girl said mildly, making Harry gape. He was in her apartment, sitting on a chair while she was seemingly busy designing new outfits. Heidi was reading a book on the sofa, but Harry suspected that she was paying far more attention to what he was saying than to what she was supposedly reading– the girl hadn't turned the
"Wrong with me?" Harry said. "I— what? Why me? It's not me who's acting strangely here!"

"How do you feel about Truls?" Filippa asked. "Deep inside your heart, how do you feel?"

"He's my best friend," Harry replied, starting to become even more confused than before. "What should I be feeling towards him?"

"Let's put it this way," Filippa started. "If I told you that Truls feels… urges towards you. That he… wants to give you a whole new experience and show you, er, something very… new? Well, new to you two as people but not to the mankind, actually. People have been doing this and that ever since they realized that there're holes in human bodies that can fit… stuff… inside. Like, er, metaphorical wands."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Harry asked, and he could see Heidi's form shaking while she kept the book pressed against her face. Was she crying or something? He didn't hear sniffling.

"Truls wants to show you his true… He wants to give you a ride, Harry. And, and, and… give you a colourful experience."

"Is he taking me to a carnival?"

"Oh, it would be a carnival alright," Heidi said, her voice strangely muffled. Harry glanced at her only to see that she had replaced the book with a pillow and was pressing it against her face while she was still shaking. Was she all right?

"Harry," Filippa started. "Have you had the talk yet?"

"What?"

"The talk. About sex."

"Oh," Harry flushed, and coughed. "Yes. Somewhat." Sirius had done a terrible job by using a donut and a lollipop and jelly to explain some facts few years ago. But Harry had gotten the gist of it. Besides, he wasn't completely ignorant— he had read books after all that had quite explicit scenes. His personal conclusion had ended up being that sex was rather messy and too taxing to be of interest to him.

"And you know about puberty?"

"Yes."

"And about sexual urges?"

"Yes…"

"There you go, then!" Filippa exclaimed, feeling immensely relieved that her task was over. Harry blinked owlishly at her, before tilting his head to the side while a frown appeared on his face. He thought about asking for more clarifications, but he feared that he'd only get more confusing explanations from his friend.

"I don't get it."

"Harry…"
"But that's okay," Harry hastily added. "Some things just are meant to be mysteries, right?"

"Poor Truls," Heidi said. "I think we need to talk him out of this madness. For the sake of his own health."

"I think I'll go now," Harry said, standing up. "I've got a bit of homework I need to finish. Thank you Filippa. You too, Heidi." He then exited Filippa's apartment, walking towards his own. Asking Filippa had obviously been the wrong move, but who else could he ask? It's not like he had many options whom to ask about this. Should he just confront Truls? Or perhaps the best thing to do was to…not react in any way?

Did Truls expect him to react somehow?

Harry entered his flat and was surprised to see his mother's owl flying outside, waiting to be let in. Curiously the boy rushed to do so and proceeded to read his mother's letter. Why would she send him a message, though? He'd be home soon enough, so why would— Oh dear.

My dear Harry,

As you know, I have been terribly busy with work. Your father, as well, has been so overworked that he had to arrange for the werewolf to temporarily live in a camp instead of our home. It doesn't seem that this situation is going to change anytime soon.

I am very sorry to tell you this, my son, but your Christmas holiday will be spent with Gilderoy at Hogwarts. He will take care of you in our absence. We'll send you your gifts, and I promise you that you will love them.

Never forget that we love you, Harry. You are the most important person in the lives of your father and I. Take care of yourself.

— Mum
Chapter 9

As soon as he woke up, he knew that it was one of Those Days.

He could feel his magic waiting, right beneath the surface, to be used in ways that would satisfy his heart. There was a strange sort of comfort to having the ability to hurt others, and sometimes Tom needed that comfort. Needed to see their tears and hear their screams. Needed to take his time and leave them with hope only to come back and kill them. Sometimes he would leave his targets with damage that could never be repaired.

On those days people suffered, but Tom – Tom was content. On those days he didn’t speak much, didn’t even reply to Nagini as she greeted him in the morning. Didn’t acknowledge the portraits as he made his way through the Riddle Manor, towards the Floo.

There was a heavy, dark feeling inside of him and it kept him calm. That’s how it had always been, for as long as he could remember. It wasn't rage or anger. It wasn't fury or even hatred. It was just a need – an all-consuming need to vent, to release a build-up of tension inside of him that he never truly understood.

In all honesty, sometimes he felt pathetic.

It didn’t matter that he had already achieved what no other wizard or witch before him had, not when he was in this mood. It made him angry that he had no equals even though the mere thought of someone claiming to be his equal was enough to make him reach for his wand. He was sick of the people around him. Of people in general.

Days like these, Tom wished that he was the only person in the world.

He could hear sounds around him. Each and every single one of those sounds was getting on his nerves, from the wind bellowing outside to the faint sound of a house-elf working in a room nearby.

He stopped in front of the fireplace connected to the Floo, trying to decide whether going to pick a few prisoners from Azkaban to torture and kill was worth having to talk with a few people first. Maybe he should just satisfy his hunger with a few Muggles? He could apparate to a Muggle-infested area, pluck one or two, and vent a bit before going to read the reports about the front.

Ah, the front.

Tom’s hold of his want became tighter with agitation as he thought of the rebels.

No, he didn’t want to torture Muggles right now. He wanted to hurt rebels. Those arrogant traitors that fought against him, the filth that refused to remember its place. Maybe he should personally lead a raid? To remind the people of how brutal war really could be? Some of his henchmen were getting a bit too comfortable.

Or perhaps he could start sending seventh-years to complete the easy missions? Maybe even sixth year students from Durmstrang and Hogwarts? Perhaps he could use that Tournament idea that had been presented to him a while ago to somehow determine the best candidates to be sent for actual combat training? Oh well, he could think of that later. Right now he wanted… he wanted…

He wasn't exactly sure what it was what he wanted.
But he knew, from experience, that torturing someone to death was close enough.

Gilderoy was dressed in green and red when he came to pick Harry up. He also had colourful bells in his hair and glitter on his face.

"You look like a Christmas tree gone wrong," Harry said. The man smiled brilliantly at him in response while trying very hard to attach a red, round nose to Harry's face.

"Did you say bye-bye to your friends, Harry darling?" Gildy said cheerfully, succeeding in his quest. "Yes? Then let's go! I can't wait to introduce you to Barty-darling… if I can get my hands on him first."

"Have you heard anything from my parents?" Harry asked, pulling off the red nose before the man could cast a sticking charm on it. "Because after mum's last message, I haven't received anything. Are they alright?"

"Of course! You needn't worry! Come on, now. The portkey to Hogsmeade will be activating shortly. You already sent your luggage, yes?" Harry nodded, still looking troubled. Most of his friends had left already, and while he wasn't all that thrilled by the idea of going with Gildy to Hogwarts, the thought of staying alone in the apartment complex for the Christmas Holiday was extremely unappealing.

"Yeah. Let's go," Harry said, trying to shrug off the feeling of having forgotten something.

As they travelled with the portkey, the boy tried to distract himself from feeling increasingly nauseated by worrying over whether or not Ron or Draco would be at Hogwarts. It was very unlikely that the Malfoy heir would stay at school for the Christmas Holiday, but maybe Ron was there? Maybe he'd take Harry to see the Gryffindor common room that his parents had talked about?

The portkey took them atop a hill right outside the village. Harry fell face-first into the snow while Gildy brushed imaginary dust off his cape, rearranged the curl on his forehead, and waited patiently for his young companion to stand up and stop glaring.

"This, my dear, is Hogsmeade," Gildy said, pointing at the village. "We'll walk through it and then some before we reach Hogwarts. Come on."

Hogsmeade looked like a Christmas card; the little thatched cottages and shops were all covered in a layer of crisp snow; there were holly wreaths on the doors and strings of enchanted candles hanging in the trees. Harry's bad mood eventually vanished as he saw many intriguing shops, among which was the bookshop Tomes and Scrolls that his mother had mentioned once or twice.

"There's a huge library at Hogwarts, right?" Harry asked as the two walked side by side. "Am I allowed to go there?"

"Of course! You can wander as you wish. I'm sure you won't be up to no good."

"Will you let me come alone here to do my shopping? I need to buy some gifts."

"Absolutely not. Besides, I need to buy Barty-darling some gifts too. Mainly a new outfit or two. As much as I love that man- and I love him plenty- I must say his fashion sense is a source of grief to me. Mainly due to its absence."

"Hold on," Harry said, stopping and staring at the man. "Love him? You? Love… Professor"
"Crouch?" He had thought that Gildy had a crush on the man, but… love?

"When you're old enough, you'll understand," Gildy assured him gently. "You too will have a friend who hugs you, touches your hair, smooths your clothes, carries your bags…"

"After avoiding me for no reason for a few weeks?" Harry asked suddenly, narrowing his eyes as a realization was about to creep into his mind. "And then everyone else around you just smirks at the two of you and offers nothing but confusing, vague explanations?"

"Why, yes?" Gildy said, looking at Harry with surprise. "You read Witch Weekly?"

"I don't!"

"Then how—?"

"Oh my God," Harry groaned. "Can I un-realize something after I have realized it?"

"Oh, Harry, never mind that," Gildy said, his hand finding its way to grip the boy's shoulder as the two started walking again. "There are far more pressing issues to be discussed, after all. You see, I would like to give you some… advice. If you could call it that. More like… instructions? Oh, whatever. If you see Barty-darling, and if he talks with you—"

"Why would he talk with me?"

"— memorize every single word of what he says and report them to me. And if he asks you about me—"

"Tell him the truth and warn him away?"

"— tell him the truth of how wonderful and perfect I am."

"You know," Harry said, "we're both talking but somehow I feel like there's no conversation going on."

"Talking? You said something?"

"…"

"Anyway—"

"I should write to Filippa."

"— about Barty…"

Admittedly, while Durmstrang was very modern and prestigious and had an extraordinary reputation, Hogwarts was… special. Impressively. Amazing in a way that no other place could be. Harry could feel the ancient magic humming around him, and he felt as if Hogwarts not only had a story, but was a story. Maybe that was because, as far as Harry knew, Hogwarts was built with the dreams and hopes of the Founders while Durmstrang was simply made due to necessity?

Did something like that really even matter?

"You'll be living in the room next to mine– Headmaster Yaxley was kind enough to allow that to happen."
"Are there any students here during the Christmas holidays?"

"Not many. Mostly muggleborns."

"Really?" Harry breathed, his heart skipping a beat. If he could meet a muggleborn like his mother, maybe he could get a different point of view on the Muggle society. "I completely forgot that muggleborn students are allowed here. I mean, in Durmstrang, you've got to be at least a half-blood. It's weird, actually. One would think that Hogwarts, since it's in the UK which is the Dark Lord's domain, would be the one turning muggleborns away—"

"Harry," Gildy interrupted with uncharacteristic seriousness. "That's not an issue I'd suggest discussing here." Harry's mouth snapped shut, and he swallowed the remaining words, hunching his shoulders. Of course. He'd have to watch his words, his steps, even here. Everywhere. If he was to do what Albus wanted him to do, he'd be in even more trouble. Things would be so much tougher and complicated.

And yet, Harry still thought about it. Thought of the possibility of, of… doing something. The feeling of frustration was like a pressure, slowly building inside him. Harry was sick of feeling lost and confused. He was tired of being so indecisive. But he simply didn't know what to do and from where to begin.

"I'll introduce you to a good friend of mine, soon," Gildy said, leading Harry through Hogwarts' corridors. "Sybil. She's absolutely delightful! I'm certain that you'll love her sense of humour." They had turned to a wider hallway that had a few students loitering around, some of them giving Harry appraising looks. The boy knew that his Durmstrang uniform could be recognized, and he felt an unfamiliar twinge of pride.

And then he saw her.

She was small and very thin, and Harry was sure that a fall would break her bones. Her straggly blonde hair was long and pulled into a loose ponytail, and her silvery grey eyes were staring at a spot on the wall as if it was the most fascinating thing in existence. Her wand was behind her ear, and she had a wreath of daisies on her head.

"Who's that?" Harry asked, but they had already walked past her. Harry turned to look, noticing that she wasn't even wearing shoes.

"Who?" Gildy asked in return. "I saw only Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws there. Speaking of Ravenclaw– did you know that both Barty-darling and I were in Ravenclaw? When I was a fifth year student, he had already graduated, which was very sad for me."

"So this unhealthy obsession has a long history?"

"What unhealthy obsession?"

"I remember when you used to claim that you didn't care about him at all," Harry said.

"Denial," Gildy replied dismissively. "Denial is a waste of time, Harry darling. Oh, here we are! This room is yours, mine is that one there. It was actually intended to be the teacher's assistant's bedroom, but for some reason, Barty-darling wanted to live near the Ravenclaw Tower. Oh, maybe he misses old times. Do you like these rooms? Unfortunately, I wasn't the one to decorate this place– I'm not sure who did. Maybe the house-elves."

The room was surprisingly big with its own bathroom, but no kitchen. There were thick, green carpets on the floor, and the furniture was very old-fashioned, if not old. The curtains were white,
and Harry could see the windows through them. It was a basic room, but then again, it wasn't as if Harry had expected quarters like the ones he got in Durmstrang— he was here just for a few short weeks before going back to his own school, after all.

"Your trunk is on your bed, as you can see. I'll leave you to unpack," Gildy said. "When you're done, you can go out and wander around if you wish. Breakfast at eight, lunch at twelve, supper at six, and if you get hungry or lost, call for a house-elf."

"Alright," Harry replied. When the door clicked shut behind him, he felt… strange. Slightly hollow inside, and he couldn't help but think of what his parents were possibly doing, where Sirius was, where Tom was, what his friends were doing, and maybe he should have just told his mum that he'd rather stay at Durmstrang?

'It's pointless to think of that now,' Harry thought. 'I think I'll go look for the library and unpack later.' With a sigh, Harry turned to reopen the door and almost yelped in surprise when he saw someone standing there, right outside his room. It was that girl— the little girl he had seen on his way here.

"The Blibbering Humdingers were right," she said, sounding and looking dreamy and distracted.

"Uh, who are you?" Harry asked curiously.

"Luna," the girl replied, "Luna Lovegood. And you? Daddy says that Blibbering Humdingers don't lead astray so you must be someone I was meant to meet. It's nice to meet you for the first time."

"I'm Harry Potter," Harry said, feeling more and more fascinated with every second that passed. "You're a student here, right?"

"A first year Ravenclaw," Luna told him, and somehow it felt completely natural for her to grab his arm and pull him away from the doorway to walk through the corridor with her. "Would you like an earring, Harry? You look like an earring could make you happy."

"Uh…"

"You don't believe me, do you? It's alright, not many do."

"It's not that I don't believe you, it's just—"

"You don't think that earrings would make your worries easier to handle?"

"Frankly, no," Harry replied before taking a long look at the girl and feeling yet again that strange sensation. It was as if his magic was fluttering around them, mingling with hers. "How did you know that? That I'm worried about something, I mean."

"You're covered in Wrackspurts," Luna said faintly. "I saw them earlier when I wore my glasses. Right after you stopped looking at me."

"What… are wrack...spurts?" Harry asked curiously.

"They're invisible," Luna started. "They float in through your ears and make your brain go fuzzy." Harry's lips twisted into a bitter smile as he nodded.

"Sounds like what I've got, all right."

"It's fine," Luna assured him, her hand covering his. "Nowadays, most people do."
By midday, Tom was in a considerably brighter mood.

If there was something he hated in his enemies—aside from their views and idiocy, of course—it was when they smiled at him. It was aggravating. However, almost nothing was quite as delightful was wiping off those smiles for good. There was a special thrill in witnessing the exact moment when an enemy lost their hope and gave up. When they gave into dismay. Even if they didn't beg for mercy, it was written on their faces clearly.

It made Tom feel superior, and more than that—it made his opponents realize that he was superior. He enjoyed crushing their self-esteem, and sometimes, when he wanted prolonged enjoyment, Tom wouldn't torture a person physically as much as psychologically. Nothing made him feel accomplished the same way driving someone to suicide did.

Good times.

However, this was precisely the kind of enjoyment that Potter was simply unable to feel.

'Maybe instead of trying to understand him, I should just pity him,' Tom thought. 'I don't need to keep in contact or send him a gift or seek his presence. He's going to become a Death Eater, and eventually he will have to come to me.' And yet, he couldn't just let go. There was something about Harry Potter that drove Tom to seek his presence. The boy was young, but he would grow and become a powerful tool.

'Except,' Tom thought reluctantly, 'I can't exactly imagine him wearing a Death Eater's mask.' And knowing the boy, he would somehow succeed in becoming a Death Eater as independent as he was problematic.

It was alarming. Tom hadn't gotten this far by giving his followers privileges they didn't deserve. Having the brother wand of Tom's own wasn't something the boy had achieved. Perhaps, instead of sending Nagini to Potter, he should send something else? Or maybe he shouldn't send Potter anything at all. He should let Potter be the one to seek him out and make the first move.

There was so much Tom needed to figure out about Potter before knowing even how to use that particular pawn of his. The dead-alive thing Nagini had talked about was still an unsolved mystery, and Tom was getting frustrated with not knowing things. How could other people, the ones with less knowledge than him, deal with being so ignorant?

Then, a thought occurred to him.

The idea came to him out of nowhere, but the more he thought of it, the more he was convinced of it being the right option. It'd take a while, though—Potter was still in his second year, and he'd have to be fourteen at least for him to take part. He could involve Hogwarts, too… and to keep up appearances, one of the other schools. He'd let his finest Death Eaters take a look at Potter, and the aftermath of that would determine his next move.

'A year and a half before I can start,' Tom thought. 'That gives me enough time to settle the battles in Italy and focus on eliminating the hideouts in Ireland. I'll need to send some Healers right to the front and keep them there for a few months to treat the injured and draw in the locals.'

Only after that was done would he have time to start solving the mystery that was Harry Potter.

Tom leaned back on his chair, startled by the unfamiliar surge of pleasure he felt at the thought of what he could do to Potter once he got the chance.
"So this is the famous library of Hogwarts," Harry muttered as he followed Luna into what appeared to be a maze of bookshelves. As they walked, Harry saw study tables nestled in alcoves and between the shelves throughout the place, none of them occupied. What really made him happy, though, was the amount of books surrounding him.

"It closes at eight," Luna told him, looking at something near the top of the shelves they were walking by. "Maybe we can find out a way to get rid of those Wrackspurts around you."

"I don't think that the solution to my troubles will be found here," Harry admitted, feeling gloomy. "I've been so confused lately."

"No, not really," Luna said dismissively, dancing a few steps ahead of him. "You're not confused. You're scared."

"What?"

"You're not confused; you already know what you should do. But you're scared, and that allows the Wrackspurts fly around you so annoyingly, making your mind funny."

"What the hell do you know?" Harry asked breathlessly. He wasn't angry, as much as… surprised and suspicious. "How do you know?"

"I'm very observant," Luna replied, bending down to pick up a fallen chess piece and tying it into her hair, not minding at all the little soldier's flailing. "Do you want to talk about it? I could listen. I'm very good at listening."

"I don't—"

"— know if you can trust me?"

"Yes."

"As much as you can trust yourself if you weren't you," Luna said, and oddly enough, that made sense to Harry, even if he didn't quite understand why or how.

"I'm confused," Harry said again, but the words felt overused and false. Luna smiled at him and shook her head.

"You're scared," she repeated, her voice void of accusation. She was simply making a statement. "You lack courage."

"Are you calling me a coward?"

"Mm-m. Yes."

"You," Harry started, feeling uneasy and now a little bit angry, "have no idea what I have been through!"

"It doesn't really matter, you know," Luna said, twirling while tugging at the end of a few strands of her long hair. "Not really. What matters is here and now. The past isn't going to change just because you're too afraid of picking a future."

"I'm not scared," Harry insisted. "I'm not… I'm not a coward." And of course the past mattered – it's what brought him here after all!
"Courage can't see around corners, but goes around them anyway," Luna replied, her voice just as dreamy and calm as it had been during the whole conversation.

"Mignon McLaughlin," Harry said, recognizing the words. "But I still don't know why you— from where did you draw those conclusions of yours?"

"You don't know, even though you felt it, too?" Luna asked, blinking at him curiously. "The connection. I think it's what made the Blibbing Humdingers lead me to you. They can sense these things, you see. They can tell."

"C-connection?"

"We're a bit like oceans and lakes, you'll find."

"I don't understand you," Harry admitted, wondering why he wasn't feeling annoyed at the strange girl. However, as odd as it sounded… he felt as if he was talking to himself. "How do you know so much? I mean, you said that you're observant and that we have a connection, but…"

"Aren't you tired of doubting? You've already seen beyond the veil of reality, Harry. Why do you insist on keeping your eyes closed?"

"You don't understand. You think you do, but really you don't."

"Is it easier to believe that?"

"Stop," Harry finally snapped. "I don't… Don't talk to me about that. Please."

"Do you want to go look for Gibberdubs with me?" Luna asked pleasantly, changing the subject. "They hide under snow and bring good luck to their finders."

"No, thank you," Harry replied. "I think I'll… stay here and read."

"As you wish," Luna said, smiling dreamily. "I'm happy to have met you. I'll see you soon again."

Harry couldn't help but feel as if meeting Luna was the start of something. But what?

* *

On the evening of the third day of his visit, Harry was ambushed.

Well, not exactly ambushed. He had been walking towards his room when someone grabbed his arm and pulled him into what turned out to be an empty classroom. Alarmed, Harry turned to take a look at the ambusher, only to be surprised when he came face to face with a pale and cranky-looking Crouch Jr.

"Professor," Harry started, clearly surprised. "What—"


"Yes sir."

"You're also here under the care of Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Yes," Harry said, looking resigned to his fate. "Not by choice, though."
"I was hesitant in the beginning," Crouch said, "but I am left with no options. I need your help."

"Let me guess," Harry sighed. "He's been harassing you?"

"You could say that," Crouch admitted with a grimace. "In a most inappropriate, showy manner. I do not appreciate waking up to see a carpet of purple feathers on the floor."

"He's good at breaking and entering, isn't he?"

"Alarming so."

"I'm not sure how I can help you, though," Harry said. "I can distract him during my stay here, but when I leave…"

"Can you not," Crouch hesitated, looking for the right words, "steer him to a different direction?"

"He's in love with you," Harry said bluntly, and Crouch flinched. Was that a faint blush making an appearance? "I can't just point him towards someone else and say fetch."

"I'll… teach you the basics of duelling," Crouch offered. "Just get him off my back." The man was clearly desperate, and while Harry didn't think that he'd succeed, he also didn't want to turn down the opportunity to receive some teaching. Duelling was interesting and he had read several books about it, and knowing how to duel was definitely something he would benefit from.

"Alright," Harry said. "I'll try. When will you start teaching me?"

"I'll write you a pass," Crouch replied, pulling out a piece of paper and conjuring a quill wandlessly. "After curfew-- it's at nine-- go to the seventh floor and wait for me near the tapestry depicting the attempt of Barnabas the Barmy to teach trolls ballet. Do not talk about this to anyone or I'll make you sorry. Are we clear, Potter?"

"Crystal," said Harry.

*

The meeting was all Harry could think of as he made his way back towards his room. A part of him was still disbelieving-- the meeting had lasted less than a minute, maybe-- and did he really just score dueling lessons with a renowned duelist such as Crouch! Pity that he had to keep quiet about it-- this was something Harry would have loved to talk about with Truls or Filippa.

Harry turned around the corner only to see Gildy talking with a strange woman who was wearing a gauzy shawl covered with shining sequins and a pair of bright orange slippers.

"Harry," Gildy exclaimed at the sight of him, "perfect timing! Let me introduce you to one of my close friends, Sybill Trelawney, the professor of Divination and an excellent Seer. Sybill, this is my charge, Harry Potter." The woman turned to take a look at Harry, who felt uncomfortable as she stared at him with wide eyes through a pair of thick-rimmed glasses.

"I see misfortune befall you," she said, her voice raspy. "Loss. So much loss. And death. How is your mother?"

"She's fine," Harry replied, feeling a chill wash over him. "She's perfectly fine."

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you, dear," the woman murmured, and instantly Harry knew that he wouldn't like her. That he wouldn't be able to like her. Who was she to—
"If that was all," Harry said, trying to not scowl, "I'd like to go to my room."

"You shouldn't dismiss my warnings so easily," Trelawney reprimanded. "The light of Life only makes the shadows of Death stronger."

"Excuse me," Harry snapped, pushing past the two. Was Hogwarts the gathering place of oddities or something? Luna, Gildy, Trelawney… and then there was Snape whom Harry had seen a few times since the man was his mother's friend. Were there any ordinary people at Hogwarts?

'I need to write to mum,' Harry decided as soon as he entered his room. He didn't want to believe Trelawney, but she had… well, it could be a guess. A bluff. But why would she talk about death to him if she didn't know—? Was she like Luna? No, no. Luna was different from everyone else—Harry knew that even though he had no idea how.

"I must figure out why I end up at the train station in the first place," Harry said aloud. "That's the first step. To find out why and what does it mean."

Meeting Luna, scoring some dueling lessons, meeting Trelawney, and needing to write to his mother… With all that, Harry had completely forgotten about his realization regarding Truls. As things were, whether or not his best friend had a potentially embarrassing crush on him wasn't something Harry had the energy to worry about right now.

Luna had called him a coward. Maybe he had been, partly at least. Afraid of finding out the truth, afraid of doing something— anything. But it was going to stop now. Harry was going to find out how to stop these trips to the train station, and he was going to tell Albus to give up on trying to convince Harry to go against the Dark Lord.

He should go to the library as soon as possible to start his research… but what kind of books could possibly have the information he needed? Maybe, instead of a library, he could go to a bookstore and ask for a book on how to find uncommon information? He'd have to go to Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade soon anyway, since Christmas was only three days away.

So much to do, so little time.

*

Half past eight, Harry left his room, clutching the pass Crouch had written for him in his hand. It took him some time and several wrong turns before he found the tapestry depicting the attempt of Barnabas the Barmy to teach trolls ballet. Harry had read the biography written about that man and hadn't found him impressive or remarkable, and didn't know why someone would bother to immortalize any aspect of his life.

When Crouch arrived, he didn't seem to even notice Harry at first. Instead, the man walked a few times across the hallway with a scowl firmly on his face before a doorway suddenly appeared.

"Come on, Potter," he said, still not looking at Harry. "In we go."

"What's this place?" Harry asked curiously, following the man inside. "A hidden dueling arena?"

"Not quite," Crouch replied. "It's known as the Room of Requirements. Its existence isn't really common knowledge so I'd appreciate you keeping quiet about it. This room appears only when needed and transforms itself into whatever you need it to be."

"How fascinating," Harry muttered. "I wonder what kind of magic could achieve that…"
"It's said that somewhere in Durmstrang there's a room quite similar to this," Crouch continued. "Except that while this room gives you what you consciously desire, that room gives you what you subconsciously need. It's just a rumour though, and the existence of that room has never been confirmed. But that aside, I trust that you have your wand with you?"

"Of course," Harry said. "Will we start imme—"

"Of course we won't duel right now," Crouch cut in, sighing with irritation. "I'd kill you in half a second. I'm going to first teach you a few spells that you must practice. One spell for defense and another for attack. Remember, however, that most spells— even the ones that seem useless— can be used in a duel. Winning a duel is really more about how you use the spells instead of which spells do you use."

"Even the milder spells?"

"If not to injure, then to distract."

"Is there a way to cast two spells simultaneously?" Harry asked. "For example, by using two wands? Can a wizard have two wands?"

"It's impossible to cast more than one spell at the same moment," Crouch replied. "You can however, non-verbally, cast a few spells in rapid succession right after one another which, if done fast enough, could give the impression of several spells being cast at the same time. What comes to owning multiple wands… it's possible. Your first one, however, is the one that will serve you the best, and no other wand will choose you like it did. You can acquire a second wand by winning it from its owner in a battle. Killing the previous owner to prevent any lingering bonds from distracting the wand is advisable."

"Have you ever… taken someone else's wand?"

"I have a few wands from several Rebels, but I do not carry them around all the time. Anyway, we have wasted time already— let's start. Show me your grip. Yes, boy, how do you hold your wand—?"

* 

"You look like you didn't sleep last night," Luna said to Harry when she sat next to him during breakfast. "Did you stay up all night hunting for Wibbleberries?"

"Something like that," Harry muttered in response before yawning widely. "Where's the hair-thing you wore yesterday?"

"It's gone," Luna replied simply, and didn't elaborate further on how it had disappeared. "Want to come later on look for it with me?" In all honesty, what Harry wanted to do was to go back to his room and sleep, but he didn't feel comfortable with the idea of leaving Luna wandering alone— what if something happened to her? What if she… tripped or fell down the stairs or something? And so, instead of excusing himself politely, Harry nodded tiredly and allowed himself to be dragged away after breakfast.

At least they weren't looking for an imaginary creature, but Luna's lost hair-thing that Harry didn't know what to call. Perhaps he could use a locator spell to find the trinket?

"Do you want a copy of the Quibbler, Harry?" Luna asked as they made their way through the corridors. Harry shook his head. What in the world was a quibbler anyway? From where did this girl get these ideas? Harry had thought that he was too deep in stories, but compared to Luna, that
definitely wasn't the case!

That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, though. If Luna viewed the world differently, then perhaps she could have answers other people didn't have, simply because other people overlooked things that were noticeable to her?

And, well, vice versa.

"Luna," Harry started. "How often do you lose your things?"

"Often," the girl replied. "I'm not worried, though. I'm sure my things will turn up eventually. Maybe the Snorkling Sleizers are borrowing them, and it'd be terribly rude of me to demand them back."

"You," Harry said suddenly, "are odd."

"Oh, Harry," Luna replied with a pleasant smile. "You're not so ordinary yourself, are you?"

"I guess not," Harry admitted, and it felt… somehow **weird** to say it aloud. They were on the third floor when Luna suddenly pulled him into a room full of shiny cups, plates, shields and other trophies.

"This is the Trophy Room," Luna said. "I wonder if I'll find it here. The Snorkling Sleizers like shiny things, you see, so I wouldn't be surprised. Oh, there's a mouse. It's a cute little mouse, right, Harry? I wonder if it's a real mouse or a Snorkling Sleizer pretending to be a mouse. Or maybe it's neither. Maybe it's a whole new undiscovered race that looks and acts like mice but actually isn't... What do you think, Harry?"

But Harry wasn't listening. He had stepped closer to take a look at the trophies when he saw a vaguely familiar name on one of them. A burnished gold shield hanging on the wall had been awarded to Tom Riddle in 1944. Why was that name so familiar? Someone had said that name to him before… who? A classmate? No... Ron? Draco? Sirius? His pare—**Albus**. Albus had said...

"That Lord Voldemort of yours. His name is Tom Riddle."

"Luna," Harry said breathlessly, "can we look for your stuff later?"

"Of course, Harry," the girl replied. "Shall we—"

"Go to the library? Yes."

As they rushed towards the library, Harry couldn't help but wonder at the world's blatant... what should he call it? Pretentiousness? Hypocrisy? The Dark Lord Voldemort was a known half-blood, and yet, he ruled a world where the purity of blood was an important factor. How was it that the people knew of him being a half-blood, and yet it didn't seem as if many knew of him being Tom Riddle— otherwise the shield in the trophy room would have been in a much more noticeable place, surely.

Harry had thought that there were some people who didn't really care about blood purity, but put up a front to lure in power and fortune. But surely there were some who thought less of the Dark Lord for being a half-blood?

'He rules this country and affects most of the world beyond it greatly,' Harry thought. 'I wonder how he achieved that. He... did he start from nothing or did he have an inheritance?'

"What are we looking for?" Luna asked when the two finally arrived at the library.
"Is there a list of Hogwarts students?" Harry asked. "I need to look for a student who—"

"There're yearbooks somewhere here. I saw Madam Pince rearranging them once," Luna replied. "Who are we looking for? If you know when the person you're looking for graduated, you can easily find their name and picture and general information in a yearbook."

"Where are those yearbooks? I need from… year 1944 onwards. Can you find them? Do you know where they are?"

"This way." It didn't take them long to find the yearbooks, and while Harry didn't find his target in the yearbook of 1944, they found him in the yearbook of 1945.

"Here he is," Harry muttered.

**TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE; b. 31.12.1926**  
Student: 1938–1945; Slytherin House.

"He was a Prefect and the Head Boy," Luna read aloud, standing next to Harry and leaning her head against his shoulder. "They even have a picture of him."

"I've seen this guy before," Harry whispered. The picture was in black and white which meant that Harry couldn't figure out what were the man's eye and hair colour. But there was something familiar in Tom Riddle's face that Harry couldn't exactly put his finger on.

"Who is he?" Luna asked, slipping her hand into Harry's.

"Promise not to tell anyone?" Harry asked, knowing already that he could trust Luna as much as he could trust himself.

"Of course," Luna assured him. "I know how to keep your secrets, Harry."

"It's the Dark Lord," Harry whispered. "This guy… years after this picture was taken, became Lord Voldemort."

"No wonder he looks so lonely, then," Luna noted.

"What? Lonely?"

"Yes. I wonder if the Umbugular Slashkilters attacked him."

"Luna. He's the Dark Lord."

"I know, Harry. But he's a human too, isn't he? I think he is. And Daddy says that even if I suspect otherwise, I mustn't tell anyone. It's apparently illegal. Funny, isn't it?"

"I suppose," Harry muttered, biting his lip and staring at the picture of the 18-year-old Voldemort. Was it presumptuous of Harry to feel as if he could relate to this guy somehow? If Harry was going to walk the path his heart told him to… it could be dangerous and devastating. Had Voldemort ever hesitated? Had he doubted himself? Or had he succeeded because he hadn't doubted or hesitated?

Maybe it was high time for Harry to start talking with Tom again. He could ask the guy about Lord Voldemort… and hope for the best.

*"

"I just feel, dear Sybil, as if love is waiting for me just around the corner," Gildy sighed during
dinner, shooting meaningful glances towards Barty who tried very hard to not see or hear the blonde man. Why was he sitting near the two frauds anyway? It was probably Yaxley's fault. Most things were.

"You never know, Gilderoy," Trelawney said dreamily. "Love could be within your reach soon enough. Just let it wait for a few short moments, and then pluck it out..."

'I want to go back home,' Barty thought morosely, staring at his meal. Maybe he should ditch his agreement with Potter and just assassinate the glittery fraud that was sparkling at him?

"My love is lost," Gildy moaned. "Because Mr. Narnia is so oblivious!"

'I can hear you! And I know who you're talking about!'

"Maybe you've been too subtle. How about you give love potions a try?"

'Stop encouraging him, you old liar!'

"I don't know... I don't want him to love me just because of a love potion."

"Oh, Gilderoy, you're so noble."

"I should try a lust potion instead. One night together is bound to get something started."

'I'm going to kill him.'

"Do you know from where to get a lust potion, dear?"

"I was planning on taking Harry tomorrow to Hogsmeade anyway, so I'll just let him wander around alone or with a friend— he has been terribly attached to that little Ravenclaw girl, it's cute— while I go and buy the potion. Or check if it's available. If it isn't, I'll have to resort to plan B."

"Which is?"

"I'll barge in when he's having his daily evening-bath."

"...he... how do you know if Cro— Mr. Narnia bathes every evening?"

"Oh, I observed."

"Well! How dedicated of you! I'm sure he's honoured!"

'Someday I'll boil the two of you together,' Barty thought, trying to not grab his wand and start the bloodshed. To death. And I'll watch and laugh.' He looked up, searching for the Potter boy whom he quickly enough found sitting with a blonde Ravenclaw girl. The boy was... strange. He was well-mannered, quiet but didn't seem to be shy. He was also surprisingly serious and hard-working... and very hard to predict and understand.

It was as if there's an invisible wall separating the boy from the rest of the people. Barty couldn't imagine what the boy would want to become or what he was thinking. Even in dueling tactics— not that they had dueled yet... Barty had thrown in a few questions for Potter to answer with surprising results. At times when Barty had expected a shield or a form of defense, the boy would attack instead, and sometimes, Potter would suggest a clever transfiguration trick instead of a known hex.

What also was very interesting was the boy's approach on how to attack someone with their defense shields up— the child had immediately suggested blowing up the ground beneath the enemy's feet, for
example, instead of even trying to break the shields. It was so very refreshing to know that there were people who seemed to actually think about dueling tactics instead of just charging in. He couldn't wait until Potter grew up and became an active duelist.

What Barty found potentially troubling, though, was that the boy didn't seem to have presence at all. If Potter was to stand still in a corner and be quiet, chances were that Barty wouldn't be able to even realize that he was present. It was, of course, a very useful talent… but it was the sort of skill you would want to have yourself but never see another person with it.

Especially not a kid like Potter.

Harry was in his room, thinking.

He had a lot to think about, and yet, it was hard to organize his thoughts. Mainly, though, he was mulling over a belated realization. Didn't Crouch say that Durmstrang had a room relatively similar to the one where they trained? How can a room know what a person's subconscious desires were? What kind of magic had been used? Somehow, to Harry, it seemed that the magic they used nowadays was nothing compared to the magic that had been used centuries ago.

What had changed?

Harry hadn't been able to stop thinking of Tom Riddle either. He wanted to know more of who the Dark Lord had been before he had taken over the Wizarding World of Britain, but he could only imagine what kind of trouble he could get into for researching that. Ah, life had been so much easier when he had had only his stories surrounding him. If only Harry could get guidance… Will Stanton had had Merriman, and Garion had had Belgarath, and Polgara… But who did Harry have? Albus? Who was… who exactly?

'Maybe Albus studied here too,' Harry thought suddenly. 'But how could I search anything about him? I only know his first name and what he looks like…'

The best thing he could do was to ask Tom's advice. Maybe he should stop thinking of Tom Riddle as Tom Riddle, since the name 'Tom' belonged already to someone else? What did the Dark Lord look like now? It was known that the man didn't allow his pictures to be taken, but Harry knew that he was past his seventies or something… Was he ever going to retire? Or was it true what some people believed…?

Sirius had once told Harry's parents that some suspected that the Dark Lord was immortal.

There had been disbelief and awe in their voices, but Harry… Harry still could remember the absolute feeling of wrongness that had almost overwhelmed him. He… knew without a doubt that no one, absolutely no one, had the 'right' to be immortal. Harry wasn't sure where this knowledge came from, but so deep in his heart was the belief of it that he didn't have a thought of doubt. This belief had been with him ever since he could remember– from the first time he read about immortality, the feeling…

Ah, whatever, this wasn't the time to think about anyone's rumoured immortality; Harry had a letter to write. The boy dipped the tip of his quill into the bottle of red ink before starting to write.

"Dear Tom..."
Chapter 10

Dear Tom,

I wish to meet you soon, there's a lot I want to ask you about and I hope that you'll be able to answer.

I know you might not wish to see me again – it has been quite a while after all and we didn't part on best terms – but I don't think anyone else can help me. I'm currently at Hogwarts, spending the Christmas Holiday with a friend of my parents. I think I could sneak out at some point and meet you in Hogsmeade (it's a little village nearby).

Sincerely,

Harry Potter.

PS. How are you?

"If your followers were to see you now," Nagini hissed, “they'd think again whether they want to bow down to you or just find someone else."

"Look," Tom hissed in reply while standing on his desk with Harry’s letter still in his hand. "I haven't had this much fun with anyone since I was born unless it involved somebody’s death. Probably. Do you know how many decades that is?"

"No. But I know it makes you look pathetic," Nagini said, not bothering to lift her head to take another look at her master. "And what happened to your I-don't-care-about-Potter, he's-only-a-random-loser-and-I'm-the-Dark-Lord attitude you've been sporting for the last few centuries?"

"He is just a kid who only happens to have the twin of my wand," Tom said absently, wondering if he should just jump off the desk onto the floor or if he should step on the chair first. "I'm just investigating to make sure that that's all of what he is. I'm being cautious. Besides, he wants to ask questions. So do I! I found nothing about his dead-alive issue so I'm going to try and find out by observing him."

"You're going to meet him?"

"After Christmas and before the end of the year, since people will be mostly meeting their families or friends then and there won't be crowds wandering outside."

"It's not like there are many outside of your Inner Circle who'd recognize you anyway. Between us, I'm the… what's the word? Celebrity? The more recognizable one?"

"I wonder if Potter is going to ask me about politics and the war… He might."

"…boring."

"Should I tell him that one of his classmates died? I just got a report regarding that," Tom said, before frowning and shaking his head. "He'd just want to know from where I got the information and how could I justify that the Durmstrang reports are sent to me without revealing my true status? Besides, he's unpredictable. What if he reacts weirdly?"

"Like?"
"I don't know. What if he cries or something? How do I make someone stop crying without killing them?"

"Just throttle him till he passes out. That works. People are happier when they're unconscious."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I haven't yet met anyone who complained about anything while they were unconscious."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Also…"

"What is it?"

"You're a really bad dancer. Don't dance on the table ever again. You'll fall and break your spine and my primal instincts are telling me that you won't know how to explain that to your healers."

* *

"This is sickening," Emalda Brown muttered while pulling a white sheet over yet another corpse. "I feel like there's no end to this."

"No kidding," Lily Potter sighed, exhausted. She had been working almost non-stop for the past few weeks and was just about ready to call for a break of a few days – not that she could, even if she wanted to. It wasn't as if wars paused for Christmas just because the people wanted to celebrate.

Lily's long red hair had been cut short to make it easier to manage. Her skin that had always been a bit pale was almost ashen and her lively green eyes looked tired. There were lines on her face that hadn't been there before and often at night she'd press her face against her pillow and cry. She missed her family so much. She wanted to see James and be protected by him and she wanted to hug Harry and spend time with her precious son. But she couldn't. Not even for a day.

She hated staying here. Most of the other healers were Italian and almost half didn't speak English very well. The War Hospital was always so filthy and noisy and there weren't enough healers working. The constant urgency to treat the worst injuries first made everyone sloppy regarding hygiene and treating non-fatal injuries. Lily wanted to go back home, return to her ordinary shifts at St. Mungos and worry about Harry's grades and James's late nights out with Sirius instead of… this.

She wanted to be with her family. But quitting wasn't an option.

James was stuck somewhere in Ireland fighting for ideals that he didn't fully believe in and her son was at Hogwarts for the break. Lily hoped that at least Harry's Christmas would be an enjoyable one. She had received a few letters from him, but she hadn't had the opportunity to reply to any of them – she had barely managed to scribble something on a card and send it, apologizing for the lack of a gift and a proper party.

"I didn't know that there were that many Rebels," Emalda said. "I thought that there were less than hundred here. How can they manage to keep fighting us when we have hundreds of trained Death Eaters—"

"The battle started when we attacked a Rebel camp," Lily cut in quietly. "They're fighting like this to keep their families safe. They're giving all of what they have because their backs are up against the wall and they have no other option but to win or to see their families executed."
"This is war, isn't it?" Emalda whispered, blinking her tears away. "Back in England there has been only whispers of a possible war, but here it's already the current reality. What's the point of all this… killing? Why can't we just live and let others live?"

"I don't know."

"I feel like… we're fighting for nothing here. We've got nothing in Italy that we need to defend. Is this war still right?"

"My son once said," Lily started, closing her eyes. "That one should never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime. I still wonder if that applies to all wars or just a few."

"You have a son," Emalda smiled, leaning forward. "How old is he? He's a Death Eater?"

"He's twelve. Studies at Durmstrang."

"You miss him a lot."

"Yeah," Lily admitted quietly. "He, my Harry, he's… a good child. He's a bit of a dreamer and likes his stories but I know that he's got a good head on his shoulders and a heart of gold. I hope… I hope that he won't ever have to fight in a war like this."

"I wish I could say that's every mother's wish," Emalda said. "But I know what kind of mothers are in the ranks."

"We need some Dittany here! " a healer Lily didn't recognize called suddenly, interrupting the conversation of the two women. "We've got four severely splinched wizards!"

"Back to work," Lily sighed. "This never ends."

"It's past midnight," Emalda noticed and turned to look at the redhead who had grabbed a bottle of Dittany Extract and was heading towards the splinched patients. "Merry Christmas, I guess."

---

We're on the island of mystic toys.

Here we don't want to stay

We want to travel with Santa Claus in his magic sleigh

Harry had to admit that the Christmas Feast at Hogwarts was fantastic. It was attended by the students who hadn't gone home for the Holidays, the Professors – including Snape, who was shooting occasional glares towards Harry – and a few guests, none of which Harry could recognize. There were four Christmas trees in the Great Hall, the stars of the ceiling twinkled merrily and there was even a choir or singing gingerbreads floating around.

"Headmaster Yaxley really likes Christmas," Luna said while trying to decide between roasted and boiled potatoes, before just taking a bit of both. "Maybe it's because—"

"Hey Loony," a girl who was passing by with her friend cut in. "Got any gifts from your friends?"

"Imaginary friends," her friend added. "Since she doesn't have any real ones." Snickering they continued their way towards the end of the table. Harry stared at them for a few moments, bewildered at witnessing something like this happening right in front of him, before turning to Luna.
"Can nothing be done about that?" he asked.

"There's no need," Luna told him. "Their words don't affect me one way or another."

"You don't feel slightly hurt?"

"I don't have a reason to."

"But they insulted you."

"By saying that I don't have friends? I have you, which means that they're wrong and that their insult is invalid," Luna said with an easy smile. "It usually is like that, you know. A bully who doesn't even know you – it doesn't even have to be a bully. Simply someone who disagrees with you or doesn't like your personality. Someone like that could call you all sorts of things but they're all just guesses. It's like raindrops trying to hit me through a wall of stone."

"In time water can wear down the stone," Harry told her quietly. "Even if the first thousand times can be shrugged off with ease. And I know that these people don't stick to words only."

"This just means that I have to get stronger, right?" Luna said, leaning her head against his shoulder while reaching for his bottle of pumpkin juice. "Like you, Harry."

"I'm not that strong," Harry replied, thinking of his classmates. "But Luna, those bullies have to be stopped before things escalate further. And aren't you, you know, lonely?"

"One can be alone without being lonely. You just have to start liking yourself and your own company."

"But—"

"Not everyone in this world will like you, Harry, just like you will not like everyone in this world," Luna said, her dreamy smile widening. "That's good. That's how it's supposed to be. It's not wrong. Of course being disliked doesn't feel good, but if you're disliked by someone who doesn't even know you, then might as well just forget about it. Have you tasted these potatoes? They're delicious!" The abrupt change of subject caught Harry off-guard, and he stared at Luna silently for a few moments before managing to nod.

"Delicious, yeah."

"Your problem is that you think too much about your problems," Luna continued. "You think too much and do too little. But don't worry; I'll still give you your Christmas gift."

"Thank you. I'll give you yours, too."

Harry had realized that he couldn't count on Gildy to take him to Hogsmeade, and so with the help of Luna and a few catalogues he had figured out how and what to order. The bill he sent back home where it'd wait until one of his parents returned to pay it.

'I wonder what they're doing,' Harry thought, unable to shrug off the worry he was feeling. He had received a card from his mother and short letter from his father – neither had had the opportunity to buy him anything, and while Harry didn't necessarily even want gifts, it just made him realize how busy his parents really were.

'I hope they're okay… I wish I could see them already.'
"We can go now," Luna said with a smile. "I'm finished with this and you don't look like you're about to eat anymore."

"Ah, yeah." Harry stood up and held his hand out for the younger girl. "Let's go to my room, then."

"Potter!" a squeaky voice called, and soon a short man with wide blue eyes and a balding head sat next to James, who was having his lunch break. "Almost didn't see you here."

"Pettigrew," James said in response. Of all the people in the camp, it had to be this wimp of a man who wasn't reliable or competent. James could vaguely remember Peter Pettigrew from Hogwarts – he had been a Slytherin. Not loyal enough for Hufflepuff, not brave enough for Gryffindor and not smart enough for Ravenclaw, but apparently cunning enough for Slytherin.

"I heard we'll be transferred from Waterford to Tramore soon," Pettigrew said, holding a mug of hot mulled wine in his hand. "Suspicious activity there too."

"Mm-hm."

"I heard your wife is in Italy? How are you coping with the stress? I mean, you're worried about her, right?"

"I don't really want to talk about it," James replied sharply. Had it been Sirius, then of course James would have confessed all of his worries, but this was Pettigrew. Why was the loser focusing on James anyway? Why wasn't Sirius here? Damn that stupid dog.

"At least your son is safe," Pettigrew continued.

"I know that Harry is safe," James snapped. "But my wife isn't, so shut it!"

"Touchy," Pettigrew muttered, before smiling brightly again. "But this is war and there are no wars without casualties."

"What the fuck?" James growled, dropping his fork and standing up. "Stay away from me Pettigrew or I'll—"

"Curse me?" Pettigrew cut in, standing up as well. He was in no way a threatening sight, and yet James couldn't help but take a step back. "Sit down, James. Finish your lunch before going out to fight." After a moment of hesitation, James reluctantly sat down again, and immediately Pettigrew followed suit.

"Don't talk to me," James hissed, grabbing his fork again. "I don't want you to ever talk about my wife again."

"What about your son?" Peter grinned, a knowing spark in his eyes. "I was surprised to hear that you have a son, to be honest. You see, my mother used to work as a midwife before she returned to France."

James felt his whole body freeze and for a few moments he wasn't sure if he knew how to breathe. His heartbeat was loud, so loud and there was an unpleasant feeling inside him. How did— Nobody was supposed to know, no one but him and Lily and the midwife. It was nothing. It didn't matter. It had been a mistake. The midwife had been confused, she had admitted her mistake. And it had been so long ago, they had already forgotten. It had been nothing. There was no proof—
"Wh-what, did you think that the baby was a girl?" James sneered, finishing his food in a few mouthfuls and standing up. He wanted to leave before Pettigrew spoke again, because this unpleasant feeling wasn't vanishing and—

"No," Pettigrew called after James, who didn't turn or slow down. "Nobody ever claimed it to be a girl. I heard it was a stillborn."

They had dropped first by the Ravenclaw Tower for Luna to fetch Harry's gift, before the two made their way towards Harry's room. When they finally arrived, Luna shoved the relatively big box into Harry's arms for him to unwrap immediately and bounced to take a closer look at the other gifts he had received. The present he had bought for her was on his table, but the girl didn't grab it yet.

"You got lots of cards as well," she said.

"Ah, yeah. I haven't read all of them yet," Harry replied, setting the box onto his bed and starting to open it warily, not knowing what to expect.

"Your parents didn't send you any gifts?"

"Yeah. I didn't expect them to — they're both very busy. It's oka… huh?" Harry had unwrapped Luna's gift and he stared at it with confusion. "Luna… this is a gas mask. A muggle gas mask. I read about them when I researched the history of air-cleaning spells."

"Why would you research the history of air-cleaning spells?"

"I was writing an ess— wait, that's not the question here, Luna. Why are you giving me this?"

"I have one too. We match."

"But what do I do with it!"

"It'll give you a breath when you've gone none left," Luna said, smiling dreamily. "And see how many people scream at the sight of you. It's fascinating."

"…I'm impressed," Harry admitted reluctantly. "I mean, it's terrible, but…"

"There's a darker side to all of us. That's my gift there, right?"

"Oh yes. You can open it if you want," Harry replied. He was tempted to try on the gas mask, but for some reason he felt slightly reluctant to do so. He didn't get the feeling that he shouldn't wear the mask, no. He got the feeling that he shouldn't wear the mask right now.

"Lovely," Luna said with a pleased smile as she lifted the music box she had received for closer inspection. "There's an owl outside your window, by the way."

"What?" Harry exclaimed, turning to see that indeed, a rather large owl was waiting to be let in. As soon as Harry opened the window, the owl dropped in a tiny envelope before sweeping out again. Luna, who was sitting under his desk while listening to the sleepy melody of the music box, didn't pay him any attention. Hoping for it to be a message from one of his parents, Harry hurriedly opened the envelope, and was disappointed to find only a neatly folded piece of paper.

27th of this month at 13:00. Hogsmeade, the Three Broomsticks Inn, room 11. Wear a hat and hide your face. Come alone.
Strangely enough, even though this meeting was what Harry wanted, the first thought that came to his mind was *what if he kills me?* Perhaps he was being paranoid… besides, Harry knew that this secrecy was necessary. Tom – whoever he really was – had to be someone high-ranked and infamous, which meant that if someone caught wind of their meeting, things could turn complicated and uncomfortable questions might be asked.

Harry didn't want that.

This wasn't like meeting at Durmstrang – there'd be nothing that would stop Tom from killing Harry if the man decided to do so. However, Harry needed to ask his questions and there was no one else but Tom who could answer them.

"Why don't you open the rest of your gifts?" Luna asked suddenly. "And then read the letters? You look like you're thinking too much again. You'll be getting wrinkles if you keep that up." Deciding to worry later about whether or not to meet Tom after all, Harry nodded and moved to do as advised. He received books from Truls, Filippa and even Sirius – although the man had sent him *Becoming Animagus* by Lord Austen Jane, not a storybook. From Gildy, Harry received a pair of high-heeled white boots that the boy decided to burn as soon as he got the chance. Or maybe he could give them to Filippa? What had Gildy been thinking?

'Or maybe that's the problem,' Harry thought sourly, glaring at the boots. 'He didn't think. Like always.'

"Just because I said that it's fun doesn't actually mean that I like doing this all day," Bellatrix Lestrange said, eyeing the five caged wizards in front of her with a bored face. "Life's not all fun, you see? My Lord wants answers and you're being stingy and mean. Now tell me so I can finish you off already."

"Your negotiation skills leave much to be desired, cousin," Sirius said, not looking up from the documents he was supposedly reading. "Have you tried to use Imperio on any of them yet?"

"Of course! But they keep somehow either avoiding the question or telling me nonsense about birds and sand. There's clearly a spell of some kind acting as a barrier between the information and I. Which means that the information has to be *given*, not *taken*.

"If that's true, that rules out Veritaserum as well."

"I tried to threaten them, of course," Bellatrix sighed. "Even killed two of them. But they're still keeping quiet. Ah, maybe I should… oh, yes, why didn't I think of that before?" She smiled, and once again Sirius realized with a start how… outstandingly beautiful Bellatrix actually was. All Blacks were beautiful, of course, but Bellatrix took it to near perfection with her flawless skin, ruby lips and dark, long hair. Admittedly, though, her personality was *nasty*.

"This ought to work," the woman muttered, casting a few spells to enlarge the room and then transfiguring four new cages that looked exactly like the original one. "Help me, cousin. I'm going to put these dogs into separate cells and Legilimens the *life* out of them!"

"Don't call them dogs," Sirius protested, and belatedly Bellatrix remembered what his animagus form was.

"Terribly sorry," she replied, not sounding sorry at all. "Now help me with this. I'm going to get
these answers even if I have to cut their skulls open and pick on their brains."

"Didn't you try that once already?"

"Yes, well, I'll try it again. My Lord wants results. And I will not disappoint him. I'm not like those fools, Yaxley, Karkaroff and Mulciber!"

"Can't believe Mulciber's actually teaching brats to duel. In Durmstrang of all places." Bellatrix stood still for a moment, completely quiet, before smiling slowly and turning towards Sirius again. Her dark eyes were a tad too wide for it to be natural, but then again she always looked like that when she was thrilled.

"Your godson," the woman started softly, and Sirius tensed, completely surprised.

"What about him?" he asked warily. How did she even know about Harry?

"He's such a beautiful child," Bellatrix sighed. "His eyes… The first time I saw those eyes of his, I wondered if he could kill like a basilisk."

"Don’t be foolish. And where have you ever seen Harry?"

"A year ago. The Christmas Ball of the Malfoys. That pretentious party with too many hopeful idiots mingling. I saw him, I looked at him, and I saw something pleasant. Sirius… I know you do not believe in Divination, and most of the time, neither do I… but that boy, cousin… there's something about him."

"Harry's a completely ordinary boy, I assure you."

"Then you are blind and stupid."

"Stay away from Harry," Sirius said then, his mouth pressed into a firm line. His fingers were already curling around his wand, and his whole body was tense. Harry catching this woman's attention was not a good thing at all. But what had she seen in him, in all honesty? Harry was quiet, and, true, his green eyes were almost frighteningly eerie, but… there wasn't anything suspicious about him. Sirius had been there since the beginning; he'd know if there was something wrong with Harry.

"If that boy became My Lord's aid," Bellatrix murmured, "he'd follow in my footsteps, that Potter boy. He'll grow up to be so fine, I'm sure, and he'd stand tall and proud beside the Dark Lord. He'd be like me, the most faithful and useful—"

"Bella!" Sirius cut in sharply, glaring at the woman who was smiling in a crazed manner at the cowering Rebels. "Focus on your work and stop daydreaming. Stun them, separate them, make them blind and deaf for all I care. Just stop even thinking about Harry. He's not going to fall victim to your scheming."

"When something is destined," Bellatrix whispered, "you needn't scheme to see it happen."

* 

The twenty-seventh of that month was a clear day. The sun reflected brightly from the snow that covered the ground like a white sheet, and the cold seemed to sweep through the thick layers of clothing that Harry had pulled on before leaving. He vaguely remembered the village from when he had arrived with Gildy, but luckily the Three Broomsticks Inn was easily found after a bit of wandering. The Inn was slightly crowded inside, warm and a bit smoky, but clean and welcoming.
A curvy sort of woman with a pretty face saw Harry and smiled widely at him.

"Hello dear," she said, and her smile dulled a bit when she recognized the sign of Durmstrang on his cloak. "Something to snack on?"

"I have a meeting," Harry replied warily, tugging his hat lower and scarf a bit higher. "Room eleven. At one o'clock. Can you tell me where that room is?"

"You're right on time, then," the woman said before pointing towards a staircase. "Third floor, the first room."

"Thank you," Harry murmured before nervously rushing towards the stairs. Was Tom already there? In all honesty, Harry wished to get a few moments alone for him to organize his thoughts and decide what he should ask about. The Dark Lord, of course, but what exactly about him? And what if Tom decided that it was rude of Harry to pry and cursed him or something? Then again, Harry had a hard time believing that the man would do that to him.

The room was small and tidy. There was a thin white carpet on the floor, white and red striped curtains, and a king-sized bed. Next to the window, there were two chairs and a round table. When Harry entered the room, Tom didn't bother standing up from the chair– he merely gestured for the boy to shut the door behind him and sit down.

"I'm pleased to see you," Tom said easily as Harry pulled off his hat, scarf and coat and sat down. "You've grown taller. Your hair is longer, too."

"And you haven't changed at all," Harry replied. "Er… have you eaten anything?"

"I don't eat outside," Tom said. "But I did order one of my house-elves to bring us something to eat shortly after it sees you arriving, so expect to be fed soon."

"Oh… thank you."

"I was… surprised to receive your letter. I didn't expect you to contact me, much less for you to ask me out like this."

"Look," Harry started, before taking a deep breath and then continuing. "I'm going to be completely honest and go directly to the point. I need to ask you about the Dark Lord."

'Well, isn't this a surprise,' Tom thought, leaning forward curiously. "Why?"

"His name is Tom Riddle, right," Harry said, and he'd never know how much these words startled the man in front of him. "He… I saw the shield he was awarded when he was still at Hogwarts. I also saw his picture in a yearbook. I just… I want to know if he started from nowhere or if he had an inheritance and a strong family that helped him…"

"The Dark Lord…" This would be the perfect opportunity for Tom to tell Harry who he really was. But did he want to? He wasn't sure what he should tell the boy– should he go along with this or should he put a stop to it? Deciding what to do what hard since Tom had no idea what Harry would do with the information. "You do know that asking about the Dark Lord is potentially dangerous? I happen to know that he does not like the idea of anyone snooping around, asking about him."

"Which is why I'm asking you," Harry said. "You're the only one I can get these answers from."

"You don't even know me," Tom replied. "Really, Harry, who do you think I am?"
"A Death Eater," Harry said, trying to ignore his own nervousness and the loud beating of his heart. "An important Death Eater. Dangerous, too."

"How adorably vague," Tom sighed and watched silently as a house elf carrying a tray popped into the room and set food and drinks on the table. When the creature was done, it left immediately and Harry and Tom were once again alone.

"If you don't want to tell me about the Dark Lord," Harry started, sounding braver than he felt. "Then can I ask you about yourself?"

"I can tell you," Tom said with a slight smile. "Either about the Dark Lord or myself… But you'll have to answer some questions as well. So how about we ask questions in turns? We can choose between answering honestly or not answering at all– if you choose to not answer, however, I'm allowed to ask another question. Of course, that works the other way around as well."

"Okay," Harry agreed, wondering which one of the numerous questions he had should be asked first. "Will I start or will you?"

"You can start if you wish."

"Okay… um… What's your name?"

"Marvolo," Tom replied easily. It was his name. One of them.

"What a weird name," Harry muttered, staring at the older man's face. All of a sudden Harry felt as if he should… remember something. Those features… "It doesn't really suit you."

"You can keep calling me Tom if you wish," Tom replied. "Why did you choose Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts?"

"Not sure," Harry said. "Felt like a good idea at the time and my parents really recommended it? I'm not sure actually… Um, I was wondering, if people don't even know who the Dark Lord is, then how do they know of his blood status?"

"He deliberately let them know. Keeping that kind of secret hidden would be foolish in case someone else was to ever somehow find out and reveal it to the world through their own words. So the Dark Lord made it known in order to not only erase the threat of exposure but to make it also acceptable to be a half-blood in this society."

"…that makes sense, I guess."

"Of course it does," Tom said dismissively. "Harry, are you healthy? Physically, I mean. Completely healthy?"

"As far as I know, yes," Harry replied, feeling wary. Should he ask why the man wanted to know? But there was so much else he wanted to find out first! "Has… what… is… Is the Dark Lord satisfied with this world?"

"Sorry?" The word escaped Tom's lips before he even realized that he had spoken aloud. For a few long moments, he stared at Harry with something that wasn’t quite shock, watching the boy's face become gradually redder.

"You don't have to answer," Harry hurried to say almost breathlessly. "I mean, I was just… I…"

"It's okay," Tom said, eyes still focused on the boy. "But first, I want a vow of secrecy."
"You're really going to tell me?" Harry asked, sitting straighter. "Really?"

"I see no harm in telling you this," Tom replied, feeling thrilled at this new possibility. "But first— the vow." He put down his cup of tea and reached forward to grab Harry's hand. The man's grip wasn't overly tight, but it was firm enough to make Harry unable to pull away.

"Just a vow of secrecy, right?" Harry said nervously, and the man nodded. Only then did Harry notice that Tom was holding a wand, its tip pointing at their joined hands. While Tom was concentrating on casting the spell, Harry used the few moments to take a look at the man's face.

'He's actually pretty handsome,' Harry thought. 'I wonder if Gildy would ditch Barty for this guy. Except that Tom would probably kill Gildy instantly.' Harry was hard pressed to not flinch in surprise when he felt magic suddenly wrapping itself around him for a split-second before vanishing. Tom's hold on his hand was tighter and the man had turned to stare at Harry's face instead of their still joined hands.

"There's something about you, Harry," Tom whispered, and for some reason Harry felt almost flustered. "I wonder… what you will become. Do you think you'll be a Death Eater, Harry? Bowing before the Dark Lord, finishing the missions he gives you?"

"It's not your turn to ask," Harry replied just as quietly, body tense and heart beating rapidly. Tom blinked once before letting go of Harry's hand and leaning back again.

"Oh yes," the man said, not whispering anymore. "Is the Dark Lord satisfied with the way this world is now? I could have spared us both from this secrecy spell and answered either yes or no, but I cannot resist the temptation of telling you more. The Dark Lord… well, isn't this complicated to answer. The Dark Lord is… well, not content or pleased or even satisfied… He's fine with how the world is now. For him, it could be better."

"But why? The pureblood supremacy has been achieved already!"

"He isn't a pureblood, as you well know. Promoting pureblood supremacy was just an open opportunity."

"But why did he then… Did he… What does he believe in, then? What's his goal? What's his motivation?"

"The Dark Lord," Tom started, "was born in a filthy little Muggle-filled orphanage in London. His Muggle father had abandoned his pure-blood mother as soon as he could, and the woman died as soon as she had named her child. The Dark Lord's father, despite his wealth and prowess in the Muggle society, never once looked for his son, and the Dark Lord grew up right where he was born - in that orphanage. He was completely unaware of his Wizarding heritage 'til the day he received his Hogwarts letter. By then, Tom Riddle had already seen a glimpse of the true face of reality, you could say. How dirty people were inside. How selfish and greedy and hypocritical, no matter how young or old."

"He views all people like that?" Harry asked, feeling his heart flutter in… It wasn't fear. More like disappointment and… sadness?

"Since the beginning, it was clear that the Dark Lord was far more powerful and intelligent than his peers and even many of the people older than him," Tom continued, not replying to Harry. The man was seemingly looking at the cup of tea on the table, but somehow Harry felt as if he didn't really see it. "People realized quickly how outstanding he was, and there were many who wished to befriend him. Make him their ally. But regardless of how they treated him, he knew what they were like
inside—undeserving. Eventually, the Dark Lord realized that there is no one who is equal to him in any way. He realized how superior he was to everyone else, and the stronger he got, the harder it became to forgive other people's weaknesses and ignorance."

"Then why did he become the Dark Lord if he hates everyone?"

"It wasn't his first option, initially. He… you could say he suffered from extreme apathy. It was a fog around him and only his bouts of rage could momentarily make that fog fade. He studied, became stronger day by day, living in that state of apathy. He didn't feel many emotions, had no particular desires and believed that one day… he'd die out of sheer boredom and depression. Till something happened to turn that emptiness into hatred and make as many people as possible suffer."

"What happened?" Harry asked. While he did feel intrigued, he couldn't help but feel a bit bad for the Dark Lord.

"He found his father and killed him," Tom said, his tone dismissive again. "The man deserved it, I assure you, so don't go all moral on me now. After the death of his father, the Dark Lord decided to take over the Wizarding World of Britain. He didn't care of pureblood supremacy but knew that using that as an excuse, he'd gain powerful followers quickly. And he did. Now he has achieved the position that he wanted—he's safe and he can hurt anyone and everyone he wants. And while to him that is enough, it's not… it'd be inaccurate to say that he's content with the world."

"You mean he started from nothing?" Harry muttered, pressing his hands together in an attempt to stop them from shaking. "He… Did he ever… was he ever scared?"

"Whether or not he was ever afraid didn't matter to him. He isn't the type to let fear hold him back," Tom replied.

"I bet he never cried, though."

"He cried plenty. 'Til he got sick of his own tears and decided to grow up and strike back twice as hard. He had many opponents, but only ever one true enemy, and that was mercy."

"He's amazing," Harry whispered. "I—"

"Isn't it my turn to ask a few questions now?" Tom cut in, casting a spell to reheat his tea. "Do you think you could ever serve the Dark Lord, now that you know that he's more than just a… Well, you get the idea."

"I… I think I respect him," Harry started. "It's amazing to have achieved what he has, starting from less than nothing. And… and it makes me sad, to think of him being an orphan. It makes me even sadder to think that he must have had reasons to believe that people are, um, greedy and selfish and all that. I'd be honoured to follow him, one day, but… not as a Death Eater. I… I can't… imagine myself hurting anyone just because they're werewolves or muggles or seemingly less deserving than rich purebloods."

'I can't see you as a Death Eater either,' Tom admitted to himself, watching the boy think. 'It makes you sad, to think of my life? Ignorant child. He… how can someone be so weak emotionally while having the potential to be so strong magically? I don't understand.' "What do you think of war?"

"War is wrong… and should be avoided instead of sought. Who are we to decide who is good and who is evil?"

"It's not about good an evil, you little idiot. It's just us and them, and that's all the difference that matters."
"…I wonder."

"And," Tom said suddenly, "what do you think of dying?"

"What?" Harry's green eyes widened with surprise when he heard this question. He gaped at Tom for a few moments before taking a deep breath and leaning back on his chair. "I… Death is… necessary, I think?"

"Do you think there's life after death? Or that people can be… revived after they're gone?" Tom asked, wondering if he was going to get a clue, finally, as to why the boy, according to Nagini, smelled as if he was sometimes dead, sometimes alive.

"No," Harry replied slowly. "I mean, no one can be revived, and no one should be immortal. But I think that there is certainly something after death, and… I believe that the dead could be, um, contacted. Spoken to, or something."

"Well, there are ghosts," Tom said. "But I wasn't talking about those."

"I wasn't either," Harry blurted. "I, well, the dead… they… go somewhere, you know. After they, er, die? And, um, maybe someone can, uh, occasionally go to where they go and—"

"That's what you do?" Tom cut in, feeling the heat of excitement inside his body. Could it be? This possibility hadn't even crossed his mind, but… seriously. The mere idea of it was simply outstanding.

"No!" Harry exclaimed hastily. "I was just wondering. If it's possible. I, I, I th-think I read about it somewhere. Maybe in a story, or something. It just, it's nothing."

'To go to the realm of the dead and return,' Tom thought. 'It would explain why he'd smell sometimes dead, I think. But why and how could he have gained such power? Can he do it consciously— He must. I remember that he flickered away during the execution all those months ago. Amazing. Simply amazing. I wonder if he can affect Death itself, or can he only contact the dead? I want to experiment on him…' "It's your turn to ask, isn't it?" Tom said suddenly. He had no idea whether or not it was the boy's turn, but that didn't really matter.

"Actually," Harry said, trying to not sound too shaken, "I should be going now. I didn't exactly ask for permission when I sneaked out, so…"

"Write to me, then," Tom told him, not moving from his seat as he watched Harry stand up and head for the door after a few moments of hesitation.

"Goodbye," Harry whispered before slipping out. Tom allowed himself to smile as soon as the door was closed again.


Because if Harry really could move between the realms of the living and the dead, then the boy had moved from being an 'interesting little creature' to being a 'potentially invaluable creature'. Even with his moral dilemmas and general naivety. Tom didn't regret telling Harry about himself, even if he had ended up revealing more than originally intended— he had given Harry a lot to think about, and the boy probably didn't even realize that he hadn't asked really anything important about 'Tom the Death Eater'.

Well, the boy had asked for this meeting, so the next meeting would have to be initiated by Tom.

He couldn't wait.
"You're leaving tomorrow?"

It was almost ten days after Harry's meeting with Tom, and he was currently in his room, packing his bags. The Christmas holiday was almost over and it was time for Harry to return to Durmstrang. Luna was sitting on his bed, knitting what looked like a really long scarf while trying to not look as disconnected from reality as she felt she was.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "Right after breakfast. You'll… take care of yourself, alright? You don't have to put up with anyone pushing you around."

"Of course, Harry."

"If anyone bullies you, you'll go directly to the teachers."

"Of course, Harry."

"Remember to keep your trunk locked to prevent anyone from stealing anything, and don't be afraid of secretly jinxing anyone who mistreats you."

"Of course, Harry," Luna said for the third time, smiling absently. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too, Luna."

"You'll write, right?" the girl asked. "No one but daddy has ever written to me before."

"I'll write," Harry promised. "And next summer, I'll ask my parents if we can meet or visit each other. We could hang out and stuff."

"That would be lovely," Luna whispered, before smiling dreamily at Harry. "Don't change too much."

"What?" Harry asked, looking up from his trunk. "What do you mean?"

"Hmm, nothing special," Luna replied. "You'll be going on your own?"

"No," Harry said. "Gildy will take me there. I wonder where he is right now." Probably somewhere harassing Crouch. Harry had done his best with trying to distract Gildy from Barty in order to keep on receiving private tutoring on duelling, but at times, he just had to let the glittery blond wizard out of his sight. Unsurprisingly, harassing Crouch was exactly what Gildy was doing at the time.

'I wonder if the Dark Lord will forgive me if I killed this freak,' Crouch thought, pressing his back against the wall while trying to keep Gildy away with the power of his glare. The Potter boy had managed to distract the flashy wizard from cornering Barty before, but this time, the kid was nowhere to be seen. Probably packing and preparing his escape. Lucky little bastard. "What do you want?"

"You," Gildy replied immediately. "But I know it's too early for you, so I just want to say that I will be leaving the country tomorrow for a few hours."

'But why are you telling me that!'

"He doesn't get it, darling," Sybil Trelawney said from the background where she was filling her smoking pipe with something purple. "I think he's immune to your charms."
"No one is immune to my charms."

"Just what the hell do you see when you look in the mirror?" Crouch sneered. Gildy smiled gently, taking a step forward while Crouch tried to somehow push his way through the stone.

"Me looking fabulous," Gildy replied. "Speaking of which, I've wanted to tell you this for a while, sweetheart, but dressed like that you... Well, you're handsome, of course, but you're missing something."

"He's too dull," Sybil said, closing her eyes and enjoying whatever she was smoking.

"Yes," Gildy breathed. "And if you'd just let me help you, we could turn that dull thing you're channelling into something else. Into..."

"Dull-icious," Sybil stated. Crouch cursed the lack of a backdoor in his own classroom where he was being cornered. Maybe he could just hex these to and call it an accident? No, no. With his luck, his punishment would be nursing them to health.

"Yes, that," Gildy agreed. "But we're getting side tracked here. Darling, I'm going tomorrow to take my young charge—Harry, you've seen him. Cute, but not as cute as me, is he? I just wanted to ask if you'd like to come with us. I mean, you could wait here and worry about me, or you could tag along."

"I'd rather not," Crouch said, scowling.

"He's being shy," Sybill declared before focusing again on her smoke pipe.

"I'm not being shy. I'm uninterested."

"I don't think so," Gildy said, his face void of the usual mirth. "I think you're just so deep in denial that even the suggestion of having sex with me scares you. You're trapped by your foolish belief that passion can truly exist only between a man and a woman, and that makes you blind to the possibility of discovering your inner pervert with me. I don't hate women—really, I love them. Platonically. But the mere idea of having sex with a woman confuses me. Where do you grab her? She doesn't have a penis! At least, most of them don't, and a strap-on doesn't count. You just, what, fondle her breasts?"

'How can you love women – platonically or otherwise – and speak of them like that?' Crouch thought.

"I think he's properly traumatized now," Sybil said approvingly at the sight of pale and nauseous Crouch. "Our work here is done. He's definitely not going to recover quick enough during your absence for him to get involved with anyone else."

"Excellent," Gildy smiled. "I'll leave tomorrow after breakfast and will be back before lunch. See you then, Barty-darling!" The man's words seemed more like a threat than anything else, and Crouch couldn't help but feel threatened.

He needed a plan, and he needed it now.

Potter would surely like to continue his lessons even after the break. He definitely wouldn't turn down another offer of alliance, would he?
His bags had already been sent back to Durmstrang, including a basket full of food that Luna had insisted on preparing for him during breakfast. He was dressed in his usual Durmstrang uniform and he was ready to go… except that he really didn't want to.

It wasn't just the issue of having to leave Luna behind. Actually, it was more about having to face Truls. With all the things going on during this holiday Harry had nearly forgotten what he had found out about his Swedish friend. Then again, he could have been mistaken? Truls certainly didn't act like Gildy in any way, and he didn't look like he was in love or anything. Maybe he was just being friendly?

And even if he wasn't, Harry didn't want to confront him about the maybe-feelings that could be a potential source of trouble. Would it be terribly rude if Harry just ignored them? As long as Truls didn't confess to him or anything, everything would be fine, right?

"I'll see you in a few months again, Harry," Gildy said when they had finally reached the apartment complex where Harry and his year mates lived. "Take care, darling. And do wear the lovely boots I gave you."

"They're too big for me," Harry said. "Anyway, just go. Thank you for escorting me, but, uh, I'm sure you already miss Professor Crouch so——"

"Don't worry," Gildy said dismissively. "I made sure that he won't be hooking up with anyone else anytime soon."

"…" Poor Crouch. "Bye." Harry didn't start moving towards his flat 'til he made sure that Gildy had indeed left. Only then did he turn his back to the portkey-point and hurry inside— it was cold, after all. Had his friends arrived already? Surely at least some of them?

'Oh well,' Harry thought while shrugging off his coat and proceeding to light a fire in the fireplace. 'Tomorrow morning will, without a doubt, start with the homeroom hour so I'll see all of them then.' He could enjoy his day alone, reading a book. Perhaps he could take a look at that animagus book Sirius had sent him?

That's what Harry did. He sat in his flat, focusing on the rather fascinating book while occasionally snacking on the food Luna had given him. And while he did hear when some of his friends arrived, he remained in his flat, completely unaware of the fact that the apartment below his own had been emptied.
The following day was bright, clear, and cold. Fresh snow was covering the grounds outside, and the mere idea of going out there made Harry shiver and pull on another shirt just in case. When he finally left to go to the homeroom class, he bumped into Filippa in front of the apartment complex.

"Darling!" the girl exclaimed, pulling him into a hug. "Looking good, Harry. How are you?"

"Pretty good," Harry replied with a smile, hugging her back before stepping away to take a good look at her. "And you?"

"Simply fabulous," Filippa said. "I thought about dropping by your place yesterday, but by the time I had exchanged news and gossip with Heidi and Petronella, it was simply too late."

"It's okay," Harry assured her as the two started to walk again together towards the classroom. "Besides, we'll all get to see each other now anyway."

"Yeah, in this Death Eater factory," Filippa muttered, and Harry was surprised to hear the tone of her voice.

"You disapprove?" he asked curiously.

"I spent Christmas with my family in Italy," Filippa replied quietly. "And while we weren't involved in any of the battles– since none of them took place anywhere near us– we still got the news, you know. So many die, Harry, and for what exactly? I can't help but remember what Professor Dietmar told us when we started studying here… I don't want to be hated and feared, Harry. I… I just… Please don't tell anyone. I know I shouldn't be like this…"

"On the contrary," Harry told her firmly, "I agree with you– these wars are pointless. They're nothing but the suicide of the Wizarding World masked as a struggle between what people like to call right and wrong."

"Don't tell the others, though," Filippa whispered right before they reached the classroom. "They wouldn't agree. Especially the likes of Clemens and Petronella. I know that Lorenzo is pretty relaxed about that stuff, and Björn only hates poor people. I'm not sure about Heidi and Nikolai, though. But just in case, let's keep this a secret– we could get into trouble if someone finds out."

"Don't worry," Harry assured her and sat down on his usual seat. He and Filippa were the first ones to arrive, and as usual she took the seat in front of Harry instead of the one next to him. That seat belonged to Truls. Speaking of whom… "Hey, I think I realized something during the break, but I need your confirmation about it."

"Hmm?"

"About Truls."

"Oh!" Filippa's expression brightened suddenly as she turned to look at Harry with a grin on her face. "Finally figured it out, did you?"

"He likes me," Harry whispered, unable to not blush at the admission. "What should I do?"

"Do you like him?" Filippa asked quietly, and Harry shrugged.
"He's a friend," Harry said. "Like you and the others. Sure, he's sort of my best friend, but I haven't really thought about liking anyone that way."

"Liking isn't something you can really decide to do or stop doing," Filippa said. "Give it time. Hi, Heidi! Hi, Nikolai!" Harry hadn't even heard when his other classmates had entered the classroom, and when he looked at Nikolai he couldn't help but remember what he knew about the guy. Harry didn't have the time to focus on those thoughts, though, since Truls arrived soon after.

'It's not that he's not good-looking,' Harry thought. Truls seemed to have grown quickly in a short amount of time and was most likely the tallest one in their class now. His curly blonde hair was well groomed, and his eyes were very, very blue. But did Harry like him? Somehow, the boy couldn't help but feel that even if he was aware of someone being handsome or beautiful… it just didn't click. It didn't make him feel one way or another, and Harry couldn't even comprehend why anyone would develop feelings for him, for Harry.

"Students," Professor Dietmar said, entering the classroom, "take your seats and be silent; there is something important I must tell you."

'Ooh dear,' Harry thought. 'I wonder what kind of news we'll be getting.' The students did as told, sitting quietly and nervously, wondering if they were in trouble for some reason.

"As you can see," Professor Dietmar started, "one of your classmates isn't here. Lorenzo Tancredi was killed during the Christmas break."

It took Harry a few seconds to understand what the man was saying. When he finally did, he felt numb. Of all the things he had expected to hear, this wasn't it.

"What!" Filippa shrieked. "How? Why?" Petronella, who was sitting next to her, immediately wrapped her arms around the girl to comfort her.

"This is ridiculous," Jakob muttered with disbelief, turning to look at the other students present, as if to make sure that Lorenzo wasn't there. Jakob's face was very pale and he looked much thinner than when Harry had seen him last time.

"Mr. Lorenzo's family lived in Rome and were, unfortunately, caught in the crossfire of the battles between our troops and the Rebels," Professor Dietmar explained, and as far as Harry could see, the man didn't appear to be particularly concerned or sad. "This is a very unfortunate incident, but it shall not affect your schedules in any shape or form. I must urge you to push it from your minds and focus on what is relevant– your studies here."

"One of our friends died," Heidi said, her tearful voice not masking her anger. "And you expect us to just… go on as if it didn't happen? As if Lorenzo never existed?"

"Every single one of us will die," Professor Dietmar said, his voice just as monotonous as it had always been, "one way or another. Some of us could die fighting. Some of us could die in accidents. Some of us could end up getting murdered. Some of us could die of old age. Some of us could die of illness. One way or another, Miss Albin, everyone will die."

"But—!"

"This is your future," the man continued, looking at the nine students in the classroom. "You're here to be trained to survive situations such as the one your friend died in. You're going to kill people or get killed for being too weak to succeed in that. Reality– this world– is brutal. It will not offer you sympathy, and it will not be affected by your death and sorrows. In the big picture, none of us is
significant. A hundred years from now, we might as well have never even existed."

"But you can't expect us to be so jaded from the get go," Heidi protested. "He's—"

"Was."

"—our friend!"

"I've said this already, but it bears repeating: we all die. There is no happy ending; there is no happily ever after. There is just this: we all die," Professor Dietmar said. "You nine out of all the other people should understand this. You will be elite Death Eaters eventually. *This* in comparison to what will happen in the future amounts to nothing. The person who is sitting next to you right now could be the next one to die. It's something you'll just have to deal with. You're now dismissed from here— your next lesson, history, will start at ten as usual. You have over half an hour to calm down, accept this situation, and move on." After saying that, the man didn't wait for his students to leave, opting to do so himself first.

"Calm down, calm down," Petronella whispered to the sobbing Filippa, even though Harry could see the tears in her eyes as well. He turned to Truls, and the taller boy gave Harry a strained smile, while reaching for Harry's hand under the table.

"Should we go back to the flats?" Truls asked quietly. "Maybe we could all after school gather there and… talk about this. How to get over it. We should… I don't know, have a funeral or something, even if we don't have Lorenzo's body."

"You're right," Harry whispered, letting go of Truls's hand and standing up. Filippa also stood up, turned, and threw her arms around Harry, pulling him into a tight hug, sobbing all the while.

"I can't believe this," she gasped between her sobs. "He's dead. He's dead. Lorenzo- our Lorenzo is gone."

"You guys know what it means, that Professor said 'crossfire' and not 'killed by the rebels'," Heidi said, clutching Nikolai's arm.

"They don't know who killed him," Truls said quietly, moving to stand right behind Harry.

"Which one of the rebels, you mean?" Jakob asked, looking almost green.

"No," Clemens replied tiredly. "Whether he was killed by the Rebels or by Death Eaters in the crossfire."

★

Professor Thomas Lyuben looked at the nine glum faces in front of him. He was supposed to start the history lesson, but he knew that it'd be a waste of time to talk to this bunch as long as they were distracted by the death of their classmate.

"This is what war does," Lyuben said, catching the attention of his students. "It kills. Freeing countries, promoting causes, conquering places— all those are side-effects that might or might not happen as a result. But the only certainty of war is death. And as long as this war against the Rebels goes on, the more you'll have to face the deaths of people you know and care about."

"Is this war *necessary*?" Filippa asked with sudden anger.

"All wars serve a purpose," Lyuben replied. "Even if it's not the purpose they were meant to serve.
Some say that certain wars are unavoidable because they were meant to happen. Because their consequences must come around. For example… the Salem witch trials. They were terrible, tragic and unforgivable… and they led to the creation of the law separating Muggles and us. Now tell me—where's the benefit in what happened? Why is it good that that particular event happened at that particular time?" The man waited for a few moments, but none of his students seemed to know the answer. They did, however, look much more focused than before.

"What's the only area wherein Muggles have improved more than us?" Professor Lyuben asked softly. "Weapons! If they had decided to develop their weapons before attacking us, then who's to say what could have happened to us? The Rebels seem unable to believe that Muggles are vicious —"

"Humans," Harry found himself saying. "They're humans. There are all kinds of humans with different personalities. The good and the bad. The kind and the vicious. The stupid, the smart, the hard-working, the evil… Whether or not someone has magic does not contribute to their intelligence, I think."

"So you're saying that Muggles are like us?" Clemens asked sharply, and for the first time, Harry sensed hostility from him.

"I don't think that's what Harry meant," Truls said quickly, preventing Harry from replying. "Intellectually, Muggles can be just as intelligent as some witches and wizards, so we should be careful. Especially since Muggles have their own advanced weapons now." Harry knew that Truls had just saved him from a very awkward situation— he hadn't meant to reveal his thoughts regarding Muggles. The words had just slipped out. Merlin, how could he have been so careless?


"Treat the death of your comrade like a lesson," Professor Lyuben advised. "The war raging in Italy will spread soon, and if it ever was to reach England, then all of us will certainly be sent to fight. And when we fight, we show no mercy or pity. We fight to win. You, as second-year students, are still very sheltered. Next year, however, we'll be focusing on the current goings of the Wizarding World, the political environment and how our history led up to it. In Divination next year you'll be taught to look for signs of disaster and death, and as far as I know, even your Dark Arts lessons will finally advance from theoretic to practical. You are being prepared to fight in a war. You're elite. You're chosen."

"So we should just… forget about Lorenzo?" Petronella asked with disbelief. "That he died?"

"One day, we'll run out of tomorrows. Every single one of us," Professor Lyuben said, before sighing and reopening his book. "Now, let's focus on what's relevant. Chapter twenty-seven. The Harpy Wars. Calling them Harpy Wars is slightly inaccurate considering that the enemy consisted of harpies, mermaids and even some veela, but…"

Harry was feeling sick. And cold. And tense. His body was shivering and Truls's hand felt so hot compared to his own. He didn't know what to think, what to feel, what to do. He hadn't been that close to Lorenzo, but what Professors Dietmar and Lyuben had said was true — they'd have to be aware of the possibility of dying. Of losing friends to death in this war. Whether or not they liked or approved of it was completely irrelevant to the reality going on.

'I've never felt this helpless,' Harry thought. Never felt this helpless or this insignificant. He remembered the execution he had witnessed a year ago. Remembered Albus's words. Remembered that small room he had found before the Christmas Holiday.
'I don't have to become a leader if I don't want to,' Harry assured himself. 'But I'll go back there and read those books. There must be something I can do.' Hadn't Albus said that Harry could just... influence the thoughts of some people? The opinions? If he could make people see sense, then maybe there'd be hope of some kind. And if he remembered correctly there had even been a book about Occlumency in the collection – it'd be useful to study, especially if he was to hang around Tom a lot.

'Then again I heard it's difficult to learn,' Harry thought, not even pretending to be listening to what Professor Lyuben was saying. Feeling tired and unmotivated, Harry leaned to rest his head against Truls's shoulder.

"Tired?" Truls whispered, and Harry nodded.

"I'm worried about Filippa," Harry said quietly. "Lorenzo was a very close friend of hers. We need to do something to cheer her up."

"We can talk with Björn– he comes up with pretty good ideas."

"You mean we can buy ideas from Björn? That guy sells anything he has that can be sold."

"He's going to end up rich one day," Truls muttered. "Unless his gambling habits make him bankrupt."

"We have Charms next," Harry said. "Can I sit next to Filippa? I mean... do you mind if I do? I just think that she'd need..." 'Why am I asking his permission anyway? It's not like he's going to feel hurt even if I don't sit next to him every time!'

"Petronella seems to be taking care of her, though. Maybe after school we could visit her?" Truls suggested.

"Alright," Harry agreed hesitantly. There was... something going on. He was feeling slightly uneasy. Maybe because he had no idea how to comfort Filippa? That could be it. He'd need to look for a book of some kind to give tips on how to comfort people properly. Or maybe he could ask Luna? He'd need to write to her anyway.

"You can lean on me again if you want," Truls whispered, lips almost touching Harry's ear. "I don't mind."

* The remaining of the school day passed slowly. Harry was very worried but didn't get a chance to talk with Filippa, even though the girl had shot him some desperate looks earlier.

"I'll drop by tonight sometime," Harry had managed to whisper to her during lunch break. "That way, no one will disturb us. Don't worry, Filippa. You're not alone." The girl's sad expression had turned into an almost scarily blank one, and she nodded.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll... I... Thank you."

Before that, however, the nine gathered in Petronella's flat. The girl had insisted on all of them spending a few hours together after dinner.

"We'll all be thinking about it anyway," she said. "We might as well talk about it together."

"What's there to talk about?" Nikolai asked. "I won't lie to you guys– I don't really care. I didn't
know the guy well, and I can't see how his death should affect me."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Filippa hissed tearfully.

"He's just being honest," Heidi reminded her. "Either way, we ought to plan a memorial of some kind, right? We can't have an official funeral here, but we can do something."

"Which one of us will die next, I wonder," Jakob suddenly muttered. "Will we forget those who die?"

"Never," Filippa snapped. "I don't forget my friends."

"You heard what the professors said," Clemens said. "We're going to be Death Eaters, Filippa! Not some fucking Peacekeepers! What if, one day, we end up in a situation where we have to kill a friend to save someone else? Or… or that you'd have to kill someone you know because if you let them live, they'll end up leaking information? Death happens! It'll happen to all of us!"

"The only way to maximize the probability of survival is to become the strongest," Nikolai said calmly. "Had Lorenzo been strong, he would have been able to fight his way out, I'm sure."

"Bastards," Filippa said darkly. "You two utter bastards."

"No need for name-calling," Heidi sighed, standing up. "It really seems that we're all too emotional to talk about this right now. It was nice of you to invite us here, Nella, but maybe we should talk about this tomorrow."

"Indeed," Nikolai agreed, standing up as well. Harry was mute with shock—he hadn't expected such lack of… empathy? Compassion? Sorrow?—from these people he had thought of as friends. Then again, hadn't he already known that something was wrong with Nikolai?

"See you tomorrow," Clemens said before leaving as well. The door had barely swung shut behind him before Filippa burst into tears. Petronella was quick to move and wrap her arms around the Italian girl.

"I see how it is," Jakob muttered, closing his eyes and leaning his head against the armrest of the couch. "When we're gone, we're gone."

"I'm surprised, though," Björn said. "Not that I expected any genuine compassion, really. I didn't think that they'd be so bold about it, though."

"If only closed minds came with closed mouths," Harry sighed, before reaching to touch Filippa's shoulder gently, unsure of what to say. "We won't forget him. We definitely won't. Not him. None of us. We won't forget each other, no matter what happens. Not just Lorenzo. I'll never forget you or Truls or Jakob or Björn or Petronella either. I won't forget Nikolai, Heidi or Clemens regardless of how they act."

"Harry's right," Petronella hurried to agree. "There are ten of us. And as long as we remember that, there will forever be ten of us, no matter what happens."

"We'll have a tombstone set for him somewhere," Truls promised. "We'll look for a good place and make it worthy of him."

"You look exhausted, Filippa," Björn said. "How about we plan the memorial later? You try to sleep a bit, yeah?"
"Yeah," Filippa replied, although it was clear that she didn't think that she'd be able to sleep. Jakob, whose flat was the nearest one to Petronella's, offered to walk all the way down to Filippa's flat with them, but Harry declined.

"You look exhausted too," Harry said. "Filippa knows that you care. We all do. But just like we care about her health, we care about yours too." Jakob shot him an appreciative look, before smiling tiredly.

"He was a close friend," the German boy admitted, even though they both knew that Jakob's exhaustion had little to do with that. "Thank you."

Harry ended up being the one to take Filippa all the way to her flat. Then again, she did live right next to him. When they entered the flat, Harry helped her to the couch before gently taking off her shoes and jacket, offering to even make some tea.

"I wonder if he was hurt," Filippa said instead, closing her eyes. "I need to know. He was like a brother to me, you see. Our families knew each other and… I can't believe… I just…" Her whole demeanour was so defeated that Harry felt almost scared. He moved to sit next to her, reaching to hold her hand. He couldn't help but do what his heart told him to, regardless of the risks he knew he was taking.

"Filippa," Harry started. "If… if you promise to not ask me any questions, I can… have access to that information."

"What?" Filippa asked, startled out of her sorrow. Harry was aware of the confusion and bewilderment in her voice and eyes, but he still continued.

"Promise to never ask me about this," Harry demanded. "To never try to find out… and I'll reach the dead to find out what happened to Lorenzo."

"What are you saying?" Filippa asked, wide-eyed. "That… Are you humouring me? Do you know someone who was there? Or are you going to talk to the divination professor or something?"

"No," Harry replied. "I don't need the help of others. I shouldn't even be offering you this, but I don't want to see you so sad. I never had any siblings, but the thought of losing someone I love like that is too painful. If I can bring you any relief… Just promise me to never ask me about it, and to never tell anyone either. Not even Truls. No matter what."

"You're not lying," Filippa whispered, lifting her hand to touch Harry's cheek with her fingertips. "You're not lying."

"Give me a week," Harry said. "There are some books I need to read, some decisions I need to make, and some letters I need to send. But I'll find out and I will tell you. I promise."

"You know," Filippa breathed. "I used to think that you'd be the hardest one to approach."

"What?" Harry was genuinely surprised at the admission. "Why?"

"There's something about you, Harry. Something… like a thin, invisible wall. The others can sense it to some degree, but as far as I know, only I am consciously aware of it."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Filippa."

"Probably," Filippa murmured, and Harry could see that she was almost asleep. He didn't dare to remove her skirt or shirt, but he did pull off her socks, undo her plaits, and carry her to her bed. He
was about to leave her bedroom when the girl's voice stopped him.

"Hey, Harry," Filippa said drowsily, staring through the darkness at him. "Can you stop this war?"

Harry stood for a long time, feeling frozen inside. He was tense and afraid and wary. Filippa's even breathing indicated that regardless of what the girl herself had believed– that she wouldn't be able to sleep– she had still managed to do so. Harry couldn't help but remember what Remus Lupin had told him all those months ago–

'if you think that both Rebels and Death Eaters are wrong, then talk to the people who are neither. If you don't think that war is the answer, then make people share your opinion. Put your future in good hands, Harry. Your own.'

When Harry finally left Filippa’s flat to return to his own, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would have to return to the train station again and have another long talk with Albus.

But before that– tomorrow already– he'd go back to the secret room and take another look at the books there.

*'

'Stones and trees and rivers as far as the eye can see,' James thought gloomily. 'With that stupid Pettigrew hanging around, there's no way I could enjoy the scenery. If only Sirius was here, we could push that bastard of a cliff.'

James hadn't been able to shake off the feeling of wariness and dread ever since Pettigrew had talked about Harry with him. What the man had said, however, was true. As unbelievable as it was, Harry had been thought to be initially a stillborn. And magic couldn't lie about that kind of things. It was no misdiagnosis. Harry had been dead and then somehow came back to life.

Lily and James hadn't known why or how, but they had been so grateful; their baby was alive despite everything, and for a while, Lily had insisted on calling him her 'boy who lived'. Harry had grown up to be almost like any other child, and James couldn't be prouder of his son.

Harry had, though, had a hard time remembering Lily's name in the beginning– James remembered with amusement the times when Lily had tried to teach her son to say her name, only for the little child to insist calling her Merope. Where had he even heard that name? There weren’t any Meropes in their lives.

'He's going to become a Death Eater,' James thought then, remembering the unfortunate, depressing truth. 'I hope that these battles will be done by the time he's expected to take part in any of them. Ah, I wish I could just go back in time to when it was peaceful. Last year was good. I miss Lily and Harry so much—'

James wondered what his wife was doing. Was she still working in the hospital of Rome? Was she safe? She was scheduled to return back home in the summer, and James couldn't wait to see her. And Harry. But at least he knew that Harry was safe at school.

'My thoughts are too scattered. I'm getting a headache.'

"You know, James," Pettigrew said suddenly, walking quicker to keep up with James's steps. "When we started attending Hogwarts, we didn't even know what Death Eaters were. And we used to hate Dark magic so much, didn't we.? And we—"

"Stop saying we," James interrupted, feeling irritated. "You were a Slytherin, and we never hung
"How harsh," Peter whined, but somehow James felt as if the man was amused. "Why are you always so cruel to me? When did I offend you? Surely it's not when I mentioned your son—"

"Never," James hissed, reaching for his wand, "mention Harry again. Besides, even if you told anyone about the mistake a nurse made, no one would take it seriously. Stop hanging around me and get lost."

"I can't really do that, James," Peter replied, amusement now clear in his tone. "We needn't talk about your son if that makes you uncomfortable, but I'm still going to spend time with you. We could catch up and exchange news regarding what we have been up to since we graduated, yes?"

"You and I have nothing to talk about," James snarled, hurrying forward. Peter shook his head and sighed.

"You're a fool," Peter muttered, before following the other man slowly. "A poor fool, James Potter."

While Sirius liked France, he wasn't particularly fond of Paris. However, that's where his current mission took him to. 'Gauge the atmosphere,' he had been told to do. 'See if they feel the war. If they're nervous. If they are hostile towards England. If they're planning an attack.' Sirius hated information gathering missions— he'd have to keep low profile, avoid catching attention, not drink much at parties, and basically be focused on work all the time with no chance of a break.

Although he did get the chance to charm French ladies— he just loved French women. How could he not? All they needed to do was talk, letting the French words roll out of their precious mouths, and Sirius would feel the urge to be very friendly towards them.

He couldn't wait to meet yet another Monique or René.

'I wonder what James is doing,' Sirius thought on this third day of walking through tricky and dark alleyways. 'Bet he's having fun in battle, duelling his worries away. Damn it, I want something to drink.' He was grumpy, getting even grumpier, when he almost tripped at the sight of a familiar man begging at the corner of the street.

'Should have known that scum like him wouldn't be able to survive even after being helped,' Sirius thought with disgust, standing still and almost glaring at the beggar. 'After all of the help James and Lily offered, and he still ends up in the streets.' Sirius was conveniently forgetting about the simple fact that no matter where— not only in England and France— werewolves had no chance of survival on their own. Who'd hire a werewolf? Even if someone hired one, due to the protocols, any small mistake would definitely lead to immediate firing.

The werewolf was, if possible, even thinner than before. Sirius didn't bother to try and remember his name— it didn't matter anyway. The Death Eater did wonder, however, where the man went every full moon— he definitely didn't roam the streets in his savage form, did he? Besides, why was the creature in France anyway?

'Either way, none of my business,' Sirius then decided, turning away. 'He ruined his life on his own.' Surely if the wolf had actually tried a little bit harder, he would have succeeded in adapting to live with civilized human beings. Sirius started walking again, trying to think of something else.

The dirty snow beneath his boots made squelching noises as he walked, and he wondered whether or not there was this kind of snow near Durmstrang. Perhaps they had more snow? Since it was up
north and all. Was Harry cold? Maybe Sirius could buy something nice and send it to his godson? He missed the little brat so much. Harry—

'—would give that wolf another chance. '

Sirius froze in his tracks with wide-eyed surprise at the thought. It had come out of nowhere, but he knew that it was the truth. Harry would insist on saving Lupin again. Sirius could still remember very clearly the way his godson had acted when the werewolf had been brought to the Potter Manor.

'The wolf is dangerous. Where would I keep it anyway? Besides, my mission isn't even finished yet!'

Well, he could restrain the wolf easily. And keep it in one of the rooms of Grimmauld Place— Sirius lived there alone, after all. But why? Sure, Harry would be glad, but… Harry wouldn't even need to know that Sirius had seen Lupin at all. Involving a werewolf in his life was simply too risky and troublesome and didn't come with any benefits.

Besides, no matter what Harry would think, Sirius was sure that James and Lily would disapprove.

Not to mention that he really was still dealing with an unfinished mission! He simply didn't have the time to help anyone— surely Harry would understand that?

'James and Lily don't have to know.'

He'd have to keep it a secret from everyone. Being branded as a werewolf-sympathizer was just wrong and unacceptable.

'Only Harry would know.'

But was it worth it? Sirius didn't like werewolves— they were nothing but a burden to society, and frankly, he wasn't even amongst those who thought of the werewolves as weapons.

'But it'd make Harry happy. And I'd do anything to make Harry happy.'

What came to the mission, Sirius could spend a day in England and then return to complete it. The man nodded to himself, turned and strode to where the werewolf still was.

* *

Leaders need to be aware that communication relies at least as much on how you say things as what you say. By appreciating how easy it is for messages to get distorted and misunderstood, leaders take care to ensure that they communicate effectively, encouraging the behaviour that they intended. Leaders also have to be good— active— listeners, so that they recognize the message behind the words others use.

Harry closed his eyes, yawned, and resisted the urge to throw the book into the fireplace.

It was Wednesday evening, and Harry was in his flat, reading the books he had taken from that secret room. Filippa had dropped by and sat on Harry’s couch for a few hours, drinking tea and staring into nothingness while occasionally reaching to hold his hand. When Truls had arrived, Filippa had left.

'He keeps looking at me,' Harry thought, feeling his concentration falter.

"You look tired," Truls said suddenly. "Maybe you should rest, Harry."

"Maybe," Harry agreed and yawned again. "My head hurts. And shoulders, too."
"You've been very tense lately," Truls sighed, standing up. "Want me to massage your shoulders… and back?"

"Oh God, yes," Harry sighed, setting down the book. "Do I go lie on the couch?"

"I think it's best if you went to lie on your bed," Truls said. "I mean, we don't have any massage oils anyway so the bed won't get messy. Also, chances are that you'll fall asleep at some point."

"I'll go brush my teeth, then," Harry decided, rubbing his eyes and yawning again. "Do I change into my pyjama?"

"Actually…” Truls started after a moment of silence. "It's best if you'd wear just your underwear. If possible." Harry, who was too exhausted to think straight, simply nodded and left the bathroom's door open while he brushed his teeth and undressed. Truls wiped his sweaty palms and took a few deep breaths to calm down. He was just going to give Harry a massage. Massages were good, and it'd help his best friend relax. There was nothing weird about giving someone a massage.

'I need to stop thinking about this,' Truls thought, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt. "Is your bed empty?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. He didn't bother folding the clothes he had been wearing, leaving them on the floor of his bedroom instead while he went to lie on the bed. "This good?"

"Lie on your stomach," Truls instructed before climbing on the bed as well. His fingertips were toughing the back of Harry's right thigh lightly, making the dark-haired boy shiver and hide a blush by pressing his face against his pillow.

"Next time, we could do this properly," Truls said, sliding his palms down Harry's leg, applying slight pressure. "With oils and all. Would work better. I can bring some oils and leave them here, if you want. I think Filippa has many, and if she's against parting with one bottle, I'm sure she could at least tell us from where to buy some."

"Mm-hm." Truls almost chuckled at Harry's tired response but then opted to just focus on what he was doing. Harry's legs were smooth, and he didn't seem to have any scars. Truls kneaded the right leg, avoided the back of the knee as he should, and spent quite a while massaging Harry's thighs. Harry's skin was warm and smooth against Truls's fingers, and the boy barely managed to resist the strange urge to press a kiss on Harry's thigh.

"We haven't played Quidditch in ages, have we?" Truls asked, not expecting an answer. When he moved to the other side of the bed from where he could get a better access to massage Harry's left leg as he had done to the right, he saw that Harry's eyes were closed and his mouth was slightly open.

'Is he sleeping already?' Truls thought with surprise, leaning closer to take a good look at the dark-haired boy's face. "You awake?"

"Mm," Harry replied, and Truls returned to massaging the left leg. Harry opened his eyes and sleepily watched the Swedish boy whose face was serious with concentration. Truls was unaware of being watched as he was wondering which position he should take to be able to massage Harry's back properly. A few minutes later, he ended up sitting on Harry's thighs, his front pressed against Harry's arse, trying to not even think about anything remotely forbidden.

Again, Truls pressed his palms against the Harry's back, starting from the bottom and kneading slowly and smoothly upwards, all the way to the shoulders. He did it twice before moving off and wondering whether or not he should continue– being in that position while actually facing Harry was
just… Truls knew that he liked Harry, of course, and he really did want to be as close to the other boy as possible… but the strange feelings inside his own body were almost frightening.

Maybe he should stop the massage and just have a nap?

Harry closed his eyes, feeling so very relaxed and sleepy. Truls wasn't massaging him anymore– the other boy's touch was now feather-light and left a strange, tingling sensation on Harry's skin. Harry yawned yet again, and as soon as he felt Truls's body lie down next to his own, he pressed closer, seeking comfort and warmth. Truls let out a shaky breath, wrapping his arms around his best friend.

"I'll always be here for you," Truls whispered, running his fingers through Harry's dark hair. "Sweet dreams, Harry."


Remus Lupin looked up when he saw an unfamiliar pair of boots in front of him. The boots, he thought, looked expensive. The boots, he noticed, were also being worn by someone who was sneering down at him. The man– tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed and relatively handsome– was very familiar, and it didn't take long for Remus to remember who he was– Sirius Black.

"Werewolf," Black said, "stand up." Remus, unsure of what was going on, shakily did as told. He knew that he looked extremely unflattering, but he was starving, felt cold, and hadn't had a chance to wash up for days.

"Yes?"

"You're the one James and Lily tried to help, aren't you? What are you doing here? Why did you fail?" Black's words were blunt but also honestly confused. Remus refrained from sighing tiredly, opting to answer instead.

"I did get a job," he started quietly. "But since the owner knew that I'm… what I am, he fired me as soon as he could find an excuse to do so. I spent a few months travelling, looking for a job, but… no one would hire me."

"And so you ended up begging here," Black muttered with clear disgust. "Where do you go during full moon?"

'Why do you ask? It's not like you care,' Remus thought but didn't say it, knowing that Black could kill him for such insolence. "There's an abandoned basement not too far from here. I lock myself down there a few hours before I… transform."

"You're going to come with me," Black said suddenly, surprising the werewolf. "I won't lie to you– I do not think that creatures like you should be allowed to roam freely. But… I remember how Harry acted towards you, and that is the only reason why I am going to help you. If you stay here, you'll die. Either you'll freeze to death or die of starvation or someone will half-accidentally curse you to an early grave."

"That child," Remus muttered, remembering the young boy who had treated him like an equal– something that Remus hadn't experienced in years. "Is he well?"

"You're not permitted to ask me any questions," Black snarled, turning away. "Come on, follow. And don't think that I'll let you stay in a room with Harry alone. I just know that my godson has been feeling down lately– he even had to spend Christmas alone!– and considering his lack of hostility towards you, he'd probably like to see you again."
"He's a fine young man," Remus said, following the Pureblood. "Wise beyond his years."

"Idealistic and naïve, actually," Black muttered. "But he's the most precious and amazing child in the whole world. Now shut up. I don't want to hear your voice, wolf."

In all honesty, Remus thought about refusing to go with Black– for all he knew, Black could be planning on just killing him somewhere or torturing him and using his body for research or potions. But why would the man bother claiming otherwise if he wanted to hurt Remus? It's not like Remus would be able to defend himself if Black was to stun him and portkey him away.

He couldn't shrug off the feeling of being considered as a pet, though. Black's attitude reminded Remus of a parent reluctantly buying a puppy to their child. And yet, that attitude was far better than the other alternatives.

"When we arrive at Grimmauld Place," Black started. "You'll vow to never harm Harry and never betray him. Oh Merlin, why am I even doing this?"

"You," Remus said, voicing his thoughts before even realizing it, "do not understand. Do you think that my condition makes me feel—"

"I said I don't want to hear your voice," Sirius snarled. "You're nothing but a monster that needs to be trained."

"You should talk to him," Remus continued calmly, not bothering to even try and dodge the sharp slap he received. "Your godson. It seems he has far more wisdom than you."

"All the months before Harry's summer break," Sirius said. "It seems I really need them to train you properly."

* *

When Harry woke up early next morning, Truls was gone. The clothes Harry had thrown carelessly on the floor were now folded neatly on the chair. It was still dark, and Harry could hardly believe his eyes when he turned to the clock he had on the table and saw that it was only half past five in the morning– his first lesson wouldn't start till eight. And yet, Harry felt far more awake and far less tired than he had in ages.

'How can a simple massage affect me so much?' Harry wondered, sitting up. He turned to look at the empty spot on his bed where Truls had been lying down hours earlier. 'I wonder if he wanted to kiss me at any point.' Didn't people who liked other people want to kiss them, after all? Did Truls even know how to kiss? Harry only had a vague idea– what if everyone else knew how to kiss but Harry was the only ignorant one?

'Why am I even thinking about this?' the boy then thought, standing up. 'I'll go shower and eat some breakfast.' And then, perhaps he'd refocus on those books he had brought. Harry also knew that he needed some kind of a plan if he wanted to go to the train station and hopefully meet Lorenzo.

All the previous times when Harry had ended up at the train station due to an accident of some kind, he had only been able to see Albus. Harry did, however, remember twice when he had had a strange sliding sensation and ended up at the train station for an instant, during which he was able to see the crowd– the dead. He was sure of it! Which meant that even if he knocked himself out, he wouldn't be able to find Lorenzo anyway… and therefore, he'd have to figure out a way to go there intentionally.

'But what if Lorenzo has already boarded the train?' Harry realized, entering his bathroom to take a
quick shower. 'I have no idea how quickly they board a train. Surely a week is too long of a time to wait! But then again, Albus didn't seem to be aware of the time passing at all... I wonder if the time is still somehow there? Is that even possible?'

Most importantly, Harry was worried about whether or not he'd be able to keep his promise to Filippa. What would he tell her if he failed?

'I have to figure out how to get there pretty soon,' Harry decided, reaching for the shampoo. 'I don't recall using any magic though, so maybe it's all just concentration.' Was it really that simple?

Besides, Harry knew that, during the execution, he had just wanted to vanish without thinking of any particular place.

"This is giving me a headache," Harry muttered, rubbing his eyes. But as soon as he decided to think about something else, his mind brought up the other annoying topic: kissing.

Was it normal for him to think about kissing? Was it normal to be worried about whether or not he knew how to kiss? He wasn't planning on kissing anyone anytime soon, so why couldn't he stop thinking about it? Was it Truls's fault? How exactly could Harry blame Truls for this— the guy hadn't done anything!

He should really just focus on his plans. Maybe he should make a list of the important things he ought to do and not think about anything else? Yeah, that could work.

After his shower, Harry made some porridge, and by the time he was done, it was barely five past six. Still too early for him to go to the school building, but perhaps he could take a walk? The sun hadn't even risen yet, and it probably wouldn't rise for at least another hour. If Harry took his wand, surely he'd be safe enough outside. Besides, the area was shielded from outsiders.

Harry prepared his schoolbooks, put them into his bag alongside with quills and parchment, and left the bag on the couch— he'd later drop by to get it before going to class. He put on his uniform and the heavy coat and didn't forget to wrap a scarf around his neck and wear his gloves before going out.

The temperature outside was colder than Harry had thought it would be. The stars were hidden somewhere behind the clouds between him and the dark sky. The snow beneath his feet was fresh and a few inches deep— it wasn't hard to walk on, but Harry knew that, sometimes, this deceptively beautiful snow hid ice right beneath it. A careless step could make him fall down.

'Aren't most things in life like that?' Harry thought. 'Some of them, at least.'

"I'm confused," Harry said aloud, then, as he walked further away from the apartment complex. "I am not sure about what I should do. I think I know, but..." The boy's voice got quieter and quieter until he fell silent and stopped walking. If the possibility of him reaching the train station intentionally depended on his willpower, then he should focus on that. Harry knew that whatever willpower he had was being hindered by the confusion he found himself constantly plagued by. To get rid of that confusion, he'd need to... be organized.

He really needed to make a list of things he'd have to do.

Talk with Albus. Talk with Tom. Write to Luna. Write to his mother. Write to his father. Ask about Sirius, too, while he was at it. Find out how Lorenzo died. Learn how to kiss, in order to avoid future humiliation. Do something about his resolution.

'There's a lot more I have to do,' Harry thought. 'I'll add to the list whenever I remember something new.'
To be more confident, he'd have to be more… daring, right? Bolder. Willing to take risks. But how could he do that? What could he be bold about without really risking anything serious?

*That kissing thing,* Harry decided. *It's the first step.*

And he knew exactly who to ask for help.

***

"You mean he started from nothing? He… Did he ever… was he ever scared?"

Tom was used to thinking a lot. He was used to having something constantly in his mind. But he wasn't used to being unable to control his thoughts like this. It just didn't happen – he usually could just shove even the most persistent thoughts to some corner of his mind with the help of Occlumency. And yet… he couldn't forget Harry's words.

The boy was strange.

But was he dangerous? Tom didn't think so– Harry didn't seem like the type to intentionally do anything risky. But he also seemed to be very…morally correct. What if the brat decided, one day, to spread those ideas of his? What if he gave Tom no choice but to erase him? Should Tom just go ahead with that? Tom knew that if it ever came down to it, he could kill Harry. But *would* he? Perhaps he'll never know unless he ended up in a situation like that.

The problem with being bored most of the time was that when something interesting finally appeared, he'd find himself reluctant to let it go… no matter how risky it could be.

"He's amazing. I… I think I respect him."

The admiration Lord Voldemort had gotten from thousands, if not millions, of people worldwide was flattering– he wasn't going to deny that. But there was still something special about the admiration when the source was Harry. Perhaps because Harry's worth in Tom's eyes was different from the worth of everyone else? Why would one little boy– no matter how interesting– become so important to him?

Tom could claim that Harry's importance was solely because of the boy's possible connection with the dead… but he knew that that wasn't exactly it. And it wasn't just because the boy was entertaining either.

In all honesty, it was starting to get on Tom's nerves how much he thought about Harry. It wasn't like him to obsess about people like this. Tom had considered his fascination to be some kind of attraction but had then dismissed the idea– Harry was… much too young.

Tom had never really been emotionally attracted to anyone, and whatever sexual attraction he had felt had been short-lived. People served many purposes, but none of those purposes had anything to do with actual attachment. And yet… Harry wasn't exactly *useful*. Not yet, at least.

"It's amazing to have achieved what he has, starting from less than nothing. And… and it makes me sad, to think of him being an orphan. It makes me even sadder to think that he must have had reasons to believe that people are, um, greedy and selfish and all that."

What kind of face will Harry make when he finds out that his Tom is the Dark Lord? Tom had tried to tell the boy before so surely the brat would have no right to accuse him of lying. Would he be angry? Calm? Accepting? In denial?
Maybe Tom should reveal himself to Harry at a certain moment, see the reaction, obliterate the boy, and do it again at a different time? Would Harry have different reactions? Maybe he could experiment a little bit? Well, not really. He didn't want to take the risk of making the boy intellectually damaged, somehow. That'd ruin the fun.

The boy was, as far as Tom knew, academically pretty good. Did he stumble upon the information regarding contacting the dead during his studies in Durmstrang? But what the hell had the boy been searching for to find that kind of— no, it was impossible. If Harry didn't acquire the information from a book or learn the skill from a teacher— which was very unlikely anyway— then that meant that the boy was born with this ability.

But what kind of… heritage could do grant this gift? Did one of his parents have it? No, Tom had already researched the Potter family and found nothing out of ordinary there. Had he missed something? Surely not. Then again, he hadn't really been looking for this either.

"Not that I even know what exactly 'this' is," Tom muttered sullenly. Should he ask the boy directly?

"I'd be honoured to follow him, one day, but… not as a Death Eater. I… I can't… imagine myself hurting anyone just because they're werewolves or muggles or seemingly less deserving than rich purebloods.

What would Harry look like five years in the future? He'd be seventeen. Still growing up. What would his magic feel like, then? Will his delicate features ever harden or would the boy look so… fragile even when he grows older? He wouldn't be a good Death Eater, though. Harry's moral compass seemed to be very much active, and while Tom didn't understand the point, he didn't think that Harry would be giving up on his views. The boy, despite his young age, seemed to be very aware of his own opinions.

Maybe associating with the dead had made him like that?

If the boy did not become a Death Eater, then what? He wouldn't be able to keep Harry as an advisor either— the boy would probably insist on saving kittens and adopting orphans and stopping wars with poetry or some other nonsense like that. Letting the boy live his life as a regular citizen was out of question as well— education in Durmstrang shouldn't be wasted like that.

"I mean, no one can be revived, and no one should be immortal. But I think that there is certainly something after death, and… I believe that the dead could be, um, contacted. Spoken to, or something."

Harry would have to learn how to lie. The boy had been pathetic at it when he denied his abilities. But were Harry's powers limited to speaking with the dead or could he actually control them somehow? Tom wanted the information, and he did think about using Legilimency after all, but what risks would that include? If Harry's abilities gave him some kind of immunity or defence against mental attacks, then there could be some damage waiting to be unleashed on whoever dared to try and intrude.

It was such a pity that powers of that kind were granted to Harry who clearly would never use them the way they were meant to be used.

Tom had already ruled out asking the brat and then obliterating him. Using the Imperius curse wasn't an option either because there was a chance that the boy would remember it afterwards.

Well then, it seemed like Tom would have to do it without magic.
Now, all he needed was an opportunity to get Harry drunk.

"I need to talk with you," Harry whispered to Björn on their way towards the last class of the day—Divination. "I need a favour."

"Said something?" Truls asked, turning towards the two. Harry shook his head with an awkward smile on his face.

"Nah, just… I really am not in the mood for Divination of all things."

"Fat lot of good that craft is doing," Filippa snarled. "If you can't predict death, then—"

"Too many people are dying nowadays," Petronella sighed. "It's so sad."

"I want to play Quidditch," Jakob suddenly cut in. "Think we could? After the lesson's over, I mean?"

"Well, we could go fly at least," Truls said. "You sure that you're up to it?"

"Bet you I can fly faster," Clemens claimed, looking at Truls.

"Bet accepted," Björn said quickly, grinning.

"I don't think he was talking to you."

"When you talk about bets, you talk to me. I'm joining too."

"If it's a race, I guess I won't do it," Jakob said quickly with a slightly troubled expression.

"Can you teach me how to fly?" Filippa asked suddenly, and Harry almost smiled at the way her request made Jakob's expression turn into a happier one.

"Sure!"

"You'll be joining us, Harry?"

"I'll watch," Harry said. "I've got a book I want to finish, so… I'll leave flying for summer."

And so, less than two hours later, Harry was sitting on a bench wrapped in his warmest coat and reading a book. Jakob was giving Filippa and Petronella instructions nearby, while Clemens, Truls, and Björn were having their race. Heidi and Nikolai had both decided to not venture out, and Harry could understand that—it was a cold day, after all.

'Lorenzo should be here with us,' Harry thought. 'He—'

"Harry Potter," a vaguely familiar voice said, and Harry turned to see Viktor Krum standing awkwardly nearby.

"Viktor Krum," Harry said, smiling. "Hi. Want to sit?"

"Ah, no, I was… I'm actually on my way to, ah, the other Quidditch pitch," Krum stammered. "We're practicing. I just wanted to, ah, ask if you're alright. I mean…"

"I'm perfectly fine," Harry assured the endearingly awkward upperclassman. "Really, no permanent
damage of any kind. Thank you for asking, though. I really appreciate it."

"I'm glad," Krum sighed, his dark eyes squinting at Harry's classmates, particularly the three boys racing. "Why don't you go there and fly with them?"

"I'm not in the mood, really. I'm reading…"

"Do you mind if I ask… what are you reading?"

"I don't think this book will interest you," Harry admitted. "It's about war."

"War and sports are… same paintings, in different frames," Viktor said. "Enemies, strategies, attacks and defences."

"You're right," Harry said thoughtfully, wondering if there were any useful books he had overlooked simply because they didn't directly address what he wished to learn about. "I've been so… blind and careless."

"Is something wrong?" Krum asked, and Harry shook his head. They could hear a male voice calling Krum from a distance.

"On the contrary," the boy replied, "you've just solved a problem for me. Thank you."

"I'm not sure what I did, but you're welcome," Krum said, offered a tiny– almost unnoticeable– smile, before leaving. Harry stared down at the pages of his book, thinking about his mistake. Krum had barely left when Harry noticed Björn walking towards him.

"The other two are still racing," Björn said, sitting next to Harry. "You wanted to talk about something?"

"Uh, yeah," Harry muttered, flushing. "But first, promise me that you'll tell no one."

"Cross my heart," Björn assured him, leaning closer. "What is it that you need my help with?"

"Can you," Harry started, voice hesitant and wary, "can you teach me how to kiss?"

"Me? Why not ask Truls?"

"Because he likes me. I just want to learn how to kiss. I don't want any… you know, uh…"

"I get it," Björn said after thinking for a few minutes. "I can do it. Our friendship will not turn awkward because of this, right?"

"Oh, absolutely not. Don't worry," Harry hurried to say. "We would have to keep this a secret though."

"Yeah, of course."

"Do you know how to kiss?"

"Not really, no. Never done it before," Björn admitted. "I don't think others know either, but you've brought up a good point. What if I really should know how to kiss?"

"The others don't know?"

"Hmm, Nikolai and Heidi maybe, but definitely not the rest of them."
"Oh well, I won't stress about this if we aren't supposed to even know yet," Harry sighed with relief, closing his book and standing up to leave. If the others didn't know how to kiss, then there was no shame in him not knowing either. He wouldn't have to feel worried about this issue.

"Wait!" Björn called. "For five galleons an hour, I'll agree to be your practice partner!"

"What? Doesn't that make you feel like a… well, you know?" Harry asked with genuine astonishment, sitting down again. "And no, forget about it."

"Fine, I'll do it for free," Björn said. "I'm convinced that I really need to know how to kiss. What if Mette snuck into my flat some night—"

"No, I don't think that will happen. Ever."

"It will," Björn said confidently. "I'll become the richest man on earth, Harry. I don't care how. And some women can't resist rich men. But yeah, you in or out? Don't tell me you're a chicken."

"Of course I'm not; I'm the one whose idea this is in the first place," Harry sighed. "Where and when? And if you laugh at me, I'll just…"

"I get it. How about your flat after curfew today? Just make sure that Truls won't be there."

"All right," Harry said. He would have, perhaps, said something else as well… but the sight of Jakob suddenly collapsing made both him and Björn leave their seats and rush towards the boy.
"He'll be alright, won't he?" Filippa asked, clutching Jakob's hand. The boy was pale and barely conscious on the hospital bed. Nurse Ester's face was serious as she cast a few spells before turning to the students gathered there.

"You might as well leave," she said firmly. "He'll need quite a bit of rest."

"What's wrong with him?" Clemens asked. "He was just fine. He couldn't have caught a cold, could he? Or is it the same cold he had since before Christmas break?"

"You mean you didn't figure it out yet?" Filippa hissed. "This isn't some cold—"

"Hey!" Harry cut in sharply, sounding ruder than he had intended. "If Jakob wants to tell us at some point, he will."

"You mean you knew?" Petronella asked, bewildered. "That he has something serious, I mean."

"I thought it was anaemia or something," Björn said.

"Well, he never outright told me anything," Harry replied truthfully to Petronella. "I just sort of… figured it out."

"Figured it out," Clemens repeated. Harry, who didn't like the tone the other boy was using, held back a grimace.

"Exactly that," he said.

"When will he wake up?" Filippa asked.

"Not for a few hours, at least," Nurse Ester replied. "Now, children, out, all of you. You can drop by tomorrow if you insist. But now— out!"

'I wonder how serious it truly is,' Harry thought, casting one last glance at Jakob's unmoving form before following his friends out of the hospital wing. 'I hope it can be cured soon. I bet it's no fun to be bedridden. Maybe it really is anaemia like Björn said? Does anaemia cause fainting spells like that?'

"You look worried," Truls said, and Harry looked up with a frown still on his face.

"I am," he admitted. "I just hope that he'll eventually be alright again."

"Soon, preferably," Clemens said. "If he ends up falling behind, who knows what will happen. Maybe they'll force him to withdraw from Durmstrang or transfer or something."

"No!" Filippa exclaimed, appalled. "Don't even say that!"

"It's a possibility," Clemens insisted. "Nobody wants it, of course, but—"

"We can tutor Jakob," Björn cut in. "He won't fall behind if we all help him. He won't go to the classrooms, but we'll take his homework to him and help him as well as we can. If we do our homework at the hospital wing with him, I'm sure he won't fall behind."

"Not sure if that will work. I sort of got the impression that we aren't supposed to rely on each other
too much,” Clemens said. “Besides, think about why we're in this school. It's not just to get high grades and some office job.”

"I'm afraid Clemens is right," Truls agreed reluctantly. "Besides, if Jakob is seriously ill, then… I mean, physical fitness is required…"  

Harry stopped walking then, feeling uneasy. He watched the backs of his friends as each step they took, took them further away from him. What was going to happen to them? The world was changing, and Harry felt as if he was on a Ferris wheel, hanging on to a capsule from the outside, on the verge of falling off to his sorry end.

"Harry," Truls called, snapping the boy out of his thoughts. "You okay? I can carry—"

"I'm coming," Harry cut in and hurried after his friends.

*  

What Sirius hated about that werewolf the most was that the creature looked so… harmless. It was quiet, didn't eat much, didn't spit insults or threats, didn't even growl. And most appallingly: it claimed to prefer vegetables over red meat. That just didn't… it wasn't… it must have been a lie because Lupin was a werewolf and what kind of werewolf didn't like meat?

Not to mention that the thing kept shooting him these exasperated yet amused looks, as if it found him funny!

Sometimes, Sirius wondered what the hell he had gotten himself into. Kreacher had fixed the basement to resemble a prison, and even though Sirius allowed Lupin the freedom to walk inside the house—provided that he wouldn't enter certain rooms—the wolf rarely ventured out of its cage. Occasionally to the library and the bathroom, but other than that… it just sat on its bed and read. He came to the kitchen only when told to.

Sirius spent most of the time in France anyway, using the Floo to travel between the countries. However, the time period of the mission eventually ended, and Sirius was once more stuck in England waiting for the next mission.

"You owe Harry for this, you know," Sirius once said, watching Lupin drink a cup of coffee. "If it hadn't been for him, I would have just left you there."

"There must be some good in you too, though," Lupin replied quietly, not looking up from his drink. "Thank you. Although I'll be sure to thank Harry more sincerely."

"I don't understand you," Sirius huffed. "What is it like, to be a werewolf? Do you dream of ripping people to shreds and eating them raw?"

"Don't be ridiculous," the werewolf replied. "What is it like, then?"

"Painful." Lupin said that single word and then fell silent. His golden eyes weren't focused on anything in particular, and Sirius wondered what the creature could be thinking about.

"Well, surely cannot be more painful than a Cruciatius," Sirius said nonchalantly, but then felt strangely cowed when Lupin shot him a look. It wasn't even a glare; it just made Sirius feel stupid. Like he had said something foolish.
"The full moon is pretty soon," Sirius hurried to continue, trying to regain his superior attitude regardless of how flustered he actually felt. "You'll be locked in the basement, of course."

"Of course."

"Do you… do you need to be fed when you're, eh, under the influence of… of…"

"No," Remus said flatly. *Under the influence?* What did this man think Lycanthropy was? A drug? "I'll manage."

"Well, yes, obviously you *can*, since you've done that so far," Sirius agreed, "but I don't want you to decide that being away is better. I'm keeping you for Harry. You deciding to hitch it isn't… preferable."

*What kind of answer is he expecting?*

"Just tell me one thing," Sirius continued. "Do you have… any urges to bite people – for example Harry – when they're around?"

"Not more so than you do," Remus replied tiredly.

"But Greyback is known for biting people, especially children. You're both werewolves. Do you still claim to not have the same natural urges as that werewolf?"

"With all due respect… Evan Rosier is known for torturing children and molesting them. You're both humans. And related. Do *you* molest and torture children?"

"Hey—" Sirius protested angrily, but was interrupted.

"Greyback's urges," Remus continued sharply, "are no more natural than those of Rosier."

Sirius stared at the werewolf for a few seconds, silent and angry, before turning and leaving the room. Lupin was making him think, and there were some things Sirius wasn't ready to think about quite yet.

They both wondered what Harry would say of the situation.

* *

It was almost a week since Harry had promised Filippa to somehow find out about Lorenzo, and the boy was getting increasingly frustrated with his inability to go to the train station. It was already Saturday evening, and he hadn't been able to do anything worth mentioning. Sometimes, he'd feel a weird sensation, as if he was being taken on a Side-Along Apparition, but when he'd open his eyes he'd still be in his flat.

What was he doing wrong?

He was focusing as hard as he could, but was it *enough*? Should he… meditate or something?

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back on the couch. He was feeling hungry and faint and annoyed. He couldn't fail- he had promised to talk with Lorenzo. And Filippa had believed him. What would she say if he told her that he hadn't been able to do what he had promised?

'Should I just trip on the stairs and hope to knock my head?' Harry thought with no real intentions of going through with the idea. His eyes were still closed, and he tried to remember all of what he could about the train station. The colours, the smells. The bench he'd be sitting on… the slight chill… the
Harry had, after the days he had spent thinking carefully about the train station and his methods of going there, discovered a rather curious thing.

Most of the previous times— actually, every time except once— when Harry had found himself in the train station, it had been an accident. When he’d wake up, someone would be there, and they’d think that Harry had been unconscious. There were no after effects of any kind aside from the ones he’d get from whatever had knocked him out in the first place.

The one time Harry had managed to transport himself to the train station intentionally, many things had been different. Sure, it had happened only for an instant, but Harry could quite clearly remember that the sensation of holding his mother's hand had… well; it had been as if his mother's hand had vanished from his grip. What did that mean?

'I'm all so confusing,' Harry thought. Merlin, he wanted to go to the train station, and he wanted to go there now. He wanted to talk with Albus, wanted to talk about the world, about what was going on. Harry wanted to see if Lorenzo was there, wanted to keep his promise to Filippa, wanted—

And suddenly, an overwhelming sensation of sliding washed over him, and Harry could see himself in the station. He was there, and he barely managed to see Albus turning to look at him with surprise before he was already back in his flat.

"What," he croaked with disbelief. "What?" Instinctively, he sought out that sliding feeling, tried to imitate it, and managed to suddenly stand once again in the train station.

But it was different.

Albus was talking but the noise was too overwhelming for Harry to hear him. It was hard to breathe, as if the air itself was grainy somehow. There was a pull clutching the boy's body, trying to bring him back to the real world. Like a rubber band, he was barely managing to prevent it from snapping him back before he wanted, although Harry could feel his grip on this— whatever 'this' was— faltering. And there were people— so many people. Old and young men and women from all over the world… Harry could even see some pets.

Were they… were they really all dead?

Seriously?

The horrifying reality had just managed to sink in when Harry found himself once again in his flat, this time a few feet above the couch he had been previously sitting on. With a loud yelp, the boy fell on the couch, feeling slightly dizzy and nauseated. There were so many thoughts running through his mind, disorganized, and it was giving him a headache and making him feel slightly panicked.

Harry was almost relieved when everything suddenly faded to black and he passed out.

—

Gilderoy Lockhart was worried.

"This is worse than when Yves Saint Laurent rejected my advances," Gildy whispered to himself, clutching the message he had received from Peppita Peppino in his hands. It was a bright, cold morning, and he had just opened the windows of his quarters to let fresh air in. He was dressed only in a pale yellow silk robe with orange feathers, and yet, he was too distracted by the letter to notice the cold. Peppita wrote:
Prepare for war, my friend for it is war that is in your future. And when I say war, I don't mean a catfight like the one between you and that German ragazza from two weeks ago who had better legs than you. I mean armies and killing and blood.

"This can't be happening," Gildy whimpered. "Not in my lifetime!" Of course he knew of the rebels and had heard and read reports of some battles, but this sounded so serious, as if he was under the risk of getting sent to some distant corner with no fashion to fight for a lump of bread. Or worse– that the rebels would bring the battles right here to England. Maybe even Hogwarts!

"You scholar-type Englishmen, especially the ones like you, probably are completely unaware of how to survive in the wild. I know how good you are at dueling, my dear, but I also know that you'd rather not do anything that might lead to your face getting injured. If you really want to avoid getting caught up in the upcoming war, then I must urge you to leave England behind. Go to Japan or China. Or Morocco or Canada. But do not stay in England or anywhere in Europe. This war… I have a bad feeling about it.

"Well, I can't exactly abandon my home country," Gildy muttered, folding the letter and sliding it back into its envelope. "That'd be like treason." The man sighed, feeling gloomy and tired. He hated fighting, although Gildy wouldn't quite dare to call himself a pacifist. He did base his books mostly on reality after all. Well, somewhat. Partly. Someone else’s reality, at least.

But really, if a war did break out in England, what would he do? He'd be expected to fight. Maybe he should get some Healing training and offer his life-saving services at hospitals? Maybe he could be the one to save the life of a handsome, injured colonel and finally get the romance he so longed for? He'd be… He'd finally get his Scarlett O'Hara days, except hopefully without the heartbreaks, widowng, and all that poorness.

Fine, maybe he shouldn't call them his Scarlett O'Hara days. Maybe calling them… Elizabeth Bennett days would be better. He'd definitely rather live Elizabeth's life than the life of Scarlett.

"Hey, friend," Trelawney said, sauntering into the room while wiping what looked like white powder from around her nostrils, effectively interrupting Gildy's musings about love and life. "I brought you something."

"Sybill," Gildy said with a small smile before he almost gaped when he saw the man who walked in after her.

"I was ordered to discuss the next semester's lesson plan with you," Crouch said stiffly. Gildy stared at the man's handsome face for a few moments before turning gloomily away. Even the sight of his crush didn't make him feel better. There was war coming! He couldn't enjoy seducing anyone right now. He wanted to be seduced instead, damn it. He wanted the wooing and the pampering and that wonderful getting-stalked-by-love-interest thing to happen.

"Gildy," Trelawney said warily, "what's wrong?"

"Maybe-" Crouch started.

"I know what's wrong with you," Trelawney interrupted before turning back to Gildy. "Hey. Look. He's here. Sure, he's got his clothes on, but I personally would rather not see him naked anyway."

"I received dreadful news," Gildy sighed mournfully. "And I am not in the mood to… to bother with someone who clearly doesn't want me."

"By the Grim," Trelawney swore, utterly shocked.
"Well, then—" Crouch started, taking a step back, thankful for the miraculous chance to retreat. Talking at all at this point was a wrong move to make, though— that was something the man realized after Trelawney turned to glare at him, her eyes behind the wonky glasses dilated with rage.

"You broke him!" the Professor of Divination hollered, flinging herself towards Crouch with her hands extended. Her nails resembled a dangerous set of claws, and her frizzy hair and the dozens of colourful scarves draped around her thin body made her look like an exotic predatory bird trying to maim whatever it was flying at. "I'll make some death predictions come true if you don't fix him right this instant!"

Gildy offered another sad smile and wished that he'd have at least some white roses and maybe a dead dove nearby to make himself look even more tragic and beautiful.

Harry woke up knowing, even before he opened his eyes, that someone was nearby. He could smell Filippa's perfume.

"How did you get in?" Harry asked, still keeping his eyes shut.

"Did you sleep all night on the couch?" Filippa asked in return before sighing. "I picked the lock. Sorry." At this, Harry opened his eyes and turned his head to take a look at her. He was still lying on the couch, and the Italian girl was sitting on the floor right next to him.

"How?" he asked. "And what time is it?"

"It's half past five in the morning. And… and I tried to knock first but then used a spell. Effringo. It works better than Alohomora with locks like that."

"Not that I don't want you here, but why are you here?" Harry asked then, sitting up. There was a strange feeling thrumming inside him, as if his blood was… happy? What a ridiculous thing to think! But it left him feeling very shaky and… he had this unexplainable urge to be somewhere else. Somewhere… back at the train station, perhaps?

"I couldn't sleep," Filippa confessed, and only now did Harry notice that she was dressed in her nightgown. "I… I thought if I came here I could. Why were you asleep on the couch? I actually didn't even notice you there when I first came in. Only after I couldn't find you in your bed and came to take another look did I notice you. Stupid of me to not notice you immediately since it's not that dark here."

"You know when I told you that I could find out about what happened with Lorenzo?" Harry whispered and shifted a bit to the side to let Filippa squeeze into the space next to him. "Well, I did it. Partly, though. I went there but couldn't find him yet. So you'll have to wait for a few days still before I can tell you what happened to him."

"It's okay," Filippa said quietly, reaching to hold Harry's hand in her own. "I… I don't think I want to know after all."

"What?" Harry asked, surprised. "But—"

"I'm scared of knowing," the girl admitted. "I know it's very weak of me, Harry, but I just… I don't want to know. Not yet. Perhaps someday in the future when all this is a distant memory. But right now, I just can't. What if he died after hours of horrible pain? I don't want to know, Harry."

"Okay," Harry replied soothingly. "That's all right, Filippa. It's nothing to be ashamed about."
"Can I ask you how you do it, though?" Filippa whispered. "I swear I won't tell anyone else. I know you told me to not ask, and you don't have to answer, and if you tell me to not ask again, I won't, I just…"

"Sometimes," Harry replied quietly, tightening his hold on Filippa's hands, "sometimes, I can go to where the dead go." Whatever Filippa had expected, it certainly wasn't this.

"I don't know why," Harry continued. "I'm not even sure how it's possible. But I go there, and I see… those who died recently. I don't know how recently though. Filippa… there are so many of them."

"Many of what?" the girl asked breathlessly, pressing even closer against her friend.

"So many people who died recently," Harry said. "The ongoing war that killed Lorenzo is killing thousands of people all the time. Even as we sit here…"

"It needs to stop."

"Yes. But what could stop it? There are two sides in a war and neither will listen us."

"If the reason for this war ceases to exist, then surely eventually people will stop fighting?" Filippa asked. Harry shrugged.

"You never know." Actually, he didn't think they would, for a few years at least. It was, after all, easier to start a war than to end one. Even if the war was to officially end, even if it was declared to be over by the leaders of both sides, the people would still remember. There would be matters of revenge and wrongdoings of all kinds to sort out. Would they ever be able to coexist peacefully? Was it possible?

"Jakob is still in the Hospital Wing," Filippa said after a few moments of silence. "I… I wonder what it is that he really has. Think it's serious?"

"It probably is," Harry admitted honestly. "His stints at the Hospital Wing aside, he has been very… pale and thin lately. Paler and thinner than he used to be, I mean. And he gets tired very easily. He tries to not to show it, but next time you walk with him– especially if you go up the stairs at some point– listen to how he's breathing."

"If I had gone to Beauxbaton like my family had originally planned, I wonder what I'd be doing now," Filippa huffed. "Why is life so… complicated?"

"I've been thinking the same," Harry admitted. "If I had gone to Hogwarts… but if that had happened, I wouldn't have met you or Truls or Björn and the rest."

"Oh well," Filippa sighed, standing up. "I guess I better go back to my flat now. I seriously don't want to be caught by Truls. He'd think that I'm trying to do something to you."

"He's not that bad."

"Not yet." Harry smiled and shook his head in response to Filippa's words. The girl winked and snuck out of his flat, and Harry could hear her fixing the lock from the outside. The smile on his face melted off as he remembered the train station again. And the people. He'd have to talk with Tom, somehow. Make him realize that too many were dying, and hopefully the man would talk about it with the Dark Lord.
A week later, Jakob was still in the hospital wing. Most of his classmates had decided to go along with their plan of helping him keep up with his studies as much as they could with tutoring sessions. That Sunday, it was Truls's turn, and since Filippa was having some kind of fashion designing weekend with the girls, Harry had expected to spend most of the day alone. Therefore, it came as a slight surprise to him when the doorbell of his flat rang.

"Hi," Harry said to Björn who offered a nervous smile before slipping past Harry into the flat.

"Hey," the redhead said, sitting down on the couch. Harry closed the front door and moved to sit next to his friend.

"What brings you here?" Harry asked, and Björn flushed slightly.

"I'll be blunt," the boy started. "It's about that kissing thing we talked about a week ago, remember?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "I thought that you had… forgotten or something."

"Well it's not like I could just talk about it, what with Truls hanging around you all the time! We're not telling him about this, by the way. I value my life too much."

"Fine, fine. But, um… you mean you want to…?"

"Yeah," Björn said awkwardly. "If you don't have anything else to do right now…"

"We could try, I guess," Harry said, feeling suddenly very hesitant. The two boys stared at each other for a while, gathering courage, before Björn took a deep breath and moved to sit very close to Harry. After a few seconds of silence, Björn moved his hands to hold Harry's face still before finally leaned in to kiss the other boy. The kiss was nothing more than a faint touch of lips. Frankly, Harry barely felt it and couldn't believe that all the fuss about kissing could really be because of something like this.

'It's not difficult,' Harry thought. 'It's not unpleasant, but not particularly fun either.' After doing nothing but this kind of kisses for the next ten minutes, Björn slowly and hesitantly pushed Harry to lie on his back on the couch, settling to sit on the other boy for a few moments, trying to think of what to do next. Neither was feeling awkward anymore, although they did feel slightly embarrassed. Neither, however, suggested backing down.

"We should open our mouths the next time we kiss," Björn said instead. "I think that's called French kissing. I don't know what the French have to do with it, though."

"But I don't want your saliva in my mouth," Harry said. "No offence or anything. What did you eat at lunch?"

"I drank tea before I came here," Björn said, leaning closer again. "When you feel me opening my mouth, you do the same. Then we move our tongues."

"Do you even know how stupid that sounds?"

"Look, I'm not exactly clear on the details here either. We'll improvise." That said, Björn leaned closer once again, and kissed Harry with far more determination than the other boy felt reasonable. Soon, Björn warily opened his mouth, and when he felt Harry doing the same, he touched the other boy's tongue with the tip of his own. Then he pulled away.

"Your tongue is like a dead fish," Björn said. "Move it a little bit."
"Fine," Harry sighed. "Pucker up." This time, their kiss went much smoother; the tips of their tongues even touched properly, which was pretty damn strange in Harry’s opinion, and while it didn't make either boy feel any sparks, they both agreed that it was pretty okay.

"We'll continue this next week," Björn decided. "If you want."

"Sure," Harry replied. "Although I can't figure out why anyone would be particularly enthusiastic about this. Are you sure we’re doing this right?"

"No. But I think it's because you and I aren't attracted to each other like that," Björn said. "I mean, if I was Truls, he'd be—"

"Stop it," Harry interrupted. "Seriously, why is everyone always talking about Truls like that? He likes me, okay, I know that. But not that much."

"I don't know," Björn said. "I mean, he's pretty freakishly obsessive about you, to be honest. Maybe it's the life debt."

"What?" Harry frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, I'm not exactly clear on the details about this either," Björn started. "But as far as I know, the longer a life debt lingers unfulfilled, the stronger its effects become. I think there's some kind of theory about these effects intensifying the most prominent feeling the debtor has towards the creditor."

"Great," Harry groaned. "One more thing I should research."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it," Björn said lightly. "That theory isn't really well supported. Could be proven false by anyone, I'm sure."

"Really?" Harry asked hopefully. Björn nodded.

"Trust me and forget about it. I know these things."

James was throwing up, leaning against a tree. The brains of someone— he wasn't sure whose exacty— had splattered on his robes when a blasting curse hit the head of a fellow Death Eater who had been walking nearby.

"You don't really have the time for that," Pettigrew said nonchalantly, walking to stand next to James. "It happens."

"Fuck you," James spat, before casting a cleaning charm on his face and mouth and then a few more on his clothes. He then turned to the battle scene again, holding his wand tightly and ready to charge.

"How many are you going to kill?" Pettigrew asked, following James closely. "Of these…enemies?"

"As many as I can," James grunted, flinging a severing curse at the closest Rebel he could find.

"Maybe you'll kill… fathers, like you. Or sons, like your own son," Pettigrew said, James only barely held back from casting a cutting curse at the man's throat. "Ever wonder why we meet the people we end up meeting? Or become—"

"Supplanto." James didn't turn to watch Pettigrew tripping, thanks to the hex, and focused on hitting as many Rebels as he could with far more dangerous curses. He was there to fight, not to think. He
wasn't a strategist; he was a soldier. He wasn't high ranked like Sirius to be able to go on missions instead of fight in battles like this one. He wasn't a healer like Lily to work in a hospital saving lives instead of ending them. He wasn't a student like Harry who could stay at school and not think of war.

He was there to follow orders, not to decide what was wrong and what was right.

"Tripping hex? Really?" Pettigrew said almost cheerfully, scrambling up and shooting a few quick curses towards the enemy with surprising ease and speed. "You never change."

"I have never used a tripping hex on you before," James hissed, dodging a strangely coloured and potentially unpleasant spell. "And stop hanging around me!"

"So rude," Pettigrew said, but did not sound particularly offended. "You make me feel rather unwanted. What if I ended up committing suicide because of you?" Frankly, James didn't care. Well, of course he didn't want anyone to kill themselves because of him, but he also didn't care whether or not Pettigrew died.

"Why are you pestering me?"

"I can't tell you that."

"So there is a reason!"

"There's a reason for everything, James," Pettigrew said. "You're always too stubborn to notice these things. You can only see things through your own point of view. Lily is like that, too, isn't she? I wonder from where your son got his—"

"Why the fuck," James interrupted, growling. "Do you talk about my family as if you know us? You don't, Pettigrew. You don't know us. You never knew us and you never will." James then turned to another direction, running to fight Rebels as far away from Pettigrew as it was possible at the time.

Peter, with a strange expression on his face, stared after the other man and shook his head.

"Then things you don't know, Prongs. The things you don't know."

* * *

It was nearing the end of March, and Harry had finished reading most of the books the little secret room had provided. He couldn't help but remember Albus's words when the old man had encouraged him to... to do something. He also remembered Luna calling him a coward. Filippa, half-asleep and most probably unaware, had asked him to stop the war.

As if he could! Just what was expected of him?

Did some people—dead and alive—really think that Harry could do something to change the world? The mere thought was enough to exhaust him and make him feel small and insignificant. He was just Harry. Practically a nobody. These thoughts plagued him even when he was with his other classmates, making him zone off every now and then.

"You need to eat more," Filippa said during dinner, shoving some potatoes onto Harry's plate. "Want some salad?"

"Don't tell me you're still affected by Lorenzo's death?" Nikolai asked then, his voice almost mocking. "Or maybe by the deaths you read about in the newspapers? Potter, life isn't fair. Man up
"You think you're so *jaded,*" Harry replied coldly, much to the surprise of others who hadn't expected him to say anything. Harry wasn't one to fight with others, even verbally. And yet… this time it seemed that Nikolai had said the right words to annoy the usually quiet and peaceful boy. "You think you're so *cold.* You sneer and hark and laugh when you see injustice and someone being slighted, and the best line you ever have is *life isn't fair."

"Hey,—," Heidi said sharply, but Harry continued, not even sparing her a glance. He didn't let his rage show fully, but the others could *feel* it. They could feel the temperature around them dropping rapidly, and it was only Truls who didn't seem to be alarmed in the slightest.

"You think you have experienced all the darkness the world has to offer. You think yourself to be… *disillusioned* and, thus, *wise.* You, Nikolai, are nothing but an example of a person who keeps his eyes clenched shut while mistakenly thinking that his mind is open. I am not surprised, though, because despite of what you think you've been through, you've actually lived a pretty sheltered and privileged life. If it was someone else, I'd say that they'll never truly comprehend how terrible injustice is, till they see with their own eyes an innocent man executed for no reason. Witnessing it happen, feeling every second as an oppressing weight above you. You know that what is happening is wrong but you also know that speaking out against it will get you killed. But *you…*"

Harry could absently feel Filippa's hand on his arm as he still continued with his speech. "You've never considered yourself really alive, have you? You feel like a void, and the only things that bring you pleasure are the pain of others and being admired and feared. The enjoyment brought by injustice is based on either ignorance or inhumanity. With Heidi and Clemens, it's ignorance. With you, I know it's partly both, but it's only a matter of time before the reason is only the latter."

"That's a *terrible* thing to say!" Heidi exclaimed angrily.

"It's the truth," Filippa shot back.

"Guys, calm down," Jakob said shakily. "Let's not fight, please."

"You seem to think that you know me well," Nikolai finally said, still keeping his gaze fixed on Harry.

"I do," Harry replied. And he did. The little gestures, the words, all the little things Nikolai had mentioned… Harry hadn't been aware that his mind had stored all of that information, but now it all came to the surface, and the dots connected to form a picture. Perhaps he was misjudging the other boy… and perhaps he wasn't. Either way, Harry wasn't going to put up with getting mocked when there was so much else bothering him.

"School will end in a few short months," Björn hurried to change the topic. "Any summer plans?"

"How about a road trip, Harry?" Truls asked eagerly, and Harry remembered vaguely planning on going with the Swedish boy to look for any Muggle relatives his mother might have. The thought of an adventure that didn't involve war or politics made Harry almost smile.

"If nothing urgent and important comes up, then why not?" he replied. "Could be interesting."

"I'm going to spend the summer going between Milan, London, and Paris," Filippa revealed. "The fashion weeks, you see, and the whole ordeal revolving around them."

"Can I come with you?" Petronella asked. "I don't have any particular plans, and I think it'd be interesting."
"Sure," Filippa replied with a small smile.

'It's time like these, Harry thought, 'when we talk about the future and our plans... times like these when we feel Lorenzo's absence the most. I wonder what he'd have been planning...'

Sirius was bored.

It was mid-May, and while usually Sirius would be enjoying his life— summertime always came with a delightful promise of skirts shorter than the year before— this time around, he was stuck in his house. The Dark Lord had given him a file on a rather tedious project and told him to start working on it. He'd have one year's time to prepare; set up the challenges, seek the contestants, organize the prize, and the location and what not.

'I can focus on this tomorrow,' Sirius decided, dropping the file onto his table. 'I wonder what that werewolf is doing. Probably reading. How can anyone read so much? It's not normal. Maybe he's up to something?'

Much to Sirius's... well, not exactly dismay... Lupin seemed perfectly content and was up to nothing evil. Sirius had tried time and time again to sneak and ambush the werewolf, expecting to catch him in the act of something that would uncover his beastly nature, but... he hadn't succeeded in that quite yet. Sirius had used spells to mask his presence and had succumbed to looking pretty ridiculous, sneaking from shadow to shadow inside his own house just to see Lupin... reading!

Reading!

Not even books like So You Are A Captive-- What Now? by Murdy Murguggle or How To Flee The Household You Just Committed A Murder In by Knot Nown, no. Lupin would be reading books about household charms and muggle history and birth of traditions! Sirius narrowed his eyes and, after casting a few presence-masking spells on himself, raced once again to where Lupin was without a doubt reading.

Remus was so used to Sirius Black randomly flinging himself into rooms that he didn't bother looking up from Philosophical Theories of Transfiguration by Marius McGonagall when the man once again made an appearance. He did, however, ask what he was doing.

"None of your business," Black spat, scrambling up from the floor, his icy blue eyes still fixed on the werewolf. "Oh Merlin, what are you, a walking encyclopaedia? A Library in hu— werewolf form? Are there books that you haven't read yet?"

"Yes, there are many books I'm yet to read."

"Why are you doing that?"

"I like reading."

"How can you like reading books like that!"

"It's educational."

"HOW CAN YOU FIND SOMETHING EDUCATIONAL FUN!" Sirius bellowed. "I can't let Harry anywhere near you! You'll turn him into a bookworm! A worse bookworm than he already is, but at least Harry reads stories. Fifteen minutes with you and I might see him enjoying a book about potions!"
"There's nothing wrong in enjoying studying."

"Everything's wrong with enjoying studying. It's... it's a disease! A disorder! A mental condition!"

"..." Lupin's golden eyes were almost twinkling with suppressed amusement as he watched the dark-haired pureblood rant, throwing around some bizarre theories about book-aliens and book-curses. The most amusing thing was, in Lupin's opinion, that Black was most likely completely serious.

"...and then all everyone will ever talk about is books, books, and books. People will start talking by quoting other people all the time..."

'He's also prone to exaggeration,' Lupin thought.

"...and I'd need to read and recite War and Peace just to pick someone up, for Circe's sake..."

'And dramatics. I wonder if he's going to stop ranting anytime soon. '

"...and even in bed, only Arithmancy formulas would work..."

* 

"Two weeks before freedom!" Clemens yelled, hanging upside down on his broom. It was a warm, sunny Thursday evening, and they were done with their lessons for the day. Instead of going to the Hall to eat, the nine students had packed together three baskets full of food and went outside to one of the least used Quidditch pitches. Clemens was eager to lure the others to fly.

"I can't wait," Harry grinned, feeling happy and impatient. "I miss my parents."

"We'll be third year students!" Filippa cheered. "I'll be thirteen!"

"Feels like time goes by so quickly," Jakob said, sitting on the grass and tiredly leaning his head on Petronella's shoulder. "Second year is practically over. Next is the third. Then the fourth. Then the fifth..."

"When I turn fifteen, I'm going to throw the biggest fashion party in Europe," Filippa said. "And I'll have my designing debut! Heidi, Nella, you'll model for me, right?"

"Sure," Heidi promised with a smile.

"I will if I'm skinny enough at the time," Petronella said. "It'd be so cool. I can't wait to see your designs."

"Mette and I would love to attend your party," Björn promised cheerfully.

"Erling still doesn't even know that you exist," Jakob pointed out. "The likelihood of the two of you..."

"This year, my betting profits rose to five hundred galleons," Björn cut in. "The older I become, the better betting chances I get with higher stakes. I'll be super rich in a few years, and no one is going to say no to me."

"Oh come on," Filippa exclaimed, shaking her head. "Not all women are swayed by money!"

"Correct," Björn said calmly. "But Mette is. She's a gorgeous gold digger with an empty head and perfect face."
"You know that, and you still want to get her?" Petronella asked, clearly surprised. "I want to marry for love."

"Same here," Heidi agreed, blushing slightly. "I can't wait to experience romance."

'I wonder if Tom is involved with someone,' Harry suddenly thought. What kind of woman would suit Tom anyway? Someone like Bellatrix Lestrange, perhaps?

"What about you, Harry?" Filippa asked suddenly with a mischievous expression. "Do you want to marry for love?"

"Right now, I can't even imagine falling in love," Harry replied honestly. "I can't imagine a girl I'd fall in love with."

"Well," Björn drawled with a smirk. "It doesn't have to be a girl." Harry resisted the temptation to glance at Truls and focused on trying to not blush. While he did succeed in the former, he failed miserably at the latter.

"Shut up," he said instead, standing up. "Anyone up for a round of Seeking? Clemens, got the Snitch?"

There was something seriously wrong with Peter Pettigrew. Usually, James would have been curious, trying to find out what… but not this time. He didn't want to know— all he wanted was to see the man gone. Or more accurately, James didn't want to see Pettigrew at all ever again. Then again, he had only three days left before he'd get to go back home. Harry's school would end in two days, too, and hopefully, Lily could make it back from Italy for the summer as well.

Even now, Pettigrew abruptly looked up from his bowl of soup with a toothy grin on his face. His watery blue eyes were full of mirth as they were suddenly fixed on James who couldn't help but suspect that Pettigrew had somehow heard James thinking about him. Or as if there was some secret about James that Pettigrew knew and found amusing. Either way, it was very unsettling.

'But that's impossible,' the man thought. And then; 'I wonder if he's human.'

Pettigrew looked human and was definitely not a vampire or a werewolf or a veela. He didn't act or look like any magical creature, and yet… he was too creepy and unreal to be just a human. Or was James just becoming paranoid? Maybe he was. All this camping around, fighting, and looking for more rebels was really taking its toll on him. Lucky Harry— the kid got to be at school, enjoy his days with no stress.

"Mr. Potter," a familiar voice said, and James turned to see the Lance Corporal of his team, Jeremy Gills, standing behind him.

"Yes?"

"Could you please come with me for a few minutes," Gills said, and warily, James stood up.

"Did something happen, sir?" James asked. "I… I didn't break any rules here, did I?"

"No, Mr. Potter," Gills replied as they walked towards Corporal Carrow's tent. "We… received some news that concern you."

"Did something happen?" James repeated, this time feeling worried and alarmed. "Are my wife and
son alright?" he asked just as they entered Carrow's tent.

"Mr. Potter," Corporal Amycus Carrow said, looking up. "Please sit down. I have… unfortunate news for you."

"My family… are they alright?"

"We have already sent a message informing your son in Durmstrang," Carrow started. "A few rebels attacked the Central Wizarding Hospital of Rome… And I am sorry to be the one to tell you that your wife… was amongst the fallen."

"What?" James whispered. *I didn't hear this. I'm misunderstanding something.* "You're saying…"

"The death of your wife is very unfortunate," Carrow said, his monotonous voice betraying no emotions. "I am sorry for your loss."

"My loss," James repeated, feeling numb. What was going on? Surely Lily wasn't… couldn't be. Lily was gone. His Lily was *gone*.

No. No, no, no. Nononononono. It couldn't be. It wasn't. There had to be a misunderstanding. Maybe they mistook some other redhead for Lily. Yes, that's what happened. Lily couldn't be dead. She couldn't just… just *die*.

Elsewhere, Harry had finished packing all of his things that he'd take back home with him for the summer when an owl carrying a black envelope entered the flat through an open window.

To Mr. Harry Potter:

*I extend my most profound condolence to you on the loss of your mother Healer Lily Amelie Potter, née Evans, who died on 27th of June 1993 as result of an enemy attack. I sincerely hope the knowledge that Healer Lily Potter was an exemplary member of the healing unit and died while serving the Cause and the Country will comfort you in this hour of great sorrow…*
Chapter 13

To Mr. Harry Potter:

I extend my most profound condolences to you on the loss of your mother Healer Lily Amelie Potter, née Evans, who died on 27th of June 1993 as result of an enemy attack. I sincerely hope the knowledge that Healer Lily Potter was an exemplary member of the healing unit and died while serving the Cause and the Country will comfort you in this time of great sorrow.

Harry felt his whole world shutting down. All he was aware of consisted of the slip of paper and the words on it – and the sound of his own, loud breathing. A small part of Harry wondered how was it that he could breathe when he had such a painful feeling in his chest right now.

He felt as if he had been pushed off a bridge. He didn't know what to do and didn't even notice when his legs gave in from beneath him, and he fell to sit on the floor. The slip of paper was still in his hands, and he kept reading the words over and over again.

He didn't understand. There was probably a mistake in there somewhere.

Harry's face was a blank as he left his flat, still clutching the paper. He didn't wear his shoes or jacket, didn't care that it was rather late and everyone would probably be resting at this hour to be up tomorrow bright and early to go back home. He didn't even hesitate when he stood in front of the door of Truls's flat and rang the doorbell.

He was carefully trying to not think about the possibility of the message being true. And yet, the knowledge pushed through denial, making silent tears fall down his face.

"Who's the— Harry?" Truls's tired tone changed into an alarmed one when he saw his best friend crying in front of him. The blond pulled Harry inside and led him to the couch, trying to think of what could have possibly happened. He didn't need to ask, though, as Harry handed him the letter he had been clutching.

As Truls read the paper, a loud sob escaped Harry. His tears were falling freely now, and he didn't want to believe this, didn't want to accept it. Wasn't going to accept it. This couldn't happen, not to his mother. She was just a healer; she wasn't a fighter! Why would she—

"Harry," Truls breathed, sitting down next to Harry and wrapping his arms around the boy, "I'm… so sorry… Merlin, I don't even know what to say…"

Harry opened his mouth, wanted to say something, anything, but he couldn't. He held back his sobs, tried to not cry anymore because crying would mean that he had a reason to cry, right? And he didn't have a reason because this wasn't, couldn't be, true.

What was he supposed to do?

"Harry, do you have anyone we can contact?" Truls asked. "Is your father—"

"In Ireland. Deployed," Harry whispered. He wanted to… he wasn't sure what. Scream? Wail? Circe, how could someone feel so much pain without a curse of some kind?

"Is there anyone else who can come now and help you home?" Truls asked gently, rubbing Harry's back. "A relative or a family friend or a godparent?"
"Godfather," Harry croaked. "Sirius Black. But Truls… this isn't… she… my mum…"

"I wish I knew what to say to make you feel at least a little bit better," Truls muttered. "But any way I can, I'll stand by your side. If there's anything you need, anything at all that I can give…"

"There's going to be a funeral," Harry whispered, moving to press his face against Truls's shoulder to hide his fresh tears. His voice was slightly muffled when he continued: "My mum is going to be in a coffin and buried."

Truls ran his fingers through Harry's hair in a manner that he hoped would be soothing. He didn't know what to say– Harry was right after all.

"And then insincere people who barely knew her will come to me and tell me how sorry they are that she's dead," Harry said, sounding bitter. "People who, when she was alive, kept thinking less of her because she wasn't a pureblood like them."

"Do you want me to attend the funeral with you?" Truls asked, and after a few moments of silence, Harry shrugged and sighed.

"I… I don' know," he said. "I don't want… the funeral…"

"What's your godfather's address?" Truls asked.

"He lives in number 12 Grimmauld Place," Harry replied, finally leaning away from Truls who nodded and moved towards the fireplace.

"I'll firecall your godfather," Truls said. "He'll get you home tonight, I'm certain. You and your dad will support each other."

"But—"

"I'll tell the others tomorrow morning that you had to leave early due to a family emergency. Unless you don't want me to tell them?"

"…I… thank you."

"You'll pull through this, Harry," Truls promised. "You will."

Harry was aware of what was happening around him. Somewhat.

Sirius had come and picked him up from Truls's flat, and Harry hadn't had the energy to so much as greet his godfather. When they came back to Godric's Hollow, Harry… didn't know what to do. How could his mother not be there? It didn't feel right to be there if his mother… wasn't.

"Go to your room and try to rest, Harry," Sirius said, looking exhausted after a few hours of trying to make sense of things. "It's almost morning. I'll… speak with James."

James.

Harry's father. The man who had locked himself into the bedroom he used to share with his wife and hadn't made a sound since doing so. He hadn't checked on Harry, and the boy was partly relieved about that– he didn't feel like seeing his father either. It'd just make it more real. That… only the two of them were left.
Harry felt as if this wasn't part of reality. As he walked towards his room, he expected his mother to call him, and when she didn't, he felt scared. So scared. His room… the last time he had been there, his mother had been in the house as well.

"Don't be gone," Harry whimpered clenching his eyes shut. "Mummy, don't be gone." Thoughts of possible courses of action filled his mind before he suddenly remembered the train station. Harry's eyes widened, and he stood up in his room, breathing hard.

"I'll do it," he hissed before clenching his eyes shut. If his mother was at the train station… if he could find her… Maybe he could pull her back? Maybe he could… he didn't know what, but Harry needed to see her. Needed to talk to her one more time. Needed it so badly—

The overwhelming sensation of sliding came faster this time.

He felt the coldness of the train station surrounding him again and heard the faint noise of the trains as they moved, stopped, or just passed by. Perhaps because he was so desperate? Because he had done it before already? For some other reason? Harry didn't know or care about that right now. All he wanted to focus on was finding his mother.

Except that it would be easier said than done.

Just like last time, the train station was packed. Harry looked around, tried to find his mother, but just standing still and searching with his eyes didn't much help him. There were too many people, even children! How was he supposed to find Lily in this crowd? He couldn't even see Albus anywhere!

Harry ran, looking for his mother, calling her name. Maybe if she wasn't here, she'd be alive? Maybe a mistake had happened? He didn't stop and ask people, none of them looked friendly.

"Lily!" he yelled. "Mum! Mum!" He bumped into someone, got a glare sent his way, but didn't stick around to offer an apology. It wasn't important right then, he had something far more important to do. The pull that was trying to push him back to the world of the living was strong, very strong, and Harry didn't know how much time he had before he'd be pulled away from the station.

"Mum! Lily Potter!" What was he supposed to call her? It felt so weird using her name but how would she recognize herself if all he called was 'mum' or 'mother'?

A woman with long red hair was just boarding the train, and Harry almost screamed when he saw her. He ran as fast as he could in order to reach her, only to realize—when he was already close—that she was far too tall to be his mother.

He almost cried, then.

Harry was feeling increasingly desperate when a thought occurred to him— if his mother wasn't in the station, maybe she was in the train? Yes, he would board the train and—

Suddenly, someone was gripping Harry's arm and pulling him back, away from the train. Away from where his mother could be.

"No!" Harry screamed and then struggled, but the grip of the person dragging him was far too strong. "Let me go! I have to find my mo—"

"I didn't let you die then," a female voice snarled. "And I'm not going to let you die now!"

"My mum is there! She must—"
"No."

"I have to find her!"

"No."

"LET ME GO! I WANT TO FIND MY MOTHER!"

"And I said NO!" The last 'no' was accompanied by a pull, and Harry was suddenly shoved against the wall, and the person– the woman– who had dragged him away from the train was glaring down at him. It was a frightening sight as the woman's eyes kept twitching to opposite directions in her pale face that was framed by lank, dull hair.

She looked… familiar. He had seen her before… Had… he knew her name… knew her.

"I've seen you before," Harry gasped, stopping his struggle to catch his breath. "I know you. You're… you're…"

"You're far too important," the woman hissed at him. "You have great things to do; you can't collapse just because of something as insignificant this."

"It's not insignificant! My mother—"

"Your mother does not matter in the big picture, Harry Potter. And neither does your father. But you do, Chosen One. The Boy Who Lived."

"What?" Harry asked, confused. He was simmering with rage at this woman's belittling words regarding his mother, and he felt even more desperate than before. But he couldn't move from where she had pushed him. "What are you talking about?"

"Ask you father," the woman hissed, bringing her face closer. "Ask your father about when you died."

"You're crazy," Harry snapped, trying to push her away. "I need to find—"

"Your mother is long gone. And you don't belong here. Go back."

"I won't!"

And yet, despite his words, Harry found himself back in his room, falling onto the floor and holding back a scream of pain and disappointment. His vision was blurred by tears, and he didn't bother trying to stand up and move. He didn't want to cry, he didn't know what to think or feel. He was so confused, and everything was crazy, and… and maybe he was the crazy one? Maybe that's why he didn't understand anything anymore?

Harry hoped that he would pass out— his mind was going overdrive and he needed a break. Everything was so overwhelming. So maddening, so—

Harry didn't even notice when his table started shaking or when the bed started creaking. He was so fully focused on trying to organize his thoughts. He shouldn't have gone to the train station– it only had made things worse. He hadn't managed to see his mother. His mum was dead. Gone.

Harry just… couldn't accept it.

Didn't want to even try.
Meanwhile, Sirius was trying his best to comfort James, who had managed already to down one whole bottle of firewhisky and seemed to want more.

"You loved her, and she loved you just as much, James," Sirius said, "but don't forget that Harry needs you now, too."

"She's gone," James replied hoarsely. "My Lily is gone."

"Harry—" Sirius tried again but was interrupted by his friend.

"Harry is bloody fine!" James snarled. "He's up in his bloody room safe and sound! But Lily is gone! My wife dead! MY... WIFE... IS... DEAD!"

"As if I don't know," Sirius muttered. He honestly didn't have any idea of what to say, what should be said. "Don't let the grief overwhelm you."

"It's not like you would understand," James snapped angrily. "You've never been married!"

"Well, yes, but that doesn't mean that I haven't experienced loss—"

"Just shut the bloody hell up, Sirius! Get out of here; I don't want to see you right now. I don't want to see anyone right now."

"Fine," Sirius said. "I'll come back when you've managed to sober up a little bit."

"Like I'm going to let that happen," James muttered, reaching for another bottle of firewhisky that Sirius hadn't noticed before. The elite Death Eater shook his head and left the room, closing the door behind him. After a few moments of standing still, trying to figure out how to handle this disaster, Sirius decided to go and check on Harry, hoping that the boy wasn't in a state similar to that of James.

He wished that he knew what to say, anything that would bring a little bit of comfort. But he didn't. Sirius had never been good with feelings and all that talking business. Although, lately, the werewolf had been telling him to work on expanding his emotional side or whatever.

Sirius found the boy lying on the floor. His tears had dried, and he stared at the ceiling with an expressionless face. It... wasn't an expression Sirius wanted to see on his godson's face.

"Harry?" he said quietly, and the boy turned to look at him.

"Uncle Sirius," Harry whispered, and he sounded so... defeated. Sighing, Sirius stepped into the room, noticing the mess but not commenting on it.

"You shouldn't lie on the floor like that," Sirius said gently. "Come on, at least on bed. It's softer and warmer."

"When's... When will mum be buried?" Harry asked, and Sirius froze, feeling his heart ache painfully. He didn't want to reply, didn't even have the answer. So he stayed quiet as he lifted Harry off the floor and onto the bed. The boy, so pale with such wide, tired green eyes, stared at him with an unreadable expression.

"I don't know," Sirius finally replied, staring down at Harry. "I'm sorry. Is there... can I do anything for you, Harry?"
"How's dad?"

"James is… upset. He's grieving. It's understandable, and I guess it'll last for… I don't know how long. Grief is a… terrible thing, I've heard. But it's also necessary."

"Will he take care of the funeral?"

'Why are you so practical?' Sirius thought. 'Let me handle this if your father can't. You're too young to force this kind of control on yourself.' "I… I'm not sure. I'll ask him. If he doesn't, then I will."

"Thank you," Harry said, closing his eyes. "Can you close the door behind you, Uncle Sirius?"

"Sure," Sirius replied, knowing a dismissal when he heard one. "Harry… I'm not really good at comforting people, but don't forget that I'm here for you, alright? No matter what."

"Thank you," Harry repeated, and didn't turn to look at his godfather when the man left. Alone again, the boy covered his face with his hands, taking a deep breath. He wasn't crying, He didn't want to cry. But… how was it possible to feel this bad and not die?

He felt lost and empty inside and had no idea how to get rid of that feeling. Then there was nausea… Nausea that didn't make him want to throw up– it just burned inside him like acid. It was difficult to breathe, as if breathing had become a chore too heavy for him.

Was this the grief Sirius had mentioned? Or was it denial, the way he didn't want to think about the aftermath of his mother's death? The consequences. Couldn't imagine a future where he'd never see her again.

Grief.

How many emotions can one word truly include? It felt as vast and deep as the sea, as high as the sky, as unmovable as earth itself. Like an open wound set on fire, and Harry didn't know how to deal with it. He had foolishly thought that by accepting Albus being dead he had understood death.

How wrong, how naïve he had been.

And how he hated himself now for such naivety.

* * *

Tom had recognized the name Lily Potter the moment he had seen it amongst the names in the list of deceased. He had stared at it for a few long minutes, feeling highly uncomfortable, wondering what her son would do. Will he cry? Will he hate the war and blame the Dark Lord?

Will he blame Tom?

Even if he did, Tom couldn't bring himself to feel sorry. Harry’s mother had worked in the front where many people died anyway. And war was necessary. Her death didn't make war any more or less terrible, didn't make it any more or less… necessary.

"Well, aren't we being gloomy tonight," Nagini hissed. "What's up, ugly?"

"I am not ugly. And the boy lost his mother," Tom said. "I expect him to be quite upset about it."

"Are you going to see him?"

"I might be recognized so I won't go undisguised to the funeral."
"Why not go as, well, Voldemort? If the boy gets angry about that, it could distract him from being upset."

"And then he won't talk to me ever again. Not likely, Nagini."

"When is this… funeral?"

"I was recently informed that it'd be on next Tuesday. Organized by Sirius Black since apparently the boy's father is in no condition to… do anything."

"What will you tell the boy? You're not sorry."

"What if he starts crying?" Tom asked suddenly, scowling. "I doubt that throttling him 'til he passes out is appropriate in a funeral."

"...I don't know," Nagini replied. "But I can tell you that few moons ago I saw a woman crying. She was comforted by getting naked with one of your black things. People. What do you call them… Death Eaters? How can you eat Death anyway?"

"...what!"

"There were stabbing motions involved, anyway. Just not with a knife."

"I am NOT going to— Oh, get lost, you!" Tom glared at the snake as it hissed in a way that could be considered laughter before slithering away. He then shook his head and clenched his eyes shut. Why was dealing with people such a complicated thing to do?

Except that… hold on…

The boy would be in a very vulnerable state of mind. He'd be missing his mother terribly and all that nonsense. Perhaps Tom could use that to find out whether or not the boy was truly able to travel between the realms of the living and the dead? He would be off guard and even if he denied it, Tom could easily see the lied.

Fantastic!

Now, to wait for the funeral. It had been a while since Tom felt as excited about one of those as he did now.

*

The sky was grey. The sun was hiding behind the dark clouds, but there was no rain and no wind. Harry stood between his father and godfather through the entire ceremony. Sirius's hand was on his shoulder, but James hadn't so much as looked at him. Harry felt hurt, but also… strangely understanding. They were both focused on trying to not crumble under the terrible feelings of loss caused by the death of the woman in the beautiful, ebony casket.

There were many guests attending. The Malfoys, the Weasleys, all of Lily's friends and co-workers, and many neighbours. Even Gildy was there. And some of Harry's classmates, too, who had come to show him support. Harry was thankful even though he had yet to get the chance to talk to them. Just knowing that they were there for him made this all more bearable.

When the coffin was lowered into the open grave, Harry wanted so desperately to hold his father's hand. But when he lifted his own hand to do so, James folded his arms on his chest as if rejecting any kind of touch coming from Harry. The boy clenched his fists and ignored the burning behind his
Eventual, after what felt like an eternity, the ceremony was finally over. The people started moving towards the house, but Harry stood still, not saying anything or looking up even when his father and godfather left. After a few moments, he could hear someone approaching him from behind and felt a pair of arms warp around him. A faint fragrance of lotus revealed the person to be Filippa, who was crying against his back.

"Oh, Harry," the girl sobbed. "I can't even imagine how devastated you must be."

"Condolences, man," Björn said with a serious expression, coming to stand next to Harry. Not a second after, Truls was also there. Truls took Harry's hand into his own and held it, knowing that nothing he could say would make things better.

"Is there anything we can do?" Petronella asked, pushing to stand between Björn and Harry. Her black dress made her seem paler than usual, and for a moment, Harry wondered if she had always been that skinny. "Also, Jakob offers his condolences, but he couldn't come. His condition—"

"I understand," Harry said quietly. "Thank you. Every one of you. Thank you." Filippa's hug tightened, and the girl burst into tears again.

"We'll support you as well as we can," Petronella promised, touching Harry's arm gently. "No matter what."

"This is the first funeral," Harry said, not looking at any of them. "But the war is only starting… How many funerals will we attend before all this is over?"

"The downside of war," Björn said grimly, "is that funerals become a habit."

"So many stories claim that it's sweet and fitting to die for your country," Harry continued darkly. "But there's nothing sweet of fitting in dying like this, dying after fighting on foreign soil to kill, not to defend. Dying like a dog for no good reason."

"The Cause," Petronella muttered, sighing. "To some, it's a good reason."

"My mom was a Muggleborn," Harry said and didn't pay attention to the surprise clear on the faces of Petronella and Björn. They both recovered from their surprise fairly quickly, and despite what Truls had predicted a long time ago, Petronella didn't seem to be particularly alarmed or disapproving.

"No cause, then," Filippa said, finally letting go of Harry. Her red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained cheeks made the boy almost break down and cry as well, but he didn't. He refused to. He wasn't going to cry. "No reason whatsoever. I'm so sorry."

"Harry," a familiar voice called, and Harry turned to see Ron Weasley walking towards him with, surprisingly enough, Draco Malfoy trailing a few steps behind. "I'm sorry for your loss, mate."

"My condolences," Malfoy, too, said as soon as he was close enough to be heard without shouting. His silver eyes were warily looking at the Durmstrang students surrounding Harry. He blinked with surprise when he saw Harry's hand held by a tall, blond boy but didn't comment on it. Whatever assumptions he had, he kept them to himself.

"Thank you," Harry said. "Is my father inside?"

"Yes," Ron replied. "Do you want me to, um, call him here or something?"
"No," Harry muttered. "I want to be alone."

"We'll go then, now," Truls said, finally letting go of Harry's hand. "Don't stay out for too long and take care of yourself."

"I… will. Thank you." Truls offered one last smile before turning towards the others.

"Come on, all of you. Let's go." Understanding that Harry would need some time alone, the rest didn't protest, merely offered final condolences and followed Truls towards the house, from where they each flooed back to their homes.

And Harry stood alone, staring at his mother's last resting place and wondering how sad the lilies on the fresh grave looked.

*

Tom saw the boy before the boy saw him.

Standing alone, so pale, dressed in black funeral robes with a grim expression on his face, the boy looked older than his age. He hadn't, in the end, bothered with a disguise, only using a strong notice-me-not charm. He didn't want to be unrecognizable to the boy, after all.

"Um," Tom started, "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Are you really?" the boy asked, not looking up. "Why are you here? By your standards, she's just a Muggleborn and wasn't even a useful one. She was just a healer. So why did you come? Shouldn't you be somewhere killing more people to please your master?"

'Awkward,' Tom thought, moving to stand next to the boy. The man didn't get angry at Harry's words– he had stayed up late last night reading a book about grieving and that kind of nonsense, and apparently, lashing out thoughtlessly was only part of the picture. "Well, I didn't know her so it's not my loss. That's why I said I'm sorry for your loss, not mine. And I am sorry for your loss. It upsets me to see you…sad."

Much to Tom's own surprise, he wasn't lying. Actually, seeing the boy in such a miserable condition made him decide to not even try to wheedle out information– he wasn't in a hurry to find out the details after all. And he could always just drug the boy and legilimence the information out of him next summer.

"I want her back," Harry whispered, and Tom glanced at the grave and the text on the tombstone. It was, admittedly, a simple and tasteful thing. Then again, it had been a Black that had organized all this.

"Why did this have to happen?" Harry asked. "Why did she have to die?"

"Well," Tom started. "I… am not sure. Why do people usually die?"

"I miss her," Harry said, and Tom felt immensely grateful and relieved that the boy wasn't crying. Encouraged by that, he continued.

"Some old fool once told me that to the well organized mind death is but the next great adventure," he said. "Does that make you feel any better?"

"Not really," said Harry.
"Dreadful," Tom muttered, frowning. Stupid Dumbledore.

Harry then took in a shuddering breath before he clenched his eyes shut and burst out crying.

"What? Why are you crying now?" Tom yelped. He wouldn't admit it later, but at that moment, he was panicking, not knowing what to do. "What did I say? Potter, did I say something wrong? Harry! Stop it! Merlin, can I stun you? Should I stun you? How do I stop people from crying?"

"You're pathetic," Harry cried, his whole body shaking as he sobbed. "You utter bastard."

"Yes, I am a bastard," Tom agreed. "But certainly not pathetic. How do I stop you from crying!"

"Don't yell at me!" Harry sobbed.

"I'm not, I'm not yelling at you," Tom yelled at the distressed boy. He needed Harry to quiet down or the noise would catch someone's attention despite the notice-me-not charms. So he kneeled in front of the boy and pulled him into a stiff, awkward hug. Harry didn't seem to care about the awkwardness at all as he instantly wrapped his arms around Tom, pressed his face against the man's shoulder, and cried even harder.

'Merlin, I sure hope nobody can see us,' Tom thought, patting Harry's back in what was supposed to be a soothing or comforting manner. "Okay. There you go. What should I say to make you feel better?"

"Don't say anything," was Harry's muffled response. "You suck at comforting people."

"Well, to be fair, you're the first person I have ever comforted."

"I want my mummy back."

"Yes, Harry, and so do many others. I, of course, was different. But then again, I never knew her."

"You never knew your mum?" Harry asked, pulling slightly away. "Why?"

"She died right after I was born," Tom replied, glad that the boy seemed to have calmed down at least slightly. "And at the time, I had no idea who my father was so it's not like I got to hear anything about her anyway."

"You didn't live with your father?" Harry asked, and he had a peculiar expression on his face. Not quite curious, more like… wary? Suspicious? "Why?"

"Oh, he, well, didn't stick around once my mother told him about me."

Harry, from his part, was coming to a very mind-boggling realization. He had thought that Tom's face was slightly familiar and vaguely similar to the face of the boy in the picture… the Dark Lord. And now… what had Tom said about the Dark Lord's past?

"His Muggle father had abandoned his pure-blood mother as soon as he could, and the woman died as soon as she had named her child."

But it couldn't be! The Dark Lord must have been… at least seventy years old! But Tom— who had claimed that his real name was Marvolo— didn't look older than a man around his early-thirties! So surely he couldn't be…

'Except that wasn't it rumoured that the Dark Lord is immortal?' Harry thought, and the magnitude of the possibilities presented almost made him fall down. If Tom really was the Dark Lord, then how
come he hung around Harry anyway? Wait, what if the man knew about Harry's wand? But he hadn't acted hostile towards Harry aside from that very first meeting in the Library a long time ago.

"What do you want from me?" Harry asked, his hands still on Tom's shoulders, staring into the man's eyes. "Are you my friend?"

"What?" Tom asked, blinking with surprise. He couldn't help but notice that even though a lot had changed in the boy— he wasn't as annoying or rude, for one— the _Avada Kedavra_-green eyes were still the same. "What's this, now? My response depends on whether or not you'll start crying."

"Oh, shut up," Harry snapped, scowling. "I'm not going to cry again… I think."

_I take back that bit about him not being rude anymore,'_ Tom thought. "It's probably going to rain soon. Shouldn't you go inside?"

"Perhaps," Harry replied, narrowing his eyes again. "Why don't you come with me? Uncle Sirius is an elite Death Eater too. You probably know him."

"Well actually, I have some things to do," Tom said hastily. He did not want to see Black's expression if the man was to see him… as hilarious as the reaction might be. "I just thought I could drop by and see how you were doing. I'll… just… take my leave, soon."

"Who can I blame for this?" Harry asked suddenly. "My mum's dead. Who can I blame? The Rebels? The _Dark Lord?_

"Blame the war," Tom replied. "And for the war, blame the Rebels."

"As long as I don't blame the Dark Lord, huh?" Harry stated bitterly.

"You and I will soon have to talk about this," Tom said, letting go of Harry and shrugging the boy's hands off his shoulders before standing up. "If you're not going to be a Death Eater…"

"Shouldn't you just get rid of me, then?" Harry asked, taking a step back and looking up at the man with a blank expression. "I wouldn't mind. My mum's dead, and my dad can't bear to look at me anymore. Life is too confusing, and everything's a mess anyway."

"Don't be stupid," Tom replied, offering Harry a handkerchief. "Wipe your nose and look presentable. Always act like you're wearing an invisible crown."

_I'm probably mistaken,'_ Harry thought, doing as told. 'He's much too nice to be the Dark Lord.' "What should I do? I don't… mum isn't here, and…"

"Focus on your studies," Tom said. "You're still just a brat; you aren't _supposed_ to have any grand goals or responsibilities anyway at that age. Besides… if you try to get involved in this war at this point, all you'll manage to do is to make yourself an enemy of the Dark Lord. And that, as much as I'd hate it, will get you killed."

'I don't doubt that,' Harry thought and nodded. "It's not like there's anything I can do anyway."

"Precisely," Tom said and nodded as well. "I'll take my leave now. Just focus on school, and learn as much as you can. Your mother is gone, but you're not. Your future is still ahead of you."

"Goodbye," Harry said, and watched the man walk past the wards as easily and unnoticeably as he had done before. As soon as Tom was outside the warded area, he apparated away.
'You're right,' the boy thought. *There is no such a button that I can press on to stop the war, but I can definitely do something to help that process.*

"Mum," Harry said, "I don't think I can stay hidden anymore, no matter what your wishes were." But first, he'd have to confront James about something. He hadn't forgotten about what the woman at the train station had told him.

"Ask your father about when you died."

Sirius had ended up force-feeding James two vials of Calming Draught before the man could sit still and talk. Harry was still outside, and all the guests had left, thankfully, not wishing to linger around for any longer than necessary.

"Your attitude is hurting Harry," Sirius said. "I know you're in pain right now, but he's a child, your son, he needs you."

"I want Lily to come back," James muttered, eyes closed. "What's the point in doing this shit anymore if I can't have Lily with me?"

"Doing what?" Sirius asked, alarmed. "Look, buddy, I know you're mourning, but don't do anything hasty—"

"Hasty like what?" James drawled, sounding almost drunk. "Give it a few years, and then Harry will be in the front, too. He's going to be *elite*, you see. All that Durmstrang nonsense and all. He'll go and fight in that war, and what if he dies too, huh? My wife's gone, and my son will die before he reaches twenty—"

"Don't be stupid," Sirius scoffed. "I'm not going to let Harry end up fighting in a battle if I can prevent it."

"I don't know how I can survive without Lily, Sirius."

"You just have to be strong, James."

"And… and what's the difference between being strong and being jaded?" James snorted. "Wish I could be jaded. Maybe… maybe I would feel less *miserable*."

"I'm not telling you to not feel sad and grieve," Sirius said. "I'm just telling you that there's life even after this."

"No there isn't," James deadpanned. "I'm going to live in this stupidly big house on my own with the house-elves—"

"And Harry."

"Harry will be in Durmstrang. Or he can be with you. He can do whatever he bloody wants, I don't care."

"James!" Sirius snapped. *I'm glad I fed him the potions. Who knows what he would be like otherwise without them.* "I told you a few times already– I know that you're sad and grieving, but don't you fucking dare to take it out on Harry like this."

"Take it out on *Harry!*"
"You're ignoring him! Fuck, more than that, you're neglecting him! You didn't bother asking about him at all, whether he's eating or sleeping—or—"

"Fuck you Sirius," James hollered, feeling such anger that it even pushed through the haze of calmness the potions had forced him into. "You think I bloody care if he sleeps badly for a week! My wife is dead! Which do you think is worse!"

"Don't you love him, you—"

"Well of course I do! I just don't think that he's important right now! He's fine!"

"If that's what you think," Sirius growled, "then I'm taking Harry to live in Grimmauld Place with me for the summer. Meanwhile, do try to snap back to your senses before you end up as alone as you really think you already are."

"Lily would know what do," James groaned, covering his face with his hands. "She would…"

'I didn't know you depended on her that much,' Sirius thought and sighed. "You're not the only one who lost someone important in this war, James. As devastating as it is, you have to move on. Eventually."

"Don't take Harry away yet," James said then, sadly. "I'll try to get better. Just… not today."

"As you wish."

"I'm tired."

"Go to sleep."

"I can't."

"I can stun you."

"Don't be a bitch."

"Bastard," Sirius grinned, standing up. "It's getting late, mate. Instead of stunning you, how about you just get a sleeping potion?"

"I think I have some left," James muttered. "Hand me one?"

"I'll put it on the table," Sirius said. "Grab it when you want to sleep, though I suggest talking to Harry first."

"You'll come tomorrow?"

"For sure. See you."

"Yeah… See you."

Sirius left then, right after positioning a vial of Dreamless Sleep potion within James's reach. He wondered absently where Harry was on his way out. He didn't see the boy on his way to the Floo, and the only thing that stopped him from looking for Harry was the possibility of him wanting some time alone.

'If he really is alone,' Sirius wondered while grabbing a handful of floo powder. 'Did all of his friends leave? Maybe one of them stuck around or something.'
It was almost an hour later that James moved from the armchair he had been slouching on. He stood up, rubbing his face and wondering if the sleeping draught would really help him. He was tired, so tired, but he knew that, if he went to bed, he’d just stay awake thinking and thinking and thinking.

He had no idea what to do without Lily.

He didn't have any idea how to raise Harry on his own. Didn't know how to order the house-elves to do all of what they should— Lily had handled that part, always. And now, she was no longer there. Whose wise advice would he listen to now? Who'd know to soothe his doubts and fears?

His wife had been more than just a spouse— she had been his friend. And now, it felt like James was missing a half of his heart and soul, and he didn't know how to cope without that half. Who'd be there to say no when James and Sirius would try to lure Harry into doing something reckless? Who'd be there to stop them from eating a whole cake in one go?

For some reason, James was frightened of the idea of having to drink his morning coffee alone. At breakfast, lunch, dinner… there’d be just him and Harry. And every time he saw Harry or thought about him, he’d also think about those future moments when Lily should be there, but wouldn't be.

Like Christmas.

Or birthdays.

What about when Harry graduates? Who'll stand by James then, clapping and watching Harry with pride? Sirius? No offence to the man but James didn't want Sirius to look like a proud mother. Best friend or not, there were some things a guy just shouldn't do, in James's opinion.

Sighing again, James grabbed the vial and exited the office room. He'd sleep in a guest room— sleeping in the room he had shared with Lily would be just too painful.

'I wonder if this feeling will ever go away,' James thought. Suddenly, he stopped. In the hallway in front of him, Harry was standing with a peculiar expression on his face. The boy looked taller and older than James remembered. Then again, he hadn't really looked at his son for… almost a year. He hadn't seen Harry at all for months, and when he finally could, he had tried to avoid doing so.

James felt ashamed but didn't regret it. Couldn't. It hurt, looking at Harry who had eyes so similar to Lily.

"I have something I want to talk about," his son said.

"Harry, I don't want to talk right now," James replied tiredly. "I'm sorry for how I've been acting, but —"

"I don't care," Harry cut in. "It's important."

"Not now, Harry," James said, scowling. His earlier irritation was surging up again. Why couldn't even Harry understand? Why was the child being so dense and insensitive? James really didn't have the energy to deal with this kind of behaviour right now. "Just go back to your room—"

"I'll leave you to drown in your self-pity as soon as you answer my question," Harry snapped, glaring. James was… surprised? Maybe even shocked. Harry wasn't really a negative person, and James couldn't remember a time when his son had looked so angry and… hateful.
"I'm not drowning myself in self-pity," James muttered, hunching his back.

"In self-pity and whatever liquid you get your hands on," Harry replied coolly, eyes flickering towards the half-hidden bottle of firewhisky in James's right hand and the dreamless sleep potion in his left. "Since, according to you, you're the one who suffered the worst loss, isn't that right?"

"You wouldn't understand," James groaned. How many times would he have to repeat it for people to finally understand? "She's… was… my wife, Harry."

"And she was my mother," Harry replied. "No amount of grief will bring her back."

"So you're over it already?" James growled, narrowing his eyes. "You—"

"I don't think I'll ever truly be over it," Harry said calmly. "But there's something I need to know. And you're going to tell me, dad."


"I'm sure," Harry muttered. "I want you to tell me about an event that took place probably very early in my childhood."

"What the hell is that about?" James wondered, frowning. "What is it?"

"Tell me," Harry started, taking a deep breath. "Tell me about when I died."
James found it hard to breathe. Had he been prone to heart-attacks, he was sure that he'd be in the middle of one right at that moment.

"What?" he croaked, flinching when the bottle slipped off his hand and landed with a loud crash on the floor, resulting in a puddle of firewhisky and sharp pieces of glass scattering around him. "I... I don't know what you're—"

"Don't lie to me dad," Harry said, and he looked so tired. Even old, strangely enough, and James wondered what kind of lessons his son had gone through in Durmstrang for him to have changed so much from the timid, shy and unnoticeable boy he had once been.

"Harry—"

"I'm tired of having too many questions in my head. Tell me. Please."

"There isn't much I can tell you," James stammered. "Almost nothing at all, in fact. Not because I don't want to, but because I really don't know."

"Then tell me what you do know," said Harry. "I need to know."

"Now really isn't the time for it."

"Now really isn't the time for getting completely drunk either, but that isn't stopping you."

"I am not getting completely drunk!" James snapped, flushing as soon as he said the words out loud. He then sighed and rubbed his eyes, looking almost tearful. "Can't this wait till tomorrow? I'm tired."

"Your tomorrow," Harry said, shaking his head, "will never be my today if I let you decide when."

"Fine," James finally sighed. "But not here in the hallway. Let's go... to the kitchen. I might want some coffee after all."

'I wonder what he'll tell me,' Harry thought, following his father towards the kitchen. 'This is so surreal. I had thought that he’d… say something different... Deny it more. That he'd give a reasonable excuse or...'

"Do you want anything to drink?" James asked as soon as they reached the kitchen. Harry shook his head, sitting down. "Hot chocolate? Tea?"

"No. No, thank you."

"Alright. Um. Well... You asked... about that. And, well..."

"Just get to the point," Harry urged. He felt, as silly as it might sound, scared of hearing what James would have to say. He did want to hear it and knew that it'd be important, and yet... he was afraid. He wondered fleetingly what his mother would have said.

James, after making himself a cup of coffee, sat down as well. He didn't look at Harry, opting to keep his gaze fixed on the dark surface of the table. He stayed silent for a few long moments fore looking up with troubled expression.

"You were a stillborn," he started. "When you were born, you were dead. You didn't breathe. Your
"Did you do some kind of a ritual or something, then?" Harry asked quietly, forcing himself to believe and try to accept what he was hearing. James shook his head.

"No. After a few moments you... coughed and started breathing. And your heart, too, started beating. We... passed it off as a misdiagnosis, but we know... knew that it wasn't. You were dead and we don't have a clue how come you... lived again."

Lived again.

The Boy Who Lived, that's what that crazy, familiar woman had called him at the train station.

"I didn't let you die then," she had said. "And I'm not going to let you die now!"

Did that mean that the woman – if only he could remember her name! – had something to do with him living after being stillborn? But how did that work, technically? Was he a healthy baby till minutes before being born or was he somehow—

"Do I have any kind of internal deformities?" Harry asked nervously, feeling almost nauseous. James shook his head.

"No, no. You... we checked you... We took you to several different, extremely skilled Healers all across the world. There was nothing physically wrong with you that they could point out."

"And that's all you know about this?"

"Yes. I told you, it's not much. I don't know what happened, Harry. But I do know that it did happen." James then sighed and looked away from Harry again. "There were several instances, though, when we'd wonder if... well... what kind of effect having been dead would have on you."

"Like what?" Harry asked quickly. "Did I do something strange or...?"

"Not really strange," James explained. "You were a quiet child and there's nothing wrong with that. But up till you were... six, I think, you used to sometimes... call your mother and when she'd come running, you'd claim that you weren't calling her, but calling... what was that name again... Merope."

"Merope," Harry whispered, feeling as if some parts of a very big, vastly unknown puzzle were sliding into place. Merope. The woman at the train station. She was Merope. But why did he know her name? Why did she know him? Why was he so important to her, for her to keep saving him?

"From where... did you find out about this?" James asked warily. "Not many know about this and it worries me greatly to think that you're being approached by some stranger."

"I have my sources," Harry replied, resisting the temptation to continue: 'none them alive.' Instead he said: "Are there any more secrets I should know of?"

"I don't know," James said. "I don't think so. Are you... okay with this?"

"When the possible stops making sense, it's time to believe in the impossible," Harry muttered. 'I need to go back and find Merope again. I wonder if Albus knows her.'

"Harry," James spoke again, after a few moments of silence. "I don't know what to do." Harry looked at his father, who was staring gloomily at his cooling cup of coffee, looking more like a lost
child in a man's body than the strong, dependable father he was supposed to be.

What could he say? He knew how he felt and knew that he'd need a lot of time and Merlin knows how many crying episodes before he'd be able to cope well enough to find some semblance of peace. But saying *that* would do nothing to help James, and Harry felt as if he was with a stranger there, not with what was left of his family.

"I'm unbelievably sad about mum," Harry finally said. "But I think that if I don't force myself to move on, I'll be unable to do anything anymore. I think that… You have to move on or you won't be able to live."

"Move on?" James sneered. "Move on when her body is yet to cool in its coffin? Move on when the mud on her grave is still fresh? Move on—"

"You're weak."

The words escaped Harry and it took him a few moments to realize that he had actually been the one to say them. James's mouth was gaping open but no sound was coming forth. And so Harry gathered his thoughts and continued, deciding that nothing he could say would be able to bring more damage than what had already been brought.

"I feel like a part of me is in that grave with her," Harry said, feeling tears burning behind his eyelids once again. "I feel like all I can remember right now are the moments when I said something mean and nasty to her. Every time I didn't say thank you or sorry or please. Every opportunity I wasted being silent when I could have told mum that I love her."

"Nothing," the boy continued, "is going to bring back those moments for me to fix them. And I don't think I'll ever stop dreaming and wishing upon every star for the chance to talk to her at least once more. I feel so sad and angry and terrible and guilty and so many other things I can't even start naming. And yet, you know what dad? I'm not going to forget about… tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow. The future. My future. The future without mum."

"Harry—" James started, but Harry cut him off.

"And I think that's what being strong is, sort of. To move on in order to survive even if you don't want to. Because times like these we have to *decide*, dad, between what we *want* to do and what we *should* do. It's no different from deciding when to fight and when to not fight."

"Durmstrang has taught you well," James muttered.

*I need you,* Harry thought, but didn't—*couldn't*—say that. So instead he turned to leave the kitchen. "I'll sleep the night here and tomorrow will go to Grimmauld Place. I'll spend most of my day there."

James didn't stop him.

James didn't stop him the following morning either.

*"…and thus, knowing that it would please you greatly, I saved it from a definite death," Sirius said, finishing his explanation regarding the presence of Remus Lupin in his house. Harry, who had been pleasantly surprised, was very relieved to hear that the werewolf was in good health and nearby.

"Thank you, Uncle Sirius," Harry said to the dark haired man who nodded with a satisfied expression.*
"Just remember to not go outside with it or anything. I made it take an oath a while ago so you're not in danger even when I'm out. Which is... soon, considering that I have to help your daddy dearest regain his lost senses."

"He's completely lost his footing," Harry muttered sadly. "And I said... mean things to him yesterday. I think you're the best person to support him right now."

"Kid," Sirius sighed, reaching to ruffle Harry's messy black hair. "Knowing you, mean or not, whatever you said was probably something very meaningful."

'If only you knew,' Harry thought. 'Or maybe you do. I don't know and I don't want to know.'

Less than an hour later Sirius finally was done combing his hair and picking his robes – not that Harry could see a difference from the man's usual appearance – before Flooing to the Potter Manor with the promise of getting James's drinking under control.

'He's probably going to get them both drunk,' Harry thought, making his way towards the basement where Sirius told him the werewolf would be. 'And then the world's worst hangover would supposedly teach dad a lesson.'

Seeing Lupin after what felt like an eternity was nostalgic. Last time when Harry had seen the creature, so many things had been different. His mum had been alive, for one.

Lupin was just as tall as Harry remembered, but not quite as thin. He was dressed in dark brown robes that were of finer quality than what he had been wearing when he had lived with the Potters. The werewolf was looking at him silently, with a friendly expression on his face.

"You know," Harry started. "I think I missed you."

"Well, that's something I haven't heard before," Lupin replied with a smile, before it faded away. "I'm sorry about your mother. And please, do sit down."

"Thank you," Harry replied, walking towards one of the chairs in the room and sitting down. After a moment of hesitation he kicked off his shoes and lifted his legs to curl on the chair comfortably.

"Your godfather—"

"Went to talk with dad."

"He isn't coping well, I take it."

"He isn't even trying."

"Do you want to talk about your feelings regarding this?" Lupin asked gently. Harry shrugged. He sort of wanted to talk, but at the same time he felt that he had already talked and thought so much about this. So he shrugged again and shook his head.

"A... friend said that to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure," Harry said. "I wonder... where my mum is right now."

"How strange," Lupin muttered. "Do you know who the person who originally said those words is?"

"No. My friend just said that it was some old fool."

"Your friend was quoting the previous headmaster of Hogwarts. His name was Albus Dumbledore."
"Albus?" Harry said sharply, eyes widening. "I mean… what a strange name. It's not very common, is it?"

"No," Lupin replied. "He was the Dark Lord's most dangerous enemy… Although, in my eyes, Albus was always a good man."

"What was he like?" Harry asked, trying to sound nonchalant. "I mean, what did he look like?"

"Tall and thin, he was," Lupin said. "Long silver hair and a long beard too. Blue eyes, if I remember correctly. He was a good, wise man."

'If we're thinking about the same person, then I probably agree,' Harry though, feeling the now familiar disbelief and doubt enter his mind again. "Do you miss him?"

"Not particularly," Lupin said. "But I do sometimes wonder how different the world would be, had he lived to see this day."

"When I woke up this morning I didn't remember at first that mum's gone," Harry admitted suddenly. "Remembering was terrible. I thought I was doing well, trying to get over it, but…"

"Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, and love leaves a memory no one can steal," Lupin quoted. "Give yourself time."

"I can't imagine staying at home anymore," Harry whispered. "It feels so wrong, with mum gone. And whose bloody idea was it to place a family cemetery so close to the main house anyway? It's like a constant reminder, forbidding us from feeling happy without feeling guilty at the same time."

"Mignon McLaughlin once said," Lupin started, "that the death of someone we know always reminds us that we are still alive - perhaps for some purpose which we ought to re-examine."

"Purpose," Harry repeated, as if tasting the word. "I think I know what my purpose is. Or at least… I think I know what I want my purpose to be."

"Good," Lupin said simply. "Moving on is easier when you know where to go."

✦

"Crucio."

Tom stared at the convulsing body of a Rebel with dark sense of satisfaction. It was a woman, perhaps in her forties, who had tried to smuggle a stolen file of important documents out of England. Her piercing screams irritated Tom, but silencing her would be pointless.

"The problem is that you confuse me too much," Tom muttered, thinking of Harry. "I should just kill you, Harry Potter. Who knows what kind of problematic character you'll end up becoming in the future."

"Why didn't you?" Nagini asked, slithering into the cell. "If dead-alive boy is dead then he'll do you no harm in the future."

"I told you," Tom replied, scowling. "He's entertaining."

"You were never into dangerous entertainment."

"Shut it, Nagini."
"Ooh, cranky, are we?"

"I don't feel good," Tom said, not looking at the snake, focusing on torturing the Rebel instead. "I don't feel good at all."

"Why? Surely not because of what you're doing."

"Mm? Oh, this. No, of course not."

"Explain yourself."

"Well, I—"

"Boring. What's for dinner?"

"Sometimes I hate you," Tom hissed, scowling at Nagini.

"Only sometimes? Good scales, I'd say. You hate everyone else always," Nagini replied, before it seemed to rear back and hold its breath – if snakes could do that. Tom wasn't sure. Contrary to popular belief, his animagus form was not a snake. Not that Tom was in a hurry to correct that particular misconception. He did feel that it was vastly unfair for him to not be able to turn into a snake, but never knew quite on whom to pin the blame.

Definitely not himself.

He was the epitome of all things Slytherin. He was a Parselmouth, for Merlin's sake! He was cunning and ambitious and... he was...a thestral animagus of all things. What for? Sure, the animals were all things dark and dangerous but they weren't snakes! They weren't—

"Smell that?" Nagini suddenly said, flickering her tongue. "This room is suddenly reeeeeking of self-pity."

"I am not wallowing in self-pity!"

"...I was talking about the female human there."

"...oh."

"Anyway, " Nagini said. "I think you feel uncomfortable because you don't hate your dead-alive boy."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Think about it."

"You say that I'm feeling uncomfortable because I don't hate Harry," Tom said. "I refuse to think about it."

"Because you know I'm right."

"Because you're a snake and you don't understand humans."

"I understand you well enough."

"No," Tom said, sending the Killing Curse towards the Rebel. "No you don't." He then stood up, still feeling troubled. There was so much that still could go wrong, as long as the opposition existed.
He'd have to snuff them out quickly and focus on making the rest of Europe submit to him the way England has.

Excluding Muggles, of course. Those were only good for being hunted like the disgusting filth they were. Sub-humans. Lacking. So very... weak.

"I hate Harry Potter," Tom murmured. "And I hate how he makes me feel all these... feelings. " The feelings he didn't even know he had, such as the feeling of being content simply due to the presence of another person. The feeling of wanting to see someone, to enjoy the company of someone. And this... confusing, troubling hesitation that stopped him from getting rid of him.

Tom didn't, couldn't, understand why he was feeling like that. He couldn't even pinpoint when exactly during the past two years he had started feeling like this. All these little attachments had crept upon him like invisible thieves in the dark.

"How do I fix this?" he asked the corpse of the dead Rebel. "What do I do with that child?"

Harry's days were busy.

There was so much he needed to think about, so much he needed to research and so many questions he needed to find answers to. He focused on that with everything he had, allowing his research to distract him from thinking about his mother. It did help, a little bit. He'd see her after-image standing where she'd never stand again, conjured by his imagination and desperate wishes, and nothing but closing his eyes and thinking about his research would succeed in driving the thoughts of her away.

He'd be reading a book and for a few insane moments hear her calling him, though he knew that she wouldn't – couldn't – do so from the world of the dead. So he'd start reading aloud and pretend that everything was fine and nothing affected him. It'd work, somewhat. He'd read and research for as long as he could stay awake. He'd sleep only when he was too tired to resist, ending up resting on couches and chairs and sometimes even on the floor of the library.

Harry was sure that he wouldn't be able to stop the war – thinking that he could was unrealistic. But he could try to find out what were the aims of the Rebels and what were the aims of the Dark Lord and then he could look for ways to either make both happen or come up with a compromise.

There was so much he would have to do, aside from that. Making people understand that not every werewolf was a monster would be tough, if not near impossible within Harry's own lifetime. But if he could start the process, that would surely, eventually, one day improve something. It all was in the education. If people would just learn from neutral sources before judging... why was that so difficult to some?

There were so many people who mocked others for being easily fooled, and yet believed most of the propaganda said about strangers. Not just creatures, but foreigners and people of different religions. Didn't they understand that magazines sensationalize things in order to sell? They encouraged stereotypes and prejudice and more often than not offered only the convenient, misleading, scandalous side of the truth. How many people thought that they knew everything about a group of people just because they read a few articles about it?

With papers like that, was it really a wonder that people thought that every werewolf was a monster, every foreigner a criminal, every person with a different religion a cult-obsessed killer?

'Maybe that's where I should start,' Harry thought. 'Subtly. I need the co-operation of some
Harry reached for a piece of parchment and wrote down a note about looking into the option of using media to his advantage. He'd have to divide his cases and recruit people at some point – there was simply too much for him to handle on his own. It would be dangerous, but what did Harry have to lose anymore? His own life? He honestly couldn't bring himself to worry about that right now.

'It's not like people would even have to know that it's me behind this,' Harry thought. 'Who knows that I'm behind one idea doesn't have to know that I'm behind other ideas. I just need to... I need advice. I don't know how to deal with people. I don't know anything about how to be a politician.'

Yet another thing he'd need to talk about with Albus.

Harry had tried to understand all of what politics involved, but there was so much that didn't make sense to him. He had read many books, even the mind-numbingly boring tome *Politics of the Proper and Pure* by Pius van Houten, but nothing had given him the answers he needed.

The boy didn't look up from his notebook when he heard someone walking nearby, coming closer by the step – it'd be either his father or Sirius anyway.

"Harry."

Harry looked up then, to see James standing there, looking awkward and tired and old. The man had lost weight and was very pale and he hadn't bothered to even shave for quite a while.

"Yes?" Harry asked, wondering when he had started to think of his father as 'James' anyway. When, during these past days, had James the father turned into James the man, James the Death Eater, James the husband-of-Lily... and most of all: James the widower.

But not James-the-father. Not anymore.

Not that Harry didn't know that James was his dad, and of course he loved him still, but he didn't feel as if he still had the father he could depend on. The father who had been there.

"I'm going with Sirius to France," James said. "He thinks it'd do me some good to leave the country. Do you want to come with us?"

"No thank you," Harry replied evenly. "I can manage being here on my own. The house-elves will clean and prepare the food and I'm well capable of making... sensible decisions."

"I contacted Gringotts yesterday," James continued. "Siri's idea. I know you're a smart boy, Harry, so I'll leave you the key to your vault. It's not the Family vault, obviously, but it does have quite a few galleons in it. So... if you need to get anything during my absence... you can. I put five hundred galleons there, just in case. Should cover for the whole summer holiday if I don't return before you go back to school."

"Thank you," Harry said. "I'll see you... when I see you, I guess. Take care."

"You too," James replied, hunching his shoulders and turning away. Harry stared at the spot where his father had been, and couldn't... didn't want to believe the conversation that had just happened. He'd be alone in the manor, feeling even more like the orphan he was now.
What would he do in an empty house, on his own? Sure, he and his father hadn't interacted much and whenever James made an appearance it was so very depressing, but... Did he want to be alone?

The decision was made for him when, on the evening of the next day, an owl with dyed feathers brought him a letter.

_Dear Harry,_

_Many little sparkly moons have passed since we last talked. I miss you dearly._

_I was at the funeral, of course, but I didn't want to make you think. You always think so much, Harry. Perhaps you should buy a pensieve? Although they can be very expensive, so how about you steal one instead? You have my full support and approval._

_When I was nine my mum died in an accident. She was experimenting with some spells and the results were less than stellar. I still wish she was here with me, or at least more than pieces in a box, but I'm no longer sad about it. You see, Harry, there are things that we don't want to happen but have to accept, things we don't want to know but have to learn, and people we can't live without but have to let go._

_That said, I would like to come and see you. If you have absolutely nothing against it, I'd like for you to be home tomorrow. I'll come for lunch._

_Love and livers,_

_Luna Lovegood_

*Luna hadn't changed much, only gotten taller.*

She arrived carrying a basked, her hair in a braid and a crown of sticks and flowers on her head. Her layered green and white dress and bare feet didn't make her look any less like a human-shaped forest fairy.

"Hello Harry," the girl said, smiling dreamily. "How have you been holding up?"

"I'm fine," Harry replied. "Let's go to the lounge."

"Oh, you're not fine," the small girl said, reaching for Harry's hand. "It's warm outside. Let's go see your mum."

"What?" Harry blurted, eyes widening. He hadn't even _thought_ about going to see his mother's grave so soon, and he certainly didn't feel like doing so even now. "I don't want to."

And yet, despite his protests, he found himself following Luna, who apparently didn't mind walking outside with no shoes on.

"Such a nice weather," the girl said pleasantly as they approached the graveyard. "Perfect for telling your mum that you're not yet alright."

"It's not like she's there anymore," Harry replied sullenly.

"Of course not," Luna agreed. "But we don't know if she can hear us through it anyway, now do we?"
"I have so much I should be doing, though. Like research and stuff. I haven't even done my summer homework yet."

"Careful, darling. I understand your thirst for knowledge but don't drown in all the information. Give your mind the time it needs to process everything. Oh, here we are." And then, much to Harry's astonishment, Luna spread a blanket in front of Lily's grave, sat down and started pulling out snacks from the basket.

"A picnic?" Harry asked, disbelieving. The last time he had been there, it had been… awful. And now…

"Hello Mrs. Potter," Luna said kindly. "I'm Harry's friend, Luna."

'She's crazy,' Harry thought, but sat down next to the girl anyway. He looked at the tombstone and oddly enough didn't feel like crying. He missed his mother so much, but it didn't hurt like it used to.

"Harry hasn't been doing well lately," Luna continued talking to the grave while handing a cup of tea to Harry. "He looks almost transparent, doesn't he?"

"I don't," Harry said, shaking his head. He was reluctant to admit that the weather really was nice and that as bizarre as it was to have a picnic where they were at the moment… it seemed to help, in some strange way.

"Nobody is completely gone till they're forgotten and all signs of their existence have been wiped out," Luna said, reaching for a purple cupcake and offering it to her friend. "Eat, Harry. You're way too skinny."

"Like you're one to talk," Harry muttered, but did accept the offered cupcake. "Did you make these or your house-elves?"

"Oh, we don't have house-elves. I made these. Mum's recipe – she used to write all of her recipes into cards and pin them on the walls."

"When... when did you get used to the idea that your mum was, you know, gone?"

"When I realized that if I don't take care of the snacks during trips, we'd go without," Luna said. "Daddy is very bad at organizing things."

"You're weird."

"But so are you. It's not a bad thing."

"Mum," Harry said, speaking for the first time to the grave. "I'm here with the oddest girl in the world." Luna smiled, picking up a green cupcake and licking its frosting.

"I don't think I mind, though," Harry continued. "The world needs more people like you, little Luna."

"Coming from you, that means a lot," Luna replied lightly. "Eat some more. I made over sixty cupcakes."

By the time Luna left the amount of cupcakes had been significantly lessened, and while Harry felt more nauseated than ever, he also felt more content than he had for the past days.
Harry hadn't heard of his father for two weeks, and despite the complicated feelings he had – the anger and resentment he didn't want to admit to feeling – he was quite worried. What was James up to? What was he doing? As long as he was with Sirius, then surely he'd be alright, right?

Harry sincerely hoped so.

He had been thinking a lot about going to the train station soon, but was yet to get around to doing that. He wasn't sure, after all, when his father would come back barging in. Or when someone would visit him and not give him a chance to regain his composure or something.

He'd have to do it in a room that wouldn't be the first option for him to be found in, should someone come looking. That ruled out his own room and the library. Perhaps one of the guestrooms would be the most suitable.

"Vurney," Harry called, and the house-elf in question appeared immediately, looking at him with wide, wary eyes.

"Master Harry," the thing squeaked.

"I'll be in the third guestroom," Harry said. "If someone comes in and asks about me, tell them that I'm resting and must not be disturbed. If it's my father, then warn me before he reaches me."

"Yes, Master Harry."

'I wonder if I can take one of the unused rooms and turn it into a secret study or something,' Harry thought, on his way to the third guestroom. 'I could fill it with my own books about this research… but I don't know any good locking charms that could keep Sirius and James out if they decided to snoop. Does Fidelius work on rooms?'

Oh well, he'd have the time to think about that later.

Harry locked the door of the guestroom behind him before lying down on the bed and clenching his eyes shut. It took him longer than usual to concentrate, but when he finally managed to focus, the sliding sensation washed over him so fast he was left breathless and nauseated for a few long moments.

Once again the first thing he became aware of was the damp coldness surrounding him, and a moment after, the sound of by-passing trains. When he opened his eyes, Harry was surprised to see considerably less people in the train station than what he had seen there before.

'Well, it's not like attacks happen every day,' Harry thought, rubbing his eyes. 'Maybe the others boarded their trains, already. Mum, too.'

"It seems that you have learned how to come and go at will," a familiar voice said, and Harry turned to see Albus smiling at him from a bench nearby. "Come sit, Harry."

"It's been a while," Harry said, eyeing the man curiously while hurrying towards him.

"Yes," Albus replied. "You are… taller now. And far less… naïve."

"How can you tell?" Harry scoffed. "Naivety—"

"You're weary," Albus cut in. "Your face is tired and set on such a grim expression. You have… experienced loss, no? Last time I saw you here—"
"I have a lot I need to ask you," Harry interrupted, not wanting to hear the rest of that sentence. "I have decided to do something about the situation out there, but I have no idea how, which steps to take and what I can even do. I can't bring peace to a world I do not know how to deal with. And… and there's so much I need to ask you, about Tom Riddle, and there's this woman called Merope, and there's just so much I don't know, Albus."

"Well, sit down and I can try to answer some of your questions, my boy," Albus offered. Harry nodded, and finally took a seat next to the old man.

"Are you Albus Dumbledore?" Harry asked. The old man nodded, and although at some level Harry was aware that he was talking to a supposedly great man, great wizard, he didn't feel any different. "A friend of mine quoted you at my mum's funeral. He said… that to the well-organized mind…"

"…Death is but the next great adventure," Albus continued with a warm smile. "Who is this friend of yours?"

"His name is Marvolo," Harry replied. "He's a very high-ranked Death Eater. Although… I've had my suspicions lately."


"Can you tell me about your… friendship with this person?" Albus asked, narrowing his eyes. "What does he look like? What does he tell you?"

"Well, he…"

*Lily was always a better parent than I could ever hope to be," James sniffed, looking at his drink. Sirius made a sympathetic sound while checking out a brunette dancing nearby.

"You're a good dad," Sirius said absently, gesturing for the barmaid to bring a few more bottles. "Really. You are."

"That's a lie," James muttered, sighing. "I'm nothing but a failure."

"I'm sure that Harry doesn't think that. Did you talk with him yet?"

"You should have seen him, Sirius. I felt like I was breaking to pieces in front of him and he was so composed all the time."

"What did he say?" Sirius asked. "I mean, you did mention that you have some kind of a serious discussion before he came to Grimmauld Place that one morning. So, uh… what exactly happened? He didn't tell me any details, just said that he had been harsh with you."

"Not sure if harsh is the right word," James replied, sighing. "And I know that a lot of what he said was reasonable, but… I just can't help but feel that he's not feeling enough. As if his emotional capacity is stunted or something. Don't you think that Harry has changed vastly ever since he started his studies at Durmstrang? Maybe they taught him something strange there—"

"And how'd that make him feel any less?" Sirius snorted. "Jamie, I don't think that Harry feels any less sad than you do. But he expresses it differently."
"But you do think that Harry has changed a lot!"

"Well... yeah, I guess. He's growing up away from home and all that. I think it's just normal."

"What should I do?" James groaned, reaching for a new bottle of whisky. "He even... he even told me to move on. S-said that I'd have to move on or I won't be able to live. Called me weak. And you know what, Siri? Compared to him, maybe I am."

"Readjusting is a painful process, but most of us need it at one time or another," Sirius said wisely.

"So what does that have to do with anything I've said today?" James asked, looking and sounding unimpressed. Sirius grinned sheepishly.

"Uh, haha, nothing?"

"What do I do?"

"Talk to him again," Sirius suggested. "This time without thinking about yourself all the time. I mean, of course tell him about how insecure you feel and all that rot, but ask him what he wants. What does he think he needs from you. That song and dance."

"But what if I offend him or something? I don't want him to hate me," James muttered. "I want to be a friend, not an enemy."

"Harry's got plenty of friends," Sirius said. "What he needs for you to be is a parent."

"I need to take care of him," James said, and although it was a statement, it sounded more like a question. Sirius nodded enthusiastically.

"Yes! Focus on taking care of Harry! Whenever you feel dangerously depressed, do something to make Harry happy! Buy him a book or take him to a Quidditch game or something."

"Alright," James said, and for the first time ever since his wife passed away, he felt a ray of hope. Yes, maybe if he focused all of his energy on keeping Harry happy, he could somehow survive. Harry was a smart boy; he wouldn't need James to tell him what to not do or set limitations or punish him.

"I'll talk to him," James decided. "Tomorrow. Let's drink till we drop tonight, because tonight's my last night of mourning."

"That's my mate," Sirius grinned, before turning to see where the closest barmaid was. "Wench!" he yelled when he saw one. "More whisky!"


And tomorrow he'd go to Harry.

* *

"...and after that I haven't seen him," Harry said, finishing his tale about Tom.

"I believe that what you have suspected regarding his identity is true," Albus sighed after a few moments of silence. "Your Marvolo Gaunt might indeed be the Dark Lord Voldemort, Tom Riddle."

"But why would he be so nice then?" Harry asked. "I mean, if he's really the Dark Lord, then... so much doesn't make sense! Why does he even bother with me? Why... why did he tell me about his
past? What made him notice me? There's just so much that I don't understand."

"The lives of you two are connected," a familiar voice joined the conversation, and startled, Harry turned to see Merope standing a few feet away from them.

"You!" Harry exclaimed, standing up. "What are you—"

"Merope Gaunt," Albus murmured. "Indeed, it seems that young Harry here is connected to Tom somehow, for you to care."

"He is," Merope confirmed, her eyes glaring at Harry. "But this child is far too confused and ignorant to understand what's going on and what he should do."

"Why won't you tell me, then?" Harry snapped, narrowing his eyes. "Tell me! Tell me about who you are, who Tom is and, heck, even who I am and what I'm supposed to do!"

"You asked your father about when you died?" Merope wanted to know, and after a few moments of wary silence, Harry nodded.

"I was a stillborn," Harry said. "It's why I can come here, right?"

"Is it?" Merope grunted. "Is it that you can come here because you're supposed to be dead, or are you supposed to be dead because you can come here?"

"...it's not the same, is it?"

"No. And some things nobody knows. We might never know which one is the reason and which one the consequence."

"Do you know how Tom and I are connected? How do you know Tom, anyway?" Harry asked. Merope smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile at all, and Harry shivered, feeling suddenly almost scared.

"Tom has told you a lot about himself," Merope drawled. "But not everything."

'I'm still doubtful about if Tom is really the Dark Lord,' Harry thought. 'It just feels so bizarre. I think... Should I ask him?'

"You know that Tom was an orphan," Merope started, and Harry nodded.

"Yeah... he said that his Muggle father abandoned him and his witch mother died."

"I'm that witch mother who died."

'What? Wait, what?' Harry gaped, before shaking his head and clenching his eyes shut. "There should be a limit to... shocking news. I just..." It sometimes overwhelmed him, and he wasn't sure if he knew how to cope.

"Are you all right, my boy?" Albus asked.

"When the possible stops making sense, it's time to believe in the impossible," Harry muttered. Just how many times would he have to repeat those words for him to stop feeling surprised?

"That's a good rule to live by," Merope said, sounding bored. "You think your life is bizarre now? Just wait till I'm done explaining."

"It's alright, Harry," Albus said, patting the boy's shoulder. "At least your life is exciting."
"That's not exactly something I'm happy about," Harry said, and opened his eyes, nodding with a grim expression on his face. "All right. Start explaining."

"Let me tell you first all that there is to know about my son's life," Merope started. "Before I start telling you about your death from my point of view."

"How do you know that much anyway? I mean… you're dead, right? And most ghosts are visible if they stick around."

"Death has its secrets. Stop asking me or I'll kick you in the face."

"…yes ma'am."

* 

"I thought you said you weren't going to visit him."

"Because I'm not going to visit him."

"Really? I suppose you're clearing your schedule for tomorrow's, uh, Quidditch match?"

"Since when do I care about Quidditch?"

"Then why are you clearing your schedule for it?"

"I'm not clearing my schedule for it!"

"For what, then?"

"For… for… just in case," Tom snapped, glaring at Nagini who was rolling on the carpet. "Vanish from my sight."

"I want to see the dead-alive boy," Nagini whined. "I want to. I want to. I want to."

"I don't care about what you want."

"But you're going to see him?"

"No!"

"Yes you are."

"No, I am not."

"Yes, you are."

"I said I'm not going to see him, Nagini."

"You are."

"This is juvenile," Tom hissed, turning away from the snake. "But fine, since you seem to be so fixated on the issue – I'll go and see him tomorrow."

"Oh sure, be my guest and use me as an excuse. Are you going to tell your dead-alive boy that bad old Nagini forced you to drop by?"

"Amusing."
"But in all seriousness," Nagini said, lifting her head up from the carpet. "You need to stop letting the dead-alive boy throw you off your game. You've been distracted lately."

"Which is why I need to talk with the brat," Tom said. "I need to… establish his position or something. See if I should… think about ways to, uh, take him out of the picture."

"Kill him?"

"More like… keep him out of the way."

"And if you can't?"

"He's still young. I don't need to think about that yet."

Tom was going to seek Harry and have a word or two with him first. He'd go visit the boy and talk with him – surely the brat was going to be at home? If not, then Tom would just wait for him to return.

If the boy didn't want to be a Death Eater, then what? Tom knew that he'd never hire advisors - fake or genuine - and even if he did, he wouldn't hire an advisor with such strong feelings about right and wrong. Especially if they tended to make sense, like Potter often did.

Tom didn't need or want anyone with a conscience around him.

Tomorrow, he'd go to talk with the boy and finally decide what to do. He hated being unsure and since the situation didn't seem to get solved on its own, he was going to solve it himself.

By force, if necessary.

…and maybe with a bottle of spiked firewhisky.
Chapter 15

After Merope had finished telling him about the life of Tom Riddle up 'til the moment he became Lord Voldemort, Harry sat in silence for a long time. He almost couldn't bring himself to believe all of what he had been told. He was overwhelmed by the achievements of the Dark Lord. Had Tom… had that man really been the one to do all that? It seemed so unbelievable. Horcruxes, murders, immortality, dark magic… it just didn't sound… real.

"Are you sure you that we're talking about the same person?" Harry asked skeptically. "The Tom you're describing sounds so… bitter, angry, and cruel. My Tom isn't—"

"There are different sides to people," Merope replied curtly. "People can hide monsters behind smiles."

"Tom isn't a monster!"

"Not to you, not with you, he isn't," Albus agreed, "but I'm afraid that all you'll need to do to see what Voldemort believes in is to take a look at the laws that uphold the Wizarding World right now. The system that values those laws above justice."

"You can't blame one man for the faults of the whole system," Harry snapped, scowling. "I mean, sure, I don't agree with what's going on and yes, if Tom really is the Dark Lord then he's responsible for a lot, but not everything."

"And that's why you're going to help him," Merope said, sounding strangely pleased.

"Help him in what!" Harry snapped loudly, feeling a surge of irritation. "I was planning on doing what I can to stop the war and bring some sense of equality, one way or another. How can I… why are you asking so much from me? I can't do this! I still doubt that I can actually accomplish what I'm trying to do!"

"Don't let what you can't do stop you from doing what you can do," Albus said lightly.

"Your mother died because of this war," Merope said bluntly. "Who's going to die next? Your father? A friend? War is not a game, Harry Potter. If you don't stop it, then no one will."

"Why me!" Harry all but shrieked. "Why me! Why did you choose me to do this! Why is this all happening to me!"

"It had to be someone," Merope replied. "You're not special on your own, Harry Potter. You are special because the circumstances made you so."

"I don't understand," Harry groaned, clenching his eyes shut and trying to not let the desperation overwhelm him. There were so many questions without answers inside his head. Why did Merope make him live? Why did Tom tell him about his… about the Dark Lord's past? Had he ever told anyone else before? What did he see in Harry, for him to seek Harry's company and— did he know about the wand? Ah, his thoughts were swirling, and Harry couldn't focus on anything. He was starting to feel a dizzy.

"That's a lot to take in, I suppose," Albus sighed. "Go back home, Harry. Rest and think. You still have time. Many hours must have passed since you appeared here, and someone might be missing you already."
"Hah? You can't just… Look, there's still so much I need to know!" Harry exclaimed, although he did believe that he had spent the whole night at the train station. "Merope promised to tell me about my death from her point of view."

"If unfulfilled promises were nooses, we'd all be hanging before turning seventeen," Merope said wisely. "I'll tell you when you come back here again, Harry Potter. But now, you must return to your own existential dimension."

Harry looked at her for a while, silently, wondering if he really should go before getting the explanation he wanted from her. Then again, to be fair, she had already given him a lot to think about. All of which concerned Tom. He'd have to spend a lot of time trying to understand, trying to accept that maybe his Tom really was the Dark Lord.

The boy didn't resist the pull of magic as it snatched him away from the train station. He was, instead, trying to make sense of the strange feeling of… disappointment and dread inside him. If Tom really was the Dark Lord… then all the terrible, unjust things that had happened… The pointless executions, the racist speeches… had Tom really…?

Did Tom know about Harry's wand? When he had found Harry in the Durmstrang Library all that time ago… what had he even been doing there?

"I was merely observing," the man had said. His surprise when Harry had called him "Tom"—the name of the Dark Lord. Tom had red eyes. Wasn't there a rumour that the Dark Lord's eyes were red, too? And in the beginning, when Harry had told Tom about the rumours regarding war… then he had received a letter from Sirius saying that the Dark Lord had been told by someone that there were rumours going around. Harry had assumed that Tom had told the Dark Lord, but what if that wasn't the case? What if it had been Harry who told Tom who was the Dark Lord?

"Karkaroff said that it's very advanced there. And you know that the Dark Lord occasionally tests the seventh year students himself, don't you?"

Bright sunlight indicated clearly that not only had Harry spent his entire night with the dead, but that it was well into the morning by now. Harry, who hadn't moved from his position on the bed even after he came back from the train station, clenched his eyes shut and cringed when he remembered the words Sirius had said years ago. And then he remembered something else, too. A conversation between him and Tom.

"Why are you here?"

"Giving a guest appearance and testing out the older students."

How come Harry hadn't noticed all this?

Did Tom tolerate Harry just because Harry had his brother wand? Because right now, most of what Harry could remember about their past conversations was somehow… dangerous. Suddenly relevant. Harry had been careless, obviously, when talking with Tom, even if he hadn't noticed it at the time.

"Do you think you could ever serve the Dark Lord?"

Tom had asked Harry that, hadn't he? He had asked Harry about his views on death, war, Death Eaters, life after death and the more Harry thought about it, the more… wrong it all felt. How stupid had he been, to carelessly just reply to everything! Had Tom been using him all this time? For what purposes? Did the man know about Harry's ability? That was impossible, wasn't it?
What if? But what if not? Could it be? Was it? Was it not?

At the funeral, though, Tom hadn't done anything suspicious to him. Harry had been very vulnerable back then and all Tom had done was… comfort him. Had that been just a ruse to make Harry trust him? What was it? Why did the man have to be so complicated?

'I wonder what will happen once we meet again,' Harry thought, opening his eyes and sitting up on the bed. 'I guess I'll avoid him 'til I know what to do. Oh Merlin, what would I even say if he appeared now? Something completely stupid, I bet.'

Just then, a house-elf popped in.

*I just came waltzing in,' Tom thought disapprovingly. The brat needs better wards. Someone will murder him in his sleep if they're not fixed.' He glared at a trembling house-elf that squeaked something or other and then vanished, presumably to fetch the boy. Well, at least Harry was home. If the brat hadn't been there, then Tom would have… done something. He wasn't sure what exactly, but he knew that it wouldn't have been pleasant.

"You." The word was said breathlessly, almost disbelievingly. Tom turned to look at Harry and frowned. The brat looked exhausted, pale, and messy. The expression on his face seemed to be frozen to show some kind of… horror and shock? What for?

"You look terrible," Tom said. "Do I really have to ask you about your sleeping and eating habits?"

"You're the Dark Lord," Harry blurted out, and Tom tried very hard to pretend that his grimace was a pleasant smile.

"Well…” he started, setting the bottle of spiked firewhisky onto the table and nodding approvingly when two glasses appeared. "Well."

"The first time we met," Harry continued, still standing at the doorway, "I called you simple-minded."

"And told me to not think on my feet lest I fall down and injure myself," Tom continued, sounding reluctantly impressed. Harry closed his eyes, and for a moment, the Dark Lord thought that the boy would pass out. Eventually, the child opened his eyes again and moved to sit down on one of the chairs in the lounge they were in. Tom, wary, sat down as well.

"Why didn't you kill me?" Harry asked, sounding desperate and confused. "You have had so many chances and so many reasons. Why haven't you? Is there a reason? Is… I just… And why didn't you deny it? You've been hiding it so far; why didn't you just tell me that I'm being stupid and that you're not him!"

"What does it matter?" Tom sighed. "I have my reasons for doing what I do." Usually. Most of the time. Sometimes. Okay fine: that was what he said when he had no idea what the hell he was doing but didn't want to admit it.

"This is insane," Harry said, and alarmed, Tom looked at the boy sharply. Why was the brat sounding tearful suddenly? He wasn't going to cry, was he? He had absolutely no reason to cry! The boy was, however, hiding his face behind his hands, and his hunched shoulders didn't seem to be shaking.

"The truth won't change regardless of whether or not you like it," Tom said, pouring some
firewhisky into the two glasses on the table. He wasn't, of course, going to drink his own—the whiskey was doused with a modified calming draught that should work to make the boy agreeable and talkative.

"This is too much," Harry said, clenching his eyes tightly shut behind his palms. "This is too much."

"What—?"

"Are you really the Dark Lord?"

"Didn't we already—"

"Are you?"

Tom stared silently at Harry for a few moments, his mouth slightly open, before swallowing and nodding. "Yes. I am."

"Then why are you so nice to me?" Harry asked, finally looking at Tom. His green eyes were wide and... Well, not deranged exactly, but Tom did wonder fleetingly if the boy's sanity was under pressure of some kind. Perhaps Tom wouldn't need the spiked whiskey after all. Harry didn't seem to be up for any mind games anyway.

"I... have been alive for many, many decades," Tom finally replied, sitting down again. "I've seen thousands of people, achieved more than anyone else. I won't say that I'm bored, because there's still plenty to keep me entertained. The Rebels, general politics, that kind of things. You could say that there are many situations, numerous occurrences, several tasks that prevent me from dying out of sheer boredom, but when it comes down to people... I find them lacking."

"I think you told me something along those lines a long time ago," Harry said quietly. "Remember? When we met in Hogsmeade."

"Yes," Tom said softly. "People... always seek the easy way out. If anything is difficult or complicated or doesn't go as planned, they complain and whine and might leave the task unfinished. People judge, people think they're better than their superiors; they're never satisfied with what they have and demand more, more, and more. People are slaves to their desire to impress one another. They are so simple and weak and easy to figure out. Don't get too arrogant now, and I do not think of you as my equal, but you, in my eyes, are superior to the rest of them."

"How so?" Harry asked, frowning.

"I don't understand you. I can't figure you out."

"Well yes, that's mutual."

"That's pleasant to know," Tom said, leaning back on the chair and staring at Harry. "As I told you, I don't think you're my equal—I don't have equals. But... you might be the closest equivalent to what equal could be."

"You're the Dark Lord," Harry muttered again. Tom scowled.

"Yes, didn't we already establish that fact?"

"You're not as pompous as I thought you'd be."

"I'm never pompous. I simply know my position. I thought that you'd be far more scared, though."
Harry bit his lip and shrugged, then nodded. "I... don't know. I think I will be, as soon as I manage to wrap my mind around it. I... this is ridiculous. You're unbelievable. Are you sure you're the Dark Lord? Well, of course you are. And you don't want to kill me?"

"No, although, if you keep repeating yourself, I just might. You look exhausted, by the way. You should probably go to sleep," Tom said, watching Harry yawn and rub his eyes.

"And you look kind of pretty," the boy mumbled sleepily, making the Dark Lord's mouth fall open in shock. "I thought you'd be plenty uglier."

"Excuse me!"

"Oh my God, you're the Dark Lord."

"For Merlin's sake, boy!" If Tom hadn't already accepted the fact that he didn't understand Harry Potter, he would have done so now as the boy suddenly, for no apparent reason, burst out laughing. Granted, there might have been a slightly hysterical undertone to the laughter and it didn't last long. "How did you find out anyway?"

"I figured it out," Harry replied after he had calmed down. "I should have noticed it sooner. Are you going to kill me now, though?"

"What is it with you and getting killed?" Tom asked. "Do you want me to kill you?"

"That's not it, I just... I don't know how to...," Harry sighed, shook his head and stood up, walking stand in front of Tom. "How am I supposed to treat you?"

"The way you've been treating me so far, I suppose," Tom said calmly. In all honesty, he himself didn't know what was going to happen next between him and Harry– he hadn't expected revealing his identity to go quite like this. "Although we might still want to keep this a secret."

"It's not like anyone would believe me anyway," Harry muttered and leaned forward to press his forehead against Tom's. "Thank you, though. Considering how busy you probably are all the time, you still came to my mum's funeral."

"I'm glad that you're being calm and reasonable about this," Tom admitted, moving his hands to rest on Harry's hips. "It's quite a shock, I'm sure."

And that was the scene James Potter walked in on.

Sirius had woken him up at eight in the morning, kicked him into the shower, and told him to clean himself up. By the time it was eight o'clock, James looked more than presentable. He felt better, too. As if he had survived some kind of a dark cloud and finally left it behind.

"Do you want me to tag along when you go to Harry?" Sirius asked.

"No," James replied after a few moments of silent contemplation. "I think... I'll try to do this alone. I'm... scared, though. I feel like I might throw up after all."

"Did you drink the hangover potion yet?"

"Yeah. Drank it as soon as I could move, actually."

"Good. Now go there, talk to him again, and don't lose your temper, no matter what," Sirius advised.
"Don't make him feel as if you're judging him or that you're angry at him. Listen to him. Be honest."

"And if he—"

"If you mess up again and he disowns himself, I'll do something. Trust me."

"Okay," James said, nodding a few times. "Okay. I'll go home and… talk to him. I'll see you later."

James had thought that he'd find Harry in the library. Or perhaps in his own room, studying or
something. Maybe even flying outside. He had not, however, expected to find his son in the main
lounge with a strange man that looked to be only slightly younger than James. Far too old to be a
friend of Harry's in any case. The situation was not made better by the fact that Harry was standing
too close— much too close— to this stranger whose hands were on Harry's hips.

"What," James croaked, and at the sound of his voice, Harry took a step away from the man who
was still sitting on the couch. "Who is this, Harry?" The words 'and why are you so close to him'
were left unsaid as James battled inwardly between staying calm and pulling out his wand
because ohmerlinwasthatapaedophile!

"Put that wand away," the man ordered firmly, and James narrowed his eyes. Red eyes? Who had
red eyes these days? Aside from vampires and some nutjobs with issues.

"I'm not in danger, dad," Harry said, smiling awkwardly. "Really."

"Really," James repeated, wholly unconvinced. "Then tell me why an adult man was molesting
you."

"Excuse me!"

"What!" Harry's mouth was hanging open as he stared at his father in shock and disbelief. The man
on the couch sighed and stood up, pushing Harry to sit instead.

"There seems to be a misunderstanding," the man said in what probably was supposed to be a
soothing manner. Instead, he came across as condescending. "However, I'm reluctant to explain
myself to you."

"Wait, Tom," Harry started, looking alarmed.

"Who the hell—," James started at the same time.

"Stupefy," said the red-eyed man.

*"

"You stunned my father," Harry groaned, rushing to kneel next to James's stunned body.

"You stunned my father!"

"Next, I'm going to Obliviate him," Tom said, looking satisfied with himself.

"Obliviate me, too," Harry snapped, scowling, before he sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly. "Oh
Merlin, I need a vacation."

"It's your summer holiday, boy," Tom reminded him. "This is vacation." Harry stared at him silently
for a few moments with a strange expression on his face. Then he let out a sound that was either a
sob or a giggle— Tom wasn't quite sure— before he burst out laughing. Or crying. Or maybe both.
There were tears and there was giggle-sobbing, how was Tom supposed to know what to call it?
"This is vacation," Harry repeated, laughing so hard that his whole body was shaking.
"This… is… vacation!"

'Did I say something strange? ' Tom wondered. 'Should I make him drink that firewhisky after all? Or should I stun him too? Firewhisky first.'

Tom turned towards the table where the bottle of whiskey and two glasses full of the liquid were. He reached first for one of the glasses before changing his mind and grabbing the bottle instead. Then he kneeled next to Harry and, after a moment of hesitation, grabbed the back of boy's head and poured some whiskey into his open mouth. He then forced the boy's mouth shut and told him to swallow.

Harry, of course, in order not to choke, swallowed.

"What is that?" the boy croaked with tears in his eyes, before sneezing a few times. "Oh Merlin, it's dreadful. It burned!"

"Really," Tom said and repeated the process, forgetting that Harry, as a twelve-year-old boy, was most definitely not used to drinking firewhisky. In the end, Tom ended up with a very drunk Harry who was giggling and… giggling some more.

"I could use the sobering charm," Tom muttered, staring at the boy for a few long moments before he sighed and shook his head– the sobering charm would make the boy vomit, and he'd throw up Tom's carefully prepared potions, too. "Why do you always mess up my plans, little Potter?"

"Wheee," Harry said, allowing himself to be carried to the couch. Tom sighed, shaking his head again. Why did the boy make him always feel so chaotic? None of this was supposed to happen! The boy wasn't supposed to have discovered Tom's identity on his own and his father wasn't supposed to barge in on them like that. And the man had called him a molester!

A molester! Tom had never been called anything as appalling before! And he had been called many things so far in his lifetime.

'I'm going to obliviate him and keep him stunned 'til Harry recovers,' Tom decided and proceeded to do so, not stopping for a moment to think that perhaps Harry would have preferred not having the Dark Lord mess around in his father's mind. Either way, after Tom was done, the man refocused on the drunken boy who was still muttering and giggling quietly as if he was telling himself a story of some kind. Oh well, Tom was there for business, not for fun, and he was done playing considerate.

"Harry," Tom said quietly, sitting on the couch and pulling the boy to rest his head on Tom's lap. The potions should have worked by now, and all Tom could do was hope that the firewhisky wouldn't make the boy's words too slurred to be understood. "Harry, are you awake?"

"Eehhh?"

"Remember when we talked about the war?" Tom said pleasantly, his hand touching the side of Harry's face gently. "Remember when we talked about the war, Harry?"

"Mmmyeeeesss..."

"And the Death Eaters? Do you remember when we talked about the Death Eaters?"

"Yeeaahh… m' dad's a… dether."

"And you, Harry? Do you want to be a Death Eater like your father?"
"Can't," Harry mumbled and yawned. "Wouda been ees, easy, easier."

"Why can't you be a Death Eater, Harry?" Tom asked carefully, wishing that he could have added Veritaserum into the mix. Unfortunately, though, the serum was known to sometimes react badly with alcohol.

"Can't." Harry repeated, sounding sad, and something in his tone and the way he spoke now made Tom remember how young the child he was interrogating actually was. "I can't, Tommy," Harry said and turned to press his face against Tom's stomach.

'What am I supposed to do?' Tom thought, not even noticing how his own fingers were now combing Harry's hair. "I don't think I'll get you drunk again if you're going to be sad all the time."

"Gotta... gotta save you, Tommy," Harry mumbled, and after a few moments of silence, the boy started sobbing again. Tom sighed, leaning back on the chair couch and relaxing.

"I give up," the man muttered, keeping his fingers entangled in the boy's hair even after Harry had stopped crying. "For Merlin's sake, Harry Potter, I'm never again making any plans that involve you. You're not even making sense anymore. Who even told you that I'm the Dark Lord?"

"M'rope," Harry replied before he yawned. The boy, in his intoxicated state, didn't realize that the name had caused Tom to tense, and the man's red eyes widen in shock. The answer now was different from the reply he had gotten earlier.

"What?" Tom hissed, glaring down at Harry. "What did you just— How— What? Potter, wake up this instant!

"Shh," the boy said, turning his face up towards the Dark Lord while reaching to pat the man's cheek with his hand. "Evere... everything is gonna be, gonna be okay, hm? I'll take care of you, Tommy. Whassamatter? I'll take care of you."

"Idiot," Tom whispered numbly. He was feeling strange. He shouldn't even be there. Why had he wanted to meet Potter again? The longer he kept the boy alive, the more dangerous everything became. He didn't want to change; he didn't want to... to not want to kill someone. He couldn't leave things as they were— Tom knew that he had to do something about Harry, but he wasn't sure what exactly. The boy had said Merope, hadn't he? Where did he get that name from? Unless Tom's suspicions had been correct and Harry really could speak to the dead.

If that was the case, then Tom would have a good, solid reason for not letting the boy leave his sight. Not that he wanted to keep an eye on Harry all the time or anything. But... just in case.

'There has to be a way to solve this problem and get all the answers that I want,' Tom thought, frowning. 'Brainwash the boy? If only I could just imperio him... but that'd be too risky. If this goes on, I'll be left with no options but to use legilimency on him.' And even though Tom was more than ready to blame Harry if he ever was to do that— because clearly, Harry and his stubbornness were to blame— he doubted that the boy would share that belief and accept the blame quietly.

No, Tom couldn't force Harry because then he'd be expecting the boy to somehow figure out how to betray him, and Tom would exhaust himself with paranoia while waiting for that to happen. No, there had to be something else. He had to make Harry want to obey him... He had to make Harry feel honour-bound, obligated to obey him. There had to be some way for that to—

Ah.
Tom relaxed slightly, smirking as the plan started to form in his mind. Feeling better now that he had something he could do, the man called a house-elf to point him towards Harry's room. He then carried to boy to lie on his bed. James Potter was still lying on the floor, obliviated and unconscious. Tom did think about what to do with the man before deciding to just leave him as he was—Harry could try to explain his way out of that one. The brat deserved some trouble anyway for making Tom feel so strange all the time.

'I need to make some research about life-debts,' the Dark Lord thought as he grabbed a handful of Floo powder. 'And after that happens and I have him under my complete control, I'll interrogate the information out of him. Every bit of it.'

Because Tom hated feeling confused and not knowing.

Harry woke up feeling awful.

He felt incredibly nauseated, the ceiling wouldn't stay still, and there was a general atmosphere of dread. His head and eyes hurt, and it took him quite a while before he realized that he was in his room. What had happened to him? Was this some kind of a curse? Or a reaction to a prolonged stay at the train station? Merope hadn't told him about his death despite what she had promised. Instead, she had told him that Tom, his Tom, was the Dark Lord—

Oh Merlin.

Harry was gradually remembering what had happened earlier that day. Tom had been there. They had... talked? Had they talked? Harry wasn't sure, but he vaguely remembered his father barging in and accusing Tom of being a molester. Accusing the Dark Lord of being a child molester... Harry would laugh at the absurdity of it if it wasn't so terrifying. And then Tom had... obliviated James and stunned him. Or had he stunned James first and then obliviated him? Did he really obliviate James? Harry remembered that Tom had stunned his father, and then he had made Harry drink something...

He had made Harry drink something.

Oh yes, Harry remembered the awful, burning liquid. It must have been an alcohol of some kind. The bottle! Tom had brought a bottle with him, hadn't he? Had the man planned on getting Harry drunk? What for? Just what had they talked about for him to decide to do something like that?

'All this thinking is making my head hurt,' Harry thought and cringed when he heard the door of his room opening.

"Harry?" James said, walking towards the bed. "You awake now? Good. Drink this, it's a hangover potion. You, er, you have a lot to explain."

'If he's really been obliviated, I'll have to come up with a believable story,' Harry thought, slowly sitting up and accepting the potion. 'If he hasn't, then, well... I could say that Tom is a teacher. Someone from Durmstrang who came to... talk to me about coursework. And he's a bit eccentric and simple-minded so...'

James sat down on the bed and looked at his son, wondering if the boy had tried to drink because of him. He had been bad influence, and perhaps Harry had thought that James encouraged getting drunk. How was he supposed to fix this misunderstanding? If only Lily—

'I'm not going to think about her now,' James told himself before focusing on Harry again. "Why were you drunk?"
"Do I really have to tell you?" Harry asked, feeling sick. Sure, his father didn't look angry, but… what if he was just barely holding back some simmering rage?

"Yes," James replied. "And you'll also explain why I was unconscious in the lounge."

"I was practicing a spell," Harry said, the lie slipping out before he had even realized that he had thought about it. "The, um, sobering charm. But something went wrong, and it hit you when you arrived into the lounge and knocked you unconscious. Then it flung back at me and made me sick. Drunk. Sick." Harry's heart was beating rapidly, and he was so sure that James would realize that he was lying.

Lucky for Harry, though, James was caught up thinking about why Harry would feel the need to learn the sobering charm, ending up feeling guilty and responsible. He shouldn't have gotten so recklessly drunk in front of his son and so frequently, too. He shouldn't have… And James knew that while he'd try to not repeat his mistakes, it'd be very difficult because… Lily wasn't there and he missed her. Didn't know how to live without her.

It was easy to tell him to move on. It was hard– but doable– for him to think about living his life, taking care of Harry and getting over Lily. But when it came down to actually putting theory into practice… he just… couldn't.

Lily would know– would have known– what to do now. Should James leave Harry to sleep some more? Should he offer to make the boy something to eat? Was he supposed to stay at home or something? Harry was just hungover, not sick, so maybe James should just… ignore this?

'Sorry, Sirius,' James thought, 'but I don't think that there's a reason for me to talk with Harry about what happened after all. I wouldn't even know what to say."

Harry, on his part, felt increasingly awkward due to the reigning silence. He looked at James and couldn't help but… prefer being alone. The twinge of guilt he felt due to that wish did nothing to lessen it though, and he wondered if he could ever again feel at ease with his father. It wasn't that Harry loved James any less, of course, but… a connection that had been there before his mother's death… was now severed. James and Harry were a father and son, but for the life of him, Harry couldn't consider them a family anymore.

"I'll be returning to work in a few days," James said suddenly. "Harry… I…"

"I'll be able to take care of myself," Harry assured him.

"That's not it," James sighed, shaking his head. "I'm just… sorry. I'm failing as a parent, aren't I?"

"That's not—"

"Don't lie to make me feel better. Just promise me, Harry, if you ever need anything… you won't hesitate a second before contacting me, alright? Please, promise me that." Harry stared at James's grim and serious expression for a few moments before nodding.

"I promise."

Three days after that, James rejoined the Death Eater army in Ireland.

On his 13th birthday, Harry was alone at home. He didn't mind– to him, this day was just as good as any other for him to return to the train station. He still had to ask Merope to tell him about his death
from her point of view, and he needed to organize his plans— he really needed to know and make it clear to himself what he should be doing next.

"Don't let anyone come in," Harry said to the house-elf Vurney before heading towards his room. He was eager to go back to the train station, but he was worried about the possibility of someone trying to barge in. Harry knew that he should probably wait for a few days more and think about how to handle Tom— how to act around the man and just… what to do— but his thoughts kept circling around unsolvable problem points that were driving him insane.

Such as, Tom being Lord Voldemort… meant that Tom was actually Harry's opponent. And to think that Merope wanted Harry to save Tom while Albus wanted him to save the world from Tom. Just what was he supposed to do? Unless saving Tom would somehow contribute to saving the…world?

'This is ridiculous,' Harry thought, taking a deep breath and lying down on his bed. 'I'll leave saving the world to heroes and supremely powerful people with enough ambition and skills. I'll focus on something less challenging. Something smaller.'

It was with notable ease that he could now go to the train station. The resistance, the pull back to the living world that had been almost impossible to fight against was now nothing but a tug— nothing he wouldn't be able to control if he cared enough to do so. Breathing there, however, wasn't getting any easier.

Harry arrived just in time to see a train leave from the station. He wondered absently if Lorenzo had left in a train like that, if he had perhaps left in the same train as Harry's mother. And where did these trains go, exactly? He had tried to board one not so long ago— had Merope not stopped him, what would have happened?

'Maybe that's one more thing I should ask her about,' Harry thought, seeing the woman standing alone in the distance and walking towards her. Harry wondered where Albus was; were there parts of this station that he wasn't aware of? Probably yes, Harry hadn't ever really looked around in this place, and not just because he had always been busy doing something.

The place was creepy. Harry felt nervous being alone, and he walked faster towards Merope.

"You shouldn't come here so often," Merope said as soon as he was within earshot. "It's taxing to your body and spirit."

"Where's Albus?" Harry asked. "And I'll be fine, don't worry."

"Dumbledore is doing something or other; I don't care enough to find out," Merope replied coolly. "However, your assumption about you being fine— or that you will be fine— is wrong. The air around here isn't suitable for a living human."

"I can breathe just fine." The lie slipped out too fast for Harry to catch it.

"You shouldn't come here so often," Merope said as soon as he was within earshot. "It's taxing to your body and spirit."

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"Oh yes, and every time you inhale, particles of this unholy air here enter your body and stay there."

"Is that why I can come here easily, now?" Harry thought suddenly, before shrugging. He hadn't come here for that this time. "Very well, I'll be more careful about coming here. Anyway, will you finally tell me about when I died?" Merope stared at him for a long moment with a grim expression, and Harry feared that she'd deny him his request. He wasn't, however, going to leave before getting some answers.

"Fine," the woman finally sighed and gestured for Harry to sit down with her on the cold floor of the train station.
"Do you believe in fate?"

"Huh?"

"Fate, boy," Merope sneered. "*Destiny.* Pre-destined occurrences and all things included."

"Not really," Harry said hesitantly. "I mean... I'd like to believe that people can affect their—"

"Spare me that song and dance," the woman scoffed. "You don't believe in God, do you?"

"I never thought about it," Harry admitted.

"Of course, because human arrogance seldom wants to accept the fact that there's some power far superior to it. However, I am not willing to have a religious debate with you about this, so for the sake of you to understand this explanation about fate, let's say you believe in God."


"The most common misconception is that destiny and fate exclude free will," Merope said, and Harry, who really didn't know what to say about that, shrugged. "As I said, that's wrong."

"What is correct, then?"

"Destiny, or fate, rather, is what God has decreed to happen."

"Doesn't that already exclude free will?"

"No. It is fate, not because it happens despite what you decide, but because it has happened already according to your choices, and God, who is not bound by time, has made that your fate."

"...I'm not sure I understand," Harry said hesitantly, and Merope let out an irritated sound. She scowled at Harry before talking again.

"Fine, let me explain it to you in simpler terms. Hypothetically, God told you that, according to your father's destiny, he's going to eat tomato soup tomorrow. The next day, you see him making some tomato soup and eating it because according to him, that's what he wants. Does that make his choice fate or free will?"

"Uh... f-free will?"

"Both. It's fate because he wanted it, and God, who's not bound by time, went to the day after tomorrow, and by then, your father wanting to eat tomato soup had already happened."

"...oh."

"That's why it's said that seers are prophets. God has granted them the gift of foresight, and it's based on their ability to see the threads of fate."

"Okay," Harry said, frowning, "but... what does that have to do with me?"

"Listen and focus," Merope ordered darkly. "Once you die, some of these threads become visible if you spend years learning how to see them. I've been watching the thread of my son's fate for decades, and when you arrived, I could see your thread entwining with his. That's why I pushed you back, because I knew that that's what was meant to happen. You were supposed to die, and I was supposed to bring you back to life. That was part of our fate."
"How can I know what else I am supposed to do?" Harry asked, and the dead witch shrugged.

"I don't know," Merope replied. "What you can really do is go forward on the path you've chosen. And whatever you chose to do, boy, do it wholeheartedly. Nothing is worse than half-assed effort."

"But that's the thing," Harry said. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do. Albus wants me to save the whole world from Tom, and you want me to save Tom. Whichever I choose, I don't know how to start, how to proceed, how to—"

"Save Tom," Merope cut in, looking annoyed. "Save Tom, and teach him how to accept being normal. Make him understand that he doesn't have to live forever and rule the world to be accepted, loved, or respected— whatever that boy is wishing for, anyway. And by doing that, you will take the most dominate pawn off the chess board."

"And then the smaller pawns will declare wars against each other," Harry said immediately. "And there will be war for decades to come. As much as I hate some of Tom's decisions, laws, and rules, I also know that without them— without him— there would be chaos."

"How about you—"

"No," Harry cut in firmly. "I am not going to step into the limelight. I am not going to lead or rule. Not now, not ever. Maybe I could learn how to, but I don't want to."

"Then you must make someone else do it for you," Merope said. "You have to be bold, you have to be daring, and you must take risks to succeed. I told you already: half-assed effort will only get you killed. Don't let anything hold you back or make you hesitate."

"I'm just… afraid of doing something I'll regret," Harry admitted.

"Everyone does things they will regret at some point or another," Merope told him. "If you learn from those mistakes, however, they have been necessary."

"I'm such a coward," Harry groaned. "I'm just too scared. I wish I wasn't afraid."

"A man with no fear isn't brave," Merope sneered. "He's just a man with no fear. A man with fear who still does what must be done is brave. Now stop being a spineless worm and do what you know you should be doing."

"I want to be brave," Harry muttered, standing up. "I just don't know how to, though."

"The next time somebody you care about dies," Merope said, "you'll wonder whether or not you could have saved them. Think about that." Harry stared at the woman for a few long moments before nodding hesitantly. He wasn't sure why he was nodding— he didn't feel like agreeing with her at all. And yet… he couldn't quite give up the thought of doing what Albus and Merope wanted him to do. Maybe he should talk with… Truls, maybe? Or Filippa?

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. He was going to return back home now and think about what to do next. How many times had he told himself to stop being so hesitant about everything? How many hours had he wasted feeling confused? Nothing changed, and Harry was sure that as long as he stayed in this should-I-or-should-I-not state of his, he'd be stuck in this strange situation.

'Yeah,' Harry thought as he returned back to the realm of the living, back to his own room. 'I'm done standing still. It's time to start walking forward.'
Chapter 16

Merope.

Tom had never expected to hear that name again. And yet, he had heard it from a boy who was so beyond Tom's understanding that he didn't know from where to start guessing how and why and when Harry Potter found out about her. How could one name, one person, one child… be so complicated?

Tom was feeling… strange. Worried? Anxious? He didn't know, but the more he thought about it, the more he was convinced by the fact that if he wasn't able to make Harry tell him everything, he'd just have to kill the boy. Sure, Harry was entertaining – and potentially useful – but he was an unpredictable pawn, and if the Rebels became any more dangerous, then Tom wouldn't be able to afford having his attention divided between two potentially disastrous things.

Between entertainment and survival, Tom would always choose survival.

Then again, if his plan regarding the life-debt worked, then he'd have nothing to worry about when it came to the Potter boy. Tom really hoped that it would work because killing Harry Potter wasn't something he particularly wanted to do at the moment. Good entertainment was hard to come by these days.

'The said that Merope had told him,' Tom thought, 'so he is able to talk with the dead. Does he have limitations? Did he choose to talk with Merope or was it a coincidence? Who else has the boy managed to talk with? How often can he do that? Since when and how is he able to do it anyway? He doesn't seem to be the type to conspire, but I have to find out if he's up to something.'

There was so much he'd need to find out, and yet, he couldn't. All he had been doing so far consisted of guessing and playing nice. But Tom knew himself. He knew that if he didn't find the answers soon, eventually his patience would run out, and he'd legilimence everything out of the boy's mind, not caring about the state Harry would end up in afterwards.

It would, of course, be completely Harry's fault for being difficult.

"You're scowling again," Nagini hissed, lifting her head up from inside a vase. "Are you hungry? Or! Don't tell me… it's about that boy again."

"Nagini," Tom replied, "I have come to the strangely upsetting realization that I have to pick the boy's brain apart before killing him if my next plan fails."

"Since when has torturing somebody been upsetting news to you?"

"It's just, he's… well, he has the brother wand of my wand. His mother died, his father isn't much of a father, and he's different from everybody else. I can't help but feel that there's a reason as to why he… exists."

"I think he has made your world smaller," Nagini hissed. "You used to see the world and focus on the plans and schemes you had going on. Lately, it seems that all you see in this world is that dead-alive boy."

Tom was ready to open his mouth and deny that accusation when he actually thought about it. Had Harry's presence really become that distracting? Tom knew that he was sometimes-- rarely-- in the bad habit of obsessing over something completely irrelevant rather single-mindedly. If that was really
the case, then would making Harry his obedient servant really fix the problem? Maybe he should just stop thinking about the boy for now—simply not contact him at all for a considerable amount of time? Take a bit of distance.

Ah, he'd think about that later. Now he had some other issues to worry about—the war, for example. He had a pile of papers he needed to read and a few people to meet. Bellatrix was going to drop by soon to give her report, and her excessive groveling was something Tom wholeheartedly approved of. He liked being worshipped, and why wouldn't he? He was better than everyone else so wasn't it just right that they treated him accordingly?

'That's one thing Harry's yet to do,' Tom thought. 'He should, though. Next time I'm going to—' Ah, right. He was supposed to not think about the boy anymore. Tom sighed and scowled, reaching for his cup of cooling tea.

He had much else to focus on. Things that were far more important than Potter.

Harry had almost forgotten about the birthday gifts he had received. When he finally sat down to go through the pile, he was trying hard to not think about his previous birthdays when his both parents and godfather had been present.

'Next year, I'll spend this day with someone,' Harry promised himself and grabbed the first gift, which turned out to be from Luna. Remembering the previous gift he had received from her, he felt very curious as he brought the small box closer. The gift turned out to be a pair of earrings in the shape of two purple hearts. Was Luna seriously expecting him to wear these? Hopefully not, because Harry wasn't going to.

The next gift was from Filippa: a pair of black dragonhide gloves that seemed to have a strange red glow to them. Harry wondered what his friend was doing at the moment— he hadn't seen her since his mother's funeral. Filippa was the only one who knew about Harry's ability to talk with the dead and also the only one who had told Harry about her true feelings regarding the war. Should she be the one he'd open up to about his plans first? Well, not that he had any good plans, really.

Then again, maybe he should talk to Truls first? Truls was Harry's best friend, and the thought of talking with Filippa about this kind of thing before discussing it with Truls made Harry feel as if he was betraying his best friend somehow. What if Truls was to disagree though? Could Harry even start such operations without Truls finding out at some point on his own?

'I'll tell Truls first,' Harry decided. 'And then I'll tell Filippa. After that, maybe Luna.' Aside from those three, he really didn't know who else could be a potential ally. With a sigh, Harry reached for another present, smiling and shaking his head after unwrapping it to find a book titled How To Charm Your Clothes by Meredith Malkin sent to him by Gildy. Well, at least this time, it was a book and not some strange outfit.

From Sirius, Harry got a beautiful dagger that the boy couldn't help but warily admire while wondering why he had been sent such a thing. Then again, coming from Sirius, it was very likely that his godfather had simply thought something along the lines of "Shiny! Pretty!" and bought it. Jakob's gift turned out to be a book of maps, while Petronella had sent him a fancy tea-box. From Truls, Harry had received a very much appreciated collection of Grimm's Uncensored Fairytales.

Harry took care to not think of his father or his mother at all. He didn't want to think about them, didn't want to think of what had changed during this one year. How much was different now, how the loss of one person seemed to end a family of three. Harry would much rather focus on feeling
surprised at the gift he had received from Björn.

It was a music box made of dark wood. On the lid, there was a silver plate onto which *T H E R E A L W A Y S* was engraved. When Harry opened the box, he could see two tiny white foxes playing on the surface of a mirror while a lovely melody that reminded Harry of a lullaby could be heard.

"There always," Harry murmured. "Is that the name of this song?" It was a wonderful gift– it reminded Harry of the many stories he had read so far in his life and brought a smile to his face as he held the box closer. It was surprising to receive such a gift from Björn– the boy hadn't seemed to be particularly thoughtful about things that didn't involve either money or one Mette Erling.

'He always says that he's going to be richest guy in the world,' Harry thought, chuckling. 'It wouldn't surprise me, what with the way he deals with money. I wonder where all of us will be in ten years… Alive, I hope. Alive and well. But I doubt that I can really achieve what I need in ten short years.' Not to mention, what was his goal exactly? Ending the war sounded nice in theory, but to succeed in that, so many other things would have to be done.

Besides, even if the war was to end, there'd be so much else to fix. Harry wasn't interested in fixing the world, and he didn't want to ally himself with the rebels. Maybe he should work on creature equality? Remus Lupin was a prime example of potential gone waste due to prejudice. Or should he just do as Merope had told him to and focus on saving Tom? *How* could he save the Dark Lord anyway, and from *what* exactly? The thought of Harry being able to do something that Lord Voldemort couldn't was ridiculous!

Then again, hadn't he made some plans just a few weeks ago about this? He'd need to find a way to secure the alliance of some magazine which he'd start using to his advantage. Subtly, with suggestions. But how? He had nothing he could offer in return, and the Daily Prophet would not only mock him but probably cause him to get into some legal trouble under the accusations of treason! Well, maybe nothing that severe but still… nothing nice. He'd have to polish that idea into a usable one.

First, he'd have to find out the aims of the Rebels and the aims of the Dark Lord and find some kind of a middle ground he could use for negotiating. Then… what would he negotiate with? *Who* would he negotiate with? Tom? Sure, huh. Somehow, Harry couldn't imagine the man paying attention to that kind of requests. What about the Rebels– what reason would they have to listen to him or trust him? It's not like he could just go and tell them that *Albus* had told him to do something!

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes, trying to ignore the headache he had.

Everything felt so suffocating, and he was afraid of failing.

He just wanted to go back to Durmstrang.

* *

They had been fighting since before the battle, trying to keep their guards up all the time while keeping on advancing with only a few moments of rest between the fights. James had hated these kinds of battles before– they demanded all of his concentration, all the time. Now, he was grateful about that as it prevented him from thinking of his own life's problems.

"Potter!" A familiar, annoying, squeaky voice called, and Pettigrew appeared next to him just in time to send a severing curse at a Rebel who had been trying to run away. "It has been a while, eh?"

"What do you want?" James asked sourly, scowling. Why didn't the pest leave him alone? "My day
was going well before I saw you."

"Why do you hate me so?" Pettigrew asked, although the hurt expression on the short man's face was clearly insincere as it faded quickly, replaced by a grin. "I heard that your wife passed away recently. I'm sorry for your loss."

"That is none of your fucking business," James growled. He didn't want to talk about Lily and especially not with Pettigrew of all people. In fact, he didn't want to talk with Pettigrew about anything at all. The man didn't even sound sorry!

"Think positively," Pettigrew continued as if he hadn't heard what James had said. "In some other universe, she could be alive." James didn't know what to say to that so he simply focused on trying to see if there were any Rebels hiding nearby. He really didn't want to talk or think about anything else but this current mission he was trying to complete right now. Because if he thought about Lily, he'd end up eventually thinking about Harry, and thinking about Harry and Lily was enough to make James sick with guilt and grief.

The solution was, clearly, to not think about them. Pettigrew, however, seemed to be hell bent on making James do exactly that.

"Isn't it fascinating? The thought of alternate universes existing? Perhaps in another world, you and your wife—"

"Stop!" James growled grabbing the front of Pettigrew's jacket and lifting the short man up. "I don't want to talk about my family with you, Pettigrew. Stop hanging around me, and stop talking to me. And for the record-- I don't believe in alternate universes or whatever you call them!" Seriously, no one sane would believe that kind of tripe anyway.

"Pity," Pettigrew said, not looking threatened or cowed at all. His watery blue eyes seemed to look through James in a way that left the dark-haired man feeling quite uncomfortable. "To some, the existence of alternate universes signifies the existence of second chances."

"You're mad," James hissed, letting the other man go. "I should have realized it sooner-- there's something very wrong with your head. I don't care; it's none of my business. Stay away from me or I'll lose my temper with you, Pettigrew."

"Am I crazy just because you don't understand me?" Pettigrew asked with an amused grin on his face. "Is that how you define everything, James Potter?"

"I—"

"Then what about your son? You don't understand him either, you know. Is he crazy too?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" James asked, feeling confused and angry. "You don't even know Harry so don't even bother to talk about him!"

"Poor James, it must be hard," Pettigrew said mockingly, stepping away. "You're so focused on having lost your wife that you never even noticed that you lost your son long before that." With that, the man left to join some other Death Eaters, leaving James behind. James, who wasn't sure why he was suddenly feeling hollow with hurt and loneliness – because surely what Pettigrew had said, meant nothing. That annoying pest didn't even know Harry and, and, and why was he so fixated on James's life anyway, huh?

"Go to hell," James yelled after Pettigrew, who didn't turn, but replied anyway right before vanishing behind the trees.
"Your son will always be destined for things greater than you can imagine."

'There’s something going on with Pettigrew,' James thought, frowning. 'I should investigate this guy... just in case.' Also, he should probably warn Harry that if he ever was to meet someone called Peter Pettigrew, that he should avoid the man.

Then again, Harry was soon going to go back to Durmstrang, and there, he would be safe.

* *

Dear Harry,

I am going to Diagon Alley tomorrow to buy my school supplies. Would you like to accompany me? We could get some ice cream!

Love, Luna.

1. Wear the earrings. They deflect Wrackspurts. Your mind won't be fuzzy anymore.

Harry had smiled when he had read the message Luna had sent him. He had already owl-ordered the supplies he didn't already have and needed nothing in particular from Diagon Alley, but he had missed hanging out with Luna and here was his chance to do exactly that.

Which is why, a day later, he was in Diagon Alley, wearing black robes and boots and purple heart-shaped earrings while waiting for Luna in front of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour. His earlobes were still aching slightly – he had had to use a spell he had found in a magazine in order to be able to wear the earrings as his ears hadn't been pierced before. He had contemplated leaving the earrings aside and apologizing to Luna, but he had then decided against that.

Unknown to whoever would see him, Harry was also wearing his manticore shirt, and the dagger he had gotten from Sirius was hidden in his right boot. The boy had decided to get himself used to carrying these two items with him as often as possible– just in case he'd even need them.

"Harry!" a familiar voice exclaimed, and Harry turned to see Ron Weasley with his family and a few friends making their way towards him. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to meet a friend soon," Harry replied, before proceeding to greet everyone in the group. Mrs. Weasley hugged him and told him that if he was ever to need anything, he'd be welcome to contact her at any time. Harry smiled, feeling strangely happy with the offer even though he doubted that he'd ever really take advantage of it. He couldn't. He didn't even want to. Somehow, the thought of opening up to an older woman– not just Mrs. Weasley, but anyone at all, felt to him like a betrayal to his mother.

Harry didn't want to think about it. He wasn't sure if he could understand why, and he wasn't going to dwell on it.

"This is Neville, by the way," Ron said, pointing at a boy standing next to him, and Harry guessed that he was the Neville Longbottom Ron had told him a long time ago about. Ron's best friend. He was round-faced with blond hair and a chubby build. "Nev, this is Harry. He goes to Durmstrang."

"Pleasure to meet you," Harry said, and the other boy stuttered something in response. Ron turned to Harry again.

"You're not waiting for Malfoy, are you?" Ron asked, and Harry could see Ginny Weasley grimacing when she heard the name.
"No," Harry replied. "Are you guys here to buy your school supplies?"

"Yeah," Ron sighed, nodding.

"Luna!" Ginny exclaimed suddenly. "What a surprise! How are you?" Harry felt slightly relieved at the knowledge that his friend was nearby– it was slightly awkward to stand there with Neville and the Weasleys. Why had they stopped anyway?

"Quite well, Ginevra," Luna said, her voice as dreamy as always. "Hello, Harry, you look dashing today."

"So do you," Harry grinned, turning towards the girl and stepping closer. "Your father isn't here? Shall we go then? You have your list, don't you?"

"Of course," Luna said, linking her arm with his. Harry turned to say goodbye to Neville and the Weasleys– some of whom looked quite surprised at seeing Harry with Luna– before the two started walking towards the bookstore nearby.

"How have you been?" Luna asked. "I see that you're wearing the earrings. There are no Wrackspurts on your shoulders today."

"I'm feeling better," Harry replied, looking at her. "There's something I have to do—"

"I know."

"—and I've finally gathered enough courage to start doing it."

"I'm proud," Luna smiled, patting his arm. "The courage and the will to start are very important. Always. Pity people don't appreciate them more."

"I'm scared, though," Harry admitted. He wasn't sure if Luna actually knew what he was talking about– most probably not, he hadn't told her after all– but he still felt like he could talk to her about it without actually explaining himself. "People… scare me. Their reactions… their beliefs in right and wrong… People can be so narrow-minded and prejudiced. How can I deal with that? How should I feel about them?"

"You can pity them, Harry," Luna told him softly, her blue eyes looking at something he couldn't see. "Their minds are the blindfolds that prevent their eyes from seeing the sceneries you can see. They won't even realize the existence of the roads you've walked on, they won't hear the sounds that fill your silence. Doesn't that make you sad for them?"

"I guess, when you put it that way," Harry sighed. "But how can I make them understand?"

"There are people who will never understand," Luna said as they entered the bookstore. "There are people who will say that you are wrong even when you know you're right. You can only do your best to prove them wrong, Harry. But never let them bring you down. That aside, would you like a Quibbler?"

"A Quibbler?" Harry repeated, vaguely remembering the name. "Oh! The magazine?"

"Newspaper," Luna said, handing him a copy of the Quibbler. It was sparkly and– Harry glanced at the front page quickly– seemed to be mostly about nonsense, what with titles such as 'Smurkling Snugglebugs Gone Rabid!' and 'House-elf Legless Tells Us His Amazing Story!'.

"It looks interesting," Harry said. "Uh, very interesting. Do you subscribe?"
"Oh, no," the girl replied. "My dad owns it. He lets me help sometimes." As their arms were still linked, Luna almost stumbled when Harry stopped walking abruptly, almost knocking her against a bookshelf. Blinking owlishly, she turned to look at him.

"Your dad owns a newspaper," Harry whispered, his eyes almost glowing. "A newspaper full of wild, new theories, right?"

"Yes," Luna confirmed. "Do you want to subscribe?"

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling refreshed at this potential new opportunity. "I do."

For the rest of their trip— which tool almost the rest of the whole day— Harry was admittedly slightly distracted unless they were discussing the Quibbler. Luna didn't seem to mind at all. In fact, the girl seemed to be pleased at the interest Harry was showing in her father's work.

She didn't ask why, and Harry didn't tell her. Then again, it was Luna, so perhaps she already knew.

Two days before going back to Durmstrang, Harry's peaceful morning was interrupted by one Gilderoy Lockhart. Much to Harry's misery, Gildy wasn't alone— he was accompanied by Sybil Trelawney and a basket of firewhisky bottles.

"Harry!" Gildy exclaimed, rushing to hug the boy. He was dressed in tight white pants, a feathery turquoise jacket, a red shirt, and sparkly green boots. "I have missed you terribly! How are you?"

"Are you drunk?" Harry asked, smelling the whiff of alcohol on the man, who smiled dazzlingly at him.

"I don't like to do things sober anymore," Gildy said before letting go of Harry, sashaying towards the closest chair and sitting down. The basket of firewhisky bottles floated after him. Trelawney also, looking like a junkie from Knockturn Alley, stumbled after him, pausing only to put a battered flower wreath on Harry's head. A dead bee fell on the floor, and Harry spent half a second watching it with horror before a house-elf took it away.

"What are you two doing here?" the boy asked warily, wondering if he should call his godfather to do some damage control. Then again, Gildy was mostly harmless and Trelawney didn't seem the type to do anything violent. Besides, Harry had his wand, the manticore shirt, and the dagger. Just in case.

"You're going back to Durmstrang soon," Gildy said, conjuring a few empty glasses. "Let's celebrate!" Harry cringed, remembering the last time he had ended up drinking. He did not want a repeat performance, and so he just shook his head and sat on a chair as well, taking care to sit as far away from the two adults as he could.

"So Barty's going back to Durmstrang too," Gildy started after a few moments of silent drinking, and Harry felt as if he should have figured that that would be Gildy's main topic. "I can't believe that he's just going to leave me behind like nothing happened between us."

"Nothing happened between you two," Trelawney pointed out while rolling a joint.

"Compassion, Sybil. It won't kill you."

'Figures that he's whining about Courch. These two are obviously planning on getting
smashed,' Harry thought, eyeing the two with disapproval. 'I wonder if Trelawney will have a fit if I throw this wreath away. Ah, I better wait 'til she's too drunk to notice. I really don't have the energy to deal with any scenes now. Why did they come here, anyway?'

"Professor Crouch still hasn't caved in, huh," Harry said, and Gildy sniffled loudly.

"Maybe he hates me because I'm blond," the man wailed.

"That xenophobic little shit!" Trelawney bellowed suddenly before gulping down what seemed like half a bottle of firewhisky. Harry was torn between feeling disgusted and awed. He settled for feeling reluctantly respectful.

"You won't be doing coitus with him if you keep on failing like this," Trelawney continued. "You have to grab him and make him cry uncle or you won't bed him. Ever."

"You don't know that!" Gildy exclaimed. "I, this is, it's just a phase! A slump!"

"Well, unless you force him to coitus with you—"

"Stop it!"

"What now?"

"Stop calling it coitus. I can't focus when you use 'coitus' instead of sex."

"Why not? It's the correct term."

"No. Well, yes, it is. But I still don't like it. No calling it coitus. I don't want to hear the word coitus ever again."

'Doesn't coitus mean the sexual unison between a male and a female?' Harry thought before deciding to stop thinking about that right now and never think about it again. He shook his head before speaking up again. "Why do you insist on targeting Crouch, anyway? I'm sure there'd be many other people interested in you." Not to mention that the thought of forcing or harassing someone the way Gildy and Trelawney had been doing – it was really unsettling.

"That's what I've been telling her," Trelawney said. "I mean, him," she corrected, sounding as if she didn't really care whether she was referring to Gildy as a male or a female.

"I might seem normal right now," Gildy sobbed, hugging one of the firewhisky bottles against his chest, "but actually I just want to bite my tongue off and die."

"Do it," Trelawney urged. "We'll take pictures and use them when we crash his future wedding with some woman."

"Who's we?" Harry almost shrieked, feeling very alarmed. "Don't include me in your crazy schemes! Don't you have any morals?"

"I have morals," Trelawney said, her pupils so dilated that Harry was starting to wonder what she was seeing, exactly. "I just choose to ignore them blatantly. And you, my friend, man up. He's an asshole. Try some of this Chinese herb joint– I used to be different before I got my hands on this stuff. Much more timid, I was. My life used to be all about predicting the deaths of others. Now, it's all about making those predictions come true while being higher than the fucking sun."

'Did she just imply that she's some kind of a serial killer?' Harry thought before swallowing and
turning away, hoping that the woman was just joking.

"But I love him," Gildy whined, not even bothering to look up and see the joint that was being offered. "I love him and his tiny little asshole self anyway."

"But he doesn't love you," Trelawney reminded him, pulling back her joint.

"I hate you, Sybil. There's a special place in hell reserved for people like you."

"I've always wanted to travel somewhere warm."

"I think I'll go back to sleep," Harry muttered, sliding off his chair and heading towards the door.

"Beds aren't meant for you to lie alone in!" Trelawney hollered after him.

"You can't leave!" Gildy wailed, lunging at Harry and grabbing his arm. "It's your farewell party!"

'Ooh Merlin, somebody save me,' Harry thought, trying to come up with an excuse as to why he was going to sleep so early in the day. He wasn't fast enough though, and so Gildy dragged him back to his chair and forced him to sit down. "Is there a point to this?"

"He asked!" Gildy crowed before looking at Harry with a focused expression. Well, as focused as he could, in his drunken state. "Barty will be in Durmstrang with you!"

"Yeah," Harry said, remembering that the dueling lessons were going to start that year. "I'll even start attending some of his classes."

"So you'll be a good boy and keep us updated," Gildy said. "And if my Barty-darling seems to be showing some kind of interest in anyone who isn't me, you'll send me the info, alright?"

"I am not going to stalk him on your behalf," Harry protested. "He's my teacher!"

"Well, it's not really stalking in the full meaning of the word," Gildy tried to reason. "I'm not going to tell you sneak into his rooms and watch him as he undresses that sinfully wonderful, muscled body of his. Oh, the mere memory of those scars—"

"Spare me," Harry whimpered, closing his eyes. "I don't want to hear that!"

"He said he doesn't want to hear," Trelawney snickered. "Tie him up and force him!"

"Which one?" Gildy asked, sounding interested. "Tie this one and force him to listen or tie the other one and force him to—"

"Don't you have any honour! That's disgusting to joke about!" Harry exclaimed, standing up again, dead set on escaping the kitchen where they were all gathered.

“I lost that at fourteen,” Gildy giggled. “Come here… I’ll tell you how and when…”

Harry was sure that he was going to end up with lifelong traumas, despite his attempts at ignoring everything the two adults were trying to tell him. After Gildy and Trelawney had finally left, the boy, exhausted, had collapsed onto a chair and asked a house-elf to bring him a cup of tea.

He was, without a doubt, glad that soon he’d be returning to Durmstrang where would have the time to think, plan and rest.

And where he’d have some sensible company.
When Harry’s portkey took him to the square in front of the apartment complex where his flat was, he was pretty sure that no one else would be there yet – it was early, and even the sun hadn’t properly risen yet. He hadn’t originally planned on coming here this early, but he hadn’t been able to sleep anyway and had decided to just make the trip and sleep in his flat if he felt like doing so.

‘Besides at least here I won’t have to worry about surprise visits from people I don’t want to see,’ Harry thought, setting down his trunk and sighing with relief as he closed the door behind him. It felt strange, to be back in his flat after all of what had happened. Harry felt as if his whole world had changed during the few months he had spent away.

He had a whole day ahead of him, and he was looking forward to seeing his friends after what seemed like an eternity. Tomorrow he’d get his schedule for the year and start with the lessons the day after. A familiar routine, and it was exactly familiar routines that Harry needed to feel comfortable in midst of chaos.

The boy made himself a cup of tea before sitting down to read yesterday’s copy of the Quibbler. It was nonsense, of course, but he wanted to familiarize himself with the paper before doing anything. He would have made something to eat but his fridge and cupboards were woefully empty, and he wasn’t in the mood for summoning a house-elf and ordering it to do some grocery shopping on his behalf.

It wasn’t till well after midday that Harry heard someone walking past his door, continuing their way up. He considered leaving his door ajar as a sign to let the others know that he was there, but then decided not to. As much as he had missed his friends, he didn’t wish for any obligatory visits that would be full of awkward small talk; something Harry knew would occur if Heidi was to arrive.

‘There’s so much I can’t help but think about,’ Harry sighed, refilling his cup of tea. ‘Like Tom. What am I supposed to do about Tom? He didn’t seem too angry when I last saw him, but he’s the Dark Lord, which means that he’s far more complicated than what I’ve thought so far. I mean… otherwise he wouldn’t have managed to achieve what he has, especially considering what kind of dangerous, cunning Dark wizards and witches are out there.’

And now a guy like that would be Harry’s… opponent. Maybe. Harry did want to make Tom consider him an enemy, but he doubted that the man would understand why Harry needed to do what he was going to do.

‘If I just knew what exactly I should be doing,’ Harry thought, ‘I would also know where I stand. For all I know maybe he won’t mind me trying to change the way people think about werewolves and other magical creatures… if that’s all of what I should do. And if I’m supposed to save him, just how do I do that!? If he’s truly immortal, then should I make him mortal? How am I supposed to do something like that, for Merlin’s sake?’

Harry was startled when the doorbell suddenly rang, and he hastily put down his cup of tea before rushing to open the door. He couldn’t help but smile when he saw Truls standing there.

“Harry,” Truls said, grinning. He was taller than when Harry had last seen him. His hair was slightly longer and his voice was a tad bit rougher.

“Come in,” Harry said, pulling his friend inside. “How have you been?”

“I should be the one asking you that,” Truls replied, kicking off his shoes and moving to sit on the couch, pulling Harry to sit right next to him. “Are you okay? Need anything?” He didn’t – and Harry
was thankful about that – comment anything about the purple heart-earrings Harry had taken to wearing.

“\textit{I miss mum, but I’m learning to cope with it,}’’ Harry sighed. He wasn’t going to tell Truls yet about his plans – perhaps later on in the evening. “\textit{But really, what have you been up to?}”

“\textit{Since my parents found out that we’ll start dueling this year,}” Truls started, “\textit{they got me a tutor. It’s been hell – the guy’s a slave driver. Not too pleasant either.}”

“\textit{Poor you,}” Harry chuckled, before sighing, feeling content. It was so \textit{nice} to be with Truls again.

“\textit{I missed you,}” Truls said, as if he had heard Harry’s thoughts. His blue eyes were fixed on Harry and he leaned slightly closer. “\textit{I really missed you. I wished so hard that I could have been with you and supported you this summer. I don’t like it when you’re sad.}” Harry swallowed, reaching to curl his fingers around Truls’s own.

“\textit{Thank you,}” he whispered, closing his eyes and leaning against his taller friend. “\textit{I missed you too, you know.}” And then, suddenly, Harry remembered what he had found out about Truls’s feelings towards him. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to \textit{do} – did Truls expect something from him? Did Truls even know that Harry knew?

“\textit{Do you know who our dueling Instructor is going to be?}” Truls asked. Harry nodded.

“Bartemius Crouch Junior,” he said. “\textit{I met him a while ago. He’s good. Very good. I don’t know about what kind of reputation he has, though, but I expect that we’ll be starting from the very basics, as he won’t expect us to know anything beforehand.}”

“My parents said that according to what they’ve heard, this year we’re going to start our real training,” Truls said, just as the doorbell rang again. “\textit{Whatever that’s supposed to mean.}”

“Perhaps they mean dueling by ‘real training’,” Harry said, standing up and moving to open the door. He stepped aside to let Filippa and Petronella in.

“\textit{Harry,}” Filippa exclaimed, hugging him tightly. “\textit{Oh, sweetie, are you okay? Nice earrings! Didn’t know you were into that, though. I’ve got remember it then.}” Harry wasn’t sure what in the world Filippa had meant by ‘that’, and he wasn’t eager to ask either. He didn’t want to know.

“When did you become so… affectionate?” Truls asked. “\textit{Seriously, hugging him. First few weeks we saw you, Filippa, you’d barely crack a smile.}”

“She spent most of her holiday with even more affectionate fashion designers,” Petronella revealed, before moving to hug Harry as soon as Filippa let go of him. The boy couldn’t help but notice how thin she was.

“Hugging a friend is not unusually affectionate,” Filippa said, sitting down on the couch as well.

“It is when you do it,” Truls claimed. Petronella giggled, taking a seat as well while Harry wondered if all of his friends would drop by at some point. He wasn’t sure what brought them to his flat, specifically, but he didn’t mind – it felt nice, to be sought out like that.

“I can’t wait to see our schedule,” Petronella said. “\textit{Really, I wonder if we’re still going to have to put up with those astronomy lessons. Honestly, I don’t want them.}”

“No kidding,” Filippa agreed. “\textit{I’m still baffled at how they managed to find enough material to cover for two years. Surely there can’t be much more to teach regarding that subject!}”
“We can certainly hope so,” Harry said, moving to open the door once again when it rang. Björn walked in, followed by Clemens. Harry was, in all honesty, surprised to see Clemens there – he wasn’t really a good friend of Harry’s and they didn’t particularly hang out together.

“You guys know of Viktor Krum, right?” Clemens said immediately after the obligatory greetings. “He got scouted by the Bulgarian team! The national team, I mean!”

“It’s giving me something new to bet on,” Björn grinned. “That guy’s the best seeker I’ve ever seen!”

“You mean he’s playing professionally now?” Filippa asked, sounding impressed. “We’re schoolmates with a celebrity!” Harry thought of the older boy who had come across as quiet, rather shy and awkward. And, well, very polite. He somehow doubted that Viktor Krum would really enjoy being a celebrity. Actually, it wouldn’t surprise Harry if the guy was secretly terrified of it.

“I guess everyone’s looking forward to the dueling lessons the most,” Björn said suddenly. “You know the rumours about the older students, right?”

“What rumours?” Harry asked, frowning.

“That the best of them get to meet the Dark Lord himself,” Björn said, and Harry’s heart skipped a beat when he thought about Tom again. He wondered what his friends would do or say if he was to ever tell them – but no, they probably wouldn’t even believe him.

“Isn’t that just about the seventh years, though?” Filippa asked.

“We’re the special generation, though,” Truls reminded her. “He could observe us from, say, next year onwards!”

‘The Dark Lord they’re talking about is really, really, really Tom,’ Harry thought. Of course he knew that his Tom was the Dark Lord, but sometimes he couldn’t help but feel… unsure. He was nowhere near used to the idea, and more often than not it still seemed so unbelievable.

Harry really missed the simpler days from the past. The days when what he worried about were the characters in his books, not the people in his actual life.

The simpler days when he knew where he stood. Perhaps friendless, but with his family.

‘The world keeps changing,’ Harry thought and sighed, watching his friends talk. ‘I can barely keep up with it now. I can’t imagine what Tom must have felt when the world kept changing drastically around him. Then again it’s mostly the kind of changes that he has approved of… But to think… if he really is immortal, then eventually he’ll see the day when nothing in this world is how it used to be, and nothing he could do could bring back what once was.’

Maybe that’s what he could start with, Harry thought, sitting up straighter, deep in his thoughts. Maybe he could start by trying to convince Tom of the necessity of being mortal. There was no need for those… what they were called again? Oh yeah, Horcruxes.

‘It can’t be that hard, right?’ Harry mused silently. ‘Surely it’s doable.’

When Harry and his classmates received their schedules, he wasn’t the only one who grimaced.

“Sir,” Heidi started, sounding desperate. “Are we not allowed to have free time at all?”
“You exaggerate, Miss Jöran,” Professor Dietmar replied, looking uninterested. “Besides, do remember, you all are here to study. Free time is necessary only for completing your homework.”

“We still have astronomy,” Petronella groaned. “Tuesday night. Oh, the agony.”

“You know, I was thrilled about the dueling lessons,” Björn said, inspecting the schedule. “But Merlin’s balls, just look at Saturday! Six hours! I’ll spend my Sundays dead.”

“I don’t think that we’ll have time for any extra Quidditch,” Clemens said sadly. “Last year’s schedule was so much…well, less demanding.”

“You are older now,” Professor Dietmar said. “And you are expected to work hard if you wish to keep up with the new standards. You are elite, and if you ever have a student of some other school as your opponent, you must be the victor. You are being trained to succeed in that. Your education will be heavily focused on dueling and improving your fitness and stamina… none of you – not a single one of you in this room right now – is meant to work in an office, pushing papers. You belong out there, on the battlefield. As leaders.”

“What if we don’t want that?” Petronella asked, sounding almost tearful. Harry saw Jakob nodding, and the expression on the other boy’s face showed a mix of hope and bitterness. It made Harry think, once again, of the illness the other boy had. Did Jakob know already what it was and how serious it was? Would he tell them? Could it be cured?

“You still have time to change your mind, if that’s the case,” Professor Dietmar replied. Harry could see Filippa’s expression turning sour, before his Italian friend turned to offer some comfort to Petronella, who seemed genuinely distressed.

“And those who fail to live up to these high expectations?” Björn asked, narrowing his eyes. “What will happen to them?”

“If you work hard, you needn’t worry about that,” Professor Dietmar told him. “Now, is anything else unclear? No? Dismissed. Your lessons will start tomorrow. Good day.”

“This is ridiculous,” Filippa hissed to Harry as they packed their bags. Harry glanced at Truls who didn’t look particularly concerned.

“Well, at least tomorrow morning will start with Divination,” Petronella said. “It’s not as tough as the other classes so we have a bit of time to get used to this pace.”

“And what a pace it is,” Björn whistled as they left the classroom, all together. “I mean seriously, did you see what we have on Saturday?”

“No kidding,” Clemens agreed, nodding. “From eight in the morning till nine in the evening! That’s crazy!”

“Well, at least we have three empty hours in there somewhere,” Heidi said, trying to sound hopeful and yet unable to erase the misery completely from her voice. “I’m almost scared of seeing what kind of schedule we’ll have next year!”

“It’s not so bad,” Nikolai said. “We’re obviously going to get a tougher kind of education that the students of other schools. We work hard now and we’ll surpass all the outsiders when it matters.”

“That’s true,” Harry muttered, thinking of what he’d have to do in the future. “If the war gets any worse, we’ll have to be the best of the best. I’m sure that the Rebels train every day to fight for what they believe in. We have to be… better, more skilled, in order to win.”
“And here I’ve spent years thinking that you’re a softy,” Clemens said, sounding approving. Harry didn’t feel particularly delighted to be the receiving end of the boy’s approval. Neither did he like agreeing with Nikolai.

“Aww, look!” Petronella suddenly exclaimed, looking at a group of students following a teacher. “Aren’t those first year kids?”

“They look so tiny,” Filippa sighed. “Poor dears.”

“We’re just two years older than them, you know,” Björn reminded her. “Think they’d be interested in betting?”

“They, too,” Nikolai said suddenly with a dark look in his eyes. “They too will be our rivals. We not only have to be better than the students from other schools, but we also have to be better than the other students at this school.”

“Not each other, though,” Petronella said hastily, sounding almost frightened. “I don’t want to think of any of you as competition or opponents!”

“We’re the first generation,” Björn said pompously. “We’re allies!”

‘I wonder if everyone agrees with that,’ Harry thought, remembering how Nikolai, Heidi and Clemens had reacted after Lorenzo’s death. ‘When the time comes to do more than just talk, what will they do? Will we all really stay as allies forever? I can’t see that.’

“Think we’ll ever really be officially tested against students from other schools?” Heidi asked. “I mean, really, what are the chances of that happening?”

“Maybe in a competition,” Clemens replied. “Which means that every lesson we receive is valuable. We simply can’t afford being worse than them. Hell, we can’t afford even being equal to them. We have to be better.”

“That terrifies me,” Petronella admitted. “I mean, honestly. Acing written tests and succeeding in practice during lessons is one thing, but the idea of actually having to be able to defeat someone…it’s scary.”

‘Scary,’ Harry thought. ‘That describes life itself pretty well.’

* * *

“My Lord,” Bellatrix Lestrange said, kneeling down in front of Lord Voldemort. “I come bearing good news.”

“Speak, then, Bellatrix,” Tom ordered.

“One of the Mudbloods we captured recently has revealed that there are at least eight major Rebel camps in Europe,” the witch said eagerly, loving the chance to gain the approval of her Master. “Previously we only knew of the camps in Ireland, Spain and Italy.”

“Do you have the exact locations of those camps?” Tom asked, hiding his displeasure well. If there were indeed that many major camps, then the number of Rebels would be much higher than what anyone had estimated. Just how could there be that many? Did they recruit Muggles or something? Or did they really have nothing else to do but breed out there?

“We have the locations of two of those camps, my Lord,” Bellatrix replied promptly. “Both of them
are in France."

“Ah.” France. The most problematic country from his point of view. Why did they have to be so
dramatic and opinionated all the time? They would readily offer promises of alliance and glory and
brotherhood, and yet Tom was more than aware of how the majority of the French magical
population considered him an enemy.

Of course Tom understood why. They were afraid of being absorbed and turned into a subservient
branch, different from his British servants only in name and language.

“I have a job for you, Bellatrix,” Voldemort said, and the woman leaned forward, devotion shining
in her dark eyes.

“Anything, my Lord,” she whispered. “Any way I can serve, I—”

“You are to choose a few Death Eaters – whichever are fine – and train them personally. You’ll
 teach them Legilimency and Occlumency and how to survive while gathering information,”
Voldemort said. “Their eventual task will be to abduct a Rebel and impersonate them, and to succeed
in that they will have to be… perfectly trained.”

“Of course, my Lord,” Bellatrix said, her lips twisting into a wide smile. “It’s an honour to be trusted.
An honour…”

“Think this one would try to get rid of your dead-alive boy if she knew how much time you spend
thinking about him?” Nagini hissed, lifting her head from a vase nearby. “I wonder if he could ever
behave like that towards you.”

Tom didn’t reply to Nagini, although he couldn’t help but think about Harry kneeling like that in
front of him – the way Bellatrix was doing now, showing her submission – offering his devotion so
readily and promising to do whatever he was told. The thought wasn’t unappealing.

“Sirius Black,” Voldemort called then, and the Death Eater in question stepped forward. “I gave you,
quite a while ago, a rather special mission. What is its current status?”

“I only have a few technicalities to sort out, my Lord,” Black replied, kneeling down as well.
“Hopefully a year from now on we can reintroduce the Triwizard Tournament. There are a few
things I wish to have your opinion on, though… If I may be so bold as to ask, of course.”

“Speak.”

“Where will the tournament take place? I would think Durmstrang, but—“

“Hogwarts,” Tom cut in. “It will happen in Hogwarts.”

“And the judges—“

“I have no interest in who you nominate to be a judge. You are free to pick whomever you want.” At
this, Sirius bowed once more before taking a step back. Tom spent a few moments in silence, trying
to think of anything that should be discussed and hadn’t been yet. When he couldn’t find anything,
he dismissed the Death Eaters and retreated to his private study with Nagini following him, fully
intending on thinking about war strategies and how to track down and hunt Rebels.

He did not want to think of what he had dubbed the Potter Problem.
When Harry saw Professor Crouch, he thought about Gildy.

It was Saturday, and their first dueling class was about to start. They were gathered in a spacious, empty room, dressed in simplified children's version of real battle robes. They'd have three consecutive hours of dueling, then an hour's break, and then two hours of the same kind of hard work again before the lessons of the day would be over. As much as Harry wanted to learn how to duel, he did think that five hours were a bit too much to start with.

Crouch seemed to recognize Harry when he saw him and nodded in greeting to his direction. Harry smiled back, warily.

"You don't need to pull out your wands yet," Crouch said, looking at his nine students. "Sit down. Yes, on the floor." Harry could see Filippa's disapproving expression at sitting on the floor. The girl had also managed already to express her dislike towards the grey garments they were wearing.

'Well, at least she can be happy knowing that real battle robes are fancier than these,' Harry thought, sitting down and turning to look at Crouch, who remained standing. He was dressed in black battle robes with silver runes around the collar, and Harry wondered what their purpose could be.

A long time ago, Sirius had told Harry about runes that made battle robes better, safer… and more dangerous. Runes for resisting fire, runes for defense against certain curses, runes that make apparating easier, and much more. It was very hard to find well-runned robes though. Runemasters were rare, and runes were expensive to create and embroider onto robes.

"Contrary to the popular belief," Crouch started, "dueling is far more than just flinging hexes at your opponent. Formal dueling has rules and protocols… and the only time you are permitted to neglect those rules and protocols is during war. Anytime aside from that, you'd get disqualified for breaking the rules. Let's start with the absolute basics– What is the definition of a duel? Mr. Marvin?"

"A confrontation between two or more wizards. Or witches." Clemens replied, and Crouch nodded.

"Yes, a duel is a confrontation. You face your opponent, bow, and then start. Your aim is to disarm, injure or kill. Usually only magical means are allowed in duels, but knives and swords are nowadays commonly accepted. Using your actual body to physically hit your opponent, however, is frowned upon in a formal duel."

"So we won't be learning that?" Petronella asked, sounding relieved. Much to her grief, though, Crouch shook his head.

"You will be learning hand-to-hand combat, of course, because most of the time you will not be fighting in formal duels, but in a war. And in war whatever can give you the advantage should be used. No matter what it is. Now, can anyone here tell me what a 'Second' is? Mr. Lennart?"

"A stand-in duelist who'll take over if the original one is beaten?" Björn replied hesitantly. Again, Crouch nodded.

"Duelists will often have a 'second'– a person who will take their place in a duel if necessary. What makes a good duelist?"

"Extensive knowledge on different spells," Heidi suggested.
"How to use whatever spells he or she has," Harry said, remembering what Crouch had told him quite a long time ago. "And to think outside the box."

"Quick reflexes," Truls added. "And the ability to stay calm."

"Willpower and stamina," Filippa said. "Awareness, too."

"All that," Crouch told them. "Your sports lessons for the past two years have included activities such as running, swimming, and Quidditch to improve your stamina and aerial balance. You will not only continue to keep up with those, but we will also devote some of the dueling lessons to improve your physical fitness."

"And… and if someone is unable to keep up?" Jakob asked, and Harry felt a twinge of pity towards the other boy who looked embarrassed, guilty, and even slightly bitter. "If they try hard and still don't succeed, what will happen?" Crouch looked at them for a few silent moments, and Harry was starting to think that he wouldn't reply, when he finally spoke.

"We will look into that when it happens," the man said simply. "Now, you can start by running laps around this area. The first lap is to warm up, the second lap is for you to run as fast as you can, and the rest are at your own pace, for an hour. Go on."

The hour was almost over when Jakob fell and was unable to stand up again. Harry felt his heart ache when he saw the way his friend was lying on the floor, sweaty, pale-faced, eyes clenched shut, and expression of pain clear on his face. Before he, or anyone else, stopped and went to check on him, Crouch told them to keep on running.

"In a mission, if you're being chased," Crouch said coldly as they ran, leaving Jakob on the floor on the verge of passing out, "if one of your comrades falls, you will not have the time to turn, help them up, and carry them— you too will be caught. It's always better for one person to be caught instead of two. And in missions where your fallen comrade knows something the enemy must not find out about, it is your duty to shoot them with a killing curse to ensure their silence."

Harry had, to some extent, expected this kind of instructions. He was sure, though, that some of his classmates— especially Petronella – would have a hard time accepting it.

'Not that I can blame her,' Harry thought. 'We're just thirteen. Why do we even have to know about a possible future where we would have to kill our friends?" Then again, perhaps it was better for Harry to get used to the idea of not always keeping the friends he had now. They would surely leave him anyway if they were to know about his future plans.

"You okay there, Harry?" Truls asked, jogging next to him.

"I wonder if Jakob will be okay," Harry replied, gasping for breath. "He should be taken to the hospital wing."

"Professor Crouch put a stabilizing spell on him," Clemens said, sounding far less winded than Truls or Harry, making the two boys wonder what kind of private training their classmate was secretly doing. "I don't know why he'd still keep Jakob there, though."

'To humiliate him?' Harry thought angrily before dismissing that thought. Crouch wasn't the type to do that. 'More likely, it's to teach us a lesson. Make us endure the sight of a fallen comrade. I wonder if this is making Jakob feel betrayed or angry… oh Merlin, I hate this.'
"Start slowing down now," Crouch suddenly said. "Don't stop immediately… slow down gradually 'til you're walking before you stop. Then stretch."

"Finally," Harry groaned. His legs were aching, his heart beating fast, and there seemed to be some kind of a pain right beneath the right side of his ribs. He was very, very glad at the thought of finally getting to stop walking. How were they expected to do anything after this first hour?

"It's probable that we'll have to do this in the beginning of every dueling lesson," Clemens said, slowing down as well. "But once a week won't be enough."

"I am not going to sign up for morning jogs if that's what you're implying," Harry replied. "Doing this once a week is bad enough. Oh Merlin, my legs hurt." Eventually, they got to sit down on the floor—after stretching their sore muscles—and were soon enough joined by the rest of their classmates. Heidi was lying on the floor next to Nikolai, gasping for air.

"If I move now, I'll throw up," the girl said. "I feel like someone threw me into a barrel and made it roll down a rocky hill."

"How do you think Jakob is feeling?" Filippa asked, wiping her sweaty face with the hem of her shirt and sitting down after she finished stretching. "Santo inferno sulla terra, that was painful."

"I'm not going to even pretend I understood two thirds of that sentence," Petronella said. Her face was as red as her hair, and Harry could see her arms and legs shaking. "But what comes to Jakob, I think we should go and see him."

"He'll probably have to transfer away," Nikolai said. "If physical fitness is so valued here, those who don't have it will be better off somewhere else."

"Not necessarily," Clemens said. "There have to be more than just good duelists in a team. We'd need a healer and a strategist. As long as Jakob excels in something, I'm sure that will be good enough to keep him here. With a modified schedule, maybe."

"Why would they do that just for one student?" Heidi asked. "It's not like we got in by luck," Clemens reminded her. "We got in because we have something the other examinees didn't have. If the magical potential that we have really isn't common, then they're not going to throw out those who actually fill the criteria of getting in. Not unless they absolutely have to."

"He's got a point," Harry said, feeling relieved. "Jakob still has a chance."

"What do you think we'll do after Professor Crouch returns?" Petronella asked. "I hope no more of this or I might end up joining Jakob in the hospital wing. I thought I'd pass out. My legs were starting to feel numb, and I just couldn't breathe."

Crouch stood silently for a few moments before he spoke.

"Only one hour has passed," Crouch said. "One hour out of five. Since your physical fitness..."
man replied.

"To the gym."

"Supporting Muggles and Mudbloods," Tom murmured, looking at the four bound Rebels kneeling in front of him. "Helping them, protecting them, considering them equal to you… What a disgrace to the Wizarding kind."

"A Dark wizard like you is the disgrace here!" one of the Rebels snarled. "Torturer! Murderer!"

Tom's lips curled into a tiny smile as he stopped Rabastan Lestrange from killing the Rebel who had spoken to him so boldly. No, he wouldn't need Rabastan to set them straight this time. He had something far more entertaining in store for all four of them.

"And you believe that… Muggles are harmless?" the Dark Lord asked. "You believe that they couldn't, not in a million years, invent a way to torture that is worse than the worst of curses out there? Well then, I must say that it is my duty to prove you wrong, isn't that right? Rabastan, Rodolphus, bring the prisoners and follow me." He had a special section in the dungeons, and he had been waiting eagerly for the chance to use it. Now this chance had finally arrived.

The first room he took them to was very, very simple. There was only one thing, and that thing was a chair. But what a chair it was– there were spikes covering the back, arm-rests, seat, leg-rests and foot-rests. There were also leather straps hanging from the sides of the chair.

"One of you four will have the pleasure of experiencing this, ah, product of Muggle inventiveness and goodwill," Tom said, enjoying the expressions of dawning comprehension and the fear caused by understanding. One of the Rebels was untied, and he was dragged towards the chair. The man cursed at them and tried to break free, but his attempts were doomed to fail.

"This is the Judas Chair," Tom said, his voice as calm and sweet as he could make it. "Muggles used it 'til the end of the 19th century, when it gave way to far more… civil methods. It's a pity, really– I find this particularly delightful as it will not kill you immediately." The Rebel screamed as he was tied down to the chair and the spikes penetrated his flesh. Tom paused with his explanation, enjoying the pained screams.

This is what his enemies deserved.

"None of the spikes will penetrate any vital organs," Tom said after a few long minutes, during which the Rebel's pained wails had quieted down to pitiful whimpering. "And the wound is closed by the spike so the blood loss will be greatly delayed. Now, do you want to know what else Muggles did with this thing? They lit a small fire under the chair, to heat those spikes. Shall we try that method of Muggle kindness?" The Rebel howled as the pain intensified, and Tom turned to look at the other three captured criminals. None of them was unaffected by the sight.

"You brought this upon yourselves," Tom reminded them gently. "You just had to make me your enemy, hm? Why, if I may ask? What in this world of mine is wrong, for you to want to change it?" He didn't receive an answer. Not that he had really expected one. The only one who talked back to him was, after all, Ha- Potter.

Tom waited for a few moments watching the Rebel sob and writhe in pain before gesturing for Rodolphus and Rabastan to grab the remaining three prisoners and follow him to another room again. The straps holding the fourth rebel weren't going to let him go– Tom had made sure of that.
"I am not going to ask you to volunteer any more information," the Dark Lord said to the rebels as they entered the second room. "I gave you a chance already, and I... do not believe in second chances. Now, this one here is known as the Rack." Once again there was only one thing in the room— it looked like a wooden frame with two ropes fixed to the bottom and another two tied to a handle in the top. It was held a few feet above the floor by two pipes, and there was a handle on its left side.

Once again, one of the Rebels was untied. The man was pulled onto the Rack, his legs and hands tied with the ropes. Tom tried to not smile too eagerly when he gestured for Rodolphus to turn the handle, making the ropes pull the Rebel's limbs.

"A long time ago, Muggles used this to tear each other apart," Tom said, watching as the Rebel struggled to not scream. "Your limbs will never work again after this. Not that you'll be needing them— the dead have no use for their limbs, after all." At that, the Rebel screamed. Just as there was pain in his scream, there was also rage. Anger. Was it directed at Tom? The Dark Lord wasn't sure— perhaps the man was angry at himself for getting captured? Or maybe even angry at supporting a cause that was clearly not worth it?

Tom didn't know, and he didn't really care either. He stood there, listening to the captured man's screams as they grew louder and louder. He heard when the first bone in the man's body broke, and when he turned to look, he could see the skin stretching as far as it could go as the bones inside it moved in unnatural ways.

'Harry would hate this,' Tom thought. He didn't understand why. He tried, as he stared at the tortured man, to muster up something he could call regret, or even pity. But he couldn't. All of what he could see in front of him was a Rebel being rightfully punished. It was just something that had to be done— it was his duty, a job. He wasn't even feeling angry. He was... having fun, actually. Who told these people to join the Rebels, huh? This is what they deserved, for preferring to protect Muggles over serving a righteous cause. Over serving him.

The world he had worked so hard to create was being sneered at and ignored by fools like this. They chose wrong, when they chose the Rebels. Tom wanted them to be aware of that. He didn't need confessions, didn't care about their silly little plans.

He wanted to make them sorry for crossing him.

By the time the Rebel had died— ripped apart and bled to death— the other Rebel in the previous room had fallen silent as well. Tom doubted that he was dead— more likely he was simply unconscious for now. Not caring enough to check, the Dark Lord led the two remaining prisoners and the LeStrange brothers to the next torture chamber. There were two hooks in the ceiling of the room with a bit of rope hanging off them and a saw on the floor.

"Now which one of you to choose?" Tom murmured, turning to look at the prisoners— a man and a woman. The woman was sobbing quietly and the man face showed already a pained expression. Perhaps the woman would be easier for this kind of torture. With a smirk Tom spelled the ropes off her, alongside with her clothes, leaving her nude, humiliated and afraid on the stone floor. Not wasting any more of his precious seconds, the Dark Lord levitated the woman towards the hooks.

"Attach her legs to the hooks using the rope," Tom instructed, and Rabastan Lestrange hurried to comply. When that was done, Tom cancelled the levitation spell, leaving the woman hanging upside down.

"This is actually one of the most popular torture methods Muggles used in the Middle Ages," Tom explained. "You will be cut in half using the saw. This can go on for hours, depending on how much
we use the saw. Now do send a thankful thought towards those Muggles you've been protecting. They're the ones who invented these kinds of delightful methods of torture and extracting information. The people you have been helping and protecting all this time will betray you the moment they think they can win. I was never your real enemy, you fools."

Truly, aside from seeing his servants grovel in front of him and torturing people for fun, Tom really, really, really liked crushing dreams and hopes. It made his heart skip a beat.

Because, honestly, whoever stood against him deserved this.

Harry wasn't sure how he managed to drag himself to his flat after the dueling lessons. His legs could barely carry him, and in the end he had to take a bath rather than shower, simply because he didn't have the energy to stand any longer than necessary.

The following day his legs – no, his whole body was still aching. Harry tried to get rid of that feeling by taking a short walk outside, enjoying the few free moments before he'd have to go back inside and focus on his homework. The busy days had prevented Harry from thinking about his plans, much less actually tell someone about them. He wasn't really sure about how to even approach the subject.

Humming quietly, Harry walked further away from the apartment complex and towards the garden. He thought about Tom – what was the man doing? Planning the war? Make more rules? Order more executions like the one Harry had witnessed once? So focused on his thoughts, Harry was, that he didn't see Viktor Krum till the older boy was standing right next to him.

"Harry Potter," Krum said, and startled, Harry looked up.

"Viktor Krum," Harry said. "Hello. And congratulations on joining the national team."

"Thank you," Krum replied, although he didn't look particularly thrilled. "What brings you here?"

"Had my first dueling session yesterday and my muscles are still a bit sore," Harry explained. "I thought that a walk will make me feel a bit better. And you?" Krum shrugged, looking at a fountain nearby. He stayed silent for a few long moments before speaking.

"It's very quiet here," the boy said slowly. "I… feel like I can breathe."

"You've been hounded by people, huh," Harry muttered, feeling a bit sorry for the older boy. "Well, you're a celebrity now, aren't you? Many learn to enjoy the fame."

"I don't like being famous," Krum muttered, his shoulders hunched and arms folded. To Harry it looked like the older boy was expecting a blow of some kind, and trying to shield himself. "I just like Quidditch. A-and I don't even want to be famous. It's…” He quieted down, as if embarrassed to talk about whatever was on his mind. After staring at Krum for a few moments in silence, Harry pulled him towards the bench he could see nearby and pulled the older boy to sit down with him.

"You can talk," Harry said soothingly. "I won't tell anyone. I can give you an oath if you want."

"Ah, it's not important," Krum said, flushing. He didn't stand up and walk away, though, and Harry wondered if he was just gathering his courage to talk. It took quite a while before Krum sighed, coughed and started speaking.

"It… used to be worse," the boy muttered, his blush darkening as he avoided looking at Harry. "You
"I hear the way I speak. It's... slow." Not just slow, actually. Krum was in the habit of carefully pronouncing every word, as if they were strange to him. Harry had just assumed that Krum wasn't as used to English language as most of everyone else at Durmstrang was.

"Stammering problem," Krum continued. He sighed and buried his face in his hands, but Harry could still see from the boy's red ears that the blush was firmly there. "It... used to be worse. Now I can talk without stuttering if I'm careful, but when I'm nervous or stressed it... comes back. And... I hate it. It's... I can't control it." Harry nodded, trying not to look pitying as he glanced at the boy by his side. He could only imagine how much a boy from a pureblood family – and now a celebrity – could suffer from a stutter.

"You have bad memories about it?" Harry asked gently. "Something happened?"

"P-people used t-to ask my parents wh-why I talk... talk... like that," Krum admitted, distress evident in his speech and voice. He was talking faster now, though, and he didn't seem to bother with trying to control the stutter as he spoke "It... it was..."

"Painful," Harry said quietly, feeling his heart ache at the thought of someone being mocked for stuttering. He was sure that no one who didn't have this problem would ever completely be able to understand how painful it could be. How much it could really burden a person, especially if they were in the limelight.

"People th-think less of you if you stutter," Krum said grimly, his stutter lessening as he regained his composure. "They th-think you're stupid or s-slow. Mentally, I mean. Th-they think it-it's a joke. They think it's a joke. R-respect is hard to earn. There is prejudice but n-no one really talks about it be-because only th-those who stutter know of it. Experience it."

"Have you tried therapy?" Harry asked, and wasn't surprised when Krum nodded.

"Speech therapists and mind healers," the older boy replied. "I w-want to fly forever but I don't want to be a celebrity. I don't want to have to talk to people suddenly. I... will be expected to do press conferences. I will be introduced to important people I don't even want to meet. M-my new team mates told me all about that. The thought alone makes me... anxious." Harry wished that he would have been able to say something – anything – comforting, but he couldn't. There just wasn't anything he could say. He just didn't know what to say.

"It's never too late to teach people to give up their prejudices," Harry finally said. "If you can't get rid of your stutter, then accept it. You are already respected, and the more you play, the more people will respect you as a wizard with superb flying skills. What comes to intelligence – well, you attend Durmstrang and everyone knows how high the standards here are."

"It's not that easy," Krum replied tiredly. "I-in my head it can be done. But then I just c-can't do it."

'Well, that feeling is familiar,' Harry thought. The two sat for nearly an hour in silence, thinking of their own problems. Neither felt the need to talk, simply enjoying being alone with someone else, without feeling lonely. Harry's muscles weren't any less sore, but he was still feeling quite a bit more alive than he had been before.

When Krum – or should Harry call him Viktor from now on? – left, Harry was still sitting on the bench, wondering if he would be able to help anyone at all, or if he was just trapped by delusions of grandeur that he didn't know he had.
"I'm starting to hate history lessons," Björn whined on Monday as they left Professor Lyuben's classroom behind. "Honestly, I'm up to my ears with politics. Completely fed up!"

"It wasn't that bad," Truls said, and Harry grinned. Truls had seemed to enjoy debating about the current political events. "But cheer up, we have sports next."

"Oh Merlin, no," Petronella groaned. "I don't want sports. I always end up almost passing out after the lesson."

"Eat more," Heidi told her promptly. "Honestly, Nella, you're way too skinny." Harry silently agreed with Heidi, but was distracted when another issue crossed his mind. He bit his lip and glanced at Jakob, wondering if the boy was going to attend the sports class or if he was going to go somewhere else. Harry was really curious about what his friend could possibly be suffering from, but he didn't dare to ask.

"Think we'll finally play some Quidditch?" Clemens asked eagerly. "I just hope that we won't be stuck running laps or – Merlin forbid – be dragged to the gym again. I bet no other school focuses on physical fitness like Durmstrang is doing!"

"Next Sunday, how about we race or play?" Truls suggested. "We could invite some second-years to play with us. What do you think, Harry? Björn, you in? Clemens?"

"Yeah of course," Clemens said immediately. Filippa scowled.

"Where's my invitation?" she asked. Truls looked at her with a surprised expression.

"I didn't know that you liked Quidditch," the boy replied. "You never fly if you can avoid it."

"Whether we give or refuse," Filippa told him, "women are glad to have been asked."

"So when Mette slapped me for asking her out, she was still glad on the inside?" Björn asked. Harry gaped at him. When had that happened and how come he hadn't heard about it?

"Um, no," Petronella said. "That's a different matter altogether. Really, Björn, move on. She's obviously not interested."

"She will be once I turn fifteen and get to officially start gathering my fortune," the Swedish boy replied confidently. "If it wasn't for the age-limit needed for the bank account applications, I'd be her main target already by now."

"You're seriously going to be rich one day," Jakob said. "I wouldn't be surprised if you really ended up being the richest wizard alive."

"With his betting luck, he's bound to get assassinated before he turns thirty," Clemens mocked, before his expression turned serious. "I wonder what we all will be doing after we graduate. Or where we'll be ten years from today."

"Probably hunting stray Rebels if there are any after the war," Nikolai said.

"And if the world was to change?" Harry asked him. His eyes were open, but instead of seeing his friends who had now turned to see him, he, for an instant, daydreamed of a peaceful world void of unfair executions, prejudice, and useless hatred. "Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

'He's going to change the world,' Filippa knew suddenly, watching her friend mutely. The thought had crossed her mind uninvited, making her almost breathless with surprise. Harry's brilliant green
eyes were half-closed, and there was a beautiful smile on his face. But what really made him special, at least to Filippa, was the feeling she got from him. She couldn't help but remember the words her own grandfather had told her a long time ago; something about seeing what everyone else could see, and thinking what nobody has thought before.

"To believe in dreams," she muttered, feeling suddenly as if her heart was full of happiness. Really, if there's someone– anyone– who could change the world, it would be one of them. More specifically, Harry. Or maybe all of them, together. But that was a dream, a dangerous dream, and as much as she yearned for it, fear kept her away from it.

"Isn't the world changing all the time?" Nikolai said dismissively, and Filippa was almost ready to glare at him when she happened to glance at Jakob. It had vanished as quickly as it had appeared, but Filippa was sure that she saw a very uncharacteristic expression on her friend's face.

She couldn't tell, though, what kind of expression it was.

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"Where did my week vanish to?" Petronella all but sobbed as they made their way yet again to the dueling classroom. Heidi was trying to comfort her, although she looked just as miserable about it. Harry noticed that Jakob's expression portrayed nothing of what he must have been feeling.

They entered the classroom and were positively surprised when there were nine chairs, presumably for them to sit on. When Professor Crouch eventually arrived, he simply nodded in greeting before closing the classroom's door and starting.

"We will, today as well, do some running and physical exercise," he said. "But first, there are a few things I would like for you to discuss."

"I hope it's not politics," Harry hear Heidi whisper. "I hate politics."

"There are many things you need to be aware of when you duel," Crouch said. "Your outfit, for example. The things you're wearing. Some of you use earrings– now tell me, why is wearing earrings unwise if you're in a duel?" Harry flushed slightly, wondering if this example was specifically aimed at him.

"A summoning charm would be harmful," Nikolai said, glancing at Harry, making the green-eyed boy's blush darken. "By summoning the earrings during a duel, they'd rip their way off the earlobe and distract the opponent quite painfully."

"Only if the summoning charm is strong," Petronella added. "And only if the one who wears them hasn't cast an anti-summoning charm on the earrings."

'I should remember that,' Harry thought, before speaking up. "Not just earrings, though. I mean, can organs be summoned? Even if they don't get a way out of the body, the summoning spell can cause a lot of damage internally." Crouch stared at Harry for a few moments before a tiny smile appeared on his face.

"An excellent thing to notice," Crouch murmured, looking pleased. "Excellent indeed."

"But gory," Petronella shuddered before glancing at Harry. "How'd you think of that?"

"It just crossed my mind," Harry admitted. The words had tumbled out of his mouth before his mind had even registered them. He wondered if Tom's company was to blame.
"I'm surprised," Clemens said and grinned. "You don't seem the type to have ideas like that."

"How can we defend against that sort of attacks?" Nikolai asked curiously. He, too, had glanced at Harry with a sly expression before asking his question. Crouch's smile melted away, and he nodded.

"There are many ways to protect your body," the man replied. "Usually, battle-robets have all kinds of protection runes. However, some people go to runemasters to have runes carved into their bodies—that's blood magic. It's very rare to meet someone who has gone through that process."

"They're expensive, right?" Björn asked. Crouch nodded.

"Dangerous too. Only outstanding runemasters know how to wield that kind of blood magic. You will be taught the basic theory of blood magic, but it's too complicated for third-years like you. Now, moving on to other matters… There are different stances one can take before a duel. The way you stand matters—each way has its advantages and disadvantages, and you will have to know which one to use in what kind of situation."

"Will you teach us how to duel even if we're not standing?" Clemens asked suddenly. "If we're, for example, forced onto our knees and still have the power to keep on fighting—"

'Just what kind of family does he have,' Harry thought, looking at Clemens warily. 'His physical fitness is notable, his political opinions well-explained, his behaviour… I think that Clemens, rather than Nikolai, would be the perfect Death Eater. Does he do some kind of special training in his free time?'

"Yes," Crouch said. "I will teach you that as well; however, not quite yet. There is a lot to teach in the field of duelling, and we will need all of our lessons for the next few years in order for you to learn as much as you should."

'I wonder how well Tom can duel,' Harry thought suddenly. 'He's the Dark Lord, and I bet he's very, very good. I wish I could see, but I'm not sure if I want to be in a situation where I'd end up seeing him duel seriously. That'd be one scary situation, I bet.' Scary and potentially lethal. Harry didn't want to be the receiving end of anything like that.

"Now, stand up," Crouch said. "I'll teach you the most basic battle stance. No, you don't need to pull out your wands right now. You won't need to do that for quite a while, actually. Stand up and keep a distance of a few feet between one another…"

Tom was, simply put, exhausted. He had kicked away his shoes, shrugged off his robes and shirt, and was now sitting on a chair with his eyes clenched shut. A house-elf popped in, bringing him a light snack and a headache potion.

It had been a long day.

Sure, many necessary things had been done, such as torturing Rebels and showing off some new interrogation ideas to his Death Eaters. He had also managed to extract fair amounts of information from the last Rebel who had happily agreed to talk when promised with a merciful death instead of the torture his team mates had been subjected to.

He had Bellatrix already working on the preparations for an important undercover mission, but that wouldn't be enough to give him the chance to get rid of the Rebels for good. Killing one there, another here, and capturing a few more people just won't be enough to bring him the victory he so desperately wanted.
He needed something new. He needed something grand. Something… final and unexpected. If only he knew the exact locations of every Rebel camp, he could send Death Eater units to annihilate and mass murder. However, because he didn’t know of their locations, he’d have to lure them out.

If Bellatrix's undercover project worked out as it should, the Death Eaters could sabotage some of the camps, set traps, and spread wrong, misleading information to the Rebels.

'This work never ends,' Tom thought, rubbing his eyes and sighing. 'Merlin, even if I manage to get rid of one group, another will pop up soon. Oh well, I suppose it at least keeps me from getting bored.' He would need to make things a tad bit more entertaining, though. A convenient disaster that would make time pass faster.

He would have made some Potter Plans, but he still didn't feel like approaching the boy.

Tom didn't even notice his lips curling to form a reluctantly amused smile. Harry Potter. Such a funny child. If only the little bugger would stop being a source of constant headache, Tom suspected that he could even learn to tolerate the boy's presence for quite a while.

"I ate a mouse," Nagini hissed, slithering into the room. "It was big, it was fat, and it struggled before losing the fight. Wonderful, juicy meat. Crunchy small bones. The— I know that face. Thinking about the dead-alive boy again, are we?"

"Shut up," Tom replied, wondering when his snake had become so eloquent. She hadn't always been like that, had she? He could remember the time when Nagini kept asking for clarifications and explanations. In all honesty, Tom had never met a snake quite as smart as Nagini. Then again, she was one of his horcruxes.

'Ha— Potter said he talked to Merope,' Tom suddenly thought, narrowing his eyes. Pushing aside the questions of how and when temporarily, just how much did the boy know about Tom? The Dark Lord would need to know, for sure.

Tom sat up straight, completely forgetting about the food near him. A plan was forming in his mind, and he hastily reached for a quill and a piece of parchment to write it down.

He'd need to investigate a few things, such as who Harry's best friend was and how easily Tom could use him for information gathering. Didn't typical kids tell their best friends everything? A bit of good old possession tricks could give Tom the information he wanted while keeping Harry unaware.

But who was Harry's best friend? Did the boy even have any good friends? And who could find out that kind of information for him? Crouch. Wasn't that man teaching in Durmstrang? Crouch could get him that information. It wouldn't even be difficult— the only thing required would be to make the target drink a certain potion, and the rest Tom could take care of on his own.

If he couldn't stop thinking about the boy, at least he could focus on trying to solve the potential threat Harry Potter presented.

It was about time that he solved that mystery and moved on with his life.

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Harry hadn't planned on talking with Truls about his future plans on that day. Really, the thought of telling anyone had actually vanished to the back of his mind, not to mention that he had first planned on talking with Filippa, not Truls.

That evening found him in Truls's flat, working on his homework. Harry had seen Truls's flat quite a
few times before— it always gave him an odd feeling. Truls, to him, seemed so normal. No specific interests or hobbies, no unique, outstanding talents that would make him stand out in a crowd of other talented students.

His flat, however, showed off the blond boy's interest in runes and sports. It was a rather dark, cool, and comfortable place, and to Harry, the time seemed to stand still whenever he was there.

Then again, hadn't Truls's presence always seemed calming to him? Harry knew that some of his other classmates were, for some reason, wary of Truls sometimes… but he couldn't figure out why.

"Here," Truls said, setting down a cup of tea in front of Harry before sitting down as well. "Trouble with Transfiguration?"

"Trouble with everything, to be honest," Harry said, the words slipping out. He looked warily at Truls before sighing and pushing away his homework. "I don't even know how to talk about it."

"Try anyway," Truls encouraged. "If something is bothering you, then please talk to me about it. Together, we can solve it."

"It's complicated," Harry said, feeling uncomfortable. "It's… dangerous, too. Very dangerous."

"Trust me," Truls said, and Harry knew that he could.

"I want to change this world," Harry started, feeling embarrassed for some reason. "There's so much wrong with it, not just the war. The Dark Lord's world works for the benefit of a small population in this world, but the rest suffer terribly for no good reason. And it's all just… wrong. Something needs to be changed. The war needs to be stopped before it kills most of the people. And if the system isn't changed after the war is stopped, it's going to start up again for those same pointless reasons."

"The world isn't going to change on its own for the better," Harry continued. "And waiting for someone else to do this will just be a waste of time. But I'm so terribly scared, Truls. I don't know what to do for sure, how to do it, who to trust, and I feel like this all is going to just fall over my head and I don't know what to do!" The more he talked, the more the stress seemed to catch up with him.

"And as if it's not enough that I have to basically stand against the Dark Lord and the world he created, I'm in a school surrounded by people who would gladly kill me for it. I'm expected-- we're all expected-- to fit into a mould that the Dark Lord has designed, and failure to do so will lead to failure in life itself. It's wrong that the whole world has to dance to the tune of one person only, no matter who this one person is!" Harry took a deep breath and looked at Truls with a wary expression, leaning slightly forward.

"Am I the first one you've told about this?" Truls asked. Harry nodded, and the blond boy smiled slightly with a strange expression on his face.

"We'll do this together, then," he said after a few moments of silence. "You and I. The two of us. Do you have any plans yet? We need to first set certain goals and start planning on how to reach those goals."

"We'll need more people, though," Harry said, and Truls shrugged.

"First, we plan. Then we can see who is fit to be recruited and who isn't."

"You seem to be accepting this easily," Harry said suddenly, hesitantly. "I mean… this isn't a harmless game, you know. It could set you against your family. And—"
"I trust you," Truls replied, shrugging. "I don't know everything yet, but I trust you to choose well and decide wisely. I know you, Harry. You're not into doing risky things recklessly. If you're ready to do this, then it's going to be worth it." He then moved to touch Harry's cheek gently with an odd little smile on his face.

"It's going to be worth it," Truls repeated, and Harry wasn't sure if he was supposed to feel comforted or disturbed. There was something very odd in the atmosphere around them, and it made Harry feel slightly suffocated.

"There's a lot more I need to tell you," Harry continued. "Things you probably wouldn't believe."

"You wouldn't lie to me," Truls said, sounding utterly convinced. "How about you stay here tonight and tell me all of what you feel like telling? Tomorrow's free anyway."

"What do you think the others would say?" Harry asked hesitantly. "Filippa, for example?"

"Don't think about any of the others yet," Truls replied, standing up. "You don't need to go and get your clothes—just take one of my T-shirts."

"Okay," Harry said. It wasn't the first time he shared a bed with Truls although, sometimes, he couldn't help but wonder if the other boy's crush was still there or if it had changed into this close friendship. If Truls still liked him that way, was it unwise of him to go along with things such as sleeping in the same bed?

Maybe he should ask Filippa about this.

His concern about the unclear relationship with Truls was pushed to the back of his mind by the time he had brushed his teeth, changed his clothes, and climbed into the bed next to the other boy. Truls turned to look at him and gave him an encouraging smile.

"You'll think that I'm crazy," Harry warned. "But I promise that I'm not."

"I wouldn't think that," Truls assured him, moving even closer. "I'd never think ill of you."

"Alright then," Harry said, his heart hammering nervously in his chest. "It actually started quite a few years ago, and I thought that it was a dream at first…"
Chapter 18

By the time Harry had finished telling Truls about the train station and Albus Dumbledore – carefully leaving aside everything about knowing Merope and Tom personally, as well as big parts of Tom's past – the sun was just about to rise. Truls was lying on his back with Harry sprawled next to him on the bed, their bodies almost touching. The Swedish boy was thinking about what Harry had told him, and while he didn't understand all of it, he didn't think that Harry would lie to him. Truls wasn't sure, however, of how to react.

"You'll put yourself against the Dark Lord," he finally said.

"And against the Rebels, too," Harry whispered. "Sort of. Although I've been thinking... I don't really need to wage a war against them or anything, do I? I want to stop the war. If I could find another way to convince people of what is right... Or even just convince the leaders to persuade their followers to stop killing... It's all so very confusing and I don't know what I should do, exactly."

It didn't help that voicing his ambitions aloud made them sound unrealistic to the point of fantasy. It was... it was embarrassing. Thankfully, Truls didn't comment on that.

"From what I gathered, you've got three projects at least," Truls replied. "First, stop the war. Second, promote equal rights for everyone, including werewolves and Muggles. Third, promote freedom of speech which includes the right to criticise anyone without the fear of getting killed. That's... that's a lot to handle. Actually, maybe you should start with the third point first."

"A friend of mine, well, her father," Harry started, "owns a magazine. I had thought about writing articles there or something. But, Truls, are you really not bothered? I mean, this kind of thing isn't exactly... void of danger."

"Worried, I am for sure," Truls said, gently touching Harry's cheek with his fingertips. "But I'd never abandon you, Harry. You want to do it, so you will. And I'm going to stand by your side through the good and the bad."

"People have been sentenced to death for less than speaking of this kind of matters."

"I know."

"I have no idea how to start," Harry huffed, feeling almost tearful. "One wrong step and—"

"It's all about saying the right things to the right people," Truls explained quietly. "We can do nothing right now, though. When we get the opportunity, we'll use it well. Don't worry, I'll help you."

'The whole mission seems impossible,' Harry thought, before suddenly remembering the Horcruxes. Maybe he really should start with them? If he could make the Dark Lord mortal, then, eventually, his era would end – that was the law of nature. He wasn't some kind of a hero, after all, and saving the whole world couldn't be done. Because, well, it was impossible to save humans from the human nature.

'I had considered asking Tom about the horcruxes directly and convince him to give them up,' Harry thought, closing his tired eyes. 'But the more I think about it, the less likely it seems that he'd readily give up all of what he has worked hard for so far.' Which left him with one option: disposing of the horcruxes without Tom knowing.
Easier said than done. He didn't even know what could be used as a horcrux, and he didn't know how many of them Tom had. Not to mention that he honestly had no clue about how to even destroy a horcrux. Would he be able to do it without Tom feeling it somehow? At least he'd have Truls's help, though. That was a relief.

*I'm surprised at how agreeable he is about this, though,* Harry thought suddenly. Wasn't it rather… odd? Truls was his best friend, sure, but what Harry was technically asking for went beyond what friends were obliged to do. Truls didn't so much as look reluctant, and while that did make Harry happy and relieved, he now couldn't help but feel… worried? Wary? Not that he'd accuse Truls of betraying him or anything, but… was it normal?

A long time ago Björn had told him something about life-debts… something important… but Harry couldn't quite remember what it was…

Harry yawned. He was tired and more than ready to fall asleep – he'd have enough time to worry about horcruxes and the world after waking up.

* Bartemius Crouch Jr. hadn't expected to be called for a mission by the Dark Lord during the school year. However, on Sunday morning, a neat little envelope with an invitation within made it clear that his presence was required on that very same day, as soon as possible.

And when the Dark Lord says 'as soon as possible', he means 'now'.

Trying to remember if he had done anything wrong and calculating the probability of ending up as a human sacrifice of some kind, Barty pulled on his cloak, checked that his wand was where it should be, and left to meet the Dark Lord.

'Last time I was singled out, I got stuck assisting Lockhart,' Barty thought warily, as he made his way towards the office room where the Dark Lord would be waiting. 'Merlin, I sure hope this mission doesn't involve dealing with him again, in any shape or form.' The corridors leading towards the room were mostly empty, and when he entered the Dark Lord's office, he wasn't surprised to see that no one else was present there aside from the two of them.

"My Lord," Barty said, kneeling down. The fact that Lord Voldemort's appearance was that of a man around Barty's age didn't make him seem any less threatening. In fact, knowing his real age – or the estimation, really – just made him come across as some kind of… deity. A deity with a taste for torture.

"You're late, Bartemius," the Dark Lord hissed. "But no matter, you're forgiven this time."

"Thank you, my Lord. You're most merciful—"

"I have a mission for you."

"Anything, my Lord," Barty said, hoping that he wouldn't be sent off to some faraway island to hunt for some rare snake food again. Or worse: bring some important plants that fought back viciously.

"Does the name Harry Potter ring a bell, Bartemius?" the Dark Lord asked, his voice deceptively smooth. Barty was startled; he had not expected to hear the name of his arguably favourite student here. What— how and why did the Dark Lord know about Potter? Was the kid somehow important?

"Yes, my Lord," Bartemius replied honestly. "He's a student of mine."
"Who," started Lord Voldemort, "is the closest one to him there? His… closest friend, so to say."

Why does he want to know?' Barty wondered, and tried to recall with whom Potter seemed to be the closest. He couldn't quite remember… he wasn't sure. There was that girl, Peppino. And two boys – a tall blond one, Truls Kettill, whose records spoke of aggressive magic best suitable for offense. The other one was the red-haired Lennart boy, whose talent in Charms was remarkably superior to that of not only his classmates, but probably many of the older students, too.

The Dark Lord sighed, sounding displeased, and put a small vial full of light blue liquid onto the table.

"Look at this, Bartemius," the man hissed. Barty, obediently, stared at the vial. "This, as you can see, is a potion. Your task is very simple – find the one closest to Harry Potter and make him or her drink this potion. That is all."

Questions were barely held back as Barty nodded, wondering if he'd have a dead student in his hands soon. "Yes, my lord."

"Once you're done," the Dark Lord continued, "you'll bring the vial to me. You are to tell no one – directly or indirectly – of this. You will not research the potion and you will do nothing more or less than what I told you to. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord," Barty said, torn between feeling thankful for not being sent somewhere suspicious and wary at the thought of feeding a student an unknown potion.

"You have three days," the Dark Lord said, his red eyes almost glowing with glee. "Dismissed. Get to work."

Harry was still sleepy when Truls dragged him to have lunch with the rest of their classmates. The dark-haired boy could barely keep his eyes open, and for some reason Heidi, Petronella and Filippa couldn't stop making cooing noises at him. It was disturbing, to say the least.

"My muscles are still sore from yesterday," Björn said, piling what looked like grilled fish and roasted potatoes onto his plate. "Speaking of yesterday, did anyone else see my darling Mette? Her skirt is shorter than it was last week."

"Because Viktor Krum was confirmed single only three days ago," Filippa said dryly. "Before that, nobody knew for sure if he was dating some girl who just didn't attend Durmstrang. But he doesn't, never has, so he's the most sought-after guy at school right now. Which leads to shorter skirts, apparently."

"Well, at least in this liberated world she can do what she wants," Heidi said. Filippa shook her head with a frown on her face.

"This world isn't half as liberated as you think," the Italian girl said. "Liberated? This world where everything is judged and criticised and categorised? This world where, if you're a vegetarian, you get criticised, and if you're not a vegetarian, you get criticised for that too? This world where, if a woman wears short skirts and a sleeveless top and as much make-up as she wants she's a slut or if she wears a burqa she's oppressed? This world where you're always either too thin or too fat? This world where, if you have an opinion, it's always the wrong one? This world where every person with a flaw feels persecuted so badly that even the slightest insult will hurt them deeply? Is this what you call liberation?"
"She's got a point," Petronella said, and Harry was almost startled at the grim tone the girl was using. "People are brainwashed to believe that they're free to think and do what they want as long as they harm nobody else, but society’s oppression is like an invisible chain. How pleased must the brainwashers be – people have faced the uncomfortable truth and opted to believe their comfortable lie."

"That's not entirely true," Heidi argued. "If you're brave enough and with a backbone, then you can be the person you want to be, no matter how different you are."

"And by standing out in a crowd you have to bear the burden, the stigma of being different," Filippa sighed. "The prejudice of people is a terrible thing. In theory, you're free. But in reality, you're not. How many of us are right now free to do whatever we want?"

"The problem is that people mistake their freedom of speech and expressing opinions as the freedom to judge," Björn said. "Most people do that, actually."

"But isn't having an opinion already classified as judgement, no matter how private it is?" Heidi asked curiously. Harry replied, shaking his head:

"No," he said. "The difference between an opinion and a judgement is, for example, the difference between 'I don't like apples' and 'apples are bad'. You're free to have your own opinion – that you don't like apples – but you're not entitled to label all apples as bad just because you don't like them. That'd be rather…"

"Egocentric," Clemens finished for him with a nod. "I get your point. Never thought of it like that before, to be honest."

"To think that from discussing the length of Mette Erling’s skirt we ended up talking about human nature," Björn said, sounding oddly proud of himself. "Next we can talk about her unde—"

"We could start a conversation about the regular size of potatoes in Asia and end up discussing human nature," Filippa cut in, before changing the subject. "I heard that seventh year students get to drink wine at dinner. How unfair is that?"

"You drink wine at home?" Petronella asked curiously.

"Italian, duh," Björn told her. "She probably started drinking wine from the bottle as a baby."

"Hilarious, Björn," Filippa said coldly. "I'm splitting my sides with laughter, I am."

"Oh Merlin, we've got Arithmancy tomorrow," Harry suddenly realized. "I haven't done my homework yet."

"I haven't done mine, either," Truls said. "We can study together."

"You two always hang out together," Heidi suddenly said, leaning forward. "There are going to be rumours sooner or later if you don't put some kind of a distance betwe—" The words seemed to die on her lips when Heidi finally saw the expression Truls was regarding her with. A cold feeling washed over her body and with a small shudder she leaned back and pressed herself closer to Nikolai.

"Rumours?" Harry asked, oblivious to what had made Heidi quiet down. "What rumours?"


Harry saw Clemens
grin suddenly and open his mouth, and with dread he realized that the other boy was going to make a joke that would set Filippa on warpath.

'I guess researching horcruxes can wait,' Harry thought, enjoying the time he was spending with his friends. 'I don't want these people as my enemies.'

* *

"I hate idiots," Bellatrix said, staring at the ceiling with a blank expression. Sirius yawned, shuffling a few papers to the left, and then back in front of him again. The words Triwizard Tournament – Task Ideas' stared up at him from an otherwise empty paper.

"I hate work," Sirius said. "Aren't you supposed to be torturing those poor spies of yours into submission and obedience?"

"I sent a few out to work already, but the newer ones are pathetic," Bellatrix sniffed. "As soon as I use Legilimency on them they start whining and collapsing and bleeding from their ears. You try to work when your test subjects keep dying."

"I don't think they're meant to do that," Sirius pointed out, before yawning again. "I'm hungry."

"What are you even doing there?" Bellatrix asked, sitting up on the couch. "I heard that you have… some kind of a festival to plan. It better be something interesting."

"It's not a festival," Sirius replied. "It's the Triwizard Tournament. It's a magical contest held between three schools. It's an ancient tournament, and the first one was held in twelve ninety-four. Each school is represented by one Champion, and the Champions compete in three extremely dangerous tasks that are meant to test magical ability, intelligence and courage. The prize for the victor is the Triwizard Cup and money. However, the Tournament was discontinued in seventeen ninety-two when the death toll became too high."

"What's wrong with a few deaths? It just sets the mood! Not to mention if there are a few mudbloods at Hogwarts – I have no idea why they're still allowed to partake in education – we could use as target practice, to create a nice atmosphere."

"Anyway, cousin. Now the Dark Lord has given me the task to bring back this tournament. I've already decided that the schools taking part in this will be Durmstrang, Hogwarts, and Beauxbatons and the competition itself will be held at Hogwarts. I'm now working on the tasks."

"Ooh," Bellatrix said, her dark eyes suddenly sparkling. "I want to help. Who are the judges?"

"Traditionally, the judges were the Headmasters – or Headmistresses – of the schools," Sirius said, "but I thought that they'd end up being biased if that's the case. I mean, can you see Yaxley being fair? Yeah, my point exactly. So I'm choosing three neutral people who are not in the school board. I will be too busy to judge, myself, but—"

"I'm one," Bellatrix decided. "I'm going to be a judge."

"Merlin save us," Sirius muttered. "But fine. And if you're not doing anything else right now anyway, then come up with task ideas."

"Just lock them in a room with transparent walls and have them duel to death while we watch," Bellatrix suggested, lying back down. "Last one alive is the winner."

"We want something spectacular. Something… showy. Flashy. Interesting. Three tasks, Bellatrix,
not one."

"Let's have them hunt werewolves during a full moon."

"And how are we supposed to watch that happen? No. Besides, it's boring. Another no. We need something new, something..." Sirius paused, looking for the words, before continuing: "something real." There was a sudden silence in the room as the two Blacks thought about the words, before they slowly turned to look at each other.

"Real," Bellatrix murmured. "Like... the Rebels..."

"It could be a wonderful experience," Sirius said, his mind coming up with more possibilities on how to use the Rebels. "For the audience, at least."

"We'll be leaving Ireland soon," a Death Eater – Septimus Rolfe, if James remembered correctly – said. "About time. Bloody hell, feels like I've been stuck here for years. But at least the place is clean now from traitors and we can relax a little bit."

"Where do you think they'll send us next?" James asked as the two walked through the muddy roads of St. Cattlesweep, a small village not too far away from Dublin. "Think Italy? Spain?"

"Or France. Thornfield from the fifth division said that France is infested with Rebels. Although the French government might not allow British Death Eaters to fight there," Rolfe replied. The two men entered a tavern where many of their squad members were already drinking. James could see Pettigrew sitting alone in the far corner.

"Can't wait to drop by home," a man was saying when Rolfe and James sat down. "Haven't seen my wife and kids in months."


"Elite, mate," Rolfe whistled. "My nephew tried to get into Durmstrang last year, but he failed. I don't have any kids, myself. My wife is still young, though, so we'll see about that."

"Just take care that she doesn't see about that with someone else," a man nearby laughed loudly, before trying to grab Rolfe's drink. Sourly the other man sent a stinging hex and turned back to James with a scowl on his face.

"Asshole," he grumbled. "She wouldn't. She's a good woman, she is."

"My wife died," James said, the gloom of months ago returning now with vengeance. "Last summer. She was a healer, was sent to Italy. And then she died there." Rolfe didn't say anything, just refilled James's pitcher with more ale.

"And then my son," James started, before pausing to stare at the alcohol in front of him. Harry. What had he promised Harry? There was a nagging feeling as if... he was supposed to remember... "And my son... I... should have taken more care of him."

"If your son is in Durmstrang, you've got nothing to fear," Rolfe assured him. "The kids there, they've got their future bright and welcoming. Nobody will turn down a job application from someone who studied in that school. Not since the Dark Lord made the adjustments and made it special. The kids there have no worries, nothing that would make them fail."
'Is that really the case, Harry?' James thought, feeling tired and so very old and useless. 'But if your life was really full of careless days at school, from where did you get that maturity I can't remember you learning from home?'

"Soon we all can go home," Rolfe continued, gulping down a few mouthfuls of ale before continuing. "And then we'll get to live with our families again, and if there's anything that needs to be fixed, we can finally fix it without worrying about the next great absence."

"Wouldn't that be nice," James muttered, and he couldn't help but glance at where Pettigrew was sitting alone. Pettigrew didn't look dangerous or impressive in any shape or form. He didn't come across as a threat and didn't inspire feelings of wariness. And yet, when he suddenly looked up from his drink and stared at James with his watery blue eyes, the dark-haired man couldn't help but shudder.

He couldn't wait to leave this place and go home. At least there he'd never have to see Pettigrew again.

It would have to be Truls Kettil. That boy was, without a doubt, the closest friend of Harry Potter.

This was the conclusion Bartemius Crouch Jr. came to after a whole day of observing. It was painfully obvious, now that he bothered to actually watch the third year students. Where Potter was, Kettil was as well. Always together, and most of the time so close that another person couldn't come between them. Strangely, that lack of distance didn't seem to be a result of conscious effort. It was actually... a bit odd, seeing boys at that age being so close.

The more he observed, the more aware of it he became. The proximity, the touches. They were young, though, and Barty couldn't help but get a sense of wrongness from the thought of those two being intimate in any way. They were too young – just children, still.

'Focus on what's relevant,' Barty told himself, trying to shrug off the uncomfortable feelings he had.

Making Kettil drink the potion would be easy enough – all Barty would need to do was use a house-elf to include it in the kid's breakfast or something along those lines. So no, he wasn't worried about whether or not he'd be able to succeed in the mission. Rather, he was worried about the aftermath.

Barty hadn't inspected the potion – for all he knew, the Dark Lord could legilimence the truth out of him and he'd be in a world of trouble and pain as a result of going against direct orders. But he was curious, and very much concerned. He doubted that the potion would kill the boy – why would the Dark Lord benefit from killing Potter's closest friend?

'Or rather, the questions should be: what brought Potter to the Dark Lord's attention?' Barty thought while doing his regular morning exercise. *The Dark Lord knows Potter. Why? Potter, whose family is not high-ranked. Potter, who doesn't seem to stand out in anything in a way that would make him more remarkable than the rest of the special students here in Durmstrang. Why Potter?*

What made *Potter* different from everybody else? Well, the brat could mask his presence alarmingly well... but that was nothing outstanding. Surprising for someone so young, yes, but nothing special. Not unless... it was part of a bigger picture.

What would happen to Kettil after drinking the potion, and how would that affect Potter?

'I shouldn't think about this,' Barty told himself. *The Dark Lord's orders were clear.* He didn't want to end up being tormented by curiosity about a mystery he had no permission to solve. That would
be worse than being stuck with Gilderoy Lockhart in a room.

Too much had happened for Barty to voluntarily risk his position for a bit of curiosity. He wasn't where he stood now simply because of luck and connections. It had taken a lot of time and effort to work off his father's legacy and build a reputation good enough for people to forget or ignore what Crouch Sr. had done before the Dark Lord took control.

"Tip," Barty called, and a little house-elf appeared. He levitated the vial with the potion towards the elf, and frowned at the trembling creature. It was actually one of his own, not one of the creatures that belonged to Durmstrang. He didn't trust those things with important tasks such as this one. "Make sure that the third year student Truls Kettil drinks this potion, one way or another. Don't let anyone know of this. Once you're done, bring be back the vial."

"Yes Master," the house-elf stammered, bowing deeply before taking the vial and vanishing. Barty stood still for a few moments, wondering what would happen next. Should he start paying more attention to Potter? He'd have to observe Kettil, that was a given, but what about the others? Or should he just pretend that nothing had happened?

"Does anyone know how the Bitsheet Bumblebee affects Draught of Pleasant Dreams?" Filippa asked, looking up from her potions essay. "Harry? Nella?"

"If the chopped bits aren't fried first the draught turns into a nightmare potion," Petronella replied. Everyone was, once again, in Harry's flat doing their homework. The boy himself was trying to make sense of the transfiguration essay he was supposedly writing.

"How about we have a break and go play some Quidditch?" Clemens suggested suddenly. "Just for half an hour."

"I'm in," Björn immediately, throwing his quill down. Truls turned to Harry with a questioning look on his face.

"You go and have fun," Harry told him. "I'll try to tackle this hurdle first."

"All right," Truls said, standing up. Eventually, Nikolai and Heidi left as well, and only Harry, Petronella, Filippa and Jakob remained in Harry's flat, working quietly on their essays. After a few minutes of quiet working, Filippa sighed and put down her quill.

"This is so complicated," she said, pulling closer a potions book she had borrowed from the library. "Why's the Christmas Holiday so far away?"

"What are you going to do on Christmas?" Petronella asked, pushing aside her own essay and leaning forward. "If there are any fashion shows going on, please invite me too, okay?"

"Of course," Filippa replied. "But don't you want to spend the time with your family?"

"Not really," Petronella snorted. "They're not… well… whatever. What about you guys?"

"Nothing special," Jakob replied, and Harry nodded, agreeing with him.

"I'm probably going to spend the holiday here," Harry said. "I've got no reason to go home, so… might as well stay here."
"With Truls?" Filippa asked, grinning. Harry rolled his eyes and set down his quill as well and didn't reply. Petronella, however, spoke up.

"You know, I've been wanting to ask about that," she started. "How come you're so… close to him? I mean, I know you're best friends or something but Truls – his whole family – has a rather dangerous reputation."

"First time I've ever heard about that," Harry said warily. "Can you elaborate?"

"Well, Heidi has told me a few things," Petronella said. "She's Swedish too, you know, and their families move in the same circles. And… there was this scandal about his older brother poisoning people and stuff."

"Truls is scary," Jakob said quietly. "Not in the same sense as Nikolai, though."

"Nikolai is evil," Filippa agreed grimly. "The things that guy has done…"

"But what makes you say that Truls is scary?" Harry demanded to know. "He's the nicest, most loyal person I have ever known. So, no offence to you guys, but if you can't back up any of your claims, then don't say things like that so carelessly."

"It's just hard to explain," Filippa told him. "I don't know much either, and I know nothing certain about Truls's family. All of my comments are only about him and according to what I have observed with my own eyes. Truls is usually the nice, funny guy you see him as, but sometimes it seems as if something clicks inside his head and he changes completely. I can't give you any proof yet, so I won't tell you to believe me, Harry. But you'll find out on your own, eventually."

"It's not that Truls is a bad person, though," Jakob said. "Just sometimes very brutal and ruthless. Like when Nikolai said something about Harry and Truls just glared. I thought he'd kill Nikolai, that's how mean his glare was."

"How come you guys know about that and I don't?" Harry asked, feeling almost angry. "I'm with him most of the time. So how come you know and I don't?"

"He's careful when you're nearby," Petronella replied quietly. "He's very, very careful when you're by his side." There was something in the way she said those words, something in the expressions of Filippa and Jakob as well, that chilled Harry to the bone.

"I think I know Truls better than you do," he replied, pressing his lips into a tight line.

"Rather than know better, you know sides of him we haven't seen," Jakob said. "And we, too, know a side of him that you're unfamiliar with. I think it's because he cares about you the most so he doesn't treat us the same way. He's pretty… well…"

"Possessive about you," Filippa for Jakob. "He doesn't really let anyone else near you, does he?"

"Don't be silly," Harry replied, reaching for his quill and pulling his half-written essay closer. "Let's not talk about this anymore. It's nonsense."

"As you wish," Petronella said. "Mind if I make some tea? I feel a bit thirsty."

"Make some for all of us," Filippa told her. "Please."

"Consider it yours," Harry said, nodding towards the kitchen. "Have fun." He kept his tone light and expression neutral, but inside he couldn't stop thinking about what the others had told him. Truls
wasn't like that. Truls was… well, he was Harry's best, best, best friend. And Harry trusted him with his life.

When Truls came back with the others, he sat next to Harry like he always did. Harry glanced at - Filippa, who was looking at him with a serious expression. To prove a point – he wasn't sure what kind of a point exactly – Harry didn't move away even though the other boy sat close enough for their bodies to be touching.

Filippa bit her lip, unsure of what to do next. She had tried to tell Harry, but the other boy seemed to be dead set on not believing that there was anything off about Truls. She'd have to wait, and hopefully get some kind of a proof before trying again.

'It's not that Truls is a bad guy,' the girl thought, sighing and looking down at her essay again. 'I just don't think that he's… a good guy either.'

Thursday evening the house-elf Tip popped into Professor Crouch's quarters, holding an empty vial. Barty took the vial, sent the elf away and got ready to go to meet the Dark Lord again. He wondered if there'd be some news about Truls Kettil falling ill soon, but then decided to not think about it.

Really. Because it just wasn't any of his business. He had nothing to do with it. Dark Lord's orders. He wasn't responsible for this.

'I just hope that the brat won't die,' Barty thought while turning towards the fireplace. 'Not that I care about him personally, but the performance of the other kids could suffer because of any sudden deaths. Merlin knows they're now bad enough. If the progress was any slower it'd be a disaster.'

Entering the headquarters where without a doubt the Dark Lord was, Barty stopped in the front hall to be called further in. He wasn't sure how long he'd have to wait – he had come unannounced, after all, and the Dark Lord was probably busy. Much to his relief, however, it took less than an hour for a house-elf to appear, telling him to proceed towards the office room where the Dark Lord was.

'I've met him dozens of times,' Barty thought, bowing deeply. 'I should stop feeling so surprised every time I see how young he looks.' "My Lord. Thank you for your time."

"You have succeeded in your mission, Bartemius?" the Dark Lord said. Barty swallowed and nodded.

"Yes, my Lord."

"Well done," Lord Voldemort murmured when the Death Eater presented the empty vial to him. "I trust that the boy has already drunk the potion and soon… it will take effect. Well done indeed. Now… step closer." Feeling his heart beat loudly against his ribs, Barty took a few steps closer towards the Dark Lord and kneeled down. A moment later he felt the man's cold fingertips lifting his face up.

"Look into my eyes," the Dark Lord ordered, his voice, as usual, void of emotion. Barty swallowed and did as told, knowing that he was leaving his mind vulnerable for inspection. He was glad that he hadn't gone against the Dark Lord's orders, having opted to ignore his curiosity instead.

"How smart of you," the Dark Lord murmured, clearly having read that stray thought. "You have done well indeed. However… leaving you curious isn't something I intend on doing." The Dark Lord let go of Barty, taking a step back, as if reluctant to stand too close to a mere mortal for any longer than necessary.
'He's going to tell me?' Barty thought, feeling surprised. 'Well, maybe I should have expected that. He'd need to tell me for me to know how to deal with the aftermath.' It did make him feel honoured, of course, to be the only one in the know about this secret plan.

"Unsatisfied curiosity brings unexpected problems," Lord Voldemort continued. "Which is something I wish to avoid."

"Thank you, my Lord," Barty said, bowing again. "I'm most honoured."

"Long story short," the Dark Lord started, turning slowly towards Barty. "Obliviate."

"Are you all right?" Harry whispered to Truls. They were in the Charms classroom, and Harry had noticed that his best friend seemed to be a bit off his game. He looked rather pale and tired and Harry contemplated taking him to the hospital wing.

"Just got a headache," Truls replied. "Probably just muscle pain in the shoulders and neck. I get headaches easily when my muscles are tense."

"I can give you a massage later on if you want to," Harry offered quietly. "You can stay over at my place tonight." At this Truls smiled, moving to rest his right hand on Harry's left. He didn't reply anything for a while, content with just looking at Harry for a few moments in silence. In the front of the class, Professor Elis was explaining something about the numerous uses of a scrubbing charm and how it could be used to scrub the skin right off a person.

'Why would I ever even wish to use that kind of a spell for that sort of purposes?' Harry thought, and sighed. He glanced at Truls again, feeling concerned. He thought about Jakob, too, and Jakob's illness, and hated himself a little bit for being grateful that it wasn't Truls who was sick.

'I'm a terrible person,' Harry thought gloomily, before his thoughts wandered to what Filippa, Petronella and Jakob had told him about Truls. He didn't want to believe their suspicions - whatever it was that they suspected. They didn't know Truls the way he did, and... well... they just didn't. He couldn't, however, just dismiss their claims as lies because they were his friends too, and he knew that Filippa in particular would never lie to him.

"For homework," Professor Elis said, "I want you to list five household charms that could be used for defence during an attack. I want you to be able to tell me about them adequately without checking your notes. Dismissed."

"Not the scrubbing spell, though," Heidi was saying when they gathered their books. "I mean, the Professor already mentioned it. Maybe a cleaning charm? A dusting charm?"

"How would you use a dusting charm for defence?" Filippa asked, shaking her head. "I'd say... maybe a waxing charm."

"Chopping charm is considered a household spell," Nikolai said. Harry nodded - he had actually been rather surprised when he had learned that bit.

"If you're feeling sick then maybe we should drop by the hospital wing and get you a headache potion," Harry suggested, looking at Truls. The blond boy once again refused, with a small smile on his lips.

"I'll be fine soon enough," Truls said. "Really, Harry, you needn't worry."
"Our next Charms lesson is tomorrow morning," Petronella said. "I'm off to the library, I suppose. Anyone tagging along?"

"I will," Björn said. "I have some other books I need to check out anyway." Harry and Truls didn't stay with the others to sort out who'd go to the library and who wouldn't, continuing their way together towards the apartment complex instead.

"I'll just quickly do my homework, have a shower, get changed and then I'll come by," Truls said. Harry nodded.

"You'll stay the night, right? Want me to make dinner or anything?"

"Personally, I'm not hungry, but if you want to eat then fine."

"Nah," Harry said, smiling. "See you in a few hours, Truls." He waved to his best friend before entering his flat and closing the door behind him. Aside from the charms homework, he'd only need to quickly finish his Dark Arts essay and then have a shower as well. He wasn't actually all too sure about how to give anyone a massage, but he did have a vague idea.

Besides, Truls would guide him if he did anything wrong.

"You finished delivering a file to me," Tom said, planting the carefully constructed images into Crouch's memory. "And now you're leaving. If you wrote down any notes regarding this task I gave you, you'll simply dismiss them as something unimportant and feel the urge to destroy those papers immediately. You can leave now."

"Yes, my Lord," the dazed man replied, scrambling up. He was blinking rapidly and seemed slightly unbalanced, which, from Tom's point of view, wasn't an uncommon look on him. Crouch had always come across as slightly unbalanced, regardless of whether he was affected by magic or not.

Tom watched him leave, before sighing and disposing of the vial. It was done. He'd have to wait for a few long hours before opening the connection, but that task wasn't difficult at all. The toughest part had been brewing the potion, and he had, of course, succeeded in that already. Erasing Crouch's memories had been just a step of caution – Tom knew how dangerous curiosity in other people could be.

"Well, look at that smile," Nagini hissed, lifting her head up from behind a pile of books on the table nearby. "Something good happened?"

"You could say that," Tom said, brushing his fringe to the side and sighing, feeling content. "Something potentially good, indeed." He was so close to achieving his goal that it made him feel almost giddy.

He wouldn't be able to control the body of the target – in fact; he wouldn't be able to even affect the target's thoughts. This was more of a way for Tom to see through the target's eyes for a limited amount of time and hope that Potter would actually trust the person with his secrets or reveal something about himself. The only way for Tom to really be able to control the target's body would be if the target was asleep or unconscious for some reason.

He had plucked out the name Kettil from Crouch's mind, and assumed that to be the target's name. How close was Kettil to Harry? In a way, Tom hoped for them to be quite close, for him to be able to benefit from the close ties between the two. On the other hand it felt… strange to think that the strange child had a close friend. Tom didn't know why it felt odd – it just did.
'Even if Potter doesn't reveal any of his secrets,' Tom thought, sitting down on his chair, 'at least I might figure out how to deal with him. What to bribe him with. Or what to threaten him with.' All of his plans seemed to be going well enough, but the biggest elation was brought by the feeling that soon the Potter Problem would be solved.

"About time," Tom muttered.

"Talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity, you once told me," Nagini hissed. "I'd start worrying, if I was you."

"Don't be foolish, Nagini," Tom sneered. "I was simply thinking that soon Potter—"

"Oh no, not the dead-alive boy again."

"— will be a problem of the past."

"You mean," Nagini hissed, sounding far too sceptical for a snake, "that if you figure him out you'll… what, kill him? Stop thinking about him? Stop talking to him? Forget about him?"

"Well," Tom started hesitantly. It was a good question – what would he do after figuring Potter out? He didn't feel like killing the boy and the thought of purposefully treating him like a stranger didn't sound… natural, oddly enough. It made him feel weird. "Well…"

"That's what I thought."

"I didn't even say anything yet!" Tom protested, before taking a deep breath and calming down. "I'll observe first. When I know what exactly I'm dealing with, I'll figure out how to deal with it." If, after all, Potter turned out to be as useful as Tom wanted to believe him to be, he could just proceed with his make-Potter-owe-you-a-life-debt plan.

"Why can't you just let me eat him?"

"I don't want him to die yet. I have plans for him!"

"That doesn't make sense to me," Nagini hissed, sounding disapproving. "I do not understand."

"It all makes sense," Tom told her firmly. "I just don't know how, yet."

*

"Feeling okay now?" Harry asked, rolling off Truls to lie next to him on the bed. The other boy sighed and nodded, the tension gone from his muscles. They were both lying down on Harry's bed, in his dark and quiet flat.

"Yeah, felt good." Truls's headache, however, seemed to only intensify. He didn't tell Harry that, though, opting to just yawn and close his eyes, ready to fall asleep. He smiled, being clearly aware of Harry so close to him, which made him feel… weird. "Happy, way too happy." "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Harry replied. "Besides, you've done it to me too so it's payback rather than a favour. Do you need anything?" Truls blinked his eyes open and took in the sight of his grinning friend, which made his own lips pull into a smile, too.

"Just sleep," he said, closing his eyes again. "Come on, you. We've got charms early tomorrow."

"I'll set the alarm clock first," Harry muttered, and Truls heard him getting out of bed, setting the alarm before crawling back and pulling up the covers. "If your headache comes back in the morning,
we'll go to the hospital wing."

"Mmkay," Truls mumbled, and yawned again. Harry grinned, and settled next to his friend, ready to go to sleep as well. He had decided to ignore what Filippa and the others had told him about Truls, because even if Truls wasn't as good of a friend to them as he was to Harry, he couldn't bring himself to care. Truls had always been there for him, since the time they met. Or well, since the life-debt…

*I really should research that one soon, though,' Harry thought. *Just in case.' It didn't seem so urgent anymore, however, and the idea was pushed away as sleep claimed him, too. The room – the whole apartment, in fact – was dark and silent as the two boys slept side by side on the bed.

It wasn't till a few hours later that Truls suddenly frowned in his sleep, sighed and shuddered, before slowly opening his eyes.

His eyes, that weren't blue anymore but a deep red, widened with shock as they took in the sight of Harry Potter sleeping next to him.
Chapter 19

Tom didn't know what to think.

He didn't… know… what to think. It felt as if his mind was suddenly blank, as if it was void of any thoughts and feelings aside from confusion and shock. So startled he was, that he barely even realized it when his awareness slid back into his own body, undoing all the hard work Tom had put into this project so far.

"Your face looks funny," Nagini hissed, seeing her Master's expression. "Did your thoughts fight and break something in your head?"

"He," Tom started suddenly, still not looking at Nagini but at the empty air in front of him. "He was sleeping next to me. I mean, no, not next to me, but… Durmstrang dorms aren't… he shouldn't have a room-mate, I am sure of that. How come, then…?"

"I don't understand."

"Why would he share his bed with… anyone if he doesn't have to? Are they having a sleepover? Why would he want to…? It's dangerous, how could he trust anyone to not put a spell on him while he's not awake to even know about it? A simple Imperio… maybe I should use that on him. Would teach him a lesson."

"I'm not getting it, friend," Nagini hissed, slithering closer. "I order you to make some sense."

"Shut up," Tom replied, clenching his eyes shut. He scowled, then grimaced, then shrugged and shook his head. "I do not understand people," he said finally. "Or maybe he's… oh, who cares. I tested the potion and it works." He hadn't tested for how long he could control the boy's body, but then again that wasn't what he was aiming for in the first place. If he was to take over the boy's body, it was probable that some of his own features would show – the eyes, for example, and maybe the hair, too.

He had intended for the possession to last for much longer, but no matter – he knew now what to do if he wished to do this again. Too bad, however, that his options were limited in terms of what he was capable of doing while in someone else’s body. Too bad he wouldn't be able to browse through the boy's memories – he'd need legilimency for that – but this would have to do for now.

'I'm thinking too much,' Tom decided. There was absolutely no reason for me to behave like an unprepared… idiot. This isn't me. This isn't the way I act.' To be fair, though, waking up in the same bed as Harry Potter was a strange and unexpected experience. The man sighed again and summoned a house-elf, ordering it to bring him a cup of tea. Nagini was still staring at him, before slowly lowering her head onto a pillow.

"If you kill the boy, all your confusion regarding him will vanish."

"But so will the possibilities!"

"You're beyond my help," Nagini hissed. "Don't talk to me anymore. You might give me the harpies."

"You're the one who started talking to me!" Tom exclaimed, before sighing and flinging a hex at a vase nearby, making it explode. He then frowned and turned to look at his snake. "Harpies? "
"I heard that one of your white-faced people got harpies from a Muggle woman," Nagini replied, before turning away. "He didn't seem happy about it."

"Harpies," Tom repeated, imagining a Muggle woman with a cage full of screaming Harpies. One Harpy would be bad enough, to think that more would be available— but no, Nagini must have misheard or misunderstood. One Harpy would easily be able to slaughter twenty, thirty humans before they'd manage to even wound it. A woman who'd have enough Harpies to give was… not real. Anyway… he didn't really care enough to think about that.

Muggles just didn't make sense.

"Potter," Tom hissed, glaring at the darkness outside. "Harry Potter. Once I know his secrets and solve the puzzle, I'll decide whether or not to kill him." But what if he'd end up not wanting to kill Potter? Potter, with his ridiculous Gryffindor habits would be a bad, bad Death Eater. Tom knew with absolute certainty that if Potter didn't somehow amputate his morals and mutilate his personality, he'd never ever torture anyone the way Tom would expect his elite soldiers to be able to do.

'Maybe I should give him a crash course with Bellatrix,' Tom thought, finding the thought amusing. If he did end up wanting to let Potter live, then he probably would do exactly that.

* *

"Charms this early in the morning should be illegal," Björn said and yawned. Harry, just as sleepy as the red-haired boy, nodded and closed his eyes. If only he could go back to bed and sleep a few extra hours he'd do exactly that. No matter the season, why was the world always colder outside the bed in the mornings?

"Did you finish your homework?" Petronella asked while rummaging through her bag. "I'm so nervous about this. I just ran out of ideas of how to use household charms and I had to redo my list a few times because there were some ridiculous ideas and—"

"As long as you got five, you won't fail, even if the explanations aren't stellar," Heidi replied. "Did anyone else include the freezing charm glacius in the list?" Harry nodded and tried to stop himself from yawning again.

"I did," he said. "Truls did too. And Filippa, who probably has a list of twenty instead of five."

"Björn should get an award for most creative uses of levitation charm and carrots," Jakob said, and grinned. "I mean honestly, levitating carrots to block every orifice in the human body? Can you even do that?"

"With practice, I'm sure I could," Björn replied dismissively. Their conversation halted when they saw Professor Elis approaching with a stern expression. The man pushed past them and opened the classroom's door, but oddly enough didn't step in first like he usually did.

"Now, the lot of you," he said instead, turning to look at them with a serious expression. "You'll go in there and take your seats – quietly. Then you'll open your books and start reading from chapter seventeen onwards till chapter twenty. On Saturday I'll quiz you about it."

"Yes, sir," the students mumbled, and Harry couldn't help but feel curious about what was going on – this procedure wasn't ordinary in Durmstrang. Professor Elis wasn't done yet, though.

"I will not be here to keep an eye on you," the man said, "but do not for a moment think that your misbehaviour will not be revealed to me if anything was to occur. Now, Mr. Marvin…"
"Er, what?" Clemens asked, looking just as surprised as his classmates at being singled out. "I mean, yes sir?"

"Follow me to the Principal's office," Professor Elis said. With a wary expression, Clemens did exactly that, and the others stared after the two till they were out of sight before finally moving into the classroom and taking their own seats in silence. Harry felt strange and even slightly sick when he thought that once upon a time there had been ten, not just eight in a classroom.

'He'll be back,' Harry told himself sternly, remembering Lorenzo. 'Nobody is going to die.'

"What do you think that was about?" Petronella whispered suddenly, looking clearly worried. "He hasn't broken any rules, has he?"

"None important enough to warrant a trip to the Headmaster's office, that's for sure," Filippa said. "His grades are good, right? He hasn't failed anything, has he? Or cheated in an exam?"

"No, no, he hasn't done anything like that, I'm sure," Jakob assured her. "This has to be something else. Maybe some news from his family. If someone is injured, some families prefer to contact the student through the school staff instead of directly."

'I got a message first from Mum's boss, I think,' Harry thought, before shaking his head. 'And then Sirius took over. The school was just informed separately.'

"We can ask him when he comes back. Next period is History of Magic and I doubt that they'll keep him from attending today's classes even if he's in trouble of some kind," Truls said. "For now, we better focus on reading these chapters and prepare for the quiz Professor Elis mentioned."

The minutes passed, and eventually – to Harry it felt like an eternity later – Professor Elis returned to dismiss them. He had come back alone, Clemens was nowhere in sight. For a few hopeful moments Harry assumed that Clemens would be waiting for them in front of the History classroom, but he was absent from that lesson too.

"He'll come, eventually," Filippa said, looking at the others with a worried expression. "Today. Right? Any minute now. Or maybe next period. We've got Ancient Runes and you guys know how much he loves that subject. He won't miss it, for sure. He'll be there."

"Yeah," Petronella agreed, nodding. "He'll be there."

But he wasn't.

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The sound of her quick footsteps echoed in the empty corridors of the manor as Bellatrix Lestrange made her way towards the meeting hall, where the Dark Lord and a few others of the Elite were most likely already waiting. She hated being late, hated the thought of making the Dark Lord wait, but this time… it was for a reason.

"My Lord," she said, curtsying deeply once entering the hall. "I apologize for my tardiness." She could see the white-masked elite, not unlike herself, whispering amongst each other. She knew which ones did, Bellatrix knew all the subtle differences between the masks and the way these fools stood – later on, she would gladly track down Mulciber and Karkaroff for a delightful and clearly needed face-to-face lesson of attitude.

In fact, she kind of didn't understand why they would even need masks anymore. They didn't need to hide their identities and everyone knew who each one was anyway – well, almost everyone. Why
couldn't they just ditch the masks?

'Just seeing them irritates me,' the woman thought, her fingers itching to wrap around the wand in her arm-holster and show Mulciber and Karkaroff the meaning of pain.

"I trust that you have a reason for that, Bellatrix," Lord Voldemort murmured, and Bellatrix curtseyed again, nodding eagerly. Her handsome Dark Lord was sitting on his throne, with his snake on the armrest. What did the serpent tell its master? Did it speak of desires to hunt and maim or did it whisper of secrets only snakes knew? Nagini, the Dark Lord's snake, was truly a creature of great mystique and wisdom.

"My Lord," she said again. "I come bearing good news." She knew that the attention of everyone was fixed on her now. Well, let them stare! She was the most competent one and they really ought to finally accept that fact. She was an example to be followed and a perfect Death Eater in every way.

"Speak," Lord Voldemort ordered. Bellatrix took a deep breath before starting.

"The first team of spies I sent have returned with important information," she said. "According to documents they managed to obtain, there are seven big Rebel camps in Europe, and twenty-four small ones, resulting in a total of thirty-one camps."

"And the locations of these camps?" Lord Voldemort asked. It wasn't evident from his tone or expression, but the news pleased him to no end. Even though the actual amount of Rebel camps was surprisingly large – he hadn't expected there to be so many of them – he was pleased. No wonder the battles seemed to be never-ending.

"The exact locations of only five have been confirmed so far, my Lord, but I'm working on confirming the locations of the rest, too," Bellatrix said. "I sent my spies back to keep working, but if you wish for us to attack—"

"No," Lord Voldemort interrupted. "We will attack after we have located at least half of the camps. Moving before then would be unwise. We will first deal with the front in Italy, and only later shall we attack the rest."

"Ah, my Lord," Bellatrix hurried to continue, in fear of being dismissed. "There is also a little something… an idea, my cousin and I, came up with in regards to the… Tournament." The Dark Lord narrowed his eyes at her, wondering why she would bring up the subject of the Triwizard Tournament in a meeting that was about the Rebels.

"Continue," he said, feeling mildly curious.

"If I could say this to you privately, my Lord," the woman suggested. "I wouldn't want to suspect that some of the, ah, proud parents here would perhaps prepare their children in case they were selected to be champions, but one must be aware of the possible… risks." She shot a smug look at Lucius Malfoy when she said those words, knowing that the man, if he knew what kind of a tournament they were discussing, would do his damnest to not only make his son a contestant, but also the winner.

"Is the suggestion worth my time, Bellatrix?" the Dark Lord asked softly, with a slightly amused expression. "If it is not, you will be severely reprimanded for wasting my time."

"It is to ensure the… enjoyment during the event, my Lord," Bellatrix said, curtseyng again. "I'd be most honoured for your time and attention, my Lord… most honoured indeed."

"Very well," Lord Voldemort said. "After the others are dismissed, you and your cousin are to
"My Lord," Bellatrix said almost breathlessly, wishing for a way to be able to show her gratitude to the man in front of her. "Thank you, my Lord."

Luna Lovegood was pretty used to missing people.

She missed her mother, who died years ago, and she missed her father who was at home. Right now, however, the person she was missing the most was, well, her only friend. Who was slightly odd but, then again, people considered her to be odd, too. Perhaps that meant that they were destined to be friends? Luna wasn't sure but she liked to think so.

She did, however, try to never dwell on depressing matters such as missing people who weren't there and wishing she'd have a friend to talk with. It'd do her no good, she knew that for sure. Besides, being alone wasn't so bad.

At school, Luna was most commonly called 'Loony'. It wasn't pleasant, but she had long ago learned to not pay attention to the names people chose to call her by. Right now, however, it was hard to not pay attention to one Ginny Weasley who was not only calling her 'Loony', but also standing right in front of her.

In all honesty, Luna suspected that Weasley wasn't calling her 'Loony' to insult her, but because she had no idea what Luna's actual name was.

"How can I help you?" Luna asked, smiling faintly at the red-haired girl, who smiled back nervously.

"Uh, well, the thing is," Weasley stammered. "I have a question. Well, it's actually Ron – my brother, who's an idiot – who has a question but he's too, uhm, I'm not sure what exactly but whatever. I mean, look, the thing is, I just want to ask… you know Harry Potter?"

"Harry and I are friends," Luna replied. "He is a very nice boy."

"I don't know him well," Weasley said. "But my brother does. He was curious… I mean, he just wants to know how you became such good friends. I, we, saw you in Diagon Alley that time and, uhm…"

"It's very easy to be friends with Harry," Luna told the red-haired girl. "He's a very good person. Would you like to sit down by the way?"

"Ah, thanks," Weasley said, blushing, and sat down on the chair next to her. "I'm Ginny, by the way."

"And I'm Luna," Luna said with an easy smile. "Not Loony. Not that I mind being called that. It doesn't really bother me."

"Not Lo— oh Merlin, I'm sorry!" Ginny exclaimed. "Ron said that's your name and I wondered how come but I just…"

"A lot of people call me that. But Harry doesn't. He never has." Luna closed her eyes and thought about Harry. What was he doing now? "He'd be a wonderful older brother, wouldn't you think?"

"I, er, I don't know," Ginny admitted. "I have seen him a few times and he sometimes – very rarely –
visits Ron during the summer, but I don't remember really talking to him. He seems kind of… unapproachable."

"It's because he's different," Luna explained, as if it was a perfectly common feature in someone. In fact, Ginny felt as if Luna expected her to somehow understand how and why Harry Potter was 'different'. From what she had seen, he had come across as a rather quiet, serious boy who didn't look hostile but not particularly friendly either.

"He studies in Durmstrang, doesn't he?" Ginny asked. "That elite school. So amazing – I heard Malfoy wanted to get in there but he couldn't. Not sure if that's true or just a rumour, though. I wonder what it is like, there. I bet they have the best of everything!"

"I think that Hogwarts is better," Luna replied, thinking of the place she was in and of the magic surrounding them. "I can't wait for Harry to come here again." Perhaps she should write to him – even if he wouldn't have the time to respond, at least he'd know that she hadn't forgotten about him. The Christmas Holiday was less than a month away… perhaps she could persuade her friend to drop by for a visit?

"You agreed to her idea," Nagini hissed after Bellatrix Lestrange and her cousin, Sirius Black, had apparated away. Tom sighed and turned to leave the hall and head towards his private quarters.

"It sounded interesting," Tom said. "Something worth watching. Far more entertaining than watching those children duel each other, that's for sure. I can't wait to see how the education of the new Durmstrang can be used on Rebels."

"What if your dead-alive boy is the student who has to complete that task?" At these words, Tom paused, not sure of what to think. It would surely be most fascinating to see that do-no-evil brat put in a situation such as that.

"Nagini," Tom murmured, before starting to walk again. "I am very tempted to somehow rig that Goblet of Fire that's going to be used for selecting the champions." Because the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to see Potter being put into a situation that would force him do something he'd rather not do.

"I don't know why, but," the man continued, entering one of his rooms, "the mere thought of tormenting Potter makes me feel… delighted. But it's also very strange… I don't want to torture him, not like I torture others… I just want to… torment him a little bit. Differently. It's not reasonable."

"You two-legged creatures tend to be unreasonable," Nagini hissed, slithering to lie onto a pillow on the couch. "Do what you want and stop being so boring."

"You're the one who made me interested in Potter initially," Tom accused. "You were the one who kept calling him 'dead-alive boy'!"

"If you'd just do something about it, I could start calling him dead-boy instead. Or corpse. Oh yes, I'll call him Corpse from now on. It will keep me hopeful."

"Back to the subject at hand!" Tom exclaimed, and scowled. "Should I or should I not rig the thing?"

"Depends," Nagini replied. "Do you want him to catch people's attention? As a champion, he definitely will. If someone else gets the boy before you do, how would that make you feel?" The snake's words made Tom breathless for a few silent moments, during which the scene of the previous night flashed into his mind.
"Why would Potter prefer to work for anyone else but me?" Tom asked, but somehow he didn't feel fully convinced of his words. He didn't feel particularly good, either. And his good mood seemed to be trickling away rapidly as well. "It's not like anyone can offer him more than I do. I could… make him my second in command. If he'd be worthy of being that, I mean."

"If he disagrees with your ideals…"

"It's not like I haven't convinced people to agree with my way of thinking before."

"And then you'd have to fear betrayal from him. You'd need to constantly keep an eye on him and—"

"Speaking of which," Tom suddenly said, sitting down on a comfortable chair. "I think it's time to retry what I did last night. With any luck, there will be enough potion left in the boy's system still to get this done."

"…Hatchlings?"

"What? No! I didn't—Merlin… get out!"

"Sensitive fellow."

"And stop spying on my Death Eaters!"

* 

"If his mother is sick or something," Björn reasoned, "Clemens might have gone to see her. So he'll probably be absent for a day or two." It was lunchtime already and none of them had heard a word from or about Clemens that would explain his sudden disappearance. Due to that it had been quite hard for any of them to focus on anything aside from thinking of what could have happened to their classmate.

"That actually makes sense," Filippa said. "Want some cheese or butter with those bread slices, Nella?"

"Ah, no thanks," Petronella replied. "They're good the way they are."

"Did you slice them once more?" Jakob asked, comparing the girl's bread with the other slices in the bread-basket. "Are you sure you don't want even a little bit of cheese —"

"Can we not talk about my eating habits?" Petronella demanded, frowning slightly. "What do we have next, by the way? Transfiguration?"

"Dark Arts," Truls replied. "If we keep going by the order of the book, we'll be starting to learn about shields."

"There aren't many shields that can stop a Dark curses," Nikolai said. "And many of them can't be stopped at all. You can only dodge."

"In theory, yeah, a magical shield isn't enough to stop a particularly Dark curse," Truls said, "but if someone flings a killing curse at you, for example, it can be stopped by simply levitating a solid object of any kind to take the damage for you. No curse is unstoppable." Harry, uninterested in the conversation going on, glanced at Filippa, who was looking at Petronella with a worried expression.

'Are her eating habits really that bad?' Harry wondered. The girl was eating bread, and surely she had already eaten something else as well. He sighed and refocused on his plate. Worrying about
Clemens had killed his appetite; maybe Petronella's lack of appetite was because of the same thing?

"Looks like I forgot my book," Truls said suddenly, standing up. "I'll go get it quickly. See you guys later."

"Hold on, I'll come with you," Harry said, standing up as well. He waved briefly to his classmates before walking by Truls's side out of the dining hall and the main school building, towards their apartment complex. Truls looked slightly pale and rather grim, which prompted Harry to ask if something was wrong.

"I just got a headache all of a sudden," Truls replied, sighing and shrugging his shoulders as if to shake off a burden resting on them. "I was alright earlier but... I don't know. Maybe it will pass quickly. Hopefully."

"Maybe you should go to the hospital wing," Harry suggested, frowning. "If it bothers you and makes it hard for you to concentrate..."

"If it continues, I will," Truls assured him. He then glanced around them, and when seeing no one nearby, continued in a much quieter tone: "I was earlier thinking about what you said yesterday. About writing columns for that newspaper you mentioned."

"Oh yes," Harry whispered, nodding. "The Quibbler."

"What kind of articles were you thinking about writing, exactly?" Truls asked. "You can't make them too radical or there will be a world of trouble. Besides, for all you know, the owner of the paper might refuse to publish what you write."

"I'll use a different name," Harry replied, frowning. "And I can't be sure, exactly, but I think that Mr. Lovegood might surprise us." If he was anything like his daughter, at any case. "And regarding the topics of articles... I don't know yet. I mean, I'm not sure. I just can't think of a topic that would help people be... more tolerant."

"Tolerance," Truls sighed. "I think the world is doomed to repeat a circle of intolerance and attempts at racial obliteration. When everyone has the freedom of speech, speeches become worthless. Every idiot's opinions can be heard and for many it's easier to live with prejudice than to muster up the courage to let go of their fear of the unknown."

"They don't realize that they don't know," Harry muttered, frowning again. "It's... people get wrong information regarding a specific human group or sect or something. And if that wrong information is spread actively, then everyone is judged based on... a misunderstanding. Is it like that with the Rebels, too? It's especially bad if the media is what provides us with wrong and biased and sensationalized information."

"I don't know," Truls admitted, unlocking the door of his flat. "I'll just grab my book and then we can go back. Just a second. I won't make you wait for long, I promise."

"No need to hurry," Harry told him. "We still have time. Maybe we'll go back and see Clemens there waiting for us with the rest of them."

"That little son of a mudblood really is planning something," Tom hissed as soon as he returned to his own body. Okay, fine, maybe speaking and writing about tolerance wasn't exactly illegal. However, not only did such topics make him think of one Albus Dumbledore but they were potentially... hazardous.
'What will I do if people start developing morals!' Tom thought. "That would be terrible. I need to do something." Actually, he knew exactly what to do to solve this particular problem. But what would stop Potter from planning something else to make this world resemble a Gryffindor's daydream?

'I need to give him something to worry about,' Tom decided. 'Keep him occupied with something trivial to prevent him from doing anything foolish.' Maybe he should kill off the boy's father? That would leave Potter having to focus on not only his education, but also his duties as the new head of the family. Not to mention that he'd have to organize a funeral and deal with all that grief that was bound to appear in the picture. He wouldn't have any free time to waste on being troublesome.

But no, who knew what would happen if the boy would somehow figure out that his father had been specifically targeted. Besides, in the long run, being an orphan might end up giving Potter far too much freedom to do reckless and stupid things. Although… Potter's father didn't seem to be particularly competent. Or bright, for that matter. He had accused Tom of being a molester, for Merlin's sake! Him! A molester!

'It was unlikely that he'd ever be able to forget that incident. Ever.'

"I could distract him with anything small till next year," Tom murmured. "And then I could rig the Goblet and make him too busy to even think about writing silly little articles. That foolish child." And then he'd kill the boy's father and make Bellatrix adopt him, if only to see how that would turn out.

Unable to suppress his smile, Tom thought about the entertainment that would be provided by Potter if that was to ever happen. Would the boy protest? Would he struggle? Would he run away and give Tom an excuse to declare him an outlaw and start a big-scale game of hide and seek?

'Entertaining these ideas is okay, but I won't kill the boy's father – I decided that already,' Tom thought. 'Either way, I'm glad I went through with this plan. First visit and already I have something to prevent.' He had been prepared to put up with a few hours of boring discussion about… well, whatever boys of that age talked about. Tom didn't know or care.

"I am a genius," Tom murmured, mentally saluting himself.

"Spare me," Nagini hissed. "All that smugness is ruining my appetite. What did you do to deserve such praise anyway? All of I've seen you do consists of you just sitting there."

"Someone is cranky," Tom replied. "I am simply pleased about my progress. Remember when I told you about that plan I had that would enable me to observe Potter better? It's working. It's a success!"

"Based on the information and experience of years that I have gained during my time with you," Nagini hissed, sounding genuinely irritated, "what you're doing is called stalking, not observing."

"Call it whatever you want, I don't care. It's working and that's all I need. Why are you so angry anyway?"

"Your single-minded idiocy is the reason. Just kill the boy and be done with it! Focus on what you have focused on so far!"

"But why?" Tom asked. "I want a bit of a change in my daily routine and Potter is providing it. He isn't a threat, not really. This magazine thing is irrelevant; I'm stopping him from doing it simply out of caution. So why are you so dead set on having me kill him? He isn't distracting me enough for it to affect my work, you know."

"You must kill the spider to get rid of the cobweb," Nagini told him. "You stopped a harmless plan
"but his schemes will evolve and improve."

"It doesn't matter how brilliant a plan is. If I have the information of how everything is going to happen, I can stop any plan at any time," Tom pointed out. "And in all honesty, if it really came down to it – if the boy would really end up being a threat of some kind, I will kill him. I don't want to and it'd be a pity, but I would do it."

"That's what you keep saying," Nagini hissed, before turning away. "I wonder if you really mean it, though."

A few days later, on a Tuesday evening, Clemens returned. They saw him waiting for them in front of their apartment complex, after the last class of the day. He looked tired – exhausted, dead on his feet – and the smile he mustered up didn't reach his eyes at all. Harry very nearly frowned, wondering if the boy had been mistreated somehow during the days he spent missing.

"Clemens," Petronella gasped, and was the first to run towards the boy who looked so grim and serious – a vast difference from what he had been like before his absence. "It's cold here! Why are you outside? When did you come back?"

"Where have you been?" Heidi exclaimed. "We were so worried! We sent you letters and you never answered and—"

"You're not injured, are you?" Filippa demanded to know. "And you're not in trouble either, right? You're not leaving?"

"You're not sick?" Jakob asked with a concerned, even a slightly panicky expression on his face. "You're all right?"

"Your family didn't go bankrupt or anything, did they?" Björn asked, looking torn between worried and horrified. "Man, I—"

"It was nothing important," Clemens cut them off. "I'm... it was just a family emergency, but nothing really worth mentioning."

"How can a family emergency be not worth mentioning?" Harry thought, frowning. 'Perhaps he just doesn't want to talk about it. Yeah, that must be it. It's easier to claim that nothing is wrong than to actually explain if it hurts. I wonder if he needs help, though.'

"I'm actually incredibly sleepy," Clemens continued, "but I wanted to see you guys and tell you that I'm back and in good health. I did receive your letters but I didn't have the chance to respond. I'm sorry about that."

"Hey, no problem," Filippa said cheerfully. "As long as you're back with us and in good health. We tried to ask Professor Elis and even Professor Dietmar about where you were but they wouldn't tell us. Said to butt out and stop asking – well, not in those terms – and gave us more homework. You've got a lot of catching up to do!"

"You can borrow my notes, if you want," Petronella offered, and Clemens's expression softened a little bit and he nodded and thanked the girl.

"Let's go inside," Truls said suddenly. "It's getting increasingly cold here."

"If you guys don't mind, I'm going to go directly to my flat and sleep," Clemens said as they entered
the apartment complex. "I haven't slept well for the past few days and my thoughts are all jumbled. Thank Merlin tomorrow is Wednesday and our lessons won't start till ten."

'I wonder if he'll get angry if I ask him later on privately of what's going on,' Harry thought after wishing a good night to the others and entering his own flat. 'Not that I'm particularly curious, I'm just a little bit worried. A family emergency... It's really none of my business, though. I don't want to make him feel as if I'm prying.' If he'd get the chance, he'd ask, but only if the opportunity came up naturally. He wouldn't go out of his way and he wouldn't corner Clemens and demand answers.

"Family emergency," Harry muttered, kicking off his shoes and shrugging off his jacket while moving to sit on the couch. "I wonder where da— James is. If he's all right. If he's injured. Is Uncle Sirius there with him, wherever he is?" Maybe he could write to Lupin. It had been so long and he really needed to know that there was a stable-minded adult in his life. He could ask if his godfather was all right, although he doubted that Lupin would know the answer to that.

'How strange,' Harry thought. 'Trusting a werewolf. Mum would disapprove, I know that for sure.' But then again, his mother had disapproved of many things, including treating werewolves rightfully at all, not just trusting them. Despite her flaws, though, Harry would readily give up anything just to spend once again some time with her.

He missed her. He missed her terribly.

* *

"How are the plans going?"

Sirius looked up from the books, maps and parchments he had around him, to see Bellatrix standing in the doorway. She looked just as immaculate as she always did, and had it not been for her too-wide smile and for the fact that he simply knew her, Sirius could have mistaken her for a respectable pureblood lady.

"Pretty well," Sirius replied. "I was thinking about how to put that Rebel-task idea's theory into practice. We could use an improved scrying system to keep an eye on the contestants while they complete their task and somehow show it to the whole audience."

"That could work," Bellatrix agreed, stepping further into the room. "Are you going to use Rebels for all of your tasks, though?"

"Would it be too repetitive of me?" Sirius asked. "You wouldn't have any of your fabulous ideas to share, cousin?"

"You want me to do your work for you," Bellatrix laughed. It wasn't a pleasant laugh and it didn't fit her, in Sirius's opinion, even though he knew that Bellatrix wasn't a pleasant person either. "Fabulous ideas? Truly, flatterers look like friends, as wolves look like dogs."

"Ah, but I am a dog," Sirius said and grinned. "You can go and hunt for wolves elsewhere, if you fear them so."

"Don't be an idiot," Bellatrix sneered, and sat down. "How about we make those students battle a bunch of inferi? With Rebels they can be cunning and use as many tricks as they want, but fighting inferi will force them to bring out their real power."

"And where do you think I'll be able to find a bunch of inferi?" Sirius asked, bewildered. "I can't exactly mail-order thirty of those to be taken to Hogwarts!"
"Why not?"

"Because! Just because!"

"You never really grew up, did you," Bellatrix said, sounding wholly unimpressed. "How about Dementors, then? Although they tend to be boring, considering the limited selection of spells that actually work against those things."

"I want something flashy and shocking," Sirius said. "Maybe we can really base it all on a Rebel-theme? Have all three tasks be about doing something regarding the rebels. We'd prevent it from being boring by being… creative."

"How many rebels can they catch and torture in twenty-four hours?" Bellatrix suggested. "Or perhaps, how creatively they can kill their Rebels and we'll rate their style!"

"No," Sirius frowned. "Honestly, no. There will be first-year kids watching this tournament, maybe even younger ones if families will attend with their broods. We have to keep it all within the limits of what's proper. If they kill, it has to be... clean."

"Fine," Bellatrix sneered. "You'll probably have them hunting unicorns and saving orphans from trees or something. I don't like saving orphans from trees and I refuse to watch it happen."

"You hate everything about orphans."

"Not quite. I like making orphans."

"That's beside the point," Sirius said, yawned and stood up. "I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

"How many breakfasts have you had so far?" Bellatrix asked, not moving from the couch. "Also, while planning these tasks, you did remember that your godson might be one of the contestants, didn't you?"

*I*

"I have told you, countless of times – Runes are a language," Professor Didi said with his heavily accented English. "You must use that language to not forget it. You must use it daily to feel it become a part of you. Ancient runes can contribute actively to this modern world."

Harry hid his yawn behind his hand, wishing that he had been able to sleep properly the night before. He had tried, but thoughts about Clemens, of what could have happened to him, kept him awake.

And even after he managed to fall asleep, Harry dreamt of his mother and woke up crying.

'I thought that I had recovered from... losing her,' Harry thought. Could grief really resurface like that? Because last night he felt as if the saying about time healing wounds was nothing but a lie. However, he had felt just fine before that, for quite a while already.

"Runes can be used for protection, in wards and clothes and even skin. But they also can be used for..."

'Christmas break is drawing near,' Harry remembered suddenly. 'I wonder what I should do. I don't want to go back home. And somehow going to Hogwarts again doesn't seem like a good option. Maybe I will really stay here – it's not like that's forbidden or anything. I'll be able to take a portkey to Diagon Alley if I need anything.' Not to mention that it seemed like a lifetime ago that he last talked with Merope and Albus, and if he was alone for the holiday, he'd be able to contact them without worrying about being interrupted.
"I wonder what Tom is doing. I haven't seen him in ages, either."

"Are you okay?" Truls whispered, leaning closer to Harry. "You look rather distracted."

"Just a bit tired, really," Harry replied just as quietly. "We still have herbology, transfiguration and charms, though, so I can't go to sleep or anything."

"Maybe eating something will restore your energy," Truls said. "We've got lunch next." Harry nodded, hoping so too. As tired as he was feeling now, sitting through transfiguration would be pure agony. Thankfully, though, it wasn't a Saturday – he'd die if he'd have to go through six hours of dueling practice.

"I wonder if Clemens is really as okay as he wants us to believe," Harry whispered. Truls frowned.

"Why are you worrying about him?" the blond boy asked. "I'm sure he'll be just fine. Even if something is wrong, there must be a reason as to why he isn't telling us. Maybe he doesn't trust us or maybe he just prefers to keep it private. Or perhaps it's not his secret to tell. You needn't worry so much about others, Harry."

"I can't help it," Harry admitted.

"Would you worry this much if it was me acting like Clemens now?" Truls asked, and for some strange reason Harry found himself blushing. Why would he blush? There was no rational reason for this reaction, and yet he couldn't stop it.

"Yes," he said. "Of course I would, Truls. You're—"

"Oh, gag me now," Björn, who was sitting behind them, said. "Seriously, you two. Slap a rating on it and mind the kids."

"Mr. Lennart," Professor Did said, finally noticing the lack of concentration going on in his classroom. "If you have something more important to say than what I am right now telling you all about runes, then please, do us all a favour and share."

"I was simply wondering if runes can be crafted on air, sir," Björn lied quickly. "Air isn't exactly nothingness, after all. Or is solid material required?"

"I'm sure you were wondering that," Professors Didi replied with a suspicious look. "Stay after class, young man, if you want the answer. I will not ruin my lecture by adding unplanned parts just because of your curiosity."

'Feels like this class will never end,' Harry thought. 'I wonder what Luna is doing right now. The time difference isn't that big – she's probably in class, too. I miss her a lot... Maybe I should ask to spend some days with her during Christmas break. I wouldn't want to stay at Hogwarts since I have my flat, but spending a day or two with Luna would be nice.' He should buy her a gift first, though. He'd need to buy gifts for others too, of course.

Should he send a gift to Tom, too?

'He probably gets tons of gifts from everybody,' Harry thought. 'Adding mine to the pile... He probably won't even notice it. Oh well, if I find something that would fit him, I'll buy it. But I won't specifically search for anything.'

"Now," Professor Didi said. "Much to the delight of Mr. Lennart, I am going to end the lesson five minutes earlier than I should. For homework I want you all to write a list of fifteen pros and cons
regarding runes, with brief explanations of why. Dismissed."

"He's never going to forgive or forget," Björn muttered sullenly as they left the classroom. "Not unless I bribe him. On a scale from one to ten, ten being the toughest, how easy or hard would it be to bribe Professor Didi?"

"Eleven," Nikolai replied immediately. "Your only chance is to ace every exam from now on if you want him to approve of you again."

"What did you say, anyway?" Filippa asked. "I didn't even hear you!"

"I was just commenting on a cavity-inducing scene I was forced to witness," Björn replied. "Just be happy you didn't see it. My eyeballs almost rioted and left my face."

"Oh, put a sock on it," Truls said, sounding unimpressed. "Harry and I were just talking."

"Pity I missed that," Filippa muttered, and Heidi grinned. Truls sighed and shook his head, looking rather annoyed.

"Okay guys, let's hurry and get something to eat," Harry said, changing the subject to something less potentially dangerous. "I'm starving!"

*

That evening found Harry alone in his flat, doing his homework. He had decided to temporarily push aside all thoughts about his future and worries about everything in order to finish his assignments. This was, much to his annoyance, easier said than done.

'For a duel or a battle, runes should be prepared beforehand because writing runes during the battle would slow you down,' Harry thought. 'I wonder how good Tom is at runes. He probably knows and has used a lot of them… I wonder if I should learn how to properly use runes, too.' Harry yawned and stood up, deciding to make some tea, when the doorbell suddenly rang. The boy turned away from the kitchen and rushed to open the door instead.

"Trul— er, Clemens!" Harry exclaimed. "What are you— Come in! Do you want tea? I was just about to make some. Come in and sit down."

"Hi again, Harry," Clemens grinned tiredly, pushing past the shorter boy into the apartment. "Sorry for intruding."

"You're not intruding," Harry said. "I was alone, trying to battle with my homework."

"Ah," Clemens replied, sitting down on the couch and sighing heavily. Harry's smile vanished as he took in the tired appearance of the other boy. Deciding to leave the tea for later, Harry sat down as well.

"Do you need to talk about anything?" Harry asked. "I mean, I can't really say I can give any advice, but if you need to vent…"

"Thanks," Clemens said. "But I doubt I even know what to talk about. I just feel like being quiet. Everything is so exhausting. I… don't want to be alone, but I just… don't want to talk, either."

"It's okay," Harry assured him. "If you want, you can sleep here tonight. I'll just do my homework."

"I don't want to be a bother," Clemens said, but he looked rather relieved. Harry offered him a smile,
wondering if the family emergency was similar to the one he had gone through when his mother died. The mere thought of that made Harry's heart ache and he wished desperately that his family would still be the way it had been before.

"It's not a bother," Harry said. "Do you want to sleep in my bed like Truls does sometimes or would you prefer the couch?"

"Truls does—? Um, the couch, please," Clemens stammered. "He won't be coming here tonight, though?"

"Truls got some pain-relieving potion from the hospital wing," Harry explained. "He has been suffering from a rather intense headache for a while. The potion knocked him out. I'll go grab some extra pillows and blankets so you can sleep anytime you feel like doing so."

"Need help?"

"No thank you. I'll be right away back there with you," Harry called, walking into the bedroom and to the closet, where the extra pillows and blankets were folded neatly. 'I wonder what brought him here of all places. Not that I mind, but I didn't think he considers me that close to him…' Then again, Clemens didn't seem to be on particularly close terms with anyone. None of the girls – except maybe Petronella – and while Björn and Truls both shared Clemens's passion for Quidditch, they never really seemed to spend time together voluntarily.

'I wonder if he'll ever tell me what's wrong,' Harry thought. 'Ah, I might as well finish my homework tomorrow morning. If nothing else works, I'll copy from Filippa. My head hurts and I'm tired, too.'

"Thank you," Clemens said again. Every time Harry looked at him, he couldn't help but feel worried about how exhausted and pale the other boy looked.

"Anytime," Harry replied. "I mean it. You can stay here for as long as you want. Sleep well."

That night Harry tried very hard to pretend that his mother was still alive and James was still someone he could call a father.

He tried, just as hard, to pretend that he didn't hear Clemens crying himself to sleep.
“One week to go before we’re free!” Björn cheered happily as he and his classmates left the transfiguration classroom. “I can’t wait! Mother promised to take me to bet on racing horses and that’s a golden opportunity! In more ways than one, ha!”

“I heard that YSL is releasing a Christmas line this year,” Heidi said, turning to Filippa. Petronella looked up, interested as well. “Will you and your aunt attend the fashion show?”

“I wish!” Filippa replied. “I mean, my aunt is obviously going but she hasn’t said anything about me being allowed to go with her.”

“What are your winter break plans?” Truls asked, turning towards Harry. Harry shrugged.

“I think I’ll stay here, in the flat,” he replied. “And once or twice take the portkey to England to meet some friends, maybe.” He’d also need to talk with Albus and Merope, write obligatory letters to Gildy, James, Sirius and Lupin, look for Christmas gifts and a few other things as well. Well, at least he had already sent a letter to Luna, and he was waiting eagerly for her response.

“I have to go home,” Truls said after Harry asked about his plans. “I don’t really want to, but there are some things that need to be done there and my presence is required. I’ll try to arrange for a swift return, however—”

“Don’t be silly,” Harry grinned. “You needn’t cut off your time with your family for my sake.”

“I don’t want you to stay here alone, though,” Truls insisted.

“He won’t,” Clemens said suddenly, joining their conversation. “I’m staying too.”

“You are?” Björn exclaimed just as they entered the apartment complex. “Why?” Clemens shrugged.

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. Harry wondered if the boy’s reason for staying had anything to do with his tears last night. Clemens had left before Harry had woken up, leaving a thank you note behind. Clemens... just didn’t seem the sort to cry over anything. He was a bit like Nikolai – not as friendly and nice as the rest of Harry’s classmates. Like Nikolai, Clemens had a certain kind of coldness about him. It was easy to forget that the feelings of people so cold could be hurt, too.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” Nikolai said, opening the door of his flat. Harry felt slightly intrigued when he realized that even though Nikolai had visited Harry’s flat quite a few times during the past few years, Harry has yet to visit the older boy’s flat even once.

“I’ll drop by later on,” Heidi said, and Nikolai nodded before pulling the door shut.

“I hate these stairs,” Jakob muttered then. “And I live on the ninth floor. Merlin.” As they passed the second floor, Harry glanced at Filippa who was, just as Harry knew she’d be, looking slightly gloomy at the sight of Lorenzo’s abandoned apartment. Not for the first time Harry wondered if the girl would ever truly get over their friend’s untimely death.

“It’d be wonderful if we could spend a holiday together,” Petronella said. “Maybe travel somewhere, all nine of us. Go explore the world and just... be together.”

“Once we graduate,” Björn said immediately. “The summer right after it, we’ll go. All together. Tour the world or something!”
“You guys must come to Italy,” Filippa said, stopping in front of Harry’s door while Harry dug around in his pockets for his keys. “Even though they’re mostly muggle events, the carnivals in Italy are beyond description. You have to witness the annual Carnevale at least once in your lives!”

“I really envy your life sometimes,” Heidi admitted. “Fashion shows and carnivals, high profile parties and model friends.”

“She’ll show us all that one day,” Harry said, finally finding his keys and managing to open his flat’s door. “Anyone coming in?”

“I will probably sometime later on today,” Filippa said. “One of my cousins sent me a box of struffoli and I’ve been dying to make you all taste some. So keep the tea ready and anyone is welcome to have some.”

“I’ll drop by my place quickly and then be right over,” Truls promised, shooting a slightly irritated glance at Filippa. Harry nodded with a smile, happy that he really had so many friends who’d enjoy spending time with him. It was a bit strange to think that a few years ago he had had no friends and the only way he could pass his time was by reading stories.

It felt like a lifetime since he last read a story – perhaps he could do that during the break. He could read all of his favourite stories. In fact, why wait till the break started? Why not now? The Secret Garden would be perfect. He’d make a cup of hot chocolate and read quietly that evening, everything else be damned.

After his friends would leave, of course.

Harry closed the front door after entering his flat, and after a quick shower and a change of clothes, he emerged from the bathroom only to find a familiar owl right outside his window. Much to his delight, it seemed that Luna had been quick to reply. Soon enough Harry was on the couch, opening the envelope, eager to read what his friend had written.

Dear Harry,

I was very happy to receive your letter and even happier to know that you’d wish to meet during the holiday. Of course the answer is yes. As you know, my winter break starts in less than a week, and I do believe that so does yours. I will be staying at Hogwarts, but I am very sure that we can meet in Hogsmeade at some point.

I am well, and I hope that you’re well too. What comes to my father, I’m sorry to say that our Quibbler is currently put into use by the Dark Lord. For some reason my father was sent to Spain to keep an eye on what’s going on and report every two days. Father says that it’s a pity how the war has driven away the most peaceful creatures. Spain used to be full of dancing morinoleys but now he says there are hardly any left.

I made a new friend! Well, I have known her for quite a while, but only recently do we seem to spend more time together. You do know Ginny Weasley, don’t you? I think you and her brother are friends. She’s a nice girl. Very brave, too.

Ah, I hate to cut this letter short, Harry, but a herd of bluwywings is suddenly approaching, so I must seal this letter and send it before they see it. They like to eat parchment, you see. It’s quite a treat for them, especially if there’s blue ink on it.

With sincere love,

Luna
“Potter,” Tom said, “is staying at Durmstrang.”

“Well, he does study there,” Nagini hissed, staring at an oblivious rat that was creeping a few feet away from her. “If you didn’t know even that—”

“Of course I know that he studies there, you overgrown flobberworm,” Tom sneered. “What I meant is that he’ll be staying there during the winter break. Alone and defenceless.”

“Hmm, sounds like the perfect time for a murder. Make Corpse truly a corpse.”

“No. It sounds like I could go and… well, talk to him. About things. Important things.”

“Such as?” Nagini asked, sounding unimpressed. “Dinner? That’s important. And if you didn’t realize it by now, I am trying to subtly tell you that I’d appreciate something else aside from mice and rabbits.”

“Fine,” Tom said, “it’s not that there’s anything specific I could talk to him about, but I still think that I should go. I feel like I just keep revolving around this same issue—”

“You do. And the issue is that boy. Forget about him and focus on something else. Something more important. Like feeding me.”

“—but I just can’t stop either. I’m not even exactly sure why, but there’s… something I can’t ignore about that child. My… instincts or… something of the kind.”

Nagini stretched her jaws, imitating a yawn.

“Maybe I ought to find a competent seer to look into the boy’s future,” Tom said, and sighed. “If I could just focus on my actual work and not be constantly distracted…”

“Go to the battlefield,” Nagini suggested. “Kill a few dozen people. Get in touch with who you really are.”

‘Who I really am?’ Tom thought, leaning back on his chair with a contemplative expression. ‘What a strange thing to say – I have never been anyone else but me.’ Sure, he lied to others almost at every chance he could simply to mock them silently about their lack of intelligence and awareness… but he had never lied to himself, or been in denial about anything.

He still hadn’t decided what to do about the Triwizard Tournament, and whether or not he should rig the Goblet to pick Potter. It was a good thing that the war fronts were in the steady and capable hands of competent generals, because as important as they were, Tom was far too distracted to focus on all the details.

Maybe he really ought to go to the battlefield and torture a few dozen rebels. He had a cause to see through, and he didn’t want anyone to think that he was losing interest in taking over the, well, world, and try to overtake him. The last thing he needed was a third party trying to confuse the clear enmity between his forces and the Rebels.

Tom had learned a long, long time ago that there was nothing quite as dangerous as determined, self-confident stupidity. He, in fact, hated stupidity, and had it not been for the fact that almost everyone was an idiot, Tom would have made stupidity a crime punished with death.

“You say you could kill him if you want to,” Nagini hissed suddenly. “I doubt that.”
“Don’t be foolish,” Tom replied, sounding dismissive. Nagini’s words, however, echoed in his mind and he knew that if he didn’t prove his claims to himself, he could end up doubting himself. He wasn’t overly worried, though.

He knew exactly what to do.

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“If there’s anything you need,” Truls said, for the hundredth time. “Anything at all, just write to me and I’ll come back.” Truls’s arms were wrapped around Harry’s shoulders, and the taller boy seemed reluctant to let go. Harry smiled fondly.

“I’ll be alright,” Harry assured him. “But if it makes you feel better, I promise to call you if I need anything.”

“You’ll miss your portkey if you don’t move,” Clemens said, sounding bored. The look Truls gave him was a bit more than simply displeased, but Clemens stared right back at him, seemingly unaffected. After a few moments Truls pulled away from Harry and sighed.

“I’ll see you in a few weeks,” he said, and turned to leave.

“I’ll write to you,” Harry called after him, and the boy couldn’t help but feel slightly lonely, especially after Truls disappeared with the portkey. Soon it was only Harry and Clemens, standing in front of the apartment complex.

“You two are very close,” Clemens said suddenly. “Very, very close. It’s obvious to everyone.”

“He’s my best friend,” Harry explained.

“Even most best friends aren’t that close. If they’re just friends, that is.”

“And things outside the norm are not a part of reality, I assume?”

“I didn’t say that,” Clemens said, and turned to go back in. “It’s cold here. Let’s go to my place and I’ll make us something warm to drink.”

“Alright,” Harry murmured, and followed his classmate inside. He knew – and didn’t like – what Clemens had implied. He and Truls, they were close. Very close indeed. But they weren’t… they weren’t like that. Harry didn’t think that he’d even have the time and energy to be involved with anyone, what with the hectic school schedule and his other obligations.

Not to mention that Harry needed to focus fully on Tom. He couldn’t afford being distracted by anyone else, be it a girl or a boy. That was why he, while sorry on Luna’s behalf, wasn’t overly sorry for the fact that he couldn’t use the Quibbler the way he had wanted. By deciding to focus on Tom, Harry wouldn’t need to speak to the public at all, right?

Harry and Clemens entered the boy’s flat, and Harry was surprised to see how… still it was. It seemed as if time itself stopped inside the small flat. There were thick, soft carpets on the floor, bookshelves hiding the walls, and weapons on nearly every flat surface.

“Sorry about the mess,” Clemens said, not sounding sorry at all. “I was cleaning up my collection earlier and it’s kind of… unfinished.”

“Not many know,” Clemens replied. “People think it’s… dangerous. As if I, just because I like collecting these, would one day snap and use them all. A bloody stupid way of thinking, but people tend to be like that. They’re so lacking on the inside that they want to think the worst of everyone else.”

“That’s an unusual thing for him to say,’ Harry thought. ‘I wonder what in the world happened for him to… well, change. Should I ask him? Maybe he needs someone he could talk to. And since he has been voluntarily spending time with me, he most likely doesn’t dislike me…’

“A sickle for your thoughts,” Clemens said, putting a cup of tea in front of Harry. “Is something bothering you?”

“Isn’t that what I should be asking?” Harry asked warily, looking at Clemens’s face. The older boy looked exhausted, even slightly desperate, and it was painfully clear that something was troubling him a lot. Harry sighed and stood up. “You’re going to sleep, now. Unless you want to talk about what’s bothering you.”

“Nothing’s bothering me,” Clemens claimed, but it didn’t sound convincing. “What makes you say —, just drink your tea, alright?”

Harry narrowed his eyes and levelled Clemens with a serious look, before nodding slowly. He would stay till the boy went to sleep, and hopefully by then Clemens would have opened up a little bit. Harry didn’t wish misery for anyone, especially not one of his friends.

* * *

“Want to talk about the mission?” Sirius asked, pouring a glass of whisky for his friend. James accepted the drink with a grateful smile before sinking into the chair.

“Not really,” he replied. “I’m just glad it’s over. I have two days of rest before I have to go to Russia for a month of, well, they called it training but who knows what they will teach us there. Maybe a few spells. I don’t even care.”

“Have you,” Sirius started carefully, eyeing his friend with a wary expression. “Have you thought about Harry?”

“What about him?” James asked dully. His hands were rummaging through his pockets, and eventually he pulled out a box of cigarettes. Sirius didn’t know when James had even started smoking, and he wondered if it was stupid of him to feel a bit… sad.

“Aren’t you going to spend Christmas with him?” Sirius asked. “When did you last even see him?”

“He’s a Durmstrang student,” James explained, closing his eyes. “He can handle himself. Besides… I don’t think that he’d enjoy spending time with me anyway.”

“Where did you get that idea from?” Sirius demanded to know, frowning. “Honestly, James. Harry is still just thirteen you know. You can’t just let him stay at the Durmstrang dorms if you’re at home, doing nothing important! The kid needs his family! You are his family. There’s only so much a godfather can do – there are some things only a father can do, can be.”

“Sirius,” James murmured, still keeping his eyes closed. “Don’t pester me about this.” Sirius huffed, drank a few mouthfuls of whisky before speaking again:

“You’re still grieving, and I understand that, but—“
“I’m not sad anymore,” James cut in tonelessly. “I just… don’t feel anything at all, Sirius. I feel like after battling with so many feelings for so long, I’m suddenly drained. I’m not sad, but I can’t quite remember how to be happy, either. It’s like something inside me is switched off now.”

“You need to see a mind healer,” Sirius stated. “Come on, James, old boy. Life goes on.”

“Indeed it does,” James murmured. “But I can’t be made to care. Give it a rest, Sirius. I’m actually feeling much better now than I was, say, a week ago. It’s much easier to carry on once you stop caring about your misery.”

“It’s not that you’ve stopped caring. You’re just resigned to it,” Sirius said sharply, before sighing and slumping against the cushions of his chair. “I shouldn’t have given you anything to drink before bringing up this issue.”

“If you’re so worried about Harry, why won’t you go see him?”

“Because I have work. A lot of it! I can hardly believe that I have an evening of freedom that I could spend like this!”

“He’s going to grow up well,” James said. “Much better than me. He’s a smart kid, he is. Durmstrang is good for him. I’m glad we ended up picking that school, despite the claims of it being, well… a military school. Harry’s going to be alright. He’s an independent little fellow.”

“But he’s still just a kid,” Sirius insisted. “I’m giving you time until next summer. If you don’t get better by then, I’ll take you to see a healer.” James snorted, and repeated that he was, in fact, better than he had been in a long time.

Somehow, Sirius wasn’t quite convinced.

* *

“This is the first time I’ve ever done anything like this,” Clemens said, pulling the covers up to his chin. Harry, who was sitting next to him on the bed, gave him an amused look.

“Done what? Had a sleepover?”

“Yeah, that.” Clemens fell silent, and remained so for a few long minutes. Harry didn’t push him to talk – he knew that eventually the boy would end up telling him what was wrong. If Clemens had no intention to confide in him, he wouldn’t have asked Harry to stay the night at his flat.

“You know when I was called by the Professor, and left the school for a while?” Clemens started finally, hesitantly, his voice barely more than a whisper. Harry nodded, but then realized that due to the darkness it was likely that his friend couldn’t see him.

“Yes.”

“My dad died.” Clemens’s words held no particular emotions in them – they were simply a statement, as if his father’s death had nothing to do with him. Harry suspected, however, that rather than cold and unfeeling, Clemens was simply holding himself back.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Harry whispered. “You know my mother died last summer.”

“Yeah,” the older boy said. “It’s why I came to you. How is… how is your father taking it? That his wife is gone?”
“Not well, of course,” Harry told him, wondering what Clemens was aiming at. The curly-haired blond sighed.

“My mother is… she… already has a new lover that she introduced to us,” the boy revealed, and this time rage and helplessness were clear in his voice. “She had the nerve to bring him to father’s funeral. I… I hate her for it. I just… I knew that she didn’t love father but… the nerve!”

“That’s horrible,” Harry murmured, and offered comfort in the only way he knew how – shifting closer to Clemens and reaching to hold his hand. “She didn’t talk with you before about it? Didn’t warn you?”

“No. She… I did ask her, but she simply ignored me. You know, Harry, some days I feel like I’m invisible. Like I don’t even exist. People don’t reply to me, don’t notice me, don’t… acknowledge me. I feel as if… if I looked into a mirror, I’d see no one. And I don’t know if they’re ignoring me on purpose or if they just honestly don’t notice.”

Harry wished so desperately to be able to find the right words to say, but he couldn’t. Every option that crossed his mind seemed so pretentious and insincere, and so he simply pressed his ear against Clemens’s chest, and listened.

“I can hear your heartbeat,” Harry said quietly. “I know you’re here, Clemens.” The raven-haired boy then felt his classmate’s arms wrapping loosely around him, and he did not shrug them off.

“Sometimes I wish I was like Truls,” Clemens whispered. “But I can’t feel the way he does.” Harry frowned, unsure of what the other boy meant, though he didn’t bother to ask for a clarification. He was feeling increasingly sleepy, and although the position he was in wasn’t particularly comfortable, it wouldn’t keep him awake for much longer.

“How about we go somewhere away tomorrow? We can request a portkey from Professor Lyuben,” Harry suggested sleepily. “Change the scenery, the mood and have fun. If we go to Hogsmeade – it’s a nice little village near Hogwarts – I’ll introduce you to Luna. She’s a bit odd, but very nice and I’m sure that you’ll like her.”

“That’d be nice,” Clemens whispered into the darkness of the room. “Let’s do that.”

The sun was setting, casting its orange glow on the snow beneath his feet. He was approaching the graveyard of Godric’s Hollow with steady, heavy steps. He had no flowers with him and no candles either. He wasn’t even sure why he had come here – it hadn’t been his intention when he left his house.

Peter Pettigrew passed the gates of the cemetery and didn’t stop until he had reached the grave of Lily Potter. He stared at the tombstone for a few long moments before crouching down.

“Again, huh,” the wizard said quietly. “I’m sorry, Lily. I really am.” He had never really met this Lily, but that did not matter to him right now. Nothing was like how it could have been, and yet Peter knew that this was how everything should be. Almost. There were still a few things he needed to make happen before he could, finally, move on. Events that were bound to happen and paths that were bound to cross one another at some point. Everything was simply a matter of time.

He was tired, though. Tired of all this. After so many years of doing this, of being who and what he was, Peter wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and sleep, and perhaps never wake up again.

Not yet, though. He had a job to do.
‘James is slightly disappointing, though,’ Peter thought. ‘I know that how he’s coping is beneficial to me, but still… Then again, one could assume our roles have been reversed. Now I’m the strong and he’s the weak.’ The thought of that did not make him happy – not that he had expected it to. His life now served a purpose that had no space for personalized measurements of worth. He was as he did, and without his mission he would be nothing.

Peter sighed, and stood up from his crouching position. Lily was gone, and her death had resulted in a necessary chain of events. It was unfortunate, though, that she died so young, once again. At least she got to see her son grow from an infant into a healthy preteen.

Not that Peter knew much about Harry. The boy wasn’t one of his… targets.

The sound of footsteps behind him made him stand up and turn sharply, fingers curling already around his wand while a pleasant smile was plastered on his face. ‘I should have known,’ Peter thought, once he saw Severus Snape standing a few feet away from him, eyeing him warily. The man’s expression was void of anything that could be called sorrow, but Peter knew that Snape had never been one for showing emotions aside from anger and contempt.

‘I’ll leave him to it, then,’ Peter thought. He didn’t feel like talking right now. He didn’t feel like throwing off Snape’s composure by revealing how much he knew about the man’s past. He didn’t feel like saying ‘I’m sorry for your loss. She was your best friend, wasn’t she?’ even though he could have done so. He just… didn’t want to talk and let words out, because some words were too heavy, some meanings too big, and some secrets too dangerous.

Besides, it wasn’t as if Snape would recognize him anyway, at all. Not in this life. Which meant that Snape would most likely just ignore him and come up with his own explanations eventually – explanations that would be wrong. It didn’t matter, though. Not much mattered anymore.

Peter’s pleasant expression didn’t change as he walked past the taller man, unwilling to risk having anything happen by staying for too long in his presence. There was an unpleasant feeling in his stomach and everything felt so wrong, even though he knew that nothing was out of order. He knew it as well as he knew his reasons for doing all this.

Atonement.

In Hogwarts, one Gilderoy Lockhart was sitting by the windowsill, watching the beautiful scenery outside. Behind him, Sybill Trelawney was pushing herbs into her bottle of firewhisky, and she didn’t look up from her task even when she heard Gildy sigh heavily.

“This world is changing,” Gildy said. “It’s most noticeable when I think about the little ones. Like Harry.”

“Mm-hm.”

“I feel as if it was not long ago that he was barely eleven. And his mother, Lily Potter, she was a good woman. Back then we didn’t think of a big war approaching. We didn’t think about… life. We just lived it. I still try to do exactly that… I just want to have fun and be silly sometimes. All the time.” Gilderoy sighed again and turned towards Sybill with a worried expression. “Am I immature?”

“I don’t know,” Sybill said, “but being mature doesn’t mean that you’re not allowed to be silly. Like, picking fights with adults won’t make you an adult. Pretending to be mature doesn’t mean that you
are. Mature is… it’s a way of thinking. Maturity is all about what’s inside your head, how you think, how you see yourself. Basically… the more you understand how unimportant, insignificant, and ignorant you are, the more mature you are.”

“That sounds appropriately depressing and wise,” Gildy said, nodding. “Depression and grief is what’s in right now. Everyone who is someone is depressed. I suppose one must be, if they want to be part of the high crowd. Where did you quote all that from, anyway?”

“Hell if I know,” Sybill grunted, lifting the firewhisky bottle and shaking it. “Pretty sure he’s dead, though. I don’t quote people who’re alive, they tend to sue if they catch me stealing their words.”

“How terribly inconsiderate of them.”

“Selfish savages.”

“Anyway,” Gildy said. “Harry sent me a letter that arrived yesterday evening – he will be dropping by a few times during the Yule break. The poor dear – once again spending Christmas without a family. I’m just glad that he won’t be completely alone – he did say that a friend was going to stay at school for the break as well.”

“The boy’s father is alive, isn’t he?” Sybill asked, finally pouring some of the firewhisky into a glass. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I must confess I never knew James Potter well. He and I… do not swim in the same ocean, if you catch my drift,” Gilderoy said, and then continued almost hesitantly: “I do admit to being rather appalled and sorry on Harry’s behalf, though. It seems that dealing with family after the wife’s death is… well, Mr. Potter is out of his depth, let’s just say that.”

“I’ve met Potter, years ago,” Sybill declared after swallowing a mouthful of her whisky. “He’d be out of his depth in a puddle.”

“To make Harry feel better, I was thinking about giving him an extraordinary gift,” Gildy said. “Like a… unique pet. Nothing like an owl or a cat or a dog. Something like a unicorn.”

Sybill said nothing, but she did give him a look that told him ‘fat chance’ and ‘are you stupid’ in several different languages.


“How about we give him a Muggle instead?” Sybill suggested. “A pretty Muggle.”

“So many options!” Gildy exclaimed, looking much less depressed than he had minutes ago. “Pull on your cloak, girlfriend, we’re going gift hunting!”

“You know your way around this place?” Clemens asked, once the portkey left them standing in the middle of Hogsmeade’s High Street.

“As long as we stick together, everything should be alright,” Harry replied. “Besides, I sent a message to Luna that we’ll be at the Three Broomsticks – apparently that’s the best place to grab lunch around here – around two o’clock, so if she can, she’ll drop by.”

“Suppose we might as well buy Christmas gifts for the others,” Clemens said. “Although I have no
idea about what to buy. I’m not really close with anyone. Not like how you’re with, say, Filippa or Truls.”

“Speaking of Truls,” Harry suddenly said. “Clemens… what do you know about life debts?” The other boy gave him a sharp, curious look, and Harry continued: “A few have mentioned that Truls cares about me a bit… too strongly. Or something. That his behaviour is strange. I’ve never noticed, however. Björn said, though, that maybe the life debt he still owes me is affecting him somehow…”

“Oh, right,” Clemens hissed. “He does owe you a life debt. I had forgotten. He should pay it back soon, to be honest, because the longer they linger, the more complicated and rooted they get.”

“What do you mean by ‘rooted’?” Harry asked, suddenly feeling worried. He warily glanced around them, not willing for their conversation to be overheard. “Can you tell me what you know?”

“Of course,” Clemens replied immediately. “But what I know isn’t much – I’m not a specialist or anything, of course. It’s just that the longer a life debt lingers, the more entwined it gets with the… mind, I suppose, of the witch or wizard. The side effects of that are basically that it enhances the most prominent feeling he or she feels towards the person they owe their life to. For example, if Truls disliked you slightly before he got indebted to you, he’d most likely hate you by now.”

‘Well,’ thought Harry, feeling uncomfortable. ‘At least that’s not the case.’

“I’ve been told that the intensifying process is faster the stronger a person’s magic is,” Clemens continued, not noticing Harry’s discomfort. “Truls has – his whole family, actually. It’s kind of their trademark. – ridiculously huge magical reserves. I think his lineage does some kind of training for it. It comes with drawbacks, though. I don’t know if you have noticed, but he has a tough time with gentle spells. It gets worse as time passes.”

“I do know that he tends to put too much force behind his spells,” Harry said, “but I didn’t think… I…”

“It’s not something he would talk about,” Clemens explained. “I just know because his family and mine associate with one another pretty regularly.”

“Oh,” Harry muttered, and fell silent. He wondered if he really knew Truls, after all. Well, he did know the other boy. He knew what Truls liked, what he didn’t like. Knew what political views Truls had, what kind of morals and ideals. Knew what he was good at, knew what he was bad at… And yet…

“If it becomes a problem, there are mind healers that specialize in treating cases like that,” Clemens said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry groaned, feeling selfish and stupid. Clemens had just lost his father, and here Harry was whining to him about Truls, and getting comforted!

“He’s your friend, it’s understandable that you’ll worry,” Clemens said, shrugging. “Anyway, gifts. Got any ideas? What kinds of stores are in this village?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure,” Harry admitted. “It’s rather small, though, so I’m pretty sure that we can just… walk around without getting lost. This place has a lovely atmosphere, I think. Really soothing.”

“We have a Muggle-free area like this in Münster,” Clemens said. “It’s really old, but still one of the most popular places in Germany. I bet if we went there now, it’d be incredibly crowded and noisy. This place – Hogsmeade, was it – is so quiet.”
“I like it like this,” Harry grinned. “It’s going to be dark well before we return, so we might as well do our shopping as soon as possible. We can go from store to store and buy gifts when we see and like something that would be suitable. Who knows, we might make some discoveries here.”

“Yeah,” Clemens said, a small smile finally appearing on his face. “If nothing else works we can just pitch in together and buy the whole group a joint trip for the summer. We’d go somewhere away.” The taller boy was looking at the scenery ahead of them with a slightly wistful expression as he continued: “Just for a few weeks. We’d go someplace and just… be. We’d forget about the war and Lorenzo or your mum or my dad or how we’re going to be out there one day finishing what they started. We’d just enjoy a few sunny days having fun and…and just…”

“I get it,” Harry whispered when Clemens’s voice cracked. The German boy’s blue eyes were bright, and the smile he gave Harry was bitter, and yet somehow hopeful.

He knew why he was doing this, and he knew that there was no other way but forward. He needed to get this done to prove to himself that he could do it if he wanted to. The only thing that bothered him was how well he knew how the boy looked, from the exact shade of his complexion to the shape of his fingers. Tom took a deep breath and stepped back from the Rebel he had transfigured to look like Harry Potter, and watched the slightly twitching body for a few moments.

“Very good,” he murmured. It had been rather precise work – human transfiguration was tricky and complicated – but even if there was any internal damage, it wouldn’t matter. He wouldn’t need this thing to stay alive for longer than a few hours. It looked like it should and, oh, even its voice was nearly identical to Harry’s.

“This,” the Rebel croaked, shuddering. “This is a child’s body, you sick bastard.”

“Yes,” Tom said simply, crouching down. It was odd to see such a hateful expression on Harry’s face, but he assumed that it was to be expected. He was sure that if he ever was to do this to the real Harry, the boy’s expression would be quite like this one. “I wish to simply test something, and you are the lucky one to aid me in this… research.”

“Go to hell, you pervert,” the Rebel spat. Tom narrowed his eyes at the victim, before shaking his head. A pervert? Him? He wasn’t sure what he had done for such an insult to be used, but it wasn’t as if this Rebel’s opinion mattered.

“Hell isn’t my destination today, as I’m not the one who’s going to die soon,” the Dark Lord said gently, touching Harry’s face with his fingertips. The boy’s appearance reminded him greatly of his own, even though there was nothing in them that was exactly similar. It was rather odd, really.

“I did not want for our… association to end up like this,” Tom murmured, staring into the emerald green eyes and wishing that he could tell this to the real Harry himself. “But you’ve put me into a tough position and have left me with no options.”

“I knew you were a monster,” the Rebel hissed, its voice suddenly rough, “but I didn’t know you—to children— you—!”

“I’m not talking to you,” Tom said coldly, pressing his palm against the slender throat. “I’m not talking to you. Why is it so hard to understand? Be quiet. This is between him and me.” The Rebel opened his mouth again to say something – without a doubt, yet another unimportant, meaningless insult – but Tom did not care to listen. He could feel the boy’s windpipe as he gripped the throat beneath his palm firmly, increasing pressure gradually.
The boy’s body started twitching and trashing, and to be able to hold him down properly, Tom cast a quick asphyxiation spell on him before moving to press his wrists against the cold stone floor. Tom wasn’t sure what he was feeling, exactly. Usually he enjoyed this, but the feeling he had now wasn’t quite that. He didn’t know what it was, but… as long as it wasn’t a hindrance, he would ignore it for now.

Harry’s slender hands were clenching into fists, and Tom couldn’t quite resist the temptation to touch the boy’s fingers with his own. He wasn’t sure why the boy’s fingers suddenly fascinated him, but… well, he felt no need to dwell on that. When he allowed the asphyxiation curse to fade, the Rebel gasped for breath – big gulps of air, as if he could store some inside his body for later use. Tom didn’t wait for his victim to regain his composure, and cast another curse on him instead.

Harry’s – right now the thought of this being anyone but Harry had slipped from Tom’s mind completely – back arched and he let out a scream that was so full of pain that Tom’s heart thundered in his chest and his small smile widened slightly. He stared down at the convulsing boy whose tear filled green eyes were staring at him before clenching shut. Harry was letting out choked sobs and suddenly, suddenly, it wasn’t so fun anymore. The smile on Tom’s face melted off and the more he watched Harry in pain, the less amusing the sight became.

He pointed the tip of his wand at the boy, feeling an alien sense of wrongness. He did it anyway – cast the Killing Curse – because he did not know what else he could do.

When the green light hit the boy, Tom gasped, as if it was his turn now to breathe properly.

How many had he tortured and killed before this? Many, he knew, and not once had he regretted it. At times he had even enjoyed it. Usually it was just a way for him to calm down, to vent by using torture – it had always made him feel better. But now… now something was amiss, and he didn’t understand— He didn’t know what or why.

It was completely unnecessary, he knew, but he still transfigured the Rebel’s body to look like someone else – anyone who was not Harry – before he set it on fire.

“Maybe we should go with that summer trip plan, after all,” Harry said, unable to not laugh. “We can go buy cards and envelopes, suggest this to everyone so they won’t buy us gifts either. We’ll all just pitch in and have the best summer holiday ever.”

“Why is it so hard to find gifts for people?” Clemens asked, shaking his head. Snow had started to fall, and Harry could see a few snowflakes sticking to Clemens’s eyelashes. He chuckled and shook his head, feeling unexplainably happy. “Think we’d be allowed to just go somewhere on our own? We’ll be, what… fourteen next summer. You’ll still be thirteen.”

“My dad wouldn’t care,” Harry admitted. “I doubt he’d even notice.”

“Similar situation here,” Clemens sighed as they walked forward, from store to store. “I know that Petronella’s parents won’t let her go. They’re really rich and spoil her rotten, but they’ve got their issues, too. I don’t know much about the others, though.”

“Well,” Harry sighed, ready to suggest something else, when Clemens suddenly gripped his arm and grinned a bit too widely.

“Next summer!” the boy crowed. “The Quidditch World Cup! They’re already preparing for it and even though the tickets are not for sale yet, I’m sure I could get my hands on some for the final
before we meet the others again. We can’t go travelling, but I don’t think that anyone will mind a one-day trip to an event like that.”

“Yes,” Harry breathed, his eyes wide. “You and I will split the pay. I’m sure that the others would love that. Björn will call it a betting heaven!” Clemens grinned at this – and for some reason, Harry wasn’t sure how to explain it, but the sight of that smile made him feel just a little bit weird and breathless.

“Alright, since we’ve decided on that,” Clemens said, “how about we go to… what did you call it again? The Three Broomsticks?”

“Yeah. I think we passed it twice already while wandering around.”

“Considering how tiny this place is, it’s likely that we’ll find it soon enough again. You said your friend will be dropping by at some point?”

“At two o’clock. It’s not even one yet, but we might as well go there and get a table for us. And maybe even order something. I’m not sure if she’ll be able to come – I have no idea if she will get permission. I doubt it, now that I actually think about it – but even if she doesn’t, you’ll be able to meet her later,” Harry explained, as if Clemens had been wanting to see his friend all along.

“Petronella would love this,” Clemens said when they, not ten minutes later, stepped into the Three Broomsticks Inn. It was warm inside, crowded and a bit smoky, but clean and welcoming. Harry couldn’t help but think of Tom before he forced himself to refocus on the present.

“Filippa would as well,” Harry grinned, before pulling his friend towards one of the few empty tables he could see. “Let’s order something. You’ll want to taste some Butterbeer, it’s delicious. When do you reckon the World Cup will actually start? I wonder how well England will do.”

“I don’t have much hope for Germany’s Quidditch team,” Clemens admitted as the two boys sat down. “Think Belgium will let Krum play?”

“That’d be wicked,” Harry said, thinking of Viktor. His humble awkwardness and stammers and the expression of shame that made waves of pity almost overwhelm Harry. “I just hope everything goes well for him. He’s a very… lovely person, really.”

“Don’t let Truls hear you say that,” Clemens snorted. “He’s bloody mental when it comes to you. He doesn’t like it at all when it seems like you’re focusing on someone else. He’s probably planning on how to kill me without making you upset as we speak.”

“Don’t say that,” Harry sighed, feeling uncomfortable. “He wouldn’t— Should I talk with him about the life debt thing? If this is really going to be a problem, I think it’s best to, just in case…”

“Don’t fret,” Clemens said, sounding unconcerned. “Let’s just focus on something happy right now and worry about everything later.”

Harry looked at his friend, watched as the German boy stood up to get them something to drink, feeling like he was swimming in a dream. So much didn’t make sense, he was still scared of so many things, but knowing that there were people around him – people he could trust and who trusted him in return – made him feel better.

It made everything seem a little less impossible, and a little more doable.

By the time Clemens returned with two mugs of Butterbeer, Harry smiled, and his heart smiled with him.
Luna hadn’t been able to come, which didn’t really surprise Harry. Christmas break or not, since she was staying at the school, their rules most likely prevented her from wandering outside the school premises on her own. She was, what, a second year student now? Too young for sure. As much as he had wanted to see her, it was easy to push aside the disappointment after the apology note arrived, carried by a brown owl with a red small scarf wrapped around its neck.

“Will you spend the Christmas day itself at the school?” Clemens asked, watching Harry scribble a small note in response to Luna. “I know that I’ll get a word from my mother to spend that day with the family.”

“It’s alright,” Harry replied, thinking of the train station, Albus, and Merope. “I was planning on something like that, too. Spending the day with my dad, I mean. Somehow.”

“I’ll be back the next day,” Clemens said, and then, suddenly, in a completely different and hushed tone: “Lorenzo died around this time, didn’t he? I never found out when exactly.”

‘I didn’t think you cared,’ Harry thought before he gave the message he had been writing to the owl and then waving it away. “Filippa is still… she still mourns him. Much more than anyone else. She doesn’t speak of him often, but it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it.”

“Yeah,” Clemens sighed, his expression rather grim. “She’s good friends with Jakob too, and Grimm knows when he’s going to—”

“Don’t say it,” Harry interrupted, a troubled expression appearing on his face. “Really, Clemens. We don’t know if… We… just don’t say it. That’s… I’ve thought about it, and I don’t want to do so again for a while.” Clemens remained silent for a few moments, eyeing him with an expression that was not exactly sad, but very close to it.

“Sometimes, I wish I hadn’t come to Durmstrang at all,” Clemens admitted. “It’s the best school, yes, and when it comes to the curriculum and what it has to offer – I’m fine with all that. I’m more than just fine with all that. But… their expectations, you know. They want us all to be amazing and great and the best… or die trying.”

“And that is a whole another level of frightening,” Harry replied, managing a small smile this time. Clemens watched him silently for a few moments, before leaning forward suddenly and wrapping his fingers around Harry’s wrist.

“Hey,” he started, the expression on his face showing nothing but utmost seriousness. “No matter what, as long as we’ll stick together, everything will eventually be fine. We’ll survive. When one of us needs help, the other – the others – will help. If there’s something you cannot bear to do, I will do it for you, and if there is something I cannot save myself from, you must save me. All right?”
'Oh,' Harry thought, feeling suddenly breathless. ‘I want this.’ And so he swallowed, nodded, and moved his hand to rest on Clemens’s own. “Yes,” Harry said. “Yeah, Clemens. We’ll manage this.”

“Harry?” a familiar voice said, and Harry pulled his hand out of Clemens’s grip, turning to see Ron approaching. Neville Longbottom was following Ron with a slightly nervous expression, carrying two mugs of Butterbeer. Neither waited for an invitation before sitting down, and Harry saw Clemens’s expression twitch as if barely holding back a grimace.

“Hello Ron,” Harry said, smiling fleetingly at Longbottom before turning to his classmate. “These are Ronald Weasley and Neville Longbottom. Guys, this is Clemens Marvin.”

“Pleasure,” Ron said, grinning. “Just call me Ron, though.”

“I’ll stick with Weasley,” Clemens replied coldly, and Harry wondered if the other boy was this unwelcoming to all strangers in the beginning. Ron’s expression had shifted from friendly into a rather disapproving one, and remembering what kind of a temper the redhead had, Harry decided that it was high time he and Clemens returned to look for gifts. He needed to buy something for Luna after all. And maybe Tom. If he found anything for—

‘It’s his birthday soon,’ Harry thought, before telling himself that what he should have been thinking instead was ‘am I seriously going to buy a gift to the Dark Lord? What on earth could I give him that he doesn’t have already?’

“It was nice seeing you, Ron,” Harry said, standing up. “We’ll keep in touch, yeah? It was nice to see you as well, Longbottom.”

“See you some other time,” Ron replied, eyeing Clemens with a sullen expression. The German boy had stood up as well and was pulling on his hat, saying nothing in form of goodbye – only nodding towards Ron and Longbottom briefly before heading for the door with Harry right behind him. The weather outside had become, if possible, even colder than before. Or perhaps it was just Harry’s imagination. Maybe he had gotten used to the warmth of the Three Broomsticks, that stepping out of it made cold feel even colder.

“I wonder why they’re here,” Harry muttered. Clemens shrugged and glanced at him.

“They’re your friends?”

“Hardly,” Harry replied with a shrug. “I mean… I’ve known Ron for a while, and we’re on good terms, but…” After knowing what real friends were like, it was very hard to consider anything he shared with Ron or Draco a friendship.

“I get it,” Clemens said, nodding. Right then, a particularly cold gust of wind made Harry close his eyes and shudder. When he opened his eyes again, he saw Clemens staring at him with a smile on his face before the taller boy shook his head and continued walking.

If Harry’s heart skipped a beat right then, well, it was easy to ignore.

* *

“You’ve been glowering ever since you returned from school,” an elderly woman said. “Is there a reason or are you doing that to maintain your reputation of inapproachability?”

“Farmor,” Truls said, turning from the window to look at his grandmother. “I’m simply feeling restless. There’s something important I left at school, and I hope that no one will pick it up and take it away during my absence.”
“If it’s yours, you can simply take it back,” the woman drawled, gliding closer. “It would, after all, reflect badly on you if you were to allow people to take what’s yours without any payment. Some people allow themselves to overstep their boundaries.” Truls thought of Harry, and an unwanted feeling washed over him, settling somewhere under his heart.

“If only everything was so simple,” the boy said. “You remember the Marvin family?”

“The German bunch,” Truls’s grandmother sneered, her pale blue eyes flashing with contempt. “Weak. Not in magic, perhaps, but in spirit. They succumb to their desires far too easily, and temptations are irresistible to them. If who you detest is one of them… then you need not make a move. Wait, and you’ll see the inevitable working for your benefit.”

‘If only everything was so simple,’ Truls thought again. It didn’t matter what would happen to Clemens if, by then, Harry would have… grown attached to him already. Then again, there was no reason to worry and no need to exaggerate, was there? It wasn’t as if Harry and Clemens had been particularly good friends before, and one short Christmas break wouldn’t be able to change that. Even if they got to know one another better, what Harry had with Truls would be beyond Clemens’s reach.

Truls was, after all, the only one Harry had trusted enough to tell about the odd train station and the even odder Albus Dumbledore. Truls didn’t know what exactly that all would eventually result in, but he knew that he’d stand by Harry’s side no matter what. Clemens, on the other hand… he wouldn’t be able to.

“Until when is my presence here required?” Truls asked, and his grandmother chuckled, touching the side of his head in what could have been mistaken for a tender sign of fondness. Truls knew better, though.

“The whole holiday, of course,” the old woman murmured. “If you leave earlier, people will talk. And you know how I hate that. We all have things much more important to do than travelling around silencing voices that should have known better than to speak.”

‘Appearances before everything, like always.’ Truls nodded and then stepped away from the woman. “I understand. Excuse me. It’s getting late and I have to rise early tomorrow. Horseracing with Duke Holstein-Gottorp and the Senkilsson heir. Håkon, I think his name was.”

“Of course,” his grandmother replied. “Håkon Hedningen. I do hope that whatever… challenges you will accept in that company will end up with our name emerging as victorious.”

“Always.”

“You may leave now, if you so desire.”

Truls didn’t bother to muster up a smile before departing. He left the lounge and made his way down the long hallway, towards his own room. He could hear the sound of his mother laughing to what was most likely either a tasteless joke or a meaningless, insincere compliment delivered by his father. Truls wasn’t sure where his siblings were, but if any strange deaths were to be discovered the morning after, at least the culprits would be known.

A bit of blood was leaking from beneath the curtain that hid behind it an alcove. Truls, not pausing to investigate, stepped over the growing puddle and continued his way. He wanted to get out of this place. He wanted to be back at Durmstrang, with Harry.

Could he be faulted for thinking of Harry all the time if Harry was the only source of happiness in his
“Tomorrow’s Christmas,” Harry said, staring at the falling snow. “Already. Time flies by so fast.”

“Don’t press your face against the window,” Clemens said, not looking up from the message he had just received from his mother. “It’s too cold. Did you manage to send all of the gifts you bought, yet?”

“Pretty much,” Harry replied, thinking of the small wrapped package in his room that he should have sent to Tom already. “And you?”

“Aside from the Quidditch Cup tickets, yeah. I’ll try to get those tomorrow, actually. Or have them sent to me before the others come back.”

“I’m looking forward to it. The Quidditch Cup, I mean.”

“Me too,” Clemens said, and Harry, still not turning away from window, heard him approaching. Soon, the blond boy was leaning against the window as well, disregarding his own advice from moments earlier. “It’s beautiful outside.”

“Yeah,” Harry replied, feeling suddenly conscious of every breath he took. “It’s beautiful. If I knew how to paint, I would. This is the kind of scenery I’d like to look at during the summer.” They stayed silent for a few long minutes before Clemens spoke up again.

“My portkey will leave at six in the morning.”

“Oh,” said Harry, feeling oddly disappointed. He’d have a whole day free, and it was unlikely that his meeting with Albus and Merope would last for longer than an hour. “When will you be coming back?”

“The day after,” Clemens said, turning to look at him. It was odd, Harry thought, how he and Clemens had been almost strangers but a few weeks ago. “You’ll be alright?”

“Yeah,” Harry assured him. “Of course. But, um… will you?” Clemens shrugged, with a carefully neutral expression.

“Suppose when it comes down to it, I can always leave,” he said. “And once I get back, we can go to… England again, if you want. Anywhere. To celebrate and stuff. Do you like opera?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied. “I’ve never been to opera. My parents went once though, and I remember them being dressed up in fancy outfits. Do you like it?”

“Yeah,” Clemens admitted. He then sighed, moving away from the window. “Want something to drink? Tea?”

“Tea’s fine.” Harry turned his back to the window, and silently watched the blond boy pulling out a kettle and selecting the tea type. It was strange, really, how easily Harry and Clemens had gotten along ever since Clemens had sought him out. It was hard to remember that they had been in rather indifferent – or downright cold – terms previously, after spending the past few days in complete harmony with Clemens.

‘Not quite like with Truls, though,’ Harry thought, smiling slightly. ‘They look a bit alike, and maybe even act a bit alike, but they’re very, very different.’ Somehow, despite their similarities, in Harry’s
eyes, Truls and Clemens were almost one another’s opposites.

“I wonder what the others are doing,” Harry said suddenly. “I hope everyone’s safe and alright. I…
can’t wait for this war to be over.”

“Technically, the Dark Lord hasn’t declared a full war against the Rebels yet,” Clemens said. “So
far, it’s all been subduing the opposition and some scattered battles. When the war starts, it will be a
long road to better days.”

Harry nodded, not hiding the dread he was feeling. He knew that he’d have to soon make a solid
plan of action and go forth with it. Tomorrow, maybe, after his trip to the train station.

He had no reason to wait any longer. Even if he could not act yet, he could plan.

* * *

The Rebel on the floor was screaming itself hoarse, and Tom stood and watched, feeling content.
This was the punishment his enemies deserved. They should know better than to cross him. Should
know better than to cross him. Should know better than to think they could actually reach him, do
something, or succeed in anything.

They never learned, though. Always, always there would be new attempts, new protests, new
challenges, and new fights, and the Dark Lord Voldemort would be required to make an example
out of them. Regularly, again and again. That’s how it was supposed to be. That was the right thing
to do.

But suddenly, suddenly, it all went wrong.

Suddenly, it wasn’t the Rebel, but Harry. The real Harry. He wasn’t supposed to do this to Harry,
not yet. This wasn’t— He had done this just to assure himself that he could. That should the need
come, he wouldn’t hesitate or back down.

He undid the curse with a wave of his hand – a gesture he had done thousands of times before. A
gesture that was now little more than a reflex. And it took him one breathless moment to realize that
it wasn’t working. Harry – Potter, damn it all. Potter! – was going mad with pain and Tom couldn’t
stop it. Time was running out fast, and who knew what kind of damage—

Finite wasn’t working.

Nothing was working.

And Tom knew that the only mercy he could show right now, the only act of kindness, the only
option left was to kill the boy to save him from the pain. He didn’t let himself think about it, quickly
lifting his wand and casting the curse.

He hadn’t expected it to work, but of course, it did. This time. Of course it would work now, when he
partly didn’t want it to.

A fraction of a second after Tom cast the spell – a few fumbling heartbeats before the green light hit
Harry – it seemed that the pain curse had vanished, and by that time, Tom realized that had he
waited for a moment longer – had he hesitated – Harry wouldn’t be dead.

Tom woke up.

He didn’t open his eyes. Didn’t stretch, didn’t yawn, didn’t so much as move his head. Had anyone
been watching, they would not have been able to tell that he was no longer asleep. That wasn’t, however, what Tom was thinking about.

As awareness swept into his mind in swift strides, the only thing he could think about was the nightmare. Dream. It shouldn’t… there was no reason for it to be called a nightmare. It had been just about Harry. Potter. Harry Potter. It had just been about that brat dying.

With a groan, Tom pressed his palms against his closed eyelids. Why was his heart still beating so fast when there was no reason for it to do so? Was it really Harry’s fault? Just what had happened, and why, and when did he become so… fond of the boy? It was, Tom knew, like an addiction that had snuck on him. He had seen it happen to others – men and women who believed that they were capable of controlling their addictions, believed foolishly that they could quit at any time, and when they tried… the bitter truth became evident.

His thoughts were running in circles inside his head, uncontrolled. He felt nearly disoriented, which alarmed him greatly – he had had his fair share of nightmares, but never had one affected him like—

“Fucking hell,” Tom hissed, a surge of rage making him sit up. He’d need to do something about Potter. He didn’t understand the stupid reaction he had, but it was absolutely unacceptable. If only he’d be able to figure out what to do about it. Things had gone too far, if he was affected like that. He had… this had been… This was supposed to be a game. It felt more like a trap now, though. Too much like a trap.

What should he do? What was the best way to deal with situations like this?

Tom was tempted to go and see Harry – but he didn’t know why. There was no reason to go and see the brat. What would that solve, anyway? Meeting Harry had never resulted in any great epiphanies; on the contrary, the mere presence of the boy just created questions out of thin air. Even possessing his Swedish sidekick hadn’t given Tom any answers.

Would it still be for the better to visit the boy, really? He had, after all, told Nagini that he would…

‘Work first,’ Tom decided. ‘I’ll think about Potter later.’

* *

After Clemens left, Harry sat on his couch with the cup of tea in his hand, thinking of what he ought to say once he’d gone to the train station again. He felt as if it had been ages since he went there last… and it had really been a while, hadn’t it? Was it stupid of him to feel nervous?

Regardless – it wasn’t as if he could back out now. Who knew when he’d get his next opportunity to go there without risking someone finding out.

‘Then again,’ Harry thought, setting down the cup of tea, ‘Truls knows already.’ Taking a deep breath, Harry moved to switch off the lights and then made himself comfortable on the couch. He closed his eyes and focused like he had done so many times before.

It was the shift of the air, the new wind that whispered over him coldly, that made Harry aware of the success of his trip once again. The sensation of the dampness of the air sweeping through the fabric of his clothes made him shiver, and when he heard the sound of a train leaving the station, he finally opened his eyes. The air was, if possible, even worse than before.

He sat up and wrapped his arms around himself, cursing himself for not having brought a jacket. Surely he could have managed that?
“It has been a while,” said a familiar voice, and Harry turned to see Merope sitting on a bench nearby. Oddly enough the frightening and vaguely disgusting sight of her made Harry feel better.

“You said not to come here too often,” Harry reminded her.

“Indeed I did,” she replied. “So what brought you here now?”


“Going to save the whole world, then?” Merope said, smiling wryly. Harry shook his head.

“I’ve decided to focus solely on Tom,” he said. “I just don’t know what to do about him.”

“The old man will be disappointed,” Merope sneered, managing to sound approving despite her tone. “What you need to do is find his horcruxes and destroy them. He could have changed their number and location by now, which means that my information regarding the amount of them is potentially inaccurate.”

“How do I find out how many he has?” Harry asked, sounding worried. “And where is Albus?”

“I don’t know where Albus is, and I do not particularly care,” Merope replied. “What I will tell you, though, is that there is a way to find out the exact number of the piece’s of Tom’s soul… and summon them to be destroyed.”

Harry narrowed his eyes warily. “Oh?”

“You’re too young for that now, though,” Merope continued, eyeing him as well as she could with her unfocused eyes. “Too young and too weak and too inexperienced. And worst of all… too bound to the world of the living to do what you must.”

“What’s the point in mentioning the possibility if I can’t do it anyway?” Harry demanded to know.

“You’re too young now,” Merope murmured once again. “But you won’t be so for long. Go back, boy. Go back to your world and train. Learn every spell that comes your way. Study the people, study their minds… and most importantly: study their souls. And when you grow older… I will show you how to make my son mortal once again.”

“Is that all I can do?” Harry said tiredly. “Wait?”

“Train,” Merope corrected. “You are still so young and foolish and reckless. Your peers might consider you mature and wise, but you are still nothing but a child.”

“Then what have I been doing up until now? Everything I have been so worried about… I just… I don’t…” Harry clenched his eyes shut and covered his face with his hands. He felt suddenly so disoriented. So out of touch with everything – including who he was.

He supposedly had a goal now, but it didn’t really help if he wouldn’t be able to do a thing in order to reach it quite yet, now would it?

“The best thing you can do right now,” Merope told him quietly, for once not sounding harsh or mocking, “is to train and become stronger. My son is strong, Potter. I thought you had realized that already. He is strong. Stronger than you realize, stronger than you can imagine right now. Making him mortal by destroying his horcruxes isn’t going to amount to anything unless you’re strong enough to actually defeat him in a battle.”
“I don’t want to kill him,” Harry protested, horrified by the thought.

“I never said you should,” Merope drawled. “But you are a fool if you think that you – or anyone at all – can gain his respect without defeating him once. If you want him to listen to you and see you, you must make him do so by proving to be better than him at something he values.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Which is why I’m telling you, Potter… learn. Train.” Merope looked at him once again before a slow smile twisted her face into a gleeful expression. “Find your own branch of magic, boy. Tom found and mastered the Dark Arts. There must be something out there waiting for you. You simply have to find it.”

‘How?’ Harry thought, allowing himself to fade away from the train station and slide back into reality. ‘How do I even know from where to start?’ Was it stupid of him to fear every step awaiting him in the future? It was so easy to be determined and brave for a moment, but then… then…

Harry didn’t move from the couch for a while. He didn’t even bother to go and switch on the lights, opting to simply be still in the darkness and try his damnest to not cry like a lost little child which he wasn’t, thank you very much. He wasn’t, he wasn’t—

A sob made his whole body shudder. He couldn’t help but regret his visit to the train station now. All it had done was upset him, and suddenly, he was missing his mum again, even though he probably shouldn’t, and—

*%

“You shouldn’t have told him.”

Merope snorted and turned to look at the old wizard who had finally revealed himself from the shadows. “You could have stopped me,” she said. “You chose not to.”

“Had I stopped you then, you would have simply found another opportunity to tell him,” Albus said. “You would doom the world to make your son happy?”

“Don’t bother with that song and dance,” Merope said sharply. “By taking Tom out of the picture, Potter will ensure that an ending will happen. Eventually.”

“At what cost?”

“The price will be hefty no matter which goal he would end up aiming for.”

“And yet, you urged him to save your son and risk the world rather than save the world and risk your son,” Albus said, walking closer. “What are the chances of—”

“Tom can feel it, you know,” Merope cut in, feeling smug. “There’s a connection between the two of them. Tom doesn’t understand it, but he knows. Subconsciously, vaguely, but very certainly – he knows that there’s something about Harry Potter that is important to him.”

“You sent Harry to train, knowing that no matter how much he learns… it is hardly going to matter once he sets out to find the horcruxes,” Albus said then. “You know where he has to go in order to see where the pieces of your son’s soul are.”

“Like I told him already,” Merope said, “restoring my son’s soul and making him mortal again is not the ultimate goal, but simply a step to ensure the success of what happens after. No matter what, he
would need to find the horcruxes—"

“The way you told him about is the only way to restore your son’s soul without killing him,” Albus said, sounding unsettlingly nonchalant. “There could have been other ways. Ways to locate and destroy the horcruxes instead of uniting them into a complete—”

“I know,” Merope interrupted. “I know. But it needs to be done that way. There’s a web that needs to be untangled, and only Tom can untangle it without triggering any of his horribly clever traps.”

“You are toying with Harry’s life,” Albus said softly. Merope smiled bitterly, turning away from him.

“So are you,” she said. “To win this game.”

*

Apparently, he had fallen asleep.

To be more precise: apparently, he had cried himself to sleep. It didn’t really change anything. He wondered, though, if he would ever be able to think about his mother without feeling hurt and lonely and lost.

“If you’re done staring at the ceiling…”

“Merlin!” Harry shrieked, startled and nearly falling off the couch while sitting up.

“Calm down,” the Dark Lord Voldemort said coolly from the couch nearby. “And be quiet. I’m thinking.”

Harry closed his eyes, shook his head, frowned, and then opened his eyes in order to stare at the man in his apartment with what hopefully was a disapproving – rather than just confused – look.

“You’re here,” Harry said. “Why are you here if you want to think?”

“Because it involves you,” Tom replied, waving his hand dismissively. “Now shush.”

‘I’m probably still dreaming,’ Harry decided, standing up from the couch and staggering towards the bathroom to wash his face. What was— Was it a coincidence? Why was Tom— Did the man somehow figure out what Harry was planning on doing? That was impossible though, wasn’t it?

Harry didn’t speak to Tom even after he stepped out of the bathroom again. Instead, he went to make himself a cup of tea and then sit silently on the couch. If the Dark Lord had something to say, he’d spit it out eventually.

‘I should probably be more shocked or awed by his presence or something,’ Harry thought, breathing in the faint scent of vanilla and cinnamon of his tea. ‘But I guess I’m just too used to him. Besides, if I want to actually be his equal in some way, I need to get over any kind of… worshiping. I hope he doesn’t see how nervous I am though. What is he doing here? Just… how did he even get in? Okay, I probably don’t want to know…’

“Why did you decide to spend the holiday alone?” Tom asked suddenly.

“Who would I spend it with?” Harry said, not looking up from his tea. “My dad’s still busy mourning for my mother, and it’s just much easier to stay here than to—”

“Alright,” Tom interrupted. “And everyone else is with their families, I take it?”
“Well, Clemens Marvin will be coming back here tomorrow,” Harry said. “If you know the Marvin family.”

“Hmh. Vaguely.”

‘Is he pouting? No… I don’t think so. He doesn’t have a reason to pout, does he?’

“What brought you here?” Harry finally asked again. “And are you planning on staying for lunch or dinner? What time is it anyway?”

“It’s half past three or so,” Tom replied. “And I told you… I’m here to think.”

“Don’t hurt yourself doing that,” Harry muttered, turning away.

“What was that?” Tom asked sharply, narrowing his eyes and glaring at the boy. “Oh yes. I remember how you were in the beginning. A cheeky little thing, making enemies out of people far stronger than you could ever be.”

That actually stung, but Harry didn’t grimace or let it show. He would just… need to work on proving Tom wrong, right? Somehow.

“You’re in a bad mood,” was all he said instead. ‘I won’t get into any fights with you. Not now. Not yet.’ It wasn’t as if he was in the best of moods at the moment either. In fact, he was not only exhausted and wary and even slightly hurt, but he was also feeling nauseous.

‘My head hurts, too,’ Harry thought, clenching his eyes shut and putting down his cup of tea, right next to the other cup he had left there on the table hours ago. ‘I hope I’m not getting sick or anything. Or maybe… could this be some kind of a side effect from the train station? No… I don’t think so. I mean, I’ve never before left that place feeling like this. And it’s been hours since I left, anyway. Why would it make me feel sick now rather than immediately after returning?’

“What do you know about life debts?” Harry asked suddenly. Had he asked this question before? Had he actually received an answer? He wasn’t sure. If he ever had, then he couldn’t remember.

“What a strange question,” Tom replied. “Why are you asking me that?”

“Someone has owed me a life debt for slightly over two years,” Harry said, still keeping his eyes closed. “And I fear that it’s somehow affecting him—”

“Owing someone a life debt for so long is definitely going affect the poor bastard,” Tom cut in, sounding slightly gleeful. “Who is it?”

“Just a classmate of mine,” Harry replied quietly. “Could you please tell me what you know about life debts?”

“What for?” Tom sneered. “Because I’m such a nice, charitable person?” At this, Harry opened his eyes and glared at the older man.

“Are you going to be like that all day?” Harry demanded to know, his ire making him forget for a moment who exactly he was speaking to. Or rather, it made him care less. “Because if you’re going to act like a selfish brat, I might as well go to sleep.”

“Watch your words, Potter. I have killed people for le—” Tom didn’t finish whatever he was saying, falling abruptly silent and looking even less pleased. Harry shook his head.
“I don’t even want to know what’s going on in that head of yours,” the boy said. “I’m tired though, and I need to rest. And then I should start working on homework and practicing other stuff. There’s so much to do—”

“Potter,” Tom interrupted, finally deciding on which issue to ask about first. “How can you talk with the dead?”

Soon.

A year, maybe.

To Peter, a year was a short time. That hadn’t always been the case, but the longer one lived, the faster time seemed to go for them. At least, that’s what he thought.

James Potter was currently at home, most likely either drinking himself into an early grave or pretending to be trying to get better. It didn’t matter though. It didn’t matter what he was doing or how badly he was coping because he could do nothing to stop Peter’s plans.

How odd it was to atone through methods that would bring only misery to everyone involved.

Peter took a deep breath and turned away from the Potter Manor. He didn’t need to go there yet. Soon, he’d have to, but now wasn’t the time.

‘One year,’ he thought. ‘One year, during which I’ll have to execute my plan carefully. It won’t fail. It mustn’t fail. I’m sorry, Harry. I’m sorry, Lily. I’m sorry, James.’ He wasn’t sorry enough to stop though. Not that he could.

With a sigh, Peter apparated away from Godric’s Hollow only to appear at the outskirts of Hogsmeade. That village had always been an important place to him. So bittersweet, it hurt his heart and yet precious enough to heal it time and time again. If only he could be the way he used to be – all those years ago. All those dimensions ago.

One year.

In a year, where would Harry Potter be? It was strange, really, how everything seemed to revolve around the boy. How no matter how different the worlds were, Harry Potter was always special.

“Excuse me,” someone said, and Peter turned to see a young woman with bright blue eyes and a wide smile offering him a card of some kind. “We’re havin’ a sale down yonder for the whole week, if yer interested.”

“What do you sell?” Peter asked, accepting the card, now recognizing it to be an advertisement of some kind. “Potions?”


“Any cheering potions?” Peter wanted to know. “Or any for some ghostly pranks?”

“We’ve got illusions but those aren’t potions,” the woman replied. “Yer welcome to see, I guarantee yer gonna find what yer looking for!”
“Thank you,” Peter said, nodding and pushing the card into his pocket. “I think I will drop by sometime today. How long will the sale last, you said?”

“A week,” the woman said. “Hope to see ye there. Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” Peter replied and turned away thinking of the possibilities. Was this a coincidence? It wasn’t as if he’d need to do anything – not yet, really – but if he used this to his advantage…

‘It needs to be done after all,’ the man thought, walking towards the closest pub. ‘And as soon as I’m done with this, I’ll move to the next one. It’s been… good, though. And easy.’

One year.

He’d need to wait for one year more.

Just one.

* *

It was terribly predictable, although definitely genuine, how Potter dropped the cup he was holding due to shock. The cup broke to pieces on the floor, and since Tom didn’t want to hear the boy whining, he went ahead and fixed the cup with a nice, polite `reparo`.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry said, his voice an octave higher than it should have been. Tom wasn’t impressed. He was, though, slightly relieved to know that Harry truly sucked at lying.

“It was only a matter of time before I found out, really,” the Dark Lord said, feigning nonchalance. “Honestly, just think about all the conversations we’ve had in the past – how could you not have realized that I knew already? Do you think me an idiot?”

“I—”

“Do not disrespect me by lying, Harry.”

Harry took a deep breath, swallowed and resisted the temptation to change the subject. Instead, he moved to sit down on the couch again while contemplating what to say, exactly.

“How can you talk with the dead?” Tom asked again, his voice still not betraying any of his emotions or actual thoughts. “Where did you learn that skill from?”

“I didn’t learn it from anywhere,” Harry finally admitted hesitantly, feeling nervous and wary, but also, oddly enough, rather reckless. Maybe revealing this to Tom would change something.

‘I say revealing, as if I hadn’t already,’ Harry thought before continuing: “I just dream sometimes. It’s been happening for a few years, but not very often. It’s pretty rare, really. And I don’t really get to know anything useful… I’m not even sure if it’s real or—”

“You mentioned Merope once,” Tom interrupted. “I want you to elaborate.”

“She’s there,” Harry admitted, feeling suddenly sweaty and pretty much resigned to his fate. “Not always. Not in the beginning. But sometimes she’s there and… she… tells me things.”

“What kind of things?”
‘Stop asking me,’ Harry thought, forcing himself to not panic. “Usually it’s me just telling her stuff. Like… about school. And other things I get worried about. She listens and gives me advice.”

“I see,” Tom drawled, his red eyes still fixed on Harry. “Well then. I forbid you from doing that again.”

“Excuse me?” Harry blurted, his eyes widening with surprise. “You what?”

“You do not, perhaps, know what kind of a person this Merope is,” Tom said, narrowing his eyes at Harry. “It could be dangerous, and I forbid you from contacting her again.”

“Maybe I’m tired, but that doesn’t make sense,” Harry muttered, shaking his head and feeling slightly less alarmed. “Is this what you came here for?”

‘Not really,’ Tom thought. ‘I’m not even sure what I came here for.’ “I was bored. And I needed to think. And yes, actually, this is a rather important matter so of course I wanted to talk about it. Don’t think I won’t bring it up again at some point.”

“You’re the Dark Lord,” Harry said, sounding rather unimpressed. Was the boy getting too used to Tom’s presence? The older wizard wasn’t sure if he disliked that thought nearly as much as he perhaps should have. “I’m sure you have something far more important and entertaining to do than to sit here. Isn’t there a war going on out there somewhere?”

“No,” Tom replied. “Absolutely not.”

“That’s a lie and you know it.”

“You do realize that most people cower and bow before me? And those who don’t, end up dead, I’ll have you know.” Harry stared at Tom for a few silent moments with a rather peculiar expression. The Dark Lord did not think that anyone has ever looked at him with such a strange mix of fondness and disapproval before.

“I am not amused,” Harry said. “And you know what, I give up on this.”

“Give up on what?” Tom demanded to know, feeling slightly alarmed. “You’re thirteen. You’re too young to give up on anything.”

“You’re the Dark Lord,” Harry said, standing up and wandering towards his bedroom and leaving the door ajar behind him. “But I’ll just forget about that. If you insist on behaving like—”

“I can’t hear you,” Tom called after the boy. “Get back here and explain yourself.”

“I said,” Harry huffed, emerging from the bedroom a few moments later, carrying a small box. “I said that if you’re going to keep acting like that, I’m not going to treat you like you’re some almighty Dark Lord even though I know that you are. Kind of.”

“Not just kind of,” Tom said sullenly. “I am. And what’s that?”

“It’s called a gift,” Harry replied, rolling his eyes. “Merry Christmas, since we’re spending it together, apparently.”

Tom stared at him for a few moments with an unreadable expression before the gift flew from Harry’s grip right into the man’s hands.

“Well then,” Tom said, shoving the small box into one of his pockets. “You’re correct. We’re
Sirius shrugged off his cloak and kicked off his shoes as soon as he arrived home. He was exhausted, and not just because of having to spend hours talking with James about the same old grief plaguing the man.

‘When did it become like this,’ Sirius wondered tiredly. ‘That I have to spend time with him, rather than get to spend time with him?’ Well, at least his work was going well, even if his personal life wasn’t. Planning next year’s tournament had proven to be something quite entertaining.

‘Speaking of entertainment,’ Sirius thought, ‘I wonder how the wolf is doing.’

The wolf was, apparently, doing rather well. It was reading a book – yet again – and looking like it enjoyed its life. Somehow, that irritated Sirius a little bit.

“What a simple life you’re leading,” he said, nearly glaring when the wolf looked up from the book. “You don’t have to worry about anything, do you?”

“Did the stores run out of your shampoo again?” Lupin asked in a maddeningly, frustratingly polite manner that made Sirius hate him just a little bit more.

“No,” the Death Eater said, trying to not sound insulted. “You don’t have to worry about politics or economy or anything at all. You don’t have to worry about relationships—”

“Because I don’t have any.”

“Because you don’t have any, yes, but that’s not the point. What am I going to tell Harry once he gets back from school only to see that his father isn’t even trying to get better?”

“Just don’t leave him alone,” Lupin said, sounding far too gentle for a monster. “That child deserves better.”

“Well yes,” Sirius said and then eyed the wolf suspiciously. “How’d you know that, anyway?”

“I have had the pleasure to speak with him a few times, if you remember,” Lupin revealed, finally closing his book and putting it down. “He is a remarkable child.”

“Lily was so proud of him,” Sirius agreed grimly. “Which is why it makes me so angry to see James failing him now. I just… I’ve seen what happens to smart, bright kids who’re angry at the world. And what if that’s how Harry will end up? He has— I’ve seen it happen. My bro— I’ve seen it happen, okay?”

“I don’t doubt you,” Lupin said, and he gave Sirius a look that was both pitying and understanding. Sirius felt partly angry at him and partly… something else. Something that almost made him think that maybe there was hope for werewolves. That maybe they—

“I’m sorry you’re not human,” Sirius said sincerely. Lupin’s hopeful, slightly friendly expression faltered, and he swallowed before looking down and reaching for his book again.
“Why?” Lupin asked suddenly. “What traits are so admirable in humans and non-existent in all the other races? Do you think that you, as a human, are more genuine and true and good than every other race? On what basis?”

“It’s a matter of genetics,” Sirius said. “And magic. There are weaknesses in you that do not exist in me—”

“I could say the same.”

“If you are equal to humans, or maybe even better… then why has your race fallen into the state it’s in right now? Think about that.”

“You could become a good man, Lord Black,” Lupin said. “If you could simply see more than what’s in front of you, understand more than you see, and hear more than what you’re told.”
“When you said ‘eat out,’” Harry yelled over the wind, clutching a rapidly cooling cup of noodles while squinting through the snowstorm they seemed to be in the middle of, “I thought you meant that we’ll be eating in a restaurant!”

“Boring,” Tom replied, pulling Harry to walk right next to him, causing some of the soggy noodles to fall out of the cup. Clutching the boy’s shoulder Tom wondered if the brat would ever grow taller. “Keep walking.”

“Where are we going!”?

“You’ll find out eventually.”

‘He’s insane,’ Harry thought sullenly and sniffed the cup of noodles before wondering if it would be horrible of him to just throw it away. “Why are we in the middle of a snowstorm?”


“The snow—”

“It’s winter. Of course there will be a little bit of snow.”

“A little bit—!?” Harry exclaimed, before snapping his mouth shut and shaking his head. He was getting tired of screaming to be heard and decided to wait until they were in some other place with less wind and less snow – hopefully soon.

After walking for a few moments, Harry saw a dark shape in the distance. He couldn’t quite tell what it was with the snow obstructing his view. It was a big building of some kind, though. Maybe they were going to a restaurant after all? Why on earth didn’t Tom just apparate them there, then?

“Where exactly are we?” Harry asked. “On the map. Which country, even?”

“Can’t say.”

“Are we still in Europe?”

“Hm.”

“That’s not an answer,” Harry said, scowling. He glared at the cup of noodles – if they could be called that anymore – and let it fall from his hands. In but a few seconds, it was buried beneath a new layer of snow.

“We’ll be there soon,” Tom replied absently. Harry sighed and narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out what the building in the distance actually was. It looked a little bit like a… fortress, actually.

“What is this place?” Harry asked as soon as they were close enough to see the huge iron gates. “You’re not going to kill me and leave my body to rot there?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Tom sneered. “I’m not going to kill you.” The man scowled then, not liking in the least how true his statement was. It wasn’t comfortable at all to realize that, for once, there was someone he would mind getting rid of.
“Well, that’s nice to know,” Harry huffed. “Why not apparate there directly though?”

“I have wards preventing apparating to and from this place,” Tom explained, and with a wave of his hand, the gates started opening, creating a horrible creaking sound. Harry cringed, allowing himself to be dragged inside.

Not that the ‘inside’ was much better. Safe from the wind and snow, sure, but it was by no means warm. The area inside the fortress was cold and dark and grim, and Harry doubted that anyone would willingly live there.

“Come on, we’re going to the highest floor,” Tom said, and Harry hurried after the Dark Lord, feeling increasingly alarmed. This kind of place wasn’t the ideal set up for good news. Was Tom going to ask Harry a bit more about his talking to the dead thing?

It was, Harry believed, such a big thing that Tom really would not just let it be. The man must be up to something.

‘Even if he doesn’t question me about it today,’ Harry thought, ‘he definitely will do so at some other point. He’s crafty.’

As they walked through the corridors and up what felt like an endless staircase, Harry saw no doors – none at all – but instead small windows with bars.

‘Is this a storage of some sort? It looks like it could be… But why bring me here? Surely he isn’t planning on giving me a gift in return?’

“No,” Tom said, stopping in front of the first door Harry had seen since entering the fortress. “This room is divided to two parts. One part is for you and I to stand in while the other… is for the person I brought you here to see.”

“Who is in there?” Harry asked, feeling suddenly nervous. “Why… I just… What is this place?”

“This is my gift to you,” Tom replied with a strange little smile. “Nothing is more precious than good advice, Harry Potter. Remember that. Knowledge and power and what you can and should do with them. However… don’t reach too far lest you fall.”

‘If only he knew what Merope roped me into doing,’ Harry thought, swallowing.

“As for what this place is,” Tom continued. “It’s called Nurmengard.”

“I heard from your grandmother,” an elderly man started, reaching for his glass of wine, “that you are… pursuing something that belongs to the Marvin family.”

“Inaccurate,” Truls snapped aggressively, the mere thought of referring to Harry as something that belonged to Clemens making him feel sick. “He doesn’t belong to the Marvins. What do you care, anyway?”

“He,” repeated the man, an unpleasant smile appearing on his face. “Don’t tell me you’ve gotten yourself attached to someone. Come on, son. That’s not good.”

“Again, what do you care?”

“Having bonds like that makes you vulnerable,” Mr. Kettil said. “And what leaves one of us
vulnerable leaves *all* of us vulnerable as well.”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about,” Truls said, narrowing his eyes. “I’m surprised at having *you* lecture me about this, though.”

“We’re not so different, you and I,” Truls’s father said, lighting up a cigar. “Your mother doesn’t get attached to people, and your siblings seem to take after her… no matter how much they all pretend. You and I, though. I *know* how it feels.”

“I don’t think—” Truls started, then bit his lip and simply shook his head. There was no need or use to explain himself. Instead, he said, “Contrary to what you seem to think, I have everything under control.”

“Hardly, if you feel that a *Marvin* is a source of worry,” Mr. Kettil sneered. “And don’t even claim to not be worried – your focus was clearly elsewhere, to nearly *lose* the race against Duke Holstein-Gottorp and the Senkilsson heir.”

“Their horses were excellent,” Truls pointed out. “Besides, if I had beaten them too clearly, the audience would have grown bored of the predictable competition.”

“That’s my boy, always ready with an excuse,” Mr. Kettil said, grinning slightly. “Now, though, back to your problem—“

“I don’t *have* a problem.”

“Your grandmother said that it’d work well enough if you left the Marvin mess up on his own… but you should never let your success depend on luck.”

“Weren’t you *just* discouraging me against, how did you call it, getting attached?” Truls said, before shaking his head and turning away.

“I’m not telling you to get attached,” Mr. Kettil claimed. “I’m telling you to not *lose*. I know you – you’re attracted to the challenge, not the person. That’s how you and I are. You’re getting used to being attracted, which creates a sense of attachment. The sooner—”

“Just shut up, already.”

“—you get over it, the better. Grab your guy, drug him, do whatever your naïve little imagination tells you to do with him, and get it out of your system. You don’t have the time for this. For him, whoever he is. You can’t afford the bonds you *think* you want.”

“I can afford what I want,” Truls said calmly, eyeing his father with a calculative expression. “The question is: can *you* or anyone else afford to try and stop me? You know that regardless of the much praised traits in my siblings that you just mentioned… you won’t leave the family inheritance to *them* unless you want for this family fall into ruin within a year.”

“You’d leave, then?” Mr. Kettil sneered, amusement vanishing from his expression and turning into something much darker at the sight of his son smiling.


However, if his father outlived his usefulness, *well*… Didn’t the man tell him to not get attached to people, anyway?
The name Nurmengard rang vaguely familiar, but before Harry could focus on trying to remember what it meant to him, the door was pushed open and he was let into the room. It was cold there. Not as cold as in the corridors, but cold nevertheless. The room itself was round, and in the middle, there was a set of vertical bars dividing the room into two parts.

“Bringing me guests, now?” a wheezy voice said, and startled, Harry focused on its source. Sitting behind the bars was a frail old man whose skull-like face and sunken eyes combined with the nasty smile made Harry feel very, very nervous.

“This,” Tom said, gesturing at the prisoner, “is Gellert Grindelwald. He is a prime example of someone with power, resources, and intelligence who tried to oppose me… but failed. What does this tell you?”

‘That opposing you is dangerous,’ Harry thought, biting his lip. Why was Tom showing him this? He didn’t think that the other man was really giving him the opportunity to learn something from—Hold on a second, Grindelwald?

“The previous Dark Lord,” Harry breathed, itching to step closer. “What…”

“I know your potential, Harry,” Tom said, and the boy felt the man’s hand on his shoulder again. “Your little gift with the dead, for example, is a rare talent. I have never heard of anyone with the same ability. However… the problem with having potential in something so rare and special is that… you end up with ideas, Harry. Bad ideas.”

“Such as?” Harry asked warily, glancing quickly at Grindelwald, who was leaning against the stony wall of his cell with his eyes closed, seemingly ignoring their presence.

“You might be tempted to do something you shouldn’t,” Tom said. “Stay faithful and loyal to me, Harry, lest you meet an end neither of us wishes upon you.”

“Hooo,” Grindelwald suddenly said. “You’re warning the boy to not act against you? Good heavens, is he really that valuable?”

“Isn’t it risky to keep him alive?” Harry asked curiously, gesturing at the former Dark Lord. “Not that I want him dead or anything – you know I’m not… into that stuff. Killing people, I mean. I just…”

“It’d be such a waste to kill him,” Tom replied. “All that power, all that knowledge. He’s harmless here. Harmless but useful. A tiger with its paws cut off can only use its mouth. And if the words he says are not valuable, he… knows what will happen.”

“He… gives you… advice?”

“Occasionally.”

‘That’s it, then,’ Harry thought, swallowing and turning to look at Grindelwald. ‘Like Merope said, Tom listens – to some degree – to those who are powerful. He recognizes Grindelwald’s power, and that’s why he occasionally listen to him seriously. However, since Grindelwald never defeated Tom, ultimately Tom will do whatever he wants to…’

What did that leave him with?

In theory, the best way to go would be to – somehow – become powerful enough to at least hold his own against Tom. In reality, that was unlikely to happen. One needn’t be a genius to realize that Tom most likely knew spells that Harry – or most other people – had never even heard of.
No, even if defeating Tom would be impossible… if Harry could at least be a formidable opponent, then maybe somehow… Maybe he could achieve something.

“You brought the boy here to use me as a warning example,” Grindelwald said and let out a cackle that made Harry feel chilled to the bone.

“You’re not yet past your expiration date,” Tom replied evenly.

“Who is he?” the previous Dark Lord asked, his sunken eyes fixed on Harry. “Is he the ‘someone else’ you found? Does he talk back to you?” The old man fell silent for a moment, before leaning forward with a grin. “Didn’t know you went for kids, though. Is it the eyes that got you?”

‘What on earth,’ Harry thought, the implications of Grindelwald’s words making him confused and uncomfortable.

“I believe we have no reason to stay any longer,” Tom said coldly, ignoring the other wizard as if he hadn’t spoken anything. “Unless you have something to ask, Harry?”

“No,” Harry replied quickly. “We could just go—”

“Watch your step, boy,” Grindelwald called after Harry. “The big bad snake isn’t just ‘not held back’ by morals. He doesn’t even comprehend them.”

* *

“If I could see more than what’s in front of me,” Sirius muttered sullenly. “What does that even mean? Stupid wolf.”

Lupin was clearly implying something… but Sirius couldn’t figure out what exactly. It was maddening! Distracting! As if he needed anything to get distracted by, what with the Triwizard Tournament approaching. The plans were almost finished, and all he’d need was to make some test runs before sending out invitations to the schools he had selected.

The host school would be Hogwarts, of course. The place had enough space in it to host the handful of visitors from Durmstrang and Beauxbaton. He’d let the headmasters of each school pick their own students without setting any specific age restrictions.

‘I need to check that stupid goblet one more time though,’ Sirius thought with a sigh. There was so much to do, and he was constantly worried about forgetting something important. If only he could go for a drink with James now to relax, but… that wasn’t something they could do anymore.

‘I wonder if he’ll get better anytime soon. I… I wonder how Harry’s doing…’

It felt like an eternity since he had last heard from Harry. Sirius didn’t like that – he didn’t want to neglect Harry in any way, but it just felt so wrong to contact his godson without James knowing or caring. Maybe it was stupid, but Sirius didn’t want James to think that he was trying to become some kind of a… father replacement to Harry.

It all was just wrong. So wrong.

At least Harry wasn’t the sort to make trouble. Sirius couldn’t remember an instance in which he would have needed to interfere in order to do something to or for Harry. The boy took more after Lily than James, after all.

‘Maybe that’s because he never had the chance to take after James,’ Sirius thought, remembering
how relaxed their days at Hogwarts had been. Plenty of time for pranks and such. Nothing at all like Harry’s busy life at Durmstrang, surely.

What a pity it was that Harry had gone to Durmstrang, really. Sirius was sure that, had Harry gone to Hogwarts after all, things would have been a little bit different. Maybe not different enough to change anyone’s… entire situation, but just enough to let Sirius have a better chance at being involved in his godson’s life.

‘I suppose it’s pointless to think like this,’ Sirius thought, sighing. ‘What if. What if. So many possibilities. I wonder if there’s a way to see the consequences of all the ‘what ifs’.’ Or then again… maybe not.

It’d make him feel terrible if he was to ever become aware of all the wrong decisions he had made in his life.

Or worse – what if he ended up seeing some other reality that would make him dissatisfied with what he had now? Something that would entrance him and make him compare what he had to what he could have had. What if he’d end up seeing Re— No. No. No.

Dissatisfaction.

Sirius had sacrificed too much to afford it.

* *

Still within the fortress, Tom led Harry to what the boy suspected were the only decent rooms in Nurmengard. With a sigh, he sat down on a chair while the Dark Lord summoned a house-elf to light up the fireplace and bring them something warm to drink.

“So?” he asked eventually, eyeing Harry with a contemplative expression. “What did that teach you?”

“A lot,” Harry replied, feeling his heart become heavier than it ever should be. “Do you really think that I would ever betray you?” Because what he was going to do wasn’t a betrayal… at least, Harry would like to believe it to be much closer to saving than betraying.

“You couldn’t,” Tom said. “But I’d rather you wouldn’t even try.”

“Can I ask you something?” Harry suddenly started, eyeing the Dark Lord with a curious expression. “Just one question.”

“Go ahead,” Tom said, “I’ll let you have one question… and then I’ll be doing the asking.”

“That doesn’t sound too good,’ Harry thought nervously. Regardless, he took a deep breath before setting down his cup of tea carefully onto the table and leaning forward.

“Why Durmstrang?” Harry asked. “Why was it created even though everyone else will become a Death Eater anyway? To create a bunch of elite, talented, powerful Death Eaters? Why so suddenly?”

“What would I do with the weak?” Tom sneered. “Doesn’t it make sense to you that I would create a place from where I could have my pick of useful servants?”

“Well, yes, but…”
“No buts. That’s all there is to it. The prestige of Hogwarts is paling in comparison to what Durmstrang has become. The most extraordinary students attend Durmstrang to become the most extraordinary soldiers of mine. That is an honour to every family—”

“I’m not saying that it isn’t an honour!” Harry exclaimed. “I just—”

“Well,” Tom cut in with a charming smile. “That answers your question, then. Now… it is my turn, I believe.”

‘I should have expected this,’ Harry thought, but did not find it in him to feel annoyed. He knew that at this point still, he was nothing but a fascinating and potentially useful child in the Dark Lord’s eyes, and he would remain so until he proved his worth and stood out in terms of magical power and skills.

He would need to train like Merope had told him to. But how?

A vague, shaky, hesitant idea made its way from the nearly forgotten corners of Harry’s memory, and the boy remembered a notebook. The notebook that he had been interested in years ago. The notebook he had started reading quite a few times but never got past the first few pages.

The diary of Haines.

Maybe he could find something useful in it. Maybe Harry could learn something Tom didn’t know. Maybe there was an actual chance—

“How stupid did you feel after realizing that I am the Dark Lord?” Tom asked, startling Harry. “You were pretty sure about me not being—”

“Because it sounded ridiculous!” Harry exclaimed, all too aware of the blush that was crawling up his neck. “You didn’t really act like the Dark Lord, you know. What made you focus on me to begin with, anyway?”

“Your wand,” Tom drawled. “We haven’t spoken of that yet, have we? That you have the brother wand of mine.”

“How did you find out?” Harry asked, wondering if he should feel nervous. Perhaps he should have, but he did not think that Tom would actually do anything to him. Not now.

Not yet.

“Ollivander, of course,” Tom replied and then leaned forward to touch Harry’s chin with his fingertips. His red eyes were fixed on the boy’s face, making Harry feel more self-conscious than ever before.

“You are such a fascinating child,” Tom murmured. “You converse with the dead and possess a wand worthier than most others. You study at the most demanding school in Europe and beyond and seem to be doing well enough there. This is why, Harry, I brought you to this place.”

Harry would have replied, said something, but his voice seemed to have vanished. All he could do was stare at Tom with wide eyes, his heart beating fast in his chest, wondering what the Dark Lord would say next.

“Gellert Grindelwald had power,” Tom continued, still not letting go of Harry. “He had power, he had followers, he had experience, and he had intelligence. And yet, he failed when he went against me. If he had not been foolish enough to consider himself my equal, he could have still been great—
he could have been one of my finest. He was foolish, though. And that foolishness got him trapped within a dark, cold cell without magic. Alone and powerless. What a waste.”

Tom finally let go of Harry and leaned back on his chair, although he kept his eyes fixed on the boy.

“You have power, Harry Potter,” the Dark Lord said. “You have power that manifests itself in ways I have never seen before. Do not make the mistake of standing against me, because I do not want to lose such an asset.”

Harry sat on the chair, feeling breathless, hesitation sweeping into him and twisting his supposedly confirmed plans. He knew now why Merope had wanted him to focus on saving Tom, not on saving the Wizarding World.

Had he chosen the latter, he would have indeed ended up standing against the Dark Lord. However… If he wanted to save Tom, he had a loophole in Tom’s reasoning that he could use. Because everything Harry would do, in the long run, would be for Tom.

“I promise to never betray—”

“People lie. Words are meaningless on their own.”

“What do you want, then?” Harry asked, pressing his sweaty palms against the fabric of his trousers.

“Right now, nothing,” Tom replied evenly. Harry was, after all, much too young to be a part of a binding contract. “But when the time comes… a vow.”

By the time Harry returned back to his flat, he was exhausted, even though he hadn’t really done anything. His conversation with Tom kept buzzing inside his mind, giving him a headache, and he couldn’t help but worry.

After shrugging off his coat and kicking off his shoes, Harry collapsed onto the couch with a heavy sigh. Why was everything so complicated? He felt as if there were a thousand things that needed to be done – tasks all over the place, chaotic and without a clear plan.

He’d need to get stronger. He’d need to learn spells and how to use them. He’d need to practice and become someone who could actually do something. For Tom. To make him mortal and show him that it wasn’t a bad thing at all.

Could he ever do that, really?

How?

Merope had called it ‘saving’ Tom, and Harry wanted to believe that. It’d make everything easier in the long run if Harry wasn’t against Tom as much as just… doing something that was for his own good.

“He said he wants a vow from me,’ Harry thought, sighing. ‘Why? He doesn’t request a vow from everyone, I know that. Does he request vows from his inner circle? Or am I just… a special case?’

The problem with Tom was that he was honestly unpredictable. And no matter how hard Harry tried, he couldn’t quite understand, comprehend, or even figure out what on earth the man’s motives were. The logic of that genius mind was something that, in Harry’s opinion, made it all the more obvious how special the Dark Lord truly was.
That mind. Harry admired and respected it as much as he feared it.

So confusing. Why was life so complicated? Harry wished he could have Filippa or Truls there so he could have someone to talk with. Someone he could completely trust. Someone who would just…be there and comfort him.

‘I miss Truls,’ the boy thought suddenly. ‘I wish school would start again already. I wish everyone would come back and I could focus on some other things. I wish I could go home and feel comfortable there.’

Thinking of home made Harry think, once again, of Haines. He hadn’t brought the man’s journal with him this time – he had nearly forgotten about its existence, after all. He knew where it was though. It was in his room in the bookshelf on the right side of his desk, on the uppermost shelf.

If only there was a way for him to go home right now, to get that notebook. He wanted something to do.

‘Maybe I could,’ Harry thought suddenly. ‘I could request a portkey to the closest portkey and apparition point and then just walk home. It’d be better than waste my time here doing nothing. I’ll just end up thinking too much. Clemens won’t be back anytime soon, yet.’

The more he thought about it, the more doable his little plan seemed. It shouldn’t be a problem, should it? The portkey’s target information was registered in his school file – it would, after all, have the same destination as all the other portkeys he took in order to go home from school – and requesting it from the deputy headmaster shouldn’t take longer than a few minutes, especially if he were to send an owl…

Decision made, Harry moved to write his message. Just a short, polite note about needing to suddenly go back home – just like he had done when he and Clemens went to Hogsmeade. It was lucky that Durmstrang pointedly didn’t forbid its students from travelling and being independent as long as they managed to keep up well with their studies.

Rather than genuine trust, Harry believed that the reason for that was simply to show other schools that not only was Durmstrang superior as an institution, but also its students were far more responsible and capable than the students of other schools.

It was quite silly, actually.

‘I should change my clothes before I go,’ Harry thought as soon as he sent his request with Hedwig. ‘I can eat at home. I wonder if dad’s there. If he is…’

Well, Harry would deal with that, then.

—

Tom Riddle was staring at the small gift Harry had given him with no little amount of suspicion. He hadn’t expected the boy to give him anything. It simply hadn’t even crossed his mind that Harry would actually give him a neatly wrapped gift with a ribbon at the top and everything.

A ribbon!

“Is it dangerous?” Nagini asked.

“I doubt that,” Tom replied, wondering if opening the gift was going to give him a bigger headache than the one he had already. His trip with Harry to Nurmengard had been very necessary and he was
satisfied with it – although he could have done without Grindelwald’s comment regarding Harry’s eyes.

What was it with everyone – well, the boy’s father and Grindelwald, but anyway – thinking that he was interested in Harry Potter is such way? Sure, perhaps considering a thirteen-year-old boy a companion of some kind and dragging him around and just liking spending time with him… perhaps that wasn’t normal or expected, but surely that did not make him a pedophile?

The genuine fact was: he wasn’t sexually attracted to Harry, and not just because the boy was, well, just a child. He was fascinated by Harry’s mind and abilities, but nothing more.

It wasn’t like Tom had ever felt any genuine romantic or sexual interest in anyone. He went through the motions whenever it was beneficial, but such bonds and activities had never been of any sincere interest to him. He didn’t deem them particularly important or enjoyable and did not understand why that kind of interest was what people though he had for Harry.

“Is it food?” Nagini hissed, leaning closer to the gift.

“Unlikely,” Tom replied, finally reaching forward to take a hold of the small gift. It didn’t weight much. Just what on earth could it be? Maybe he really should open it to see what it was – that’s what was meant to be done to wrapped gifts anyway, right? To unwrap them and see the gift itself.

Tom hadn’t been the receiving end of many gifts in his lifetime. Even during Hogwarts and after it, as his reputation established itself and his powers grew… people simply didn’t seem to consider him as the sort to appreciate presents. And they were right.

It wasn’t that he didn’t understand the point – he did. However Tom had two reasons for not liking receiving gifts: he couldn’t trust the item he was given to not having been tampered with. Most importantly though, he simply didn’t like the feeling of owing someone anything, even if it was, well, a gift.

If he wanted anything, he was perfectly capable of acquiring it, thank you very much.

Regardless of all that… it somehow pleased him to receive a gift from Harry. It didn’t make sense why he was so pleased, but rather than dwell on that, Tom finally undid the ribbon on the gift and delicately undid the wrapping, careful to not rip the cheap, colourful paper. In the end, he had a simple black box on his lap, and with little hesitation, he finally pulled off the lid of the box.

There, resting on white satin, was a pair of black leather gloves.

They were, Tom decided after careful inspection, ordinary gloves. They were nice – warm, comfortable leather that looked good and elegant and expensive – but certainly nothing he wouldn’t have been able to get for himself if he had cared enough to do so.

Why would Harry – who surely knew that Tom could get a pair of nice gloves whenever he so wished – give him a gift like this?

What was the point?

Or was this, maybe, yet another one of those things that he didn’t understand, simply because Harry was such an emotional creature who valued silly things and made pointless gestures. What was his aim, anyway? His motive? Why gloves, why to Tom, why waste his money on something worthless like this?

This was the boy who, Tom reminded himself as if to reaffirm the ridiculousness that was Harry
Potter’s logic, believed in the equality of all creatures and the possibility of peace.

‘Perhaps he and I were meant to meet,’ Tom thought. ‘Perhaps he has the power I need, and I have the control and understanding he needs to use those powers.’

Maybe next time when he would meet the boy… he would start testing what his skills could be used for.

* *

It was oddly nostalgic, Harry thought, to return to the Potter Manor. As he walked towards the door, sliding past the familiar wards, Harry felt as if everything was different. He felt like a stranger, and that feeling only intensified as he entered the house and saw the dark, silent rooms and corridors.

It was as if the whole house was void of life.

‘I’ll just get the notebook quickly,’ Harry thought, moving as quietly as he could. There was something in the atmosphere that simply compelled him to be as silent as possible. Perhaps it was foolish of him to behave like this in his own house, but…

It just didn’t feel like his own house, anymore.

The atmosphere in his room wasn’t better at all – the door had been left open, and Harry’s overactive imagination whispered to him of shadows with forms and intentions hiding beneath his bed and inside his closet, waiting for him to let his guard down.

Wiping his sweaty palms against his trousers, Harry quickly reached to take Haines’s journal and shove it into the small bag he was carrying. He then cast one last look at the room, wondering if something really was hiding there, before he turned to walk towards the kitchen.

He was very tempted to call for a house-elf, if only to see someone else alive inside the manor. He didn’t do that, however. Perhaps because the house-elf would be noisy and if… if James was somewhere there, in one of the rooms, asleep… then Harry didn’t want to wake him up.

No, it’d be better to not call any house-elves. Harry could make himself a quick snack easily before heading back to Durmstrang. Or better yet… he might as well leave now. He had money, he could just eat outside. There was a nice, comfortable restaurant not too far from the Potter Manor – Harry had been there once before, years ago.

With his mother.

He knew that the restaurant served wonderful dinners – he remembered his mother praising them time and time again. Back then, James, too, had—

‘No, don’t think of James,’ Harry told himself hastily, reaching the house entrance door and closing it behind him, carefully resisting the temptation to slam it shut. He turned up the collar of his coat and made his way down the familiar road, never having felt quite so lonely and different before.

The dusty snow beneath his feet reminded him of the times spent with his mother and of the last Christmas – such a long time ago – they had spent together. It’s as if those memories belonged to someone else, and try as he might, Harry could not find in himself the will to be the person – the happy, carefree, safe person – he had been back then.

Maybe he was growing up, and this was part of that.
He entered the restaurant and allowed himself to be led to a table – any available table, he wasn’t going to be picky – trying to not be overwhelmed by the feelings that seemed to be twisting inside him then. The waiter offered him a menu, and Harry barely took a look at the selection before picking the first thing that sounded vaguely familiar.

And then he waited.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?” a squeaky voice asked, and startled, Harry looked up from the tablecloth to see a short man with a balding head and wide blue eyes smiling pleasantly at him.

“No,” Harry replied reluctantly. The man offered him another smile and sat on the empty chair in front of Harry, before gesturing for a waiter to bring him a menu as well.

“You’re James’s son, aren’t you,” the man asked, startling Harry again.

“Yes,” Harry replied warily, narrowing his eyes.

“I’ll take number five, please,” the man told the waiter, handing back the menu. “And red wine.”

“Are you a friend of my dad’s?” Harry wanted to know, wondering what he should do.

“No,” the man replied. “I am not his friend. He is one of mine, though.” Harry bit his lip, unsure of how to take that statement.

“What do you want, then?” the boy finally asked.

“To talk with you,” the stranger told him. “I didn’t want to get involved this much, but you’re letting your father drag you down too much.”

* 

Despite the fact that Araminta Meliflua was – politically speaking – on Bellatrix’s side, Lady Lestrange couldn’t find it in her to like the old woman. The old bag of bones was condescending and set on her ways and that was enough to drive Bellatrix to the brink madness every time they ended up having a lengthy conversation.

Especially when the subject of the conversation was most certainly something Bella did not wish to discuss.

“Have you considered trying for a child again?” Araminta said with mocking sweetness. “I know that at your age that could be quite difficult, but there are spells…”

“The Lestrange family has an heir already,” Bellatrix stated coolly. She didn’t want a child, no matter what Rodolphus – or anyone, for that matter – said. “Rabastan’s son, Anthony, has been brought up as an heir and will be more than adequate to take over when the time comes.”

“That boy is far too hot headed.”

“He’s one of Durmstrang’s outstanding students.”

“Yes, well. He was admitted before the selection, isn’t that right? He’s not one of the real Durmstrang products,” Araminta said, and Bellatrix could do little but shrug. The older woman was right, unfortunately.

“He would have been selected, regardless of the timing,” Bellatrix said. “It’s not as if there are many amongst the chosen ones who are genuinely outstanding.”
“Many,” Araminta repeated slowly. “So there are a few, hm?”

“Perhaps one,” Bellatrix said, fleetingly remembering a pair of green eyes and a pale, upturned face. “It remains to be seen.”

“Oh yes… the tournament young Sirius spoke about,” Araminta said, her painted lips twisting into a cold little smile. “The champions will show us their worth then, hm? I’m looking forward to it.”

“You’re not the only one. The plans cousin Sirius has for the Triwizard Tournament are absolutely delightful… although he spoke of modifications regarding not only its title but the number of champions as well,” Bellatrix said. “I’ve seen his plans… the tournament is going to be very different from how it used to be.”

“There are rumours that Sirius will be using some Rebels. Is that true?”

“I came up with the idea with him, actually,” Bellatrix revealed. “We thought that it’d add some extra flavour to the audience… and give the champions a taste of what will be waiting for them.”

“Delightful,” Araminta said, nodding. Bellatrix eyed the older witch’s sparkling diamonds, wondering if she should demand more of those silly trinkets from Rodolphus. Gemstones or not, Bellatrix had never seen the appeal of owning something – even jewellery – if it had no magic in it.

“Do you know how the competitors will be chosen?”

“At random, I believe. If he manages to modify the magic that selects the number of candidates chosen, Sirius will use the Goblet of Fire.”


“It’s a powerful magical artefact,” Bellatrix reminded her. “Nothing to sneer at, surely.”

“The wizard who created it was French,” Araminta told her, as if that explained everything. To the old witch, perhaps it did. “Make sure Sirius nominates Anthony. I wish to see that boy proving himself.”

“I have no say in who gets nominated,” Bellatrix replied. “I believe that whoever so wishes may enter their name and be considered.”

“Surely not every weakling—”

“The weak will be forced to consider carefully,” Bellatrix interrupted, a smile appearing on her face. “The probability of all of the competitors getting out alive is not hundred percent. Especially if the number of the competitors will be increased…”

“That will just make it all the more interesting, wouldn’t you say,” Araminta murmured, clearly pleased. “The tournament will take place after the summer, hm? I can’t wait.”

“Neither can I,” Bellatrix said, leaning back on her seat. With any luck, it’d truly be a fantastic show.

“Emotionally, I mean,” the stranger clarified, leaning back when Harry’s order was set on the table in front of them, followed by his own order a few moments later.

“Don’t storm out on me, angry,” the man continued. “But I would like to point out that the pathetic state your father is in right now… you should accept it and move on. He will not get better.”
“How do *you* know?” Harry replied sharply, his hear beating so hard inside his chest that it almost hurt.

“Eat,” the man said, pointing at Harry’s plate with his fork. “You already know that your father is not going to get better. That is why you’ve given up on confronting him. Yet, even though you know that it’d be hopeless… you still feel guilty for not trying anyway.”

“I don’t—,” Harry croaked, his voice breaking in the middle of a defensive sentence he had been about to offer. He didn’t understand who this person was, didn’t know how on earth he could guess the feelings Harry had carefully not even thought about…

“Don’t convince yourself of having to pay the price of your father’s failures,” the stranger told him. “You keep doing that. Paying the price when your parents fail you. *Every* time.”

“My mother has never failed me.”

“Oh, she has. In ways far worse than your father now.”

“What in Merlin’s name are you talking about?” Harry demanded to know, trying to understand what the man was telling him.

"In some other universe, there's a you… whose father died before his mother," the odd man told him, his light blue eyes so void of life. "His mother went mad."

“In some other…” Universe? Surely he didn’t mean…

“Parallel worlds,” the man said dismissively, as if those two words would explain everything. And strangely enough… they kind of did. "And somewhere else… before the beginning, in the truest of all, there's a you who grew up with no parents at all, and would have given anything to have either one of them alive, regardless of how they would treat him."

“Why would I believe you?” Harry asked, even though he knew – knew as surely as he knew that Merope was dead and the trains to nowhere existed – that the man was speaking the truth. Oddly… it felt as if Harry had been waiting to hear these words, as if he had been aware of them, just waiting for someone to speak them aloud.

“You’ve been to *that* place,” the man said, before leaning forward slightly. “The station.”

“This is… this can’t… who are you?” Harry demanded to know. “How do you know this—”

“I know the place because I was there,” the stranger told him, his watery blue eyes fixed on Harry. The man appeared completely calm. “And I will go back there once my job here is done.”

“What is your job?”

“Never mind that. Finish your food, Harry.”

“You said that there’re other… realities?” Harry said, unsure of what to believe and whether or not to take this person seriously. He couldn’t afford not to… the man just seemed… He knew about the station.

“Yes,” the man said. “And all these realities are connected by a railway. Each reality has its own station, and… well, I do not know much of how the dead are divided, but I know that there are countless other stations.”
“How do you know that?”

“I used the trains to get here. I... I was... alive elsewhere.”

“Why did you come here, then?” Harry asked, hating himself for not knowing what kind of questions he should be asking. “Do you know why I end up going to the station?”

“I have a task to do,” the man replied, and for the first time, he seemed distressed. “I made a mistake, you see. In my original lifetime. I made a terrible, terrible mistake. I was a coward, and now I’m paying the price. I still have a few more realities to go to before I can finally rest.”

‘This so unreal,’ Harry thought. Then again, was it any less real than all the strange, unbelievable things that had happened to him so far? “What... what about the other me you spoke about? The me whose... father died, and mother... mother...”

“Went mad,” the stranger finished for him. “You needn’t think of him. Unless you ever board the train, it’s unlikely that you two would ever meet.”

“I just... Is he as weak as I am?” Harry blurted out before feeling a blush crawl up his neck. “I just... I’m... so confused by everything and...”

“You’re not weak,” the man said confidently. “And neither is he. You are very different, though. And very, very similar as well.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“You don’t need to. Forget him for now; he’s not the reason why I chose to approach you and tell you about this.”

“Why, then?” Harry asked, and the man smiled before putting down his glass of wine and speaking the words that were so eerily familiar to Harry by now.

“There’s something you must do,” the man said. “Get stronger... and do it.”
Chapter 23

Peter, the man had introduced himself as.

He had looked ordinary – *so ordinary* – and yet, he was anything but.

Harry couldn’t remember his parents – or anyone, really – ever mentioning a Peter. And yet, the name rang familiar, and he felt as if he *knew* who the man was. Knew and just couldn’t remember. Knew and didn’t like. Knew and… *resented*.

Clutching the journal of Haines Potter in his hands, Harry used the portkey to return to Durmstrang, thinking of Tom, Grindelwald, and Peter. There were so many things he was supposed to take into account and that made him worry about forgetting something important.

Merope had told him to focus on getting stronger for now, and Harry was inclined to agree with her and focus solely on that. Reading up about the Gone Tribe wouldn’t hurt though. He’d just keep it as an option. A last resort.

‘*I wonder when Clemens is coming back,*’ Harry thought suddenly, entering his flat and shrugging off his coat. ‘*Tomorrow, yes, but when exactly.*’ Without realizing it, his worried expression had melted into a smile as he thought of the German boy. Clemens had said that he’d return as soon as he could, hadn’t he?

Then again, there wasn’t much left of the Christmas break itself, and soon enough, everyone else would be coming back, too. And they’ll go back to the routine of practicing spells and trying to survive dueling classes and worrying about Jakob.

What he could do now, though, was try to stay up to date on what’s going on in the war front. James was – who knew where he was, really. What about Sirius? It was as if, after Lily’s death, Harry had lost the rest of his family, too.

Was it… was it completely *wrong* that Harry resented James, a little bit? Was he a bad person for not just… forgiving his father? Maybe he should be more understanding, more patient. Though try as he might, Harry couldn’t bring himself to do so.

‘*I shouldn’t think that,*’ the boy thought then. ‘*I need to find something else to do. Something else to focus on. Anything…’*

Then again, it had been a long day, so perhaps going to sleep would be the best course of action? He’d shower first and then go to bed. And tomorrow, well, Clemens would be coming back, and somehow, that made the future seem a lot less boring.

“*The Triwizward Tournament?*” Anthony Lestrange repeated, turning to look at his aunt with a curious expression. “It would bring honour to the House of Black.”

“If you get chosen,” Bellatrix said, sounding nearly bored. Anthony smiled, trying to not let his irritation show. He feared and respected his aunt, but the way she always treated him… it was almost intolerable.

“Of course he will get chosen,” Anthony’s father, Rabastan, said. “Isn’t Sirius the one organizing the tournament? We’ll just tell him that we want Anthony to represent Durmstrang.”
“You are a fool,” Bellatrix said, gesturing for Uncle Rodolphus to pour more wine into her glass. “There will be several students sent from Durmstrang to Hogwarts where the tournament will take place. There, the competing champions will be selected by the Goblet of Fire.”

“But—”

“Not to mention that the students who will be chosen as candidates will need to be nominated by people of influence. And knowing how many heirs there are in Durmstrang… dear little Anthony will need all the votes he can get.”

“The three of us and Sirius will surely vote for him,” Uncle Rodolphus said, and Anthony nearly nodded in agreement. He didn’t want to seem too confident though, for fear of making Bellatrix choose someone else just to be contrary. The woman smiled though and shrugged.

“Sirius’s godson is in Durmstrang.”

“What’s his name?” Anthony asked. “Did he get in before or after the change of the entrance exam?”

“After,” Bellatrix replied. “He’s one of the so-called golden generation. Harry Potter. He’s not the only one you need to be wary of; although you’re lucky that Cassius Meliflua is graduating in a few months. He’d be a tough candidate to beat. Viktor Krum has quite a few admirers.”

“He’s a quidditch player,” Anthony exclaimed. “Not a duelist!” Not to mention that Viktor, who was a classmate of his, was awkward and ungraceful and couldn’t even speak properly.

Someone like that, the Durmstrang champion?

What a joke!

“People would love it, though,” Uncle Rodolphus said. “To see the famous Krum compete like that. Some will watch the tournament only for Krum. What do you think, Rabastan?”

“Durmstrang will want to win,” Rabastan said. “They won’t send someone who cannot win, just to draw an audience. They won’t sacrifice this opportunity to show how superior they are.” Anthony nodded, feeling relieved.

“I’m one of the best duelists in Durmstrang,” Anthony said quickly. “Crouch told me so.”

“One of the best,” Bellatrix said. “Not the best.” Anthony tensed, trying to keep his temper in check. Sometimes he truly hated his aunt and her condescending attitude.

“I still have time to practice,” Anthony told her, and Rabastan nodded.

“Yes, you’re right. There is still plenty of time left.”

“Time flies by fast,” Bellatrix reminded the two, before setting down her drink and standing up. “We will see what will happen. The selection won’t take place until after summer. Impress the right people and, who knows, you might end up a champion after all.”

“No need to worry so much about impressing people,” Rabastan said. “He has done so already!”

“A piece of advice, nephew, before I leave,” Bellatrix said. “Anyone from the Golden Generation will be a tough opponent to beat. You’d do well to remember that.”
Sirius was getting sick of firewhisky. Not just the taste of it, but the smell.

A part of him was getting sick of James too, but he didn’t want to admit it to himself. Every time the thought crossed his mind, he just felt so guilty. James had suffered such a huge tragedy and—

‘And instead of being there for Harry, he focuses only on his own loss,’ Sirius thought, watching his friend order yet another pint. He really was a bad friend, wasn’t he? He just had no idea how to make James better. How to help him get over his pain and reach out for Harry.

Perhaps it was good that the Triwizard Tournament would take place in Hogwarts. If he got Harry nominated as a champion candidate, the boy would be in Hogwarts for a year, and Sirius could keep an eye on him. He would just need to convince a few other witches or wizards to nominate him.

“People are fighting over the summer holiday dates,” James suddenly said. “They stress so much over that.”

“Shouldn’t you be doing the same, or will Harry have to spend the summer alone?”

“How can I spend it with him?” Something in the way James asked the question made Sirius look away from the barmaid and stare at his friend.

“How could you not?”

James stared back at him for a few long, silent moments before he sighed. “How can I even face him? Sirius, do you think that I don’t know how much I have failed him?”

“But then—”

“But nothing. He’s better off without me, anyway.”

“How can you even say that?” Sirius demanded to know. “Where did you get those kind of ideas into that head of yours, Jamie?”

“Harry is in Durmstrang,” James said. “He’ll learn how to take care of himself. He doesn’t need me. I don’t have… I don’t think I know how to function right anymore, anyway.”

“I don’t get it,” Sirius said. “That doesn’t make any sense. What does that have anything to do with you spending more or less time with your son?”

“It’s not me spending time with Harry that is a chore,” James said listlessly. “I just… I don’t want it to be a chore to him. I’ve let him down so much, Sirius. I don’t want to see him because I don’t want him to see me.”

“I don’t get it,” Sirius sighed, and James shrugged.

“In a way I’m glad that you don’t,” the man said. “I wouldn’t want you to know how this feels. If I had any energy left, I’d feel horrible rather than just tired.”

“Tired and drunk,” Sirius pointed out. “Maybe you should stop drinking altogether. You haven’t yet committed an unfixable mistake.”

“Assume I did,” James said, leaning heavily against the back of his chair. “Assume I stopped drinking and started to spend more time with Harry… how would that benefit him?”

“Jamie—“
“Look, the thing is that… Lily is gone. I’m a sunken ship. All I can do now is help Harry stay afloat. If I… if I go near him, I’ll end up dragging him down.”

“That’s not true!”

“It is, Sirius.”

“You’re just coming up with excuses,” Sirius said, scowling, “to not go and see him.”

“Whatever,” James finally muttered, his shoulders slumped and face showing resignation. “You’re so high on the top you don’t realize the hard road Harry has to endure to reach you. Anything can knock him down. If he’s like… if he ends up being like me, a Death Eater who’s sent out to different fronts, he’s dooming himself to live a life of constant danger. The higher he is in the ranks, the safer he will be.”

“Come on,” Sirius said, standing up. “I’ll take you back home, and you can sleep. Maybe when you wake up, you’ll see the world for what it is.”

“It’s not the world that let me down, my friend,” James said, stumbling to follow Sirius. “It’s me.”

“Then maybe you should pick yourself up again,” replied Sirius.

* *

When Clemens returned, he was pale and nearly shaking with anger. Harry didn’t speak, only made him a cup of coffee and set it in front of him. If Harry happened to keep his wand strictly within reach, well, he was just being cautious. He really liked Clemens – perhaps too much – but he was aware of how little he knew about the things Clemens could do if angered.

“Did you go and meet your father?” Clemens suddenly asked. Harry hesitated for a moment before shaking his head.

“No,” he replied. “I went home and he was… well, I don’t know where he was. Probably getting drunk with my godfather somewhere. Did you… How did your visit go?”

“Like expected,” Clemens said. “I’m glad I don’t need to spend time with any of them. Although I did hear something interesting. Something that may concern all of us.”

“Like what?” Harry asked, hoping that whatever Clemens had heard would not spell trouble for any of them.

“I didn’t get all the details, but apparently there’s some kind of a competition that will take place in England after summer. People from different schools will be invited.”

“I wonder if we’re expected to participate, or if it’s just for the older students.”

“I think it’s for all,” Clemens said. “Actually, I’d say it’s mainly for us. We’re the ones who matter, after all. I guess it’s something we all need to volunteer for, or something.”

“I don’t really fancy competing in anything,” Harry admitted. “But I’d love to go to Hogwarts for a while, if that’s where the competition is held.”

“We should practice during the summer, then.”

“That would be fun. Before the Quidditch World Cup, right? I don’t think we have much time after it.”
“Sure,” Clemens said and nodded. “We can talk about it with the others when they come back. Let’s just hope we won’t end up having to duel each other, because Björn is wicked with that wand of his.”

“Björn?” Harry said, surprised. “I thought that you or Truls would be the best.”

“Not to brag or anything, but yeah, I am good because my dad used to teach me,” Clemens said, “Truls has massive magical reserves, and even if he doesn’t know any fancy curses, he can use the ones he does know numerous times without getting tired. Björn, though… he’s… crafty. Unpredictable.”

“That he is,” Harry agreed. “When did you get the opportunity to see him duel?”

“A few months ago, he was setting things straight with some older students,” Clemens said, “also, I’ve kept an eye on his work in class. He comprehends spellwork easily.”

“True,” Harry nodded. It was odd how easy it was to overlook how dangerous Björn was, simply because he was also a funny, easygoing person. “I just hope that the competition won’t end up pitching us against each other.”

“Unlikely,” Clemens said. “I’d imagine that the only reason for organizing an interschool tournament is to show which school produces the best students. Making students from the same school fight each other would defeat the purpose.”

“Of course,” Harry all but whispered, a strange ache in his chest. “To show which school produces the best fighters. The survivors.”

“It’s all about surviving, in the end.”

“Do you think that the war will start shifting north from Italy and Spain?”

“Definitely,” Clemens sighed. “I know that there’ve been some battles in France and Germany too, so…”

“But isn’t it amazing,” Harry started, “how widespread this battle is? You’d think that the people in Spain and Germany and so on… that they wouldn’t care to fight for ideals of a ruler in England.”

“It’s the power of the Dark Lord,” Clemens said. “Makes you… wonder…” Harry watched his friend silently for a few moments, waiting for him to continue. Clemens didn’t add anything though, and eventually, Harry moved to pour himself another cup of tea.

“I suppose the only thing we can do now is simply keep trying our best,” Harry said. “Practice dueling; keep our ears and eyes open for any news that may come our way.”

“While simultaneously trying to keep our grades up.”

“Yeah.”

“Easier said than done though, isn’t it?” Clemens asked. “There’s so much to do and I just… sometimes I just wake up at night thinking that I forgot to submit an assignment on time or something. I’m constantly worried about performing well, and I barely remember a time without this… crippling sense of anxiety.”

“You’re doing well though,” Harry reminded him, thinking of Jakob. “Or is there something specific…?”
“I make a lot of mistakes,” Clemens admitted with a small shrug. “Don’t get me wrong, I can make up for them, but sometimes, it’s as if some of the professors don’t want to… help?”

“Professor Kay is like that,” Harry agreed, nodding. “It’s rough, writing a great report that you end up having to rewrite completely just because he spotted one mistake.”

“Yeah, it makes effort feel so pointless,” Clemens sighed, running his fingers through his hair tiredly. “How many times am I going to fail before I can just give up and let go?”

“We’re done with two and a half years,” Harry said, eyeing his friend with a worried expression. “We can survive the rest.”

“Alive, maybe,” Clemens snorted. “Somehow.”

*I*

“I just… don’t understand him anymore,” Sirius said, watching the werewolf warily. He wasn’t sure how exactly he had ended up telling it about James, but then again – who would it tell? And it was much more pleasant to talk with someone – something, damn it – that could respond and react.

“I suppose you have not experienced grief quite as deeply as he has,” Lupin replied with irritating calmness, eyes still firmly fixed on the book on his lap. Sirius sighed loudly and resisted the urge to stomp.

“What would you know,” he sneered, and Remus – *Lupin*, for Merlin’s sake! *Lupin*, not Remus! – finally looked up from the dull book that had held his attention for the past two hours.

“Quite a lot, I’d imagine,” Lupin said. “I wasn’t born a werewolf, after all. I was a human, and I got bit. That… caused more grief than you can comprehend, I suspect.”

“Stop treating me like an idiot, wolf,” Sirius all but growled. “Why can’t you just… learn your place or something?”

“You think less of me for something I can’t help. I think less of you for something you choose to do,” the wolf stated simply. “One can only hope that, one day, you will see how wrong you are.”

“Wait, hold on a second. You’re not saying you actually like being a werewolf.”

“Curiously, the only hardships I have experienced due to me being a werewolf are because of people and how they treat me.”

“And you never wished you had died instead?” Sirius asked bluntly. Lupin rolled his eyes, and that gesture made him, just for the briefest moment, almost tolerable.

“I had a brother. He died after a werewolf, rather than turn him, decided to eat him. Perhaps it was mercy that made another werewolf turn me, rather than eat me.”

“Mercy?”

“I can die any time I choose to. He left me with that choice to make. And having a choice is a luxury we can… seldom afford anymore.”

“Okay, whatever,” Sirius said with a dismissive wave, trying to not show how much Lupin’s words bothered him. “Back to James and his chromic—”

“Chronic.”
“— stupidity.”

“It’s not stupidity,” Remus said. “It’s lack of confidence. He has lost his self-worth. Maybe he’s even depressed.”

“He’s not depressed,” Sirius was quick to claim. “He isn’t crying or anything. He should soon get over that grieving stage, honestly.”

“Depression and grief are not the same.”

“What would you know?” Sirius had expected the werewolf to respond in some way. To tell him something about how it has feelings too or how tough life is. What Sirius got instead was a look that told him nothing and a smile void of any good humour.

Lupin didn’t say anything, opting to refocus on his book instead, leaving Sirius to stare at him in silence.

“I just don’t understand how you think,” Sirius said after a while. “Does your kind have uncontrollable primitive urges? Do you always want to kill? Do you feel hunger all the time? Is a human in your eyes a prey or a predator?”

“I’m sure that any of the books on werewolves that have been written by highly praised professors will tell you all of what you need to know,” Lupin all but drawled. Sirius frowned.

If only that would be true.

The problem was that he had tried, actually, to reread one of his favourite books, An Unbiased Study on Werewolves by Gordon Carrow, and had found it… painfully inaccurate at times. Mere months ago, Sirius had read the book with delight, absorbing each sentence eagerly, but now… each paragraph seemed like speculation, not research. Having observed Lupin for a while, there were so many things in the book that were simply wrong.

It was unsettling, because a part of Sirius was thinking of things he should definitely not think of.

As if Sirius didn’t have enough on his plate already, what with James and the Triwizard Tournament and nominating Harry and a dozen other things! He couldn’t wait for James to snap back to his senses and just start living again.

* *

“It feels like ages since I last saw you,” Filippa exclaimed, throwing her arms around Harry and greeting him enthusiastically. “Is your hair longer? Do you want a haircut?”

“I’m fine,” Harry replied, hugging her back. “How have you been? Did you enjoy the break?”

“I bet she did,” Heidi said, sauntering past them. “You have to tell me all about the show in Milan, Filippa!”

“Of course I will,” the Italian girl said immediately, smiling brightly at her friend. “Will you drop by my place later on? How soon? I have a few pictures I want you to check out.”

“I can just go throw my luggage in my room and come by immediately,” Heidi promised. “So I’ll see you in a moment again.”

“Alright,” Filippa said, and turned to look at Harry. “Will you join us?”
“I don’t think so. I’ll pass this time,” Harry replied. “Truls should be here soon. Did you get my message by the way? About the Quidditch World Cup this year?”

“I did, and I think it’s a brilliant idea,” Filippa said, nodding. “Anyway, I have to go now. I’ll drop by later on so we can properly catch up. See you!”

“See you,” Harry called after her, feeling happy to see that the girl was now far more cheerful than she had been for quite a while. This was how things were supposed to be. His classmates, loud and talkative and happy. For a moment, for just this moment, Harry stood in front of his apartment and forgot about the things worrying him.

For a moment, he thought of how beautiful the world would be if people were happier. If smiles were easily given and kindness a habit rather than a luxury.

‘I wish I could give Tom this feeling,’ Harry thought. ‘This happiness that fills me and leaves no space for much else until it fades.’ That thought, for some reason, felt important. Important enough to be remembered.

Not wishing to stand in the hallway pointlessly for an unknown amount of time, Harry left the front door open and stepped back into his apartment. He knew that, eventually, Truls would wander in.

Eventually ended up being slightly less than an hour.

The break had lasted but a few weeks, and yet, Harry could see a slight change in his friend. Not just that his hair was now long enough to require pulling back, but also... there was something in the way he moved that seemed almost tense.

Aggressive, maybe?

"You and Clemens are better friends now, I take it?" Truls asked, sitting on a chair and watching Harry wash the pair of coffee mugs that they had used. "You like him, now?"

"He's not bad," Harry admitted, thinking of how to describe the other boy. "But he's not... he's not you." Clemens was like a hawk, or an eagle - someone who was free to fly independently, a predator who could survive on his own. But he wasn’t trustworthy, and no matter how close they had gotten, Harry didn’t think he could count on Clemens to help him.

He simply wasn’t the loyal type.

"I got your message about the Quidditch World Cup trip," Truls said then, after a moment of strange, awkward silence. "I’m in, of course. Already told my parents to not demand anything from me during the summer."

“Want to spend some days with me, then?” Harry asked, the question slipping out before he had made the conscious decision of voicing it. “I don’t think I’ll have much to do during the summer, anyway. Aside from watching Quidditch, I mean. Dad is… probably not going to be there, anyway. At all.”

“I’d love to do that,” Truls assured him quickly. “We can train together or something.”

“Speaking of training,” Harry started. “Have you heard anything of some sort of a tournament taking place soon?”

“A tournament? No. You have, I take it?”
“Yeah. Yeah, I… I have. Hold on I’ll dry these and then tell you what I know.”

“I still think it’s cruelty to start Monday mornings with History of Magic,” Björn moaned as they entered the classroom. “I’m going to fall asleep and nothing will wake me up.”

“Except the sound of coins,” Filippa said dryly, sitting next to him.

“Or the sound of Mette Erling,” Heidi added cheerfully. “Who still, by the way, doesn’t know who you are.”

“I hate you all,” Björn said. “Even you, Harry.”

“What?” Harry yelped. “What did I even do?”

“You were smirking! Is this the unfortunate side-effect of spending time with Clemens?”

“I’m good company,” Clemens was quick to claim.

“Sure you are,” Truls drawled, earning him a surprisingly sincere glare from Clemens.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Obviously.”

“I wonder when Professor Lyuben is going to get here,” Harry interrupted hastily, feeling unsettled by the nearly hostile tension between Clemens and Truls. “He’s usually early, isn’t he?”

“It’s still two minutes until eight sharp,” Nikolai pointed out. “It’s pretty cold outside, but I think I’m going to fly a little bit after classes are over. You guys in?”

“If it’s a race, I’m betting!” Björn said.

“If it’s a race, I’m in,” Truls grinned. Clemens nodded as well.

“Yeah, sure. Getting into the mood for the World Cup already,” the boy said. Harry grinned, feeling pleased every time someone mentioned anything related to the summer break. He couldn’t wait to actually be there, watching the game happen and enjoying every moment spent.

“Think Krum will be there?”

“Of course he will be! Man, we’re so going to brag about that guy, eh?”

“Speak for yourself. I have no intention of doing something like that.”

“That’s what you’re saying now. Just wait until—” Whatever Björn had been about to say was interrupted by the arrival of Professor Lyuben, who seemed to be in a mood worse than ever before. The usually calm man was visibly irritated, his face set in a severe scowl.

“Students,” he began, “the original study plan for today had been about the political impacts a series of muggle wars have had on our world. However, due to… unexpected circumstances, I have been required to teach you the history of something else.”

‘Anything is better than more talk about wars,’ Harry thought. Lyuben eyed his few students with a mix of pity and disdain before he continued:
“The Triwizard Tournament—oh, I see some of you have heard of it. That does not matter—today’s lecture will not require active participation from any of you, but do listen carefully. This information might be part of history, but it will also be a possible part of your future as well, even though I doubt the wisdom of such… decision.”

‘He clearly disapproves of the whole tournament idea,’ Harry thought. ‘That, or he had just really wanted to talk about muggle wars.’

“The Triwizard Tournament is a competition in which three schools pitch in by nominating a champion. It was held for the first time in 1294 and was designed to test magical ability, intelligence, and courage,” Professor Lyuben said. “Champions compete for the honour and glory of winning the Tournament, the Triwizard Cup, and a monetary prize. The first Tournament was held in 1294, and the next one will be held later on this year.”

“What?” Petronella yelped. “Wait, we’re not required to participate, right? We’re—”

“You’re not required to participate,” Professor Lyuben assured her. “In a few weeks, you will be given an application form, which you will fill only if you wish to be nominated for participation. After you have submitted it—by the end of April—your name will be added into a list.”

“A list of… participants?” Jakob asked hesitantly.

“A list of nominees. Seven students will be chosen based on recommendations and suggestions and will go with Headmaster Karkaroff to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Britain, where the tournament will take place.”

“What about the classes that we miss?” Clemens asked. “I mean, if some of us go to Hogwarts—how long will we be there and what will happen to our classes?”

“You would be staying there for nearly an entire school year,” Professor Lyuben said. “More information will be provided later on, of course. It is recommended that you try hard to not only be selected as the Durmstrang Champion, but also to go for the win. Be ruthless and cunning—this tournament is not a game.”

“Is it dangerous, then?”

“It was discontinued after 1792 after the death toll from previous years reached triple digits. The tournament is extremely dangerous, and I doubt that the rules regarding killing the competitors have been changed.”

‘Ideally,’ Harry thought, ‘it’d be lucky to get to be part of the group that goes to Hogwarts without being the Champion. I wonder if Truls and Clemens will want to do this…’

* *

Tom was tired.

It had been quite a few years since the last time he had felt tired like this. Since the beginning of the year, Rebel activities had increased in Italy and Spain, spreading to France and Switzerland far too easily. What was most alarming, though, was the Rebel activity in Ireland, the battles that seemed to become fiercer day after day and the assassinations carried successfully by the opposition. Tom had already lost three excellent Generals in Dublin, and the thought of losing more talented people was simply unacceptable.

The problem wasn’t just that the generals had died, but that they had been assassinated. Two out of
the three had been found dead in their tents, and that made them more than simple casualties of war. Therefore, either the Rebels had somehow recruited extremely skilled assassins or there were traitors in his ranks.

It wasn’t that Tom didn’t think that there would be traitors somewhere in his army, hiding and waiting for the opportunity to strike. He just… hadn’t expected them to be quite so skilled as to succeed in eliminating Death Eaters of significant ranks. He had miscalculated, perhaps due to the exhaustion plaguing him.

Tom had never been much of a sleeper, but nowadays, the time for rest had dwindled down to a few measly hours every other night. Strategies, one after another, had to be studied and carefully perfected. Political decisions had to be made, complaints looked into, missions assigned, all the while keeping up a facade of normalcy in order to keep the British public calm and at ease in regards to the war.


"I'm just tired," he said. "The situation should improve soon, though. There are some quite brilliant plans about to be set into motion. Though right now, I only need to confirm and accept two of these plans, and then, I'm free to rest."

"Is this war?" Nagini asked. "Your two-legged pets keep talking about it."

"They're fools," Tom replied dismissively. "We've slipped into war quite a while ago, and even if I were to confirm it and declare it publicly and officially now, nothing would change for the better. There will be no more or less military actions taken. People will just panic, and traitors will see opportunities."

"What about your boy? Does he know?"

"Know about the war? It would not... surprise me. It's very likely. I'd say yes, he knows at least something about it."

"Hm."

"Also," Tom added, "he's not my boy." Speaking of Harry though, could his ability be of use at the time? Tom still only knew bits and parts of what Harry could do, but the little he knew held a lot of potential. Would Harry be willing to use that potential though?

"It would be quite useful if he could... talk with the Generals who were assassinated," Tom murmured. "Ask them who killed them. If there's a spy in the ranks. Find out what happened."

"Do you think he would help you?"

"Perhaps not without a reason," Tom replied. "Luckily, I can give him one."

"Well, doesn’t that sound promising."

“There are things he wants that I can give him. And since his father is pretty much out of the picture, it’s not like there’s anyone who is going to monitor his activities. A child his age... he will want some kind of guidance, I’m sure. Anything to not feel lost. He will want security, safety.”

“And you can give him that?"

“I can give him power,” Tom said. “And power will help him keep himself safe.”
Okay so, this is basically the last chapter of the "peaceful arc" that we've had with Harry up until now.

After this chapter there'll be a lot of stuff like drugs and eating disorders, suicides, deaths, graphic murders (none of which happen to, or are committed by Harry directly).

Just thought that I'd rather warn y'all now than let you read something that makes you go OK NO. Like when I'm reading shitty teen wolf fics and sudden unrealistic love by penis happens, and I backtrack like program lolhope.exe

So yeah.Warnings.

Filippa wasn’t in her flat. Either that, or she was ignoring Harry – which was quite unlikely. Harry stood in front of the closed door of her apartment, unsure of what to do next. He had been planning on talking with her, mostly about the Tournament, but he couldn’t do that if he didn’t find her first.

In all honesty, Harry didn’t want to go back to his own apartment either – he knew that soon enough, Clemens or Truls would drop by and while he really liked both of his friends, he didn’t feel like talking with them at the moment. It was strange, perhaps, that at times he needed a break from the presence of the very same people he usually wanted to keep near.

With a sigh Harry turned, only to come face to face with Heidi, who was clearly on her way up – presumably from Nikolai’s apartment to her own.

“Hi,” Harry said. “Have you seen Filippa?”

“I thought she was visiting you,” Heidi replied. “I saw her go down a little while ago.”

“Strange,” Harry muttered, frowning. There was a possibility that she was… but… would she? “All right, Heidi, thanks.”

“No problem,” the girl replied with a bright smile, and continued her way up. Harry waited until the sound of her footsteps was gone before going down the stairs. He didn’t stop at his own floor, though, and continued instead to where Lorenzo’s empty apartment was.

‘I wonder if she’s really here,’ Harry thought hesitantly, feeling slightly anxious. ‘If she is, should I just leave her alone? What is she even doing there? How many times has she been here after Lorenzo died?’

The distant sound of someone’s door opening a few floors up made Harry hastily pull out his wand and tap the lock of the door in front of him. In fear of being caught, he opened the door, stepped in, and closed it quickly. It was dark, cold, and empty. Filippa was sitting next to an empty fireplace- Harry stood awkwardly for a moment, barely daring to breathe.

“I’m sorry, were we supposed to hang out?” Filippa asked.
“No,” Harry admitted, moving to sit down in front of her, on the cold floor. “Are you okay?”

“How did you find me?”

“I bumped into Heidi. She was visiting Nikolai, and said that she saw you leave your own flat and go down. Between your flat and Nikolai’s flat are only two – mine and… this one.”

“Smart,” Filippa murmured quietly, before she sighed and reached to touch his hand, perhaps seeking comfort. “Are you going to sign up for the tournament thing?”

“That’s what’s making you worry today?” Harry asked, curling his fingers around her own.

“Today,” Filippa repeated. “We do seem to get new reasons every day, don’t we?”

“Yeah. I… yeah. If I get enough people to nominate me or something. I don’t know if I’ll succeed in that, considering the people I’ll be going up against. There are quite a few popular people in Durmstrang.”

“Why would you want to take part in it?” Filippa demanded to know. “It’s barbaric. Fighting to the death for no other reason but to hurt others?”

“No. Not… not quite. Not really. Filippa… taking part in this tournament – even winning it – will help me with… It will make me known. And if I get known for being strong, people will listen to me.” Harry took a deep breath before shifting to sit closer to his friend.

“Listen to you?” Filippa asked, narrowing her eyes. “You have a plan?”

“I have a project,” Harry told her. “There is so much wrong in this world, Filippa, and I know I can’t fix all of it. But I want to do what I can, and being known as strong and smart enough to win is going to make people take my words into consideration. You understand that, right?”

“Yes, I do,” the girl admitted. “I do, and I understand the necessity of what you’ve chosen to do. But Harry, it’s all so… so much bigger than us.” Her dark eyes were wide, her voice both angry and sad. Harry wished he could tell her more – he wished he could explain how winning the tournament would make Tom notice him as someone strong enough to be an equal… but he couldn’t. Not yet.

“I know,” Harry said instead. “And it scares me. Bloody hell, it sure does. I’m scared. But if I don’t do it, Filippa, who will? I don’t want to do it; I don’t want to risk my life to change a world that isn’t out to get me. It would be so easy to ignore that this same world that accepts me, hurts and excludes so many others. But I won’t. I won’t ignore it.”

“So you will change it.”

“I will try. Winning the tournament would help me, and that’s why I want to… need to do it.”

“Will you use whatever means necessary in order to win?” Filippa asked suddenly. “Even that… skill you told me about, a long time ago?”

“I don’t want to, and I hope I won’t need to,” Harry replied. “But if I must, I will. I need to win, Filippa. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” she said, and then surprised Harry by smirking. “Well then, I guess you will have to start training. I doubt that the basic lessons we’re getting right now – no matter how hard Professor Crouch is being on us – will be quite enough.”
“You mean I should get another tutor?”

“If you can,” Filippa said. “Or I can help you train. I know a lot of spells that can prove to be useful. I can also send for more books that could be useful. If you end up being the Durmstrang Champion, losing will not be an option.”

“Yeah,” Harry breathed, feeling his heart beat fast against his ribs. “You’re right. You… you’ll help me?”

“Always,” Filippa promised. “Until the day I die.”

“We’ll start modifying the Quidditch pitch of Hogwarts as soon as the summer break starts,” Sirius said. Bellatrix grinned, and set a house-elf on fire.

“We’re finally getting somewhere with this project,” she cooed, “That’s great.”

“And that’s not,” Sirius said, banishing the elf with a flick of his wand, grimacing at the lingering stench of burnt skin. “I can’t wait to see the list of applicants. I wonder if there will be a lot of students trying their luck.”

“Your godson will be applying, won’t he?” Bellatrix asked, and Sirius narrowed his eyes, feeling unsettled by her interest in Harry.

“I don’t know,” he said, “Probably. I hope he does, it’d be great to have him attending Hogwarts for a year.”

“It’s unlikely that Durmstrang will let any of their chosen students sink to Hogwarts’ level,” Bellatrix sneered, “I wouldn’t be surprised if they had their own tutors with them.”

“Yes, true, but what I care about is having Harry in the castle;” Sirius said dismissively, “So he can see the places where his parents studied. He was there once – during some break, I’m not sure which.”

“Will the boy’s training be enough? My nephew Anthony is quite enthusiastic about this, and he… well, you know how he gets when he’s like that. If he won’t survive against Anthony, how could he survive against what you’ve planned?” Bellatrix’s lips twisted into a dark smile, and she leaned forward.

“Keep your cleavage away from me,” Sirius hissed, leaning back.

“Unless,” the woman said, ignoring Sirius’ words, “That is your plan. You wish to see the boy pushed to his limits. You want to see him broken and wounded, you want to see him—“

“No,” Sirius dismissed, “No. No. No. For Merlin’s sake, Bella, are you in your right mind today? Or ever? Where do you get these kinds of thoughts from, anyway?”

“Well, what else do you expect? If he’s not strong enough, he will die. Painfully. If he’s lucky.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“You’re trying to send him to his death while telling me that you have no such intentions. Come now, Sirius, I wouldn’t judge you,” Bellatrix said, patting the man’s arm soothingly. “I wouldn’t judge you at all. I never understood what you liked about the Potters anyway.”
“It’s none of your business,” Sirius replied stiffly. “Harry would be fine. He’s a smart kid and he would know what to do if he ends up being the champion. He would be just fine.”

“No. He really would not.”

“There’s still plenty of time for him to train and prepare, you know. I could get him a tutor for the summer.”

“Time flies.”

“So what’s your point?” Sirius finally snapped. “You want me to train him? Start training him right now?”

“Merlin, no,” Bellatrix drawled. “That’d be cheating. I want nothing, cousin. I simply thought it to be of importance to point out that should your godson take part in the Triwizard tournament, he is going to be hard pressed to survive it, let alone win.”

“I won’t make his choices for him,” Sirius said.

“Because you fear the responsibility, hm?”

“Because his decisions are not mine to make. Whatever he chooses, I will support him.”

“Even if he chooses to foolishly risk his life and take part in the competition?” Bellatrix wanted to know.

“Really?”

“Where’s the harm?” Sirius asked, shrugging. “Even if I voted for him, who else would? The other participants will be nominated by many important individuals, I’m sure. Harry has only my vote, and it’s unlikely that he will get more than that. It won’t be enough to carry him through, you know. Realistically, he won’t be the champion.”

“If you say so,” Bellatrix replied, leaning back against her chair again. “If you say so, dear cousin.”

Balancing training with schoolwork in a way that didn’t make his absences seem suspicious was difficult. Harry slept less and couldn’t focus in class quite as well as he perhaps should have. He knew, however, that the extra training he was doing was much needed.

‘It’s not that I’m bad,’ Harry thought, pressing his face against his pillow and enjoying the warmth surrounding him. ‘It’s just that so many others are better.’

The training itself was going well, even though it didn’t feel like he was doing enough. Harry was sure that all of the other people who wanted to take part in the tournament were being trained by tutors and were being helped by their parents. Harry only had Filippa.

Not that she wasn’t, well, hardworking. She was. And she knew quite a few spells that Harry had never even thought of. The problem was, simply, that Harry was very unlikely to use a spell to change his facial features or modify his clothes during a duel.

‘I need something else,’ the boy thought. ‘Something more. I wonder if… Merope or Albus can help. Or Sirius. Is it too early to think of the tournament yet, though? I probably won’t even be selected.’ Regardless, it was better to be safe than sorry. Asking Merope for help would cost him
nothing. Should he do it now? Although he was tired and sleepy, he definitely wouldn’t have the
time to do it in the morning.

Harry contemplated going to the kitchen and making himself a cup of coffee, but then decided to not
bother. If he ended up falling asleep while talking with Merope – or before that – then so be it. He
could always try again at the next given chance.

He did succeed.

The same old sliding sensation took him to the ghost-filled station, although this time it felt far more
unpleasant than ever before.

Harry opened his eyes and shuddered, cursing himself for not even grabbing a coat or a pair of
socks. It was cold and windy and rainy.

Harry was glad for the sheltered areas at the train station, and as he hid under one of them, he
couldn’t help but realize that despite the constant cold and dampness of the place, it had never
outright rained before. He stared at the rain for a few moments, wondering if it was of any
significance, before turning to look for Merope. He found her soon enough.

“You look less alive than I feel,” Merope said, eyeing him with a rather unimpressed expression.
“What did you get yourself into this time?”

“Hi,” Harry said. “Is Albus here?” He watched as the woman threw her head back and shook it,
rather aggressively, before fixing her unnerving eyes on him.

“He’s not. He has been… wandering around a lot, lately. Perhaps you will find the time to tell him to
take care not to step under a train.”

“He’s not senile.”

“Did you come here to discuss Albus?” Merope snapped, suddenly angry. “You can see that he’s not
here.”

“I actually came to talk about Tom,” Harry said quickly. “There’s a… tournament coming. I don’t
know what will exactly happen there, but everyone says it’s probably dueling. I need to——“

“Dark Arts,” the woman cut in. “You will impress no one by using neutral spells, boy. In a duel you
fight to win, you fight to hurt your opponent.”

“It’s not that simple,” Harry said, scowling. “You can’t expect me to believe that learning a few
simple Dark spells will actually catch his attention. Numerous others will use Dark spells as well!”

“Well then,” Merope drawled, “the spells you will end up using will simply have to be outstanding,
isn’t that right? And don’t argue with me, boy. If you’re not going to listen to my advice, I will stop
giving it.”

“I don’t know any Dark spells anyway, and I don’t know anyone who’d teach me,” Harry
continued. “It’s not like I can go to Sirius or anyone else and ask for their help. And I’ve heard
enough stories to know better than to try learning Dark Arts on my own.”

“Figure it out,” Merope simply said. “My son has already expressed interest in you, has he not? He’s
curious about you, has voluntarily spent time with you. It shouldn’t be tough for you to keep that
interest from straying.”
The problem was that Harry didn’t even know if he wanted to keep that interest fixed on him. He sighed, and took a step back. He felt tired and disoriented, and the trip here had been more trouble than what it was worth. He might as well return to his bed and rest.

“Potter,” Merope called out suddenly. “You’ve been reading about the Tribe.” Harry stiffened, unsure of how to respond. In the end he just turned and shrugged.

“I thought it would be wise for me to be informed,” he said. The gaunt woman smiled so unpleasantly, it made Harry look away.

“It would be wiser,” Merope said, “to not know of them at all. You see, boy, the more you know about them, the more aware of you they become. And their attention is something you do not want. Not yet. So stop.”

“I’ll think about it,” Harry replied, “but I make no promises.”

And then he left.

* *

The downside to being busy and having a lot to do was that time seemed to go by faster. Harry didn’t feel ready or confident when Professor Lyuben started handing out the application forms for the tournament.

“If you do not wish to participate,” the man said, “then of course do nothing with the paper. If you do wish to participate, fill it up and return it by the end of April – which is almost five weeks away. You have plenty of time to think carefully about whether or not this tournament is something you want to take part in.”

“Professor,” Nikolai started, “could you please tell us again the steps that we should take after we have handed in our applications?”

“Your names will be added to the list of nominees,” Professor Lyuben said. “If, say, fifty students hand in their correctly filled applications on time, the list of nominees will have fifty names. Out of these fifty, seven will be selected. These seven will be picked based on several different points.”

“Recommendations, right?” Clemens said, and Professor Lyuben nodded.

“How do the recommendations work?” Filippa asked.

“It’s a bit tricky,” Professor Lyuben admitted. “The information regarding it was updated a few days ago. Each nominee will have to look for people of significant standing in our society, and those witches or wizards will need to send the Headmaster a message by the end of May. However, what matters more than these recommendations are the grades of the nominees and the individual assessments done by their teachers.”

“So, if someone doesn’t manage to get any big shot to nominate him or her,” Filippa said, “they might get picked anyway?”

“Yes,” Professor Lyuben said. “It’s improbable, but not impossible. On the sixteenth of May there will be an info session for the applicants – do not miss it. Information on study schedules and accommodations will be given, and several other important issues will be cleared then as well. Not to mention that the info session might very well end up being your only chance to ask questions about the Tournament.”
“Sir, when will we know who have been chosen?” Heidi asked, and Harry could see her hand resting on Nikolai’s. She was, maybe for a good reason, rather worried about her friend.

“At the final feast, right before you start your summer break,” Professor Lyuben replied. “The selected seven will be revealed, and a few days after that they will be contacted by the Headmaster. This will give them the chance to train and prepare during the summer.”

The whole summer time to train. If Harry asked, would James help him? Would—

‘No,’ Harry thought, barely managing to not scowl. ‘I won’t count on James for anything.’ Could he count on Sirius, though? Harry hadn’t seen his godfather in quite a while, and more often than not he felt as if he didn’t have him at all. Harry felt guilty for feeling disappointed – Sirius was a high-ranked Death Eater, surely he had far more important things to do than the check on Harry.

Suddenly, Harry thought of Tom.

Would he help, really? He hadn’t seemed particularly reluctant to spend time with Harry, and maybe if Harry could offer him something in return – or just leave it all as a pending favour – he could ask for some tips from Tom? Would it work? Would the Dark Lord be willing to offer him some advice?

Knowing Tom, he would agree to a deal if he had something significant to gain from it, but for the life of him Harry couldn’t recall anything he could do for the man in return.

“It is advisable,” Professor Lyuben said, “that those who wish to participate should clear it with me first. You nine are, without a doubt, brilliant students. But not all of you are fit for this – not by a long shot. My evaluation will not aid nor hinder your chances to be selected, and it is not mandatory. Simply, as I said, advisable.”

Weeks passed. Thoughts of the tournament alternated between dreams of grandeur and nightmares of grisly ends. Harry knew that every serious nominee would use the upcoming Easter break for intensive training. He wished he could, too, but the chances of James teaching him anything at all were non-existent.

“You could come with me,” Björn offered the day before the weeklong Easter break was to start. “You’ve never been to Stockholm, have you?”

“No,” Harry admitted, not looking up from the small bag he was packing. “But I wouldn’t want to impose. I’ll go home and—”

“Train on your own?”

“There are advantages in training alone.”

Björn sighed and flopped down on Harry’s bed, clearly displeased. “I don’t like it when you do this,” he said, and it was the completely serious tone of his voice rather than his words that made Harry stop what he was doing and turn to look at him.

“Do what?” the boy asked, feeling wary all of a sudden.

“Isolate yourself because you’re so afraid of being a burden,” Björn said. “I’m pretty sure that Truls would drag you with him if his family was a little bit less freaky.” Harry looked surprised.

“You’ve met his family?”
“You’d be surprised by how small the Swedish magical community is,” Björn revealed. “I’ve bumped into his sister twice, and I’ve heard a lot of stuff about the rest of them. It’s good that he has you in his life, you know, or else he’d end up like them. Proof that kids aren’t always like their parents.”

“I should hope not,” Harry said, thinking of James. Where was he, anyway? What was he doing? Drinking? Fighting? Harry didn’t know which one was the more preferable option – he wished it’d be neither. “Anyway, I’ll probably just drop by home quickly and then come back here. I’ll be fine.”

“My older brother used to say that all the time,” Björn said, a sudden strange smile on his face. “He kept telling everyone who bothered to ask that he was fine. Are you fine? Yes, I’m fine. Are you okay? Yes, I’m okay. I guess it wasn’t until he killed himself that we figured that maybe we’ve been asking the wrong questions all this time.”

“What do you mean anything specific by that?” Harry wanted to know, and the other boy smiled a little bit. He felt shaken by Björn’s words, but didn’t know how to react.

“You look stressed. Often you look like you’re… not happy.”

“I’m not unhappy.”

“Well no, but you’re not happy either. And I’m not trying to pry or anything, believe me. I know you, and I know that you’re not the kind of guy who’ll feel stressed by small things. And that’s what worries me.”

‘Maybe I should have stuck to talking about going home,’ Harry thought, unsure about how to proceed with the conversation. “Björn—”

“I was at the library the other day,” the boy continued. “I was doing some research on a bet I wanted to win, and needed to take a look at the librarian’s papers. Did you know they keep records of who borrows what?”

“No, I—”

“That’s not all, though. There are select books that are red-marked, and if a student borrows more than a dozen of those books, their name will be moved to a different list. Nothing would be done, of course, because those lists are rarely checked, but just having a name listed there can be… dangerous.” Björn’s smile had vanished, and Harry felt that his heart was beating way too fast, way too heavily.

“Your name was there,” Björn said, and Harry wasn’t surprised. “Since you started attending Durmstrang, you’ve borrowed an alarming number of books that are about politics, history, and who knows what else.”

“I’m curious,” Harry told him, knowing that the other boy would know it’s an excuse.

“I reset your account and got you off the list,” Björn said easily, as if he hadn’t just saved Harry from potential future trouble. “But the thing is, Harry, that it got me thinking.”

“Serious thoughts?” Harry asked nervously, and the other boy snorted.

“I don’t know what you’re up to, but I think it’s something huge,” Björn said. “It’s not just about the books you borrowed, but just generally everything you’ve done and said up until now. Words that never made sense, behaviour that was just a bit too… something else. You don’t seem like an ambitious guy, but you are, aren’t you? And what you’re planning right now… it’s bigger than us,
bigger than Durmstang, even.”

“Those are quite the conclusions you’re jumping to.”

“They are, and maybe I’m wrong. But I’m not going to lie, Harry. *I trust you.* Whatever you’re planning to do, I trust that it’s the right thing to do. I don’t know if you’ll succeed, and I know that *you* don’t trust *me*, but I look at you and see someone I can actually trust with taking the lead. I want you to succeed, and you *can’t* if you get trapped into the isolating image of being always fine.”

“What do—”

“Nobody,” Björn said, coming to stand right in front of Harry. “Nobody is always fine. We’re human. We need to sometimes be able to sit down and admit that we’re not fine. If you don’t do that, if you keep piling on the stress while pretending to be fine, at some point you’ll get to a point you lose control at. A point where you end up making more and more mistakes, lose perspective and lose sight of your goal.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” Harry asked, wary and even more worried than before. “Did something happen?”

“Not yet,” Björn replied, shaking his head. “But if I’m not the Champion, I’ll be betting on you.”

“Has anyone ever told you that it’s a tad bit exhausting to try and follow your train of thoughts?” Harry sighed, and moved to sit down. Björn looked at him for a few moments silently, before shrugging.

“We’re not ordinary people, Harry,” the boy said with a grin. “Or else we wouldn’t be here. I think that means that maybe we’re meant for more than what ordinary people have planned for us.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, and though it was perhaps arrogant of him – he couldn’t help but agree, to some level. “And I’m not saying that the tournament and my… plans are not connected. I’m just surprised by you noticing and the way you’re reacting to it.”

“It feels weird to you because you keep thinking that you’re too insignificant to be able to achieve greatness,” Björn told him. “I’m not hindered by that kind of worries. The others think I’m kidding when I say that I want to be rich beyond reality. The reason why it’s *me* who will achieve that, and not them, is because I’m the one who believes in that whereas they keep telling themselves and everyone else that it’s impossible.”

“So you’re telling me to go for my goals with reckless abandon,” Harry summed up, not entirely disliking the idea.

“Not *recklessly*,” Björn said, “but yeah, pretty much. I have to go now to finish packing, but think about it, Harry, okay?”

“I will,” Harry promised. He’d have a whole week of free time to think about what Björn had said. After all, Easter would be a very lonely holiday for him.

The next morning, he woke up to the sound of an owl hooting outside his window.

\*

“He’s unlikely to respond before noon,” Tom said, eyeing the pile of papers on his desk. “I could read through at least one third of this pile before then.”
“Are you sure that he’ll respond at all?” Nagini hissed, and the Dark Lord nodded.

“I took a look at those who signed up to be nominated; his name is on the list. I’ll offer to not only make sure that he’ll be representing Durmstrang, but I’ll also train him… in exchange for a favour that in comparison is not too much for him at all.”

“Which is?”

“I told you a while ago, didn’t I? It’d be useful if he could ask the dead what killed them; if there’s a spy in the ranks, for example. He can do that for me.”

“Is that what you put in the message you sent him?”

“No,” Tom said. “That was an invitation to spend Easter with me. If he accepts I’ll take us to the hideout in Malta.”

“Name tells me nothing,” Nagini said. “Don’t mistake that for a request to elaborate.”

“I can teach him some tricks there as soon as he finds out the information I need. He’s a smart kid, he’ll know that he has to get someone to teach him, or he’d be the first to lose.”

“He’s a bad duellist?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t matter. He’s a third year student, there’s no way he could defeat, say, a seventh year student. Even if said seventh year student came from Hogwarts. It’s not like he can afford to turn me down. Who else does he have?”

Who else does he have?

The question slipped out of Tom’s mouth, startling him. He had intended it as a mocking note, a question that simply puts emphasis on how much power Tom has over Harry. Instead, it left him feeling slightly hollow. It’d be useful, of course, that there not be a parent or a parental figure to keep tabs on Harry, but it also made it glaringly obvious how lonely the boy’s life truly was.

Tom wasn’t feeling sorry for the boy – rather, he was annoyed on his behalf. Then again, to think positively, this way if Harry died, nobody would go looking for him. It’d be easy to send a message to Durmstrang and cover the tracks from there. If James Potter managed to pull himself up from the bottom of a bottle long enough to ask about his son, well, murder had always been Tom’s preferred way of dealing with problems.

“What will you teach him?” Nagini asked suddenly. “Spells?”

“Tricks,” Tom replied. “Nothing he can actually use against me. Thinking outside the box, so to say. A man can keep his balance while dodging spells, but such feat is impossible if you blow up the ground he’s standing on.”

“Careful, or your boy will blow up the ground you’re standing on.”

“No,” Tom said, narrowing his eyes. “Don’t even joke about that, Nagini. The moment that boy actually does something that could be a gesture against me, I’ll deal with him.”

“How?”

“I have it sorted out,” Tom assured his pet with a smug smirk, “a creative and permanent solution.”
“Pack the essentials for a week-long holiday. You’ll be spending Easter with me. This letter is a portkey that will bring you to me at six in the evening, today. Be ready.”

Harry was sitting on his bed, fully dressed with a bag on his lap and the letter in his hand. What on earth had prompted Tom to send him this sort of a message? Why did the Dark Lord want to meet him now? Did this have anything to do with the Triwizard Tournament?

‘Well, a week-long break is plenty of time,’ Harry thought. ‘Question remains, though: plenty of time for what? I should probably drop the letter and pretend I never got it.’ That, of course, would piss off the Dark Lord and Harry really didn’t want to do that anytime soon.

Maybe he could ask the man to teach him a spell or two?

Knowing him, though, he’ll ask for something in return.
“Potter,” was the first word Tom said to him when he arrived. And then, right after: “Harry.”

“Hi,” Harry said, looking at the room he was in – a surprisingly cozy living room with large windows, wooden walls, and thick, soft carpets on the floor. One of the windows was slightly open, letting in a refreshing breeze. “Where are we?” This was nothing like the cold and dark castle of gloom that Harry had pictured in his head.

“One of my houses,” Tom replied, not caring to elaborate. The man narrowed his eyes suddenly, eyeing Harry suspiciously. “You’re… taller than the last time I saw you.”

“I’ll be fourteen in a few months.”

“Impressive,” Tom said, not impressed. Sweet Circe, fourteen? By that age Tom had two murders under his belt. “Leave your bag on the floor – a house-elf will take it to the room you’ll be occupying this week. Sit down anywhere. Tea? Coffee?”

“Does this have anything to do with the Triwizard Tournament?” Harry wanted to know, sitting down on one of the soft chairs in the room. A house-elf appeared to set down a tray of tea and biscuits on the table, before grabbing Harry’s bag and disappearing with it.

“It could,” Tom replied, sitting down as well, and only then did Harry notice the giant snake peeking from a half-opened cabinet. “You need to be recommended by someone in order to become a potential champion. Do you have anyone you can count on to recommend you? Your father, perhaps?”

“No,” Harry replied, feeling foolish all of a sudden. He had been pretending to have a shot at being officially nominated without having a single guaranteed recommendation. The boy’s green eyes were fixed on Tom, trying to read the man’s thoughts somehow. He couldn’t. “No one.”

“Take something to eat or drink,” Tom said, waving towards the tray, and warily Harry did as told, trying to ignore the feeling of being stared at. “This is going to take a while, and you will think better if you’re not hungry.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, moving to pour himself a cup of tea. He didn’t take a biscuit.

“I will recommend you,” Tom said, “and I can guarantee that my recommendation will get you to Hogwarts after the summer. I’ll even teach you a trick or two – after all, if you do get selected, I wouldn’t want you to embarrass me.”

“And in return?” Harry wanted to know, numerous possibilities running through his mind. “What could I offer you in return for all of that?”

‘Obedience would be a good start,’ Tom thought, and attempted a comforting smile.

“What’s your face doing?” Harry asked, squinting at him. Tom rolled his eyes, ignoring the loudly expressed amusement from Nagini.

“Let’s talk about you first,” Tom replied. “You and your special ability… the one I discovered quite a while ago. I don’t forget things like these. What I want you to do first is to explain precisely what it is that you do, and then I will ask you to use your talent to do a small favour for me.”
‘Just one?’ Nagini hissed, but was ignored. Instead, Tom continued:

“You will be safe, of course, no matter what.” No matter what, within reason. “I won’t force you to do this.” Maybe.

“Can I think about it?” Harry said, and Tom’s smile was anything but pleasant.

“Explain your power to me first, and then I will tell you what I want,” the Dark Lord said. “And then you can go think about it for about ten seconds before you agree. Is that acceptable?”

“Apparently it has to be,” Harry replied, looking down at his almost empty cup of tea. He was clearly hesitant, and Tom knew that the boy wasn’t stupid enough to feel comfortable. “Sure.”

“Pretend I remember nothing from what you told me before,” Tom said. “What is it that you can do, and how can you do it? What are your limits?”

“Basically,” Harry started slowly, “there’s this… station. When people die, they go there for a while until they can move on.”

“A limbo, you mean?”

That term had never occurred to Harry, though it did seem to fit the train station perfectly. “Precisely,” the boy said, nodding. “A limbo of sorts. It’s like a train station, and dead people come in, then they get into the trains and go to whatever afterlife they’re meant for.”

“How long do people stay in that… train station?”

“Most leave quickly, as soon as their trains come.”

“And the rest?”

“Some wait,” Harry said, thinking of Albus. “They wait for their loved ones, I guess.” Tom made a sound that was meant to perhaps encourage Harry to talk faster, but sounded more like a snigger.

“Nobody has tried to come back?” the Dark Lord wanted to know, and Harry frowned, thinking. “No,” the boy answered. “I don’t think that’s possible. I can do it just because I’m never really there, you know? I’m still solidly alive and anchored so that pulls me back. I don’t know if anyone has tried but I can’t imagine anyone succeeding.”

“What do you do there? Aside from speaking with dead people you shouldn’t be talking to.” Like my mother.

“Nothing,” Harry replied. “There really isn’t anything to do. I can’t board any of the trains. I tried once… after my mum died. But I was stopped.” Tom nodded, not bothering to come up with anything comforting to say about the boy’s mother’s death.

Tom watched Harry quietly for a few moments, before finally speaking.

“Someone inside my ranks is killing my generals one by one,” he said calmly, keeping a sharp eye on Harry’s reaction. The boy’s eyes widened and he sat straighter, a small frown appearing on his face.

“Your godfather is safe,” Tom assured him, pleased to have found yet another way to convince Harry to help him. “Though for how long, I cannot say. Several others have either been subjected to attempted assassinations, or simply found dead. No one has seen anything suspicious.”
“No one alive,” Harry said immediately. Tom nodded, pleased and reluctantly impressed.

“What I want,” Tom told him, “is for you to go to this ‘limbo,’ look for the ones who died, and find out what happened. In return I will not only make sure that you will be one of the chosen nominees, but I will also help you prepare for the tournament. Can you do that?”

“In theory, yeah,” Harry admitted. “But the train station… it’s incredibly crowded. I’ll need to know exactly who I’m looking for, of course, and I’ll have to go there more than once. How long ago did they die? People don’t stay there for long.”

“Next time someone dies, I’ll tell you right away,” Tom promised, unable to stop a small smirk from appearing. Harry’s disapproving expression only made the Dark Lord more amused.

“I have a quick meeting to attend,” he then said, standing up. “In your room – Nagini will take you there – you will find a stack of files. They have all the information you’ll need to know about the assassinated generals. Work hard, my pet will keep you company.”

‘It’s cute how you still think that I’m the pet in this partnership,’ Nagini hissed. Harry eyed the giant snake with a considerable amount of apprehension.

“She gets nervous easily,” Tom lied with a small grin on his face. “So don’t do anything unpredictable. And if she eats a house-elf, pretend you’ve seen nothing. Nagini doesn’t like being judged.”

Being called back to the war front for a mission once again was nothing but a relief to James. Anything would be better than the empty hours that filled his days and left the taste of firewhisky ingrained in his mouth. Here, despite the horrors of war, James could at least focus on something else: survival.

Though why he bothered, James wasn’t sure. Most of the time survival didn’t seem worth the effort.

“James,” a familiar, irritating voice said. James knew before he turned around that Peter would be there, watching him with his watery blue eyes. As unpleasant as he found the sight of the grey, dying trees and masked Death Eaters, the sight of Peter Pettigrew remained even less preferable.

“What do you want,” James said, not managing to sound quite as annoyed as he felt. Somehow even expressing his feelings seemed to require so much energy and effort lately.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” Peter said, hurrying to walk by James’s side. “Considering what’s going on with your son.”

“Harry?” James stopped abruptly, and turned to grab the shorter man’s collar. “What the hell are you talking about? I know he’s alright, he’s safe. Else the school would have contacted me—”

“Oh, he is safe,” Peter assured him quickly, struggling to make James let go of him. “For now.”

“I really don’t have the patience to play mind games with you,” James said angrily. “How do you even know about what Harry’s doing? I don’t know what he’s doing, and I’m his father.”

“Not a very good one, though,” Peter said, his words leaving James breathless for a second. He then let go of the shorter Death Eater, and turned away. Without a word, James returned to marching quietly.
“You’ve heard of the Triwizard Tournament, I believe?” Peter asked, hurrying after the man. “It’s a dangerous contest where champions from different school compete for glory and fortune.”

“What does that have to do with Harry?” James asked, dreading the answer, knowing already what it would be. “Harry doesn’t want glory or fortune.”

“Maybe not fortune,” Peter said. “But to a boy who is practically parentless and hasn’t been acknowledged by the people he used to look up to, glory matters.”

‘Well,’ James thought, ‘if this bastard isn’t quite good at twisting the knife in sore wounds.’ “Harry wouldn’t.”

“Harry has,” Peter said bluntly. “I know a teacher who works at Durmstrang – I know it’s the truth.”

James fell silent again, walking through the mud and stepping over the scattered bones and body parts, thinking of what he had just heard. If Peter was right – and James didn’t want to believe him – then Harry was in danger. He’d be getting hurt, and the mere thought of that made James panic.

Harry could be getting hurt seriously, permanently. Physically or mentally. Every fiber of his being went against allowing his son to take the risk of participating in this tournament. Could he stop Harry from competing, though? He should ask for details, but Peter was the only person who’d know and was nearby.

“You can’t stop him,” Peter answered. “It’s magically binding.”

“Then I can help him,” James decided, his heart beating heavily in his chest. Perhaps this would be the chance he had wanted – the opportunity to fix what had gone wrong between him and Harry. “I could train him. Make sure that he’ll know how to defend himself.”

“That sounds great,” Peter said, the tone of his voice implying the opposite. “But you do realize the risks?”

“What?”

“You don’t have to believe me, of course, but do think of what I’m about to tell you carefully,” Peter continued. “If you go there and help him now, what will he think? That you didn’t deem him worth your time until he started seeking fame and glory?”

“That’s— He wouldn’t think that!” James exclaimed. “My son knows I love him—”

“I’m sure he does,” Peter said calmly. “But if anything goes wrong now, if you go to him and mess up, it will destroy him. Can you honestly say that you can just go there, fix everything, and save the day, James? Can you say that, with your track record?”

The words were cruel, and yet James couldn’t help but believe them. He had let Harry down so much already; he didn’t want to become a burden to his son. On the other hand he just couldn’t do nothing, now could he? He couldn’t just stand aside and let Harry take part in a dangerous tournament without even trying to help him!

“I know you want to be of use to him,” Peter said. “But by going to him you will destroy whatever routine he has. He won’t be able to concentrate because he’ll be too focused on saving you from the bottle. You’ll be putting his wellbeing at risk just to alleviate your guilt. You want to help him, James, but you can’t do that by being there with him. Stay out of his life, my friend. The most helpful thing you can do for him is to let him go for good. Don’t pull him down with you.”
“He’s my son,” James insisted, guilt and insecurity making his words hollow and full of doubt. “He wouldn’t… He couldn’t want me there?”

“James,” Peter sighed, sounding sorry. “Look at yourself. Are you a father anyone would want to have?”

“My lord,” Thorfinn Rowle said, kneeling in front of the Dark Lord. “Our prison in Turin was attacked. Several prisoners managed to escape.”

“Odd, isn’t it,” Tom drawled, “how a few short days ago you were assuring me that the situation in Italy is under control. And now, turns out, it wasn’t.”

“M-my lord—”

“Crucio.” Somehow though, even Rowle’s pain didn’t make Tom feel any better. His prison in Turin had been one of the most guarded, and yet the Rebels had managed to break in? This wasn’t a matter of a simple mission gone wrong anymore – this was far more serious.

“I hope,” Tom said, lifting the curse, “that you had the sense to bring proper reports on what happened with you.”

“Yes, my lord,” Rowle wheezed, trying to subdue the shaking of his body. “I have—”

“Put them on the table and leave,” Tom ordered, not in the mood for putting up with unnecessary chatter. “And tell all units to alert me immediately if anyone of significance is killed. Go back to Turin and investigate; make sure that every prisoner who hasn’t managed to escape is killed. Then hunt for the fugitives. Retrieve them alive if you can, but if that’s not possible just kill them.”

“Yes, my lord,” Rowle said, and after another bow that made him nearly topple over, he left as fast as his shaking limbs could carry him. Tom scowled, reaching for the reports Rowle had given him. How on earth had the Rebels managed to pull that off? It wasn’t a lucky shot, it couldn’t be. Whoever was killing his generals within his ranks was also very likely tangled up in this one.

Browsing through the quickly written reports, Tom couldn’t help but feel like there was something amiss in the whole operation. Another report, written by Lieutenant Colonel Gibbs had explained some parts of how the attack and the following escape had happened, and there was something almost familiar in the tactic used.

‘This feels like something I should remember,’ Tom thought, sighing. ‘Have I seen this tactic used before? I believe so… but where? When? By whom?’ The Rebels had managed to blow up both of the prison’s entrances to keep the guards busy. The anti-apparation wards had held, and the magic-limiting wards had been untouched as well. Yet the few guards that had not rushed to the entrances of the prison had claimed that the hallways had been filled with fog to an alarming degree.

No spells. Someone must have used smoke bombs. This wasn’t a small thing; the Rebels hadn’t been aiming for subtlety of any kind. The iron bars of the fugitives’ cells had been opened with no signs of force – someone had gotten their hands on a key or found a way to fool the magic-limiting wards. Some of the escaped prisoners had been too wounded to move, most of them barely conscious. They must have been carried out.

It wasn’t a sophisticated plan, and yet it had been successful. The familiarity of the whole operation bothered Tom greatly, and the more time he spent in his office trying to figure it out, the more annoyed he became. In the end he decided to return back to the cottage where Harry and Nagini
Returning somewhere, knowing that someone was inside waiting for you, was perhaps one of the oddest feelings Tom had ever experienced. He wasn’t used to it – doubted that he ever would – and couldn’t help but feel slightly bitter about it. And though Harry wasn’t making any noise, the cottage didn’t feel as quiet as it had before.

“Have you eaten anything yet?” Tom asked, stopping in front of the open doorway of the room that Harry was occupying. The boy shook his head, looking up from the papers in front of him. He stared at Tom for a few moments and then frowned.

“What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing that concerns you.”

“It doesn’t have to concern me,” Harry said, pushing the papers aside. “It sometimes helps to just talk about your problems.”

“What are you doing?” Tom asked, narrowing his eyes. “Are you trying to do that whole supportive and comforting song and dance?” Harry eyed him blankly for a moment, before the boy sighed and shook his head.

“Maybe.”

“Stop. I don’t do those emotional connections.”

“You did when you hugged me when my mother died.”

“Hold up,” Tom said, “firstly: I didn’t hug you. Secondly: even if I did hug you, it wasn’t… whatever you’re trying to do now.”

“Being emotionally supportive really makes you uncomfortable,” Harry said, clearly fascinated. “And you did hug me. I was crying on you and you let it happen.”

‘Ooooo,’ Nagini hissed, and Tom felt as if, had the snake been able to, she would have whistled.

“If you ever say that again,” the Dark Lord said, “I will make sure you spend the rest of your short life crying.”

“Of course you will,” Harry sighed, and much to Tom’s horror he realized that the boy sounded fond rather than afraid.

*

Dear Luna,

It has been quite a while since I wrote to you, and I’m sorry about that. I truly am. Life has kept me busy, like it tends to do these days. And while I wish I could say that this letter has no other purpose but to be a casual reminder of your friend abroad, I’m afraid the matter isn’t quite so pleasant.

I know that your silence is guaranteed, and so I won’t ask for it, my friend. Prying eyes are keen, however, and it’d put my mind at ease to know that you have destroyed this letter after reading it.

After the summer, a Triwizard Tournament will be held at Hogwarts. There is a chance that I will be participating, which would land me there for the school year. I’ve heard plenty of the four Houses there at Hogwarts, but I’d like to know more of the people who matter. The people I need to keep an
Have there been any significant conflicts between the Houses? Are there some unwritten rules I need to know? What about the staff? Ron has complained about several staff members, but as you perhaps know, his word isn’t particularly reliable in such matters – though a good guy, Ron’s quite biased. Then again, most of us are.

I’m currently preparing for the tournament with an acquaintance of mine. He has kindly offered to help me, and with no one else available I saw it necessary to accept his offer. I’m worried, though, for so many reasons. You can possibly guess why – all the stress, all the complications in my life right now. I hope you’re having a better time than I am.

How is Draco, do you know? I suppose that aside from you and Ron, he’s the only other person I may end up spending time with during my stay at Hogwarts, unless one of my friends here from Durmstrang is sent with me.

Most importantly: how are you? How have your days been? I miss you terribly and I can’t wait to see you again. One of the things I’m definitely looking forward to after the summer is spending more time with you.

Yours truly,

Harry

“We could house the Beauxbatons students with the Ravenclaws,” Sirius said, walking through one of the hallways of Hogwarts. Frederick Yaxley, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, sighed tiredly and nodded. “Durmstrang students can be comfortable with the Gryffindors. Whatcha say, Fred?”

“I say, don’t call me Fred,” Yaxley snapped. “We’re not putting students from Durmstrang with Gryffindors, Black. We can give them their own quarters.”

“Then we will have to arrange for the Beauxbatons students to have their own quarters as well. Merlin knows this place is big enough.”

“Have you confirmed the judges yet?”

“Of course,” Sirius said. “You, Karkaroff and Madame Maxime, the headmistress of Beauxbatons will be there of course. Then Araminta Meliflua - you know her, she’s on the school board – and Bellatrix somehow muscled her way in as well. I really can’t wait to see who the champions will be. You guys are lucky you don’t have to pick nominees like the other schools. They— oh ho, Snivellus!”

“Circe, no,” Yaxley groaned, noticing the Potions Master heading towards them. “Black, stop provoking him, he can poison us both whenever he wants to. Don’t give him a reason to do it.”

“Black,” Severus Snape said, his tone somehow turning a name into an insult. “Yaxley.”

‘It’s completely normal to feel nervous around him,’ Yaxley reminded himself. ‘It doesn’t make me any less of a man. I wasn’t in Gryffindor – for a very good reason.’ “Snape! How do you do?”

“How do you do, really?” Sirius sniggered. “Old Fred and I were talking about the Triwizard Tournament.”
“The headmaster doesn’t seem to appreciate being called old,” Snape said, eyeing Yaxley’s face with no small amount of contempt.

“He just doesn’t like the name Fred,” Sirius said dismissively. “As wonderful as the name is, it pales in comparison to Sniv—”

“You can hex him into silence,” Snape told Yaxley. “It doesn’t make him a better person, but it does make him slightly more tolerable. The less conscious he is, the better. The more permanent the lack of consciousness is—”

“What dragged you out of the dungeons, anyway?” Sirius asked. “Nobody is being sacrificed to ancient gods at the moment. We’re merely discussing the Triwizard Tournament that will take place here after the summer. More teenagers to brighten up your day, Snivellus!”

“You were telling me,” Yaxley hurried to say, trying to make the atmosphere slightly less murderous. “About the nominees from other schools?”

“Well, nobody knows who will be chosen yet,” Sirius said. “But Hogwarts doesn’t have to worry about that. My godson will—”

“You’re not letting him take part in the tournament,” Snape said, the expression on his face changing from bored to appalled. “Lily’s son is not even fourteen yet.”

“He’ll be fine,” Sirius claimed. He had his own concerns, definitely. He had entertained the thought of talking with Harry about it; however, hearing Snape claim that Harry wouldn’t be fit for the tournament… well, that was just not acceptable. “He’s a talented fellow.”

“It’s not a question of how talented he is,” Snape hissed, glaring at the other wizard. “You will not be pitching a child so young against seventh year students.”

“I didn’t know you cared about his safety.”

“I don’t, but I foolishly thought that you do.”

“Harry will be just fine,” Sirius insisted. “Besides, who knows, he might not be selected as the competing champion anyway!”

“How can you be so irresponsible?” Snape sneered, shaking his head. “Aren’t you tired of being the reason for the deaths of so many—”

“Baubillious!”

“Protego!”

“Not in the hallway!” Yaxley shrieked, hastily backing away from the two wizards. “Bloody hell — Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus! Stop destroying my school! Black, I swear to Circe—”

“Stupefy! Petrificus Totalus!”

“The portkey will take you back to Durmstrang at five,” Tom said, handing Harry a small stone. “Carry on with your studies and whatever else you usually do at school. Once your summer holiday begins, I’ll contact you.”

“All right.”

“Go to that train station of yours regularly, try to find the people I assigned for you. Whenever a
“FRESH CORPSE TURNS UP, I’LL SEND YOU THE HEAD.”

“A PICTURE WILL BE GOOD ENOUGH, THANKS,” HARRY SAID. “DON’T SEND ME A HEAD. IF YOU SEND ME A SEVERED ONE I’LL—”

“YOU’LL WHAT?” TOM ASKED. “STARE AT ME DISAPPROVINGLY? YOU’RE AN EMBARRASSMENT—”

“I CAN PUT THE MEMORY OF YOU HUGGING ME IN A PENSIeve,” HARRY SAID. “AND SHOW IT TO YOU EVERY TIME WE MEET.”

“I despise you.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“FOCUS MORE ON YOUR STUDIES, AND LESS ON HAVING FEELINGS,” TOM TOLD HIM. “THINK OF THE TOURNAMENT. YOU’LL BE GOING THERE TO win, NOT JUST TO SURVIVE. THE LIST OF NOMINEES WILL BE OUT IN A FEW WEEKS. I’LL SEND MY RECOMMENDATION MID-MAY.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “I wouldn’t have known what to do without you.”

“You and the rest of the world.”

“Exaggeration is a nasty habit to get into.”

“It’s the simple truth,” Tom said, watching Harry read through the notes he had scribbled down earlier. “What do you do when you think you’ve forgotten something, and you really should be remembering it?”

“What?” Harry asked with a confused frown, looking up at Tom. “Say that again, using different words, because none of that made any sense.”

“It’s because you’re not as smart as I am,” Tom told him, and sighed heavily. “Let’s assume, hypothetically, that the Rebels did something.”

“Hypothetically. Uh-huh.”

“And their method of operation is very, very familiar.”

“But you can’t figure out why it’s familiar? Maybe it happened before and you just forgot,” Harry guessed. “Knowing how your memory works, it’s likely that you’ve somehow deliberately made yourself forget it.”

“And why would I—”

“Considering your self-esteem issues—”

“I don’t have self-esteem issues!” Tom said, clearly appalled at the mere thought of that.

“I’m pretty sure that having too much of it is also an issue,” Harry told him. “Anyway, taking into account your arrogance and inflated sense of self-importance—”

“Anyone else would be bleeding through their pores for that, Potter.”

“—it would make sense if you got your ass kicked previously the same way. Just think of all the wizards and witches who managed to pull one over you during the past few decades.”
Tom scowled, eyeing Harry with a sneer on his face. As much as he hated to admit it, the boy’s logic did somehow make sense to him.

“Consider it an exercise in humility,” Harry said gently, reaching for his jacket and preparing to leave for Durmstrang. “You need plenty of those.”

“Get out,” Tom huffed. “Go annoy someone else. Live in the library and study.”

* *

And study Harry did.

A few weeks after returning from the Easter break, Harry and all of his classmates were trying to simultaneously study, prepare for the rapidly approaching exams, train, and find time to sleep. The summer break would start in a month, and Harry was certain that he wasn’t the only one waiting eagerly for it.

The tournament-related info session Professor Lyuben had mentioned was held on the sixteenth of May, an hour after dinner. Harry had insisted on dropping by the library to return a few books before it, and the others had promised to save him a seat. On his way to the classroom where the info session would be held, he bumped into Viktor Krum.

“Hi,” Harry said, smiling happily. “How’s our resident Quidditch star?” Krum flushed red and seemed to suddenly find the floor interesting.

“Hello Harry,” he said. He spoke slowly, pronouncing each word carefully. It was quite endearing and Harry found himself smiling again. “Are you heading over to hear about the Triwizard Tournament as well?”

“Yeah. Though the tournament isn’t the only big event I’m interested in. The Quidditch World Cup, you know? I heard you’ll be playing.”

“Yes,” Krum said. “The Bulgarian National Quidditch Team has… accepted me. We hope to make it to the final round this year. Our team has been successful in its other matches.”

“I hope you guys will get to the final,” Harry agreed. “My friends and I already got the tickets to watch it. It’s in England this year and it’d be amazing to watch you play.”

“Uh, I,” Krum stammered, his face becoming even redder. The older boy seemed torn between disappointment and relief when they finally entered the classroom where the info session was held.

“It was nice to talk with you,” Krum said. “I will… see you again?”

“Sure,” Harry promised with an easy smile, and moved to sit between Truls and Björn. Clemens was sitting right in front of Harry, and turned slightly to greet the boy.

“Think Hogwarts is going to be fun?” he whispered, and Harry grinned.

“I sure hope so.”

“It’d be brilliant to go together,” Truls said. “Though the odds of that happening are quite low.”

“Want to bet on that?” Björn asked, just as Headmaster Karkaroff entered the classroom with a few other professors in tow. The man hadn’t changed at all from when Harry had first seen him, nearly three years ago. The students fell silent right away, and nervously waited for the Headmaster to begin
speaking.

“I’m glad to see so many of you here,” the Headmaster said. “So many talents, eagerly wishing to represent our school in this international tournament.”

‘I wonder how many really care about the school,’ Harry thought, ‘and how many are doing it for personal gain.’ He knew that he belonged to the latter group, and felt slightly guilty about it.

“From all the people who applied,” Headmaster Karkaroff started, “seven will be chosen. The names of these seven will be revealed in a month at the final feast. During the week that follows the end of the school year, these seven will receive an envelope with several documents, all of which are of importance. The first thing you do once receiving this envelope is to look for the confirmation form, fill it, and send it to me personally.”

‘I hope I won’t need James’s signature for that one. I wonder if Tom can help me with that, somehow…’

“You will be given your customized study schedules and your English language skills will be tested. You will go through a few physical and psychological evaluations. Your study schedules will also be given to you, and I suggest you do quite a bit of pre-reading to ensure that you won’t be falling behind. You will, after all, represent the whole school out there.

You will attend some of the classes with the students of Hogwarts – classes such as Potions and Transfiguration – while the rest will be taught to you by your Durmstrang Professors. Our superior standards will not be made easier for you, regardless of the circumstances.”

‘Thank you for the pressure.’

“Hogwarts has offered our representatives private quarters, so you needn’t worry about the lodgings. I, your headmaster, will accompany the selected students to Hogwarts along with Professors Heiner and Wieland. Deputy Headmaster, Professor Thomas Lyuben, will be overseeing the school in my absence.”

‘Pity… I prefer dealing with Professor Lyuben rather than anyone else.’

“This is an opportunity,” Headmaster Karkaroff said. “This is your time to shine. Should you be so lucky as to be chosen – not only to be part of the envoy, but as the Durmstrang Champion – you’ll be given an opportunity everyone else has been deprived of. Show us – show everyone – that you are worthy of this chance.”

Dear Harry,

The possibility of you coming to Hogwarts for a full year makes me very happy. There is so much you haven’t seen yet – I know that you will find the Hogwarts Library to be particularly enjoyable. I don’t know what Durmstrang is like, obviously, but we often get muffins during breakfast here. If that isn’t done in your school, you will have something to look forward to.

I’m sure that you’re well aware of the friendly rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Your friend Draco Malfoy is one of the biggest contributors to that rivalry, though he has calmed down significantly since last year. These days the only time when the two Houses are openly hostile to one another is directly tied to whether or not there’s a Quidditch match happening soon.

Your friend Professor Lockhart has made quite an impression on everyone in the school. He’s
popular, and many students are happy to have him. Of course he has expressed how much happier he’d be if he could have Mr. Crouch Junior instead, but as per your advice, I have elected to not listen when he starts singing.

Nobody here has heard of this tournament you mentioned. Gossip spreads quickly here at Hogwarts, and I’m sure that Ginny would have told me something if she had heard anything…

“Finally,” Harry huffed, shrinking his trunk and putting it into his pocket. “I’m done.”

“About time,” Truls said with a grin. “How come you left your packing until the last minute this time, anyway? Usually you’re the first one done.”

“I don’t know! It just happened. Probably your fault, somehow.”

“Blaming the innocent, Potter? Shame on you!”

“Innocent, my arse,” Harry grinned. “We probably should get going, though. Dinner has probably started already and I don’t trust the others to actually put anything aside for us. I wouldn’t put it past Björn and Clemens to try and eat as much as they could, just to not leave us anything. You know what their understanding of pranks is. Not very funny.”

“Preach,” Truls agreed. “Say, would you like to meet a few days before the World Cup final? I think it’d be great to just, you know, spend time together.”

“Merlin, yes,” Harry said readily. “I feel like for the past few months I’ve barely seen you. Do you have anything planned for the beginning of the break?”

“Not really,” Truls admitted. “I think I’m going to spend the next two weeks sleeping and eating. Unless I get picked for the Tournament, of course. And you?”

“Probably the same. I’m pretty nervous about who will get picked today, though. Has Björn said anything about the betting pool he has going?”

“Anthony Lestrange seems to be a favourite, but you knew that already.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed, thinking of the older British boy. He had never directly interacted with Lestrange, and didn’t particularly feel the need to do so either. From what Harry had seen, the other boy was arrogant, often to the point of being outright rude. “I’m just kind of… worried about the pressure.”

“I know what you mean,” Truls said. “Soon we’ll find out, though.”

“Hi guys,” Filippa said cheerfully, waving them closer. The girl already had some potato salad on her plate, and only then did Harry realize how hungry he was.

“Feels like I haven’t eaten all day,” the boy said, sitting down and pulling Truls to sit next to him. “Björn, I don’t think that that tray of spring rolls has your name on it.”

“It does!” the redhead claimed, pulling the mountain of spring rolls closer. “It’s mine! All mine!”

“Guys, shut up,” Heidi sighed, rolling her eyes. “Just eat and let’s hope that Headmaster Karkaroff will soon tell us who will be going to Hogwarts after the summer. This is so exciting!”

“What if Nikolai goes and you don’t?” Clemens asked. “Will you cry?”
“What if Harry goes and you don’t?” Heidi snapped back. “Will you cry?”

“What would he?” Harry wanted to know. “Honestly, you guys are so strange sometimes.”

“Hearing that from you is so ironic,” Heidi said, but her smile took the edge off the words. “By the way, when are we going to meet this summer? I think we should have some specific meeting place before we go to the Quidditch Cup final.”

“I agree,” Petronella said, pushing her bowl of soup aside. “We should decide where we’re going to meet.”

“If Harry’s okay with it, we can meet at his place around noon on that day,” Clemens suggested. “My uncle can make a portkey that will take us to where the match will be held.”

“I’m cool with that,” Filippa said, nodding, and none of the others showed any signs of disagreement.

“Alright,” Harry said, smiling. With any luck, his dad wouldn’t be home on that day anyway. “Twenty-second of August. Come whenever, but not before nine o’clock please.”

“Like most of us could wake up that early anyway,” Heidi said. “Noon is good. I’ll get myself there, then.”

Eventually, once the students had finally finished their dinner and the food had vanished from the tables, Headmaster Karkaroff stood up. As he was in the habit of doing, he began a rather long-winded speech, reminding the students of their importance, reputation, and responsibilities. Usually the students would have zoned out by the end of it, however this year each person was listening avidly.

The Headmaster fell silent for a moment, eyeing the students, before a rolled piece of parchment began levitating in front of him. Harry took in a deep breath, feeling nervous. Truls’s hand found his under the table, and he clutched his friend’s fingers tightly between his own.

‘Here goes,’ Harry thought.

“I know we all have been waiting for this,” Karkaroff said. “Amongst numerous applicants, seven were selected based on their grades and the recommendations we received during the past month. The students whose names I will mention shortly will be contacted later on by me personally. Nothing is expected of you until then.”

The wizard then reached for the rolled piece of parchment to open it. Harry was certain that never before had the whole student body been so quiet – not even during the exams. The faint rustle of the paper was the only sound that could be heard, and somehow rolling the parchment open seemed to take forever. Finally though, Karkaroff was ready to read it.

“The following students have been chosen to be part of the envoy that will go to Hogwarts next September,” he said, his voice loud and clear in the hall. “From the students who will be starting their seventh year next September: Ingrid Malte.”

‘Who?’ Faint whispering had begun, and a tall girl with long blonde braids let out a loud gasp.

“From the students who will be starting their sixth year: Mette Erling, Viktor Krum, and Anthony Lestrange.”

‘Oh, Viktor will be going! Maybe I’ll get the chance to spend some more time with him there,’ Harry
thought, leaning against Truls. ‘Björn’s crush will be going. I didn’t know that she had even applied.’

“From the students who will be starting their fifth year: Maria Rurik.”

“That leaves two,” Filippa hissed nervously. “Two left.”

“From the students who will be starting their fourth year,” Karkaroff said, glancing up briefly. “Harry Potter and Truls Kettil.”

“Well, that’s yet another bloody year left behind,” Thomas Lyuben sighed. “What an end, though.”

“I expect we’re all equally baffled by the same thing,” Ulrich Dietmar, the professor of Dark Arts, said. “Who is Harry Potter, really? I thought he was practically a nobody.”

“Obviously he’s not,” Karkaroff sneered, “if the Dark Lord himself recommended him. I just cannot figure out how that could have happened! I know the boy’s godfather – Sirius Black is part of the Inner Circle but he isn’t that important.”

“The boy doesn’t seem particularly impressive either,” Lyuben admitted. “He’s good, obviously, and doesn’t seem to struggle with his studies. But there are plenty of smarter students. Better students.”

“I suppose we simply have to trust the Dark Lord’s judgement,” Professor Elis said softly, with a humourless smile on his face. “He obviously knows something about the boy that we don’t.”

“What matters is whether or not his… whatever it is that has made him worth noticing, is important enough that we should be aware of it.”

“I say we don’t even look into it,” Lyuben said reluctantly, after a moment of contemplation. “If the Dark Lord knows, I’d rather not do anything that could accidentally bring his wrath upon us. For all we know he could have picked the boy at random.”

‘The thing is,’ Karkaroff thought. ‘The Dark Lord does nothing at random.’
Chapter 26

Like I mentioned on tumblr, you have the option of checking the warnings at the end of the chapter (and get spoiled). U kno, the end notes.

Or you can just brave into it all and feel the full impact of what I’ve got in store for you.

It’s been raining for three days, nearly nonstop. Three days, during which he hadn’t bothered to get in touch with anyone, focusing instead on the tournament, on Tom’s promise, and what he would have to do in return. He was worried – he couldn’t help but to be, considering how much could go wrong.

Being back in the Potter Manor with only a few house-elves to keep everything clean and running was lonely and he couldn’t shake off the feeling of being an intruder in his own home. Strangely enough, he had felt more at ease in Tom’s secret cottage than in the place he had grown up.

Sighing loudly, Harry rolled off the bed, and then slowly stood up. He hadn’t bothered to brush his hair, but he did wash his face and change his shirt before going to the kitchen to get something to eat. It was too late to call it a breakfast, really, yet too early for it to be dinner.

Harry had barely managed to make himself a sandwich when an owl flew in through the open window, dropped a thick envelope on the table, grabbed a tomato, and swept promptly out. For the next few minutes Harry stood silently, holding a knife and staring at the open window.

“Okay,” he muttered, putting the knife down and wiping his hands before reaching for the envelope. The moment Harry saw the Durmstrang coat of arms on it, he knew what the envelope would contain. And he was right: introductions, explanations, applications, contracts, insurance agreements – all the things the teachers had told them about before, and some more.

Harry spent the next few hours going through the papers and filling the applications that needed filling, before he decided to firecall Truls.

“You got yours, too, didn’t you?” the other boy said immediately. “I got mine this morning. Did you fill them out already?”

“Some parts,” Harry said. “Are you nervous?”

“A little bit. I mean, it’s cool and a great opportunity and so on, but… if you do end up competing, it can take a turn for the worse pretty fast. I don’t regret signing up, though. Do you?”

“No.” Maybe.

“Did you,” Truls started, his voice suddenly hesitant. “Did you tell your dad yet?”

“No,” Harry replied, thinking of James. What would his reaction be? Would he forbid Harry from entering the tournament? Would he demand to see who had nominated Harry in the first place? Or what if – what if – his dad would just shrug and not care?
As much as Harry wanted to say that he was okay without James in his life, it would never be true. He missed having his father, and even though he knew he couldn’t take the risk of involving James in his plans, it didn’t make his absence any less painful.

“I don’t know how to tell him,” Harry said. “I may send a letter to my godfather, though. Sirius is incredibly busy but at least he’s more likely to give me some sort of a response. I don’t think anybody else needs to be told, really.”

“Don’t stress about it,” Truls told him. “You’ve got enough to focus on already, Harry. Think of something positive – like the Quidditch cup!”

“I’m waiting for that one,” Harry grinned. “Got any thoughts on who’ll make it to the finals? If Bulgaria will, we’ll be seeing Viktor Krum play!”

“That guy is something else. I heard he’s a bit slow, though. Is that true, do you know?”

“Slow how?”

“Not sure who started it,” Truls said, “but rumour has it that Quidditch is all Krum has. People say he barely knows how to speak.”

“That’s a lie!” Harry exclaimed, shocked. He felt bad for the older boy who was already struggling with his shyness. To think that people would spread awful rumours like that about him, it made Harry upset. “You said you’re not sure who started it, but got any ideas anyway?”

“Björn said it’s LeStrange,” Truls revealed. “Anthony LeStrange. He’s Krum’s classmate, and will also be coming with us to Hogwarts. Bellatrix LeStrange would be his aunt.”

“Why would he say something like that about his classmate?”

“Jealousy, I guess. LeStrange is a bit of an attention seeker, if Björn is to be believed.”

“How does Björn even know these things?”

“Who knows with that guy? Wouldn’t surprise me if we came back to find him running the school.”

“That would be something. I wonder how well he knows LeStrange,” Harry said. “The guy doesn’t sound like a pleasant person at all.”

“I suppose we ought to ask Björn when we meet him next,” Truls said with a quick smile. “In a month or so. Are you betting on anyone, by the way? I’m considering, but nowhere near sure yet…”

Another prison break in Italy. Ivrea, this time. What happened there was far too similar to what happened in Turin for it to be a coincidence. Would there be another prison break happening soon? What were the rebels aiming for?

Nurmengard?

No, impossible. They couldn’t possibly know who he kept in there. Nobody had a reason to consider that place relevant in any way. Azkaban was far more… infamous. Were they truly trying to attack all the prisons, systematically? So far what connected the freed prisoners was simply them being rebels, but there had to be something more.

The Rebels wouldn’t take risks just to free a few random inmates. If they were only interested in
creating havoc and chaos, they would have simply opened the cells of as many prisoners as possible. No, those plans had been created to save specific witches and wizards, and in order to predict where they’d strike next, Tom would need to find a pattern in their plans.

*Or figure out what exactly was bothering him about the attacks – what gave him that sense of familiarity, as if he had seen that kind of plan executed before.*

*“Taking into account your arrogance and inflated sense of self-importance,” Potter had told him, “it would make sense if you got your ass kicked previously the same way. Just think of all the wizards and witches who managed to pull one over you during the past few decades.”*

*“Inflated sense of self-importance,” Tom muttered sullenly. “I am important.” The boy wasn’t perhaps entirely wrong, though. Not that Tom would ever tell him that, of course.*

The attack didn’t make him think of Dumbledore, so it’d be safe to say that the old man’s friends and plans were as dead as he was, thank Merlin. There hadn’t been any notable betrayals for quite a while either. There had been a few nearly a decade ago, yet all but one were dead—

*All but one.*

*All but one.*

Tom took in a deep breath before he quickly pulled out the papers regarding the formation of the attack and set them in front of him on the table. He looked at them for a few moments silently, before summoning a dusty, paper-filled box from under one of the bookshelves.

His long, spidery fingers were steady despite his sudden nervousness, as he spelled off the layers of dust and rummaged through the pile of papers, looking for a specific report. He found it soon enough, and put it down next to the papers he had on his table.

It matched, to some degree. The plan, the methods used. The modus operandi. The two attacks that had taken place recently were obviously based on the same attack that one of Tom’s former Death Eaters had designed to help him take over Azkaban decades ago. Except that the rebels now had less resources.

*‘All of the modifications done to the plan were caused by a lack of materials or information,’* Tom thought, knowing now for sure who was behind this.

Despite what Tom had thought at first, this had nothing to do with Albus Dumbledore or his cursed memory. No, this was someone else. Someone who had disappeared years ago and had been presumed dead.

This had Regulus Black written all over it.

*§*

Standing in front of his mother’s grave made Harry feel even more disconnected with his past than before. How one person could be what holds a family together, he wasn’t sure, but that’s what his mother had managed to do without anyone being aware of it.

The sun was already setting and the temperature was slightly colder than it had been hours ago. Harry knelt down, not worrying about the mud that would stain his trousers, opting to get comfortable instead.

*“Mum, I miss you,”* he said quietly, and for a moment entertained the idea of telling her about James.
But what was there left to tell, really? It wouldn’t help, and James wasn’t the reason why Harry had come here today anyway. Harry had enough to worry about and wanted some sort of comfort, even if the comfort was something he imagined from a dead person.

“I wonder how things would be right now if you were alive,” Harry said. “Somehow I don’t think I would have been able to get myself into the tournament. You would’ve put a stop to it and told me off for being reckless.” The boy fell silent for a moment, before continuing hesitantly, in a much weaker voice: “Nobody tells me off for being reckless anymore. Not unless it benefits them.”

A soft wind had begun to blow, making Harry remember the times when his mother had absentely brushed his hair with her fingertips. The ordinary moments he had shared with her seemed to belong to another lifetime, another Harry who wasn’t as real.

“I got myself into a tournament,” Harry whispered. “Who knows what will happen there.” Tom had promised to help him, but so far the man hadn’t sent him any kind of a message. He’d come when he had something to ask; that was certain. Helping him would surely make Tom acknowledge that Harry wasn’t like other people. That maybe he was somehow useful, valuable. Worth being kept around.

‘Wishful thinking,’ Harry thought bitterly. Wanting to be acknowledged was such a dangerous need. Where would it end? How could it be satisfied? Was that something Tom had felt, too, once upon a time?

With a sigh, Harry finally stood up, dusted his clothes as well as he could, and turned to leave the graveyard. He had barely taken a few steps though when he stopped. In front of him stood a tall man in black robes, his black hair reaching his shoulders, and dark eyes looking at him with undisguised contempt.

“Potter,” the man said, his voice revealing none of the hostility his expression showed.

“Mister Snape,” Harry said. The man had been a friend of his mother’s, and very famously an enemy of Sirius and James, back when things had been easier and simpler, and an enemy was a word thrown around rather lightly. “Good evening.”

“You will be coming to Hogwarts after the summer,” Snape said, not quite blocking Harry’s way, and yet somehow managing to stop the boy from walking past him. “She wouldn’t want you to do this.”

“For glory, I wouldn’t either,” Harry lied. Then again, it wasn’t the adoration of the general public that he was after, but the respect of a specific someone. “But I’m afraid I have no other options.”

“And how could that be?” Snape sneered. “You have nothing to prove.”

“Mainly because I have no one to prove anything to,” Harry agreed. “It’s not like James is even going to turn up to watch what will happen. I know Sirius is busy, too.”

“Why not simply study, graduate, and find a job like any other person?” Snape wanted to know. “Or is your need to be someone special so overwhelming?”

Harry looked at the man silently for a few moments, wondering if there was a right answer to give. He hadn’t seen Snape in years, hadn’t thought of him either. Seeing him there, right then, hearing his words – Harry didn’t know how to answer. Strangely enough, as lonely as he sometimes felt, he couldn’t recall feeling that loneliness ever so crushingly. Standing there, in front of Snape, knowing that there would be no one to save him from the man’s words.
Hoping that the wizard wouldn’t reach out to stop him, Harry walked past Snape and towards the gates of the graveyard. He knew that Snape wouldn’t be able to step into the Potter Manor without Harry’s permission, and the thought of that made him feel a bit more at ease.

When Harry finally reached home and turned to close the front door, he saw Snape still standing there, watching him like a tall, dark, bad omen.

“Vurney!” Harry called, and a house-elf appeared. “Close the curtains of every single room facing the graveyard. Make sure all of the doors are locked.”

“Yes, Master Harry,” the little creature said, and disappeared right before another turned up.

“Master Harry,” said the other house-elf said. “There be a guest waiting for Master Harry.”

“A guest?” It would have to be someone Harry had invited before, to grant him the ability to come back. Did Truls pop in for a visit? Or maybe Luna? Luna could turn up without a warning, she—

Oh.

Tom was sitting on the couch, looking bored to the point of pain. He was dressed in dark blue, finely cut robes and what looked like dragonhide boots. It wasn’t an outfit one wore for a simple, friendly chat.

“What have you gotten yourself into this time?” Harry asked, stepping further into the room and realizing suddenly how tired the Dark Lord looked. “You look like someone going to battle.”

“Hardly,” Tom replied, rubbing his eyes before huffing in annoyance and leaning back on the chair. “Where were you?”

“Talking to my mum,” Harry said. “Not… not at the station. At the graveyard, I mean. I can’t reach her the other way, she’s long gone.”

“Can you reach her this way, then?”

“Well, no, but— It makes me feel better.’”

“You have strange hobbies,” Tom said, eyeing Harry with a contemplative expression on his face. “Do you feel better now, after talking with her?”

“I would,” Harry said, “but I bumped into Snape and… he was a friend of my mum’s. He just never liked dad or me very much. At all, really.”

“Severus Snape? Well yes, no one can accuse him of making anyone feel better.” The Dark Lord then gave Harry a rather odd look, before he continued, seemingly reluctantly: “You are unhurt though, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am. He didn’t hex me if that’s what you mean. He just… had an opinion about my willingness to participate in the Triwizard Tournament.”

“An opinion.”

“Not a very positive one, but that’s fine,” Harry said quickly. “Really, it’s fine. I mean, I know what people like him will think. That I’m, well, self-centered and fame-hungry. Acting out, ambitious… Things like that.”

“Which reminds me of why I don’t usually encourage people to have their own opinions,” Tom
sneered. “No matter, Snape isn’t someone worth discussing. I have a task for you.”

“Okay,” Harry said, nervously. “Later on, will you teach me some spells or something? Anything?”

“Yes, yes, whatever. For the moment, forget about the dead generals I’m making you look for,” Tom continued. “Go to that train station of yours and ask whoever you need to ask about a man called Regulus Black.”

‘Regulus Black? Is he related to Sirius? Probably, yeah. More like definitely. Everybody is more or less related to the Black line.’ “And then?”

“I’m only looking to find out if he’s alive or dead. I prefer the latter, but the less preferable option is currently appearing to be the more likely one.”

“Regulus Black,” Harry muttered, and nodded slowly. He could go to the train station and ask Merope if she knew anything about someone with that name. Albus, too, if the old man was there. “I’ll need to lie down.”

“The couch is available.”

“My bed is upstairs.”

“The couch is closer.”

“My bed—”

“The couch.” Harry stared at Tom for a few silent moments filled with disbelief. He then sighed heavily and shrugged off his jacket, before lying down on the couch. After a few moments of shuffling, the boy grabbed a cushion and shoved it under his head.

“We’ll talk about your behaviour later,” Harry promised. “Switch off the lights and don’t make a sound, I need to focus.”

“Of course,” Tom said absently, watching the boy curiously. He didn’t need any rituals or spells, apparently, and had simply lied down and closed his eyes, as if he was going to sleep. He didn’t really fall asleep though, right? He looked like he was, but that would be ridiculous.

The Dark Lord waited for a few minutes, before he moved closer to take a better look, trying to find any visible signs that would show him that Harry wasn’t just napping on the couch, but actually doing something. He frowned, wondering how long he’d have to wait.

Then again, he would willingly wait for a whole damn day if Potter would be able to tell him whether or not Black was alive.

* *

“I thought everything was done, already,” Karkaroff said, stopping to stand next to Sirius, who was looking at what used to be the Quidditch Pitch. “You’ve done quite a good job.”

“Everything is ready,” Sirius replied. “But I need to check the spells every now and then, just in case. Then, of course, the seating arrangements. That’s impossible to do before August, so I’m not even thinking about it yet.”

“Indeed. Say, have you been given the list of participants? The seven students from Durmstrang have been chosen already, and most of the paperwork is done.” Karkaroff turned to look at Sirius
properly, with an unusually serious expression on his face.

“‘The looks you’re giving me don’t promise me anything good,’” Sirius said lightly. “‘Should I worry?’”

“Your godson will be coming to Hogwarts after the summer. He was one of the students who was selected.”

“I’m… not upset, but… I- I thought he’d need remarkable recommendations in order to—”

“That’s the thing,” Karkaroff said. “He has remarkable recommendations. Not from his father, though. Is the man truly so neglectful of his heir that he doesn’t care to see what he’s up to?”

“James is fighting our battles in Ireland,” Sirius snapped angrily. “He’s doing far more than you are, Karkaroff.”

“Perhaps he should come back, though,” the Headmaster of Durmstrang said. “If only to keep an eye on the company his son keeps.”

Sirius stood silently for a moment, before looking at the older Death Eater with a wary expression. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Plenty,” the man said. “Harry Potter was selected as one of the seven potential champions of Durmstrang, even though he has only two recommendations. Neither is from you or, as I said earlier, from his father.”

“Who, then? Those two would need to be quite important for their votes to carry such weight.”

“Oh, they are. One of them is Bellatrix Lestrange. She didn’t recommend her nephew, Black. She recommended your godson. Any idea why?”

“Bellatrix did?” Sirius muttered, narrowing his eyes. What was his cousin up to? “Perhaps she chose to recommend him to annoy me, or to annoy her nephew’s family. You know as well as I do how whimsical Bellatrix is. Who can really tell why she does what she does.”

“The thing is, I can agree with what you said about your cousin,” Karkaroff said. “But how can you explain that your godson’s other recommendation came directly from the Dark Lord himself?”

For a moment, Sirius was sure that he had heard wrong. It became apparent, however, that he hadn’t, and this realization came with a feeling of anxiety at the pit of his stomach, cold sweat, and a feeling of nausea. He knew that he was being quite transparent with his shock, but he couldn’t control what he was going through – he couldn’t come up with a single logical explanation as to why the Dark Lord would even be aware of Harry. Not a single—

Suddenly a memory from years ago surfaced. A hazy memory of when the Dark Lord had told him to round up the Potters and take them to witness an execution. Sirius had assumed that the reason for that had been perhaps to torment Lily for being a muggleborn. What if that hadn’t been the case, though? What if, for some reason, the Dark Lord had wanted Harry there?

That didn’t make any sense, though. It couldn’t be true. Sirius was definitely jumping into conclusions with his thoughts, his panic making him think rather strange ideas. For all he knew, the Dark Lord could have simply told Bella to cast a vote on his behalf.

“You didn’t know,” Karkaroff said, nodding slowly to himself. “I had assumed that the Dark Lord was merely doing a favour to you, recommending your godson and sending him to Hogwarts.”

“No,” Sirius said, feeling numb. “I didn’t know.” What could be the reason? What if— oh! Oh! Sirius felt sudden relief wash over him when he finally figured out a good reason for the Dark Lord to want Harry to compete in the tournament. If the man had finally found out that Harry had his wand’s brother, perhaps all he wanted was to see how worthy Harry was of it?

Years ago they had been nervous about this, about the Dark Lord finding out about Harry’s wand, but things had changed so much since then. Surely he wouldn’t hurt Harry publicly?

‘Maybe the tournament is his test for Harry,’ Sirius thought, feeling dreadful again. Perhaps the Dark Lord was getting some sort of sick amusement from making Harry’s godfather design a test that could get him killed.

“I’m glad to know now, though,” Sirius said. “I suppose I ought to take a more… active role when it comes to preparing him for the tournament.”

“Will you have the time? I heard you will be quite busy, my friend.”

“I’ll find a way.” He could pick some truly useful books and send them to Harry. That wouldn’t be cheating, not at all. He was the boy’s godfather and had the right to give him gifts as often as he wanted to.

He just hoped that the books would be enough.

* *

After a bit less than two hours of waiting, Tom had discovered that while one could initially confuse Harry’s state for sleep, it really wasn’t. The boy hadn’t so much as twitched while unconscious, his breathing was unnaturally slow, his heartbeat quiet, and his skin turning from simply pale to sallow.

Harry groaned suddenly, and after a few moments of gasping he rolled to lie on his stomach and hide his face against the cushion. The Dark Lord eyed the boy for a few seconds before conjuring a handful of ice cubes and deigning to pull the boy’s shirt up to pour them over his back.

The shrieking that followed was enough compensation for the trouble.

“I hate you,” Harry said, tears in his eyes, squirming, looking both sleepy and enraged. His hair had somehow become messier and the cushion had left an imprint on the boy’s other cheek. “You are an absolute bastard.”

“Now now, no need to be so hurtful,” Tom told him. “So, do you have any information to share?” Harry regarded him with a dark look, before he sighed and shook his head.

“Not really,” he replied. “Well, aside from that nobody has seen Regulus Black – not even the people who have been waiting there for decades. It could be that he slipped in with the crowd, unnoticed… or that he just—”

“Hasn’t died yet,” Tom finished for him, grimacing. “I should have known. Anything else?”

“It keeps on becoming more and more crowded,” Harry said after a moment of hesitation. “The station, I mean. People are dying.”
“Well yes, that was obvious. War. It happens.”

“Can’t you stop it?”

The question had slipped out, and Harry looked surprised at his own question. Tom stared at him for a few silent moments, oddly unsure of what he should say. It wasn’t that there were any wrong answers to the boy’s question, but he… just…

“I’m trying,” Tom finally said. “That’s what I’m trying to do. Stop the war. Bring peace. But the Rebels would rather condemn our world to a never-ending war than accept an era of peace led by me. Whose fault is that? Who’s the one who keeps fighting?”

“Maybe you should tell them that,” Harry suggested. “Maybe you should let them know that those who don’t want to fight anymore are welcome to come back. Make them choose between staying there in the camps, under constant danger, or coming here to keep their children safe.”

“And what guarantee would I have that they won’t simply all move closer, only to have a better aim for when they shoot me?” Tom hissed. “Those people have been brainwashed by the men and women who took my rise to power personally—”

“It’s hard to take the death of a loved one in any way but that,” Harry said quietly, and the Dark Lord narrowed his eyes at the boy, before a cruel smile appeared on the man’s face.

“Do you hate the rebels?” Tom asked softly, mockingly. “Do you hate them for killing your mother? Or do you dedicate so much of your energy into not thinking of how she died, of who might be the person to blame? Or do you, perhaps, blame me?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Harry snapped, thinking of James. “No amount of grief, revenge, or blame will bring her back. I could, you know. I could spend years looking for the exact person to blame for her death, but—” But he didn’t want to. Did that make him a bad son? Did that mean he hadn’t loved her, really? Did that—

Harry sat down on the couch again, breathing deeply while trying not to cry. He was exhausted, tense, and confused. He felt sick and lonely and stupid once again, and all he wanted to do was sleep and pretend there wasn’t a world outside the door.

Instead, he thought of James.

“I have seen what grief can do,” Harry said. “I know how easy it is to drown yourself under all the bad things in your life. To be angry at everything, most of all at yourself. Carrying on from one day to the next, going through the motions in a haze, not being awake enough to feel alive. I don’t want that life. That isn’t a life at all.”

It wasn’t a common occurrence for Tom to be unable to find words to say – in fact, he couldn’t quite remember when he had last wished to say something, and found nothing but emptiness inside him. He couldn’t help but, for a moment, think of how different the world would have been had he been more like Harry, and less like himself.

He wouldn’t be a Dark Lord, he wouldn’t be immortal. He wouldn’t have changed the world.

Of happiness, he could not speak. He wasn’t sure what that truly was anyway. Besides, was Harry happy with his life? With who he was now? He really doubted that.

“Do you know any healing spells?” was what Tom finally managed to say. “You’ll need some of those in case you get injured. More men die of their inability to heal simple wounds than of great and
unstoppable curses."

“I’d like to learn some,” Harry said. “How busy will you be in the next few weeks? My friends and I will be going to watch the Quidditch World Cup’s final match on the twenty-second of August. After that it’ll be just a few days before we have to go to Hogwarts.”

“I’m aware of your plans,” Tom said. “As stupid as they might be.”

“You won’t be attending? I thought since it’s a big event—”

“No. No. No. Quidditch has never been my thing.”

“Are you bad at flying?”

“I am not bad at anything, Potter!”

Between practicing for the Tournament with Tom, reading the books and letters Sirius had unexpectedly been sending, dealing with paperwork, memorizing instructions and information as well as occasionally chatting with his friends, Harry’s time flew by quickly. The Quidditch World Cup was fast coming to its climax, and much to Harry’s delight, Krum’s team had made it to the final. The only remaining match left would be between Ireland and Bulgaria, and Harry was less than twenty-four hours away from seeing it.

“You’ve got your things packed?” Truls asked. All of Harry’s classmates had arrived at the Potter Manor quite early on that same day – with the exception of Truls who had come, as agreed, two days earlier.

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “The tent’s been packed?”

“I did that,” Heidi said cheerfully, her golden hair tied into a loose bun. “I made sure that it’s big enough for all of us.”

“This is so exciting,” Petronella grinned, her gaunt face looking a tad bit livelier than usually. “I’ve never been on a trip like this before.”

“Me neither,” Jakob admitted, flicking his personal emergency portkey tied around his wrist. “Krum will be playing, won’t he?”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “Björn, I know you love betting, but the guys there are likely to beat you up if you swindle them.”

“I’d pay to see that,” Clemens grinned, before checking the time. “Okay, everyone, gather around. We’ve got just a few minutes before this will take us there. Is all your crap with you?”

“You could just call it luggage, you know?” Filippa said, squeezing herself to stand between Harry and Nikolai, and reaching for the cane that had been turned into a portkey. “Ooh, Heidi, I love your nails.”

“Thanks,” the girl grinned. “I got them done last week.”

Harry, for his part, wasn’t quite so eager to chat with the others at the moment. He truly didn’t enjoy portkey trips, and the mere thought of them made him think of how dizzy he’d end up being. When the portkey finally activated, he held on for his dear life, trying to not cringe at the delighted
screaming coming from Björn and Filippa.

'I have to learn how to apparate,' the boy decided then. 'I'll make it a priority. Tom can teach me. Oh Merlin when will this end.'

When they finally arrived, Harry looked nearly as sick as Jakob, and the last thing he wanted to do was stand up and push his way through the crowd he could see in the camping area. Truls helped him up, grinning all the while.

“Shut up,” Harry said weakly. “Dear Circe, if I never have to use a portkey again, I’ll be happy.”

“Oh, Harry,” Petronella said fondly. “You’ll live.”

“I love this already,” Björn cheered, watching the crowd in front of them. People from all over the world, waving numerous sorts of flags, were milling around to the sounds of music and constant chatter. Children were running, their delighted screams and loud games adding its own charm to the place.

‘Tom would hate it,’ Harry thought, suddenly feeling better.

“Let’s find our place first,” Clemens said. “I told my uncle to book us a good one. It should be closer to the stands, rather than here at the gates.”

“Onwards we go, then,” Jakob said happily. “Man, I can’t wait for the match to start. Tomorrow evening, eh?”

“Plenty of time to place some bets,” Björn said. “Marshmallows!”

“We’ll pitch the tent first, and then everyone can go wherever,” Clemens said, sounding impatient. “Come on! Björn, I swear to Merlin if you don’t let go of that bag of marshmallows, you’re not buying them now——”

“This is great,” Harry grinned, looking around him. He wasn’t used to crowds such as this one – so much noise, so much colour, so much happiness and excitement. It was a pleasant change from the norm.

“It sure is,” Truls agreed. “And tomorrow will only be better.”

“Harry, you’re friends with Krum, aren’t you?” Clemens said suddenly. “Good friends, I mean. Think he’ll drop by to say hi to you?”

“Oh, no, I believe he’s much too busy,” Harry told him. “Besides, how would he even find us here?”

“I want some butterbeer,” Filippa sighed, watching a group of wizards drinking nearby and nearly tripping over two little boys running past her. “Someone should put a leash on those brats!”

“You can buy some soon,” Clemens told her, finally stopping. “We’re here, this is our—oh no.”

“What?” Harry wanted to know, looking at what had made Clemens frown. Much to his surprise, the tent that was pitched next to their empty spot was surrounded by a very familiar looking family.

“Ginger overdose,” Clemens muttered, before turning to the others. “Let’s unpack the tent. The sooner we get it up, the sooner we all can go and have fun.”

“Do I seriously have to pitch the tent with you all?” Heidi asked. “I brought the tent.”
“It’s not that difficult,” Clemens sighed, clearly annoyed. Harry was about to offer his help, when he felt someone grab his elbow.

“Harry!” Ron Weasley exclaimed. “Blimey, mate! It’s been a while since I’ve seen you! How are you? Are you here with your dad? Mum! Look who’s here!” Not giving Harry the chance to reply, Ron dragged the dark-haired boy to where his mother was standing.

“Oh Harry, sweetie” Molly Weasley said with a warm smile, her kind eyes twinkling with happiness as she hugged him. “My, you’ve grown so much! Here for the match, dear? With your father?”

“I’m here with a few friends from school,” Harry replied, allowing himself to lean into Molly’s hug for an instant. He had always liked the Weasley matriarch. To avoid any questions about James, he continued: “Dad couldn’t come.”

“Well then, if there’s anything you need, sweetheart, you come and tell me, alright?” Molly said, moving slightly to let Ron rush past her, screaming something about omelettes. “I know you must be busy, so I won’t keep you, but it’s so good to see you. You know you will always be welcome at the Burrow, don’t you?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said politely. “I appreciate it.” He really did, and for a moment he entertained the idea of someday taking her up on the offer.

“Harry!” Filippa hollered. “The tent is up! Come unpack!”

“Um—”

“Well, off you go, then,” Molly said, still smiling warmly at him. “Have fun, dear, and remember to be careful!”

“Yes, thank you, Mrs. Weasley,” Harry said, wishing he could hug her again. “I, I really— Thank you.” Molly looked at him, then, with a smile that looked nearly sad. He knew that she was thinking of Lily, and that… made him think of her as well. Thinking of his late mother was something Harry did not want to do, and so he quickly excused himself and hurried to where his friends already were.

“This is a ridiculously posh tent, Heidi,” Clemens was saying, eyeing the gilded furniture with a look of mild horror. “Is this— Oh, hi Harry! Finally back, eh?”

“It’s the Weasleys,” Harry said, setting his bag next to Truls’s, and sitting down on an empty bed. “The family to our right, I mean. They’re good people.”

“Not relatives of Björn, I take it?” Filippa asked teasingly. “He’d fit right in!”

“We can go visit them later, if you wish,” Truls offered, and for a moment Harry’s heart was filled with gratitude towards his best friend.

“Count me out,” Clemens said. “Hold on, though, we can go and brag about Krum. Okay, count me in.”

“You’re an ass,” Filippa said.

“This is awesome,” Harry whispered, shifting a bit when Truls sat down next to him. “I wish we could always have this atmosphere. I’m happy.”

They didn’t get the chance to spend the evening with the Weasleys, but it turned out that their seats in the audience would be quite close, and Harry found some comfort in that. The day itself was full
of laughter, good food, and new things to look at. By the time night fell, they were all tired.

Harry, surrounded by his closest friends and feeling truly content for the first time in years, believed there was no other place he’d rather be than there.

“How far up are our seats?” Jakob huffed, leaning heavily against Clemens’ arm. The stairs into the stadium were carpeted in rich purple. They clambered upward with the rest of the crowd, which slowly filtered away through doors into the stands to their left and right.

“We’ll soon be there,” the other boy promised. “Very soon. In fact, just hold on of a few second aaaand here we are.”

The lights were bright around them, and people were already cheering and screaming encouragements even though the teams were nowhere to be seen yet. The Weasleys were already in their seats, greeting Harry happily when they saw him. With them stood a girl with curly brown hair, and Ron was quick to introduce her.

“This Hermione Granger,” he said. “She’s in Gryffindor with Ginny and me. Hermione, this is Harry Potter. He’s from Durmstrang.”

“I’ve heard so much about your school,” the girl said, smiling nervously. “Only good things, of course. It’s very advanced.”

“Um, thank you, I guess?” Harry said, unsure of how to respond. “Hogwarts has its own excellent reputation, though. My parents went there.” The girl’s expression shifted, and she nodded warily.

“It’s one of the few schools that still accept Muggleborns,” Granger said. “I— I’m…”

“My mum was too,” Harry told her, feeling instantly more relaxed. “Do you like it there?”

“Oh yes!” Granger exclaimed, smiling brightly, her nervousness apparently gone all of a sudden. “It’s amazing! There’s so much to learn.”

“There always is,” Harry agreed. He then felt an arm around his shoulders, and turned to see Truls smiling coldly at Hermione, who flinched and averted her gaze.

“Do you hear the drums?” Truls asked Harry. “The Irish team will be here soon.”

“I hope to talk with you again soon, Miss Granger. You too, Ron,” Harry said, smiling pleasantly, allowing Truls to pull him between himself and Clemens. Clemens didn’t look particularly happy about having to sit next to Ron, who seemed to return the sentiment.

How those two managed to dislike each other despite having met only once before, Harry wasn’t quite sure.

Suddenly, a loud voice boomed in the stadium, into every corner of the stands. “Ladies and gentlemen,” the voice started. “Welcome to the final of the four hundred and twenty-second Quidditch World Cup!”

The spectators screamed and clapped, and Harry grinned, leaning against Truls while enjoying the happiness surrounding him. Thousands of flags waved, people whistled, some even had begun singing. The words BULGARIA: 0, IRELAND: 0 appeared on a huge blackboard at the other end of the stadium.
“And now,” the booming voice continued, “without further ado, allow me to introduce... the Bulgarian National Team Mascots!” The right-hand side of the stands, which was a solid block of scarlet, roared its approval, and Harry leaned forward to get a better look at what was going to happen.

“Veela!” Heidi shrieked suddenly.

“Thank you, Bulgaria!” Björn hollered. Harry was staring at a group of exceptionally beautiful women, who had started to dance there to the sound of music Harry could barely hear.

“The Veela have the power to bewitch men,” Truls said, leaning close to Harry. “Someone should stop Clemens from jumping out there, even though I think it’d be hilarious.”

“They are pretty,” Harry admitted, squinting at them while reaching to grab the hem of Clemens’s jacket. “But not... bewitching.” He was perhaps a bit more bothered by how easily Clemens had been affected. For some reason it made him almost... upset. Not quite, but he wasn’t as happy as he had been a moment ago.

Eventually, the veela women finished their dance, and the booming voice spoke again:

“And now, kindly put your wands in the air... for the Irish National Team Mascots!” He had barely finished speaking when what looked like a great green-and-gold comet came zooming into the stadium. It did one circuit of the stadium, then split into two smaller comets, each hurtling toward the goal posts. A rainbow arced suddenly across the field, connecting the two balls of light.

The crowd oooohed and aaaaahed, as though at a fireworks display, and Harry felt some of his good mood returning. Now the rainbow faded and the balls of light reunited and merged; they had formed a great shimmering shamrock, which rose up into the sky and began to soar over the stands, leaving a trail of gold light in its wake.

“Leprechauns!” Harry heard Mr. Weasley yell over the tumultuous applause. “Brilliant!”

“And now, ladies and gentlemen,” the booming voice said. “Kindly welcome — the Bulgarian National Quidditch Team! I give you — Dimitrov!”

A scarlet-clad figure on a broomstick, moving so fast it was blurred, shot out onto the field from an entrance far below, to wild applause from the Bulgarian supporters.

“Ivanova!”

A second scarlet-robed player zoomed out.

“Zograf! Levski! Vulchanov! Volkov! Aaaaaaand — Krum!”

“He’s here!” Filippa shrieked, reaching past Truls to smack Harry. “Harry, he’s here!” Krum was indeed there, flying fast with his teammates.

“Who’s that?” Harry heard Granger ask, and he grinned widely when Ron replied:

“That’s Viktor Krum! He’s the best seeker in the world!”

“He’s also one of Harry’s close friends,” Clemens bragged, making Harry muffle his laugh against Truls’s shoulder. The other boy just wouldn’t stop mentioning that, would he?

“And now, please greet — the Irish National Quidditch Team!” the booming voice yelled.
“Presenting — Connolly! Ryan! Troy! Mullet! Moran! Quigley! Aaaaaand — Lynch!”

Seven green blurs swept onto the field; and Harry cheered with the rest, though he didn’t look away from where Krum was flying. He didn’t wave, doubting that Krum would even know he was there anyway. The Seeker would obviously have other priorities.

The match that followed was Quidditch of the kind Harry had never seen before. Fast, incredible, ruthless, and intense. The Chasers were throwing the Quaffle to one another so fast that Harry found it difficult to follow.

His heart was beating quickly; excitement was making him feel more alive than he had for a while. Truls’ arm around his shoulders was a comforting weight that anchored him to the moment, and the sound of his friends cheering for Krum brought him comfort he hadn’t known he needed.

Harry felt that maybe, just maybe, there was some hope for happiness after all.

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Tired, filthy, and exhausted, James Potter apparated back home. He barely made it past the door before having to stop and lean against the wall for some support. All he wanted was a drink, everything else could wait.

“Master James,” a squeaky voice said, and a house-elf appeared. “A bath will be waiting for Master James in a minute.”

James didn’t reply, and slid down to sit on the floor. The mud on his clothes had begun to dry, and he imagined what Lily would have said about him. Nothing positive, that’s for sure. She would look at him and feel so disappointed, as disappointed as he was with himself.

The hollow emptiness that had been inside him for such a long time, ever since Lily died, seemed to grow and grow and grow, and now the void felt as big as his entire body. Would he bleed if he cut his skin, or would he find only silent darkness? A hole where a human should be?

He heard a sob, and belatedly realized that he was crying. Tears made their way across his dirty cheeks, as deep, wheezing sobs shook his whole body. The shadows around him seemed isolating, and he barely felt it when a few of the Potter house-elves came to help him to the bathroom.

There was an itch under his skin, and James knew that if he had the energy, he’d feel annoyed. Angry, maybe. Now he just… felt nothing, really. Just hollow, as if everything he was had somehow evaporated, leaving him empty. He wasn’t sad, wasn’t happy, wasn’t anything.

He used to think that Lily’s death had left him with too many feelings. More feelings than he knew how to cope with. Now he knew that the opposite was true – her death had sucked the feelings out of him, and being like that was painful, unmanageable.

James didn’t resist when the little house-elves helped him first take off his shoes, then his jacket, and then the rest of his clothes. Absently, still stuck deep in his thoughts, he climbed into the bathtub, allowing the warm water to surround him.

He sighed, feeling heavy and tired.

“Look at yourself,” he whispered, repeating the words that had haunted him for days now. “Are you a father anyone would want to have?”

“Look,” the Lily in his mind whispered, “look at what you have become.”
He had been, once upon a time, a man who could find happiness in the smallest of things. Now there was nothing in this world that could make him smile. Not even his son. Was he truly anything but a burden to Harry anyway? Wasn’t he the ball and chain that kept his son from achieving things greater than James had been able to?

All he had now was the war the Dark Lord was fighting. Days of walking through dead woods, drowning in mud, watching people wither away around him, struck down by hunger or illness.

“You used to be someone I could love. A strong man, a strong father. Look at what you are now.”

James opened his eyes, looking at the white walls and the marble floor, and the two house-elves standing by the door. He stared at them for a few moments, before he spoke.

“You two,” he said. “Bring me a bottle of firewhisky, and then leave. Do not come back here until I call you back. Do not knock, do not— just… Do as I told you.”

“Yes, Master James.”

“What are you doing with your life, anymore?”

They obeyed. Of course they did.

James let the taste of firewhisky soothe him, let it drown away everything else as he relaxed, sinking further into the dirty water. A thought at the back of his mind sparked, making him think fleetingly of standing up. Of getting out of the bathtub.

He ignored it, and sunk down further. The lack of air would make his lungs burn, he was sure of that, but nothing would burn worse than the firewhisky he had just drunk.

It was time to let go.

It was time to set Harry free.

* *

“It’s been great,” Harry grinned happily, hoisting up his bag. His portkey would take him home soon, though he truly didn’t want to leave. The sun was out, the day was warm, and everyone was in a good mood. “See you guys soon, I hope?”

“Well, you and Truls will be going to Hogwarts,” Filippa said, “but we seriously have to meet before that. There’s still about a week before it.”

“Or we can just wait until Christmas break,” Heidi suggested. “I’m pretty sure there will be several Yule Balls thrown during that break, so we’ll definitely get to meet and catch up then!”

“Are you nervous about going to Hogwarts?” Petronella asked, and Harry shrugged.

“Yes,” he said, before continuing, a sudden idea occurring to him. “My dad went there. I could ask him about it. Maybe he’d like to drop by at some point.”

“That would be great,” Truls agreed, knowing how much that would mean to Harry. He knew that as much as his friend claimed that he would give up on James, he never really would. There would always be some part of him looking for ways to reconnect, find a common ground and return to how they used to be.

“If you talk with Mette, tell her how amazing I am,” Björn said, clutching Truls’s elbow. “My
friend. Amigo. Praise me greatly and you will be rewarded.”

“Why would I talk to her?” Truls asked, grinning. “Harry, your portkey is sparkling.”

“Yep,” Harry said, eyeing the portkey and dreading what was to come. “It’s activating. See you guys!” Once again, he felt as though a hook just behind his navel had been suddenly jerked irresistibly forward. His feet left the ground, and then he was speeding forward in a howl of wind and colour.

And then, not a moment too soon, his feet hit the ground. He stumbled down, taking deep breaths and vowing once again to learn how to apparate as soon as he could. Home, sweet home – the portkey had taken him right in front of the big fireplace in the living room.

With a yawn, Harry threw his bag onto the closest chair, and kicked off his shoes. He could leave the unpacking to the house-elves, right? Just this once.

“Master Harry,” a house-elf said, appearing suddenly and startling the boy. “Master James is taking a bath.”

“Oh, he’s home, then,” Harry said, feeling suddenly nervous. Alright, maybe this was a good thing. He could talk with his dad later on, tell him about the tournament, asking him things about Hogwarts. He could do this. Maybe James would even answer.

“Master Harry,” the house-elf started again, wringing its hands anxiously. “Master James has been in bath for over four hours. Master James said no house-elf can enter unless called, but Master James hasn’t called and it’s been hours—” The creature’s squeaky voice rose higher and higher, and for some reason the panic in it made Harry feel sick.

He ran past the house-elf, towards his father’s room, and right through it to the bathroom connected to it. He saw the bathtub, but not a sign of his father. Not until he was close enough to see inside the bathtub itself.

And there, at the bottom, staring through the dirty water with dead and empty eyes was James Potter.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for this chapter: suicide by drowning
James's body was heavy when Harry pulled it out of the bathtub. The boy felt dizzy and nauseated and confused, but the topmost thought in his mind was that he had to somehow - somehow - undo what James had done. Water swept through Harry's clothes, creating large patches that he barely noticed as he clumsily pulled out his wand and cast every single healing spell Tom had taught him. He knew it was pointless to try and keep trying, yet he did.

'No, no, nononono.'

Harry's heart was beating so hard against his chest that the boy feared he'd throw it up altogether. His father's body was cold and sallow and wrong, so wrong, everything was wrong about it and Harry didn't know what to do. He saw a house-elf lurking on the other side of the open doorway, but what good did it do for the creature to come now, when it could have stopped this from happening hours ago.

'Blessed, sweet, merciful Circe, please don't let this be true. Dad. Oh Merlin.'

He ran out of spells long before he ran out of tears, and eventually all Harry could do was hit his father's still chest, screaming words that were bordering on incoherent. Breathing was hard, his arms ached, his head hurt, and Harry felt like the walls were closing in. He ended up leaning against his closed fists, bent over his father's corpse, weeping loudly.

He tried to think, but all thoughts seemed so illogical and senseless, as if he was trying to understand a foreign language. He wondered if it was a heart attack or something else that had caused this, and yet he knew - a dark thought that waited beneath the surface, waiting to be acknowledged - that that wasn't what had happened. He could have imagined his father's heart betraying him, and his body slipping slowly under the surface, but he knew that nothing had pulled James down under. Nothing but phantom chains that Harry had never noticed before.

The water pooling around him was cold, and Harry was feeling his limbs grow heavy. His eyes were aching and when he raised his head, unable to look at his dad any longer, he saw an empty bottle of wine lying nearby. Harry stared at it for several minutes, trying to feel something - anything - but all he could feel was overwhelming exhaustion and grief that seemed to wipe away every single happy memory in his life so far.

"Vurney," he said quietly, his throat aching and voice hoarse. "Vurney."

A house-elf popped into the bathroom, its wide eyes taking in the sight of the deceased Potter and his son sitting by his side. The house elf swallowed heavily, ears trembling as he opened his mouth a few times without a sound coming out.

"Master Harry," he finally croaked, and nearly took a step back when the boy's face twisted with
grief and he began crying again. Vurney felt his own eyes grow wet with tears as he took in the sight in front of him, remembering clearly how the matters had been a few years before.

"Get Sirius," Harry finally said, gasping for breath between his sobbing. "Tell him to come here, no matter where he is. Tell him to hurry, please."

"Master needn't ask Vurney twice," Vurney said. "Master Black will be brought here, Master Potter." The house-elf disappeared then, leaving Harry alone in the bathroom. He let go of James's body, even pushed himself to sit a few feet away from it, trying to wrap his mind around what was going on, what he was supposed to do. Did Sirius know about this? Did James tell Sirius something that could have warned the other man about this? Was there anyone who could have prevented this? What about the house-elves? Why didn't they stop James? Why did everyone just let this happen?

His mother would have known what to do. His mother would have known how to fix this.

His mother's presence would have prevented this. His mother's presence would have done what Harry's couldn't do: show James that there was still something worth living for in this world. Harry took a deep breath, and then exhaled heavily. The feeling of nausea was still there, and maybe it meant that he was selfish - not maybe, definitely - but the only thing that overpowered the feeling of loss was the feeling of betrayal.

People like Tom (and why was he thinking of Tom now?) dealt with betrayal through anger. Harry hoped that he too could do that, because anger was far better than this hurt that made him want to stop moving and drown in silence.

Drown. *Heh.*

Harry looked down at the tiled floor, touched the closest puddle of water with his fingertips, seeing the shape of his father's corpse from the corner of his eye. He wanted out. He wanted out, away from the water. He didn't want to see water, didn't want to drink water, didn't want to think of it and what it had done.

Water wasn't to blame, though. Harry knew it was stupid to even think of blaming it, when the only one who could be blamed, was—

No, no. Harry didn't- couldn't blame James either. It wasn't James's fault if Harry hadn't given him a reason to fight harder. It wasn't James's fault that Harry had wrapped himself in the happiness he leached from his friends at school, neglecting his father who hadn't known happiness since Lily died.

It wasn't James's fault.

But by *Circe,* Harry couldn't find him entirely blameless. Everything was so confusing, and Harry hoped - oh, how he hoped - for all this to be a *dream.* If only he could wake up, realize that it all was just a bad dream caused by stress and a mountain of regrets. If only he could wake up and get a second chance. He would definitely do better, he'd be a more thoughtful son, he'd write James a letter every day and patiently wait for him to respond.

Harry again crawled closer to his father's body and looked at him, trying to understand that which didn't make sense to him.

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"The viewers would be able to follow each champion during the first task," Sirius said, showing the Dark Lord a hologram of what he had in mind. "Since it will last for a week - the first task alone, I mean - they can purchase smaller screens and follow the events whenever they want to. Those who
can't afford a smaller screen can watch the big ones we've set up on the Quidditch Field and the Great Hall."

Tom watched Black as the man talked, explaining the finer points of what he had organized. They were in Grimmauld Place - Black's home - somewhere in London, in a room Black had called his home office. The man didn’t understand that calling it an office wasn’t enough to turn a room full of Quidditch posters into one. Grimmauld Place itself was a gloomy house with narrow staircases and few windows, and Tom couldn't for the life of him imagine living willingly in a place like this. It reminded him too much of another place with far too many dark corners and permanent dust.

"Acceptable so far," Tom said, leaning back on the chair he was sitting on. He was slightly skeptical about Black's plans, but didn't care enough to comment on them now. It would have been too late to change anything anyway, and there wasn't really anything outright wrong in Black's plans. They just seemed… slightly unreliable.

Sirius resisted the urge to sigh in relief at the Dark Lord’s approval. It had been a long day and he couldn't wait until the Dark Lord left, for more reasons than just his need to go and finally sleep. The man's presence was highly unsettling, his magic making the room feel smaller, and Sirius couldn't help but think of Lupin for a fleeting moment. Surely the Dark Lord wouldn't care if Sirius kept a werewolf in his basement, would he? It was hard to say anything about the man, what with the hood he was wearing that hid his face from view.

"I trust that you have finished the housing arrangements," Lord Voldemort said then, and Sirius was about to respond when a familiar house-elf appeared in the office.

"Master Black!" the house-elf wailed, throwing itself at Sirius. "Master Potter- Master Potter is dead!"

Hearing the words, a cold feeling washed over Sirius, and for a heartbeat the wizard thought that the floor was collapsing under his feet, only to realize that he had fallen to his knees instead. He opened his mouth, wanting to say something, to ask more, to try to understand, when he felt a pair of hands gripping his collar. He barely realized that the Dark Lord had moved from his chair and was for some reason shaking him, before they apparated.

Apparating was never pleasant, side-along even less so. The sensation of being forcibly apparated alongside someone was unpleasant to a degree Sirius hadn't experienced before. And yet what was making him nauseated were the thoughts of James or Harry dying. It couldn't be true, things like this didn't just happen. It couldn't be true, the stupid creature must have misunderstood something. Maybe it had been cursed, maybe it was confused.

As soon as they arrived in front of the Potter Manor, the Dark Lord let go of Sirius, who fell onto the ground before managing to scramble up. The front door was open, another house-elf staring at them from the other side with tears in its eyes. For a fraction of a second Sirius wondered why the Dark Lord had even come with him, before he pushed his way past the other wizard, entered the house, and followed the creature leading him to James's room. There he found Harry bent over James's body, crying so hard his little body was shaking.

"Harry," Sirius gasped, stepping into the wet bathroom and trying to make sense of what he was seeing. "James."

"He's dead," Harry said, his voice hoarse and tearful. "I tried to fix it, but I couldn't." Sirius took a deep breath and knelt down to gently pull his godson away from— Merlin, things like this shouldn’t happen.
“Come on, Harry,” Sirius said quietly, helping the boy stand and leading him away from the bathroom. Briefly he wondered about the Dark Lord, but a quick look through the window gave Sirius no definite answers. It was likely that the man had left already, and the wizard hoped that he wouldn’t be punished for basically bailing out on the Dark Lord himself.

Then again, this was an emergency, and the Dark Lord had been the one to apparate them here.

‘How did he know where to go, though?’ Sirius thought, before he shook his head and refocused on his godson. Harry was pale and shaking slightly, looking at nothing but thin air with a glassy stare. Sirius hesitated for a few moments, unsure of what to do, but then decided to carry the boy to his own room and summoned a house-elf.

“Master Black,” said the creature, his greenish skin pulled tight over his sharp features. His wide, blue eyes were filled with tears.

“Get Harry something comfortable to wear,” Sirius said, pulling off the uncomfortable and partly wet clothes off the boy. "Quickly. And then get him a cup of tea." He wished he had some sort of a calming draught with him, but this was something he most certainly had never thought he should be prepared for. Either way, he could make Harry drink something warm and then cast a sleeping charm on him, before moving back to the bathroom to take care of-- to take care of James.

‘Why?’ Sirius thought, feeling a foreign pressure on his chest. *Did someone curse him?* It was a possibility. It definitely would be an option preferable to the most probable one. Maybe someone had hexed James and killed him, and made it all appear like a— appear like... Appear like a suicide.

*Merlin,* there was a word he had never felt much about. Now he did, too much. How did people *survive* this? What did people *do*? What about *Harry*?

Harry was quiet, so *quiet.* Probably still in shock, and Sirius didn't know what to do about it. He could let Harry sleep and tomorrow morning he could... maybe Harry would talk. To him, or to someone else. Maybe he should get the boy a mind-healer, just in case. Those people were good with questions and Sirius knew from experience that though the sessions were sometimes terrible, their aftermath was worth it.

Sirius pushed Harry to sit on his bed and helped him drink some of the tea the house-elf had brought. Predictably, the boy didn't manage to swallow anything down, just as he didn't quite manage to stop the constant tears from falling. Even after Sirius cast the sleeping charm on Harry, the child kept crying for the first few minutes.

Finally, well past two in the morning, Sirius stepped out of Harry's room and returned to the bathroom where the body - he didn't know which one was making it worse: calling him James or just 'the body' - was lying. The house-elves hadn't entered the bathroom at all, and though it was odd, Sirius didn't have the time to think of it now. He took a deep breath and levitated James's body to his room, dressed him, and sat down by the bed, not knowing what to do.

In the morning he'd need to contact the ministry and inform them of James's death. Before that, however, he'd need to call in a healer to confirm the reason and have him officially declared dead. Then, of course, the funeral arrangements would need to be made as well as officially registering himself as Harry's legal guardian.

The Healers tended to be early risers, and St. Mungo's was open 24/7.

Sirius took another deep breath and stood up to make the call. His tears could wait a day or two – first he’d need to take care of Harry, then James’s loose ends, and only after that he would sit down
and allow the grief to take over for a night.

Harry woke up with an overwhelming sense of relief.

'Thank Circe it had been a dream,' he thought, ignoring the ache in his eyes and the heaviness in his heart. He took a deep breath, kicked off the covers, and sat up on his bed, thinking of breakfast with intense concentration that left no space for anything else. Slowly he moved again - standing up, walking towards the doorway. He briefly thought of changing into a more suitable attire, but who'd be there to see him? James wouldn't care.

Because James was—

'It was a dream,' Harry told himself, and thought of fresh berries with cereal, thought of a glass of orange juice and how shiny the wooden floor beneath his feet was. He made his way downstairs and right into the kitchen, noticing that even the doorknobs had been polished recently. Sirius was nowhere to be seen - surely that was another sign of Harry having dreamed everything?

His hands were shaking by the time he sat down with a bowl of cereal in front of him, and though he didn't feel hungry, he still ate. He counted the involuntary crunching sounds he made, focused on the taste of the berries and turned his face towards the window to look at the drifting clouds. In a week he'll be looking at that very same sky from Hogwarts.

"I've told you before," a familiar voice said, and Tom sauntered into the kitchen with a peculiar expression on his face. "It's ridiculously easy to break into this place."

"My dad is a good duelist," Harry said, and he didn't turn to look at the Dark Lord. "And you can go through any wards, so it's not like everyone else could just waltz in."

"I brought Black here yesterday," Tom told him, sitting down on a chair. "I didn't want to distract him so I disillusioned myself and observed the situation. Your father killed himself." The words felt like a punch to the gut, and made Harry flinch so hard he dropped his spoon and leaned away from the older wizard. It wasn't— James hadn't—

"You don't have time for that," Tom continued. "All those feelings, I mean. You've got a tournament to win."

"My dad," Harry croaked, denial finally crumbling away. "What— why did he— what happened?"

"I don't care," Tom told him bluntly. "I don't understand or like death, so I leave it entirely to other people. Are you going to be emotional about it for long?" Harry stared at the man for a few silent moments, before the boy's face twisted and he burst into tears.

"No," Tom said, standing up. "I'm out of here." He didn't, for some reason, manage to make himself walk out of the kitchen, and instead eyed the crying boy with apprehension. Harry's sobs were becoming louder - the boy was bawling, and it was disgusting and disturbing to witness.

"Your godfather is worried about you," the Dark Lord finally sighed, kneeling down. Harry was still weeping when the man leaned closer, pressing his fingertips against Harry's cheeks. "Okay, how do I get you to stop doing this?"

Suddenly, Harry lurched forward, pressing his wet face against Tom's shoulder, and the man thought of the tears seeping through his clothes and creating horrible wet patches. For some reason, a reason Tom didn't want to think about, it wasn't enough to make him push Harry away.
"My dad is dead," Harry finally croaked, his voice muffled. "Who do I have left?"

"Well, it's not like you had your father before, either," Tom told him, before he continued: "And you do have many other people willing to help you. Even more so if you win the Triwizard Tournament."

"My dad won't be there to watch it," Harry said, and though he had cried so much already, fresh tears kept falling. "Nobody will be—"

"Your godfather and I will be, most definitely."

"What do I do now?" The words were barely out before Harry began sobbing again. His thin arms were wrapped around Tom, holding him as tightly as he could. Hesitantly, Tom pressed his own palms against the boy's back, wondering if that was enough support.

"Why did he do it?" Harry asked, moments later. "Why? I don't get it."

"I don't know," replied Tom, not knowing what else to say. For that moment he regretted seeking Harry out, regretted coming to the Potter Manor to see how the boy was faring. He didn't want to be asked questions he didn't know how to answer, didn't like the feelings Harry had.

Harry pulled away from him - finally! - and the look on his face was well past the sadness Tom had expected. It was terrible to see the exhausted misery and lack of any happiness in his face.

"I don't know," Tom repeated, "but you'll get through this. And when you get through this, life may throw something even more terrible at you, and you'll get through it too. Is that understood?"

"How?" Harry wanted to know. "How is this something anyone can get through? My da— James— he, that. And how am I supposed to know what to— How do I—? What do I do?"

"Talk to your godfather," Tom said, deciding to let someone else handle all the feelings. He was here to make sure that Harry wouldn't chicken out of the Triwizard Tournament, not to talk about James Potter. "But if you need distractions, you can practice your spells. Think of the tournament and you won't think of your father."

He thought of telling the boy to go and take a look at the train station limbo he kept visiting, but what if the kid decided to stay there? What if Harry thought that hey, might as well go with his dad? Tom wasn't going to let that happen, and as long as he wouldn't remind the boy of the option - as long as he kept him occupied with other tasks and thoughts - that particular disaster would be avoided.

James Potter could have had better timing, granted. But Tom could work with this – Harry was in shock and had a lot of feelings, and even if the boy didn’t learn how to deal with them, that was fine. It was fine for the boy to not get over this particular death, as long as he still managed to function the way Tom wanted him to.

“I don’t want this to be real,” Harry said, closing his eyes. “When I woke up, I thought it had all been a dream because I didn’t remember going to bed.”

‘You’re so vulnerable,’ Tom thought, before he stood up. “Your godfather will return soon, I believe. I will talk to him tomorrow regarding your future arrangements.”

“Are you leaving?”

“I want to.”
Harry looked at him, then, with a lost expression. Tom thought of staying, and almost did.

“Yeah,” he said. “I know you feel like your world just ended, or something. But you’re not the only orphan in this world. You’re better off than many others, so don’t let go of the advantages you have.”

“I know I have to go on,” Harry replied quietly. “I know I have so many things to do. I know I should be moving forward.”

“Good,” Tom started, when Harry continued, “I feel so empty and shallow. I feel like a single gust of wind could take me away, like a shove would break me. I know I need to survive, but I don’t know if I can.” Everything still felt so unreal, in all the bad ways.

“You can,” Tom told him. “I’ll drop by in a few days to make sure you’re still breathing. Practice your spells.”

“Is that all you’re going to say?” Harry asked, wondering if he had any right to feel the disappointment burning in his heart.

“It’s all I know how to say,” Tom replied, trying to explain his views honestly. “I’ve had my fair share of losses, Harry. I didn’t need anyone to get over them. I don’t understand how you’d feel the absence of a man who was never there for you anyway. I don’t understand your grief; I don’t know why you feel it. If you want me to lie and comfort you the way I would comfort a pawn to make them move, sure, I could. But I choose not to.”

“Don’t belittle someone for needing the things you can survive without,” Harry told him tiredly, feeling hurt. “I need— I don’t know. A little bit of support. From you.”

“I’m not belittling you,” Tom said, shaking his head. “I’m telling you that this is the one thing that I cannot help you with unless you want me to lie, and I know that you don’t. And for some reason that matters to me.”

The Dark Lord left then, and for the first time he could remember, Harry resented him.

* He looked around. There were so many things that required his attention. Papers to be signed, documents to be read over, a funeral to organize, a will to sort out – thankfully not everything would need to be done immediately. When he had done this after Lily’s death – or rather, when he had dragged James around, making sure everything would be taken care of – things had been easier.

Sirius took a deep breath, feeling slightly dizzy. He couldn’t think of Harry without thinking of James, and thinking of James was… it wasn’t something he wanted to do.

What he wanted to think even less about was the Dark Lord, and the small clues Sirius was finding that implied some sort of interest the man held towards Harry. Even if him recommending Harry as the Durmstrang Champion was just a fluke, him knowing how to apparate to the Potter Manor was definitely not. Why did the man even know about the location? Not for James’s sake, Sirius was certain of that.

Did this have something to do with the fact that their wands were brothers? It had been years, but what if the Dark Lord—

“Lord Black,” the witch behind the counter said, snapping him out of his thoughts. “Your papers were successfully moved to the archives, and the information has been registered. If you could just
fill out this application here—"

“What is it for?”

“Changing the necessary information regarding your new ward, Harry Potter. Things such as his
home address and anything else you find to be outdated.”

“And then I’m done?”

“Yes, Mr. Black. This is the last paper. In case you’re in need of any funeral arrangement assistance,
the office down the corridor—”

“Thank you,” Sirius said, interrupting her again. “But the funeral has been taken care of.” That was a
lie, but for the life of him Sirius couldn’t bring himself to plan James’s funeral. Who would he even
invite? Unlike Lily, and despite his popularity at Hogwarts, James hadn’t had many friends for years.
Whatever friends he had had before Lily’s death were long gone by now.

Not to mention that Harry would need to go back to school in a matter of days and there simply
wouldn’t be enough time for a proper funeral. Maybe later. Yes, later, when things weren’t so
confusing and painful, and James’s death didn’t bring forth so much grief that Sirius could easily
drown in it.

*Circe.* Drown in grief. What a joke.

Was it his fault? Maybe he hadn’t paid enough attention to James. If he had just been there more,
dragged the man out more often, maybe then James wouldn’t have— wouldn’t— he would be alive.
If only Sirius had made sure that James went to a mind healer after Lily’s death, helped him control
his drinking, and just been a better friend, maybe then James would be happy and dating someone
else by now.

Instead, he was dead.

Logically, Sirius knew that there was nothing he could have done. He could already hear the mind-
healer telling him *depression is no one’s fault,* and even though that’s true, Sirius couldn’t quite bring
himself to accept it. Sure, he couldn’t cure depression even if he tried, but he could have done
something to prevent the s— prevent what had happened.

Sirius walked towards the closest fireplace – he had spent enough time away from Harry, and there
was no way to predict what the boy would do on his own. Sirius didn’t even know how the boy
would react to the thought of moving permanently to Grimmauld Place. It certainly was good that
he’d be going to Hogwarts soon enough – an entirely new environment would help him make new
memories rather than dwell in old ones.

Then again, would Harry have the energy to move into Grimmauld Place, only to move out again in
a matter of days? Perhaps it’d be better to let him stay at the Potter Manor for the few remaining days
of his summer break. As soon as Sirius would see Harry safely in Hogwarts, he would move Harry’s
things to Grimmauld Place and seal up the Potter Manor to wait for Harry’s coming of age.

*It took two days for the anger to appear. And when it did, it filled Harry to the brim.

Sirius would visit often, and he’d talk to Harry, and sometimes Harry would talk to him. There was a
rift between them, however, and Harry couldn’t help but wonder if he’d eventually lose Sirius, too.
Everything had begun with distance, after all. Physical distance between him and his mother,
emotional distance between him and his father, and now it seemed like Sirius, too, would disappear behind *some* sort of distance.

He had tried – seven times so far – to go to the train station to look for his father. His first three attempts were spectacular failures: he hadn’t managed to concentrate enough to get to the train station. When he finally had managed to go there, something unfamiliar had pulled him right back. Something Harry hadn’t experienced before. He didn’t know what to call it – didn’t even know what it *was*. It felt like a chain of some sort that Harry just couldn’t shake off or break.

The thought of James being in the train station and Harry missing the last chance to talk to him made the boy even more frustrated, which in turn made him angrier. The chain worried him, baffled him. He didn’t know why it had suddenly appeared – was it Tom’s doing, somehow?

Harry had never thought that he’d feel this much anger. It wasn’t the feeling he got when he thought of innocent lives lost for the sake of political agendas, and it wasn’t the feeling he got when he thought of the inequality within the magical world. This feeling was ugly, heavy, and made him restless.

Three days before Harry’s departure to Durmstrang, Sirius came to his room and sat by the bed. The man’s face was pale and exhausted, and Harry wasn’t sure if he even wanted to know what his godfather had to say.

“Hey,” Sirius started. “We need to talk.”

“That’s always a good start,” Harry told him, sighing heavily. “How are you holding up?”

“I should be the one asking you that,” Sirius said quietly. “I can manage, I promise you. How are you doing?”

Harry stared at the ceiling for a few silent moments, before he finally sighed and turned to look at Sirius. “It was easier to be strong when mum died, because there was someone to be strong for,” the boy whispered. “But now I just… I don’t know how I’m doing. I’m angry right now and it hurts so much that I just try to not think about it.”

“Do you still want to participate in the Triwizard Tournament?” Sirius asked. It was hard to believe that this was the first time he had actually spoken to Harry about the thing, but—

“Might as well,” Harry replied. “He won’t be clapping in the stands, though. Then again, I doubt he would have been anyway.”

“The Dark Lord recommended you,” Sirius said warily, looking at Harry’s expression. The boy grimaced at the mention of the Dark Lord, and huffed with evident irritation.

“I wonder what that will do for me in the future.”

“People will know you, that’s for sure. Are you prepared?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “That feels like my standard answer to everything, these days. I don’t know how I’m feeling, I don’t know if I’m prepared enough, I don’t know if I *care* about being prepared enough.”

“Hey,” Sirius sighed, leaning forward. “It’s you and me now, kid, so don’t do anything reckless. You’re the best family I have.”

“You’re the only family I have,” Harry said. “Now with James gone.”
‘James,’ Sirius thought. ‘For how long has it been James and not Dad?’ ‘About his funeral—’

“Who’s invited?”

“Nobody.”

At this, Harry sat up and shot his godfather an incredulous look. Sirius didn’t say a thing, waiting for the boy to ask his questions. What Harry did instead was squeeze his eyes shut, and take in a shuddering breath, before exhaling slowly. His fingers tugged at his fringe, in a hauntingly familiar gesture.

“Why?”

“Because there won’t be a funeral,” Sirius said simply. “He’s been buried already, next to your mother. Later, when we have more time and can be there without hating him for what he did—”

“You didn’t ask for my opinion,” Harry interrupted, feeling hollow. Should he be angry? Should he be relieved? “Do you hate him for what he did?”

Sirius stared at him for a few long minutes, before he sighed and leaned back on his chair. “I resent him, but I’d like to think that that will pass. I just… don’t understand.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, looking down at his hands, “I don’t understand either.”

The day of departure was sunny and warm and it irritated Harry in ways weather didn’t often do.

“You won’t be boarding the train to Hogwarts, will you?” Sirius asked, helping the boy shrink his trunk.

“No,” Harry replied. “Headmaster Karkaroff said we will all use our portkeys and go back to Durmstrang, and take the ship from there. Unnecessary hassle, I say, but I guess he wants to use the rare opportunity to show off the damn ship.”

“Appearances matter,” Sirius told him. “The best way to keep people interested is to keep them guessing.”

“Why would I want to keep them interested?”

“For future’s sake. Trust me.”

“I do,” Harry said, looking at his godfather. “I do trust you.”

“I’m glad,” Sirius said, giving him a fond smile. The absence of James was like a void hovering near them, and Sirius didn’t know if ignoring it was for the better. There was a scream of a darker kind boiling right under his ribs; polluted air waiting to be let out. “Remember to take care of yourself, even if you don’t feel like it.”

“Yeah, don’t worry,” Harry assured him, giving the man a strained smile. “You’ll be at Hogwarts?”

“The whole year,” Sirius promised. “I’ll see you again in a few days, and keep your Saturday evenings free for me, alright? And if you need anything, promise me—”

“Just,” Harry started, shuffling forward. “Just don’t leave, alright? I can’t— I don’t know what— Just. Promise me you won’t go where I can’t find you.”
Sirius smiled then – it was a sad little smile, barely there. He wrapped his arms around his godson and hugged him tightly.

“You too,” he said. “Be careful. Especially with anything relating to the Dark Lord.”

“Isn’t that everything, then?” Harry said, leaning into the hug. “I’ll be fine, Sirius.”

Sirius wished that he could believe that, but he knew better.

How many times would he need to do this?

Peter made his way towards James’s grave slowly, knowing that he had to visit at least once, yet wishing to never arrive. He had waited long enough to make sure that Harry and Sirius were gone, before slowly approaching the cemetery.

Technically, his job was done. Lily and James were both dead, and he should be free to move on to the next… what was it that Dumbledore had said? The next great adventure? Except that Dumbledore had meant the peace of the grave, not the curse of being caught in a constant loop of fulfilling one task—

The pebbles he was stepping on were uneven and painfully familiar, and once again Peter marvelled at how the most insignificant things never seemed to change, while the important things were never quite the same. The gravestone this time was simple, and Peter wasn’t surprised when he realized that there had not been – and perhaps will not be – a funeral.

“I’m sorry,” Peter whispered, kneeling down. “If they knew what I know, they would not blame you for this. You were a true Gryffindor, to have lasted this long. You were a true Gryffindor, James, even if I’m the only one who knows that. I’m sorry.”

There were birds chirping nearby, and a soft breeze ruffled what was left of Peter’s hair. There was a faint sound of wind chimes, though Peter knew that there were none of those close enough for him to actually hear them. His watery blue eyes were glassy and sad as he stared at the fresh grave, but there was no trace of remorse in him. He was sorry, like always, that James’s life would always end early, but some things were meant to happen.

Harry being an orphan was something meant to occur. A key ingredient, that’s what it was. Unfortunate but necessary.

(And didn’t that describe the boy’s whole life, really?)

Peter sighed, pressing his palms against his knees as he heaved himself up. Technically, his job was indeed done. Leaving now, however, would mean being stuck in that cursed train station for an unknown amount of time, waiting for the next tide to take him.

The least he could do was wait until he was sure that James had boarded a train and left.
The ship was huge and ugly, with an inelegant and sturdy build and billowing red flags. It didn’t look particularly new or well-maintained, resembling more so a nightmare in the shape of a ship than anything else. Harry couldn’t find it in himself to be amused; all he could feel was a cycle of emotions consisting of hollow exhaustion, burning anger, and grief so deep it felt endless.

“Never mind getting over the ocean,” Mette Erling muttered, walking in front of Harry and next to Anthony Lestrange. “How are we supposed to get over those colours?"

“I don’t think it’s bad,” someone said. “It has, uh, character.”

"It could be worse," said the only seventh year student in the group, a girl whose name Harry had already forgotten. She was a tall girl with an easy smile and deceptively kind brown eyes. "Besides, the trip won't take more than a few hours, we won't have to be inside for long. You also know that we'll live in the castle."

"I envy them for that, to be honest," Maria Rurik - Harry wouldn't have remembered her either, had she not introduced herself again earlier - said. "Living in a castle. Must be nice."

"They have to share their rooms," Lestrange sneered, ignoring the blatantly appreciative looks Erling was giving him. "They have common bathrooms, no private kitchens or sleeping areas. How is that better than what we have?"

"Hey," Truls whispered, his fingers tight around Harry's own. "You seem down, did something happen?"

"No," Harry said, the lie heavy and sour in his mouth. "Just a little bit nervous about going to Hogwarts."

"It'll be fine," Truls assured him quietly, "You said your godfather will be there, didn't you? And you already know people who study there, so you needn't worry. Will your dad be dropping by at some point? Did you two sort things out?" At the mention of his dad, Harry took in a sharp breath and dug his nails into Truls's hand so hard that the other boy couldn't help but let go with a startled grimace.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly, his heart hammering in his chest. "I just. There. No. No, my dad won't be coming. Let's not talk about him, though." Any mention of James - the mere thought of him - made the unreasonable anger bubble inside Harry again. He didn't understand it and felt guilty for feeling angry.

His dad— He— Was feeling angry wrong?

"Alright, roll call!" Headmaster Karkaroff hollered as soon as the students were on the ship. The man looked irritated and stressed, and Harry hoped to stay as far away from him as possible. "Malte."

"Present, sir."

"Krum, there. Lestrange, there. Erling?"

"Here!"
"Rurik?"

"Here, sir."

"Kettil? Must be you. Potter? There you are." Karkaroff looked up from the parchment, narrowing his eyes at Harry. "You come highly recommended. I expect you to live up to the standards."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, thinking fleetingly of Tom. Of course the Headmaster would know who recommended him. Did the other professors know, too? Did they... what did they think about it? Harry hoped that he wouldn't be asked about it – what would he say, anyway? He let out a huff of breath and took a step back when Karkaroff began yet another speech on what he expected from Durmstrang's champions. Harry doubted that the man even realized that the ship had begun moving already.

"Once we arrive, we will be led to their general dining area while the house-elves will take care of our luggage," Karkaroff said. "Make sure that from the first moment onward, Durmstrang will show nothing but unity, dignity, power, and superiority. You're not like the students of Hogwarts, and you're not like the students of Beauxbatons. You've been selected and recommended, you've been given the best possible education a witch or wizard could hope for, and even though you will be attending classes with the other students, you will also be tutored by your own teachers in order to keep your learning up to date."

Harry's attention drifted away from the Headmaster, and he took a look at the students he was standing with. Viktor was perhaps the only one who didn't portray an attitude of effortless confidence, but being a Quidditch star would already put him a head above the rest everywhere they went. When Harry glanced at Lestrange, who was standing behind Krum, he was startled to see the boy staring at him.

Anthony Lestrange was quite tall, and his platinum blond hair was tied back in a loose ponytail. His eyes were a shade of grey so light they were nearly white, and to be looked at by those eyes with such concentration was unnerving. Harry could see why people would call him handsome - he certainly was. But attractive he simply wasn't.

Perhaps it had to do with what Harry knew of Anthony's personality by now - vicious, arrogant, egocentric, and rude - but he found the older boy nearly repulsive. The thought of having to perhaps share a living area with him didn't make Harry feel any better.

Lestrange finally looked away, and Harry leaned a bit closer to Truls.

"Let me repeat this again," Karkaroff said, looking at the students with a sullen face. "If you have a problem with someone in the group, you will wait until we're out of Hogwarts to sort it out. I don't care what kind of a problem it is, but you won't put our show of unity at risk for your personal grievances."

'Okay, that's actually good to hear.'

"I know how cunning you are," Karkaroff continued. "I know how clever you can be. I know that if you can't attack openly, you'll manipulate someone else to do it for you, or you will find some other indirect way to make your target suffer. But know this: the moment any of you is targeted or steps out of line, I'll be interrogating all of you under the effect of Veritaserum. Understood?"

"Isn't that a bit excessive?" Malte said, sounding wary.

"You can avoid it by obeying the rules," Karkaroff told her. "Are there any questions? Is there
anything you disagree with? No? Good. We will arrive in six hours - make sure you'll be presentable by then. You're free to explore the ship as you see fit, but the lounging area is below the deck."

’Six hours,’ Harry thought, following Truls and the others to the designated lounge. ‘Six hours and then it starts. It’ll be good to see Luna again. Draco and Ron too. I wonder if they know about what happened? Why would they? There wasn’t a funeral and I doubt that James spoke to the Malfoys or the Weasleys.’

Harry shook his head and took a deep breath. He knew some of what would be waiting for him at Hogwarts, and he knew that allowing James’s death to become a distraction was unacceptable. He should deal with the surges of unexplainable anger, the stress, and the sleeplessness, and simply focus on the Tournament and impressing Tom.

And yet, James’s suicide overshadowed everything else.

*I*

“*I can’t believe this is happening,*” Ron Weasley whispered, staring at the students of Beauxbatons. They had arrived in fancy carriages less than an hour earlier, and the redhead has yet to look away from the Ravenclaw table where they were seated. “I want to participate. Think one of them would say yes to a date if I became the Hogwarts Champion? Do you think I could date one of them?”

“I’m sure you could,” Neville Longbottom said, smiling awkwardly at his friend. He glanced at the French girls, not denying the fact that they were indeed very beautiful. "Aren't they a little bit intimidating, though?"

"If you find them intimidating, what are you going to do about the Durmstrang students?" Ron snorted. "I wonder if Harry's coming as well. I heard they're supposed to be here at six? That's like... five minutes away."

"I've been reading about Durmstrang," Hermione hurried to tell them, lowering her voice. "It's really said to be an elite school."

"Well, yeah," Ron said. "The best of the best study there. Nobody can buy their way in - they have to earn it. Which is why Malfoy is here and not there. I saw Harry last Christmas with a friend of his - the guy was scary even though he was our age. Arrogant as Malfoy, with a crazy look in his eyes."

“Harry seemed really nice, though.”

“He is.”

"Susan told me, that her aunt told her,” Lavender started, joining the conversation eagerly, "that even though the Durmstrang students will join some classes with us, they will still have their own tutors. Apparently their curriculum is a lot tougher than ours and to them Hogwarts education is inadequate!"

"Oh," Hermione sighed wistfully. "How I wish..."

"They accept only purebloods, though," Lavender told her with a sympathetic expression. "Sometimes half-bloods, if they are recommended by someone famous. I've heard that the Lestrange heir also studies there. Now there's a guy any girl would love to wrap around her little finger!"

Right then, the doors of the Great Hall were suddenly pushed open, catching the attention of the students in the hall. "Sir," the groundskeeper said, stumbling in. "Headmaster Yaxley, sir. The guests from Durmstrang are here."
They're here,' Ron though, his heart thumping wildly in his chest. 'I wonder what they're like.'

A tall, dark-haired man wearing a fur-rimmed coat walked in, followed by seven students and two professors. Ron took in the sight of well-tailed uniforms and the coat of arms, before he focused on the students themselves. It was easy to recognize Anthony Lestrange - the bastard had quite the reputation and wasn't particularly liked even by the rich pureblood Slytherins. Behind him stood Viktor Krum, and it took Ron a while to convince himself that the Quidditch player was actually there, and that he wasn't hallucinating. The whispers around them were becoming louder, and even the French students were eyeing the Quidditch star with appreciative glances.

There were several people Ron didn't know, and a blond boy he remembered from Mrs. Potter’s funeral few years ago. And there, right next to that vaguely familiar stranger, stood Harry.

“He’s there,” Ron whispered, and Hermione turned to look with a smile on her face. Ron looked at his friend, noticing the grim expression, pale complexion, and the tension of his posture. Had he not met Harry a relatively short time ago he wouldn’t have necessarily noticed any of this, but the boy standing there was different from the boy he had met at the Quidditch Cup.

“Our friends from the North!” Yaxley crowed, smiling at the newcomers. “Headmaster Karkaroff! I welcome you and the students of Durmstrang to Hogwarts!”

“Much honoured, my friend.” Headmaster Karkaroff said, stepping further into the hall, followed by his students. “To think that such a glorious event is but a short time away from us. Everyone here must be very excited.”

“There’s something seriously sleazy about that guy,” Ron whispered, and Neville nodded in agreement. They watched silently as the Durmstrang students were given seats at the closest table – Hufflepuff, of all Houses – and after a few moments they begun eating.

“This welcome could have been organized better,” Hermione said, and Neville nodded with a frown on his face.

“It’s unusually… brief.”

“It feels kind of deliberate,” he said. “It doesn’t make any sense, though. Why would Headmaster Yaxley want to piss off the Headmaster of Durmstrang?”

“Who knows,” Ron said, “maybe to prove a point or something?”

“That’s probably it,” Lavender agreed. “I’m so happy that tomorrow is Saturday – we’ll get time to talk with the other students during breakfast. Maybe even Anthony Lestrange. I could show him Hogsmeade if he wanted.”

“Why would you want to talk with him?” Ron wondered, shaking his head. “Nope, Harry’s the one I want you guys to meet properly.”

“I’d love to meet Harry again,” Hermione admitted, looking at the dark-haired boy who was eyeing the food in front of him with a contemplative expression. The other boy, the blond one Hermione remembered from the Quidditch Cup, was talking to him and it was clear to her that the two were very close.

‘I’m a little bit jealous,’ the girl thought wistfully. ‘I wonder what the Durmstrang Library is like.’
“The food was decent,” Maria Rurik sighed, walking next to Harry as the Durmstrang students were led towards their rooms. The prefect walking in front of them was a boy who had blushed furiously when introduced. He barely managed to keep his eyes off Mette Erling, who took in the boy’s reaction with amused disdain. “Those roasted potatoes. Oh yeah.”

“Never mind the potatoes, we have class tomorrow at seven in the morning,” Mette said, scowling. “I thought we’d have our Saturdays free here! Is there no justice in this world?”

“Why can’t we start at nine?” Ingrid agreed, sighing heavily. “I can’t wait to graduate.”

“Can it, Malte. You’re nearly done anyway.”

“Headmaster wants our private classes to be done before most of the Hogwarts students are up,” Lestrange explained. “We have a week’s time to settle into a routine here. After that they will finally inform us properly of the Tournament and what to do.”

‘A week to settle. I hope that won’t involve too much socializing,’ Harry thought tiredly. He wouldn’t mind bumping into Ron or Luna or Draco, but right now he simply didn’t have the energy for any meetings with new people.

“Here we are,” the prefect suddenly said, stopping in front of a painting that showed nothing but an empty field and a round, pale yellow moon. “The password is ‘King’s pudding.’ Feel free to change it whenever, but if you do, make sure everyone who needs to know it, knows.”

“You have a special talent in making English sound like nonsense to me,” Mette told the boy, a mean smile on her face while she shooed him away with a wave of her hand. “Dismissed.” The prefect gave her a startled look before he stumbled away, as if being dismissed in such a manner was the strangest thing to happen for him.

‘I suppose this is why Björn likes her,’ Harry thought, leaning heavily against Truls. ‘I wonder what the others are doing in Durmstrang right now.’

“King’s pudding,” Maria said, clearly amused by the password. The surface of the painting rippled and after a moment of hesitation, the girl stepped through, followed by the others. The common room inside was rather pleasant looking; it was big, with two fireplaces and comfortable couches in shades ranging from earthy brown to dark orange. There were thick carpets on the floors, decorative curtains on the windowless walls, and bookshelves floating near the ceiling, waiting to be called down.

“Not bad,” Ingrid said. “I like it. I wonder where we’re supposed to sleep, though?”

“They’re not going to make us share rooms, are they?” Maria gasped, noticing only two doors at the back of the room. With a horrified whine the girl rushed forward to take a look.

“I did say it before,” Anthony Lestrange said, suddenly standing next to Harry. “They have dormitories here, not private apartments.”

“I suppose we’ll just get to know each other better,” Mette said, winking at Krum, who seemed to try and shrink into himself.

“I’m looking forward to that,” Lestrange said, and turned to give Harry a smile that was far too easy and practiced to be sincere. Harry contemplated smiling in return, but then only sighed and leaned further into Truls.

“You’re Harry Potter,” Lestrange continued, not deterred by Harry’s silence. “I didn’t expect you to be nominated. Who did you get to vouch for you?”
“That’s none of your business,” Truls said, wrapping an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “What matters is that we’re here now, not who got us here.”

“I disagree,” Lestrange sneered, the pretence of friendliness disappearing in an instant. “Who got us here matters very much, for various reasons—”

“Hey,” Mette said sharply, interrupting the beginning of an argument. “I’m tired. I want to go to bed. We can talk about this nonsense tomorrow. Kettl, don’t pick fights with him. Anthony, darling, you know what Headmaster Karkaroff said. I’m pretty sure that baiting falls into the category of what he warned us about.”

“I’m pretty sure you calling me darling is going to be a problem as well,” Lestrange replied, scowling. He then levelled Truls with a glare, before focusing on Harry again. “You can speak for yourself, can’t you?”

‘I’m too tired to get angry,’ Harry thought, and sighed. “I don’t think that picking fights with any of us is going to be for anyone’s benefit. We’re at a disadvantage here. Who knows what the Hogwarts students have been told about the Tournament. For all we know—”

“Yaxley isn’t above setting us up just to stick it to Headmaster Karkaroff,” Lestrange finished for him. The boy then stared at Harry for a few moments silently, before he nodded. “Very well, Potter. I see your point.”

“Only one of us will participate in the tournament, anyway,” Ingrid reminded the others. “So whoever does get picked, we all must support that person and make sure they win.”

“Could we just all agree to go to sleep now and return to discuss this issue tomorrow?” Mette asked, walking towards one of the doors and opening it. “Maria, you’re not taking that bed. I want it!”

“My bags were on this bed, Erling. It’s meant for me!”

Truls sighed, and pulled Harry with him towards the other room. It was nicely decorated, though nothing impressive in his opinion: the room was large and square, with two beds on each side of the room. A door in the far corner led to a spacious bathroom.

There were no bookshelves – floating or otherwise – but the ceiling showed a cloudy night sky. The carpets covering the stone floors were thick and soft, and the walls were made of dark wood.

“This is ridiculous,” Lestrange huffed, walking towards one of the beds and sitting down on it. “They sure are roughing it here, aren’t they?”

“It’s a bit strange, though,” Truls said. “With as much space as they have in the castle… it’s not like they couldn’t afford giving each student their own room.”

“It’s to teach unity, I think,” Viktor said, speaking slowly and carefully pronouncing each word. Harry felt a wave of fondness towards the other boy, and couldn’t help but find his way of speaking utterly charming.

“I am so glad that I got into Durmstrang,” Truls declared, digging out a change of clothes from his trunk. “Didn’t you almost come here, Harry?”


“My situation was the same,” Lestrange revealed. “After some contemplation Durmstrang seemed
like the better option after all. I haven’t regretted my choice.”

‘Well, yeah,’ Harry thought. Of all the choices he regretted, the choice to attend Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts didn’t even come close to the top.

“Look at them, staring,” Mette Erling sneered from behind her cup of creamy coffee. “So rude and tactless!”

“Mingling so much with Mudbloods has clearly left an impression,” Lestrange agreed. “And look at how scruffy they are. Some must have woken up only minutes ago.”

“Well, it’s not like they had to get up to study at the crack of dawn,” Maria Rurik said smoothly. “And don’t use that word in polite company, Anthony.” Right then, Ingrid Malte arrived, taking a seat between Viktor and a Hufflepuff boy who seemed too dazed by their presence to eat.

“Well, it’s not like they had to get up to study at the crack of dawn,” Maria Rurik said smoothly. “And don’t use that word in polite company, Anthony.” Right then, Ingrid Malte arrived, taking a seat between Viktor and a Hufflepuff boy who seemed too dazed by their presence to eat.

“Where were you?” Mette asked.

“Talking with Headmaster Karkaroff,” Ingrid replied. “They’ll start the Champion Selection on Monday. He didn’t give me any details but apparently we all put our names into some bowl and in a week the name of one student from each school will be picked out.”

“The Goblet of Fire,” Lestrange said. “My aunt Bellatrix mentioned it to me once. It’s a good choice: ancient and filled to the brim with strong magic.”

“E-excuse me,” a squeaky voice suddenly said, and they all turned to see a tiny boy with wide blue eyes, holding a quill and a parchment, standing next to Viktor. “D-do you mind, um… C-could you sign this, please?”

“All right,” Viktor said, and Harry could tell that the Quidditch star felt incredibly awkward. He sighed, shaking his head before leaning tiredly against Truls. He felt so drained.

“Are you done eating?” Truls asked, and Harry nodded.

“Yeah, I’m full. I didn’t feel hungry to begin with, to be honest.”

“Let’s go for a walk, then.”

“Be back at our common room by five,” Ingrid told them. “Headmaster Karkaroff will give us our schedules – the classes we’ll be attending with the students here, that is – and talk to us about other important things.”

“We’ll be there,” Truls promised, before pulling Harry gently with him. “See you all later.”

They left the Great Hall and were less than fifty feet away from it when Harry heard a familiar voice calling his name. Ron, followed by Neville, Hermione, and a girl with honey blond curls and bright blue eyes, walked towards them.

“So good to see you, mate!” Ron said cheerfully, and for a moment Harry was enveloped in a tight hug that made something inside him shake and hurt. He wasn’t sure if he wanted Ron to let go of him instantly, or if he wanted to ask for more hugs in the future.

The moment Ron let Harry go, Truls’s arm was around Harry’s shoulders, and the Swedish boy glared at the redhead with a vicious expression. Ron grinned sheepishly, unsure of what had
prompted such a reaction, before deciding to simply focus on Harry.

“How are you? Liking Hogwarts so far?”

“It’s great,” Harry replied, ignoring the first question. “This is Truls, by the way. Truls, these are Ron Weasley, Neville Longbottom and… Hermione Granger, was it? And… I’m sorry, but—”

“Lavender Brown,” the girl said with a sunny smile, thrusting her hand forward. “So pleased to meet you both!”

“We’ve heard so many exciting things about Durmstrang,” Granger said, stepping forward. “Is it true that your schedule is far more demanding than the standard curriculums?” Harry tried to smile, remembering vaguely her having asked the same question before.

“Merlin, Hermione,” Ron groaned. “Don’t ask them about school! Talk about Quidditch instead!”

“We’re going to attend some of the classes with you guys,” Harry said, and Granger smiled again. “Potions, I think. And Transfiguration. And Charms.”

“Our Professor McGonagall – she teaches Transfiguration – is extremely talented,” Granger told him. “I’m sure you won’t be disappointed.”

“Do you guys have a Quidditch pitch here?” Truls wanted to know, and Ron shrugged.

“We had,” the boy replied. “But now it’s been turned into some sort of a lake. Something to do with the Triwizard Tournament, I bet.”

“Some sort of a lake?” Harry repeated. “What sort, exactly?”

“The water is weird,” Ron explained. “Some days it looks like thick, liquid silver, and some other days it’s some sort of yellow fog.”

“Once it was a mirror,” Neville piped in. “Some guys from Hufflepuff claimed that they had seen it turn into fire but, well, nobody can tell for sure. It’s strictly off limits and guarded night and day.”

“It could be one of those spells that needs time to settle,” Granger said, and Truls nodded, thinking of the different options and possibilities.

“I wonder if the teachers know,” the boy said. “Or if only the tournament organizers know what’s going on.” Harry thought of Sirius briefly, wondering if he was in the castle or elsewhere, before he sighed and shook his head. The hollowness inside him was aching, and the constant change from sad to angry to indifferent made him feel very drained.

“We’ll find out eventually,” he said. “Are any of you going to apply to become the champion of Hogwarts?”

“We can’t,” Granger told him, tucking a stray brown curl back behind her ear. “Not that I would, anyway.”

“Headmaster Yaxley set an age limit, you see,” Ron explained, sounding annoyed. “We heard about it a little while ago, otherwise I would have applied. Only sixth and seventh year students can participate. They don’t think that anyone else is prepared well enough.”

“That’s a pity,” Harry said, unsure of what else to add. He wondered if James had felt awkward while interacting with people before he— Harry wondered if this was how it started: with distance
and discomfort. The thought made him feel sick, and he resisted the urge to flee.

“What’s your schedule like?” Granger asked, then. “If you don’t have anywhere to be right now, we could show you the different classrooms?”

“We haven’t gotten our schedules yes,” Harry replied. “Headmaster Karkaroff will hand them out later on today.”

“I hope we’ll have some classes together,” Granger said with a bright smile. “We can compare them tomorrow at breakfast, then. Would you two – and the rest of your schoolmates, of course – like to eat with us at the Gryffindor table?”

“We’ll see,” Truls said. The thought of Anthony Lestrange sitting at the Gryffindor table suddenly occurred to Harry, and it almost made him smile.

Sirius took a step back and resisted the temptation to shrug off his coat. The exertion had made him sweat under the layers of clothing, and to maintain the balance of his spells he couldn’t cast a cooling charm on himself. He had worked on setting up the final touches for several hours, and the work was very nearly completed.

“Nicely done,” Bellatrix said, eyeing the surface covering the previously grassy grounds of the Quidditch Pitch. “Lippershey’s Lake, eh? Didn’t know you knew how to set that one up.”

“A few runes here and there, Bella, it’s not that difficult,” Sirius replied, wiping his sweaty forehead with the sleeve of his jacket. “What brings you here? You won’t be introduced to the students until Monday.”

“Just taking a walk,” the witch said, a deceptively pleasant smile on her lips. “Hoping to perhaps bump into a champion candidate or two.”

“Especially the one you nominated?” Sirius asked, thinking of Harry. “Are you ever going to explain that to me?”

“The Potter boy,” Bellatrix sighed, leaning against the wooden stand. “Think of what he could become. How the tournament could change him. A British wizard, eyes like a bad omen, and education from the best school of magic in the world. He’s too soft now, but after the tournament he won’t be.”

Sirius bit his lip, feeling conflicted. On one hand, he wanted to argue against what Bellatrix was saying. He didn’t want to think of Harry doing the tasks he had designed. He didn’t want to change Harry that way, especially now that the boy was already changing due to what James had done.

But on the other hand… Sirius didn’t disagree with Bellatrix.

“The Dark Lord also nominated him,” Sirius revealed, and turned to look at his cousin. The information was clearly new to the woman, and she didn’t bother to hide her surprise. Soon the expression shifted to glee, and she threw her head back, laughing loudly.

“See!” Bellatrix crowed. “If the Dark Lord agrees with me, he must have seen in the boy what I did as well. Once again I am the one who stands by the Dark Lord and understands him like no other can. We have the boy figured out, we do.”

“Harry is my godson,” Sirius said, but the words rang hollow. “He… he’s my ward now.”
“I heard about James Potter,” Bellatrix told him. “It’s not public knowledge yet. Someone had it covered quite fast. The boy is under your influence now, cousin. Do with it what you may. With any luck you can turn him into one of us soon.”

“One of us,” Sirius snorted. “And what’s that? Everyone from Durmstrang is a Death E—”

“A Black, I mean,” Bellatrix cut him off. “The boy could bring such honour to the family. It’s such a pity that his lineage is rubbish, but something can be done.”

‘Hell no,’ Sirius thought, but said nothing. He sighed and turned back to the fresh Lippershey’s Lake and kneeled down to touch its surface with the tip of his wand. Everything seemed to be as it should, and the flow of the magic was steady and stable.

“Harry is kind,” he suddenly said, after many moments of silence. “I don’t want to take that away from him.”

“He’ll suffer for it, then,” Bellatrix said. “Housewives of Hogsmeade can afford kindness. Bakers and tailors and store owners can afford kindness. Farmers and florists and even some teachers can afford to be kind. An orphan boy with a relatively worthless lineage and an education from Durmstrang doesn’t have that luxury. Not in this world. Not with what will be expected of him.”

“He’s just a kid,” Sirius said with a scowl. “He’s barely fourteen.”

Bellatrix pursed her lips and readjusted her hat with a few sharp tugs. She didn’t speak, but her silence said enough.

“This Monday,” Karkaroff started, looking at the Durmstrang Champion candidates around him, “you will be given the precise information on how the tournament will proceed. The judges will also be introduced. Remember to treat them with the utmost respect.”

Harry stood quietly between Truls and Mette, and thought of Sirius. Was his godfather one of the judges? If not, then who?

“You are not here to struggle alongside the students of Hogwarts and Beauxbatons,” Karkaroff continued. “You’re here to surpass them and show your audience the difference between Durmstrang and the rest of the magical schools. You will be the very vision of unity and power. You are what others aspire to become.”

‘I really hope not,’ Harry thought, fleetingly imagining Luna at Durmstrang. Then he thought of Petronella and Filippa, and the ache in his heart grew stronger.

“You were informed earlier that you will be attending some classes with the Hogwarts students,” Karkaroff said. “Professor Heiner will tell you more about that.”

“Thank you, Igor,” Professor Heiner said, stepping forward. “I have taught Arithmancy to all of you and know that each one of you seven is a hardworking and intelligent student. I do not think that you will struggle with the curriculum of Hogwarts.”

‘I hope so, at least,’ Harry thought. ‘Despite how much they keep implying that Hogwarts isn’t up to the Durmstrang standard, what do they really know from what is being taught here?’

“That said,” Professor Heiner continued. “If any of you feel the need for any additional information regarding what is being taught, approach either Professor Wieland or me with your questions. You
will study alongside the students of your own year level. Take for example, Miss Malte; you will be studying with the seventh year students. Here is your schedule.”

Ingrid reached forward and accepted a slip of paper before moving a bit to the side to inspect it more carefully. Professor Heiner carried on:

“Misters Krum and Lestrange, and Miss Erling, you will be studying with the sixth year students. Here are your schedules. Stick together at all times and remember to show a united front.” The advice made the polite smile on Lestrange’s face turn sour, and Harry could only imagine what the wizard had been planning.

“Miss Rurik, you will be studying with the fifth year students.” After handing Maria her schedule, Professor Heiner looked at Truls and Harry with a serious expression. “You two are the first students of what has become known as Durmstrang’s trademark: the best of the best. You will aim for absolute excellence. You will study harder than anyone else and stand united no matter what comes your way. Understood?”

“Yes sir,” Harry and Truls said. Heiner didn’t quite smile, but his expression was a smidge more pleasant than it had been before, as he handed the two boys their schedules.

“Oderint, dum metuant,” Heiner said, and to Harry the motto of Durmstrang had never sounded as ominous as it did then.

Let them hate, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's lesson (or more like, what I'm hinting at): Just because a parental figure loves you, doesn't mean they know what's best for you.
"My Lord."

Sirius Black knelt on the wooden floor, in front of Lord Voldemort's throne, looking impeccable as always. Had Tom not known of the recent tragedy in the Death Eater's life, he wouldn't have made note of the signs of exhaustion Black subtly - and perhaps unconsciously - expressed. Nagini was lying on a carpet nearby, and her presence was clearly making the grieving man nervous. Just as well, people tended to be more honest when they were too nervous to come up with believable lies.

"My Lord," he said, his voice calm and steady. "The preparations for the Triwizard Tournament are ready. Tomorrow we will inform all the participants of the stages in the event, as well as introduce the judges and most prominent attendees."

"I have seen your plans," Tom said, gesturing for him to stand up. "I approve of your ideas, Sirius, as well as the other two judges you have selected. However, do remind the champion candidates and their families of the risks involved in participating. I do not want to waste time afterwards dealing with unhappy families should some harm befall any of the children."

"Absolutely, my Lord," Sirius hurried to say, scrambling up. "We have already prepared contracts for the champions to manage any possible consequences of the tournament."

"Have you gone through the finances of the event with Carrow? I believe she was assigned to help you with the budgeting."

"Yes, she's well aware of the management of the resources, and personally assisted me in all matters concerning sponsorships and partners."

"In that case," Tom sighed, resisting the temptation to rub his eyes and yawn. "You're free to go."

Perhaps he would have had more energy and enthusiasm for the tournament at this time had he not spent the previous seven hours discussing issues relating to the war fronts in a series of rather intense meetings. The involvement of Regulus Black has yet to be confirmed, despite it being quite clear to Tom that the man behind some of the most brilliant strategies had to be him. The Rebels had struck in Spain five times and in Holland once in patterns that seemed erratic and random at first, yet turned out to be extremely calculated after a while.

The Rebels were either growing stronger or becoming more desperate. Either way, it was making them bolder and that just was not acceptable.

He had, clearly, been dealing with the war far too lightly. Granted, he had had other issues to focus on, but Tom had grown tired of fooling around with traitors who truly believed that they could win, that they could even come close to the heights of his power. No, the Triwizard Tournament will be the beginning of the end for the Rebels, and what could be a better way to start than by using the champions? It'd involve nations, and if a Rebel attacked a champion, the people would be up in arms to have them truly erased.

The Rebels would become the enemies of the people, not just the government.

The thought was enough to bring a smile to the Dark Lord's face. The thought of Harry fighting against one of the Rebels was something Tom definitely wanted to see. If the boy became the Champion of Durmstrang, Tom would lend him a hand to make sure that he would indeed manage to deal with any Rebel that would cross his way. Perhaps he could even use the opportunity to make
the boy get over his father's passing. As long as the process didn't require tears or heart-to-heart talks about families.

Tom couldn't really relate - couldn't imagine - what Harry was feeling. When he had killed his own father, Tom had most definitely not been sorry or sad. Harry's situation was, however, very different. The books had made repeated mentions of anger and anger management, and was there a better target for shaping a warrior than an angry boy with an agenda? Sure, Harry had told him that he didn't believe in revenge, but such nonsense was easily fixable.

The boy was clever, and his loyalty to his relatively unclear moral ideology was strong, which already made him a risky piece on the chessboard. If nothing else, then the Triwizard Tournament would disillusion him at least partly. Showing him the ugly side of the Rebels would prevent him from trying to sympathize with them.

The man briefly entertained the idea of making Bellatrix train Harry before dismissing it. The task would need far subtler manipulation than what Bellatrix was willing to do - not incapable, just deliberately careless - and she wouldn't be able to convince Harry to finally accept Tom's ideas.

This was something Tom would need to do personally. He hadn't planned on attending the introductory event on Monday due to not having the time for it. However, he could drop by later on that week for a few hours to talk with the Potter boy about the possibility of training. It wouldn't be much, of course. Tom didn't like the idea of sharing any of his secrets, but he could teach the boy a few simple tricks that would at least prevent him from getting killed.

"Are you in pain?" Nagini hissed, sounding as concerned as a snake could. Which, admittedly, wasn't very concerned. "You're making a strange face. Stranger than usual, that is."

"I'm thinking," Tom replied, closing his eyes and leaning back on the chair. What he wouldn't do for a few hours of sleep.

"Well, that would explain it," Nagini hissed, before she let out a sound that Tom had grown to think of as laughter. He scowled at the snake.

"Go away," he groaned, and yawned. "You don't know how lucky you are."

"You're the lucky one," the snake replied. "You and that boy of yours."

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It wasn't that the bed was uncomfortable, or even that sharing a room with others was something he wasn't used to. No, Harry was perfectly comfortable where he was, and yet hours passed and sleep evaded him. Each of the other boys seemed to be slumbering peacefully, and Harry could only envy them for that. Tomorrow, early on Monday, their lessons with the Hogwarts students would begin and the thought of being tired then did not sound appealing at all.

Then again, how could he sleep, really? How could he, when his father was dead and he wasn't even sure where he'd end up in a few months? Sure, Sirius would be in charge of him, but the man was a high-ranking Death Eater with a lot of work to do. Tom was, if possible, even busier, and the thought of talking to anyone else made Harry feel anxious.

Even the usually welcome option of talking with Truls made Harry feel somehow trapped rather than relieved. He did wholeheartedly appreciate his friend's support and loyalty, and didn't want the other boy to leave him, truly. And yet the ghost of his arm on Harry's shoulders, his constant presence and overwhelming command of Harry's attention was becoming stifling. Being the center of someone's
world was frightening, and Harry did not like it at all.

Despite his feelings of anxiety, Harry couldn't help but feel guilty as well: did this make him a bad friend, to be unable to respond to Truls's attention in equal measure? Besides, who else would he confide in? It wasn't as if he had anyone else, not anymore.

Not since his mother died, really.

Unless... unless Remus Lupin was still there. In Sirius's basement. But really, what kind of a life was it, to live trapped in a cage with stony walls and have everything under scrutiny? Did Sirius monitor Lupin's books like Lily had done? Harry couldn't remember - he barely remembered the werewolf - yet somehow even the vague memories held an impression of kindness and comfort.

'Still,' Harry thought suddenly. 'Am I going to complain about James's suicide to a man who has lost far more than I ever have?' Because surely James's death wasn't to the world as painful as it was to Harry? He hadn't betrayed them, had he? He hadn't had an obligation to the world, he--

And suddenly, there it was. The anger. Perhaps he should have felt guilty instead - and he did, he felt guilty all the time for so many things he didn't know how to identify - but once anger took a hold of him, it didn't let go easily. It heated his blood and made him shake and while he wasn't usually a violent person, Harry would have gladly punched something right then.

With a few impatient kicks the boy pushed the thick covers off himself, and sat up. His bare feet hit the cold floor and he borrowed the first pair of slippers he saw - Krum's Odgen's Old Firewhisky-sponsored green and black slippers - before continuing his way out of the guest quarters and right into the dark hallways of Hogwarts. He knew that walking out after curfew was against their local rules, but the awareness of that was distant and abstract, as if it had no impact on what he should do.

How many times had James wandered through these corridors, covered by his invisibility cloak? Harry had left that cloak at home, reluctant to have more reminders of James than absolutely necessary. Perhaps he should have taken it with him, at least then he wouldn't need to worry about being seen.

His hands deep in his pockets, Harry wandered aimlessly, half-afraid of getting lost yet not caring enough to memorize the route he had taken. The soft slippers made no sound against the floors and Harry's breathing was the only thing he could hear. In a way, it made him feel better. Alone, but less lonely.

Had James lived just a day longer, would things be different now?

'He'd be here,' Harry thought, imagining him there, alive. Imagined him standing tall and healthy, with a smile on a tanned face rather than a blank stare on a dead one. 'He'd be here, and he'd be so happy. He'd tell me about his days at Hogwarts and how he dated mum and how much he loved it here.'

The boy stopped walking once he reached a hallway with windows showing a glimpse of what had once been the Hogwarts Quidditch Pitch. This was the first time he'd seen the changes done to it, and he wondered what it was that he was seeing: a fog of sorts hovering above what looked like a mirror covering the field. Would James have been able to tell him what it was? Would--

"Harry," a familiar voice called quietly, startling the boy. He turned, tense and ready to - to what? To argue? To fight? He wasn't sure. Didn't have to be sure, either, once he saw who the person was.

"Luna," Harry said, trying to smile but not quite succeeding. "What are you doing awake at this
"It's the perfect time for a walk, don't you think?" Luna said, stepping closer. Her blonde hair was tied with what looked like dyed bandages, and three radishes were tied somehow into her fringe. "I'm sure you agree, why else would you be here too, right?"

"I couldn't sleep," Harry admitted with a shrug. "There's too much going on in my life, I guess."

"This is the wrong place to contemplate such things," Luna told him, slipping her hand into his, and pulling him with her as she started walking again. "Come. I know a place where you can hear your thoughts."

"I'm not sure if I want that," Harry said, following his friend. She gave him a friendly smile, and shook her head.

"Then you can let me hear your thoughts," she said. "Perhaps that would indeed be better."

The glass of wine was nowhere near full, yet Sirius couldn't bring himself to drink it. Not after what happened with James, not after seeing how much drinking had hurt him. He had poured himself a few mouthfuls out of habit, and the bottle was still a few feet away, its cork lying perhaps under some chair.

The sun would rise in a few hours and Sirius knew that he should have been asleep, but for the life of him he couldn't manage that. In all likelihood he would take a pepper up potion in a few hours before going to Hogwarts again. There was plenty to do still, even if the preparations were ready. There'd need to be constant maintenance to keep all the spells up, not to mention several guards around the area to prevent any sabotage.

He was now in Grimmauld Place, in his office, surrounded by parchments on the floor and rebel-related newspaper cutouts floating in the air. He was thinking of the tasks the three champions would need to complete, of watching Harry fighting to win, and of how much Lily would have hated it. But Lily hadn't really understood, had she? Despite her attempts, she had never managed to completely accept the reigning ideologies of the Dark Lord's world. Especially the parts where children had to prove themselves, where love wasn't just given but earned.

Sirius sighed, pressing his lips against the rim of the wine glass before setting it down again. He thought of James's body, of Harry, and the new room he had renovated for his godson. The room had belonged to Regulus, back when Regulus was still alive and there. Right next to the room was a small office that would serve as the meeting room for Harry and a mind healer's sessions once he got around to arranging those. It was a better option than to arrange for the therapy sessions in a hospital, where nosy people liked to gossip far more than they liked to work.

The wizard sighed heavily once more, and tried to come up with something to distract him from his thoughts and worries. Work wasn't appealing in the least, and though he entertained the idea of reading, he ended up not doing that either. After a moment of contemplation and inspired by a sudden idea, Sirius left his office and headed towards the basement.

Lupin was on his bed, shirtless, his yellow eyes glowing in the darkness. Sirius narrowed his eyes before lighting up the place with a flick of his wand, and took in the rumpled state of the caged creature.

"Were you asleep?" he asked.
"I was," Lupin confirmed dryly, but didn't sound particularly upset. "I heard you coming, that woke me up."

Sirius sat down on a chair a few steps away from the iron bars separating them, resisting the bizarre urge to apologize. "Tell me," he said instead, "how many friends have you lost?"

Lupin didn't flinch, but twitched as if surprised. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, and when he opened them again, their yellow glow was almost gone. "Many," he said. "I've lost many."

"I lost James," Sirius revealed, shaking his head and feeling an ache in his bones. "I buried him without a funeral, as if that's a punishment to a man who punished himself and took it too far."

"James," Lupin repeated. "You don't mean James Potter? Harry's father?"

"You still remember him," Sirius noted, and nodded. "Yes, that James. Harry is... well, he's my ward now. He'll come to live here with us. With me, I mean."

"How is he faring?" Lupin wanted to know, moving to sit on a chair rather than the bed. "Were you there when he was informed of his father's passing?"

"Oh, no," Sirius said, and shrugged. "James committed suicide. Harry found his body."

"Merlin," Lupin breathed, and much to Sirius's surprise the werewolf seemed to be genuinely distressed. "The poor boy. The poor, poor boy."

"I lost a friend, too," Sirius reminded him. "Harry and I will help each other to overcome this."

"No," Lupin said, his voice sharp. "You will not equate the loss of a friend to the loss of a parent. Not when the child lost his mother already, not when his father died the way he did, and not when he was the one to find the body. You both knew James Potter, but do not think your loss is equal."

"He was my best friend. My brother."

"You're an adult man," Lupin said, his face not quite in a scowl, but almost. "You have an established life and a career. You have your social standing, your family, and your other friends. You have a whole network that supports you. Harry is a child who lost his only remaining parent. He doesn't have siblings and he seems to be stuck with a godfather who likes to treat him as an adult instead of the child he is."

"Don't speak to me that way," Sirius snapped, fingers itching for his wand. "I can have you thrown out at any moment, and where would you end up then? Dead in a week, that's where!"

"I thought once that you'd make a great parent to young Harry," Lupin continued, "but as I see it, you're more of a child than he is." Sirius's lips were pressed into a tight, grim line as he took in the words thrown at him. He then took a deep breath, shook his head, and rubbed his eyes.

"I didn't come here to be insulted," he said after a few moments of heavy silence. "Weren't you human once? Can't you feel like we do?"

"On the inside, I'm a human still," Lupin told him, his voice speaking of an ache that Sirius couldn't even comprehend. "Talk to Harry, Black. Talk with him. Hug him. Make him know that you won't leave the way his father did."

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Sirius thought. "How can I promise him that?" "There's a war outside, you know," he whispered finally. "There's a war, and I'm right in the middle of it."
"What is this place?" Harry asked, stepping into a room that was unlike any other he had seen before. The door closed behind him and disappeared, leaving only traces of a door handle etched into an old tree. In front of him was a lake so clear he could see the bottom of it, and a sunset so beautiful it hurt him in a way he didn't think pain could be felt. "How did you find it?"

"It's called the Come and Go Room," Luna told him, sitting down on one of the chairs that were floating on the water, chained to a rock not too far away from the shore. "When you showed me the place for the first time, you called it the Room of Requirement."

"What?" Harry asked, kicking off Krum's slippers and sitting down on a chair similar to the one Luna was occupying. His feet were dipped in water and he could hardly believe that he was awake, and not dreaming all this up.

"Oh, not the you who's here with me today," Luna assured him with a bright smile, as if he should know what she was talking about. "I think I've mentioned it before, haven't I? I know you in many places, Harry. I know you here, and I know you where the harps of gold play for your attention, and I know you where you died twice and lived thrice."

"All right," Harry said, not even trying to understand. "Do you often come here to sit and watch the sunset?"

"Oh, not quite," Luna replied. "This room can be entered only when there's a need for it. Sometimes it's here, sometimes it's not, but when you do find it - or it finds you - it will have exactly what you need. Tonight this is what you wanted the most - perhaps not the lake or the sunset, but a place so very different from where we were."

"I didn't know Hogwarts had something like this in it," Harry admitted, thoroughly impressed. Luna nodded, and a radish fell off her hair and into the water.

"I'm afraid that many underestimate Hogwarts," she said. "Not just the building, though. I'm sure you have been told how inferior we are to the students of Durmstrang."

"You're not incorrect," Harry replied, feeling embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, no need to be sorry for my sake," the girl assured him brightly, reaching out to pat his arm. "You see, you know it's a mistake, don't you? If you go into the battle underestimating everyone else, you will be caught off guard eventually."

"I know," Harry said, thinking of fighting against a champion from Hogwarts. Would there be a duel between the champions at any point? Harry really hoped not. "But when it matters the most, I seem to... to forget, I guess."

"Try not to," Luna instructed, not unkindly. "You forget that many of the students here have private tutors during the summers. And those do not stick to the curriculum they get judged by. It's been causing problems here for a while, but Headmaster Yaxley doesn't want to get involved."

"You-- ah, yes," Harry stammered. "I know. I... know. I've just... There's a lot I'm still trying to deal with."

"You've been very distracted since you arrived," Luna said, lifting her feet from the water for a few moments before kicking them down again, causing a small splash that seemed to delight her. "I doubt that this is the first night's sleep that you've missed. Many people will look at you and see how
vulnerable you are, Harry. I know that's not what you want. I'm sorry."

"Well, I can't stop them from reading me, now can I?" Harry said bitterly. "I've been trying to not let it show, but that's apparently been all in vain."

"You can't stop them from reading you," Luna agreed. "But you can make them read you wrong. How many hearts have been mistaken for cold when they are only sad."

"I am sad," Harry said, and fell silent. The words, spoken aloud like that, echoed and hit him back harder than he thought they would. "Luna, I am sad."

"Why is that, Harry?"

"James is dead." And oh, there was the anger again. How did it come and go so fast, Harry didn't know. It drained him like fire that ate away at logs, and yet he was unable to do anything but fuel it.

"He killed himself," Harry continued, his voice loud and sharp and so unlike the way it used to be. "He went and killed himself because he couldn't handle my mum's death. He didn't think about me, now did he? Didn't think of what would happen to me, and even if he did think, he obviously didn't care."

His hands were shaking and he kept kicking the water, as if it would deliver his anger through the waves to the man who had used water to die.

"He didn't have the decency to even off himself in Ireland where he spent so many months fighting," Harry spat, vicious and hurt and angry. "No, he had to do it at home, so I would find him. James Potter's last hurrah, wasn't it."

"Do you know why he did it?" Luna asked, and Harry let out an angry, ugly noise.

"I told you," the boy replied. "He couldn't handle my mum's death."

"Had that been the only factor," Luna said carefully, "he would have died sooner. Harry, don't judge your father before you know what he went through."

"I went through the same thing," Harry said instantly. "She was my mum, remember? But he went and kept on being depressed:"

"Was he?" Luna wanted to know. "Depressed, that is. Not simply grieving, but did he suffer from depression?" Harry paused, and thought for a moment.

"I don't know," he finally admitted. "I don't know for sure. Probably."

"Then," Luna said, "You did not go through the same thing, did you? Depression is far more... crippling than the world would have you believe. I know some of what it can do to people, how it can make someone lose all faith in themselves. I'm not telling you to forgive him. I'm not telling you to do anything, really. But I do suggest you think of James, Harry. Think of him not as the man who abandoned you selfishly, but the man who left you because he believed himself so unworthy of you that death meant to him your freedom, not his."
stressful as thoughts of Tom, and the train station where he hadn't been for quite a while now.

"You look like you're barely conscious," Mette Erling said the moment she saw him. Her cold fingers were pressed against his cheeks, right below his eyes for an instant, before she let go of him. Her hair was tied into a braid and somehow now, up close, Harry realized how beautiful she was. Curiously, he didn't feel attracted in the least. "Don't move."

Admitting his current inability to sleep, Harry hadn't bothered to return back to his bed, and had been sitting in front of the fireplace ever since he came back from his walk with Luna. He hadn't expected Mette to be the first one to wake up and find him there, and her behaviour towards him had been a surprise. Harry wasn't sure why, but he had expected the girl to simply ignore him.

"Here," Mette said, returning from the girls' room and handing him a small vial. "It's a pepper up potion. Drink it now, and then drink coffee at every available opportunity until seven o'clock. After that brush your teeth, drink a lot of water, and don't eat anything. Go to bed around nine. Is that clear?"

"Uhm, sure," Harry said, eyeing the vial with a speculative expression. The potion looked right, and smelled right, and he doubted that she'd poison him so casually this soon. "Thank you."

"You owe me," she replied, sitting down on the couch next to him, and only then did Harry notice the small bag on her lap. "Are you nervous about the tournament?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted, watching the girl open her bag and pull out small boxes and vials. "I think I will be after I hear more about it. I... I know how to duel, but I know also that the tasks will test far more than just that. So yes, I am very nervous."

"I'm not," Mette said promptly, and began applying her make up. It was fascinating to watch, her confident strokes and obvious knowledge of where to put what, and how much. "I want to be chosen. I want to show everyone what I'm capable of."

"A lot of people admire you," Harry said, thinking of Björn. "Isn't that something?"

"No," Mette replied, making her eyelashes darker with what looked like a very small brush. "Those boys will grow into men who will adore women the way they adore brooms and stocks. No, I want to be admired the way Bellatrix Lestrange is admired. I want men to shake when I walk past them. I want them to be so full of respect and fear that they won't think of my beauty when they see me."

"Ah," Harry said. He hadn't even known that such a thing was an issue. "Is that why you're... so close to Anthony? Because you... admire Bellatrix so much?"

"Partly," Mette admitted, and paused for a second to shrug and give him a humourless smile. "But also because I really like him. Liking someone is a bit strange, let me tell you. That's something you'll figure out eventually, too."

"I suppose," Harry muttered, and suddenly thought of Clemens. It was quite illogical, how the thought of his friend could make him suddenly feel flustered. There was something, however, that made Harry want to lean his head against the other boy's shoulder and kiss his jaw and touch his hair.

"Perhaps you have someone already?" Mette asked, sounding a lot more interested than a few moments ago. There was a new look in her eyes as she leaned closer. "Who? Is it that Italian girl I've seen you with many times? Or is it someone here?"

"What? No," Harry denied. "You mean Filippa, right? She's one of my best friends, and I'm quite
sure that she is not interested in me that way."

"But are you--?"

"No! No, goodness. No, I am not interested in her."

"Hm, all right," Mette said, sounding amused. "Not her, then. Could it be Kettíl? Are you into boys? Oh, look at that blush! It seems you are, am I right?"

"It's not Truls either," Harry said, feeling so hot that he had to press his hands against his cheeks. "Circe, must we discuss this?"

"If not now, then we will later," Mette told him. "Is it someone older? I must admit I had a crush on Professor Didi for quite a while, but obviously Anthony is a bit more realistic."

"Older?" Harry repeated, and thought of Tom for a fraction of a moment. "No. Could we... um, not... I mean, we have class soon, don't we? Shouldn't we go and wake the others?"

"I guess," Mette said, not moving from where she was painting a black line on her eyelid with a tiny paintbrush. "Karkaroff will kill us all if we're late for their classes, especially after he decided to not make us wake up earlier for our Durmstrang classes today. So go, wake them up if you want, but you and I will return to this very interesting topic eventually."

What Mette had told him occupied his thoughts for the better part of the morning, up until the Transfiguration professor swept in, decked in dark green robes and seemingly armed with nothing but a feathery hat, a pair of thin-rimmed glasses, and a box. The classroom was full and noisy, but with Truls sitting next to him and Ron in front of him, Harry felt quite comfortable.

"Silence," the teacher said, her voice carrying easily over the chatter. She set down the box and glanced towards Truls and Harry before turning away. "As all of you should know by now, we have three new students with us today. Miss Meunier from Beauxbatons and Misters Potter and Kettíl from Durmstrang. I am Professor Minerva McGonagall, the Transfiguration professor and the Gryffindor Head of House. With introductions out of the way I sincerely hope that none of you will be distracted during the class today. The tasks ahead of you will need complete concentration."

"I wonder if it's something we have learned already," Truls whispered, leaning closer to Harry. "That'd be such a waste of time, wouldn't it?"

"I hope not," Harry replied quietly. "She looks tougher than Professor Kay, and he is very strict with his lessons. Besides, I doubt Professor Karkaroff would have allowed us to attend these classes if the content is something we've learned already. You know how... dedicated he is to ensuring that we don't waste learning opportunities."

"Yeah," Truls said, amusement evident in his voice. "That was very diplomatically put."

"For the first half hour there will be no need for your wands, so you can put yours away, Mr. Corner" Professor McGonagall said, and a few students giggled as a boy at the front sighed heavily and shoved his wand back into his pocket. "So far we have mostly focused on Transfiguration as a provider of assistance in your everyday lives. Transfiguring a chair out of a book or a bed out of a blanket or even turning a cat into a mouse."

"I'd have loved to see the last one," Truls whispered, sounding impressed. Harry nodded, imagining a mouse, thinking like a cat, trying to pounce on other mice. He hoped the animal was turned back at the end of that particular lesson, and not left to suffer.
"But at times," Professor McGonagall continued, "you will need to transfigure a shield, or a sword or any other tool in an emergency situation. You will need to learn how to transfigure things from how they used to be to how you need them to become, and unlike so far, you will have to manage that within a very limited time amount of time. Most of us here, I hope, can transfigure a pen into a spear should I give you a whole day to complete the task. How many of you can do that in less than a minute?"

'That's a very good point,' Harry thought, and glanced at Truls. He smiled when he saw how pleased his friend was, enjoying the other boy’s happiness. Transfiguration had always been one of Truls's favourite subjects, and Harry had wondered if his friend would ever make a career out of it.

"No," Truls whispered, and only then did Harry realize that he had whispered the question aloud. Truls gave him a small smile, and Harry smiled in return before he even realized it.

"What would you want to do, then?" Harry asked, curious. He couldn't imagine his friend working as a healer or a teacher. Perhaps an Auror?

"Lawyer," Truls said, surprising his friend. "I'm not that interested in politics or healing or entrepreneurship, and there's always a need for good lawyers."

"You're right," Harry admitted. "It's a lot of paper-pushing, though, or so I've heard. Wouldn't you prefer something more... physical?"

"It's all right," Truls said with a shrug. "I've got that covered." Before Harry could ask for his friend to elaborate, McGonagall levitated the box she had carried with her to pass by each student, instructing everyone to grab any of the small items inside it.

"It doesn't matter which one you take," she said when some students spent a tad too long trying to pick. "You'll be transfiguring these into small balls regardless of which one you grab. The task is to be able to complete the transfiguration perfectly within ten minutes. The items are charmed to return to their original shape as soon as ten minutes have passed, unless the transfiguration has been completed. In other words: if you're too slow, you'll start from the beginning."

"I actually like her teaching style more than Professor Kay's," Truls said, enjoying the challenge wholeheartedly. "Besides, it's yet another skill that can be used during the tournament, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed, peering into the box that had finally reached them. He didn't waste much time before picking out a small coin, deliberately avoiding the wooden chess piece right next to it. As much as he struggled with Transfiguration anyway, somehow transfiguring wood into something else was even more difficult for him. "Speaking of which - the Tournament, I mean. I can't wait until dinnertime. Isn't that when we'll be told more about what's going to happen?"

"It is," Truls confirmed. "And they'll introduce the judges too. I heard Lestrange speculating if the Dark Lord himself will be there, but I really doubt it."

"I suppose he's too busy for something as unimportant as this," Harry said. "I mean, he will watch the actual tasks but I really don't think he'll bother with any of the less official events, you know?" Knowing Tom, the man would barely have the time to turn up for the actual tournament.

"You're right," Truls sighed, tapping the tip of his wand against the small button he had in front of him, managing to make it look just a little bit rounder. "I wonder who will be there, then. I guess we'll just have to wait and see, don't we?"
Dinnertime came fast, and Harry couldn't deny that he was feeling nervous even though he knew that there was no need for that. At least, not yet. When he entered the Great Hall with Truls right behind him, he saw that Anthony Lestrange had taken a seat with the Slytherins and Maria Rurik with the Ravenclaws. Taking that as a sign to go and sit wherever he wanted, Harry headed towards the Gryffindor table where Ron was enjoying a large portion of lasagna.

"Hello, Harry," Granger said with a bright smile, and Harry smiled in return. Truls rolled his eyes and sat down as well before reaching for the pitcher of lemon juice.

"All right there, mate?" Ron asked around his mouthful. Harry nodded.

"Yes," he said, "although I'm very nervous."

"I get that," Ron nodded. "Eat something. Hey, your name is Truls, right?"

"Yes. We've met before, Weasley," Truls replied curtly, and Harry expected Ron to get angry, or offended, or just snort and return to his food. To his surprise, that wasn't what happened next.

"You know Harry's habits better than I do," Ron said with an easy smile, "so could you make sure he doesn't just shuffle his food around on his plate but actually eats some?" When Truls nodded, his expression shifting instantly to something akin to polite friendliness, Harry realized something he hadn't quite known before: Ron was clever. Far cleverer and more observant than people gave him credit for.

Harry knew how possessive Truls was of him here at Hogwarts, and Ron had somehow managed to not only figure that out, but also knew how to use it to make Truls less hostile towards him. On the other hand, wasn't it bad that Truls could be manipulated like that?

'Maybe I'm just reading too much into things,' Harry thought with a sigh. "You know I can eat perfectly well on my own, Ron," he said. The redhead shrugged.

"Sure," Ron replied. "I didn't mean to patronize or anything, but I swear mate you're even skinnier than the last time I saw you. Lose any more weight and you'll disappear entirely."

"I agree," Truls said, surprising Harry. "You also need more than just roasted potatoes, Harry."

"I heard that if the Tournament is a success this year, it will be held again in a few years and regularly after that," Granger joined their conversation with a hushed voice, changing the topic of conversation much to Harry’s relief. "That means that those of us who couldn't compete this year still have a chance to do it later."

"Blimey," said Ron. "Where do you get this news from?" Granger rolled her eyes, but a small smug smile tugged at her lips. Her response was interrupted, however, when the doors of the Great Hall were pushed open, and a teacher walked in accompanied by a handful of witches and wizards with parchments, quills, and small bags.

"Reporters," Truls said sullenly. "Of course. Karkaroff told us that only the official reporters are allowed to interview us, so I suppose they'll introduce them now."

"I know quite a few of them," Granger said. "I have a friend who works at the Daily Prophet, you see. The only one you really need to be wary of is Rita Skeeter - she's the witch dressed in green
with fuchsia feathers around the collar. She's a very popular columnist but not nice at all."

"I'll do my best to stay away from her, then," Harry said, and Truls nodded in agreement. The reporters sat down around a round table near the teachers' platform, and soon after they had settled Headmasters Yaxley and Karkaroff, as well as the Beauxbatons Headmistress, arrived with Sirius and more witches and wizards in tow. It didn't take Harry long to notice Bellatrix Lestrange striding confidently next to her cousin.

He could... he could understand Mette's desire to be like Bellatrix. Even though the woman was stunningly beautiful, she had forced the world around her to see that she was far more than that. It was sad, in a way, that women had to fight just to be seen and judged as the people they were, rather than only what they looked like.

"That's your godfather, isn't it?" Truls asked, and Harry nodded. Sirius was dressed in formal robes that truly singled him out as one of the Dark Lord's highest ranking Death Eaters, and seeing him so serious made him almost unrecognizable to Harry.

"I'm so excited," Granger whispered, as they watched everyone take their seats while Headmaster Yaxley showed Sirius where he was supposed to stand during his speech. Harry kept expecting his godfather to roll his eyes and shoo the other man away but that didn't happen.

"Esteemed professors, honoured guests, and dear students of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang," Sirius began, his voice carrying easily over the silence of the hall. "We have gathered here today to learn more of the upcoming event that has caused quite the stir lately: the Triwizard Tournament. Many of you have travelled a long distance to be a part of this event, and we welcome you on British soil with the blessings of Lord Voldemort."

Sirius paused for a moment, taking in the sight of the hundreds of students in front of him, listening in anticipation. "The Triwizard Tournament was first held in 1294 and it took place once every five years. However, as years went by, more and more limitations were added to the rules to hinder the Pureblood participants who had the superior knowledge and skills, and in 1792 the tournament was cancelled altogether."

'Why is he saying this,' Harry thought, frowning. 'It's like he's blaming the Muggleborns for it.' Harry knew that that couldn't be what Sirius had meant, but it didn't really make his words any less accusatory. Then again, perhaps it was something he had been required to say? Alienating muggleborns was something most people did rather openly.

"In this year's Triwizard Tournament, the champions of Durmstrang, Hogwarts, and Beauxbatons will compete against one another to prove to all of us watching that they are the superior witch or wizard, capable of utilising their intelligence and magical ability to its full potential," Sirius continued. "The glory and honour that will be enjoyed by the victor will only be enhanced by the monetary award of five thousand galleons, granted by the Dark Lord himself."

"Blimey," Ron whispered, wholeheartedly impressed. "Five thousand! That's a lot."

"Before I begin describing the tasks your champions will be facing," Sirius said. "Allow me to introduce the judges of this tournament." He then turned towards where Bellatrix was sitting, and the woman stood up with a wicked smile on her face. "Bellatrix Lestrange, familiar to most of us, I believe. Hard to impress, so show her your best!"

"I remember her," Truls muttered, and Harry nodded. Strangely, the woman didn't seem to have aged a day from when he had seen her for the first time.
"Secondly," Sirius said, and an older woman next to Bellatrix sighed heavily before standing up with a rather displeased expression. "Lady Araminta Meliflua, whom we're lucky to have here. This lady knows more about magic than most of us here could ever hope to learn."

"I know her too," Truls said. "She's friends with my grandmother. Meliflua wanted to legalize Muggle hunting."

"Wanted to legalize what?" Granger gasped quietly, suddenly pale. She then turned to look at the old woman with a frightened expression on her face.

"And our last judge," Sirius said, and finally an old man with a face so sickly pale and blue veins crawling up his jaw and cheeks, stood up and offered the students a thin smile. "Is one of our country's finest and most accomplished war veterans: Edmund Parkinson. Now, ladies and gentlemen, let's give a round of applause to the judges!"

Harry clapped with the others, though his heart most certainly wasn't in it. He knew Bellatrix's reputation, and just heard from Truls about Araminta Meliflua... but what terrible deeds had Edmund Parkinson done to become as esteemed as he clearly was?

"The Dark Lord himself will come and watch the performances of the champions for each and every task. Never forget this, and should you think that your endurance is not enough, I recommend opting out from the tournament this time," Sirius said before he turned to the empty space next to him and waved his wand. A big goblet made of heavy hewn wood appeared, with blue and white flames going up to its edges.

"The Goblet of Fire," someone whispered, and Harry couldn't help but think of how fitting the name was.

"However, if you, after hearing the rest of what I have to say," Sirius continued, "believe that you have what it takes to be the Triwizard Champion, then you will need only to write your name upon a piece of parchment and throw it in the flames before Thursday night. On Friday, the Goblet of Fire will give us the names of the three champions."

"Such fascinating magic," Granger said, looking slightly less scared than she had moment before. Harry glanced at Araminta Meliflua again, not understanding how someone could even think of hunting other people as a sport.

"Now," Sirius said. "We will finally be moving on to the tasks each champion will face. They're not easy - but remember: nothing in the Tournament will be easy. Give it your all, and you'll not only show us what you're truly capable of, but also yourself. You'll learn more than you can begin to guess right now."

'Either that, or die trying.'

"The first task of the three is indeed the simplest. It will test your ability to pay attention to the small details and efficiency of carrying out orders that take you out of your comfort zone. Each champion will get a portkey to a closed location with no exits. Somewhere inside that place is a small plaque made of silver. On that plaque, you'll find a number. Once you get that plaque, return using the same portkey that took you there. Be fast, be clever, be efficient."

'I doubt it is as simple as it sounds,' Harry thought. 'That closed location could be anything. Like a prison cell in Azkaban or something like that.'

"The second task will take you somewhere else," Sirius continued. "You will be given a challenging
"That was really vague," Truls murmured, and Harry nodded. It really wasn't much of an explanation.

"The third task is your opportunity to show off," Sirius said with a smug smirk. "Each champion will duel a skilled opponent. Whether you win or lose, you must take the opportunity for what it is: show us the variety of spells you know and how fast you can cast them. Show us how strong your magic is and how creative your mind can be. A duel might sound less complicated than the other two tasks, but I guarantee that it is the hardest."

"I don't think anybody will be doubting that," Ron sighed, before reaching for a pastry. "Man, this is making me hungry."

"Before I finish," Sirius said, "allow me to remind you that all students may be approached by reporters. You are not obliged to respond to any of them. There are a handful of reporters that we have given permission to conduct interviews on Hogwarts grounds, and each one of these reporters carries a badge identifying them. If anyone else approaches you, contact any of the teachers or staff members closest to you. Thank you all for your attention, and enjoy the rest of your dinner."

"Enjoy your dinner," Granger repeated. "Goodness, how could we after what we just heard?"

"I can," Ron told her cheerfully. "Worrying won't change anything. We can't put our names in anyway." Harry looked away from the redhead, and glanced to where Bellatrix was sitting. He flinched when he met her eyes, not having expected her to be looking at him. Especially with a strange, almost gleeful, expression.

Suddenly, Harry felt very worried.

"Still nervous?" Mette asked, sitting next to Harry on the couch. The dinner had ended nearly an hour ago and most of the Durmstrang students had returned to their common room. Truls was talking with Krum about something - Quidditch, probably - while Harry had decided to sit on the couch by the fire and enjoy the warmth. Maria Rurik was reading a book on his other side, often getting distracted and looking up with a contemplative expression.

"Yeah," Harry replied, glancing at Mette. Her golden hair was tied into a loose braid and the make-up she had applied in the morning was still neatly intact. "I drank a lot of coffee today."

"I know," the girl said approvingly with a small smile. "And you pulled through. There's no point in staying up much longer."

"Whose owl is that," Maria said suddenly, and rushed to pull open a window at the other side of the common room. Her book was lying near Harry’s feet on the floor, forgotten. "Oh, it's carrying a letter from somebody."

"That girl has the distasteful habit of stating the obvious," Mette muttered. "I don't think she realizes how dumb that makes her sound." The dark brown owl flew in and dropped a neatly rolled parchment on Harry's lap.

"Is it from your friends at Durmstrang?" Maria asked curiously, returning to her seat, more than ready to read Harry’s letter with him. Harry took a look at the seal and shook his head, standing up.
"No, it's from my godfather. Excuse me, I think I'll go read it in private."

"Go to sleep after you do that," Mette called after him. "Tomorrow we'll all march in to enroll. I want everybody to be alert and at their best." Harry gave her a smile over his shoulder and made his way to the boys' shared bedroom. Anthony Lestrange was lying there in his own bed, if not asleep, then certainly relaxed enough to look so.

Quietly Harry changed his clothes, brushed his teeth, and climbed into his bed before breaking the seal of Sirius's letter and reading it.

"Dear Harry," the letter began.

"How have you been? Are you excited about the Tournament? It'll be one hell of an adventure, regardless of whether you're a champion or not! I wish I could have called you to my office for a short talk - you know, about anything and everything - but unfortunately for now, a letter will have to be enough. Much to my displeasure we cannot communicate too openly, lest people accuse me of favouritism. Never fret, though!

Sometime soon I'll be sending you a small package, and in it you'll find a two-way mirror. Well, not just a mirror. Your father's invisibility cloak will be there, too, as I believe that you'll end up needing it sooner or later. The mirror, however, is something James and I used to use back in our schooldays. I have the other half of the pair, and if you need to speak to me, you only need to say my name into it - you'll appear in my mirror, and I'll appear in yours.

That said, if you have anything else you'd like for me to send you either from home or acquire for you from somewhere else, please tell me. Unlike with Hogwarts students, the number of Durmstrang students participating will be so low that the chance of being selected is significantly higher. And if you do become the Durmstrang Champion, I want you as well prepared as possible.

Heh, I suppose this is exactly the kind of favoritism people would frown upon."

Harry looked up from the letter when he heard movement from Lestrange's bed, only to see that the boy had rolled to sleep on his stomach. His shoes were still on. Harry shook his head and refocused on reading.

"On another, less pleasant, note: James's death has been kept away from the papers so far. I do not know for how much longer that will be possible, though I fear that not for longer than a few weeks anymore. He was, after all, a Pureblood patriarch of your lineage.

I'll keep looking into the matter and delay the publication of his death as much as I can. Be prepared, though, to weather its consequences soon."

Below was the familiar signature of Sirius, overlapping letters and barely readable. Harry felt dread at the pit of his stomach, hating the thought of having to face the world if it ever came to learn of James's death. Could it be passed as an accident? Perhaps a war injury that got the best of him? The public opinion had never been particularly kind to people who killed themselves, and while Harry was angry and frustrated, he didn't think that anyone else had the right to judge what James had done. There was simply too much that had happened that they didn't know about.

'Then again,' Harry thought, remembering Luna's words. 'I, too, apparently have a lot I don't
It had been a long time since Harry had gone to the train station and seen Dumbledore and Merope. Somehow, the thought of trying to go there again frightened him in ways it had never done before. The chain that had last time pulled him out of there was still something he didn't understand - what if it was permanent? What if it meant the end of his... ability?

Without being able to speak to the dead, would Tom just... move on? Stop visiting?

The thought was far more upsetting than it should have been. Harry didn't like to admit it, and most certainly wouldn't like to admit it to Tom himself, but the man had become quite a big part of Harry's life. A friend, even, if Dark Lords could be friends with anyone. Without his special ability, would Tom start treating Harry the way he treats everyone else?

Unless... Well, Sirius and Karkaroff had both said that the Triwizard Tournament was a chance for the champions to prove themselves. If Harry got selected, he'd have to use the opportunity to prove to Tom that he wasn't just a boy who could speak to the dead. That was, after all, part of what he'd need to do anyway. Merope had told him to make Tom see him as more than an entertaining pawn, and by Merlin, Harry would.

No matter what it took.

Days went by and Friday evening came too soon for Harry to feel ready for anything. Mette had taken a look at him, shaken her head, and told him to stop slouching.

"At least you're not as nervous as Viktor," the girl said, painting her lips pink. "How a Quidditch star can be so shy, I will never understand. It's all right, though. Makes him quite adorable, doesn't it?"

"You know he wasn't recruited for his charming personality," Lestrange sneered, and Ingrid Malte rolled her eyes with an annoyed expression.

"As opposed to you," she said. "All charm, that's what you are. Remember to keep any insulting remarks you have to yourself, especially if your target is a fellow student from Durmstrang. Whoever gets chosen today as our champion will receive the full support of everyone else. Is that understood?"

"I don't like your tone, Malte," Lestrange said.

"I absolutely do not care," the young woman told him, and spared a tight smile at a sickly looking Krum who finally emerged from the boys' room. "Once again, feel free to sit at whichever table you wish but remember your manners even if there's no one else to keep an eye on you."

"She doesn't really trust us, does she," Harry muttered as they left the common room, heading towards the Great Hall.

"She doesn't trust anyone," Truls replied, shaking his head. "The Malte family is part of the Swedish Royal Court, and are extremely involved in the Scandinavian politics. She's quite fair in her judgement and can be a leader when she wants to... but often gets too caught up in her visions of what should be done."

"I'm so excited," Maria Rurik suddenly declared. "Imagine being the Durmstrang Champion! No matter how badly you do in the actual competition, you'll still get so many job offers."

"If you plan on working, then absolutely," Mette agreed, though her tone was quite condescending.
"But imagine the proposals that will also come. To combine beauty with power... who wouldn't want that?"

"You think you could do well?" Lestrange said sourly, and the girl gave him a sweet smile before pressing closer to Viktor. Harry remembered suddenly seeing her for the first time: even then she had been close to the Quidditch star. Despite her claim about loving Lestrange, she still seemed to enjoy flirting with Viktor and seeing how flustered she could make him.

"Well, Anthony," she all but simpered. "When a lady has a will, a lady will find a way."

"Ah," Viktor started, clearing his throat. "I think you'd do f-fine, Mette."

"Thank you, darling," Mette said, smiling up at the Quidditch player. "What do you think, Harry?"

"Hm? Oh, well," Harry said and shrugged. "I don't think my opinions matter considering that once the Goblet of Fire has selected a champion, its selection is binding. So it's not like we could trade afterwards." He then thought of what Luna had told him, and continued: "But I hope that whoever does get chosen will know better than to underestimate the other two champions."

"Well said," Malte said approvingly right before they entered the Great Hall. "Well said, indeed."

"Don't you ever get tired of trying to be such a saint?" Lestrange hissed, before he stalked away towards the Slytherin table, Mette following him closely. Truls scowled at the other boy, but rather than do anything, he simply allowed Harry to pull him towards the Gryffindor table again. Harry felt too nervous to smile and was strangely upset by Lestrange's words.

A saint, huh? If only.

Perhaps years ago he had been a better person. Someone who had loved to see the world through the eyes of the fictional, noble heroes and heroines. But now... now he felt like an ugly, shallow, spiteful void that hated James for his grief, hated Sirius for his absence, and hated the world for not fixing either. It was easy to be neutral and polite when he couldn't find it in his heart to care about new people the way he used to.

Harry couldn't remember the last time when he didn't have thoughts laced with bitterness. Even before James's suicide, things had been going wrong in ways he hadn't known how to deal with. It did make him feel terrible, though. Terrible and always tired.

"You guys have to try the bread bowl soup," Ron said as soon as Harry and Truls sat down. "I don't usually like soups, but Circe's tits this one is—"

"Ron!" Granger gasped. "Language!"

"—absolutely fantastic," Ron finished. "Did everyone in Durmstrang end up putting their names into the Goblet?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "Do you know anyone from Hogwarts who—"

"Diggory did," Lavender Brown revealed, leaning closer. "Cedric Diggory. He's that extremely handsome Hufflepuff there. Really polite and nice, but I don't know about his dueling skills. If either one of you ends up fighting against him, please spare his face. Punch him in the throat if you must, but don't break his nose."

"Is his face the only important thing to you?" Granger asked, and Brown shrugged with a silly grin that made Harry somehow want to smile as well.
"No," Brown replied. "But those other things cannot be discussed in polite company." Next to her an Indian girl smothered a laugh, her dark eyes twinkling with mirth. Granger was clearly about to reply when the doors of the Great Hall were pushed open, and Sirius walked in with Bellatrix. Everyone else - journalists, judges, teachers - were already dining, and Harry briefly wondered why the Black cousins hadn't dined with them.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. If I could ask you to put your dinners on hold," Sirius said with a charming smile. "We'll begin in a few moments."

"How come they never wait until we're actually done with eating before declaring important things and holding speeches?" Ron muttered, leaning back. "Will anyone notice if I eat anyway?"

Granger's only response to that was to shush him.

"We've been waiting for this moment for quite a while now," Sirius said. "But before we reveal the names of the champions - and to keep you in suspense for a little while longer - I'll tell you about next week's Saturday." He then smiled again, before continuing: "What's happening next Saturday? Well, it is hardly a surprise anymore, but that's when the first task will take place. All students, staff, journalists, and other guests will head to what's better known as the Quidditch pitch. We've renovated it to better suit its new purpose."

"Don't we know that," Ron sighed wistfully. "No Quidditch for a whole year."

"The Tournament will begin at ten in the morning," Sirius said. "Shortly after breakfast. I advise you all to not be late. The Champions, however, will go on Saturday at eight thirty to Headmaster Yaxley's office. You will be given more instructions then and your wands will be checked." It was obvious how little the students cared about that information right now, too focused on the Goblet of Fire.

"Any minute, now," someone whispered, and Harry couldn't deny the anxiety that was making him sweat. He had never been the type to enjoy suspense or anticipation.

"When the champions' names are called, I would ask them to please stand up and remain standing," Sirius added, pulling out his wand and touching the rim of the goblet with it. The blue and white flames seemed to grow and burn even brighter than before. And then, suddenly, the fire turned red. Sparks flew as if to encourage the excited whispering of the students before the flames spat out a charred piece of parchment.

"The champion of Beauxbatons," Sirius said, grabbing the piece of parchment and bringing it closer. "Is Fleur Delacour!"

"It's her!" Ron suddenly gasped, and one of the French girls stood up gracefully, waving at the clapping students with a smile on her face. "Merlin, she's so beautiful."

"She's pretty, I guess," Harry said, thinking first of Mette and then Heidi. He thought then of Bellatrix as well, and wondered how good a duelist Delacour was. Loud gasps indicated a new development, and Harry turned his head to see that the goblet's flames had become red again, and soon Sirius was holding another piece of parchment.

"The champion of Hogwarts," Sirius said, "is George Weasley!" Loud cheers and clapping erupted at the Gryffindor table, echoed by considerably less enthusiastic applause from the other Houses as well. Harry saw a tall, freckled redhead stand up and bow with a wide grin. Ron's brother, Harry remembered. One of the twins.
"And finally," Sirius said, and Harry felt Truls shift next to him as they watched the flames turn red for the third time. Waiting for a small piece of parchment to emerge and for Sirius to read it seemed to last a lifetime. And when Harry saw Sirius's expression as he read the name, when he saw his godfather's eyes flicker towards him, Harry knew.


Harry stood up, hearing nothing but his own heartbeat and the rush of his blood. If someone spoke to him, or congratulated him, he didn't hear. It took him a moment to snap out of his thoughts and focus on something else aside from the fear that suddenly filled him to the brim.

Ron was clapping, and so was Truls. Bellatrix, much to the evident surprise of everyone around her, had decided to give him a standing ovation. Mette was clapping with a sharp smirk on her face, Viktor looked genuinely pleased for him, and Luna was waving her both hands with a delighted smile.

And in that moment all Harry wanted, from the bottom of his heart, was to talk to his parents.

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By the time Harry went to bed, he was exhausted to the bone. He had been congratulated by the students surrounding him, his Durmstrang classmates, his godfather, and even Headmaster Karkaroff had dropped by the common room with Professors Heiner and Wieland to congratulate him and remind him of his duties as the Durmstrang Champion.

Worrying about the tournament and keeping up with all the new demands heaved onto his shoulders was exhausting, and as he lay in his bed unable to sleep, Harry couldn't help but feel a twinge of fear in his heart. What if he failed? What if he wasn't good enough? What if he was so bad that everyone would laugh at him and Tom would think he was useless and--

'Don't think about that,' Harry told himself sternly, clenching his eyes shut and resisting the temptation to hit himself. 'Don't think of how badly it could go.' Instead, he tried to focus on anything, tried to come up with any memories that would distract him from imagining his own humiliation and failures. He didn't succeed until he suddenly remembered Merope and Albus.

He hadn't been able to go to the train station for quite a while. The last time he tried he had been frustrated and unable to focus, but perhaps focusing on that was exactly what he needed right now? He could give it a shot, at least? Decision made, Harry took a deep breath, and concentrated on something beyond the beat of his own heart and the pillow under his head. It was odd, though, how for the longest time there seemed to be a new barrier preventing him from going.

Harry imagined the cold, the feeling of the damp bench under him, the sound of trains passing by. He remembered the loud ticking of the ugly, stained clocks hanging from the ceiling, the rush of people and the mist that hid everything beyond the train station itself. And then it happened: that feeling of sliding, and soon Harry wasn't lying on his back anymore, but standing on his feet. He blinked his eyes open, and saw Merope standing in front of him.

Something was wrong, though.

There was a thick rope of something - looked like mist, but was far more solid - wrapped around him. He couldn't move from where he was standing and it took him a moment to realize that though he could see Merope clearly, he couldn't hear her, and she couldn't hear him. Nor could he hear the sound of heavy rain that he could still feel or hear the sound of a train as it came to a halt on one of the tracks. With the realization came the knowledge that the rope would spring him back to where he
had come from at any second, like a rubber band that had been stretched just a bit too far.

Harry looked at Merope, who had given up on shouting at him and had decided to point at the rope instead. She then brought her hand to her throat, and made a slashing motion. Harry shook his head, unsure of how to communicate. The woman rolled her eyes - a downright unpleasant sight, it was - and jabbed a finger at the rope, before slowly spelling the word "WHO" on the air.

"Who?" Harry repeated, and shook his head. "I don't know? I mean, I don't even know what, let alone who." Merope's scowl became quite frightening as she stomped closer, and nearly touched the rope with her fingertip. Slowly, with her other hand, she began writing something in the air again. Harry tried to make sense of it but made the mistake of shifting where he stood, and it seemed that that was all the rope needed to fling him back into his body.

Returning had never hurt before, but now the impact left Harry breathless and his muscles ached. His stomach felt tender, as if someone had given him a solid punch just seconds before. After a few moments of deep breathing, he tried to sit up only to be hit by a wave of nausea that forced him back down and made him clench his eyes shut.

Why was everything going wrong in his life?

Harry could hear the quiet snoring of the other boys, and wanted nothing more than to leave and get some fresh air. Perhaps he would be able to sort out some of his worries, or at least begin to understand what the strange rope was about. It wasn't entirely unfamiliar, though. Harry remembered something similar - if not the rope itself, then the sensation - from the previous time he had managed to go to the train station.

It was as if the thing had been there for a while, and simply become stronger as time passed.

Merope hadn't asked what the rope was. She had asked "who", and-- out of all the things in his life, was this something Harry wanted to focus on first? The boy sighed and rubbed his eyes, feeling tired but not sleepy at all. His muscles still felt tender and he had a terrible headache, but he didn't feel particularly nauseated anymore. How come less than an hour ago he had wanted nothing more than a few hours of sleep, but now just couldn't manage that?

After lying on his back for many long minutes, Harry finally kicked off his covers with a huff and climbed out of bed. Perhaps if he took a walk, he'd bump into Luna again? Maybe her unique brand of wisdom was exactly what would make everything better.

This time he didn't steal Krum's slippers but rather managed to locate his own before leaving the bedroom, and continuing his way out to the dark corridor outside the common room. He had taken but a few steps when someone's bony, cold hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Fantastic timing," a familiar voice hissed, making Harry shudder all of a sudden. "Come with me."

"Isn't there a war you're supposed to keep an eye on?" Harry asked, huddling next to the fireplace in surprisingly cosy quarters. Then again, considering who the rooms belonged to, the level of comfort and luxury should not have come as a surprise.

"I am keeping my eyes on that," Tom assured him, sitting on an obnoxiously fancy chair with his snake on his lap. The bastard was even petting it with one hand and holding a glass of red wine with another. Harry clutched his mug of hot chocolate closer to his body and felt reluctantly amazed at how he had ended up where he was.
"Were you just waiting outside in the corridor?" Harry asked. "You know it was just a whim that made me decide to take a walk, don't you?"

"Potter, I hate to tell you this, but you're very predictable," Tom replied, not even bothering to hide his smug smile. "Every single time you worry about something, you take a walk. And since worrying is a habit you can't seem to change, the midnight strolls are a significant contributor to how little sleep you get in general. Considering today’s events, you deciding to take a walk is exactly what I knew would happen."

"That's not true," Harry denied instantly. "I don't do it that often. Besides, what do you know anyway?"

"I know everything," Tom said. "Now, about the tournament."

"I wish my parents were here," Harry blurted out, before looking at the Dark Lord. "Mum and dad. I realized that earlier. When everyone was clapping. And I don't know what's wrong with me but I feel a lot less enthusiastic about everything than I used to. I haven't read a good book for a while, I don't keep up with my friends, I'm just... not happy."

"Happiness is hard work," Tom told him. "Now, the tournament—"

"And I keep worrying about what will happen next," Harry continued. "What if I'm not strong enough? What if someone else I care about dies? What if I fail so badly at the tournament that no one will want to even speak to me anymore?"

"Fantastic. Now let's actually focus on the tournament—"

"I just want to sleep until everything is over," Harry sighed, and finished the hot chocolate just in time for Tom to haul him up and away from the fireplace. He was pushed to sit down on one of the ridiculously fancy chairs - which turned out to be just as comfortable as it was ridiculous - and the now empty mug was taken from his hand and set down on a table nearby.

"Listen, Potter," Tom started, pulling a chair closer and sitting right in front of the boy. "Harry, I mean. Unless you have something that is actually important—"

"Do you know what can manifest itself as a rope made of light that grows with time?" Harry interrupted. "If not, then fine, we can talk about the tournament."

"There are a few things that can do that," Tom replied dismissively. "I'll send you a list. Now—"

"All right, fine. The tournament. You probably know more about it than I do, though."

"Of course I know more about it than you do, that's why I called you here."

"You didn't call me," Harry reminded him. "You waited until I decided to take a walk - which was something entirely based on luck from your part, no matter what you say - and then grabbed me and dragged me here."

"Irrelevant," Tom said. "You were told that you'll be dueling only in the last part of the tournament. The third task. That, however, is incorrect. While the second task can be, technically, completed without dueling, succeeding that way is extremely unlikely."

"I'll be practicing," Harry said, and Tom gave him an ugly glare.

"You flinging a few hexes at a dummy is not going to be enough," the Dark Lord told him. "I could
simply tell you to continue those silly little dueling lessons you had with Crouch Junior—"

"You knew about those?"

"Of course I knew, the man hides nothing from me. However, you will need more than what he can teach you. I did consider allowing Bellatrix to teach you, but due to her being one of the judges, I had to dismiss her as an option. Your godfather would coddle you, and any of your other teachers would underestimate you and not push you to your full potential. Therefore I will be the one to train you for the upcoming tasks."

"Really?" Harry gasped, genuinely surprised. Sure, Tom had made some vague promises of teaching him something useful quite a few times in the past, and Harry had hoped that he'd come through with those promises sooner rather than later, but somehow... now? It felt quite strange. Great, but strange.

"I have a copy of your schedule," Tom said. "Your Sundays were completely free, so what we will do is this: starting this week, you and I will meet here every Sunday morning from nine onwards. You'll eat breakfast with your friends and then you'll come here, fully prepared to work hard until dinner."

"The first task is next week," Harry said. "So we'll meet once before it."

"The first task requires imagination and intelligence more than anything else," Tom told him, and leaned back in his chair. He eyed the boy silently for a few moments before he continued: "I heard that your father was buried. Was the funeral as crowded as your mother's?"

"There was no funeral," Harry said, feeling suddenly annoyed. "Sirius buried him and then told me."

"And that... does not upset you?"

"I thought you didn't like talking about feelings?"

"I don't," Tom admitted. "But the thought of you being too distracted to do your best does not please me at all. If talking about whatever is obviously preventing you from sleeping will help you, then I am willing to put up with it."

"You're really bad at comforting people," Harry sighed, rubbing his eyes and curling up on the chair. He rested his chin on his knees and pursed his lips, staring at Tom. "I was thinking about the tournament mostly. And then the rope of light - it's something I read in a book and—"

"That's a lie," Tom interrupted, a small smirk on his face. "You usually never explain yourself, but when you lie you provide explanations too eagerly. Never offer an explanation unless one is specifically asked from you. And sometimes not even then. Now, unless you have anything else to say, you're dismissed."

"What?" What happened to listening to Harry talking about his feelings?

"Go," Tom said. "Brush your teeth. Sleep. Tomorrow there will be reporters running after you, so beware."

And oh, didn't that sound absolutely splendid.
Chapter 31

Much to Harry's relief, Truls and the others were satisfied with a vague explanation when he told them that he wouldn't be available on Sundays.

"I got someone to train me," Harry had said, and that was really all the others had needed to hear, perhaps assuming that he had meant Sirius. Tom, for some reason, wasn't impressed.

"You could have just, oh I don't know, not said anything," the Dark Lord told him. "Did they even ask you? No? You just offered the information freely, didn't you? I don't understand what kind of codependency makes you a slave to the bizarre need to report all of your actions to your peers."

"I think you're being dramatic," Harry said, following Tom to an empty windowless room. With a flick of his wand the ceiling was suddenly alight, each stone shining dimly and illuminating the whole area. "Are we going to duel?"

"No," Tom said, and muttered something else that Harry didn't quite manage to hear. It sounded as if the Dark Lord had called him 'stupid,' but the ruler of the Wizarding World couldn't possibly be so childish. "I'd fry you on the spot if we started dueling now. You wouldn't last a minute."

"What are we going to do, then?" Harry wanted to know, scowling at the man’s confidence. Then again, he didn’t doubt that as they were now, Tom was far superior when it came to, well, everything.

"I've taught you a few healing spells," Tom started. "And you know many different offensive and defensive spells. The tasks – especially the last one – will require more than that." Harry listened quietly, leaning against the wall and enjoying the Dark Lord's company as he spoke. It was a little bit funny, Harry thought, how much like a teacher the man was sometimes.

"Spells are ineffective unless you use them properly," Tom continued. "Knowing how to cast the Killing Curse is useless unless you actually go ahead and cast it."

"I'm not going to do that," Harry replied, frowning. "I don't want to kill anyone."

"And let me guess," Tom said, wholeheartedly unimpressed. "You also don't want to torture or maim anyone. You'd rather have people sit down and sort out their problems by talking."

"Well—"

"No."

Tom then conjured two chairs and sat down on one of them, while gesturing for Harry to sit on the other. "I am old, Harry. I am old and I have known all kinds of people. I've met the good and the bad, the desperate and the ambitious. I've seen humility turn into wounded pride and arrogance crumble into dust and misery. And it is with this knowledge that I can tell you: you will kill someone."

Harry stared at the man in front of him, not willing to believe what he was hearing. A part of him knew that yes, in all likelihood with the life he was living he would someday have to wound another human being fatally. But to discuss it with such certainty unsettled him. "I don't want to."

"Wanting has nothing to do with it," Tom said. "That's the thing, you see? You kill when you have to, not when you want to. If you were a Hogwarts student planning on getting married and running a
household while working a typical nine to five job, then sure, maybe you won't kill anyone. But *that is not you*, Harry."

"It *could* be me," Harry claimed, though he knew that Tom was right. As long as Harry aimed to uphold his end of the promise to Merope, as long as he intended on changing some of the things that were a common part of their society, there would always be someone who'd fight him until one of them collapsed.

It wasn't a pleasant realization.

"The... *thing* that makes Death Eaters different," Tom said, "is their own sense of when killing becomes the best option. What they all have in common is that death is *always* one of the options. Sometimes you kill to prove a point, sometimes to erase a problem, sometimes just to... vent a little." The Dark Lord paused, observing the skeptical expression on Harry's face. The boy was, quite clearly, not convinced.

"I knew this would be a problem," Tom sighed. "I won't duel you, and I won't even teach you any new spells yet. What we *will* be doing instead is something else entirely."

"Considering our topic of conversation, I'm worried."

"You'll be absolutely safe, I assure you."

'It's not my safety that I'm starting to worry about,' Harry thought. Silently he watched Tom conjure a tiny brown rabbit, and set it down on the floor. The bunny sat there for a few moments, its nose twitching as it took in its environment. Then it moved, though Harry knew that it would find no exits.

"I don't need a new pet," Harry said, dread pooling at the pit of his stomach. "Really. Thank you and all that, but I really don't want a new one. I have an owl. Could you just return this to... wherever you summoned it from?"

"I'm teaching you a valuable lesson," Tom replied. "Appreciate it, because you're the only one that I have had to teach this to. Now, stand up and pull out your wand."

"I don't like this," Harry told him, but did as told. He wanted nothing more than to leave, or change the subject, or make Tom teach him something else. He didn't, though. He couldn't. Harry thought of Merope, and thought of his difficulties with the train station, and wondered if Tom would bother with him today if he knew about how difficult being special had become.

It was stupid, and selfish, and had nothing to do with making the world a better place, but Harry really didn't want to lose Tom's attention.

"What do you want me to do?" Harry asked, holding his wand tightly in his hand. Tom stood up as well, and his hand was cold and heavy on Harry's shoulder.

"Now," the man replied, sounding far more pleased than he should. "You use a simple cutting curse to kill it."

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"You look dead on your feet," Truls observed, watching Harry sit down and nearly fall face-first into his plate of syrup-covered waffles. "Was training that hard?"

"You could say that," Harry replied. Tom hadn't made him learn new spells, no. All he had focused
on was making Harry use the spells he knew on whatever small animals Tom had conjured. It was exhausting and draining and upsetting, not to mention tougher than any dueling class he had had to endure.

Harry had decided, for a change, to sit with Luna at the Ravenclaw table. Much to his secret delight, Truls didn't seem to know how to behave around the eccentric girl who told them about an infestation of some unheard of magical creature while trying to share her portion of apple pie with as many people as possible.

"It's like an edible hug," Luna told Truls, smiling in response to the older boy's wide-eyed confusion. "A hug from the inside."

"Say, Luna," Harry suddenly said, remembering something either Sirius or one of his parents had told him years ago. "Does Hogwarts really have old ghosts flying around?"

"We have a few," Luna told him, pouring more vanilla cream onto her apple pie. "But sadly, they don't interact with the students often anymore. There was some sort of a conflict, you see, when Headmaster Yaxley came to work here. Many of the ghosts liked the previous headmaster better and after he left they decided to distance themselves from the people who are here now. Which is truly a pity, some of them have quite the tales to tell."

"Do you know if any of them are old enough to have witnessed a previous tournament?" Harry asked. He knew it was a long shot, but any kind of extra help would be greatly appreciated.

"I don't think so," Luna replied after a moment of contemplation. "I don't know if the Triwizard Tournament was ever held in Hogwarts before. But if there's someone in Hogwarts who'd know, it will be the Grey Lady."

"Where do you think I could find her?"

"How useful could she be, though?" Truls asked. "Let's assume she did witness a previous tournament, it's probably going to be very different from this year's tournament, right? Different tasks, different judges." Harry shrugged, though he knew that what Truls had said was very true. However, even if Harry decided to not ask about the tournament, he could ask about something else. Maybe the Grey Lady remembered his parents when they were young. Or maybe even... maybe even Tom when he was young. He had studied at Hogwarts after all.

Good Circle, Tom as a teenager. Had he been anything like Harry?

"The dead are unexpectedly useful," Luna said with a serene smile. "If nothing else, they're good listeners. The Grey Lady is often around the Ravenclaw Tower but I don't think anyone except Ravenclaws can go up there - at least, not alone. I can tell her to seek you out, Harry, but whether she really does it or not is up to her, of course."

"Thank you," Harry smiled, before turning back to his waffles. He was nearly finished when someone sat next to Luna, facing Harry, and slammed down a few books. Startled, the boy looked up to see an angry Mette moving to pile a small mountain of steamed vegetables onto her plate.

"Interesting books," Luna said, reaching to pick one. She either did not notice or didn't care about the other girl's evident bad mood. "Do you study advanced alchemy at Durmstrang?"

"It's a hobby," Mette replied sullenly, stabbing a piece of broccoli with her fork. "Potions and arithmancy were just too easy. Anyway. You. Who are you?"

"Luna Lovegood," Luna said. "Harry's friend. And you?"
"Mette Erling. Harry, could you get me some coffee, please?"

"Uhm. All right." Harry poured her some coffee into a finely decorated cup and added milk into it before handing the cup to Mette.

"What's making you breathe fire?" Truls asked curiously. "Usually you're all smiles and sunshine."

"Oh, honey, you know nothing of my smiles and sunshine," Mette replied acidly. She then took a deep breath and shook her head, putting some visible effort into not scowling anymore. To Harry, she didn't seem angry anymore, but as if she were on the verge of tears. "It's been a shit day."

"Why?" Harry asked. His day had been... not bad, despite what Tom had tried to make him do. The Dark Lord hadn't been particularly pleased, but had told Harry to be fully prepared to shed some blood next week. "Can we help with anything?"

"Oh, darling," Mette sighed, and offered him a smile that wasn't as confident as she would have liked. "The matters of the heart tend to confuse and hurt the best of us sometimes, don't they? Never you mind, just focus on your food. I do hope though that you didn't skip the actual meal and go straight to the waffles."

"He did," Luna said helpfully. "Didn't even glance at the vegetables."

"All you have been eating is apple pie!" Harry exclaimed, and scowled. "I'm just not hungry. Circe, I thought you were my friend."

"You need to start eating properly if you want to be healthy and full of energy next Saturday," Mette told him, and Harry could see Truls nod in agreement.

"I heard that Fleur is sticking to a very strict diet," Truls said. "She will definitely be in top form next week."

"She's fantastic, isn't she," Mette sighed. "If I had legs like hers I'd never wear anything that goes past my arse."

"Anyway," Truls said, "all that aside. Harry, I'm going to the library to get some assignments done. Want to join me?"

"Yeah," Harry replied immediately, thinking of the pile of homework he hadn't even touched yet. "Good idea. Let's go."

"Proper lunch first," Mette said instantly. "Or at least take something with you. Honestly, are you planning on fainting? I can tell you, that does not attract any dashing princes. Been there, done that. You don't have the tits for it."

"She's right," Luna added. "Unless you faint on Valentine's Day while holding a cactus. But then the prince charming might not be yours after all, so I wouldn't recommend doing it then either."

"Okay," Harry said, grabbing a few pastries and dead set on ignoring whatever Luna and Mette had said. How come it was a prince, anyway? Why not a princess? Then again— oh, whatever. "Cool. Truls, let's go."

The next few days passed fast, and Harry found himself always either catching up on homework or trying to deal with bouts of anxiety. He frequently battled the urge to run far, far away and distance
himself from everything. Truls's presence alternated between being the best support Harry could hope for, and the most stifling nightmare he could imagine. Mette's mood swings had become worse, and the Hogwarts students that Harry knew were busy dealing with their own studies.

And despite it all, somehow, the worst was that he hadn't heard a single word from Tom since Sunday. Was the man truly planning on limiting their communication to once a week? If so, then the next time they would meet would be after the first task.

"Krum told me he's going to go flying soon," Truls said, and the smile on his face made Harry feel guilty all of a sudden. He shouldn't find Truls's constant presence a bother; many would kill to have this kind of a loyal friend. "I was thinking of joining him. You in?"

"I don't think I have the time," Harry admitted, feeling genuinely sorry. He missed flying, but wanted to focus his time on gathering as much information as he possibly could. At least for now, when the first task was but a few days away. "I've got so much to study and time is running out quickly. But please, don't hold yourself back on my account - all I'm planning on doing is simply sit here and read. You'd be bored to death and how would that make me feel?"

"Are you sure?" Truls asked, eyeing the book Harry was holding with a frown when the other boy nodded. "Well, if you change your mind, you'll find us near the Gamekeeper's cottage. They have only one pitch here and well, you know what happened to it."

"Sure," Harry replied. Truls didn't move immediately - instead he stared at Harry for a few long moments with a peculiar expression before leaning forward to touch Harry's cheek gently with his fingertips. A little smile was playing on his lips and for an instant Harry couldn't breathe.

"Don't tire yourself out," Truls said, and Harry nodded silently, unable to say a word. The other boy smiled again before grabbing his coat and a broom and leaving the room. Harry stared at the closing doorway, unsure of what had transpired, confused and sick of having more things to think about.

Perhaps this was something he could ask Tom about?

Thinking of Tom made Harry think of the ghost Luna had mentioned: the Grey Lady. Surely she would remember a remarkable student like Tom from his days as a student? Luna had said that the ghosts hadn't distanced themselves until the previous Headmaster of Hogwarts had left, which meant that during Tom's time they must have been far more present.

Was it strange that Harry couldn't help but be extremely interested in knowing what Tom's least favourite school subject had been? He didn't know many things about Tom, and most of what he knew had more to do with Tom's 'Lord Voldemort' persona rather than Tom himself.

'Then again, they're not separate entities,' Harry thought, suddenly far less amused than he had been moments before. 'It's the same man. He can act like a child and tell me silly things all he wants, but at the end of the day he's the man who can burn innocent people on stakes, torture others for information and actively permit and promote prejudice against Muggleborns.' He didn't want to make the mistake of forgetting what Tom actually did every day he spent away from Harry.

"What put you in a bad mood?" a familiar voice said, and Mette sat down next to Harry on the couch. "Surely the book isn't that awful?"

"I was just thinking," Harry sighed. "What about you? You've been pretty... stressed lately."

"Oh, I've been a terror," Mette admitted, and shook her head with a humourless smile. "It's all right."

"Is it really?" Harry took a look at the others in the room and lowered his voice as he continued: "Do
you want to... talk about it?”

Mette sat silently for a few moments, before she opened her mouth to speak. A moment of speculative hesitation told Harry that she had decided to discuss a different topic. “Bellatrix Lestrange gave you a standing ovation,” she said. ”How come?”

"Honestly, Mette," Harry started, "who can really tell why she chooses to do whatever things she ends up doing? I couldn't begin to guess... In fact, I wouldn't even dare to guess."

"Has anyone ever told you that you ramble when you lie," Metter asked curiously, and Harry thought of Tom, before promptly shaking his head. This time the witch's smile was genuine.

"I get it," she said with a sly grin. "You want to keep your secrets. That's fine."

"It's not really a secret," Harry said. "She once complimented my eyes, but that's it. I don't know why she'd even notice me or... or be happy to see me become the Durmstrang champion. I don't know, so I don't really like talking about it." Rather, he didn't like thinking about it, in fear of coming up with theories that would distract him from studying.

"I wish I had worries like yours," Mette said, and Harry had to suddenly put quite a lot of effort into keeping his smile from disappearing. "But when you get older, Harry, you'll enter a whole new world of trouble."

"Does this have anything to do with how upset you've been lately?"

"You could say that."

"Does it have anything to do with... Anthony?" Harry whispered, leaning closer. The witch shrugged, smiling wistfully.

"That easy to guess, huh?" she said. "It's all right, though. I know how to handle heartache. You should thank your stars that you haven't got a serious crush going on anyone... Unless..."

"There isn't anyone," Harry said quickly, thinking first of Clemens, then Truls and even Tom. He fleetingly tried to come up with a single girl he had had a crush on, and came up with nothing. "No one."

"It's all right to like someone, you know," Mette told him. "You know what... why don't you just get used to that thought for now? Girls, boys, it's fine to like either or both. Just don't sabotage your own chances out of fear."

And damned Circe if that didn't bring with it an unexpected realization.

*

On Thursday, after Harry and his classmates were done with their lessons, an older student with a badge on his robes approached Harry and introduced himself as the Ravenclaw Prefect.

"Headmaster Yaxley wants all the champions to go to his office," the prefect told him. "I'm here to ensure that you'll do so as swiftly as possible. It's easy to get lost, you see."

"Okay," Harry replied, and handed his bag of school supplies to Truls, who was eyeing the prefect with no small amount of suspicion. "Do you know what it is that he wants?"

"I have no idea," the prefect admitted. "And it is not my business to pry."
"Blind obedience with the absence of faith is stupidity," Truls said. The prefect tensed and scowled before he turned to march away, clearly expecting Harry to follow without being told so again. Harry shook his head and sighed quietly before hurrying up after him, doubting that the other would bother waiting.

For an instant Harry nearly apologized. The words "I'm sorry, he didn't mean to insult you" were ready in his mouth to be voiced in order to mollify the boy, but instead of doing so Harry remained silent. Something in him had rebelled against the thought of apologizing, which was... strange. Saying sorry for every little thing has never really been an issue for Harry, so why now—?

"We're here," the prefect said suddenly, stopping in front of a gargoyle. "Mortui vivos docent." With great interest Harry watched the gargoyle move, step aside, revealing a spiral staircase that would doubtlessly lead to the Headmaster's office.

"Well then," the prefect huffed. "Up you go."

And up Harry went.

The Headmaster's office was... not as impressive as Harry had expected it to be. It was quite large and richly decorated, with books covering the walls and strange contraptions in various places. Headmaster Yaxley was a tall man with hard, blunt features and an unpleasant smile. Headmaster Karkaroff was sitting next to the Headmistress of Beauxbatons, who was smiling at her student - Fleur Delacour, if Harry remembered correctly. George Weasley was also there, unusually quiet and careful as he sat on one of the couches.

"Ah, mister Potter," Headmaster Yaxley said, his cheer entirely unconvincing. "Step in, son. Take a seat, er, next to young Weasley there, for example."

"Yes sir," Harry said, and it was only when he was seated that he noticed the two other individuals in the office. A witch with blonde hair set in elaborate curls and pencilled-on eyebrows was sitting while a tired-looking man with a dusty hat and a camera was standing behind her chair. The woman smiled at Harry, revealing three golden teeth amongst the pearly whites.

"Now that all of the champions are here," Headmaster Yaxley said, "we can begin. This lady here is Rita Skeeter from the Daily Prophet, and she will be writing the first group interview of the tournament."

"Feel comfortable to tell me anything, dears," Skeeter said sweetly. Her smile made Harry feel oddly anxious and not at all comfortable.

"Fleur - you don't mind if I call you that, do you - what was your family's reaction when you told them about participating in the Triwizard Tournament?"

"They were very worried in the beginning," Fleur said with a smile. "But they are also very proud of me." The feeling of dread increased, and Harry hated the thought of anyone asking about his parents' hypothetical reactions. What could he say? Oh, mum died ages ago and funny thing - dad also died recently! Oh, you didn't know that, did you? Well, neither did anybody else!

Absently Harry noticed the woman's independently moving quill write far more than what Fleur was saying, and wondered if she would truly make the girl's responses somehow more dramatic. Then again, wasn't the drama exactly what made people read?

"Mister Weasley," Skeeter then said, and unlike with Fleur, she didn't seem to have any desire to refer to George by his first name. "Victory would bring your family five thousand galleons - quite the
sum, isn't it? What would you like to do with it?"

"Open a business," George said, smiling slightly. "My brother and I—"

"Charming," Skeeter interrupted, before pressing on: "Would you help your parents financially if you could?"

"What? Well, of course--"

'I really wonder what that quill is writing,' Harry thought. 'How many lines can she squeeze out of the few words she let George say? Merlin, I don't have a good feeling about this.' The reporter seemed to know where to strike with her questions, and with increasing panic Harry tried to figure out what kind of questions she would throw at him.

Whatever she'd write - and whatever Harry would say - would be printed for the world to see. Including Tom. If Harry made any stupid mistakes here, what if Tom would suddenly start thinking that Harry wasn't even worth his Sundays anymore?

"Mister Potter," Skeeter finally said, turning to him. "You're quite a bit younger than these two, hm? How are you feeling about this tournament?"

"Honoured," Harry lied. "It is an honour to be able to represent Durmstrang in such a grand event." Headmaster Karkaroff mustered up a smile, clearly pleased with Harry's response.

"When your name was called," Skeeter said next, "I couldn't help but notice that Bellatrix Lestrange stood up to clap for you. How familiar are you with Mrs. Lestrange?"

"You mean," Harry said, thinking of Mette and her thirst to prove herself, and thinking of how much Bellatrix must have worked to get to where she was now. He thought of all the women who wanted to be more than somebody’s wife. "Lieutenant General Lestrange. We've met. She's someone I... truly admire." From a safe distance and with a healthy dose of fear, sure, but admired nonetheless.

The quill stopped.

"Yes," Skeeter said, her smile slightly less sugary sweet than it had been before. "Does it make you worry that people will think her biased, considering what she did despite her being a judge?"

"With all due respect," Harry said. "If you – or anyone else – would like to accuse Bellatrix Lestrange of being unfit for the role of a judge, then I invite you and dare anyone else to go and tell her so."

She didn't bother using charms for this, no. Bellatrix preferred to use her hands and special potions to polish her throw knives. It was relaxing, especially with Rodolphus nearby. The man had given up the pretence of reading some reports, and was simply watching her quietly now.

"Is it really that fascinating," Bellatrix asked, setting down a knife and picking up another. "Watching me take care of these?"

"Not what you're doing," Rodolphus admitted readily. "But you're always fascinating to me. Who are you planning on using those on?"

"Whoever allows me the opportunity," Bellatrix replied, glancing at her husband. The Dark Mark on his bare forearm made heat pool in her belly, and she wanted nothing more than to press her lips
against his at that very moment. And that's what she did – dropped the knife she had been polishing, moved towards the bed and crawled into it before leaning down for a kiss.

"I like this development," Rodolphus whispered, and Bellatrix kissed the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "How'd you like to use those knives, love? Stab someone's shoulder?"

"No," Bellatrix replied breathily, loving the hot press of his hands against her skin. "The soft belly, I'd say. Just... sink it in... Circe... yes..."

"I worship you," Rodolphus hissed, rolling them so he could lie atop of her, before kissing her neck softly. "Would you slice it all open and pull everything out?"

"Yes," Bellatrix sighed, closing her eyes. "I would... I would do exactly that. Perhaps I should sharpen my hooked knives instead. Sink one of those in, and when you pull it out... oh, yes." She ran her fingers through his hair, pulling at it slightly, when a knock came from the window.

"If that sound is not my imagination, I'm going to use my knives on whoever caused it," the witch hissed, and Rodolphus laughed before pressing a brief kiss against her cheek.

"It could be important," he said, rolling off her and moving to open the window. An unfamiliar bird swept in and dropped a small package near Bellatrix on the bed.

"Kill the bird," she said, reaching for what it had brought her. There was a small hand-written note on the package, and Bellatrix recognized the handwriting instantly. "Actually, never mind. Kill Karkaroff instead."

It wasn't often that Bellatrix received a letter of any sort from Igor Karkaroff, and she tended to be pleased with that fact. The man was a spineless coward and a fool, and she didn't hold an ounce of respect for him. Surely he wouldn't dare to try bribing her? She wasn't going to let the Dark Lord down by vouching for anyone unworthy.

"Seriously, Igor sent you something?" Rodolphus asked, allowing the bird to fly away. "What did he send you? A request to go easy on his champion? You told me you liked the brat well enough already."

"I do," Bellatrix replied. She saw potential in the little green-eyed Potter, but if he ended up not showing enough of that potential during the tournament, Bellatrix wasn't going to allow him the pleasure of victory. Annoyed, the woman unwrapped the package and saw a small tear-shaped object that looked like glass with smoke trapped inside it.

"A memory holder?" Rodolphus said, surprised. "Colour me curious." Memory holders were crude imitations of pensieves - an unsuccessful attempt at creating something more functional with a similar purpose. An ordinary holder could store only one memory at a time, often for the maximum duration of a week before whatever memory had been stored into it would dissolve.

"It could be a ploy," Bellatrix murmured, before shaking her head. "No, he wouldn't dare. Tomorrow's the first task... and if he was trying to bribe me, he would actually send me something of value and outright ask for a trade. You remember his ways, don't you?"

"Subtle that man has never been," Rodolphus agreed. "Well then, why don't you take a look at whatever memory he sent you?" His wife held the sphere in her hand before she sighed and lifted it to touch her forehead. A thin string of blue light emerged from the memory holder and wrapped itself around Bellatrix's head, much like a crown of sorts.

Rodolphus moved to where his wife had been sitting earlier and sat down to polish the rest of her
throw knives while she relived whatever memory Karkaroff had sent her. He was admittedly curious about the Potter child - it wasn't often that Bellatrix paid attention to anyone who hadn't made an impression on the battlefield. Bellatrix's dislike for children had been clear since the moment he married her, and for her to take a liking to a kid was unusual.

It took a bit longer than Rodolphus had expected, but eventually the string of blue light disappeared and Bellatrix put down the memory holder. Her expression wasn't angry, but contemplative.

"Was it a memory worth viewing?" Rodolphus asked, and his wife nodded, still deep in thought.

"It's strange," the woman murmured. "Karkaroff sent me a meeting he had witnessed. Some journalist was interviewing the champions."

"And that was so important it couldn't wait? If it was a journalist doing the interview, then we'll be able to read about it tomorrow."

"I... I doubt that we'll read what happened."

At this Rodolphus looked surprised. "How come?"

"It's such a small, insignificant thing," Bellatrix said, but a smile was creeping at the corners of her mouth. "Rodolphus, I really want that Potter boy to win."

"What did he do to win your heart in such a way?" Rodolphus asked, his curiosity increasing. It seemed that for once Karkaroff has managed to play his cards right. "Merlin, should I ask him for tips on how to charm you?"

"Oh, you're doing just fine on your own," Bellatrix replied before she threw the memory holder at him. "Take a look. Potter's the kid with black hair. A scrawny little creature, but don't let that fool you."

"If you say so," he said, lifting the memory holder to press it against his forehead, before diving into the memory that had impressed his wife so.

* *

Harry woke up before his alarm rang. For a moment he contemplated trying to continue his slumber, but he knew that he'd only end up overthinking everything and doing more harm than good to his state of mind. The first task would begin in less than four hours and Harry didn't feel ready at all.

With a heavy sigh the boy climbed out of bed, glanced at his sleeping roommates before walking towards the bathroom. After a quick shower the world seemed a little bit clearer and better organized, and somehow each layer of clothing that Harry put on made him feel more... collected. The manticore shirt that Gilderoy had bought for him so long ago still fit, and Harry felt a little bit safer knowing that he had some sort of protection under his uniform.

A few days ago Sirius had sent him not only the two-way mirror he had promised, but also James's invisibility cloak that he had mentioned. Harry left the mirror but tucked the cloak into one of his pockets before reaching for the dagger Sirius had given him for his birthday. He slid it into the sheath hidden in his right boot and made sure his wand was securely in its holster before he quietly left the room.

Much to his surprise, he found Mette in the common room, applying her make up. On the table in front of her was a breakfast for two, clearly in accordance to her tastes rather than Harry's. Regardless, the boy was grateful.
"Good morning," Harry whispered, taking a seat. The witch smiled at him, setting down her small mirror and the brush she had been holding.

"Morning," she replied. "It's good that you're awake. I had the house-elves bring something for you to eat - you won't have time for food later. How are you feeling?"

"Nervous," Harry admitted, eyeing the food. "Um, no pancakes?"

"Oatmeal is better for you," Mette said, and Harry nodded, acknowledging the truth in her words. "Quarter past eight we're going to leave here and head towards the Headmaster's office. I won't go with you all the way up, of course, but it's good to have someone with you for as long as possible."

"Thank you," Harry said, undeniably surprised. "I don't even know how to repay you for all the support you've given me."

"Win the tournament," Mette told him. "That's how you repay me and everyone else."

Win the tournament. If only winning was as easy as saying the words aloud. Harry envied Fleur Delacour for the confidence she had shown during the interview, and wished for the opportunity to read Skeeter's article before the task began. It was unlikely, however, that such an opportunity would arise.

Eventually - far too fast and yet it took a lifetime - it was time to start heading towards the Headmaster's office. The corridors were empty and cold and Harry wanted nothing more than to turn back and crawl into his bed. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he barely noticed when Mette suddenly stopped walking and said: "Hello, Silvia."

Harry looked at the person Mette had spoken to, and saw a young witch leaning against the window. The woman didn't look dangerous in any way, but Harry knew better than to write anyone off as harmless. She was quite short and chubby, with dark hair pulled into a bun and a small stylish hat resting on top of her head.

"Mette," the witch said pleasantly. "It has been a while, how do you do?"

"I'm quite fine," Mette replied, "in a bit of a hurry, though."

"Well," Silvia said, her smile revealing dimples on her round cheeks. "Don't let me keep you and your friend, then. Have a good day."

"Likewise," Mette murmured, walking slightly faster than before. Harry resisted the temptation to turn back and take a last glance at the witch.

"Is she a guest?" Harry asked. "How come she's here so early?"

"That was Silvia Nott," Mette whispered in response. "She's... her magic is quite average, but her mind is frightening. She currently works for Gringotts as a Runes Mistress, I believe. She's part of the vault warding team."

"How do you know her?" Harry asked, curious. Mette sighed, and offered him a faint smile. "Are you friends?"

"Anthony is in love with her," she said. "Head over heels, but she doesn't give him the time of the day. Why would she, after all, when he's four years younger than her? That's how I knew her at first – a year or so ago. But after a... an unpleasant event that I went through a while ago, she helped me and I... respect her quite a lot. I'm so excited to see you tackling the first task, Harry."
"Um," said Harry, the change of subject confusing him for a moment. "I, yeah, what?"

"You're well prepared," Mette continued, just as they reached they reached their destination. The gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office had already stepped aside, leaving the staircase behind it exposed. "So you know what to do. Just remember to not hesitate, all right? Do your worst."

"All right," Harry said, and smiled at the witch nervously. Merlin, he felt sick. He took a deep breath before he climbed up the stairs, envying Filippa and the others for being far away from this mess. Then again, knowing Filippa, she would have been far more confident than Harry about participating.

"There you are, Harry," Sirius said, and Harry was relieved beyond words to see his godfather there. The man pulled Harry towards a corner where two wizards dressed in light blue robes were preparing some vials. From the corner of his eye Harry saw Fleur Delacour with two witches decked in similar uniforms.

"What's going to happen?" Harry asked.

"We've got about an hour before we have to go to the Quidditch pitch," Sirius replied. "Give your wand to one of these gentlemen - it will be tested for any hexes or curses that could interfere with your casting today. Then, here, drink this." Sirius grabbed a vial of light pink liquid from one of the two wizards, and handed it to Harry.

"What will this do?" Harry wanted to know.

"If you have ingested any luck-enhancing potions such as felix felicis or the like, this potion will flush them out. Since you're not throwing up, you obviously haven't," Sirius said. Harry hadn't even thought about cheating, and wondered if that already made him a worse competitor than the other two.

"Come on, all three of you," Sirius then said, gesturing for Fleur and George to step closer. Everywhere around them witches and wizards were either running tests on their wands or analysing the potions and finishing any last-minute arrangements. "The first task will be explained again briefly once the tournament starts, but the explanation will be rather vague and meant for the audience, not you. So focus on what I'm telling you now and you'll have a better chance at success."

'Here goes,' Harry thought, and Sirius continued:

"Once we go out there in front of the audience, all three of you will be presented with a bag filled with different items. Pick one: that will be the portkey that will take you to a remote, closed location. Your task is not to escape those premises, but to find a small silver plaque with a number etched into it. A summoning charm will not work, so you'll need to figure out a way around that."

"Do we have a time limit?" Fleur asked, and Sirius shrugged.

"Technically no," he replied. "But you will not be alone in that building. The faster you finish, the safer you'll be. Once you have the plaque, read aloud the number on it: that will activate the portkey and bring you back here. Everything you do will be broadcasted to the audience. Use the spells you know will help you and leave an impression. Now, do you have any other questions? No? Well then, take your wands back and use the next twenty minutes wisely."

Later, when Harry walked behind Fleur towards the Quidditch pitch, he realized that what was making his skin prickle and hands shake wasn't nervousness after all.

It was anticipation.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

With time you can change at your own pace. Grow up slowly.

Fear forces you to change and cuts off the pieces you can't change fast enough.

Chapter Notes

READ:

There are warnings in the end notes. Go read them if you wish, because this chapter can certainly make people uncomfortable. This is me telling you: no tags in the story, chapter-specific warnings in the end notes. Scroll down or don't, it's up to you.

I hope that I won't have to deal with another "closing the barn door after the horses have already left" comment.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Harry didn't think he had ever before seen this many people gathered in one place simultaneously – with the exception of the World Cup, of course, but even then he had been just one visitor among others. Now, it was different. Everywhere he looked there were hundreds of faces turned towards him; how had he managed to forget how awful it was, to be noticed by so many? It wasn't until Harry had somehow succeeded in calming himself down that he realized that people were clapping, whistling, and waving. Some were even holding banners and charmed signs in the sky.

Below his feet was the odd mirror surface that covered what had once been a field of grass, and a fair distance from one another were three round platforms that emanated some sort of yellow fog that rose a bit above Harry's knees.

"I love this," Fleur said, and Harry wished from the bottom of his heart that he could find this as enjoyable as she did. The anticipation he had felt but moments before had turned into apprehension and he had to make a conscious effort into keeping his back straight and expression pleasant.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sirius said, his enhanced voice reaching every person in the audience.
"Welcome to the Triwizard Tournament!"

"Oh, my mum and dad are there," George said, and waved towards where he had seen his family. Harry looked at the cheering audience and saw Truls, Mette, and Viktor, side by side. He then turned towards the judges and saw Bellatrix looking at him and clapping, but strangely enough not smiling. She didn't seem displeased, however.

And then, on a throne separate from everyone else, with a snake partly around his shoulders and on his lap, sat the Dark Lord. Harry had never asked Tom about his obsession with keeping his face relatively unknown to the public, but he did seem far more dangerous with the hooded cloak than
without it. In that instance he remembered the moment he first saw Tom as Lord Voldemort. He remembered being woken up by his parents and flooing to witness a burning, and the ghost of his mother's grip on his shoulders was something he could never completely forget.

"Let's give rounds of applause to our three champions," Sirius said, making the audience cheer even louder. "Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons! George Weasley of Hogwarts! Aaaaaaand Harry Potter of Durmstrang!"

'Don't they get tired of clapping?' Harry thought, when he suddenly saw a familiar man in the audience. Decked in what looked like white robes decorated with golden stitching and a heavily feathered hat, surrounded by about a dozen stunningly beautiful witches and wizards, was Gilderoy Lockhart. Where on earth had the man been for the past few months? Harry hadn't heard a word from him for a long time, and now—

"The champions," Sirius said, his loud voice interrupting Harry's train of thought. "Will each be given the task of finding a simple silver plaque, and sent to a closed location where this plaque is hidden. Who will be the fastest? Who'll be the cleverest? We will see that soon!"

Fleur and George were still waving at their families and friends, but Harry didn't know where to wave. Truls should have been the obvious answer, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He wanted his dad there. He wanted James. He wanted someone he could... someone who...

Harry's hands stayed down.

"I have five portkeys here in this bag," Sirius continued, levitating a small pouch above his head. "Each champion will blindly select one and go to their destination to finish their task. But! How on earth can we keep an eye on them? Rest assured, honoured guests, I did not bring you here today just to make you sit on the bleachers and chat with each other, no."

Sirius then waved his wand, and the yellow fog above the three round platforms suddenly flared, and rose up towards the sky. Startled, Harry realized that every pillar showed each one of the champions - the one closest to the Dark Lord seemed to be focused on Harry, while the one furthest away from the man was fixed on George. Fleur's was in the middle, and the witch smiled brightly at that.

"The actions of each champion will be seen by us all," Sirius said, and the audience cheered once more. "Not only today, but during the future tasks as well. Now, ladies and gentlemen, enjoy the ride and pray for the champion you're supporting to succeed in his or her mission!" The man then allowed the pouch he had still been levitating above his head to drop into his hands.

'Anything but an Azkaban prison cell, please,' Harry thought with no small amount of panic.

"Ladies first," Sirius grinned.

"Charming," Fleur said, and slipped her hand into the pouch. Soon she pulled her hand out, a small cage dangling between her fingers. "You won't be sending me to a kennel, will you?"

"Oh, it's far better than that," Sirius said, and smiled at Harry, clearly intending for him to be the next to pick. Harry shook his head and allowed George to go next. The redhead pulled out a small scalpel and eyed it warily. Harry wondered if the items actually hinted at their destinations.

"Interesting," George said, before stepping aside.

"And now you, Harry," Sirius said, his smile encouraging. Harry tried to respond with a confident smile, but it came off as a grimace. He doubted that any of the options were actually better or worse than one another, and thus wasting any time on trying to figure out what each of the remaining items
were was unnecessary. Harry ended up grabbing the first thing he could touch, and pulled out what
looked like a tiny bed.

"All right, champions," Sirius said, "are you ready?" Not waiting for the answer, he turned to the
audience. "And are you all ready to watch this happen?" The cheers were louder than ever, and the
grin on Sirius's face was genuinely amused. Harry felt sick.

"Good luck to all the champions," Sirius hollered. "Show us your best!"

* *

Harry didn't end up in a cell - not in Azkaban or in any other prison. Once his eyes had gotten used
to the relative darkness of the room, he wished from the bottom of his heart that he could turn back
and say "you know what, that cell I had already resigned myself to? Take me there".

He was in a mortuary.

'This is not where I wanted to be,' Harry thought, and then swiftly reminded himself that people were
watching him even if he couldn't see them. Showing signs of fear would be an instant strike against
him, and Harry didn't want that. Not when Tom was in the audience. Not when Bellatrix would be
watching him as well. And yet... it was strange how standing in a train station with souls of the dead
was nothing compared to being in a small room with two corpses.

Merlin, he wanted out of here and fast.

Now, where could a small silver plaque be hidden? There weren't many potential hiding places, but
Harry didn't want to underestimate the cleverness of whoever had hidden the plaque in the room.
Quietly the boy pulled out his wand, and lit up the tip before making his first round in the room,
shuddering in disgust at the brown stains that could be nothing but dried blood.

When he happened upon the door, he nearly pushed it open to see what was outside. Two things,
however, made him change his mind: firstly, Sirius had specifically told him and the others that the
point was not to search for an exit. Secondly, Sirius had said that something would try to attack them
eventually. Well, not in those words exactly, but Harry was quite sure that that was what Sirius had
meant. And that was why instead of opening the door and stepping out, Harry used three different
spells to make sure that the door was locked properly. Whoever wanted to come in would need to
break down the door first.

The plaque wasn't on the floor, but then again Harry hadn't expected it to be so easily found. Not
even under the dried up and dirty remains of what looked like a pile of human kidneys. Their stench
was horrible.

What seemingly served as the mortuary was a rather small, square room with a few broken lamps on
the ceiling and dirty tiled floor and walls. There were no windows, and the silence was heavy and
absolute. In the middle of the room was a table, and on the table was the body of a witch who didn't
look that much older than Harry himself. She didn't seem to have any visible injuries, and Harry
wondered what kind of spell had killed her.

Near the door, by the wall, was a trolley, and on the trolley was a second body that belonged to an
elderly man whose eyes - merciful Circe that was one thing Harry did not want to see - were wide
open. The man's body was littered with big and small wounds, one of which went from his throat to
his navel.

Harry shook his head, feeling nauseated, worried, and alarmed. What if the threat didn't come from
the outside, after all? What if he had managed to lock himself with it in here? What if... what if one of the bodies was charmed to stand up and attack him soon?

'No,' Harry thought. 'Let's not think about that.' He held his want tighter in his hand as he continued his investigation of the room, hoping to strike gold even by accident. He remembered being tested for felix felicis and couldn't help but hope for some of that particular potion right now.

In addition to the table and the trolley, there was a small oven - what for? Harry didn't want to begin to guess - and a sink in one corner. Harry walked towards the sink first, finding it the easiest place to start with. The strangely stainless surface made him wary, and he tapped the tip of his wand against it, wondering if he would be fortunate enough for the plaque to simply drop out of somewhere. But no, no such luck.

After making sure that what he was looking for was nowhere near the sink, Harry moved to take a look at the oven. The filthy thing was stained and rusty, and unsurprisingly even dirtier on the inside. The boy poked at the charred remains of whatever had been cooked in there, making sure that there was no silver hidden somewhere under the filth. Having no luck there either, he turned to eye the table, and the body of the witch on top of it.

A sudden thought crept into his mind, and much to his horror Harry realized where the plaque most likely was hidden. Nothing in the mortuary was there just for decoration - not even the bodies. And if the plaque wasn't under the corpses or anywhere on the table or the trolley, then that left...

Harry couldn't help but grimace as he stepped closer to the table. The air was still all around him, and the sound of his footsteps felt obnoxiously loud to him in the silence of the room. Harry glanced nervously at the door, expecting something to try and barge in and stop him, and he thought fleetingly of how Fleur and George were doing. Was one of them done already? What if Harry was the only one to spend this much time on his assignment?

How much time had passed, anyway? It didn't feel like much, and yet felt like far too long. He couldn't even give the audience a show, not this way. Not while trapped in a room all by himself, increasingly frustrated. Was Sirius disappointed? Had his smile frozen on his face, drained of amusement or pride, simply there to fool the audience? No, no. Harry didn't want to disappoint all the people who were watching him. It was with this newfound determination that the boy stepped even closer to the dead witch, and reached out.

The moment the tip of his wand touched the bare skin of the dead witch, an agonized scream from somewhere outside the room split the air.

*\n
The first thing that Fleur Delacour became aware of was the hard, cold floor she was kneeling on. The portkey had not granted her a soft landing, and her knees ached due to the impact they had suffered. It wasn't until a moment after that the witch paid attention to the sounds she was hearing.

Warily, with her wand in hand, Fleur stood up and tried to make sense of the darkness that surrounded her. From all around her - not even far, just a few steps to all sides - she could hear groaning, smothered sobs, and shallow breathing. In one corner there were even people talking. Her mouth set in a grim line, Fleur cast a protective shield around her before lighting up the place to see where she was.

Shrieks greeted the light, and the witch's own scream was stuck in her throat as she took in the sight of what surrounded her. Cages - dozens of cages - some big and some small, piled all around her.
And in each one of those cages was a person, kneeling in the small space and either shielding their eyes and screaming, or watching Fleur with rage and loathing in their eyes. She had never - not once in her life - seen anything like this.

It was frightening. It got worse when some of the caged people began reaching out, their thin hands and broken nails trying to grab a hold of her.

Blessed Morgana, how was she supposed to search for the plaque in a place like this?

With a quick flick of her wand, Fleur cast a silencing charm on the cages before selecting one and allowing the creature – the human - inside it to keep its voice. She didn't move from where she was standing, horrified by the thought of being touched by what was surrounding her.

"Qui êtes-vous?" Fleur asked, receiving no response. She scowled, before trying again, this time in English: "Who are you?"

The man, naked and bruised and filthy, cowered in his cage as far away from her as he could get. When Fleur repeated her question louder, the man whimpered and hid his face behind his arms. The French witch pinched her nose and resisted the urge to scream in frustration. There was no force on earth that would make her search the cages one by one. However, she was nothing if not clever, and so Fleur plastered a beautiful smile on her face instead and spoke again.

"Listen to me," she said, making her voice carry as far as it could in this strange, disgusting place. "I am looking for a plaque. A small, silver plaque with numbers on it. Whoever finds it for me will be allowed to leave with me. I... I will return your voice to you now, but if you scream again, I will silence you once more."

Much to her satisfaction, despite cancelling the silencing spell, she didn't have to endure the sound of their screams. What she did have to put up with, however, were the stares. It was unnerving, the way they all kept their eyes fixed on her - those who had eyes, at any case. "You will be fed and clothed," Fleur promised, painting a pretty picture of salvation, "and I'll drop you off at any place you want, and you'll never see me again."

"Food," someone groaned, their voice fragile and brittle. "Please... I need... anything..."

"What about your kind?" a raspy voice of a woman asked, and Fleur turned to look at the woman who had spoken. Her ashen skin was marred with infected wounds and scars, and her eyes were wide and desperate. Fleur swallowed a disgusted scream, knowing that even if she had had any intention of keeping up her end of the bargain, she would certainly not be touching someone so... filthy. "Will any of your kind come after me?"

"My kind?" Fleur asked, wondering how the woman had managed to recognize the Veela in her. Then again, Fleur knew that for any witch with knowledge on the matter, it would be relatively easy to make the connection. Question was, however: why was this woman so wary of Veela?

"Witches," the woman clarified with an angry hiss, and Fleur grimaced, finally realizing where she was. She had heard that there were Muggle storages somewhere in Ireland, but had never had a reason to visit one. Many people did, however, and though hunting Muggles was technically illegal, there were places where one could ‘legally’ purchase a Muggle. It was admittedly shady business, entirely immoral and barely legal, but who could really say anything against it? It simply wasn't worth the trouble.

Fleur offered the woman a curt nod and nearly smiled when she saw the silver plaque in her filthy hand.
"Let me out first," the woman demanded, and Fleur nearly shook her head before realizing an easier way. There was no need to negotiate, really, and so she simply nodded to keep the muggle from being alarmed and pointed her wand at her.

"Stay relaxed," she ordered, and the woman nodded. "Imperio."

It was a given that the woman wouldn't be able to resist. Starved, beaten, and broken, she barely had the energy to stay conscious, let alone struggle against Fleur's spell. The witch was pleased, thinking that using one of the darkest curses she knew would win her plenty of points from the judges.

"Throw me that plaque," Fleur demanded, and the bewitched woman did as told.

"You promised to let her go," a young man in one of the lowest cages howled. "You promised to let her go!"

Fleur forced out a horribly unamused giggle, and shook her head before grabbing the plaque from the floor to read the number scratched on it. By the time the portkey activated, the whole storage was full of screaming. The last thing Fleur saw was the woman's crying face, her thin hands clutching at the bars, begging to be taken away.

Startled, Harry turned abruptly towards the door and raised his wand. The wailing didn't stop for what felt like an eternity, and when it did, it simply dwindled down into heavy sobbing. Right outside the door. Harry shuddered, and hoped from the bottom of his heart that whoever was there wouldn't look into the room through the small window of the door.

Moving so his back was against the wall rather than the door, Harry focused on the corpse with renewed vigor. His hands were shaking when he used one of the simplest cutting charms to split open the witch's stomach, and he had to take a step back at the horrible smell that hit him like a wave.

'Don't throw up,' Harry told himself with as much determination as he could muster, clenched his eyes shut and reaching with his hand to lean against the wall. He stepped on something soft, and he knew without watching that it was the pile of kidneys. Disgusting. He didn't want to think of what else he had managed to step on during the search so far.

The heavy sobbing turned into miserable mumbles, and it was only then that Harry could determine that the person was indeed a man - if it was a person at all. Deciding to use the bubble-head charm to help him breathe easier, Harry returned to looking for the plaque inside the corpse. He had never seen the insides of another human being from such a short distance, and had it been a... a golem or a puppet, Harry would have been able to treat the whole thing as simply educational.

Now, however, he could only hope that the witch had no family who would be watching Harry do this to her.

He was so focused on making sure that the plaque was not inside the body that it took Harry a few minutes to realize that even the muttering had quieted down. Feeling a chill go down his spine, Harry slowly looked up towards the doorway, and flinched back. A face was pressed against the tiny window of the door, and small blood-shot eyes were staring at him, glazed with tears and grief.

"Please," the man on the other side of the door whispered. "Please, let me in."

Harry's hands shook as he continued his search, becoming increasingly frustrated and frightened. He needed to locate the plaque, since he couldn't summon it, and oh-- wasn't that the solution? Angry at
himself for not realizing it sooner, Harry stepped away from the body and balanced his wand on his palm.

"Boy, please," the man shrieked, his voice desperate. "Please, let me in! I won't hurt you, I promise! Look, I have no weapons on me!"

"Point me," Harry whispered, doing his best to ignore the man who was trying in vain to shove his hands through the small window. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't help noticing the white, stubby fingers slick with blood. He was fiercely glad for having charmed the door to stay locked. What would have happened, had the man been able to barge in?

Harry's wand pointed towards the other corpse, specifically at the belly, and the boy renewed the bubblehead charm before proceeding with the search. As soon as he had turned towards the wizard's corpse, the man on the other side of the door had fallen silent for a brief moment, before he whispered:

"You know they sent me here for you," he said, the tone of his voice no longer fearful or desperate. It was in no way pleasant, either. "They said, if you can get the boy, you go free. I couldn't say no, you know. I don't want to die here, and if you don't open this door right now, then that's exactly what will happen to me. Would you want that, darling? Do you want to be the reason why I'm dead?"

Harry swallowed thickly and shuddered, as the man continued:

"I wanted to kill you at first," he said. "I'm so hungry, boy. I would have killed you and gobbled you up like the prissy little bitch you pureblood brats always are. But I wouldn't do that anymore, not to you. You're such a nice boy, aren't you? If you open this door now, I won't hurt you, darling. I'll show you a good time, yeah? Something mummy and daddy wanted to hide from you. You're a big boy after all, right? Open the door and this uncle can show you some games big boys play."

Bile rose up Harry's throat as he understood what the man was implying. Even the rotten intestines of the dead wizard beneath his hands were more bearable than what he was hearing, and Harry knew that if the man was to somehow barge in now - if he managed to unlock the door - Harry would shoot him with the strongest curses he ever learned. It was strange how fear made murder seem like a viable option.

"Saw your pretty eyes," the man groaned, breathing heavily. "Come on, baby, bite those lips and look at me. Open the door, sweetheart. Open the fucking door right now or I'll break it. I'll be angry if I have to do that, and you won't like me when I'm angry, you won't. I'll grab that fucking hair of yours and shove my—"

Harry nearly sobbed with relief when he found the silver plaque peeking from under all the blood and fat. He tugged it free and wiped the worst filth off it, though it was hard to do with how soiled the sleeves of his uniform had become. He squinted at the four little numbers scratched on the surface of the plaque.

"Zero," Harry read aloud, and cringed when the man on the other side of the door began hitting it with his fists. For a moment he contemplated sending a hex through the window but didn't want to waste any time on that. Not when leaving had finally become an option. "Zero, three, nine."

The tug of the portkey had never been so welcome as then, when it took Harry away to safety.
George found himself standing in the middle of a square, finely decorated room with white walls and a floor covered by thick Persian carpets. It was hard to pay attention to the furniture or even the expensive, gilded paintings and vases, however, when there were a dozen children standing with their noses touching the wall at random intervals, unmoving.

"Who's here?" asked a loud, sharp voice, startling George. The wizard turned towards the source, and hastily pulled out his wand. On a chair by the fireplace was a woman, so fragile she could disappear and so wrinkled that George couldn't tell where her eyes and mouth were. Her dress was liberally decorated with pearls and ivory, and her fingers were held down by heavy bejeweled golden rings. The long, sharp nails were digging into the dark wood of a thick cane.

George remained silent, his heart thundering in his chest. He didn't remember a day when he had been this afraid, and for the first time he regretted his desire to participate.

"Who dares to come to a poor, blind lady's house," the woman said then, her voice gaining a rather cruel tone. Her eyes were now slightly ajar, but only white could be seen from them. Blind! Never before had George been so delighted to find out that someone was blind. "I heard you, you know. You ought to come and greet me lest I set my little beasts on you."

Still unwilling to speak, George silently conjured a small cat instead, setting it loose. The animal meowed, and the old woman relaxed.

"A cat," she said with a snort, before she raised her voice again. "If there's a cat in here, eat it."

And, much to George's horror, one of the little children by the wall took a few steps back from it, turned, and lunged at the cat. It was only then that George could move, the sound of his steps masked by the noise caused by the child and the cat it was eating.

Too soon the child was done, the dead cat was thrown into the fire, and silence reigned once again. George breathed as quietly as he could while looking around in the room, hoping to spot the silver plaque he had come here to look for. He was sweating nervously, knowing that if reaching the plaque required opening a drawer or moving anything, he would be caught.

For once, luck was on his side as he noticed the silver plaque on a small table across the room. It was simply there, covered by nothing that should cause George any trouble. The only difficulty now was in making his way across the room without being heard. Which wasn't going to happen easily. Not only would he have to get to the plaque, but staying so close to the hag and her children while reading the numbers aloud was bound to end up badly. The more distance George managed to put between them, the better.

Ready with another animal in mind, George took a step forward, stopping the instant the hag perked up.

"Who's here?" she shrieked again. "Who dares to come in uninvited?"

Resisting the urge to swallow, knowing that that was yet another sound that could get him caught, George wordlessly conjured a puppy and set it loose. The hag snorted, leaning back in her chair again.

"If there's a dog here," she said. "Eat it."

And once more one of the children - a girl with ribbons in her hair - stepped away from the wall and lunged at the animal. George wondered why the children did not notice him - or if they did, did not mention him to the old woman - but decided to not think of matters that were working in his favour...
Yet again George had to stop before reaching the plaque as the child was done with its meal far too fast. Yet another animal was thrown into the fire, and George felt sorry for having to conjure something that would die seconds later, and he didn't want to imagine what his family was thinking of him now. Refusing to allow his thoughts to distract him from the task at hand, George took one more step and managed to take a hold of the plaque.

"Is it a cat?" the hag suddenly snarled again. "If it's a cat, eat it!" No child moved, as there was no cat in the room. George held his breath for as long as he could, praying for a miracle.

"Is it a dog, then?" the hag continued. "Is it a dog or something else? If it's a dog, eat it!" When no child moved this time either, the hag leaned forward in her chair, and took a deep breath. George was frozen where he stood, fear making him unable to move. It was only when he thought of Fred, and the candy that they had been designing for prank purposes recently, than he figured what to conjure next.

A small canary flew a few feet further into the room, its wings flapping loudly, before it stumbled down and dropped onto a table. The hag tilted her head, her blind eyes turned to where the canary had fallen.

"I hear a bird," she said, "but I smell a boy."

The hag then fell silent, but did not relax. The fire crackled loudly, but not loud enough to hide even the faintest of whispers. No, if George wanted to be able to read aloud the numbers without being attacked, he would have to figure out how to make the place noisier.

"Boy," the hag said suddenly, startling him. Her voice was sweet, and perhaps George could have mistaken her for a kind grandmother, had he not heard her before. "Come and sit with me, son."

When no response came forth, the old woman made a disgusted sound, before she spoke the words that chilled George to the bone: "If there's a boy in this room," she started, her voice gleeful. George, unwilling to waste a single second that could bring him closer to being a snack for her freaky children, decided to forego silence and simply run while reading the four numbers aloud as fast as he could.

By the time the portkey finally whisked him away, George was nearly unconscious with pain.

Harry felt absurdly grateful for sunshine and breathed the fresh air with greedy gulps. The portkey had thrown him roughly on the same area it had taken him from, and the impact left his vision swimming. He barely registered the hand that grabbed his arm and hauled him to stand up, and it took him a moment to even see Sirius's face beaming down at him.

"Brilliantly done," Sirius said, enthusiastically, looking pleased with whatever he had seen Harry do. Had he seen the man behind the door? Had Sirius heard what the man had said to Harry? "That was brilliant!"

"What the fuck was brilliant?" Harry said, unable to smile or collect his thoughts, and for once not bothering with keeping his words proper the way his mother had always instructed him to do. The fear that had felt so overwhelming moments ago still lingered, surrounding him like a thick, mouldy blanket that made something inside him scream. What was even worse, though, was the knowledge that he had reached a point where murder had... where killing someone he viewed as a threat had become something he would have done given the chance. And oh, had he truly reached that point so easily? The thought of simply stunning him or knocking him unconscious hadn't even crossed
Harry's mind.

But if that man with his blood-slippery hands and revolting words and repulsive intentions had managed to break into the mortuary, Harry would have aimed a bone-breaking hex at his head, and nothing would have made him feel better than to see his skull cave in like a--

"No," Harry said aloud, trying to shake off the thoughts. He felt nauseated, and didn't have it in him to look at Tom or Bellatrix, or even his friends in the audience. Everything was too overwhelming, the noises were too loud, the colours too bright, and he still couldn't get his eyes to focus on anything. "Sirius, I'm not feeling good--"

"Delacour came before you," Sirius continued, as if he hadn't heard Harry's words. "But her performance, while clever, wasn't nearly as entertaining as yours. Weasley's was brilliant, too, but--oh, there he is, just turned up. Needs healers, from the look of it. Poor lad, lost an ear." Harry's head snapped up just in time to see two healers patch George up as well as they could do right then. A few feet to the left of him stood Fleur. The witch was pale and there was a wild look in her eyes, and Harry suspected that she wasn't faring any better than he was, despite how put together she looked.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sirius hollered, and was rewarded with whistles and cheers. "The first task of the Triwizard Tournament is over!"

'First,' Harry thought, wanting nothing more than to obliviate himself. 'First of three. Graceful Circe, I will not survive this.'

"We have had quite the show here," Sirius said. "But now it's time to see if the judges enjoyed it as much as we did. On to the grading, starting from the lady who came first: the champion of Beauxbatons, Fleur Delacour!" Harry wondered where she had ended up - despite looking quite shaken, she was clean and didn't seem to have had suffered through filth.

Then again, perhaps she had had the mind to use cleaning charms, Harry then realized, while watching the judges draw Fleur's grades in the air. Meliflua's score turned into a ten, followed by Parkinson's nine and Bellatrix's eight.

"An average of nine," Sirius said. "Let's give a well-deserved round of applause to this brave young lady before we move on to the next competitor: the champion of Durmstrang, Harry Potter!"

Harry looked at Tom, though he knew that the man wasn't a judge and thus wouldn't grade him. He still felt disoriented and he needed to shower and wash the filth off of him as soon as humanly possible. It wasn't until Sirius nudged him that Harry turned to take a look at the numbers and managed to muster up something akin to a smile. A row of nines kept him on equal footing with Fleur.

He thought of the man he had left there, on the other side of the door, and wondered if he would have truly gone through with what he had implied. Had he, was he, had he really looked at Harry and decided that rather than kill him, he wanted to--

Someone would have stopped him before anything would have happened to Harry, for sure. Some things went far past the point of entertainment, and-- and George Weasley had lost an ear and Circe, how was that even something that was allowed to happen? Had Sirius focused so much on entertainment that he had forgotten their safety completely?

The judges hadn’t been so impressed with him. George Weasley lost an ear and received two eights and a nine for his effort, as if his loss was nothing but an error on his part that he should be punished for. But perhaps they could attach it again? Worse injuries have been fixed successfully.
'That doesn't change the fact that it happened,' Harry thought, and oh, it had been such a long time since he had felt like the world was as wrong as it was. Women who were ignored, children who were put in danger in the name of entertainment, and millions of people looking right at it all and not seeing anything wrong. He had chosen to change Tom rather than to change the world—

No, not really even that. He had promised to... neutralize Tom, as if he was the only thing that was wrong in the world. As if without him the world would be fixed and people would stop being awful. Harry took a deep breath and stood straighter when a thought crept into his mind: a possibility. Rather than work on changing things as they are on his own, perhaps he could talk to Tom and make him see sense?

'He won't take me seriously,' Harry thought instantly. 'Not yet.'

But eventually, he would.

And that's why Harry finally pulled his arm out of Sirius's hold, took a few steps forward, and waved to the audience. His eyes were unfocused but his heart certainly wasn't. With a smile he could barely keep on his face, Harry decided that come what may, he would succeed. No matter what he became in the end.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS
Graphic gore (dissection, torture via starvation)
Sexual threats (verbal, no attempted assault)
Mentioned and briefly described abuse (slavery, violence, animal abuse)

More rude awakenings for Harry in the next chapter -and a particularly nasty one that concerns Sirius.
"There's an after-party in the Great Hall," Sirius told Harry, Fleur, and George - who was supported by the healers from both sides - as they were ushered to the hospital wing. "You'll be checked now for any injuries and treated if there's a cause for that. Don't worry, George, you'll get your ear fixed right away, I'm sure. Then off you'll go to shower - Harry, that stench of someone's intestines is particularly awful. A cleaning charm can do only so much, son."

Harry wanted to find the right words that he could respond with, but found himself unable to speak. His heart felt heavy in his chest and the hand he had used to wave towards the audience felt cold and numb. He kept waiting for Sirius to stop making light of the situation, to look at Harry and say that yes, he too understood that something was very wrong. He didn't want to believe that the smile on his godfather's face was genuine.

"Your tasks will be shown again on repeat during the festivities," Sirius said, as if he was delivering a particularly delightful piece of news. "You will get to see what the others were up against. You all did really well. Everyone was definitely pleased with your performance."

"It was nothing," Fleur said, though Harry found her smile far less convincing than it had been earlier in the day. "I found the whole experience very... exciting."

"And you, Harry?" Sirius asked, his hand heavy on Harry's shoulder. "How did you find it?"

"Educating," Harry replied, thinking of all the things he had indeed learned. Perhaps not, however, the things Sirius and the others had intended. He couldn't help but wonder what his parents would have done - would they have just accepted things the way Sirius seemed to do? This wasn't the time or the place to ask about it, though, so Harry plastered a smile on his face and felt horrible for it, swallowing his tears and holding back his urge to question his godfather's sanity.

His godfather's morals.

The awful feeling did not fade, not even after he had showered, taken a pepper up potion, and been redressed in a fancy set of dark green dress robes that he had never seen before. Apparently receiving anonymous, random gifts from people who considered one of the champions their 'favourite' was quite normal - Harry had seen Fleur trying on several sets of jewelry, and even George had received a beautifully crafted cane that he could lean on while his ear healed. People had been very fast with their gifts after the first task.

The Great Hall where the after-party was held was packed with people. Some sort of music was playing, people were dancing and laughing, and Harry could see wine being served at every turn. Wizards and witches of all ages were dressed in heavy, expensive robes and a vast variety of sparkling diamonds and golden rings and necklaces. Harry saw Mette dancing in the crowd, and wondered absently whether or not Truls was somewhere as well. Anthony Lestrange was hovering near Silvia Nott, who in turn was fully focused on the drink in her hand. Fleur was instantly swept away into the crowd, and George, who was leaning on the cane he had received, looked overwhelmed and sick at the sight of the dancing couples.

At the other side of the hall, on the platform, sat Voldemort surrounded by seven Death Eaters, one of them being Bellatrix. Three huge misty spheres were floating around the hall, showing the tasks that had taken place earlier in the day, and Harry felt strange watching himself struggle to find the plaque. He didn't understand much of the place George had been sent to, but seeing where Fleur had been was enough to shock him to the point of nearly falling on his arse.
A part of him, some part that had given up on finding a single good thing about today, wasn't surprised. Of course there were people locked in cages. Of course it was entertainment. Another part of him, a part so angry he barely contained it, wanted to deny what he was seeing. Deny it, find another explanation. Maybe they weren't people, maybe they were golems. Though no, he knew better than to assume that they would waste golems on a task if they had Muggles at hand.

With shaking legs Harry turned to leave the Great Hall, only to realize that George Weasley had left right before him. After a moment of contemplation, he ran to catch up to Ron's brother. George, his gait unsteady even with the cane supporting him, tilted his head heavily to the right before turning to look at Harry.

"Hi Harry," George said, his voice strangely uneven. He gestured for Harry to walk by his right side, and offered him a smile. "What brings you out here?"

"How's your ear?" Harry asked in response, and the Weasley shrugged.

"They attached it, but the hearing is gone," George admitted. "That's why I couldn't dance, my balance is a bit... jinxed right now. It's going to take some practice before I can get back to Quidditch, too."

"Aren't there potions to bring back the hearing at least partially?" Harry asked, feeling awful. George sighed and shrugged.

"Sure, there are. But they're pretty expensive," the other boy replied, and though Harry expected him to continue, he didn't. The two walked in silence side by side, until they reached one of the corridors with a view to the lake.

"It's strange," George said, his voice slightly louder than Harry remembered it being. He was leaning forward, his eyes set on the lake and the evening wind ruffling his red bangs. "I lost hearing in one ear and my balance is so bad right now I need a cane and still can't walk a straight line, but somehow I feel like I can see better. I wonder why's that."

"You're taking this remarkably well," Harry blurted out. "How can you manage that? I didn't suffer any losses but the whole tournament makes me sick."

"I don't know," George said. "I think Fred's the only one who gets it, really. Maybe he understands it even better than I do. My friends think I should be depressed, but I'm so overwhelmed by all the things that I'm already noticing better - because when you can't hear as well as before, you have to start relying on your other senses, you know. You see more. Anyway, you said the tournament makes you sick?" Harry didn't begrudge George the change of topic, suspecting that despite the positive outlook, the other wizard didn't enjoy dwelling too much on what had happened.

"Did you see Fleur's task?"

"The Muggles? Yes."

"Are you fine with it?" Harry asked warily, and George shrugged and shook his head.

"No, not really. I think there're quite a lot of people who're not completely all right with something like that. But people are happy to be on the right side of prejudice - not the receiving end of it - so they manage to put up with how things are."

"How can they consider themselves decent folk, though?" Harry asked, and George looked at him with hints of pity in his expression.
"Our whole system tells us every day that muggles are a different species and that it’s the norm to treat them this way: of course nobody will find it wrong anymore," the Weasley said quietly. "Except, well, muggle-born students. It’s a wonder that they’re even allowed at Hogwarts, considering the way their relatives would be treated. But, Harry, I don’t think this is something we should discuss. Especially not here." Harry pressed his lips into a tight line, before nodding slowly.

"I think I’ll go to sleep," Harry said then. "I can't stand the thought of going back to the Great Hall to celebrate."

"You and me both," George agreed. "Good night, Harry."

Harry's Sunday session with Tom began too soon for the boy's liking, and for once he wished he could opt out of a meeting with the Dark Lord. He didn't dare to, however, in fear of Tom deciding that he wasn't worth any Sundays anymore, after all. Leaning against one of the dusty desks, Harry kept his eyes on the Dark Lord who had once again conjured a rabbit. The boy slowly shook his head, making the Dark Lord scowl.

"What is wrong with you?" Tom hissed sullenly, clearly displeased. "How can you not manage to slice up one rabbit, and think that you have any chance to win the tournament? You did quite well on your first task, but you could have done better."

"How?" Harry asked, though not really wanting an answer. "The whole task was... I hated it."

"You should have unlocked the door and killed him," Tom replied, and shook his head. "It doesn't matter if you hated it. It's very accurate to what would be demanded of you as a Death Eater. Do things out of your comfort zone, isn't that what every devil’s advocate preaches these days?"

"There’s a difference, though," Harry said, fully aware of the risk he was taking my speaking up. "There’s a difference between killing someone in a battle, and murdering someone. Just like there’s a difference between war prisoners and locking up people in small cages like animals. In fact, animals shouldn’t be treated the way those people were treated either."

"Oh, spare me," Tom snorted, and vanished the rabbit. "You could learn from Delacour, Harry. Now that is a cold, calculating witch who sees muggles for what they are. Learn from her."

Harry felt strangely upset by what the Dark Lord had said, and shook his head before scowling. He knew that he was reckless when angry, but sometimes he simply didn't care. "If I hadn’t locked that door—"

"But you did."

"And if the man had come in."

"You would have killed him."

"If I couldn’t have," Harry snapped, this time louder. "He could have overpowered me and stripped me and done all the things he implied he wanted to do. Would you have punished me for it the way George lost points for losing his ear?"

"That— No," Tom said, an odd look suddenly on his face. "It wouldn't have gone that far."

"See, that’s what I would have thought too," Harry replied. "But then I found out that George Weasley lost his ear. Say, how many people clapped in the audience when they watched that
"You don't even know what happened," Tom snarled, before narrowing his eyes at the boy and stepping closer. "And watch your tone when you speak to me. I allow you plenty of my forgiveness. I waste more of it on you than on anyone else. However, I do not find disrespect endearing or brave. Don't take for granted what I've denied everyone else."

"You could change the world," Harry insisted, his voice far too brittle for his own liking. "You could —"

"I already have," Tom replied sharply. "I changed the world once already."

"Change it for the better, I mean! Fight against discrimination—"

"It has changed for the better. Look at how the society is flourishing!"

"You changed it to suit you and the people who were already in power," Harry said, standing up and moving away from the desk. He wanted out, consequences be damned. "Your purebloods with money and power are flourishing. Anyone with muggle relations—" Harry's voice disappeared when Tom cast a silencing spell on the boy. Once realizing what had happened, Harry closed his mouth, crossed his arms, and glared at Tom.

The Dark Lord felt... alarmed.

"I have sentenced men and women to die for less," Tom said quietly, gesturing for Harry to once again sit on a chair. "I daresay if your admirers heard you, they'd accuse you of treason." Harry opened his mouth, but with the spell still on, he couldn't say a thing. Tom shook his head.

"There is no peaceful coexistence in reality," the Dark Lord continued. "You're young, you're naive. You've also lost the rest of your family recently and only yesterday experienced something that scared you. You're confused and angry and rebellious and lashing out, and that's the only reason why I will let this slide. But never again, Harry Potter. Never again." He then cancelled the silencing spell, and took a deep breath before moving on to another subject, as if that had been the end of that discussion. In a way, it certainly was.

"I took a quick look at phenomena that can create a rope made of light, but I need a more detailed description of it to be able to narrow it down to something specific. Right now it could be anything from an out of control life debt manifestation to a compulsion curse."

"Truls,' Harry thought immediately, and paled. He had been about to stand up again in order to leave, but suddenly his legs felt powerless. One look at Harry's expression had Tom eyeing him with an angry expression.

"There's something you're not telling me," the Dark Lord said.

'There's a lot I'm not telling you,' Harry thought, then shook his head while clenching his eyes shut for a moment and taking a few calming breaths. The disappointment that had swept into his whole being with every word Tom had thrown at him earlier was still there, aching strongly in his bones with a pain so deep it felt permanent. "It's probably a life debt... manifestation, thing, whatever."

"No," Tom hissed. "It's not 'whatever'. Tell me about this life debt. Or rather, tell me who owes you that life debt."

"How do you know someone owes me and not the other way around?"
"Harry."

"It's been a few years," Harry admitted reluctantly. "It didn't start out anywhere near this bad. It's been getting worse just recently."

"People glorify life debts," Tom said with obvious scorn, "forgetting that they are dangerous. Give me the name of the person and I will—"

"And you'll kill them?" Harry interrupted, feeling exhausted and drained. He finally pushed himself up and something in his expression must have gotten through to the Dark Lord, who fell silent and eyed him warily. "I'm tired. I think I'll go and rest for today."

"Perhaps that is for the best," Tom agreed. "If it will keep you away from dangerous thoughts, then do put more time into resting. We will meet next Sunday again and discuss how you'll be rid of that life debt. Focus on your studies and the tournament, and leave matters that you don't understand out of your thoughts."

"If I must," Harry muttered, reaching the door and unlocking it.

"Harry," Tom called after him, making the boy stop and turn. The Dark Lord's expression was something Harry couldn't quite figure out, when the man continued: "Schools aside, you are my champion. Act like it. Once you win the tournament, your whole life as you live it now will change."

Harry closed his eyes, his fingers curling around the doorknob, as he tried to collect his thoughts. He knew that he would need to endure things he would hate, and he had already decided to do his best no matter what. With this in mind, Harry nodded.

"I... I won't disappoint you again."

But the further away he walked from the classroom, the more he thought of all the things that needed to change, and the things his talk with George Weasley had made him realize: only muggle-born students would understand the necessity of change, and risk what they had to bring that change. He needed... he needed to recruit a muggle-born. Someone smart. Someone cunning and brave who could only benefit from the change.

He needed to recruit Hermione Granger.

* * *

Before continuing with his plans regarding Granger, Harry decided to drop by Sirius's office. The time spent with Tom had left him tired and anxious, but the anger he couldn't let go of made him feel restless. Even if he went back to the dorm room, he wouldn't be able to sleep.

He wasn't sure how to discuss what was bothering him to Sirius. The less people knew about how he truly felt of the way things were run now, the more space it would give him for doing whatever he needed to do. Harry greatly suspected that Sirius, while not necessarily entirely satisfied with Voldemort's action throughout his reign, was content enough to not mind keeping things the way they were. However, absolute separation from Muggles was one thing, and oppression was another issue altogether.

He could blame Tom for many things, but none of it changed the fact that the one who had designed the tasks of the tournament had been Sirius. He had been the one to decide that it was all right to have muggles in cages, and had considered everything that had happened something acceptable and even expected. Harry couldn't forget how casually Sirius had treated George's injury, and it was hard to accept that his godfather would be...would be like that.
'Then again, how stupid can I be,' Harry thought as he reached the painting that hid the doorway to Sirius's temporary office. 'I never thought that there'd be a reason why Sirius was part of Voldemort's Inner Circle. Of course he wouldn't be like James.'

With that in mind, Harry knocked at the painting and didn't have to wait for long before it was pushed aside, and a delighted Bellatrix ushered him in. "Cousin!" the witch all but shrieked, her thin arms wrapped around Harry's shoulders with unsettling ease. "Look who's here!"

"Harry," Sirius said, grinning widely as he turned away from a man Harry recognized as Rodolphus Lestrange. "What a surprise!"

"If you're busy, I can come later," Harry said quickly. He hadn't expected to find anyone there with his godfather, and truly didn't think that it would be wise to spend more time around Bellatrix than what was absolutely necessary. The witch had a clearly different opinion on the matter, her grip on Harry unflinching as she led him towards one of the chairs in the office.

"Yesterday was fantastic," the witch whispered loudly, sitting down right next to Harry and speaking to him with familiarity that Harry couldn't understand. He had never spent time with Bellatrix before - not properly - and yet the way she treated him spoke of a relationship that couldn't possibly exist. "You did such good job, Harry."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry said carefully, and the witch smiled widely.

"Just call me Bella, darling," she told him. "Such a thrill, wasn't it? That mudblood behind the door, trying to get to you. What would you have done if he had somehow managed to break the door? Did you have any spells in mind?"

Recognizing the benefits that would come with Bellatrix's approval, Harry did his best to sound proud when he said: "A bone-breaker to the skull. It would have been... effective." It was a funny thing, though not amusing at all, how a lie could taste like ash in his mouth.

"That would have been a sight to see," Sirius chortled, and though Harry knew that his godfather was quite good at acting, his amusement was too obviously genuine this time. He clenched his fists to hide the shaking of his hands, and tried to ignore the sick feeling that seemed to fill him from right below his heart. He knew then that despite all the love throughout the years, despite all the support Sirius had given him so far, Harry wouldn't find the common ground between them in this case.

"Well, Harry," Sirius continued, "what brings you here today?"

Hideously uncomfortable with the thought of saying anything that could be considered even slightly incriminating in front of the Lestranges, Harry latched on to the first thing he could think of: "It's about my dad. You said we can't delay it forever. I want to make a statement."

His words made the smile on Sirius's face disappear, and while he didn't frown, the man certainly didn't seem pleased either. "Now? Harry, I don't think-- Well, wait for just a minute, then. We'll talk about this soon enough."

"That means he's kicking us out," Rodolphus Lestrange said, and offered Harry the kind of smile he could imagine for a man who didn't smile much. "Bella, unhand the boy."

"If I must," Bellatrix replied, rolling her eyes. She lightly kissed Harry's cheek before standing up. "Until next time, cousin."

"Until next time," Sirius said, echoing her words. As soon as the couple had left, he locked the door and turned to look at Harry with a troubled expression. "So, you want to..."
“Tell the people that James is dead, yes,” Harry cut in, and as he said that, a sudden twinge of satisfaction surprised him. Yes, he wanted to tell the world about what had happened to his father, but... he... He didn't even understand why the thought of doing something that had seemed so terrifying and impossible before, was suddenly exactly what he wanted to do – most urgently!

“I think you should wait,” Sirius replied. “It's too soon. I mean, I know I told you that it needs to be done soon, but really, you've still got some time left. I don't think anyone even questioned why James wasn't present to watch the first task.”

“No,” Harry said, keeping his eyes fixed on Sirius and noting the twitch in his expression and feeling somehow... strangely satisfied. "I want to do it."

"And you will," Sirius assured him. "Just not right now. I need to prepare myself.” It made sense, surely. Harry knew that he couldn't fault the man for wanting to prepare for any reactions that would come his way once people found out about James's death. And yet, what had earlier been vicious satisfaction was now anger. Unfamiliar anger that didn't mean bursts of courage and grand rebellions. This time it wasn't about bravery, or doing the right thing. He didn't know what to name the feeling that wanted him to come up with something to say, something so harsh that Sirius would feel a fraction of what Harry was feeling.

The words came to him from some corner in his heart. A corner he hadn't even known before. Harry stood up from his chair, eyed Sirius with undisguised anger and said: "Do you ever get tired of prioritizing your own feelings?"

"Pardon?" Sirius blurted, an expression of shock on his face. "Harry, what--"

“I know you say you love me, but do you actually realize that I’m a person?” Harry asked then, feeling hot and cold at the same time. "Why are you always so hung up on yourself, your views, your suffering? He was my dad, you know. My father. The only family I had left. And instead of realizing that I have to live without him, you only focused on not having a friend you barely spent time with after mum died.”

"You're one to talk,” Sirius shot back instantly, scowling. "I can't recall you spending too much time around him, or am I wrong?"

"Maybe it escaped your mind,” Harry said, feeling anger and sadness so deep it seemed to reach every corner of his body. "But I was at a boarding school. Think about that for a while, and don't talk to me until I can look at you without wanting to hex you with a bone-breaker."

He left, wondering how things could turn to the worst so fast, and how anger could exist as strongly as love in his heart.

 asterisk 

The corridors were mostly empty, which Harry was glad for. He did not feel like talking to anyone, and the thought of having Truls or Mette asking him about what was making him upset made Harry feel even worse. How could he explain to them what had made him so disappointed in Sirius? He had thought that his ever-increasing annoyance with the man had been solely due to what the tournament had revealed of his beliefs towards muggles, but the more he thought of how Sirius had handled James's funeral, the angrier he got.

Was it fair? Perhaps not. Harry didn't know.

All he knew was that he couldn't count on Sirius to support him the way Harry wanted him to. Like
George had said, too many people were simply relieved to not be on the receiving end of the racism and abuse. They wouldn't march for the equality of others if it came with the risk of losing something they had. However, when it came to oppression, standing silently and feigning neutrality worked only to support the bully.

It was strange for Harry that he felt more helpless in the face of Sirius's prejudice than Tom's. Tom hated muggles. He... Harry knew that Tom enjoyed hurting and humiliating them, as if to say: "look, we are both human. But I am superior." Tom did what he did with full understanding of the fact that he was being cruel and while he recognized the right of muggles to exist, he simply chose to ignore it for his own amusement.

Sirius, on the other hand, approached the whole matter with moral blindness. He didn't think that the treatment of muggles was unfair because he didn't consider them a species worthy of being acknowledged. It's as if the connection between muggles and muggle-born witches and wizards was something he didn't comprehend. Absence of magic meant absence of worth to him, and Merlin, if that logic didn't explain the way many Purebloods treated their squib offspring.

Harry was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't see the person approaching him until they cheerfully called his name.

"My dear Harry," Gilderoy Lockhart all but sang, swaggering closer towards the boy. "What a troubled expression you have, my young friend. What's wrong?"

"Where've you been?" Harry blurted, eyeing the man approaching him with confusion, momentarily distracted from his thoughts. "Do you even work here anymore?"

"Of course I do," Gildy replied. "I had a book signing tour so a substitute covered for me for a little while. Did you miss me terribly? Ah, once you've had a taste of the company of your idol, it's hard to give up, isn't it? Well, never fret--"

"It's been well over a month, that's hardly a little while."

"I am here now."

"Yes, I can see that," Harry said. "If you don't mind, I'll just--"

"Your performance yesterday was interesting," Gildy interrupted, and Harry scowled. The older wizard eyed him with a slightly weary expression before he gestured for the boy to follow him. "My new office - I moved and redecorated, you see - is right around the corner. Let's go, I have a few things to ask you about."

"Hopefully nothing to do with the entertainment I provided yesterday," Harry muttered, following Gildy reluctantly. He didn't usually mind the wizard, but right now he felt too restless and angry and sad to really be able to put up with anyone. However, it wasn't as if he had anywhere else to be, and simply walking away would be rude.

Gildy's office reflected its owner well, with numerous paintings of himself hanging on the walls and books and awards scattered everywhere. The man pushed him to sit on a colourfully decorated chair and took a seat right across from him. Moments later food appeared on the table between them, and it was only then that Harry realized how little he had actually eaten since yesterday.

"Mulled wine," Gildy said, handing Harry a mug of the hot, spicy drink. "Alcohol-free, of course. Grab a cinnamon bun, Harry, they're absolutely divine."

They were. They really were. The mulled wine reminded Harry of all the Christmases that he had
spent with his parents, and the cinnamon buns brought so many fun, happy memories of the time before Durmstrang, before death, before the Tournament. There was a terrible ache in his heart and it wasn't long before he felt tears burning behind his eyelids. He didn't want to be angry. He was sick of being disappointed.

Harry wanted to leave. To go to some far-away country, buy a small house in a peaceful town and live without any of the worries that plagued him. But how could he, when there were so many who weren't allowed to even exist simply based on who they were born to be? Harry didn't want to become one of the people who ignored the suffering of others simply because it didn't affect him.

It wasn't until Gilderoy reached forward with a napkin that Harry realized that he was crying. Accepting the napkin from his former tutor, the boy wiped his tears as best as he could, and leaned back on the chair with a heavy sigh.

"Is it the tournament?" Gildy asked. "Why don't you ask your father to visit? Perhaps some comfort from family could--"

"James died in the summer," Harry replied, wondering if he would have to repeat the words to a journalist soon. Gildy's eyes were wide as he stared at him, before he grimaced.

"I'm so sorry," the man said. "I... I didn't know. Was there an announcement? How are you feeling? You're fourteen, is your godfather--"

"There was no announcement," Harry cut in. "James died. Then Sirius had him buried. I didn't-- There was no funeral and no announcement. Sirius doesn't think that we should make a statement about James's death yet but I disagree. I feel like... I just. I disagree." How on earth could he tell Lockhart that the longer his father's death remained a secret, the more Harry felt like he was dragging the man's ghost around with him?

"Do you know why your godfather does not want for the information to be revealed yet?" Gildy asked, refilling Harry's cup. "You're one of the three champions, it's a matter of a few short weeks before a curious journalist decides to take a look at your life story and reveal what happened on their own terms. And that will be unpleasant. I know how journalists are."

"I know," Harry said. "But what do I do? How do I handle them?"

"You want to make it known? Despite your godfather's wishes?"

"If I can."

"Oh, you most certainly can," Gildy said. "There are plenty of reporters milling around, aren't there? Any of them will be delighted if you approached them. The difficulty isn't in finding a journalist or even with making them interview you, no. The hard part is making them write what you want them to write."

"And how do I do that?" Harry asked, feeling a smidge of hope stirring in his heart. "How could I possibly succeed in that?"

"The first thing to keep in mind," Gildy told him with an easy shrug, "is the importance of keeping their favour. To prevent your journalist from turning against you, you must make them believe that if you're satisfied with what they write, you will give them access to exclusive interviews. It's a commitment. A relationship. Or rather: an affair. Keep them satisfied and don't give them vague answers. I know it's tempting and I know that a lot of politicians do it, but vague answers can be twisted to suit any purpose."
"And... I don't want that?"

"No, you don't want that. You want to be in control."

"Okay," Harry muttered, and put down his drink. "What else should I know?"


By the time Harry returned to the common room in the evening, he felt exhausted, yet slightly better. Talking with Lockhart had given him an idea of what his next step would be, and though there was a lot that still remained unclear, it was still better than nothing.

"There you are," Truls said as soon as Harry stepped into the common room. "Did your tutoring really last this long?"

"No," Harry admitted, allowing his friend to pull him towards one of the available armchairs by the fire. "I dropped by Sirius's office to talk with him."

"Did you take a look at the Sunday Special yet?" Mette asked from the couch, narrowing her eyes slightly at Truls who was leaning against the armrest of the chair he had pushed Harry into. "Some local newspaper is covering the tournament."

"The Daily Prophet," Maria Rurik said, waving the paper in question in her hand. "The Daily Prophet's Sunday Special. There's one article that mentions the champions, though. Have you read it?"

"No," Harry replied. "Not sure if I want to."

"It's not too bad," Mette said. "Maria, read it aloud, will you?"

"Sure thing," the other witch said, clearly delighted as she pulled the paper closer to her face. "No interrupting me, though!"

"Yes, fine, whatever."

"The long-awaited Triwizard Tournament has finally begun, and what a beginning it has been! Sirius Black, the man in charge of the tasks - and indeed the whole tournament - has truly surprised us all with an unexpected bout of creativity and intelligence. One wonders if there were perhaps cleverer forces behind the plans that carry his signature."

"Oh Merlin what a thing to imply," Ingrid gasped, clearly appalled. "Does she have anything to back that up with?"

"No interrupting!" Maria reminded her sharply, before she continued: "This reporter had the pleasure of interviewing the three champions who gave us all quite the show on Saturday. Fleur Delacour, the champion of Beauxbatons, entered the tournament full of confidence and finished it with each one of her dyed blonde curls intact."

"Wow," Mette said. "Catty. I like it."

"Miss Delacour, not entirely a human herself, did not seem to struggle when dealing with Muggles. A secret source close to the champion claims the reason to be rather simple: Sirius Black, known for his numerous adventures with beautiful women of all kinds, had kept her well-informed on what she would need to do."
"Did she just imply what I think she did?" Harry asked, feeling sick. "Sirius would never—"

"Either she's dumb as hell or she has some sort of immunity," Mette said. "That's... that's kind of horrifying."

"Her performance - not as exciting as that of the other two champions - was vastly improved by a flawless use of the Imperius Curse," Maria read. "The witch, who's known for getting everything she sets her mind on, is clearly very familiar with casting this particular spell. Miss Delacour, whose beauty stems from the daring dash of uniqueness that her Veela blood brings to what could have otherwise been a pure lineage, tearfully revealed that her parents were reluctant to allow their daughter to participate. What could have changed their minds? Perhaps information of what her task would be?"

"She's not a human?" Anthony Lestrange yelped, and Harry saw an expression of pure disgust on his face. "Circe, how can any wizard— Ugh, I feel sick."

"Tell me about it," Maria muttered, pursing her lips. "Anyway, back to the article: the champion of Hogwarts, George Weasley, was from the beginning far less confident in his own assessment. Years of poverty have taught this young man how to watch out and be careful, it seems. It is for certain, though, that the grand prize of five thousand galleons would save his family from the brink of starvation and keep them well fed until at least some of the seven Weasley children have managed to find themselves jobs to aid in supporting the rest."

"Weasleys," Anthony sneered. "That family might be pure in blood, but that's where their worth ends. Poor, weak, and pathetic, that's what they are."

"Despite the high danger he was in during the task, Mr. Weasley's performance was adequate at best and left much to be desired - not to mention: it resulted in the loss of his ear. His reliance on tossing innocent animals to be devoured was impressive to some, but this journalist wonders if it is a sign that decent folk should watch out for. Remaining one point behind the two other contestants, Mr. Weasley will have to bring forth a genuinely impressive performance in order to catch up."

"I doubt he is," Mette drawled. "A psycho, that is."

"I agree," Anthony said. "That'd make him actually interesting, though."

"The third champion, Harry Potter of Durmstrang," Maria read, her voice louder with excitement. "Could easily be mistaken for a second year Hogwarts student." Harry flushed, and ducked his head when he heard the muffled snickers of the others around him. Truls patted his arm consolingly, but it didn't help Harry at all.

"This reporter wonders if the 14-year-old boy has a chance in winning against the considerably older and more experienced competitors in the long run. The youngest champion of the three lived through frightening moments when an adult man threatened him from the other side of a locked door, and this journalist sincerely worries if Mr. Potter's sleep will be disturbed by nightmares of what could have happened."

"Aw," Mette cooed. "Will your sleep be disturbed, Harry?"

'I don't want to ever sleep again,' Harry thought, and shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course not."
“Though young Mr. Potter’s performance did not manage to show us the alleged superiority of the Durmstrang students, it was enough to garner him a positive response from the judges,” Maria continued, before she sighed and shook her head. "The rest is about the judges. Nothing interesting there.”

"It could have been worse," Truls observed, and Harry nodded.

"I agree, just look at what she wrote about Delacour," Mette said, shaking her head. "I'll be surprised if the writer of the article doesn't get into trouble with some of the things she said."

"I don't think that she will," Viktor suddenly said, and then flushed when everyone turned to him. "I mean, it happens. Bad news and such. Journalists have the legal permission to, ah, speculate."

"Figures," Mette sighed.

"Say, Maria," Harry said. "Who wrote that article? Skeeter, right? What was her full name again?"

"Hold on," the witch said, eyeing the article in search for the name. "Ah, here it is. Skeeter. Rita Skeeter. Why?"

"No reason," Harry lied, a plan already coming together in his mind. "Just... wondering."
Finding Granger after classes on Monday was rather easy: she was in the library, hunched over a piece of parchment, working on what Harry assumed to be her homework. Her bushy hair was pulled into a ponytail and held together by a Ravenclaw tie, barring the few rebellious curls that framed her face. The wizard stood silently for a few moments, observing, before walking closer and sitting down on the chair across of her.

"Not now, Ron," Granger said, not looking up from her parchment and not even pausing with the writing she was doing.

"It's actually Harry," said Harry, startling the girl.

"Sorry," Granger said, staring at him with wide brown eyes before clearing her throat and smiling awkwardly. "Hello."

"If you're not, um, too busy," Harry started, returning her smile hesitantly. "I'd like to talk with you about something."

"Sure. I'm almost finished with my essay anyway. What can I help you with?"

"Would it be possible to talk somewhere else? It's a bit... um, private. Private matter."

Granger bit her lip and eyed him for a few quiet moments with a worried expression, before nodding and gathering her things. "I know a place. We can cast privacy charms if you want, even though it's unlikely that anyone will find us there anyway."

The place that Granger led him to was a small wooden hut near Hogwarts' infamous forest. The girl unlocked the door with a wave of her wand, and locked it as soon as Harry had followed her inside. She then cast multiple privacy charms - some were so complicated that Harry wouldn't dare to even attempt them - before sitting down and looking at him with a polite smile.

"Go on, then," she said, and Harry nodded, sitting down as well.

"First, I want us both to take a Vow of Secrecy," he said, pulling out his wand. "Because I'm about to talk about things that I really, really shouldn't speak of."

"Of course," Granger agreed easily and reached forward to touch the tip of his wand with her own. "We cannot directly or indirectly use any of the information revealed here for the purpose of attacking or harming each other. Those are my terms."

"I accept," Harry said, genuinely approving of her request. "We cannot reveal anything discussed here to anyone else, unless we both agree to it. Not by outright stating or vaguely implying. Not with written or spoken words. Those are my terms."

"I accept," Granger nodded, and a small blue spark passed through the wands. After that was done, the witch leaned back on her chair with a small smile, looking now far more at ease than she had been moments before. "All right, what is so dangerous that it needs all this?"

"You saw the first task," Harry started, and Granger grimaced, looking slightly nauseated by the mere mention of it.

"I did," she said. "Vile. Utterly barbaric."
"I agree," Harry said. "But not many do. Even people who could swear up and down that they would never torture or hurt another human being, were perfectly fine with what they saw."

"I know." Granger sounded tired and miserable. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I tried to speak with other people about what happened," Harry said, thinking of Tom. "I was told in no uncertain terms that criticizing how things are done is treason."

"That is ridiculous," Granger huffed angrily. "What kind of government cannot handle criticism?"

"The kind of government that depends on a combination of brainwashing its people and withholding important information in order to stay in power," Harry said, feeling both fearful and strangely empowered by saying those words aloud. "Think about it! The whole superiority structure is based on nothing but delusions of people who think that blood makes you superior. They justify their crimes by dehumanizing their victims, and the media helps them! When has the Daily Prophet ever questioned any of the Dark Lord's actions?"

"Never, because that would be suicide," Granger said. "People don't really know how heavily controlled the supposedly free media is. I'm surprised that you don't agree with that way of thinking, to be honest. It would be so much easier for you to just go along with everything."

"Easy, but not right," Harry said. "What kind of human would I be if I could look at all that is happening and find it acceptable?"

"A normal citizen, I suppose." Granger shrugged, looking angry again. "But, well, what to do about it? Change doesn't happen just by wishing. And I really cannot agree with the Rebels either, you know. I've investigated their ideologies - the ones that they have publicly declared, anyway - and their focus seems to be opposing the Dark Lord rather than actually fixing any of his... wrong decisions."

"Really? I hadn't... I didn't know that. I don't want to join the Rebels either. If possible, I would just like to... find out an alternative way to change things for the better."

"That is going to be incredibly difficult."

"Without a doubt," Harry agreed. "But not impossible. And I'm not saying that you and I together can change the world. I'm just saying that is has to start from somewhere."

"Why me, though?" Granger asked, crossing her arms. "No offense, Harry, but you barely know me."

"You're smart," Harry replied, "but there are many smart people out there. You're also a muggleborn. I think that you can see the importance of what I'm suggesting we do."

"You think that after what I saw, I'll consider helping you an act of self defense," Granger surmised, narrowing her eyes. "And technically, you haven't really suggested we do anything yet."

"Wouldn't it be?" Harry wanted to know. "Self defense, I mean. People are not becoming more tolerant, not really. They're getting more and more used to the horrible treatment muggles and many creatures get. Soon they'll be so desensitized that the people who will need the thrill they get from hurting muggles--"

"Will move on to the next best thing," Granger finished for him. "Muggle-born witches and wizards. And their families."
"Imagine this," Harry continued. "A young muggle-born wizard - maybe he just graduated from Hogwarts - is walking home one evening when an Auror who figures out that hey, that's a muggle-born, decides to hurt him. It won't help if the guy kneels down with both of his hands held up - with the way things are going, the Auror can kill him right then and there, and you'll have almost every pureblood in the country saying that the muggle-born attacked first."

"You're not telling me anything I don't know already," Granger sighed. "You also haven't told me yet what we're supposed to do about it."

"So you're in?" Harry asked. "You'll work on this with me?"

"Not like I have any choices, do I? I really doubt that I'll be able to work for the Ministry, no matter how good my grades are. And other places are even less likely to hire me in the future. Do you want another vow?"

"Next time. We'll need to think more carefully about the wording in case we want to recruit other people eventually."

"We will," Granger said. "So, what are you planning on doing?"

"Okay," Harry said, taking a deep breath. "Before I start with what we'll do now, there's something about me that you must know. It's... something I can do that others can't."

It was nearly two hours later that Harry and Granger - well, Hermione now - left the hut and headed back towards the school. Both had a lot to think about, and Harry felt better than he had in a while.

"That will be our regular meeting place," Hermione whispered, meaning the hut. "I'll figure out a way we can contact each other discreetly. Generally, however, the less people see us together the better."

"Agreed," Harry said. "It's almost dinner time, isn't it? How about you head there first and I'll follow in a few minutes." Receiving a smile and a nod in response, Harry watched his newest friend - ally? - hurry towards the school, leaving him alone. It wasn't particularly cold that day, but Harry found himself glad for remembering to wear his jacket regardless as he chose to take a walk before either going to the Great Hall for food or returning to the common room where his classmates probably were.

He... he would need to talk with Truls soon. He'd actually prefer to have his best friend's support over Granger's, but what if Truls's opinion of Harry changed after getting rid of the life debt? What if Truls started to think that Harry had enslaved him or something? How much of his loyalty had been really him, and how much of it had been the life debt's compulsion? There was so much that Harry didn't know, but needed to figure out sooner rather than later.

Most importantly, though, he'd need to make sure that dissolving the life debt wouldn't harm Truls in any way. He'd have to talk with Tom again and convince him that murder was not a viable solution to every single obstacle in life, no matter how well that logic had worked for the Dark Lord in the past.

Harry walked slowly, deep in his thoughts, until a loud voice from behind some pillars caught his attention. It was truly a luck chance that he caught Skeeter arguing with a wizard, waving her obnoxiously coloured quill at the man with a furious expression on her face. Harry crept closer, trying to make sense of the words while quickly coming up with a way to use this opportunity to his
advantage.

"—have the freedom and duty to write what I see!"

"You're lying, that's what you're doing!" the wizard cried angrily at her. "Can't write a decent article without those tricks of yours, eh? Wonder how you got the job in the first place, Rita. Did you suck Rudolf's cock to get an in?"

"No," Skeeter shot back. "I leave those stunts for people who need them - namely you. I hope you brush your teeth before kissing your wife with that mouth, Benjamin."

"You—"

"Is there a problem here?" Harry said, stepping forward with his wand leveled at the wizard. He wasn't sure if the plan he had in mind would work, if Skeeter would actually fall for it, but he could at least give it a try. "Keep your hands where I can see them, please. Are you a reporter? I know Miss Skeeter is, but are you authorized to be on the grounds?"

"He's a reporter, but he doesn't have the permission to be here," Skeeter was quick to say, tucking her quill into her purse while hunching her shoulders, trying her best to look more vulnerable. "Perhaps he should leave before someone reports him."

"Indeed," Harry agreed, eyeing the man whose gaze lingered at the Durmstrang coat of arms. "I trust you'll find your way to where you're actually permitted to be?"

"She's got you hooked, hasn't she?" the man asked, shaking his head with mock pity. "I've already finished my business here. Good day."

"Good day, he says," Skeeter sneered as soon as the other reporter was out of sight. "A terrible man, isn't he?"

"Are you all right?" Harry asked, managing to sound at least somewhat concerned.

"Oh, I am," Skeeter replied, her voice sugary sweet. "I was lucky that you were nearby, though. You Durmstrang students have quite the reputation." A reputation that she had questioned quite liberally in her previous article, Harry remembered.

"I must admit that it was no coincidence that I came closer when I heard your voice," Harry told her. "I was looking for you."

"Oh, really?" Skeeter's eyes narrowed for a moment, but her smile remained sweet and unfaltering. "How come?"

Rather than speak immediately, Harry began walking slowly, pulling the woman along with him. "I liked your article," he finally said. "You're witty. Sharp. Intelligent."

"You flatter me," Skeeter tittered, though Harry knew better than to believe that she had bought his words at face value. "I'm just a simple reporter. Though I do take care of the Sunday Specials of the Daily Prophet, covering the tournament as it takes place."

"It's the truth," Harry lied with a shrug. "I read your article - and the articles of a few other reporters - and I honestly cannot trust anyone but you to report on what happens in the Tournament. Not that the others are bad, really... They just... well. They did their best, I'm sure." Skeeter's sweet smile melted into an openly smug one as she preened at Harry's compliments. She tucked a curl of her bleached blonde hair behind her ear and looked at him from over the rim of her glasses.
"I respect your job and fully acknowledge its importance. It does upset me, though, how short our interview was cut last time," Harry pressed on. "I felt as if you were being sabotaged. I mean, maybe. I wouldn't want to accuse anyone and I'm sure nobody would dare to-

"Oh, Harry," Skeeter moaned, her hand coming to rest on Harry's arm. "Your words truly bring me comfort. None of the Headmasters enjoy my presence here, not truly. And the other champions are terribly rude towards me. To have your support means so much."

Harry wasn't sure how he managed to keep the smile on his face despite how close Skeeter was suddenly standing. "I just wanted to tell you that if there's anything you wish to ask me... I mean, I don't want you to think that I would ignore you or refuse to give you an interview."

"Even if I asked you for one right now?" Skeeter asked suddenly, her eyes gleaming. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all," Harry replied, trying to not let on how happy his success was making him. This was certainly something he could skip dinner for. "In fact, I'd be honoured."

**CHAMPION TO THE RESCUE!**

Young Harry Potter, the charming Durmstrang Champion, stunned us all with his performance last week. This reporter clapped right along with everyone else as Mister Potter returned after completing his task, raising his hand high with a confident smile on his lips. Little did anyone know that the smile that brought happiness to the hearts of many, was hiding behind it a tragedy.

*Harry Potter, the last living member of his family, lost his father in a terrible accident in the late days of summer...*

"...lost the last of his family and is currently in the questionable care of his godfather," Truls read aloud, standing in front of Harry while clutching the Sunday edition of the *Daily Prophet*. "Harry, what the fuck?"

"Language," Ingrid said, eyeing both Harry and Truls with concern. "Don't start fighting now."

Harry, who had been sitting on the couch by the fireplace while listening to his best friend read Skeeter's article with growing anger, shrugged.

"A fucking interview, Harry?" Truls's voice was rising, and he flung the paper into the fire. "Is this how I'm supposed to find the important news about you these days? Through the *Daily Prophet*?"

"Don't yell at me," Harry snapped, standing up. "I'm tired and I have that tutoring session in an hour. I'll go take a nap if you don't mind."

"Well I do mind," Truls said, following Harry into their dorm room. Anthony Lestrange was on his bed, but one look at the expression on Truls's face had him gathering his books and leaving to the common room. "I do mind, Harry! It's bad enough that you've been ignoring me for days-

"I haven't," Harry interrupted, sitting down on his bed and kicking off his slippers. He hadn't expected this reaction from the other boy, though perhaps he should have. Somehow Truls's anger made Harry want to cry.

"Did I do something wrong?" Truls asked then, his voice suddenly softer as he moved closer. "Please, Harry. Did I hurt you?"
Harry clenched his eyes shut, knowing there was one way he could calm Truls down and stop the fight. He didn't like it, but he liked the fight even less. "I'm the one who's hurting you," Harry told him, his voice brittle. "You just don't know it."

Truls was silent for a few moments, before Harry heard him sigh heavily. The next he knew, Truls was on the bed as well, pulling Harry to lie down with him. Harry did so readily, allowing the other boy to wrap his arms around him, surrounding him with warmth and comfort.

"Explain," Truls said, rubbing Harry's back and enjoying the feel of him. "How do you think you're hurting me?"

"It's the life debt," Harry whispered, his nose pressed against Truls's throat and voice slightly muffled by the other boy's shirt. "Remember? The one that... You remember. You know. I've been feeling it more and more lately, and I know it must be sorted out and dissolved, but what if you won't like me anymore? What if you think you like me, but when the life debt is gone, you look at me and think 'Merlin, look at how much time I've wasted on this guy'. And then you'd leave and I wouldn't have you anymore, and-"

Harry hadn't actually meant to say that much. He most certainly hadn't expected to cry, but he did. He ended up sobbing so hard his whole body was shaking, and he could only imagine what Truls would think of him now.

"Stupid," Truls said, and rolled them on the bed so he could lie on top of Harry and wipe his tears. "Stupid, you're so stupid."

"Shut up, I'm serious."

"I know, and that makes this whole mess even more pathetic."

"You know I'll always like you," Harry sniffled, rubbing his eyes and starting to feel embarrassed for his brief crying fit. Could he blame the stress for it? "You don't have to worry about waking up one day to your best friend saying he doesn't want to see you again."

"Stupid," Truls repeated fondly, before he pushed Harry's hands away from his face and looked down at the other boy, making him squirm.

Harry liked the feeling of being pressed against the bed. He felt anchored, almost relaxed, and somehow more put together. Truls's smile was doing strange things to him, and he didn't know if this was normal or if he should push the other boy off and leave early to his appointment with Tom. Tears were forgotten and there was an odd feeling inside him: it curled around his heart and the pit of his stomach and somehow got into his lungs too, making everything strangely tingly. He was aware of every inch his body touched Truls's, and it made him restless in ways he didn't quite understand.

Amusement was long gone from Truls's expression when he bent down again, pushing his way to lie comfortably between Harry's legs. Harry closed his eyes when he felt Truls's dry lips against the corner of his mouth, and for that moment everything stood still. His heart was beating hard in his chest and he felt as if that light touch had knocked the wind right out of him.

Harry turned his head and sighed softly when Truls's mouth covered his own, coaxing it open with experience that Harry would readily envy if he wasn't reaping its benefits. Before he even realized that he had moved, one of his shaking hands was tugging at Truls's blonde curls while the other was gripping the back of his jacket. He felt hot and heavy and when he wrapped his legs around Truls, he couldn't help but moan loudly at what the friction was doing to him. To them both.
"Harry!"

Mette's voice startled the two boys, and by the time the witch had opened the door, she found a flustered Harry tugging his jacket on while Truls was looking for something under the bed. She eyed them silently for a few moments, a speculative expression on her face, before she sighed and shook her head. "I thought I'd remind you that you have that tutoring session of yours in less than five minutes."

"What?" Harry yelped, alarmed. "That can't be!"

"Who knows what you were up to," Mette said, her tone implying that she knew exactly what they had been doing. "But it seems to have made time pass by quickly for the two of you. So stop blushing and start running."

"Er, right," Harry stammered. "Um, thank you. I'll be out in a minute."

"Whatever," she said, closing the door again. Harry knew he couldn't afford to sit there any longer, but he couldn't move quite yet either. Truls coughed, finally returning from his hiding place and sitting on the floor by the bed. His pleased little smile made Harry even more flustered, and he knew he would be late by the time he finally changed his clothes and went to find Tom.

But, ah, kissing Truls was so different from kissing Björn. He decided to not tell Truls that, though.

*

"You're late." Tom had been already annoyed, and Harry's tardiness didn't help that at all. The Dark Lord scowled at the boy, before gesturing impatiently for him to sit down. "Do I want to know your reasons?"

Harry thought of what he had been doing, and blushed. "Probably not."

"Tell me anyway," Tom ordered, glowering at the boy who didn't seem to notice or pay attention to his bad mood at all. "Share some of that knowledge that's keeping you so chipper, why won't you. I'm sure I'll appreciate it."

"I don't think it's something that would make you happy," Harry resisted, before wondering if the older man would actually be of any use in this case. Surely Tom had some sort of experience with, well, people. "Then again, what do I know."

"Exactly," Tom said, transfiguring one of the uncomfortable chairs into something better. "What do you know? Tell me. With any luck I'll find it entertaining."

"Truls kissed me! He and I. We kissed. It was brilliant." Harry's happy smile reminded Tom of foul-smelling Christmas candles and choirs made up of hungry children and dirty snow surrounding a filthy orphanage. The rage that was suddenly alive in his bones was calm and sharp and strong, making the Dark Lord smile. "I was worried that he wouldn't like me if we dissolved the life debt, but he said he—"

"He won't like you once we dissolve the life debt," Tom interrupted, knowing exactly what kind of tone to use to convince the boy. Firm, sympathetic, sorry. Even a little bit amused, just to emphasize his next words. "How can you think he- Harry, the boy doesn't control his feelings at all right now. If he kissed you, isn't that simply the life debt making him respond to what you want?"

"But—"
"I hate to say this, Harry, but... it's not him. It's you." Now that he knew that this Truls boy who owed Harry a life debt and the boy who kissed him were the one and same, Tom could definitely use the information to his benefit with little effort.

Harry's green eyes were wide and unblinking as he stared at the Dark Lord for a few long moments. The man could see the horror rising inside the boy as the smile that had frozen on his face crumbled into nothing. He could see the moment Harry remembered that the life debt was still very much in place and that one kiss under its influence wasn't proof of anything. The boy didn't realize that there was no way for the life debt to do that, not really and not like that, and Tom wasn't about to tell him the truth. He liked misunderstandings when they worked in his favour.

Harry felt cold and numb and unsure, trying to come up with any counter argument to convince Tom that he was wrong.

He couldn't find the words.

"And once the life debt does get dissolved," Tom continued, sitting down in front of Harry and brushing the boy's hair gently away from covering his eyes. His touch was light and cold and so horribly tender. "Once that is done, do you think he will really have the heart to tell you that he doesn't return your affection, Harry? Or would he hold you and feel sorry for you? You wouldn't wish that for a friend, would you?"

Harry shook his head mutely, lacking both words to say and the desire to speak. Tom smiled with mock sympathy, marveling at how little did it need for insecurity to get out of hand in some people. One day he would find a subject close to the boy's heart and hurt him with it until he'd cry, but not today. Tom didn't enjoy Harry's tears if they were for the loss of something that had nothing to do with the older wizard.

"It is clear now that the longer the life debt stays, the more complications it will bring to you," the Dark Lord said. "If you want to win the Tournament, you really cannot afford being this emotional. Circe, why couldn't you postpone your feelings or something?"

"Can we dissolve it soon?" Harry asked, feeling hollow. How on earth could happiness be drained so quickly out of a person? He had been so happy after his meeting with Gra-- Hermione and his talk with Skeeter. The moment he had shared with Truls had been even more amazing than the other two put together. And now, with a few words from Tom, the happiness had become nothing but a fading memory.

"I do not blame you for wanting to do it as soon as possible," the Dark Lord replied. "I did find a way, but you will simply have to trust me with its efficiency. Most spells are in a language you wouldn't understand."

"As long as Truls doesn't die," Harry said. "Then it's fine. I can handle whatever happens to me."

"I'll remind you of those words after the second task of the tournament," Tom said calmly. "It's in a few weeks, if I remember correctly. Right before your Christmas break."

"Really? Nobody told me."

"I believe that your godfather will be sharing that piece of information with you all next week. We can take care of the life debt during the holidays. You'll spend that time in my house, of course."

"You want to spend Christmas with me?" Harry asked, surprised. "Well, it's not like I have anyone else either."
Tom glowered at him. "We will be taking advantage of the free days to dissolve the life debt without having people notice any possible side effects. And do remind yourself that unlike you, I could spend my Christmas with anyone I wish."

"Just because people are afraid of saying no to you and kicking you out, doesn't mean you actually have them, you know."

"You are a horrible child."

"Yeah," Harry sighed, letting out a humourless laugh. "I can't even get my best friend to like me without somehow forcing him."

"We are not discussing that anymore," Tom snapped. "Stop talking about him. We moved on. You didn't get your heart broken."

Harry thought for a second, trying to figure out the mess of everything that he was feeling. "I don't know..."

"Potter, you are fine."

"I feel awful."

"Merlin, boy, if you feel like this after one kiss at the age of fourteen, you'll be a wreck by the time you graduate. You will simply tell that boy of yours that your morals –hah! –cannot allow you to take advantage of him," Tom snapped. "Now, enough of this nonsense. I have a shield charm for you to learn."

Harry nodded slowly. Yes, he could tell Truls that they shouldn't do anything until the life debt was dealt with…and maybe after that— Maybe things would turn for the best after all.

* *

He was surrounded by silence.

The temporary office he had set up at Hogwarts was nowhere near as comfortable as the one he had at home. This one had a few of his books and none of the fun nooks and crannies where he could hide anything from bags of candy to artifacts that no one had any business knowing about. Here, at Hogwarts, all Sirius had was a leathery chair, a big desk, and a generously sized fireplace.

Well, it wasn't bad. There were soft carpets and thick curtains and a few paintings of lovely ladies who preened whenever Sirius would look at them. Now, though, the light coming from the crackling fire wasn't quite enough to chase most of the shadows away, leaving those paintings in darkness.

Sirius sighed, reaching for the bottle of Ogden's before leaning back again. There was so much that needed sorting out, but he didn't know how. Trying to deal with Harry was like steering a broom in absolute darkness - he had no idea where to go or even if he was moving forward or backward. Every time Sirius thought of Harry, he thought of the things his godson had said and of the look of utter loathing he had received. What on earth had he done to deserve any of that resentment? Where had it even come from?

Did the Dark Lord know something?

Sirius hadn't wanted to think about it - in fact, he had carefully avoided thinking about it so far - but there was no denying that something was going on between Harry and the Dark Lord. The mere thought of that worried Sirius more than anything. It wasn't simply the matter of Lord Voldemort
knowing immediately how to get to Harry when James had died, but the Dark Lord had also been the one to nominate Harry as one of the Champion Candidates of Durmstrang. Sirius wasn't blind or stupid, and even if some would call him paranoid... he knew that something was going on. Nothing the Dark Lord did was a simple coincidence.

So what did it mean?

Objectively, Harry should have been well below the Dark Lord's radar. Even for a Durmstrang student, he was far too... noticeable. For a child who had been nearly invisible years ago, that was quite the change. Perhaps Sirius was approaching this wrong, maybe it wasn't the Dark Lord who had sought Harry out first. Maybe it was the other way around. That would mean, though, that not only had Harry managed to catch the man's attention, but also keep it.

How?

How much of Harry did he really know?

With a deep sigh, Sirius set the bottle down and eyed the copy of the Daily Prophet's Sunday Special from a week ago - the one where Skeeter had interviewed Harry and revealed James's death. Sirius knew Rita, and he knew how vicious and unkind she was, how masterfully she toed the line between speculation and libel. And yet every word in that article praised Harry as if Skeeter had never met a finer wizard in her life. What had Harry done to buy her like that?

Had Lily and James been alive, would Harry be the same child Sirius remembered from the happy times before Durmstrang? Would he be the quiet, pleasant child whose head and heart had been full of stories and fairytales? Or would he still be the angry young man who turned out to be so different from how Sirius had always imagined him as?

"Well, isn't this a wake-up call," the Death Eater said aloud, the sound of his voice startling in the still silence of the office. He didn't want to lose Harry, especially if the kid was on the verge of making powerful enemies. No matter how many oaths Sirius had taken for the Dark Lord, Harry would always come first. If that meant getting to know Harry from the beginning, then so be it. Starting from zero. Sirius knew, theoretically, how to do this. How to make amends and apologize - or was it the other way around? Apologize and make amends?

No matter. Not the point.

He yawned, pushing himself off the chair and heading towards a small staircase at the back of his office. The living quarters of whoever had occupied the office before him had been very humble indeed. Or perhaps this was Yaxley's way of proving some sort of point that no one but the damn bastard cared about anyway.

"Idiot," Sirius muttered. Then again, Yaxley wasn't the only idiot, was he? Sirius had managed to make a mess of his relationship with Harry, and he hoped that the boy would find it in himself to forgive him. He needed some good advice on how to work on their relationship, but the only one Sirius suspected he could get decent advice from was a werewolf in the basement of his home. What a joke!

'All right, but what would Lupin say,' Sirius thought while brushing his teeth. 'No matter what I tell him, he always picks Harry's side and thinks I'm wrong. So whatever I say, he'll probably start with: Black, you're wrong. Again.'

He couldn't actually go to Grimmauld Place to ask Lupin for any advice at the moment - not with the second task on the horizon. Sirius was far too busy with his job to get anything else done, no matter
what it was. However, perhaps on Christmas he could actually do something? Yes, he could take Harry to Paris for a lovely dinner and they could talk and maybe Harry would forgive him and explain why he was so angry all the time.

Until then, Sirius was free to focus on his work without feeling guilty, wasn't he?

The Great Hall was crowded once again, the students whispering amongst themselves excitedly. Harry sat between a hilariously unhappy Lestrange and some Hufflepuff who kept glancing at him every ten seconds with a strangely hopeful expression. Truls sat across from him, having accepted Harry's reasons for limiting contact for the unforeseeable future despite being clearly confused by it. Mette was eyeing her own cleavage with a smug expression, before she looked at Harry and said:

"I bought a new bra. It's fantastic, isn't it?"

"Um," Harry said, looking at her chest with a worried expression. He didn't notice a difference, but then again he wasn't particularly familiar with them anyway. "I'll take your word for it."

"Students, please." Headmaster Yaxley's voice cut through the chatter, silencing the students in an instant. The man, dressed in yet another fashionable outfit, eyed the students with a condescending smile on his lips. "Soon Lord Black will tell you about the second task of the Triwizard Tournament. And while I am certain that all of us are curious and eager to hear what he has to say, I must tell you first about a matter that concerns every student from fourth year and above."

Harry kept his eyes on Sirius, trying to look for signs of stress or lack of sleep. Anything to show him that the man was affected by the distance between them. He didn't find a thing, however - Sirius was as well put together as he always tended to be. His hair was neatly done, his robes were stylish, clean and wrinkle-free, and the smile on his face didn't seem to need any kind of effort from his part.

"The Yule Ball is approaching - a traditional and much loved part of the Triwizard Tournament. It gives us all an opportunity to socialize with our friends from distant lands and enjoy some time together. The ball will start at eight o’clock two days before Christmas, finishing at midnight here, in the Great Hall."

Harry didn't even ask himself if he had any right to feel angry at his godfather. He simply was.

"The Champions and their partners will be expected to open the ball with the first dance."

"Oh, Merlin, no," Harry whispered, Yaxley's words pulling him out of his anger-filled thoughts. Truls snorted, clearly amused. Even Lestrange looked suddenly pleased.

"Do you know how to dance, Potter?" the older boy asked, ready to make fun of him in a heartbeat. The bastard.

"Of course I do," Harry hissed in response. "I just don't like it."

"Now," Headmaster Yaxley said, glancing at Sirius. "It is time for Lord Black here to tell you more about the task that we all are looking forward to!" Taking this as a good reason for applause, the students around Harry started clapping while his godfather smiled charmingly at his audience.

"We all have been waiting for this, haven't we?" Sirius started. "The Second Task is near! And I promise you all - it will be even more entertaining and exciting than the first!"

'Just what I wanted to hear,' Harry thought miserably. 'Merlin knows what that is supposed to mean.'
"On Monday the nineteenth of December, the second task will begin at nine o'clock. We will all gather at the Quidditch pitch and each champion will once again be sent out on a mission," Sirius said. "This task will be the champions' opportunity to show us all the spells they've learned and the abilities they can utilize in order to succeed."

'Is he just recycling the first idea?' Harry wondered, before he dismissed the thought. No, even if what Sirius was saying now sounded familiar enough to give an impression of the first task, it most definitely wouldn't be. 'Perhaps Sirius was being misleading on purpose? Being sent out on a mission can mean pretty much anything. The only thing we can tell for sure is that the task won't be happening at Hogwarts.'

"As you are already familiar with the judges, I will not reintroduce them today," Sirius continued. "Instead, enjoy your meals and look forward to both the Tournament and the Yule Ball! Thank you!"

"Harry," Mette said. "You have to ask me to the Yule Ball. I want to be the first one dancing. I want all the eyes on me."

"Delacour will be dancing as well," Lestrange pointed out. "Also, you're taller than Potter. You'll look like his big sister taking him out on a stroll. Which, admittedly, would be a pretty funny sight to see. Go ahead, Potter. Ask her to be your partner for the Yule Ball."

"Never mind," Mette said coldly, glaring at Lestrange. "I'll have someone else escort me. Someone who is not English, since Anthony here just reminded me of how irritating British boys can be. No offense, Harry."

"Um, none taken," said Harry, who wasn't really sure of what had just happened. "I don't know who to ask, but we have plenty of time until I actually need to have someone, right?"

"Wrong," Maria Rurik said. "Ask one of the locals, though. Or someone from Beauxbatons. We already spend enough time with you."

"Circe, you know how to make someone feel special, don't you?"

"What do you think the next task is like," Krum suddenly asked, and flushed red when Harry turned to look at him. He continued, speaking slowly and pronouncing his words carefully. "I mean... do you have any... guesses?"

"I have no idea," Harry admitted. "A mission somewhere could mean anything. I just hope it won't be looking for something inside another locked room."

"Maybe this time the item will be easy to find but hard to get," Lestrange said. "He did say that you'll be showing off the spells you know. The best way to do that is by dueling somebody, isn't it?"

"Oh, that sounds like so much fun!" Maria exclaimed, reaching for one of the spinach pies. "Dueling! I love that!"

"Yeah," Harry sighed, resisting the urge to reach for Truls. "Fun."

Merlin help him, he was already afraid.
Chapter 35

"So Muggles have healers specifically for teeth?"

"Yes. They're called dentists, though," Hermione explained, scribbling down something on a piece of parchment. "Not healers. Can you renew the heating charms? It's getting a little bit chilly in here."

The two were once again in the small hut Hermione had taken Harry to days ago. Together they had cast privacy charms of a bit more permanent nature, and the witch had told Harry that she'd look up a few runes to make the security better. It wasn't perfect, but it was the best they could do with what they had.

"One of the things that we can do is support muggle-born business owners," Hermione said suddenly, looking up at Harry and gesturing for him to sit down. "If their businesses grow, their need for workforce will grow as well. And they won't be as discriminatory of who they hire as the pureblood company owners tend to be."

"How do we do that?" Harry asked. "I mean, I see the value and I agree with it, but if it's just the two of us—"

"First we do some research," Hermione replied. "We keep track of muggle-born owned businesses and what they do. And then we simply promote them when we get the opportunity to do so. For example rather than buying trunks from Rocherdale's - they give clearly better service to purebloods anyway and their discrimination is really obvious - we can both encourage the people around us to buy from Cleveley's. There are lawyers and healers and experts from all professions who are overlooked simply because of their heritage. Subtle suggestions that promote those people can do a lot in the long run. Most importantly, however, this sort of thing seems rather innocent. No one can accuse us of anything even if we get caught."

"I'm so happy you're doing this with me," Harry admitted suddenly, feeling relieved at how seriously the witch was taking this. Hermione gave him a quick smile before she continued:

"There are many other long-term things that we can do. One of our goals should be to form a team of lawyers who tackle the inequalities in the current legal system one by one. Oh, and we also need journalists to help with influencing the perceptions of the public. And reliable Potion brewers. And —"

"We can write a list of the long-term goals," Harry hurried to say. "But what are the things that we need to do right now?"

"We can start by listing the muggle-born owned businesses," Hermione told him. "I can do that. You should focus on winning the tournament and becoming as famous as possible. That will help a lot when we start with the promotions. And before I forget - who takes care of the fan mail you get? I'm certain that there'll be some sponsorship offers in that pile. Most importantly, though, we need to start drafting out the confidentiality contracts for any new recruits."

"I think the secrecy part of that is what we need to focus on the most," Harry said immediately. "To make sure that they can't take any actions that carry the purpose of revealing what we do without our consent."

"Absolutely," Hermione agreed with a nod. "Also restrictions against sabotage. Or harassment of other members, because that is also a risk."
"Do you think people will actually agree to our terms?" Harry asked, feeling hesitant and worried. "They won't think it's too much?"

"What our terms mostly focus on are simple security measures," Hermione replied. "If the recruits don't have any intentions to harm us, then it's not much to ask for at all. If they don't agree with our project or do not wish to be involved, then they can carry on with their lives as if they never knew about this."

"Hold up," Harry said, an idea suddenly crossing his mind. "Could we have that as another safety measure? In addition to the Unbreakable Vow that we'll have them take, I mean. If they decide to back out, we can obliviate them." The witch bit her lip and frowned, thinking about Harry's suggestion for a few moments.

"I don't know," Hermione said finally. "Isn't that a bit... dangerous?"

"It's illegal," Harry told her frankly, "but we can make that option clear to them from the beginning to get their consent."

"Do you know how to obliviate?" the witch asked. "I mean, I know in theory, but erasing specific memories rather than just a general timeframe is very difficult."

"I do," Harry lied, thinking first of Tom and then of Gildy. If he could get Gildy to teach him how to obliviate people successfully, it'd be one more thing he could keep hidden from Tom. Being underestimated in certain aspects would bring its own benefits in the future. "I'll need a while to practice, though."

"That's all right," Hermione said. "We don't need it right now anyway. We should first organise everything in order to be able to present a professional front. We need a long-term plan and security systems and financing and some sort of headquarters and— Oh, Merlin. There's so much to do!"

"We can focus on two things for now," Harry decided. "That promotion thing you talked about earlier and planning."

"The second task is too soon," Hermione sighed. "But we'll get you to promote something before the third task."

"If I live that long," Harry said, thinking of what had happened to George. "I'm not completely sure about my own survival. Or, well, maybe survival is the wrong word to use. I know I can pull through. It's what I need to do in order to pull through that worries me."

Hermione looked at him for a few moments, a serious expression on her face. "You think you'll have to do something unpleasant."

"It's a violent game," Harry said. "It shouldn't be entertainment."

"Make them see that, then," Hermione said. "If you can."

*"We have less than a week until the second task," Tom said, rolling his eyes and definitely not analysing the reasons for the annoyance he was feeling. Harry's constant concern for that friend of his was highly irritating. Didn't the boy understand that his silly little crush would go nowhere? "We will not start undoing the life debt until after you've recovered from that. I've told you this already. A complicated ritual like that will require many sessions and will be a very exhausting, occasionally painful experience for you."
"I'm not asking to work on it right now," Harry replied, rolling his eyes. "I'm just saying that I would really like to hear more about the ritual that you suggested we use. And by suggested I mean the part that came after 'Harry, this is what we will do'. What are the steps? What is required? What does it really do to undo the life debt?"

"That would distract you from preparing for next Saturday," Tom said. "And you cannot afford being distracted. You don't know what the task really is - no, really, you have no idea. Your godfather didn't tell you anything useful at all. So you will just have to trust me when I tell you to be very prepared. Think about that rather than... letting that friend of yours put his mouth anywhere on you."

"What?" Harry squinted at the man with a baffled expression, unsure of what to address first. How can a grown man be so complicated and problematic? How did he succeed in saying and doing all the wrong things, time after time?

"Don't do that," the Dark Lord ordered, scowling at the young wizard. "You look ridiculous. It's too late to change my impression of you now but could you at least pretend to have some dignity? Merlin, we'll have to fabricate a charismatic public persona for you from scratch, won't we."

"You said that the ritual will be painful to go through," Harry started, ignoring the man's words. "What about Truls? Will he feel anything at all? It would make sense if he did, he is after all the other half of the whole—"

"He won't feel a thing," Tom cut in, and technically he wasn't lying. The boy wouldn't feel a thing. And after all was said and done, Harry would probably be upset, but for how long could he carry a grudge anyway? He was a teenager - an ordinary one, not like how Tom used to be - so probably not very long. "Now, moving on to the task."

"Sirius said we all will be sent out on a mission again."

"It's nothing like the previous task."

"How so?" Harry was quick to ask. "You don't have to tell me what the task is. Just tell me how it's different from the first one."

"Are you even trying to get information out of me? That was a ridiculously clumsy attempt," Tom snapped. "Merlin, you're better off outright asking, at least that wouldn't be an insult to my intelligence."

"Fine," Harry huffed, exasperated. "What's the second task going to be like?"

"I won't tell you," Tom replied smugly, leaning back on the chair he had conjured to sit on. "But shame on you for trying to cheat."

"Tom!"

"I can give you tips, but nothing is free in this country. Especially not useful information."

"Circe, you're annoying," Harry glowered. "What do you want?"

"Some respect would be a good start," Tom started, unable to completely hold back his smirk. Harry doubted that the man had even tried. "What I want you to do, though, is to stop holding back. It's very boring and underwhelming to see you hold back and hesitate and deal with whatever moral crises you apparently have every time you're about to make a decision of any kind. I want you to win the next round with an overwhelming advantage. That is a simple request, no? In fact, it's hardly
even a request - everyone else seems to be aware of the necessity of effort."

"I don’t fail on purpose," Harry protested, slightly offended. He had tried his best, but even if he relived the events of the first task now, he still wouldn't open the door. No matter what Tom said. "Besides, I got a great score last time, didn't I?"

"You could have been better," Tom said. "And the next task will allow you the opportunity to exceed everyone's expectations. You will be taken somewhere else but this time it's an open-ground hunt that lasts for three days."

"What?"

"It's an open-ground hunt that—"


"I'm not going to tell you more than that," Tom said, quite clearly enjoying making the younger wizard scowl and glower. The bastard. "You'll do just fine with the information that I've given you. What you need to do next is make sure that your victory will be absolute. Make it something I'll enjoy watching. Something that I can compliment you about."

By some miracle Harry managed to not blurt out some sort of protest, remembering just in time the importance of making Tom believe that Harry's attitude towards his ideologies was changing. He also decided not to ask about any possible compliments Tom would give Delacour who had caught his attention once already. Because Harry didn’t care if Tom complimented Delacour. The Dark Lord could go ahead and compliment anyone he wanted and it wouldn’t matter to Harry at all. Instead the boy said, "I'll show you what I can do. You'll be surprised."

"That's the spirit," the Dark Lord replied. "Just keep in mind that I'm the only person you want to impress."

"Knowing your standards, that does not help."

"Well, your life was never meant to be easy anyway."

'I know,' Harry thought, trying to ignore the misery welling inside of him. 'Merlin, like there was any doubt about that.'

*#

“I feel sorry for you,” Maria said, pushing the homework she had been working on aside and looking at Harry. “I mean, despite your participation in the tournament, you still have to do the same exact amount of homework that the rest of us do. Doesn’t that upset you? The second task is in three days but here you are, working on your homework instead of preparing for it.”

“It doesn’t really matter if it upsets him or not,” Ingrid said from her seat near the fireplace. “Besides, if you think you’ve got a lot of homework, just wait until you get to your final year.”

Harry, who was trying to focus on his Charms essay, did feel like it was unfair to expect him to keep up with his homework and exceed expectations in the Tournament. He didn’t dare express his feelings aloud, though. Then again, the annoyance was easier to deal with when he had Truls and most of the other Durmstrang students studying around him as well.

“I miss Durmstrang,” Mette sighed. “This castle might look good but it’s so very old fashioned.”
“Oh, that reminds me,” Harry said, looking at Truls. “Have you received any mail from anyone there? Filippa or Jakob or Petronella? Because I haven’t received anything.”

“I haven’t either,” Truls replied. “Maybe they think we’re busy and don’t want to bother us? Or they could be waiting for us to contact them first.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, nodding. “I’ll write Filippa a letter as soon as I’m done with homework.”

“Filippa,” Truls repeated, sounding strangely pleased. “Not Clemens?”

“No,” Harry said, despite the feeling at the pit of his stomach and the memory of Clemens that made something inside him clench. “Not Clemens.”

“I wonder if we can invite some of our friends from there to attend the Yule Ball with us,” Maria suddenly said. “Merlin, it would be great! Much better than attending the ball with any of these Hogwarts boys.”

“You’ve been asked?”

“By two guys so far.”

“I’ve lost count of how many people asked me,” Mette sighed happily. “I know some girls already asked you out, Truls. Have you said yes to any of them yet? What about you, Harry?”

“Nobody has asked me,” Harry told her, far more interested in hearing about the girls who had asked Truls than discussing his own lack of a date. “Who asked you?”

“I don’t know their names,” Truls said. “Doesn’t matter, anyway. I said no.”

“Nobody from our school is going to go alone,” Ingrid said sharply, scowling at Truls who shrugged unrepentantly in response. “It’s a matter of image. Next time someone asks you, say yes. Unless they’re a Mudblood, of course.”

“I already have a date,” Mette bragged cheerfully. “All the eyes will be on us, so even if your date is ugly, you needn’t worry. Nobody will even notice you.”

“And you, Potter,” Ingrid continued, as if Mette had said nothing. “You especially must be picky when it comes to selecting your date. You’re the Durmstrang champion and cannot be seen with just anyone. I’m sure you know someone here who deserves to be your date.”

“Or ask one of the French girls,” Maria suggested. “There’s one in particular… I don’t know her name, but she’s stunning.”

“The Veela?”

“No, not the Veela. I think this girl is half-Algerian or something? I’ll point her out to you later.”

“Your date doesn’t have to be a girl, by the way,” Mette said, and for some reason Harry felt less anxious all of a sudden. Less anxious but more embarrassed, as if Mette was revealing something that Harry didn’t want anyone else to know. Which was odd, because she wasn’t. “I saw one of the Hufflepuff boys eyeing you up a few days ago. An older student, I think—”

“I’ve heard nothing good about Hufflepuffs,” Truls cut in. “Besides, the Yule Ball isn’t something we need to worry about yet. Homework first, and then the second task. After that is done we can start thinking about the ball.”
“Circe, and to think that the second task is three days away,” Maria sighed. “Are you nervous? The first task made me nervous and I was just watching it!”

“I’m a lot more nervous about the Yule Ball,” Harry lied. “I don’t think that panicking will help me at all with this task. Whatever it ends up being.” A three-day hunt would require for Harry to keep his mind clear, and he’d be damned if he let Delacour’s performance outshine his. He didn’t want to lose to her again.

It was a ridiculous feeling and Harry couldn’t understand why it was such an issue to him. His desire to win was all about the influence he could have afterwards, and was not tied to his self-esteem in any way. He didn’t think that he’d be less of a wizard if he lost to Delacour.

And yet.

“Whoa, what’s with the face you’re making now?” Maria asked, leaning closer to Harry. “Something bothering you?”

“You guys saw Fleur Delacour’s performance, right?” Harry said, leaning back and pushing the essay aside for a moment. “What was great about it? I mean, if you were judges, what about her performance would impress you?”

“She was ruthless,” Ingrid replied, sighing and closing the book she had been reading. “Ruthless and efficient. Both of those things are good. However if you’ve seen the articles that reflect the public’s views, people weren’t entertained by her. She was efficient to the point of being boring. Her performance was clinical and swift, but it wasn’t the entertainment that we were promised.”

“I agree,” Maria said. “I liked Weasley’s performance the most, though. Sorry about that, Harry, but Weasley’s act was intense. He even lost an ear.”

“Is this about improving your performance for the second task?” Mette asked curiously, and when Harry nodded, she continued: “Then simply keep in mind that people really do want a show. We want to be surprised and shocked and feel captivated by what we’re seeing.”

‘And you see no problems with this show you’re looking forward to?’ Harry thought, but didn’t dare say a thing. He’d do as Hermione had suggested and focus on performing well in the second task. The best change he could bring would come through the influence he’d hopefully have afterwards.

“Well,” he said after a period of silence. “I hope you’ll find what’s coming up even more… entertaining.”

Giving the audience a show they’d be entertained by was far from Harry’s mind when he was led with the other two champions towards the Quidditch pitch. He felt sick, the manticoreskin shirt he was wearing under his uniform felt heavy, and he’d much rather be in his bed. He had a dagger in his boot and a pouch of galleons, unsure of how useful they’d be but still hoping for the best.

George had given him an easy smile and a pat on the back, and Delacour continued being depressingly flawless while ignoring Harry completely. It suited him just fine. Harry didn’t think he could bring himself to talk even if there was a need for it. Walking into the Quidditch pitch and looking around him, Harry couldn’t see a single empty seat in the audience. People were cheering, there were even banners raised and Merlin – were those cheerleaders?

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Sirius began, his voice echoing loudly for all to hear. To Harry he looked like a stranger in an expensive set of robes, and he wondered if they’d ever go back to the people
they used to be. “Welcome to the second task of the Triwizard Tournament!”

‘I wonder if Hermione is here,’ Harry thought, before sighing heavily. It would have been nice to
ask Hermione to go with him to the Yule Ball but considering how their friendship would need to be
kept secret, it simply was not an option.

“There have been quite a few rumours about this task,” Sirius continued, smiling brightly. “Some
bets as well, eh? Are you that curious to see what’s ahead?” The cheer of the audience made his
smile turn into a mischievous grin. The man waved his wand and suddenly there were three bottles
and three familiar plaques floating above him.

“Once again,” Sirius started, “the Champions will be sent off to different locations. Only now… the
playground is bigger. No more locked rooms! No more simple solutions! What we have here for
you, instead, is an adventure unlike any other! The Champions will show you not only their power,
but their cleverness and survival skills. Could a show be any better?”

It couldn’t, surely. His reputation depended on it.

“You see three bottles here above me,” Sirius continued, enjoying how attentively the audience and
the Champions were listening to him. “These are full of Polyjuice Potion. It’s almost ready, but is
missing one important, final ingredient. The one that is added at the last minute after a month of
waiting. Oh yes, we all know what it is – a part of someone else’s body. A hair, or a nail… a whole
arm if you want to go above and beyond.”

As expected, his audience laughed. So far so good.

“Each champion will take one of the plaques they retrieved in the first task and will find themselves
either in Istanbul, or Helsinki, or Cairo. Good luck trying to guess which key takes you where,”
Sirius said teasingly, chuckling when there was more laughter from the amused audience. “Engraved
into the plaque is the name of your target – that’s right, not numbers anymore! Track them down,
take a strand of their hair and finish the Polyjuice Potion before drinking it. Once you’ve transformed
into your target, simply touch the portkey – it will recognize the target’s fingerprint and will activate
on its own. You will be brought here. But— that is not all!”

His audience, now more curious than ever, was silent. The Champions looked calmer than any of
them ought to be, and Sirius hoped that Harry at least would know better than to underestimate what
was waiting for him. “The champions have three days to complete this task. During these three days
you will be completely on your own. We on this end will be able to see you only when you arrive. I
repeat: you are on your own. You will not be monitored or followed.”

Ignoring the restless and confused expressions of the people around him, Sirius waved his wand
again and the three bottles descended down with the plaques, and the wizard gestured for the
Champions to step forward. “Pick a plaque and a bottle. Remember that this mission will demand
more from you than the previous one did. Be fast, be efficient. The first one to return will be the
winner of this round. Champions, it’s your time to shine!”

With yet another wave of his wand the Polyjuice bottles and the plaques floated downwards until
they were well within reach of the three students. After a moment of hesitation, Delacour pocketed a
bottle and curled her long fingers around one of the plaques before stepping back. Following her
example, the two boys did the same before they all turned to Sirius.

“Your portkeys will activate in a matter of seconds,” the wizard said. “Good luck, and may the best
win.”
Delacour gave him a bright smile in return, and even Weasley managed to muster up a grin of some sort. Harry, on the other hand, stared at Sirius with a blank face. His hand was clenched around the plaque, and the few seconds it took for the portkey to activate seemed to last an eternity.

‘I need to listen to him,’ Sirius suddenly realized. ‘I need to talk with Harry and listen to him. If I won’t, there’s no fixing this situation.’

Once the champions had disappeared, the Death Eater raised his hands to indicate that there was still something left for him to say. He smiled again, looking at the people in the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen…. you may now wonder where the entertainment is. What on earth could be fun about a mission that we cannot watch? Well, we all know how self-conscious people can be when they know they’re being watched. The champions were told that they will not be monitored or followed – that was a lie.”

Sirius didn’t bother to hide how smug he was feeling as he continued: “The broadcasting will start in thirty seconds and will continue without pause for three days. You may come and go as you please during that time, though students must remember to not stay here after curfew. There will be constant surveillance and security in the area. Ladies and gentlemen… enjoy the show!”

* 

It was a wide street with a seemingly never-ending line of shops, restaurants, and hotels on both sides. The steady drizzle of rain didn’t seem to bother the crowds of people passing by or the street vendors selling the kinds of foods Harry had never seen before. The place reminded him of Diagon Alley in many ways, but there was something amiss – something that Harry couldn’t immediately pinpoint.

The language he could hear people speaking wasn’t even vaguely familiar, though that wasn’t what was making him feel so wary.

‘Standing still and overthinking things will be just a waste of time,’ Harry decided, taking a deep breath and deciding to start walking. His brown Durmstrang uniform didn’t stand out as he stepped out of the shadowed alley he had been hiding in, and it was only when he thought of his own attire that he realized what had been bothering him so: no one was wearing robes.

People wore trousers and shirts and skirts and even dresses, but it was odd that no one in such a large crowd was wearing robes. There were no pointy hats in sight, no owls flying above, and no matter how much he walked and how many stores he passed by he couldn’t see a single broom store or a Quidditch supplies store or even a Potions apothecary.

It was as if he was… surrounded by Muggles.

(Something was wrong.)

Could that be true? Had Sirius sent him to complete his task in a Muggle-populated city? Harry’s mouth hung open with surprise as he turned to look at his surroundings with renewed interest. Where on earth was he, exactly? Which one of the three cities had he ended up in? The boy glanced at the plaque he was still holding tightly in his hand, and the name carved into it was Mario Orsini. Italian. Not Finnish, Egyptian or Turkish. Even his target couldn’t serve as a clue.

None of the destinations were anywhere near Italy. How was he supposed to look for someone with that name in this place anyway? He could be anywhere! Would a point-me spell work? Unlikely – Harry suspected that Sirius would have taken some measures to prevent the champions from locating their targets easily. Then again even if the spell wasn’t somehow blocked, he couldn’t use his wand
around Muggles, could he?

Circe, he was getting a headache.

‘Is that a car?’ Harry thought suddenly, his attention captured by what was, indeed, a yellow car making its way slowly through the crowd. The boy had seen a car only once before in his life, when the Ministry of Magic—

No, Merlin, this wasn’t the time to get distracted by cars. Ah, he needed to calm down and pull himself together, organize his thoughts and start thinking clearly. It was lucky that the audience wouldn’t be able to see him fumble like this. Knowing that he wasn’t being watched gave him a surprising kind of comfort and freedom, and Harry wondered if he could travel into the Muggle world in the summer.

(Why did he feel like hiding?)

‘If I survive this,’ Harry thought, shaking his head and walking slowly back to where he had first appeared, hoping to find a clue of any kind. ‘Tom said he wanted a show… Now that I think about it, doesn’t his request contradict what Sirius said? If we’re not being observed, how can Tom enjoy the show? How can anyone be entertained if they can’t see us?’

Feeling confused and irritated, Harry took another look at the name on the plaque before shoving it into his pocket. The fact that he was taken to this precise location must mean that Mario Orsini was somewhere nearby, right? Perhaps in a hotel? Was he one of the street vendors?

“This is ridiculous,” Harry muttered, his fingers itching to pull out his wand. Would using it in such a public place cause him to lose points with the judges? Then again – could they see him now or not? Sirius had said that they weren’t being watched, but Tom’s words had given the opposite impression.

It was then that Harry saw… him. It. In the distance, a shadow taller than an average human but thinner than Harry himself and narrow enough to glide through the crowds without gaining as much as a single look from the people. Was this something muggles were used to?

(Danger.)

No. Harry had a feeling that this was something different. It walked on two feet, silent and steady in its gait. Somehow threatening.

Harry knew without a doubt that this was something he should get away from as fast as possible. Feeling a cold shiver up his spine, the boy ducked into one of the stores nearby and pretended to look at the books for sale. The sudden fear he was feeling was unreasonable and for that moment all thoughts of the tournament were gone from his mind.

The shadow passed slowly by the bookstore, and Harry couldn’t believe how no one else could see him. Or even feel him. That presence like a sinister curse waiting to latch onto someone. Harry turned and walked further into the bookstore, afraid of stepping back into the street. He didn’t know why, couldn’t explain what made him think so, but leaving now wouldn’t be safe.

An old man behind the counter looked up at Harry and offered a kind smile. Harry smiled nervously in return, feeling very out of place. What if the thing followed him inside and—

“Merhaba,” the man said, before continuing with carefully pronounced and heavily accented English: “You not local? Need help?”

“Um, no,” Harry replied, unsure of what to say next and resisting the urge to look behind him. “I
mean yeah, I’m not local. I’m… visiting. Well, looking for someone, actually.”

(Don’t look.)

“Looking for arkadash?” the man wanted to know, though he didn’t sound particularly interested. In fact despite his kind smile and polite mannerism, he seemed to want Harry out of his store, as if he could see that the boy had no money to buy anything with. Harry doubted that his Galleons would be accepted here. “Friend?”

“A friend, yes. Well, something like that,” Harry said, shoving his hands into his pockets and trying to not think of the shadow creature that had terrified him in such a way. As if he could just forget. “Mario Orsini.”

“Mario!” the old man suddenly exclaimed, before smiling and nodding. “Yes. Yes. Mario. Everyone knows Mario. Artist. Has a, eh, atölye very close.”

“Really?” Harry asked, stunned but relieved about the turn of events. Suspicious, too. Harry didn’t believe in luck and didn’t feel comfortable trusting it. “Could you point me to the right direction?”

“Of course,” the old man replied, walking around the counter and leading Harry back outside. The boy nervously followed, hating the mere thought of returning to the street. “You see shoe shop there? Blue walls? You go to street behind it and walk until you see Orsini. It is very easy to recognize. Only building at the end of the road.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, smiling gratefully. “I’m… very thankful for your help. Your, uh, your English is really good.”

“You are welcome,” the old man said with a chuckle, though his words left Harry feeling strangely chastised. "You English, yes? People here learn your language because you will not learn ours. Travel more, son. The world is bigger than your country. Learn more. Speak more. Every language is a doorway to a new world.”

(Weren’t you told, Harry?)

Orsini’s atelier was indeed easy to find.

It was a shabby two-story building with small windows and a door that looked like a kick could break it apart. Harry knocked on the door before he even thought of what he was supposed to do next and how he’d explain his visit. It was too late to worry about that now, however, as the door was pushed open and a man with an angry scowl on his face appeared, glowering at Harry.

“Are you Mario Orsini?” Harry asked quickly, curling his fingers around his wand and smiling politely. The man grimaced at him, before nodding curtly.

“What do you want?” he said, his voice more like a hiss than anything else. “I was not expecting guests.”

“I need… just a moment of your time,” Harry told him, his polite smile unwavering. “Inside, if possible. I assure you that this is a matter that cannot be discussed out in the public.” Orsini hesitated, before pushing the door open and gesturing for Harry to enter. The boy had barely taken a few steps in before the door was slammed shut.

“You wait here,” Orsini said sharply. “I must finish a phone call that you interrupted. Do not move and do not touch anything. You steal, I will find you and make you pay. Understand?”
“Yes,” Harry replied easily, not minding the wait. He wasn’t in a hurry after all, and it felt safer to stay in the dark and hidden atelier than outside. It was a wonder, though, why Sirius had thought that completing the task would take three days. Then again… did Sirius know of the creature that Harry had seen? Was it meant to hinder him somehow?

Harry really didn’t think so. He wasn’t sure how to explain it… he just… knew.

(The more aware you become of them…)

The faint sound of a strangely unsteady melody came from upstairs, and Harry wondered absently if the man had put the music on to drown his conversation under the noise. Harry didn’t blame him, and simply did his best to hum along as he took a look at the paintings around him. They were all so silent and still, and Harry tried not to cringe as he wrapped his coat tighter around him.

It was then that he saw it: a small painting hanging on one of the stained walls. The man in the picture was nearly identical to the creature Harry had seen roaming the streets earlier: he was taller than any human Harry had ever seen. His ashen skin had a blue glow to it and his dark grey eyes looked far too alive to belong to a Muggle painting.

The fear Harry had somewhat left behind earlier, returned with vengeance. He didn’t think that this was part of Sirius’s task, no. This had nothing to do with the living, and everything to do with the dead. Merope would know. Albus would know.

‘Neither of them is here with me,’ Harry thought, and jumped with a yelp when Orsini appeared next to him out of nowhere.

“Now,” the still scowling man said. “What do you want?”

“This painting,” Harry blurted out. “How do you— Tell me about this painting.”

The man regarded him with a look that was slightly less angry than his scowls before. “Would you buy it?”

“Maybe,” Harry lied, and continued stumbling and stuttering with words that didn’t know how to arrange themselves. “I just… I need to know. This person— No, not this person, but someone like him. I’ve seen— I just. Please. Why did you paint this?”

“I dream sometimes,” Orsini said, shuffling away from the painting and turning his back to Harry. His voice, however, remained loud in the room. “Of them. I dream of them sometimes. It used to be once or twice a year, but now it’s more. I don’t know how to stop.”

“Who are they?” Harry asked. “Do you know?”

“The Gone Tribe,” Orsini replied, his voice tired and echoing – calling – something that made Harry shiver with fear and anxiety. “Well, sometimes they’re called the Fading Tribe, but really… they’re already gone. They’ve already faded into nothing.”

(…the more aware they become of you.)
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

I've got a few spoilery warnings for y'all in the end notes, so read them if you want. No sexual assault of any kind, tho. Still hella depressing (to me at least).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"The Gone Tribe," Orsini replied, his voice tired and echoing – calling – something that made Harry shiver with fear and anxiety. "Well, sometimes they’re called the Fading Tribe, but really… they’re already gone. They’ve already faded into nothing."

"But," Harry said, "how do you know of them?"

Orsini narrowed his eyes suspiciously and looked at Harry with a sneer on his face. "Isn’t that what I should be asking you, young man? It is not often that people ask me of the Tribe. You seem far too unsurprised to have never heard of them."

"I have heard of them," Harry said, mind scrambling for a believable excuse. "In a story. I read a lot of those."

"Quite the story it must have been, then," Orsini said dryly. "Now, did you come here for this painting or for something else?"

Harry fell silent for a moment, and thought of his options. He had already deduced that there was no way that Sirius’s words regarding them not being under surveillance were true - the entertainment of the event was based on people watching them, and claiming otherwise would be a blatant lie. So whatever he would respond with, whatever he would do, would have to be… something that impressed the audience. Mette had told him that people wanted a show, and if giving them a show was the only way he could get one over Delacour, then...

And... what was that strange shuffling sound coming from somewhere nearby? Did his target have any guests here?

"I’d like to buy this painting," Harry said. Orsini rolled his eyes and took a step back from him, in clear indication that his earlier question about Harry’s interest in buying the painting had been nothing but mockery.

"I doubt you’ve got enough liras on you," the man said. "And I don’t take dollars. Or pounds, if that’s what you’ve got."

"What about labor, then," Harry offered lightly, wondering if he should use a spell to convince the man. "The place is quite messy, and I doubt it’s fun to organize it all on your own. I could help."

"You could work here your entire life, and you still wouldn’t be able to afford the painting,” Orsini said. "It’s not for curious little boys. Leave."

'What the hell do I do,' Harry thought, doing his best to not show any signs of his rising panic. What would Bellatrix do? "I’m afraid I cannot do that," Harry said finally. Orsini gave him a sharp look, and tensed. Once again Harry could hear a strange, shuffling sound, except this time it sounded even
"I will throw you out **myself,**" Orsini threatened. "You have no right to anything that is mine."

"You could reconsider selling me the painting," Harry said, keeping his tone friendly, "and perhaps there will be no need for violence." Because, really, violence was the **last** thing Harry wanted. If he could somehow figure out a way to win the tournament without violence, he would. All he could hope now was for Orsini to buy his bluff and miraculously feel intimidated.

Miracles, however, weren’t forthcoming.

In response the man levelled him with a look so evil, it made something inside Harry flinch and reach for his wand. He felt bad for being so rude to Orsini, but he **really** needed an excuse to stay long enough to somehow get a hair off the man without hurting him. He didn’t want to end up having to fight his target. Not to mention that he really did want the painting, if only to remind himself that the Gone Tribe was real, and they were out there, somewhere. Aware of him. He had **seen** one.

"You can sit on that couch there all you want," Orsini said, gesturing towards a couch that had its back to a staircase leading up. "I’m not changing my mind. Let’s see for how long you can wait, eh?"

'**Should I** attack **him?**' Harry thought, and watched as Orsini turned away from him and walked upstairs. The man’s feigned lack of care was neither convincing nor relieving, and Harry found himself even more stressed and anxious than before. What was he up to? Should Harry just stun him and go?

It was well into the first day already - had Delacour finished her task yet? Had she been as efficient as before? Would she have kicked down the front door, hit Orsini with a cutting curse to the throat and been done with the task in fifteen minutes?

'I’m **not her,**' Harry thought. 'And I can’t **become her** no matter how much Tom probably wants me to.' He then turned back to the painting, and could swear that there was someone nearby breathing. The sound didn’t come from the painting itself, did it? No - it was clearly a muggle painting, no matter how well-made it was. Harry threw a glance at the staircase, and when he didn’t see Orsini there, he pressed his fingertip against the painting’s surface. Nothing happened.

'It’s painted on fabric,' Harry thought, running his hand gently over it. 'Surprisingly thin fabric.' A bit odd, wasn’t it? The painting had such sturdy frames, yet nothing to support it from the back.

Shooting another nervous look towards the staircase, Harry grabbed a hold of the frame, and lifted the painting off its hook. Behind it he saw nothing but a wall, and a small hole. Nothing special. The hole didn’t pierce through the wall, but rather... **into** it. It seemed to be nothing but a result of someone accidentally punching the thin wall too hard, breaking the first layer and then not bothering to fix it. Harry peeked closer, and saw nothing but empty darkness inside. He wondered how deep the space between the walls was.

'I have to put this back before Orsini comes down,' he decided, and glanced down for a moment to readjust his grip. When he looked up again, what he saw punched the breath right out of him: staring at him through the hole in the wall was a pair of eyes.

A pair of bulging, bloodshot human eyes.

* 

The first thing Fleur did was cast a warming charm on herself and silently curse the location she had
been sent to.

She was standing in a relatively empty square, in front of a large, white church. There was a thick layer of snow on the ground, and cold gusts of wind made it hard to breathe at times, despite the warming charm. The people she could see were dressed in a fashion unfamiliar to her, and the statue that she could see was still, without so much as a twitch. It became clear very fast that she was in a muggle neighbourhood. Did that mean that her target was a muggle as well?

'Merlin, what a bore,' Fleur thought. So far the previous task seemed to be tougher than this one, but perhaps that was for the best. A task being boring but easy was by far better than a tough task that would increase the risk of failure. Tricky but entertaining duels could wait for another day to happen. 'Now, to locate my target.'

Her target’s name was Juho Tilli, and Fleur had no idea if that was a man or woman’s name. Not that it mattered, really - while the point-me spell wouldn’t work on finding the person, it wasn’t entirely useless. Predictably, whoever had cast anti-locator charms on the target hadn’t bothered to cover the target’s home as well. Fleur knew that even if they weren’t there right now, she could wait for them - she had time, after all.

It was clear that the game-designers had decided to err on the side of caution when it came to deciding the timing for the game.

The witch followed the directions of her wand, and after several minutes of walking in increasingly inconvenient weather, she had finally arrived to what looked like a small harbour, of all things. There were people about to board a ferry standing there, and following the tug of her wand, Fleur quietly joined them. A disillusionment charm kept her from being detected by anyone, and a part of her was relieved that the audience at Hogwarts wouldn’t be watching her - this was far too boring for anyone to be entertained by.

Soon enough Fleur arrived on an island, and from there it took her nearly half an hour of brisk walking to reach a house.

It wasn’t an impressive house, really. An ugly, yellow brick house in the middle of what looked like the ruins of an old brick building. No neighbours, and even the road was a fair distance away. Really, there was nothing worth mentioning; only that ugly house, with ruins to its sides, and the Baltic Sea behind it.

'Who on earth would live here,' the witch thought, before promptly unlocking the front door and stepping into the house.

In a vast contrast to its outward appearance, the house on the inside was... clearly designed with money not being an issue. The dark wooden floor was polished to perfection. The teal wallpaper with golden leaves mixing with white-painted wall panels reminded Fleur of one of her mother’s old houses in Lourmarin. In the front hall there was a spiraling staircase leading to the upper floor, and several beautifully decorated doors. Something, however, wasn’t quite right. There was a strange atmosphere in the house, and—

Fleur snapped her head up, looking at the top of the staircase, just in time to see a small face duck behind a wall. A strange, fast, uneven sound of thumping followed.

'Oh no, you don’t,' Fleur hissed, pulling out her wand and racing up the stairs. 'I saw you!' She reached the top of the stairs, and looked both directions down the long, dark hallway. No one was there, but whoever the child had been, they could have easily slipped into any of the rooms on the second floor. Fleur wasn’t about to go there without knowing the location of the one she was looking
'Why is a child alone in this house, anyway,' the witch thought. 'Is it a child? What if this child is Juho Tilli?'

"All right then," Fleur said, knowing exactly what she would have to do. She turned her back to the corridor and returned downstairs. After a moment of making sure that the child wasn’t following her, she stepped out of the house and closed the door behind her.

Unluckily for her target, Fleur didn’t like children. Fleur especially didn’t like muggle children. And unluckily for Potter and Weasley, they were competing against a witch who genuinely enjoyed learning strong, complicated magic, and just so happened to know that polyjuice didn’t need fresh ingredients. Bones picked off the remains of a dead body would be enough.

'I know what people are saying,' Fleur thought, walking around the house and drawing concealment and containment runes every few steps. 'I’m not a witch in the eyes of many. Just a veela. Well, let me show them what a veela can do. Let me show them what a veela witch can do against two pureblood wizards.'

As she drew the last two runes, invisible walls rose to surround the house. With a flick of her wand, she set the roof on fire, and stood back to watch the flames slowly eating away at the house.

It took less than half an hour for Fleur to hear the panicked scream from inside. Someone was clearly trying to escape, and the voice was indeed that of a child. It was crying, and not even the sound of those frightened, pained sobs could bring Fleur to move from where she was standing. It wasn’t until she heard a loud crash - most likely someone falling down the stairs, by the sound of it - that she cast a shield to surround herself and stepped back into the house.

The child was now lying on the floor, crying and crawling towards the doorway. It had burn marks all over its body, and most remarkably - it had no legs. It was simply pulling itself forward with its arms, compensating for the emptiness that came after its knees.

Fleur thought of her younger sister, and cast a cutting curse.

* Horrified, Harry stumbled away from the wall and couldn’t hold back a frightened shriek. When he heard Orsini run down the stairs, Harry instinctively dropped the painting, pulled out his wand again, and ducked behind a couch - he didn’t know what the man’s reaction would be.

Not a positive one, it turned out, when the first thing Orsini did was reach for a chair and throw it towards Harry in a fit of rage. It flew over the back of the couch that Harry was cowering behind, and hit the floor with a loud thud.

"What have you done?" the man all but howled. "I told you not to touch anything!"

"What is that?" Harry yelled, as he tried to crawl towards the door, doing his best to avoid the man who was getting angrier and angrier. "In the wall! An eye!" Orsini didn’t seem to be in a mood for answers, and lunged at Harry with a wild look in his eyes, clawing at air as he tried to reach the boy. His heart hammering hard in his chest, Harry’s only desire was to get Orsini as far away from him as possible, and hopefully get some sort of an answer about the creature that was, even now, staring at them from behind the wall.

Staring, with a hungry look in its eyes, its long fingers pushing in and tugging at the jagged edges of the hole.
"Who is that?" Harry tried again, dodging a pair of scissors that Orsini had thrown at him. "Just tell me - what the hell is going on? Merlin, this is— *protego*!"

"I shouldn’t have let you get in," Orsini raged. "I learned from that, boy. Oh yes, I did. I won’t be letting you out, you can be sure of *that*. I’ll stick you right in with him, I’ll—"

"Stick me ri— You trapped a *person* in the wall?" Harry said disbelievingly. "*Why?* What a horrible, *horrible* thing to do to someone! Was it really a human? Why had— What in Merlin’s name was going on? He really should’ve just stunned the man and gone back to Hogwarts when he still had the chance.

"We can still part ways with no harm coming upon you," Harry said loudly. "Just give me the painting - or sell it to me. Or just tell me what you know of the... thing drawn on it? Anything--Listen -- No! Don’t throw that!" While speaking, Harry had tried to find a way to shift closer to the door. Unfortunately, in order to achieve that without getting too close to Orsini, the only way was to pass by the wall and the... eye. Orsini, in his rage, didn’t think twice before hurling what looked like a heavy statue made of stone at Harry, hitting the wall behind him.

The hole grew bigger, the eye disappeared for a moment, and a strange yowl came from its dark depths. Distracted by that, Harry didn’t notice Orsini heading towards him until he was far too close for Harry’s comfort. A silent thank you to Durmstrang’s curriculum running through his mind, Harry shifted his whole body to roll under a table and stand up with his wand in hand, leaving Orsini between him and the growing hole in the wall.

"I’m *so sorry* ;" Harry said, and his fast *expelliarmus* hit Orsini right in the chest, flinging him several feet back and right into the wall, breaking it even more. The hole now was big enough for the creature to crawl out, and Harry, not knowing how fast or aggressive it would be, quietly moved further and further away. He couldn’t leave yet, not without acquiring the missing ingredient for his polyjuice potion.

*‘Merlin, that is a person,’* Harry thought, horrified, as he watched the creature that pulled itself into the house through the hole. Its saggy skin was grey, greasy and sparse hair falling down in clumps onto his shoulders. Its eyes were strangely, frighteningly alert as it stood still and observed the room silently. Harry didn’t dare breathe, and neither did Orsini, it seemed. There was no telling what would be the thing’s - that *person’s* - next move.

It turned its head and stared at Harry for moment, before slowly crouching over Orsini’s now whimpering form. The silence lasted for a few more seconds, and there was nothing Harry could do but hold his wand tightly, ready to attack. It was strange, really, how he had been so hesitant about violence earlier, but now... now when the danger was so *real*, Harry knew that he wouldn’t hesitate to defend himself, no matter how he’d have to do it.

It was then that he heard a strange, wet sound, right before Orsini let out an agonized scream. Harry took a deep breath and watched in horror as the puddle of blood on the floor grew and grew, just as the sound of loud chewing filled the room. There was nothing to guess about what the... person, *creature*, was doing. The painting that had made Harry go through all this hassle was now soaked in Orsini’s blood.

‘*Why,*’ Harry thought. The Tournament didn’t even cross his mind at that point - not the tournament, not the audience, not even the Gone Tribe. All he could think of was watching the creature - the person? Which one was it? - eating Orsini alive, while the man tried in vain to flee from its hold. Before realizing it, Harry had raised his wand and aimed it at the...thing. There was only one spell he could think of and still somehow come out on top - not only survive this mess, but perhaps impress Tom as well. It would be fast and painless, and if Harry had to do this, he’d rather do it painlessly.
The green spell hit the creature on the back of its head, and silently - mid-movement - it slumped down. Harry could hear Orsini gasping for air and sobbing, somehow still alive, as he walked closer to his target. A moment later, another jet of green hit Orsini, silencing him forever.

And Harry... Harry was done.

Sirius didn’t know what to think, or how to feel.

A part of him - a small, guilty part - was relieved that neither James nor Lily were there to watch this happen. Somehow he couldn’t imagine them being fine with what had just occurred.

He was glad, however, that he wasn’t a judge - he hadn’t been able to focus on Weasley and Delacour at all since the moment Harry stepped into his target’s house. The boy’s earlier behaviour - it was as if he was hiding from something - had made Sirius curious, but that was forgotten soon in light of the events that followed.

It had seemed at first as if Harry would be both lucky and unlucky: lucky in finding his target so fast - the audience was still present and attentive - and finishing his mission quickly, and unlucky in the lack of entertainment that would create. Things took a turn to unknown roads when instead of simply taking what he wanted from Orsini, Harry’s attention had been caught by a painting. The boy hadn’t been feigning interest in the painting - Sirius knew Harry well enough to know that he had been sincere, there was something that had caught Harry’s attention about it. But what was it? What had he spoken about, with the man? While the audience could watch the events unfolding, listening to what was being said was impossible this time around.

But oh, how Sirius wanted to know. Whatever it was, it had been enough to bring an expression to Harry’s face that Sirius didn’t even recognize: some strange mix of desperation, fear, and hope.

There was plenty that hadn’t made sense - Harry had clearly been focused on something that was personal to him, and not as Durmstrang’s champion. It only made things more interesting for the curious audience, of course, and the reporters who would speculate for weeks to come.

Harry had had a bit of a slow start, but when the boy had finally decided to fight - Merlin, Sirius hadn’t even known that little Harry could be so quick. The way he had rolled under that table, ready with a curse... that had Crouch’s signature all over it. But the way the boy actually cast the curse... it was... it reminded Sirius a little bit of the Dark Lord, of all people. The way Harry held that wand, with an unusual grip that looked deceptively loose as he cast the killing curse...

The killing curse! There was no way that learning the killing curse was a part of the Durmstrang curriculum for students who couldn’t even apparate yet! Where had Harry—? It wasn’t the kind of curse that people would just study independently, was it? Especially not people like Harry!

‘What on earth have you been up to,’ Sirius thought, surprised to find himself... not as happy as he thought he would be. Harry had performed brilliantly - even better than the first time around - but... the killing curse wasn’t easy business. It wasn’t the kind of spell children knew much about, let alone knew how to cast. There was... there was something wrong, and Sirius, for the first time, regretted having taken on the task of organizing the tournament. It would keep him busy over the holidays, and somehow he couldn’t help but feel that right now what he needed to do was spend more time with Harry. To figure things out.

Up in a booth with the other judges, Bellatrix was just about ready to burst with glee. The thought of having to endure a task that lasted for four days hadn’t been pleasant at all. Much to her delight,
however, the Potter boy didn’t disappoint in the least.

He was quick and efficient - and lucky - in locating his target. At first Bella had wondered why the boy didn’t simply kill the man on the spot, perhaps off a few stray muggles on the side by accident, but if Potter was the kind of boy who enjoyed toying with his targets a little bit, well... she couldn’t exactly frown upon that, now could she? Especially not when his target’s end had been so delightful, and the boy had used the killing curse to finish his business.

It was beautiful.

"He could’ve gotten to the point a little bit faster,” Araminta Meliflua said, though she didn’t sound disapproving. The old woman looked reluctantly impressed, and Bellatrix knew that while the older witch didn’t feel particularly fond of Potter, she liked the poor Weasley and the French veela even less. At least Potter was English and wealthy. "And that killing curse - nicely done, but it’s clearly his first time casting it successfully. To be fair to the boy, however, he is quite young.”

"How can you tell?” Edmund Parkinson asked. "His work seemed quite decent to me. I doubt it matters if it’s the boy’s first time casting the killing curse. He obviously did it successfully.”

"The translucency of the colour,” Araminta replied simply, before turning away from Parkinson. "This is the champion you’ve been rooting for, Bellatrix? Who do you think would win in a duel, your nephew Anthony or Potter?”

"Po- Harry,” Bellatrix said, her eyes still fixed on the scene of Harry finishing the polyjuice potion. Soon he would come back, and in all likelihood he’d be whisked off to rest. Casting the killing curse - twice, no less! - for the first time was exhausting, and Bellatrix herself remembered having slept for two days straight after she had cast hers. When the boy would wake up, she would go and visit him. Or should she allow him to keep his secret a little while longer?

He might try to deny it, but Bella had been a Death Eater for a long, long time. She had fought side by side with the Dark Lord, and knew exactly how her master dueled. What she wanted to know, however, was how Potter had picked up the Dark Lord’s stance and grip. It wasn’t a style that Crouch could’ve taught him. In fact, Bellatrix doubted that there was anyone who could teach that style at Durmstrang. Not to mention that the Dark Lord had nominated Potter for the Tournament.

Something was clearly going on.

‘Oh, little Potter,’ Bella thought, leaning back in her seat. 'You’re so entertaining, I might end up wanting you all for myself.'

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It took George quite a while to locate his target, and even then... he wasn’t sure where he’d find the person he was looking for.

The detector that George had built with Fred in preparation for this task was very precise, but took a long time to work. By the time he had narrowed down his target’s location to a moderately sized museum in some corner of the city of Cairo, it was already nightfall. George didn’t mind - he’d rather avoid crowds if possible. It was, however, surprising that his target would be at the museum that late. Could it be the janitor, or someone who had work to do overnight? If that was the case, then wasn’t that a lucky break?

After waiting for a few hours past the closing time, George couldn’t see anyone exiting the building anymore, and the lights seemed to be all switched off. Carefully he made his way towards one of the
windows, and unlocked it with a quick flick, pulling himself inside that way. He had no idea if muggles used alarm systems, but George took care to not touch any of the items in glass cases as he walked past them. The statues, however, were fair game.

Not that he wanted to touch any of those. Creepy things, they were, towering over him in the dark rooms and hallways.

He had never really considered museums scary before, but this one was a place George would be glad to leave as soon as possible. Merlin, what was the fascination about collecting all these statues and then coming to stare at them? They didn’t even move!

'Although, to be quite honest,' George thought, stepping into a large room lined with even more statues and some ancient human remains. 'I'm kind of glad that they aren't moving.'

The atmosphere of that room was, however, very different from the other rooms that George had been to. Here, strangely enough, he felt as if he was being stared at. Not necessarily in a hostile way, just... It was highly uncomfortable, and this wasn’t the first time that he regretted ever entering the tournament. On one hand he wished he could rewind time and never participate, but on the other... there was a lot of money involved here.

'How can my target be here, though,' George thought, trying to see if there was anyone hiding behind the statues. 'I see no one, not even a janitor.'

It was purely by accident that he saw it - a pair of eyes gleaming in the dark, staring at him with a look of desperate hope from the other side of the room. Wary, George pulled out his wand, and slowly walked closer, ready to cast a blasting curse at the first sign of movement from his target.

"Stay still," George said, "if you cooperate, there will be no need for any violence, all right? All I want is——" Whatever he had wanted to say next remained unsaid, when he finally saw the face that the pair of eyes belonged to. Most of the face - and the rest of the body - was wrapped in cloth that looked like it had not only been dug out of dirt, but was old enough to gain a yellow tint to it. From what could be seen of the face, gaunt wasn’t accurate enough to describe it. The skin was tightly stretched over a skeletal face, and there were no muscles in the arms or legs. In fact... had it not been for the pair of eyes that undeniably belonged to a living human, George would’ve assumed that this was the remains of yet another historical figure.

'How?' he thought, feeling no small amount of disgust. 'How had this been done to someone?' Was his target trapped in this body or was something else going on? Didn’t Muggles - well, of course they didn’t see this. Any kind of magic could easily mask the eyes.

George stood still in front of the... display? Mummy? Person? He tried to figure out what he could use for the polyjuice potion, and kept looking around in hopes of finding someone else - anyone else, who could turn out to be his target instead. No such luck; the device he and Fred had created was very clear and left little room for error. Was the thing capable of moving? What if there was a curse, ready to be flung at him the moment he reached for it?

"Merlin," George huffed, deciding with a grimace to cut a little bit of the visible cheekbone with the tip of his wand, avoiding direct contact with the mummy and the case it was being supported by. As he did, the eyes still staring at him in hope - hope for what? help? - widened in horror and panic. There were no sounds, and George wasn’t sure even how it was possible, but the thing’s eyes welled up in tears the more he cut off its cheek. Once done, he took a step back and uncorked the vial of polyjuice. As he waited for the ingredient to settle, he stared quietly at the mummy.

It was a person. Someone, for whatever reason, had been trapped into this husk of a body, unable to
live or die. And going by the look in their eyes, they had held hope that George would somehow put them out of their misery.

He... he couldn’t. Besides, maybe he was wrong. Maybe this was an illusion created to mess with his head. Maybe there was no person at all. Maybe George was imagining it. There was no way a real person had been subjected to an existence of torment, silence, and isolation like this. It had to be a set-up for the tournament, and that knowledge made it easier for George to turn away.

After all, this was just entertainment.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: the murder of a disabled child, the murder of two men + cannibalism, leaving someone to die.

So I'm trying to get back to this fic, but will see how it goes.

Another note: I know some of y'all may have questions about the person in the wall. There will be more about that in the next chapter.
Harry stood still, in disbelief over what he had done, before reaching with shaking hands to where he had stashed the polyjuice flask. Did Sirius- had he known about the-? Was it all planned? Was this entertainment?

‘Who am I kidding,’ Harry thought bitterly, remembering what he, Delacour, and George Weasley had gone through in the first task. ‘Of course this is just entertainment to them. Merlin. This world is crazy.’

His limbs felt heavy. He felt sick. He wanted nothing as much as to go back home, crawl into his own bed, and wake up to his mum calling him for breakfast. He wanted nothing, nothing in the entire world, as much as to make his way to the kitchen on a bright morning, for his dad to offer him a muffin and for his mum to snatch it away and make him eat something healthy instead.

But he wasn’t there. That time was long gone. His parents were dead, and he was the only one left.

Harry took a deep breath, forcing himself to remain calm and rational, and took another step closer to the two bodies. It was only after a moment of silent inspection that he realized - whoever the person trapped between the walls had been, at some point in their life, they must have resembled Orsini quite a lot in appearance.

‘Similar features.’ Harry realized. ‘Close enough to be... siblings? Is he an Orsini too? What if he’s been my target all along?’ How on earth could he tell which one was Mario Orsini? And if the man he had spoken to wasn’t Mario, then who was he? How did he know about the Gone Tribe? There were so many things that Harry wanted to know, but how on earth could he even begin his search for answers?

Well, there was at least one thing that he could do.

Harry kept a tight hold on his wand as he made his way around the artist’s house, in search for anything he could use to pour half the polyjuice into. There was no way for him to tell which one was the real Mario Orsini, and he was left with no other options but to try the polyjuice twice: once with each body.

The kitchen turned out to be upstairs, right next to a messy, unmade bed and a table almost covered in sketches and dirty dishes. With a grimace Harry picked a cup that looked less dirty than the others he could see, and cast several cleaning charms on it, just in case, before returning downstairs. He then carefully made his way back to the bodies, and hesitated before leaning closer to cut a strand of each one’s hair.

‘I hope it doesn’t wake up suddenly and eat my arm,’ Harry thought, eyeing the body of Orsini’s prisoner. It had a chunk of flesh from the man’s leg still in its mouth, blood still dripping in some places, and crusting in others. ‘Nothing can survive a killing curse, but Merlin... I wouldn’t put it past this thing to return from the dead.’

Moving towards the table while keeping his eyes on the bodies was a bit of a hassle, but soon enough Harry got to where he wanted to be. Carefully pouring half of the potion into the cup and adding the hairs into each portion was a bit of a challenge as well, as Harry couldn’t help but lose his
focus easily: he kept thinking of the possibility of the wall creature’s dead body suddenly coming to life again, and crawling towards him at an inhumane speed.

It was terrifying, and he couldn’t calm down until he had set the drinks on the table and took a hold of his wand once again. Just in case.

After waiting for the newly added ingredients to settle for a few minutes, Harry drank the first batch, and grimaced, feeling slightly nauseated as his body changed. He held the portkey tightly, but it didn’t activate. It meant that whoever had been trapped in the wall, it wasn’t Mario. Harry clenched his eyes shut and stood still, doing his best to ignore the terrible body he was in at that moment. Waiting for the effect of the polyjuice potion to wear off was an exercise in patience that seemed to last an eternity.

'Merlin, I hate this task,' the boy thought, fighting the feeling of nausea. The last thing he wanted to do right then was throw up - could this body even throw up? The tasks so far had been both disgusting and horrifying, and Harry was afraid of what the third one could be. Knowing Sirius, it would be something grand in all the ways that Harry hated. Should he ask Tom for details? Oh, no, Tom. If the man was watching - and he surely would be - then what would he think of Harry’s actions?

Eventually Harry’s body shifted back to its original form, and the boy couldn’t help but hug himself tightly for a few long moments. He resisted the urge to take his shirt off to make sure that nothing of the creature had remained, and turned to where the rest of the potion was instead.

"Well,” Harry sighed, reaching for the flask. "It better be you, then.”

Just as he tilted his head back to drink, Harry spied something strange from the corner of his eye. Something blue.

Anxiety flooded back into his body, and he couldn’t even taste the polyjuice potion when he realized what he was looking at: the same creature that he had seen on the street earlier. A creature that - there was no doubt of it - was of the Gone Tribe. It was huge, had to bend down to peer into the house, where Harry was standing, his body shifting into that of Mario Orsini.

He locked eyes with the creature, and felt... strange. Fearful, definitely, but not in the same way as he had been before. The feeling of something being horribly wrong washed over Harry’s body, and the feeling didn’t disappear even when the portkey finally activated, whisking him back to Hogwarts.

The moment his feet hit the ground at Hogwarts, Harry saw the towering hologram screens, and knew that he had been right. He felt disoriented and barely recognized Sirius when the man came to feed him a potion to neutralize the effects of polyjuice. There was so much noise around him, but Harry couldn’t focus on anything long enough to listen. He felt dizzy with relief – he had made it out. Safely. Somehow.

"Drink it all up, Harry, there you go,” Sirius was saying, helping him remain on his feet. Merlin, he was exhausted.

"Ladies and gentlemen,” Sirius said next, his magically enhanced voice reaching every member in the audience. "The first champion to return is Harry Potter, from Durmstrang! Let’s give him the applause he deserves for such an amazing performance!’’

'I want to sleep,’ Harry thought, the tension of the day and the spellwork having drained him quite
thoroughly. He tried to shake his head to clear his vision, which didn’t help at all - it did nothing for his tired eyes, and only made him feel even more nauseated. The audience was still clapping and screaming, and it felt like a lifetime before Sirius finally raised his hand to ask for silence.

"Now,” the man said, ”it is time to see what our esteemed judges thought of Mr. Potter’s performance! Did he do better this time around? Well, the judges certainly seem to think so! Harry Potter from Durmstrang scores a solid ten from Bellatrix, another ten from Edmund, and a... nine from Araminta - hard to please, isn’t she? A wonderful score for the youngest champion! Now let’s give him another round of applause before we send him off to the healers for a quick check-up!”

Much to Harry’s relief, an assistant of some kind - he didn’t know whose assistant, really - helped him to the hospital wing. He doubted that he would have been able to get there on his own, as with each step the exhaustion seemed to weigh heavier and heavier on him. He didn’t remember much of the check-up itself, and was only vaguely aware of somehow ending up being carried by Truls - whom he recognized by scent - back to their temporary dormitory.

After that, nothing.

Until he woke up, that is. Still disoriented, hungry, and unsure of the day or time. Harry spent several minutes in his bed, trying to get his thoughts in order, before sitting up to see if he was alone in the room. He was; all the beds were empty, and there wasn’t a single person in sight. He... he didn’t want to be alone. Before he went looking for the others, however, he really needed a shower.

‘I wonder if they’re at dinner or something,’ Harry thought, slowly climbing out of bed. 'Or - how much time passed? Hours? A whole day? Merlin, where’s my wand?’

After a moment of slightly panicked searching, Harry found his wand under his pillow, and cast a quick tempus charm. Whatever day it was, it was already evening, it turned out. Well - that didn’t matter. Even if the day after was a school day, Harry was done with the second task. He was one step closer to leaving the entire tournament behind him.

‘I wonder what the third task will be like,’ Harry thought, heading towards the bathroom with a change of clothes. Merlin, warm water was a miracle. Showers were amazing. 'I hope it's easier to deal with than the first two. I need to practice dueling more, however. And... and I completely forgot about the dagger when I was at Orsini’s. I shouldn’t have forgotten about it, even if I wouldn’t have used it. Merlin... I have to remember it when the third task starts.’

When Harry eventually was done, he made his way to the common room, where he found Ingrid, Mette, and Maria. The girls looked up from the Daily Prophet copy that they had been reading together the moment Harry stepped out of the dorm room.

”Harry!” Mette said, sounding pleased. ”You’re finally awake! Are you hungry? Maria, go tell the Headmaster that Harry is awake, will you? Sit down, Harry, I’ll call a house-elf to bring you something to eat. I doubt going to dinner with everyone else right now is something you want to do.”

”Why?” Harry asked, sitting down. ”Food would be great, thanks. Um, is it Sunday?”

”It’s Monday,” Ingrid said. ”You missed a few classes, but obviously nobody is holding that against you. The Headmaster was so pleased with your performance; I doubt he has stopped bragging since you came back.”

”Oh,” Harry said, feeling anxiety creep into him again. Merlin, he didn’t want to even think about the task anymore! ”What happened after I was taken to the hospital wing?”
"Well, Delacour - she’s an ice cold woman, she is - arrived a little bit after you," Ingrid said. "The way she went about doing her bit took a lot less fighting that yours did, but I suppose she got extra points for, uh, how merciless she was? I don’t know. Either way, she received two nines and an eight, while you received two tens and a nine."

"And George?"

"Weasley? His task wasn’t interesting at all, to be quite honest," Mette said with a shrug, after dismissing the house-elf she had called. "Some say it was very frightening, and they loved it the most, but to me - I like action. So do the judges, apparently. Weasley got a solid eight. You’re leading! Congratulations!"

"Thanks," Harry said tiredly. "Say, where are Truls and the others?"

"Library, probably," Mette said. "At least some of the boys. Some might be socializing, I’m not sure." It was then that Maria returned, accompanied by Headmaster Karkaroff and Professor Wiemar. Ingrid had been right, apparently - Karkaroff looked extremely pleased, and looked almost friendly when he mustered up a smile.

"Mr. Potter," he said. "Good to see you awake! Excellent performance so far, in the tournament. I must say that I was quite surprised to see the level of your spellwork, but of course, it is only a credit to Durmstrang to showcase such skill. Well done!"

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, his mouth dry and stomach in knots as he remembered casting the killing curse - twice, no less! In front of everyone! Tom would definitely use that as a leverage point to make him learn more Dark Arts, Harry just knew it. "I, um, I owe it all to Durmstrang’s education."

"Of course," Karkaroff said, nodding. "You came highly recommended, and I see why now. Despite the tournament, however, I ask you to not neglect your other studies. You’ve a little bit to catch up on, if I’m not mistaken. And tomorrow you’ll be up and about in class early, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent!"

"I’d like to add one thing more, before we leave you to your late dinner," Professor Wiemar said suddenly. "Mr. Potter, there will be reporters trying to approach you asking for interviews. Remember to make sure that they have the authorization, and be very careful in what you say."

"Yes, sir," Harry said again. *He didn’t even offer his help. I wouldn’t mind getting some advice.*

Then again, even if he had offered his help, Harry wasn’t sure if he would’ve accepted it. The thought of going to an adult with his problems was... it felt undoable. Tom didn’t count and Merope was dead. Perhaps he ought to ask Sirius? Despite their disagreements, Harry really missed his godfather.

Maybe… maybe he could?

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When Harry woke up early on Tuesday morning, he still felt exhausted in ways that had nothing to do with sleepiness. At breakfast Truls was looking at him with a worried expression, and kept trying to make Harry eat more.
"Those tasks are taking a heavy toll on you," Truls said. "You should take care of yourself better."

"I agree," Ingrid said. "We can’t have you fainting or somehow lacking in school performance, Harry. Eat."

"I am eating," Harry replied, feeling slightly annoyed. 'I’d eat better if they weren’t harping at me about it all the time.' "Which class do we have first?"

"Your favourite," Truls said with a grin. "Transfigura— oh, wow, what a scowl. But at least McGonagall is a good teacher, right?"

"Right," Harry sighed. "And it’s not as if I hate transfiguration, I just... it’s a struggle."

"Hang in there," Maria said, helping herself to a plateful of bacon that Harry knew Lestrange had been eyeing for a while now. "The Christmas holiday is right around the corner. All we’ve got to do is survive until then, and you’ll have some free time to relax."

"I doubt there’ll be much time for relaxation," Harry said. "I mean, the third task is still ahead and I have no idea how much preparation that is going to need from me. Either way I can’t waste too much time resting."

"But before we even get to that point," Mette joined the discussion, "we have the Yule Ball to look forward to! Harry, have you found a partner yet?"

"McGonagall’s classroom is pretty far away, isn’t it," Harry said hastily, standing up. "Best if we go now, Truls. We don’t want to be late."

"I know what you’re doing," Mette yelled after him. "You can avoid this for only so long, Harry! Time’s running out!"

"You know," Truls said as soon as they left the great hall, "as much as I hate to agree with her, she does have a point. You really haven’t found a date yet?"

"I haven’t been looking," Harry admitted. "Can we talk about this later?"

"All right," Truls said. "So, what are your plans for the holiday? Dueling practice?"

"Actually," Harry started hesitantly, lowering his voice a little bit. "I, Truls... remember when I spoke to you about the life debt? About being worried? I... well, I’ll be working on a solution to undo the life debt without you being affected by it, and, I just..."

"You’re still worried about that?" Truls said, shaking his head. "I told you, nothing will change. I don’t mind even if the life debt remained. I don’t feel like it’s holding me back or affecting the way I act or think."

"Still," Harry said. "I... I insist."

"Well," Truls sighed. "If you insist. Just give me a warning when you start doing... whatever it is that you’re trying to do. And please be careful. I don’t think that there’s a way for me to be harmed directly as a result of trying to sever the life debt, but you be very careful to keep yourself safe as well, all right? If it turns out to be too risky to remove the life debt, then just let it be. Honestly, I’m fine. You’re too soft."

"Not really," Harry said. "I’m not too soft. I... Truls, there’s something I want to ask you to do. You can... have some time to think about it, if you wish."
"Anything," Truls replied. Harry looked at his friend, and hoped that he wouldn't feel hurt by what Harry wanted to ask of him.

"I've told you... a lot of things that I've told no one else," Harry started. "I don't know how the life debt will affect you, and I... I fear that you'll grow completely indifferent to me."

"Impossible," Truls dismissed immediately. "There's no way--"

"There's a chance," Harry interrupted. "No matter how small, there is a chance of that happening. And Truls... I don't want to ever worry about whether or not you have revealed my secrets to someone else. I don't want to ever question or doubt you."

"You won't have to," Truls said, but he wasn't as dismissive with his tone as he had been earlier. "But if there's anything I can do to assure you, then please, don't even hesitate to ask for it, Harry."

Harry stopped, glad for the absence of other people in that corridor, and pulled Truls a step closer. He looked up at his best friend and laid both of his hands to rest on Truls's shoulders, before sliding them gently to rest his palms so close to Truls's throat that he could press his thumbs lightly against it.

"I need you to take a vow of secrecy," Harry said quietly, his lips nearly touching Truls’s as he spoke. "I need you to take a vow to never ever reveal my secrets to anyone else, no matter what."

Truls didn’t move an inch. Instead he stared at Harry with an expression Harry had never seen on his friend’s face before. He then leaned down just enough to press a soft, warm kiss against Harry’s mouth, before straightening up again.

"You’re that sure that something is going to change?" he asked. Harry, his mouth still slightly open and feeling a strange desire for something unknown building inside of him, swallowed and nodded. He didn’t dislike the feeling of heat at the pit of his stomach, even though he decided to ignore it.

"Yes."

"In that case," Truls continued. "A favour for a favour. I’ll take the vow if you’ll be my date for the Yule Ball."

*The hours after dinner found Ingrid in the common room working on her academic portfolio. For a seventh year student the question of future employment was a matter of great importance, and there was no such thing as starting too early to polish up one’s merits for a job hunt. She had barely finished it when she heard someone entering the common room, and glanced up to see Harry and his friend, Truls.

'I wonder if something happened,' the girl thought, noticing the unusually good mood that Truls was in. The usually stoic boy whose resting bitch face was clearly a default that reflected his personality with great accuracy, was smirking smugly as he walked next to Harry. Ingrid huffed, deciding that his good mood was none of her business, and called out for Harry instead.

"Yes?" the boy asked, and hesitantly sat down when she pointed at the couch.

"Have you had any training in etiquette?" Ingrid asked, going directly to the heart of the matter that had bothered her earlier. "You were told yesterday - and you must have realized it yourself already - that you’ll be gaining a lot of public attention from now on. The first task already got some people interested in you. Now, with what happened during the second task, there will be even more of that."
"Etiquette?" Harry thought with growing concern. "I mean, I think I have decent manners?"

"I’m going to assume that the answer to my earlier question is no," Ingrid said, looking at Harry’s clueless expression. "Well then. Kettil, feel free to go. Potter and I will talk for a few more minutes. Potter, do you know how to dance? We might as well focus on the things that will be relevant for the Yule Ball."

"I do," Harry said, sighing when his friend left him behind. "I’m all right. Good enough to not be embarrassing, I suppose."

"That’s fine, then," Ingrid said with a nod. "What about dining etiquette? Or when you’re introduced to older people with more influence than you? Do you know how to greet people, and what to say to dismiss yourself politely from a conversation?"

"Uh..."

"Shaking hands? Referring to people? Dueling etiquette?"

"Well," Harry said. "I know about dueling."

"Holy Medusa," Ingrid muttered, and shook her head. "We’ve got a lot to cover, then. I can give you a little bit of tutoring when it comes to those matters. Not now, however. It’s quite clear that whatever you and Kettil have been up to, is still distracting you, so you might as well go to him now."

"What." Harry’s face flushed red, and the expression on his face was suddenly that of wide-eyed panic. "I don’t— um, I have no idea—"

"Yeah, sure," Ingrid interrupted with a lopsided smile, and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I honestly don’t care, and I doubt most other people do, either. Just... be careful. You can never be too careful with certain matters."

"No, it’s really nothing," Harry insisted, still blushing as he stood up to leave. "He just promised me something, that’s all."

"Sure," Ingrid said as she watched the boy leave. As soon as Harry had disappeared into the boys’ dorm room, Mette crawled out from under the table, startling the older girl rather badly.

"Something happened between those two," Mette said, sitting down on the couch Harry had just vacated. "I just know it."

"What I want to know is what on earth were you doing under that table?" Ingrid asked. "I didn’t even know you were there!"

"Oh, I was just eavesdropping," Mette said dismissively. "I was looking for a lost earring there when Harry turned up, and I didn’t want to interrupt your conversation with him. Anyway, I wonder if Truls asked him to the Yule Ball or something. It was pretty obvious that that’s all the boy has been wanting to do ever since we were told about the ball."

"Do you have a date yet?" Ingrid asked, curious to know.

"Yes," Mette replied with a smug smile. "I got one fine catch! I’ve said this before and I’ll say it now again: all eyes will be on us!"

"Well, at least that will make it easier for Potter to not make any embarrassing mistakes during the
"If he’s lucky."

"Knowing him by now, even if he conducts himself perfectly well, something will happen anyway," Ingrid said. "Merlin, the way that second task went from slightly creepy to absolutely terrifying... I don’t think that part was planned."

"The guy in the wall?" Mette said. "Who knows. Potter dealt with it very well, didn’t he? I’m sure he can deal with whatever else is thrown at him."

"Let’s hope so," Ingrid said in agreement. "But at least it’s highly unlikely that he’ll wow us all again in the third task. I mean, is there anything that can top two killing curses in a row?"

"Nothing pops to mind," Mette said. "Good for him, I suppose. Less stress that way."

Harry had expected that by Sunday he’d feel as if the second task had been nothing but a nightmare that he could discuss with his friends. That... didn’t turn out to be the case. Oh, he did have some nightmares because of it, but that wasn’t the worst of it all. There was... what felt like permanent anxiety constantly bothering him, and no matter how much he tried to focus on other things - the Yule Ball, the life debt, everything else - he just couldn’t get back to feeling normal.

At times he’d suddenly, in the midst of doing something else, look up and ready himself to drop and roll to safety, forgetting that he wasn’t at Orsini’s house anymore. He had been feeling very twitchy and found it hard to concentrate on anything. The worst of it had been on Thursday, when he spent the entire day feeling strangely detached, as if he was a bystander just watching himself.

That Sunday he had woken up earlier than anyone else, and hadn’t been able to lie still in his bed in the dark for longer than fifteen minutes before he felt the need to get out. He quietly got dressed and left to take a walk in hopes of that somehow changing his mood for the better.

It was too early for breakfast to be served, but the library was already open and Harry saw a few teachers - and even a couple of students - out and about. He had no reason to approach any of them, and continued to make his way through the corridors aimlessly, until he realized that somehow he had ended up near Sirius’s office.

"I wonder if he’s here," Harry thought, before knocking slightly on the door. A moment later it swung open, and a disheveled Sirius was there, looking at him with a surprised expression.

"Harry!" the man said, a smile appearing on his tired face. "Come in! Merlin, the office is a mess, but you know me by now, eh? Don’t mind the papers and the, uh, food containers. Just sit down. Anywhere. It’s good to see you! How are you?"

"I’m fine," Harry said, sitting down on one of the couches in Sirius’s office. "Did you sleep here?"

"Oh, just took a nap, really," Sirius replied. "Meant to go home and sleep properly, but there’s so much for me to do that I just... didn’t. Are you fine, really? You’ve been through quite a lot, Harry."

Harry looked down at his feet, wondering if he really could somehow try to make enough sense of his own thoughts and feelings to be able to share them with his godfather. "I... I don’t know. Did... that man in the wall, did you know about him?"

"No," Sirius replied with a grim expression on his face. "The targets were actually donated to us, in a
way. A few people volunteered their squib relatives. In Weasley’s case the relation was slightly more
distant, since his target was an ancestor of a pureblood family who was punished for his condition
with a curse. Harry... I wouldn’t voluntarily put you through the kind of ordeal that happened during
the second task. You did very well, and I am proud of you.”

"I don’t understand," Harry said. "How is what happened to me worse than what happened to our
targets? I saw the footage - Delacour killed a child, Sirius! A child with no legs! George’s target was
bound and helpless and-- And you’re telling me they were volunteered by their families?"

"It’s better to not focus too much on these issues, Harry,” Sirius said soothingly. "I know that you’re
under serious amounts of stress, especially after what happened with James. That’s why I... Harry,
would you like to consider talking with a therapist.”

"What?"

"It’s... it’s a step towards better health, you know, and nothing to be ashamed of,” Sirius continued
gently. "Someone who listens to you and is capable of providing you with any kind of help to make
you feel better and—“

"It’s not that I don’t want a therapist,” Harry cut in. "But the thing is, Sirius, do you think you can
find me a therapist who doesn’t consider lack of magic to be a crime worthy of a death penalty? A
therapist who can actually see this... this entertainment for what it truly is? Because honestly, Sirius, I
don’t think there’s anyone like that in this country. Not anymore.”

"All right, no therapist then,” Sirius said, doing his best to keep Harry calm. "What would you like,
instead? What would make you feel better?"

Harry fell silent for a moment, before he said: "I just... I want to know that there’s someone for me to
go to when I want support. Someone I don’t have to be careful around.” Someone who would hug
him without making Harry feel like he was imposing or that he owed them for it.

"You know, Harry,” Sirius started. "You can always come to me. Even if you and I don’t agree on
things, it doesn’t mean that I would ever hold your opinions against you. Merlin, there’s nothing you
could do that would make me turn away from you. Nothing that would make me side against you.
Nobody, not even the Dark Lord, could make me bring you to any harm, Harry. Do you understand
that?"

"I do,” Harry said, fighting the sudden and overwhelming urge to cry. "I just... I get so confused
sometimes, Siri.”

"And that’s perfectly fine,” Sirius assured him. "But when confusion becomes something that
hinders your life, when it makes you constantly sad, then I want you to come to me, all right? We’ll
talk it out together and see what we can do about whatever is bothering you.”

"Would it really be that simple?” Harry doubted that, though he nodded hesitantly. "And you won’t
tell anybody?"

"Not a soul,” Sirius promised. "Your secrets are safe with me.”

'Maybe I’ll tell him,’ Harry thought. 'When the tournament is over.’

Chapter End Notes
(°_<˘̮°) harry thought his life was tough before. puberty isn't going to make it easier.
Harry was sitting alone near the lake, wearing his warmest clothes and staring into the watery depths in front of him. He had, thanks to Mette insisting that he had to, just watched a recording of the second task yet again. He had been subjected to a few recordings already, but somehow… the more he saw, the worse he felt. Fleur’s cruelty and the silent agony George’s target was – even now, still – trapped in. Merlin…

The sound of approaching footsteps brought Harry out of his thoughts, and soon someone – a heavily perfumed someone with a lit cigarette in their hand – sat down next to him, right there on the snow.

“I almost didn’t see you here, Harry,” Rita Skeeter said, her voice saccharine sweet and words not quite warm enough to sound friendly. “What are you doing all alone?”

”Just thinking,” Harry said, mustering up a nervous smile. He couldn’t help but remember Professor Wiemar’s words about being careful with what he said to the reporters. This particular one had already proven herself time and time again to be clever with her words and capable of influencing the public quite easily. Harry was lucky that she seemed to like him, and he didn’t want to have her as an enemy. ”About, well, the tournament and such.”

”That was quite the show you gave us,” Skeeter said, and though she didn’t appear to be taking notes, Harry knew without a doubt that everything he said now was being written down somewhere, somehow. ”You’re the youngest Champion and despite that, you’re in the lead. Coming from Durmstrang, did you expect that?”

”You know, I have confidence in the education Durmstrang has given me,” Harry started, ”but, it’s still, well... as you said, both Weasley and Delacour are older and more experienced than I am. I didn’t really expect to get ahead, but I suppose it has a lot to do with luck also?”

”Well, luck is always a part of success, isn’t it? What do you think of your fellow champions?” Skeeter asked, her voice almost convincingly sympathetic. ”Have they been friendly towards you or do you they treat you like an equal?”

”Oh, we haven’t spent much time together,” Harry replied, ”but I knew the Weasleys beforehand. My parents were friends of the family.”

”Your parents would be so proud of you today,” Skeeter said, and no matter how insincere her words were - it wasn’t as if she had known James or Lily - Harry couldn’t help but feel a little bit better. Merlin, how he wished he could have them here with him and make them proud. ”What of Miss Delacour? She has gained quite the reputation so far, hasn’t she?”

”She’s immensely talented, and very strong,” Harry said honestly, deciding to not comment on how much of said reputation had been gained through Skeeter’s articles. ”I’m sure everyone will be even
more impressed by her after the third task.”

"That’s a kind thing to say, Harry! Have you got any guesses on what the third task could be?” Skeeter asked then, and how on earth could she just... keep asking questions and not make it sound like an interrogation? “You’ve been sent to far-away places twice already, do you think the third task will be like that too?”

"It’s hard to guess, really,” Harry said. "Whatever it is, I’m sure it’ll be even more, uh, entertaining than the previous two tasks. I only hope to not disappoint.”

"Well, at least there’s something to look forward to before the task, right?” Skeeter then continued, her tone teasing. "The Yule Ball! Now us journalists cannot attend, but I’m sure you’ll have plenty of fun! Do you have a date for it yet? Is there a pretty lady that has caught your attention?”

'Circe, help,' Harry thought, sweating despite the cold with the effort to come up with a satisfying response. "I think I’ll just go with a friend of mine. I’m... not particularly good at talking with girls.” Was that good enough? What if she asked him about Truls? Harry didn’t want his, well, relationship with Truls to become news. Especially since he himself didn’t yet know what it was. They had kissed, but was kissing what Harry wanted to do with Truls?

"A handsome young man like you, you’ll be surrounded by girls in no time,” Skeeter said, smiling widely. "If you win, you’ll be beating them off with a stick!”

"I don’t know about that,” Harry sighed. The thought of being surrounded by people in general - girls, boys, both - didn’t sound appealing in the least. "I’m pretty boring, you know.”

"Girls like the strong, silent type,” Skeeter insisted, though her words were far from convincing. "What about you? What kind of girls do you like?”

'I don’t like girls,' Harry thought, and somehow the thought being so clearly and simply put in his head, made something inside of him... settle. There was one less part of himself that he was uneasy with. "I like driven people,” he finally answered, as honestly as he could. "Rather than focus on looks, I think I’d prefer to date someone who has their goals and works hard, and is pretty... independent? I admire people like you and Bellatrix Lestrange, you know. You’ve got interests and careers. You’ve got personality and ambitions. I think it’s going to take a while before anyone I know gets to that point, and until then, I don’t think I can... find them interesting, in, you know, that way?”

Lies. Well, not necessarily lies. Harry didn’t want to date anyone. But he did feel attraction, and the thought of someone like Clemens sweeping him off his feet and just kissing him hard made his toes curl. The kiss with Truls had been nice too. In terms of personality, well... more than kiss, he wouldn’t mind spending more time with someone like Tom. Someone he could talk with.

Skeeter was silent for a few long moments, her cigarette between her lips as she stared at the lake. "You know,” she finally said, exhaling a cloud of smoke. "It’s going to take quite a while until kids your age sort out which bridges to burn and which to cross and for which causes. If you wait until then you’ll miss out on a lot of growing, too. You’ re young. You’re popular. Have your school day romances now and don’t take them too seriously.”

"I guess,” Harry said, unsure of what else to respond with. Skeeter sighed, and pulled herself up. The look on her face wasn’t as sweet as it had been earlier, and when she smiled at Harry, he felt wary more than anything else.

"Good luck,” Skeeter said. "Look forward to my next article, Harry.”
And then she left, leaving behind her a worried teenager and a cloud of smoke.

It was two days after his chat with Skeeter that Harry had another meeting – this time with Hermione.

The Groundkeeper’s Hut had, much to Harry’s surprise, not only gained a few more security measures but also rugs, a few pillows and blankets, a new set of curtains and other small things that made the place much nicer. It was also cleaner than it had been before, and there was even a pot of tea on a small stove.

"I know a couple of house-elves,” Hermione said, tying her hair up into several small knots, and then smiling widely at Harry. On the table there were numerous books and parchments, and it was clear that the witch used the hut as a place to study in peace as well. "They like me so... sometimes they help out.”

"Brilliant,” Harry said, deeply impressed. ”You’re amazing, Hermione. This is great!”

"Oh, it’s nothing,” the girl said, before she gestured for Harry to sit down. "How much time do you have before your friends start missing you?”

"An hour maybe,” Harry replied. "Thankfully everyone is busy revising and doing homework. How are you?”

"I’m good,” Hermione said, sitting down as well. She was clearly nervous a bit, but didn’t seem anxious. Excited, maybe? "I’ve been thinking about the things we’ve discussed so far. I believe that the most efficient way we can move forward with our mission is through organized advancement. This means that rather than recruit a lot of people right now, we could, say... recruit one more person. Then we divide the focus areas. I’d take care of research and you will obviously be, well, the face of the operation. What we’re missing, however, is a strategy. Or a strategist.”

"Recruiting one of those will require some serious luck,” Harry said, thinking of his friends at Durmstrang. All of them were clever, but none of them seemed particularly gifted in strategy. Except Clemens, and despite the feelings Harry had for him, he knew that trusting Clemens with any of this information would be a huge mistake. "What can we do meanwhile?”

"Learn how to obliviate people, is one thing,” Hermione said, torn between her academic desire to learn something new and the moral questions surrounding the need for such a spell. "You mentioned that you know how to do it?”

"Actually," Harry said, thinking of a potentially risky move that perhaps could be worth making. "I’m not good enough for it, and honestly, I’ll be too busy preparing for the third task for me to practice it. However I have a tutor - Gilderoy Lockhart - who might be able to teach you how to cast that spell.”

"Wait, Lockhart?” Hermione gasped, her eyes wide. She leaned forward, her dark eyes sparkling with excitement. "You don’t mean--”

"Yeah, yes, him,” Harry sighed, wondering how had Gildy managed to remain so popular despite his, well, everything. "I can ask him, and if you have time during the Christmas break...?”

"I have time,” Hermione replied immediately. "I have plenty of time!”

"All right, that will be taken care of, then,” Harry said. "What about the other idea you had? About
small businesses and such?”

"Oh, that, yes.” Hermione turned towards a pile of papers she had near her seat, and pulled out several files. "Remember how we discussed ways to promote small businesses owned by muggleborns? Well, I’ve written down as many as I could remember, but it’s not much at all. Then I found a law office and really, you never know when you might need some legal help, so I added them too to the list.” The girl then took a deep breath, her dark skin flushed. She bit her lip for a few seconds, before she continued:

"Is this too much? I mean, I know I get too enthusiastic about things, and maybe you didn’t want or need this much information, but I just— I like research, you see. And learning. And when I focus on something and enjoy what I’m doing, I end up, well, doing too much.”

"This is not too much, are you serious?” Harry asked, stunned and convinced that if there was love without romance, he was feeling it right now. Strongly. "This is incredible! It’s beyond what I thought you could do! It’s certainly far better than anything I could have done. Merlin... Hermione, you’re a prime example of what this world is losing because of, well...”

"People who don’t like my kind?” Hermione suggested quietly. "I know. I think about it often, you know? I can’t help but think about it whenever I do better than anyone else in class, and somehow it never gets... recognized.”

The two sit in melancholy silence for a few moments after that. The freezing wind outside rattled the windows, though inside the hut it was warm and comfortable. Harry wished that he could stay there rather than go back – which he’d need to do soon – but didn’t want to risk anyone looking for him and finding their hiding place. There was, however, something else to do before he headed back to where his schoolmates were.

"I have one more thing that I need to tell you about,” Harry said after gathering his courage for a bit. "It’s... well... someone recently told me that in order for me to excel as a wizard, I need to figure out my... branch of magic, so to say. Something that I can become the best at. Like how some people are amazing at potions, some at dueling… things like that.”

"That sounds logical, I suppose,” Hermione said, secretly relieved to have a new conversation to focus on, rather than think of the way some teachers treated her. "You need to find your niche, is what you’re saying? Do you have any idea on what it could be? What are you interested in? Light magic? Healing spells?”

"I... well, I don’t really have special talents,” Harry admitted, his heart beating fast and heavy in his chest. "Except one. I can, uh, this is going to sound so weird and I don’t want to make this awkward, and I wouldn’t even tell you if we hadn’t agreed on keeping everything we discuss here a secret, but I can talk to dead people. Sometimes.”

Hermione stared at him for a few long moments in utter silence, before she settled further into her seat with a heavy sigh. "All right,” she said calmly. "Explain.”

* *

On the last weekend before the Yule Ball, Harry was alone in the common room of the quarters reserved for him and the other Durmstrang students. He laid on the couch, perfectly content with attending the upcoming ball wearing his funeral robes - they were charmed to still fit him and were of very fine quality. Besides, black robes were quite popular in general, no one would be able to tell that he was wearing the same robes he wore for... well... his mother’s...
Everyone else, to his knowledge, was either still looking for dates or out doing some last minute shopping. Truls, excited for reasons Harry didn't want to think much about, had decided to go to a tailor and see if his robes fit him well enough. Mette had decided to go with him, a dangerous spark in her eye. Harry didn't know what she was up to, but was glad that he wasn't the one to have caught her attention this time.

'Björn would've loved it,' he thought suddenly, and smiled. Circe, while Truls was his best friend, he missed the others so much. He missed Filippa and Björn... and Clemens, too. Hogwarts was nice and all, but he wanted his own flat and the familiar halls and classrooms and dueling arenas and—

"Oh, great, you're here," a familiar voice said, and Harry sat up on the couch to see Sirius walking into the common room with a newspaper in his hand. He looked pleased, his dark hair pulled back, every bit the cocky godfather that Harry knew him as. "Is everybody else gone? How come?"

"Yule Ball is in a couple of days," Harry replied with a shrug. "What brings you here?"

"This," Sirius replied with a grin, and threw the newspaper at him. "I don't know how you managed this, but congratulations."

"What?" Harry muttered with a frown, unfolding the rolled paper only to see the front page title:
KNOW YOUR CHAMPIONS: HAUGHTY OR HUMBLE? by Rita Skeeter.

"She's a nasty piece of work," Sirius said, throwing himself down onto one of the large, comfortable couches. "I don't know how you got her to like you, but it's bloody useful."

"I didn't know she was planning on publishing another article about us this soon," Harry said, reading through the article with no small amount of anxiety. As much as he enjoyed his godfather's company, he wasn't sure if he wanted it right then, especially if he came bearing potentially stressful news. "There wasn't... we didn't have an official interview after the second task."

[Going above and beyond to bring you the most exclusive and exciting details of our three champions—]

"What about an unofficial one?" Sirius asked. "Don't feel bad about it, you did well. Poor Delacour, however, Skeeter seems to really have it in for her."

"Does she, now," Harry muttered. "What do you think of Delacour, anyway? She's strong, isn't she?"

"Of course she's strong," Sirius replied. "She's one very talented witch. I can't wait to see what she'll do during the third task."

[George Weasley, who used to be a prankster before the tournament, has perhaps undergone the most obvious change: from a healthy wizard to a grim, one-eared young man who might not even win the tournament he risked so much for...]

'What about me?' Harry thought, but only shrugged, not commenting on that part. "Any hints about the third task that you can give?"

"I wish," Sirius sighed. "But forget about it for now! There's the Yule Ball and a very relaxing break before the third task becomes something you need to worry about! Have you got a date for the ball yet?"

"I'm going with Truls," Harry replied. "He asked, I said yes."
"Merlin, really?" Sirius sighed, clearly disappointed. "You do realize you don't have to go with your friend, right? Any girl at Hogwarts would love to go with you."

Harry opened his mouth, ready to tell his godfather that he wasn't going with Truls as just friend - it was a date. And that he wouldn't have wanted to go with a girl anyway, unless the girl was a friend, but somehow he just... couldn't. He couldn't say it. A horrible thought crept into his mind, a new worry over whether or not it was fine for him to like boys this way - he knew no one else but Gildy who did that, and Harry wasn't... he wasn't like Gildy.

Perhaps it was better to say that he couldn't be like Gildy. Not with the life he was living, not with the things he'd need to do.

"I don't want to give anyone any wrong impressions," Harry finally said. "If I went with a girl, everyone would be calling her my girlfriend. I don't want that."

"When I was your age, a girlfriend was all I wanted," Sirius sighed, shaking his head. "How the times have changed!"

"Well, you look handsome," Maria said, as soon as she saw Harry dressed in his funeral robes. "A bit gloomy, though. You should have gone with green robes, I think."

"Oh, but look at this quality," Mette sighed, running her hand down Harry's arm. Her gown - pale grey and cinched around the waist, with some decorative structure made of rose gold on her hips - looked amazing. "Besides, black is a classic. He'll be fine as long as he knows how to dance. You do know how to dance, don't you?"

"He's decent," Ingrid said, joining. "If someone leads him in a dance, he'll do just fine."

"Oh, in that case he'll fine, he's going with Truls," Mette said, sounding satisfied. "I saw him earlier by the mirror, by the way, when I was saying hi to Viktor and Anthony. And Harry, your boy is fine."
"You still haven't told us who you're going with," Harry hastily said, not wanting to discuss his best friend's looks. "You haven't said anything. Not so much as a hint, really."

"Not Anthony, right?" Maria asked carefully. "I mean... Silvia Nott is here. You know how he is when she's around."

"Yes, thank you Maria, I know. No, it's not him. You'll find out soon enough who it is," Mette replied, her smile sharp and struggling to remain on her face. "We ought to go soon, right? The Champions and their partners are meant to meet up before the ball begins, and then enter together."

"Yeah, Professor Wiemar told me about that," Harry said. "I think we can all walk together towards the Great Hall, and Truls and I will just wait outside for the other Champions."

It was then that Truls entered the common room, dressed in dark blue robes that made his blue eyes seem even bluer. His blonde hair was combed back and he looked, well, good. Really good. Maria made sound that sounded a bit like she was struggling for air, and Harry couldn't help but feel... stressed, a bit. Thoughts of the kiss he had had with Truls, and thoughts of Clemens, flashed through his mind as he did his best to not think of how tall Truls was and since when were his shoulders that wide and when did he even exercise to get his arms like that for Circe’s sake and—

"Breathe, darling," Mette whispered, clearly barely containing her giggles. "You're staring. Not that he minds."

"We should go," Harry managed, trying to not dwell too much on what Mette just said. He hadn't been staring. Staring wasn't his thing. "Are we going to wait for the others?"

"Let's not," Mette said cheerfully. "For all we know Anthony is still crying over Silvia not giving him the time of the day."

"He's a terror," Truls huffed, coming to stand next to Harry before slowly herding him towards the exit. "Nearly hexed Krum twice already. The insufferable idiot."

"He's got a broken heart," Mette said, following them, leaving Maria and Ingrid behind. "It's been years and Silvia Nott still thinks he's not worth her time. Which, granted, she's right about." Harry remembered his brief encounter with Silvia Nott some time ago - the chubby witch with the dark hair and bright smile and sharp look in her eyes seemed far too nice for someone like Anthony Lestrange to appreciate.

"Mr. Potter," someone called, and Harry turned to see Professor McGonagall heading his way. "Mr. Kettil, Miss Erling, good to have the both of you here as well. Please follow me - we've reserved a small room for the Champions and their partners to stay at before we lead you to the Great Hall."

"Wait, why are you going as well?" Truls asked, turning to Mette. The witch shrugged with a knowing smirk, and walked on Harry's other side to where McGonagall was leading them. Once they entered the room, they saw George Weasley standing with a girl Harry didn't know, and Fleur — standing alone.

"Darling," Mette said, letting go of Harry and heading towards the Veela. "You look gorgeous."

"So do you," Fleur replied, and Merlin, this was something Harry had not seen coming. Neither, it seems, had George who looked at Harry and Truls with raised eyebrows. Harry smiled nervously in return.

"Now that all three champions with their partners are here," McGonagall said, "I'll quickly brief you before we begin. You've already been informed of this, but you, as the champions and their partners,
are expected to open the ball with the first dance. Journalists have not been allowed to attend, however I must remind you to still be very careful with your behaviour. You will be under the spotlight and guests and other students will be watching your every move."

'Isn't that pleasant,' Harry thought, dreading the whole event already.

"Though the temptation to leave early might be great," McGonagall continued, "you must remain in the hall until at least eleven o'clock. Mingle, dance and enjoy the food. Any questions? No? Well then... follow me."

"I can't believe she went with a rival champion," Truls said quietly as they headed together towards the Great Hall. Harry knew he meant Mette, and while he was surprised by who her partner was, thinking of it that way hadn't crossed his mind. "No wonder she kept it a secret, I don't think Karkaroff would have allowed it if he'd known."

"Why not?" Harry asked, just as quietly.

"By going with a champion from another school, she's showing support to her," Truls replied with a grimace. "I don't like it."

When they entered the Great Hall, walking in pairs, Harry barely paid attention to the sounds of clapping. He had noticed, immediately, the people occupying the seven seats on the platform at the far end of the hall: three judges on the left, three principals on the right, and in the middle, with two masked Death Eaters standing behind him, sat the Dark Lord.

"Holy shit," Truls whispered. "He's here."

'He really is here,' Harry thought with mixed feelings, before he turned his head to take in the sight of the decorated Great Hall. He absently allowed Truls to pull him into a dance when the music started, while wondering what kind of magic had gone into creating the sparkling silver frost covering the walls, the starry ceiling and the floor that appeared to be frozen over, but wasn't slippery. The House tables were nowhere to be seen; instead there were numerous smaller tables, with students and guests crowding around them. Much to Harry's relief, however, most of the people weren't actually looking at him; Mette and Fleur were in the spotlight, and all eyes were on them. Perhaps this way no one would actually notice the blush he couldn't get rid of for the first half an hour of dancing so close to Truls.

After the second dance, however, someone stepped in right before the music for the third dance would begin. Bellatrix Lestrange, smiling with deceptive charm, had decided to not wait any longer. "If you don't mind, gentlemen," she said, "I'm sure Harry here wouldn't deny me a quick dance, am I right?"

"O-of course, ma'am," Harry said, casting a wild-eyed look at Truls, whose face revealed none of what he could've been thinking. The Swedish wizard took a step back, allowing Bellatrix to take his place.

"You needn't lead, I can do that," Bellatrix said just as the music began again. Within a few short moments, they were drifting away from Truls, Harry doing his best to dance with the most feared witch he knew. "I'm quite sure I didn't interrupt an important conversation, you seemed to be too smitten to manage a word, dear."

"I'm, uh, I'm not smitten," Harry protested. He really wasn't. He just... had suddenly come to realize that his best friend was really, really attractive. Because somehow, he didn't know how, admitting to himself that he liked boys rather than girls had made him more prone to actually feeling things. "You
"Thank you, dear," Bellatrix said, her smile anything but kind and gentle. "You've been doing quite well in the tournament so far. Did you receive training for it?"

"Well, not for the tournament specifically," Harry replied hesitantly. "Just... in general."

"You seem to be in good graces right now, little Harry," Bellatrix whispered, glancing at someone over Harry's shoulders. Someone who was sitting at the end of the hall, and Harry knew that only one man aside from her husband could get that much attention from her. "You know, when I heard that the Dark Lord nominated you, I didn't suspect much beyond a coincidence. After all it is not that much a shock for him to nominate someone from Durmstrang's golden generation. But that is not all there is to it, am I right?"

Harry's heart was beating fast and hard, and his palms were getting sweaty. He took a deep breath and said: "I know better than to deny anything you clearly know already, but what... what led you to that conclusion?"

"Smart boy," the witch murmured. "I've fought by the Dark Lord's side for years. The way he holds his wand in a duel, the way he casts his spells, the movement of his feet, his posture... it's a combination that is uniquely his, and very few are capable and self-aware enough to have such control over their bodies during a duel. Dedicated training from adolescence at least is required to allow the body to gain specific muscle memories. For a young wizard training hard every day with someone who's a master at dueling that way - the Dark Lord himself, for example - it wouldn't be an impossibility to learn it. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

"Yes," Harry breathed in response. Strangely enough, however, the fear was washed away by a sudden bout of clarity; he wasn't shaking or sweating, his thoughts were clear and his voice was steady as he continued: "And if I'm right in what I think you've figured out, then please... don't ask. I can't tell you without his permission. Nobody else knows, you see."

"Not even your godfather?" Bellatrix asked, narrowing her eyes. "No one?"

"Not even Sirius," Harry replied. "Not even my dad, back when he was alive."

At this, Harry saw an expression on her face that he doubted anyone had ever seen before: pity. Bellatrix Lestrange had shot him a look of pity, before she said: "He is the greatest wizard to ever live."

"I know."

"Do not take his grace lightly, little Harry. His favour is a glorious, but a heavy, burden to carry. I've walked through fire and burnt to a husk before he built me up again. It is not easy. The Dark Lord is a leader magic itself honours, and one should take his favour with grave seriousness."

"He's more than that, I think," Harry whispered, barely daring to speak. He thought of Voldemort, of Tom. Of the moments he had shared with the wizard, the frustration he had felt every time the man had disappointed him, and the comfort he had received. Tom was someone Harry cherished, and he wanted to keep the older wizard safe regardless of the mission that he had received from Merope. "He's... he's more than a Dark Lord. I'd walk through fire for him, I'd walk through worse. I think... it's because of who he is. Not just his magic, I don't care about whether or not magic honours him - I honour him. If he told me to lie down and die, then come back to life again, I would do it." In fact, he had done it. Bellatrix didn't need to know the details of it, however, or of the conversation preluding that request.
The witch stopped, and stared at Harry with a peculiar, wide-eyed expression. She then touched his cheek with a lightly shaking hand and said: "Fall in love with a simple boy, Harry. I can see your other option and I wouldn't wish that upon you."

"Oh, I'm not in love with anybody," Harry replied, taken aback by the sudden turn of the conversation. From the corner of his eye he could see Truls heading towards them, and wondered if this was all Bellatrix had really wanted to tell him. "And I don't plan on, well I mean, I don't have time to fall in love yet."

"You're telling me there's no one but Sirius to spend your Christmas with?" Bellatrix asked, shaking her head. "No one you'd want there?"

"I'm not spending with Sirius, actually," Harry revealed. "I'm going with... well, I mean, I have training to do."

Bellatrix looked at him silently for a few more moments, before she sighed deeply. "Enjoy the rest of your evening, Harry," she said just as Truls came to a halt right next to them. "I'm sure you and your date would like to spend some more time dancing."

"Thank you for the dance," Harry hastily said. Somehow this encounter had left him with a bad feeling at the pit of his stomach, and Harry wasn't sure what to do about it.

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"And you're sure that you'd rather spend the break at your friend's house?" Sirius asked, watching Harry pack a few essentials into a small bag. "Christmas is already tomorrow, you know. There'll be another feast."

"I'll pass," Harry replied, trying to sound as gentle as possible. "I know you'll be busy with the third task preparations, and Truls already had to leave in the morning, so I'd end up spending too much time alone after the celebrations are over. It's better in the long run if I go. Besides... with the number of journalists running around..."

"Oh, come on," Sirius said teasingly. "You've got Skeeter in your pocket, what else could you want?"

"I don't want to bother with journalists for a while," Harry replied, still not quite sure where he stood with Skeeter. "I just want to... relax and take it easy a bit." Because that was what would be happening.

"Fair enough," Sirius sighed, before smiling fondly at Harry. "You've been doing well so far, kid. I'm proud of you. You even survived a dance with Bella yesterday!"

"The scariest moments in my life," Harry said, shaking his head and thinking fast to come up with anything that would prevent Sirius from asking further questions about his dance with the witch. "Truls told me it was barely two minutes, but it felt like an eternity. I don't even remember a word of what she said."

"She has that effect on people," Sirius laughed. "Do you need me to take you anywhere, or will your friend pick you up from here?"

"I have a portkey," Harry replied, finishing his packing and reaching for his coat. "I'm set. I'll see you when I get back, all right?"

"Sure," Sirius replied. When he left, Harry took a deep breath and tapped the portkey lightly with his
finger. Tom had told him that he could use it to exit Hogwarts from the inside, not needing to go all the way outside for it to work.

'That nerd,' Harry thought fondly. 'I bet he enjoyed working on how to get past the wards without making them react.' He then took a deep breath, held on to his bag tightly, and activated the portkey. And Merlin, did he hate using portkeys. The spinning, the unpleasant feeling of being pulled through space to a far-away location – Harry really hated using portkeys. When he hit the ground at his destination, it took him a few moments to even try getting up and on his feet again.

When he did, he found Tom looking at him with an unimpressed face.

"I considered teaching you something you can strike your enemies with," the Dark Lord said dryly. "But I changed my mind. Before anything else, I'll teach you how to apparate."

Chapter End Notes

Recommended watching: Auschwitz: The nazis and the final solution
It really shows how "ordinary people" can commit atrocities without thinking of them as such.
"I’d say not bad,” Tom said, peering down at a sweaty, exhausted, and slightly nauseated Harry. "But considering the state you’re in, and the amount of times you’ve tried this, I’m just... well .”

"Shut...up...,” Harry managed to say, words losing their bite as he tried to regain his breath. He knew he’d have to get up soon if he wished to avoid catching a cold. "I’ve been practicing this for a week already, and I’m still not good at it.”

"Don’t take it to heart. Most people usually spend weeks, not days, trying to figure it out.”

"I hate apparating.”

"It’s the fastest way to get anywhere,” Tom pointed out, shaking his head. Unlike Harry, he was perfectly fine with the cold, snowy weather. "Most people stay upright after they apparate, however.”

" How ?” Harry snapped, pushing himself to sit up. Ah, Merlin, he still felt a bit dizzy. "It’s like being forced through a... a really tight... tube!”

"It will be fine,” Tom said dismissively. "You’ve got the hang of actually doing it. It’ll become easier for you the more you practice it. Therefore, we’ll move on to other things you need to learn, and leave only an hour of apparition practice for you to do every morning.”

"You should have been a teacher,” Harry huffed, finally standing up and brushing the snow off his clothes as well as he could. "Or a private tutor. Merlin, you’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

"Enjoy seeing you suffering? Circe, no.”

" Lies .”

Tom smiled, fleetingly, and something about that smile made Harry feel better about himself. "Your performance when dueling that man and his creature in Istanbul was good, but it could have been better. Your reflexes are fast and your spellwork is excellent. However, as admirable as it is of you to use the Killing Curse at such a young age – twice in a row, even – mastering one strong spell will not be enough for you to survive in the long run.”

"Yeah, but we have something else I’d like to do first,” Harry said, trying to walk towards the house - well, the mansion , because apparently anything less than twelve rooms for a single person wasn’t good enough for a Dark Lord - Tom had taken them to. Merlin , he could barely feel his legs. "Help me inside.”

"I think I’d rather see you try on your own, first,” Tom replied, and with a frustrated groan, Harry began making his way indoors on his own. Tom followed, still amused, and said after closing the front door behind them: "You said there’s something else you’d like to prioritize above spellwork?”

"The life debt,” Harry clarified, sinking into the first chair he could reach with a relieved sigh. "I think that needs to be removed before I can focus on anything else.”

"Indeed,” Tom murmured,shrugging his coat off and flicking his wand at Harry’s shoes, making
them unlace themselves and head to their place by the door. "I'll start preparing for it, rest assured. And once that is done, I trust that you'll be able to, once more, access the other side more freely?"

"Yes," Harry replied, thinking of the train station, and Albus and Merope. "Is there anything specific — I mean, you've been quite occupied for the past week. Is there a threat of some sort in the horizon?" The question slipped out naturally, and Harry didn't stop to consider that it wasn't actually a question he should have had the authority to ask. Luckily, Tom didn't seem to mind.

"A threat... yes, I do think so," he said, and gestured for Harry to move to the sitting room. The boy instantly headed towards the soft rug in front of the lit fireplace, and lay down with a happy sigh. "I have spoken to you of Regulus Black."

"Briefly, yes," Harry said, and briefly contemplated sitting up when a house-elf popped in to set two cups of tea on the table. He dismissed the idea, however, as he had just found a comfortable position. "I thought you said he might be dead?"

"There's a larger probability of him being very much alive and active, unfortunately," Tom said. "I have tried to track him down and erase him, but with no luck. He... he is a rather notorious Rebel, and one of the finest strategists I have ever had the misfortune of knowing."

Harry fell silent for a few long moments, before he hesitantly asked: "Is it... I mean, am I in the way? I can go back home if I'm holding you back from something important."

"Don't be ridiculous," Tom sneered, and flung a stinging hex at the boy, making him yelp. "If you were in the way, I would have sent you back already. No, you stay here and I'll keep training you. And do remember that I'm not doing this out of my good will - we have a deal."

"True," Harry said, feeling a bit better again. He finally pushed himself upright, and reached for one of the cups. The tea was still steaming hot. "After undoing the life debt, what kind of spells will you teach me? Shields? Healing spells?"

"Merlin, no," Tom replied, bored by the mere suggestion. "It seems that everyone who has ended up tutoring you has taught you more and more shields and healing spells. You're fine on that front. What you are lacking, however, is variety in your offensive spells. And no, Expelliarmus doesn't count."

"I didn't think I'd need more than that and the killing curse."

"Which, if you recall, I had to coerce you to learn."

"Yes, yes, thank you."

"I doubt your soft heart can handle the Cruciatu," Tom said, "but the Imperius Curse is something you ought to learn. Perhaps you should be taught how to overcome it, first."

"That's possible?" Harry asked, curious. "I thought people couldn't just shrug off that curse."

"No, it's not a curse people can just shrug off," Tom replied, with a roll of his eyes. "Which is why you need to be trained to do so. Even then, it might be impossible for you. Not everyone can do it, but I suspect that your abilities and... well, the way your brain works. I suspect those may help you."

"Let's hope so."

"But before that, we have the life debt."
The late afternoon of the following day found Harry, once again sitting by the fireplace, reading through the theory behind the ritual that Tom said he’d be using to undo the life debt. By his side there was a plateful of pastries so fancy that he couldn’t even name, but apparently had been a gift from the Malfoys to the Dark Lord.

‘What they don’t know won’t upset them,’ Harry thought, trying not to feel too guilty for indulging. To be fair, Tom had said that he had found the pastries to be too sweet for him, and Harry reasoned that without him, the pastries would go bad. ‘I’ll be really nice to Draco after the break,’ Harry decided. ‘I’ll... go look for him and say hi, or something.’

"Here you are,” Tom said, walking into the room. He had clearly just come from outside, and there was an annoyed expression on his face. "Still reading the ritual notes?"

"Yes,” Harry replied, and squinted at him with a suspicious look on his face. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes,” Tom said, and dropped several papers and what looked like maps onto the table by one of the couches. "Except, well. Considering your special circumstances, I can keep you updated on some issues. However, I trust that it needn’t be further clarified that none of the things I tell you are allowed to be shared with anyone else. If so much as a whisper gets back to me—"

"Of course,” Harry said instantly. How could he explain his access to sensitive information, anyway, without making himself look suspicious? Besides, most of the things Tom told him were of no importance to anyone else in Harry’s life, really.

"Seven large Rebel camps have been identified in Europe,” Tom began, walking slowly across the room. Some strands of his usually neat hair were standing at odd angles, but Harry didn’t see it fit to mention them. The moment just didn’t feel right, even if he looked rather silly. "In addition, twenty-four smaller camps have also been realized, resulting in a total of thirty-one camps that we know of. I have no doubt that there are even more hidden somewhere."

"So you’re aware of there being at least thirty-one camps in Europe,” Harry repeated, "but what about their locations? Have they been found?"

"The exact locations of only five have been confirmed so far,” Tom replied. "But even that is unreliable information, as the camps can move or split into fragments at any moment. And there are no ways to trace their movements, really. They have no behavioural patterns outside of the battlefield, and even there it’s a matter of not using certain spells - such as the Killing Curse."

‘No behavioural patterns?’ Harry thought with a frown. Were there any differences between the way Death Eaters and Rebels behaved? He didn’t know any rebels, so it was hard to think of anything. Except, well, he doubted that they referred to Tom as the Dark Lord. In all likelihood they just referred to him as Voldemort. "It’s a pity you can’t attach a tracing spell of some sort to spoken words,” Harry said. "I mean, they refer to you as Voldemort, don’t they? Imagine if you could locate every person who said that name.” Harry shook his head, and tried to refocus on the papers in front of him when he realized that Tom had suddenly frozen in his tracks, staring at Harry in disbelief.

"I know, it sounds stupid,” Harry said, feeling defensive. "I’ve never heard of anything like it, to be honest. I just thought it, I don’t know, makes things easier. I’m sure you’ve already tried everything.”

"Of course,” Tom said, sitting down slowly. He was still staring at Harry, before he suddenly shook his head and looked down at the map on the table. "Designating a word as a key to reveal someone’s
"I know," Harry said, feeling slightly embarrassed. "No need to repeat it."

"You do not refer to me as Voldemort, do you?" Tom suddenly asked. Harry shook his head.

"No."

"Good, good. The Dark Lord sounds far better anyway, doesn’t it?"

"Well," Harry started hesitantly, but decided to remain quiet after all.

"I’ll see what I can do," Tom murmured then, not clarifying his thoughts to Harry, but appearing less annoyed. "Well, do you have any questions about the ritual so far?"

"You said you modified it a bit from these notes, didn’t you?" Harry asked instantly. "How much?"

"Not much at all," Tom lied. "As you can see, the version you’re reading requires a lot of preparation. I’ve simply found out ways to shorten the preparation time, and we can therefore begin in a couple of days. On Christmas, coincidentally."

"Before or after opening the gifts?" Harry asked, feeling both nervous and excited.

"Before," Tom said. "Due to security reasons, all of your gifts will be checked for spells first. You’ll receive them a few days after Christmas."

"All right." So he could simply focus on the ritual, for now. Finally, the life debt would be dissolved, and he could go back to the train station again. "I wonder if Truls will feel it... or if it will change him. I mean, Björn - that’s a friend of mine from Durmstrang - once said that life-debts can amplify certain feelings. What if Truls won’t be my friend anymore?"

"Then you will just have to let him go, I suppose," Tom said, uninterested in the existence of Harry’s best friend. "Surely you can find other people to spend time with."

"You know," Harry suddenly said, sounding contemplative. "You’re the person I spend most of my time with, really. Aside from classmates during lectures, I mean. Voluntarily spending time with you."

"I’m a good choice," Tom told him. "Excellent, in fact. Is there better company that you could come up with? I think not!"

Harry shrugged, a small smile appearing on his face. In all honesty, well... "I guess not."

The thing about Bella’s sitting room was perhaps that it didn’t appear to suit her at all.

Sirius wasn’t sure how a woman such as her had decided that including every colour imaginable in one room was a good idea - Bellatrix had always given him the impression of preferring dark colours and tasteful designs. The sitting room however, was nothing like that. The carpets on the floor were red, white, and a dull shade of green, one of the couches was blue, the other two red, the round table was covered in a white tablecloth and a large flower arrangement rested on it. There was a statue of a cat dressed in a suit standing by the flowers. Near the doorway there was another statue of a large horse with golden hair and bejeweled reins, surrounded by plants. The windows, spelled to let sun in constantly regardless of the weather outside, were made of glass as colourful as the room itself.
"Sit down," Bellatrix said, gesturing toward one of the couches. "You do this every time. Stop acting like you’ve never been in this room."

"It’s just... so warm and colourful," Sirius muttered, but did move to take a seat. "Tea?"

"Already served, if you could stop eyeing that horse and look at what’s on the table."

"Oh, you have scones, too! You’re spoiling me, dear cousin."

"Don’t get too happy about it," Bellatrix said. "I asked you here to discuss a matter important to us both."

"Oh?"

"Your godson Harry, that is."

"Your interest in Harry remains a mystery to me," Sirius said, instantly wary. "Why are you so concerned about him?"

"Why aren’t you concerned about him?" Bellatrix shot back. "I like the boy. He’s bright and polite. Which is why I’m quite surprised as to why he isn’t spending this holiday with you - this is his first Christmas after the passing of his father, isn’t it? I would’ve thought that you’d rather have him spend it with you."

"We decided against that," Sirius told her, smiling a bit as he thought of Harry. Merlin, how proud he was of the boy! "I have to make sure that the third task goes without a hitch, and having him with me would cause a conflict of interest that the other competitors would capitalize on."

"Even if he doesn’t win the third task, he’s bound to win the tournament as a whole," Bellatrix said dismissively. "No one who saw his performance at the second task can argue against it. Even Delacour’s admirers couldn’t rank her above him."

"He did rather well, didn’t he?" Sirius sounded delighted as he spoke. Bellatrix fell silent for a moment, before she said:

"Do you know where he learned the killing curse?"

"It’s not taught at Durmstrang," Sirius said, and shook his head. "But there’s no way for me to know how he— I don’t even know how to ask him about it."

"Will he stay with you during the summer, at least?"

"Yes, I do believe so. Most of his personal belongings are at Grimmauld Place already, and his own house is sealed for now. He could technically go there, but it won’t be properly his until he’s of age. Which is why he’s better off spending the summer with me while preparing for his fifth year at Durmstrang."

"Will he be fine with that?"

"I think so. Although, if he prefers to stay at his own home, I don’t think I want to force him to move. I love Harry, but he’s very independent and capable."

"After he wins the tournament, you know his life will be quite different," Bellatrix pointed out. "The Dark Lord will want to have him participate in Death Eater activities, and there will be quite a few journalists asking for his statements on irrelevant things. They’ll try to turn him into a celebrity, and
he has to be ready for that.”

"Haven’t you seen the things Skeeter writes? They’re already trying that,” Sirius said. "But for now, I think it’d better to focus on what comes next: the third task.”

"I thought everything was already sorted out about it?”

"Well, we might have to work on the timeline a bit. Since the task itself will require a bit of setting up, I believe it would be best to tell the champions about it well in advance and let them prepare.”

"Wouldn’t it be more exciting to watch them prepare for whatever it is?” Bellatrix asked. "Or better yet - if it’s a battle, send them unprepared.”

"I think them being prepared will allow for a better show,” Sirius said. "And unfortunately, making the audience watch them before the task itself begins would be quite boring.”

“Tell me,” Bellatrix said, leaning forward with an excited look on her face. “Is the third task anything like the first two?”

“Oh, Bella,” Sirius replied with a grin. “It’s much, much better.”

Harry doubted that he’d ever spend another Christmas quite the way he would spend it this year.

"This does look like a place specifically made for suspicious rituals of unknown origins,” the boy said, observing the gloomy atmosphere of the basement that Tom had led him to. "The floating torches are a nice touch, although the lack of skeletons is a bit disappointing.”

"You’d do well to appreciate the things you see,” Tom sniped, clearly not delighted by Harry’s words. "The basement is just fine and the ritual is hardly suspicious or from unknown origins. In fact, let’s reiterate the things I’ve already told you—”

"And the things that I’ve already read a few times.”

"What the life debt did was create several connection points between you and that friend of yours. As time passed by, those connection points only grew stronger and stronger. What I will be doing is simply severing the connection points one by one, as cleanly as possible.”

"Will it be painful?” Harry asked, and regretted his question immediately. He didn’t want to sound weak, but he just... he didn’t have a good feeling about this. Tom gave him a look, and surprisingly, didn’t make fun of him. "How will you do the severing?”

"The ritual itself will make the connection points visible to me,” Tom explained, moving towards a wooden table at an appropriately dark corner of the basement. There were a few books and bottles on it, and Harry wondered if they had been there before, or if they were somehow part of the ritual. "But they have to be weakened enough for me to be able to cut them without causing you magical or psychological damage.”

"And how will that be done,” Harry asked, noting the lack of mention of his physical well-being. "Will you use another spell, or something?”

"Or something,” Tom replied, and moved towards Harry with a small bowl in hand. "This will take quite a while, and yes, it will be painful. Did you read about the complications regarding the severing process?”
"Yeah," Harry said. "The notes said that if the connection is too strong, it’ll just cause damage all around."

"Yes, well, that’s one way to put it," Tom said. "Therefore, to make it more likely for us to succeed, we must put the life debt under some strain."

"And... how is that done?"

"We’ll poison you a bit."

"Poison me... a bit," Harry repeated slowly, a cold feeling sweeping into the pit of his stomach. "Explain. As clearly as you can, please." Tom wouldn’t kill him, would he?

"Being closer to death will put a strain on the life debt and make the bonds easier for me to sever," the man said, eyeing Harry with a carefully neutral expression. "It is the best way to do this without killing your friend." Harry stood still for a long time, watching the man in front of him, wondering if this was about to lead him somewhere he couldn’t come back from.

"You want me to drink poison," he said. "And if I do? Will you heal me?"

"If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t bother with such a complicated way of doing it," Tom replied. "I could have done it at any other point during your stay here so far. Merlin knows you’re in the bad habit of falling asleep everywhere except your own bed in the safety of your room."

"Unless you’re working on something in which consent to drink poison is needed," Harry immediately argued. "Consent for that would signify a willing sacrifice."

"I can pour this down your throat with you kicking and screaming, if that will make you feel better," Tom offered, before stepping closer yet again. "Harry. I haven’t led you here to hurt you. I need you to trust me." And wasn’t it, well, something, that for once he had to ask for someone’s trust? And why did the thought of Harry not trusting him seem so bothersome?

Harry took a few deep breaths before he nodded. What did he have to lose, really? His parents were dead, his friends would survive without him, and the Tournament would carry on whether or not he was a part of it. "All right," he said, finally. Merlin, he was really out of his depth, wasn’t he? Why had he thought that he could match the Dark Lord in any kind of magic?

"I need you to undress enough for me to be able to cover at least half of your body in runes," Tom then said. "This will make locating the connection points easier." Harry complied without a word, feeling oddly detached all of a sudden. As if he was no longer associated with what was happening. All he could hear was the sound of his own surprisingly steady heartbeat as he undressed slowly.

Once done, he approached Tom.

"I need you to relax a bit," the man told him, dipping his fingers into the bowl before reaching towards Harry and drawing something on his chest. "Let’s talk, will that make you feel better? You do enjoy talking."

"I’m cold," Harry whispered, feeling vulnerable. Tom’s eyes, red unlike any other, glanced up before going back to observe the runes he was drawing.

"Did you enjoy Istanbul?" Tom asked then, unsure of why Harry’s obvious discomfort unsettled him so. Merlin be damned, but he did want the boy to calm down and trust him. "Did you know of your target before? You seemed quite familiar with his work."
"What?" Harry asked, frowning. "His work?"

"The painting," Tom clarified, and was just about to continue when he saw Harry’s eyes widen in terror, and the boy’s hands flew to Tom’s mouth, silencing him. Surprised, Tom let him.

"Don’t... don’t mention that painting," Harry whispered, his green eyes wide and bright in fear. "Tom, promise me— I know you want to know everything, but—"

"Well," Tom murmured, pulling his head back and dislodging Harry’s hold, "now you’ve made me curious."

"Tom, there are things that I know only because of where I can go," Harry told him, the thought of Tom becoming aware of the Fading Tribe terrified him. He didn’t know enough yet to warn him, but there was something in Harry that made him feel - deeply, uncompromisingly - that Tom should never find out about the Fading Tribe. "Things that you, for your own sake, shouldn’t approach or look into. Just... just carry on with the ritual."

The Dark Lord looked at him for a few long moments before he narrowed his eyes and continued drawing the runes. He hadn’t come this far without a sense of self-preservation, and if a boy who could die and come back to life told him to not seek something, then he could let it slide – for now, at least. He didn’t know what that painting could be about, and he had learned better than to investigate anything that could bring him closer to death than he absolutely had to be.

"Because of where you can go, huh," the man said. "Sometimes I forget that you can go and come back from where no one else could return."

"I’m sorry," Harry said. "But, if it makes you feel any better, it has no impact on anything you wish to do."

"I suppose. Turn around, I need to paint some on your back."

Harry turned, cold and shivering, feeling strangely disoriented and confused. Merlin, to go from worrying about the ritual, to worrying about being poisoned, and then panicking due to what Tom had brought up... Harry couldn’t wait for this all to be over and for him to just... be. Come summer, he would spend it all alone at home. He knew that Sirius wanted him to live at Grimmauld Place, but Harry only wanted to go home. Even if his parent’s wouldn’t be there, he just wanted—

"I’m done," Tom said, interrupting Harry’s train of thoughts. "Now, I need you to drink the potion and trust me. Can you do that?"

"Yes," Harry replied, already feeling sick. The potion Tom handed him was colourless and smelled of nothing. When he drank it, it tasted metallic.

"Lie down," Tom instructed, and Harry once again complied. The floor of the basement was cold against his bare back, and felt almost painful.

"I can’t believe I trust you this much," Harry said, and reached to hold Tom’s hand. Tom let it happen, and held his wand with his other hand instead. He looked at Harry’s face, at the boy’s closed eyes, and couldn’t help but reluctantly admit that perhaps the boy was worth knowing even without his ability of conversing with the dead.

A moment later the runes on Harry activated, and the web of the life debt became visible as strands of lowly burning fire that tangled up in large knots, signifying the connection points. Harry’s breathing was heavy, and Tom could see him sweating already despite the cold. The connection points flickered in and out, telling him more than anything of the impact the poison had on Harry.
Harry’s grip on his hand became even tighter.

Merlin, the boy really did trust him, didn’t he?

And even more absurdly - Tom was acutely aware of his own desire to not fail that trust.

The runes on Harry’s body shone brightly, reflecting the web of the life debt that Tom was untangling. He knew that somewhere - he didn’t care to know where - Harry’s friend was experiencing excruciating, unexpected pain. He had his suspicions on the long-lasting effects that severing the life debt would do but didn’t see it necessary to inform Harry of the small details, especially if it meant Harry backing out of the ritual. He couldn’t let the life debt remain, however, as it had been turning into a hindrance to the boy’s development.

And, well, whatever ended up happening to Harry and his friend’s relationship… Tom was sure he would be able to spin it to his favour. Besides, from what he had seen, the two had became far too close anyway. Harry, if he wanted to become the kind of Death Eater that Tom wanted him to, wouldn’t be able to afford such a close friendship.

The effect that severing the life debt would have on Harry’s friend would drive the two boys apart, and despite how much it would upset Harry, Tom was sure that the boy would understand the long-term value of that distance.

Chapter End Notes

Before y’all get too happy about Harry trusting Tom to poison him, wait for his pov next chapter ok
Chapter 40

Harry woke up sore, cold, and momentarily disoriented. Sadly enough, that was a state of being that he was quite familiar with by now. Due to the absence of any detectable immediate danger, the boy remained still in his bed for a moment longer, trying to make sense of the world.

He was in a room that wasn’t exactly his, but one that Tom had given him when they had arrived to this house. Harry didn’t feel like he was injured in any way, although… he did feel strangely bereft of something… something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Did it have something to do with the ritual? Had they succeeded? Was the life debt gone, now?

’If the life debt is gone,’ Harry thought, ’then what about… what about Truls?’ Was his friend all right? Tom would know, wouldn’t he? Should Harry call for him, or go look for him? To ask about Truls, just in case. What if Truls was hurt? After a few moments of contemplation, Harry, feeling shaky, sat up and moved to the edge of the bed. His feet had barely touched the ground when a house-elf popped in, looking at him with its wide, bulging eyes.

”Master Potter is awake!” it squeaked. ”Master Potter’s bath will be ready right away. Does Master Potter require help? Tinsel can help Master Potter to his bath—”

”’Thank you,” Harry interrupted, realizing that perhaps a quick scrub wouldn’t go amiss. He was clean, he could feel that, but clean in a way that spoke of scourgify, rather than soap and water. It was clean but… not… clean. ”I can get to the bathroom on my own. Um… I would appreciate a change of clothes and a towel to be ready for me when I get out. Or, you know, just put them in the bathroom on a chair or something.”

”Of course, Master Potter,” Tinsel replied. ”Tinsel will make it happen, Master Potter!”

Harry’s steps were heavy and shaky when he finally began the short walk from his bed to the bathroom adjacent to his room, and by the time he had undressed and climbed into the bathtub, he could barely hold himself up. He sunk into the warm water with a relieved sigh, and sat still for a few moments, his thoughts drifting back to the life debt.

If removing it had been a success… then… what would happen next? There was an unpleasant feeling at the pit of his stomach, a ball of anxiety and fear that he wasn’t sure how to handle, no matter how used to this feeling he was by now. Merlin, how he missed his friends. Not just Truls, but also Clemens, Filippa, Björn, and everyone else. Luna, too, even though she was at Hogwarts and he could have seen her more often. He hoped that she’d like the gift he sent her: a book on mythical creatures. He knew that he would like whatever she sent him, even if he wouldn’t have a use for it. He had liked the earrings even if he hadn’t worn them in a long time, and the face mask that she had sent him… it was nice?

’Not everything has to be useful,’ Harry thought to himself with a sigh, thinking of washing his hair but finding the shampoo too far to reach for. ’Where would I need a mask after all?’ The only place he struggled to breathe in was the train station, but what were the odds of that mask working for him there?

Harry was startled out of his thoughts when the door of the bathroom was pulled open, and Tom stepped in. The man looked fine as ever, dressed in clearly tailored robes, with his hair neatly combed back. The smug look that Harry had begun to suspect to be just Tom’s, well, face, was there as always, and the man sounded almost pleasant when he spoke:
"Glad to see you awake," Tom said. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak and sore. I can barely move my limbs," Harry replied, and then gestured towards the shampoo. "Hand me that."

Tom hummed in response, and grabbed the bottle of shampoo before moving closer to Harry. "And how were you planning on washing your hair, if you can barely move?"

"You wash my hair, then," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Merlin knows I would appreciate it." When his words were met with a douse of water to the head, Harry thought that Tom would follow it up by throwing the bottle of shampoo at him as well, before leaving him to his own company for now. Much to his surprise, however, the Dark Lord kneeled down by the bathtub, and poured some of the shampoo onto his hand, before rubbing it into Harry’s wet hair with hesitant moves.

Harry wasn’t sure what to think of this, but he didn’t hate it.

"Not many would have drank that poison," Tom suddenly said, startling Harry again. "You did well."

Harry closed his eyes, unsure of what to say at first. Yes, he had taken the poison Tom had given him, but... it wasn’t simple trust that had made him do it. Harry didn’t consider himself reckless, but neither was he incapable of taking risks when necessary – not when the stakes were as high as they were in his life. He needed Tom’s trust, and if gambling with his life and drinking the poison Tom had handed him was an action that made the man believe Harry to have blind faith in him... then wasn’t it simply the wisest thing to do?

"The life debt is gone now, isn’t it?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Tom replied, and Harry’s relief nearly drowned under the second douse of water that washed the shampoo out of his hair. "You can rest until lunch, and after that... we’ll start by trying to send you to the train station, and see how that goes."

"Wow," Harry said mockingly, wiping water from his face and blinking his eyes open. "Not even a full day’s rest."

"Do you need a full day’s rest?"

Harry fell silent for a few moments, and thought of Delacour and the third task that loomed ahead of him. "No," he said. "After lunch is good."


The earlier feeling of bereavement had vanished, making Harry feel somehow... light on the inside. He still felt cold, but in a way that had nothing to do with his surroundings; a light chill that settled into his bones as if it was a part of him. The soup he was eating didn’t warm him up by much, but he wasn’t about to complain. Not when there was so much else he’d rather talk about.

"Is there anything you can tell me regarding the third task?"

"No," Tom replied absently, browsing through the day’s paper. "Mainly because even I know very little of its details. Which is why I’ll be sure to teach you as much as possible."

"Do you want me to win?" A long time ago Tom had called Harry his champion, and told Harry to do his best. But watching him try his best from the sidelines was a fair bit different from actively training him. Even if Tom wasn’t doing it for free.
"I want to be impressed," the man finally said. "You and Delacour have both succeeded in that, so far." And— Merlin, how was— Harry didn’t *hate* Delacour, but he couldn’t bring himself to feel happy about the words Tom had just said. Something about them had taken Harry’s good mood and appetite away.

"You said you wanted me to try going to the train station again?" Harry asked, pushing his plate aside. "Anything else?"

"Nothing for now," Tom replied. "We’ll start by sending you there to see if that can be done. If it is possible, you can start asking about Regulus Black again. I am certain that he is still alive, but... well, there is always a chance."

"And then?"

"Oh, that would be all for today. Tomorrow, we’ll go back to training you. You’ll also want to open your Christmas gifts, I believe."

"Will we do apparition training again, tomorrow?" Harry asked, dreading the answer. Tom, sensing his discomfort, smirked at him.

"It’s only for your own good," the main said. "We’ll practice it every day. There are, however, a few other things I’ll be teaching you, but you needn’t worry about any of that yet."

"Yeah," Harry sighed, shaking his head and thinking of rain and wind and steel already. "First, the train st—"

The shift caught him off guard, and the next thing Harry knew he was sitting on a bench in a familiar station, surrounded by more people than he could take a moment to count. The noise—Merlin, it was so loud, the people were talking while some trains arrived and some left. There were bells ringing, and a huge clock near the ceiling that Harry never seen before was ticking loud enough for him to feel it.

What was he supposed to do, again? Oh yes, look for Regulus Black. But how was he supposed to look for anyone in this crowd? He couldn’t even find Merope or Albus.

Harry coughed, absently noting how thin and dry the air felt. Uncomfortable, in ways he wasn’t sure how to describe. He sat still, not knowing what to do, but in the absence of a pull to take him back to the world of the living, he didn’t feel the urgency to leave. Someone sat by him on the bench for a brief moment, rummaging through their pockets, before the sound of a train’s horn got them moving again. Someone else almost fell on top of him, pushed by the crowd, before again disappearing into the masses.

Harry, to get a better view of the station, moved to stand up on the bench. The only thing he could see better now were the trains themselves, and the size of the crowd. Merlin, how many people were there? And they kept just... appearing. With every person that went off into a train, another came to the station.

He was so caught up in trying to make sense of the world around him, that it took him a while to notice that someone was watching him. When he finally did notice, with dread in his gut, Harry turned his head, and ended up looking straight towards a towering... entity. It wasn’t a person, no matter how humanoid it looked. Its ashen skin had a blue tint to it, and Harry knew that once again, this had to be one of the tribe. He wasn’t close enough to see its eyes, but its face was turned towards Harry, and Harry knew that it had been looking at him. It wasn’t… it wasn’t the same one he had seen in Istanbul.
Breathing became harder, and he regretted nothing as much as standing right then. If he had been sitting down, surely the thing wouldn’t have noticed him? But oh, he knew better than to truly believe that. They were following him, and somehow, they could find him even here, at the train station. And it would be only a matter of time before they would find him in Durmstrang.

Harry returned to where he had been, sitting by the table, with an impact that made him lurch forward and lean against the hard surface. He could hear a strange sound, like a dog gasping for breath, barely audible over the thundering beats of his heart. He was sweaty, and nauseated. What snapped him out of this state was a sudden gust of clean air, and then someone – Tom, of course it was Tom, no one else was there aside from the two of them and a handful of house-elves – dragged him to the couch, and pushed him to lie down. Harry clenched his eyes shut for a few long moments, before the world felt somewhat stable again.

After silence, Tom spoke: ”Well, that was interesting. Do explain.”

”Do you remember when I told you,” Harry wheezed, feeling drained to the bone, ”about the things I know that I cannot tell you.”

”Because of where you can go,” Tom said, nodding. ”You need to rethink this new habit of withholding information, if this is what ends up happening when you’re working on a task I’ve given you.”

”I’m not hiding information,” Harry replied tiredly, and closed his eyes. Merlin, the couch was soft. His head hurt. ”I’m protecting you.”

Tom didn’t ask him about the train station again.

Oh, he still sent him there. Every morning, right after apparition practice. But the few times that Harry returned pale and trembling, gasping for breath, he didn’t ask what had put him into such a state. Instead, he decided to add more into Harry’s training schedule. To distract him.

”We’ve discussed this before,” Tom said one afternoon, after a generous dinner. Harry was lying on his back by the fireplace, warm and content with his life for the time being. ”The Imperius Curse. You know what it is, don’t you?”

”I do,” Harry replied, opening his eyes and turning towards Tom. ”It’s removes a person’s free will.”

”It sounds exactly like the kind of a curse you would hate from a moral perspective,” Tom said, before narrowing his eyes at the boy. ”Am I right?”

”I know you’re trying to make fun of me,” Harry replied. ”But as a matter of fact, I once wrote an essay—”

”Of course you did.”

”—and I think that referring to it as less harmful than the Cruciatius curse or the Killing curse is arguably incorrect, because—”

”Oh, Merlin, why is this happening.”

”—the physical pain of Cruciatius, if inflicted only for short periods of time, which is usually the case, doesn’t equate to the psychological damage that—"
"We’re not having this conversation," Tom decided, and silenced Harry with a wave of his wand. The betrayed look the boy levelled at him was nothing short of delightful. "And you needn’t worry about your sensibilities quite yet. Before we get around to you even trying to cast it— on someone else, mind you. Not me. We will begin by you trying to overcome it."

"I remember that conversation," Harry sighed sadly, as soon as Tom cancelled the silencing spell. "It’s going to be a lot of work, isn’t it? Don’t make me do anything embarrassing."

"There’s no joy in embarrassing you when it’s only the two of us here," Tom said. "It is a wonder that Durmstrang hasn’t incorporated this lecture into their curriculum yet."

"Overcoming the Imperius? Do you want them to? I’m sure they’ll get it done if you tell them."

"Hmm."

"Oh," Harry suddenly said, nodding slowly. "You would think that."

"Think what?" Tom asked. "I didn’t say anything."

"Well, you didn’t say anything, but you made that hmhm sound and we both know what it means."

"We do?"

"You make it whenever you think you have a good idea, but can’t make it happen for some self-determined reason," Harry said. "You made the same sound when you considered the exchange program between schools, but then dismissed the idea because, well, as much as we could learn from Beauxbatons, they would also benefit in equal measure."

Tom watched Harry with wide eyes, and didn’t stop the boy when he continued: "I think that you find the thought of teaching people how to shrug off the imperius good and useful, in case they fight against rebels, but you also don’t trust them with a skill that will render one of the most useful Dark curses virtually useless, in case you’re the one who needs to subject them to it."

"I think you’re reading too much into a passing thought," Tom managed to say, despite how unsettling he found Harry’s observation. There was a conclusion, somewhere in there, that he didn’t want to even think of. The conclusion that somehow, despite all good sense, he actually had gotten close—

"Probably," Harry said with a shrug. "Either way, it’s hard to say when such a curse is needed." He hadn’t thought that he’d ever have to use the killing curse, but live and learn, really.

"Unexpected words from someone so hung up on the ethical implications of the imperius," Tom said dryly.

"I know you think I’m naive, and that I trust everyone blindly," Harry argued, rolling his eyes. "But considering that you never know who is going to stand by you in the end, I do understand the necessity of not... helping them build up their defenses."

"You don’t trust everyone blindly?"

Harry thought of Truls, and how close they were, and of the vow of secrecy he had made the boy take before agreeing to go to the Yule Ball with him. "No."

"Colour me surprised," Tom drawled, clearly not believing Harry. "You’ve been very trusting in my company, for a very long time now."
"Yes, Tom, I have," Harry said, avoiding eye-contact in a pretense of bashfulness, while the thought of occlumency briefly ran through his mind. "But it has less to do with me trusting people in general, and more to do with me trusting you in particular."

"That—"

"Tom," Harry interrupted, looking up at the man, and desperately hoping that he wouldn’t think to use legilimency right then. While he wasn’t outright lying, he was attempting to manipulate one of the strongest – if not the strongest – wizard alive. "You handed me poison, and I willingly drank it. Do you think I would do it for anyone else?"

"I wouldn’t know," Tom claimed, but Merlin, he did know, didn’t he? He knew that no matter Harry’s flaws – and by Circe, the boy had plenty of them – he wasn’t as foolishly trusting anymore as he had once been. But, once again, this wasn’t a conversation Tom wanted to have. "Tomorrow I’ll put you under imperius, and you’ll have to try and apparate, despite my orders."

"I can barely apparate now with your orders," Harry said, finally sitting up. He didn’t resist the shift of the conversation away from trust issues, knowing that there was nothing good to be gained by making Tom feel uncomfortable about having feelings. "You think I can somehow resist your command and apparate? Are you insane or pretending to be humble about your abili- ah!" The stinging hex hit Harry’s calf, making the boy yelp in pain.

"You do realize that you ought to speak to me in a completely different manner, don’t you?"

"Consider it a security measure," Harry said. "If anyone ever tries to steal my identity and use polyjuice- ah!"

"Why would anyone bother?" Tom asked, unimpressed. "You’re a nobody."

"Not if I win the Tournament," Harry reminded him. "But, if anyone ever does pretend to be me, all you need to do is—"

"Hear them talk, yes, yes," Tom sighed, reluctantly amused. "Merlin forbid you’d ever speak to me respectfully in private."

"You complain now, but you’ll miss me when I’m gone," Harry said. "In a few weeks, back at Hogwarts, too busy to be bullied by you."

Tom scoffed, clearly in disagreement. But he didn’t argue.

* *

Tom had instructed him against taking the train, and told him to apparate to Hogsmeade instead. Despite his reluctance to apparate all alone in case anything went wrong, Harry obeyed, and reached Hogwarts hours before the train would arrive. The boy was... nervous about his return to Hogwarts. Going back to Durmstrang was always so easy. Going back to his own apartment, meeting his friends who lived so close to him. Attending lectures in familiar rooms, living a routine he knew by heart. Hogwarts was so different, and was so full of people. There were so many students there that Harry doubted anyone could remember them all.

Also, he was nervous about Truls.

Very nervous.
It didn’t really help that Truls didn’t arrive until much later in the day, less than an hour before dinner. Nothing appeared to be out of ordinary, and Harry refused to read too much into the surprisingly sharp searching look he had received from his best friend earlier. During dinner Truls sat by Harry’s side as usual, and after a few moments of friendly and familiar pleasantries, Truls was drawn into a Quidditch discussion with Krum. Harry... wasn’t sure if anything had changed. Truls hadn’t yet mentioned anything about the life debt, but that could be simply due to him not having the time for it. He looked fine – well and healthy, didn’t he?

"Is everything all right?" Mette asked suddenly, leaning closer. "You’re not eating."

"Oh, no, everything is fine," Harry replied immediately, and offered her a smile. "It’s just, well, the tournament. I wish I knew what the third task was, already. I hate waiting."

"People are betting left and right," Maria said, joining the conversation. "The most popular bet so far is that you’ll be fighting a dragon."

"That’s ridiculous," Mette huffed, shaking her head. "There’s no way they’d do something like that."

"It would be exciting to watch," Ingrid pointed out, helping herself to more soup. "We don’t see people battling dragons too often."

"For a very good reason, I’m sure," Mette replied. "The most believable suggestion that I heard, was about a three-way duel between the champions. Think you can handle that, Harry?"

"I could try," Harry replied, though he hoped that the third task wasn’t a duel against the other two champions. He had no interest in going against George or Delacour. Although... if he defeated Delacour, wouldn’t that be something?

"You still have that confidence thing going on," Metter sighed. "The lack of it, really. The sooner you realize that you’re a celebrity now—"

"I am not," Harry cut her off, horrified. This, for some reason, made Anthony Lestrange chuckle, which was already a bad omen for Harry. "Why would I be a celebrity? That is ridiculous!"

"Well, you did perform spectacularly in the Tournament so far," Mette reminded him. "Not only that, but you’re the youngest champion, and from Durmstrang. If you capitalize on your fame—"

"What fame!?"

"—you can make a career out of it."

"He really doesn’t seem to be the type to do that," Lestrange pointed out. "Look at him. He’s shaking."

There was a feeling of something being amiss, but Harry couldn’t dwell on it, choosing to speak instead: "I’m sure that once the tournament is over, people will move on. Durmstrang doesn’t allow journalists, after all, even if it weren’t unplottable."

"Oh, keep thinking that," Lestrange replied, and why was he enjoying this now, anyway? Did the thought of Harry being harassed by journalists delight him that much? "You’ll see in the summer."

"While I hate to agree with him, it does mean that you’ll be expected to behave a certain way," Ingrid said. "To represent Durmstrang, no matter when or where."

"I’m not sure what you think I do when I’m on my own and away from school," Harry told her, "but
I doubt that the truth is half as exciting as how you’re imagining it to be.” After all, talking to dead people and conspiring to somehow rescue Tom from himself weren’t exactly exciting activities. Stressful, is what he would call them.

“Well, so far so good, when it comes to journalists,” Mette said, just as Harry’s thoughts began drifting to what could be amiss. ”I mean, Skeeter likes him well enough. She’s only ever written nice things about him.”

“So far, as you said,” Lestrange replied, clearly pleased by the thought of Skeeter turning against Harry. ”But once he makes a mistake, then there he goes. That’s the way they operate, you know. Journalists.”

”Unlike some others, such as you, Harry isn’t the type to pick fights with strangers and cause trouble in public,” Maria said, and though Harry was grateful, he was also surprised by the confidence of her assessment: he didn’t really know her, after all, and she barely knew him.

”Are you implying something?” Lestrange asked, the tone of his voice changing abruptly. ”You need to be more careful, you know. We’re supposed to present a united front while we’re among these... people.”

Increasingly uncomfortable with the situation, Harry tried to focus on the decorations of the Great Hall instead. While any signs of Christmas were well and truly gone, there was still a somewhat festive atmosphere. He glanced at the Ravenclaw table, saw Luna, who was wholly focused on something flying above her drink. At the Gryffindor table, just behind the Ravenclaws, Harry was Ron and Hermione, and a few of their friends.

Harry couldn’t wait to find a moment to talk with Hermione - the girl had left for the holidays with a list of things she’d be researching, and Harry was curious to know if she had found anything interesting. Maybe she, too, had looked forward to spending time with him again. Of course, he’d have to try and dodge Truls’s—

Oh.

With a realization tinted in alarm, Harry finally figured out what had bothered him for a while now. Truls hadn’t, not after the initial greetings, so much as looked his way. He hadn’t joined their conversation, hadn’t reached to Harry, hadn’t— Nothing, he had done nothing, aside from focus on his conversation with Viktor. Harry, feeling worried all of a sudden, wasn’t sure of what to do.

Maybe it was just… all in his head?

*

It continued.

The situation with Truls. If it could be called a situation. It wasn’t that much had changed, really... certainly not enough for anyone else to realize that something was different. Truls and Harry still spent most of their time together, and they were still far too close than what was usually considered common between two boys of their age.

But Harry... Harry knew that something had changed.

Truls wasn’t as quick to come to him, anymore. Not as eager to ask for Harry’s opinions, or sit quietly for hours by his side. He wasn’t as jealous as he had been, and hadn’t tried to kiss Harry again. Instead, sometimes, Harry would catch the boy watching him with a blank look on his face. Truls would still wrap his arm around Harry’s shoulders, but the times that he’d do that were
becoming fewer and fewer in number. He didn’t seem mad, or anything. It also didn’t appear to be something Truls was doing intentionally, and they hadn’t discussed the life debt yet. Truls hadn’t asked him about it - not even once.

What had happened? Should Harry confront him about it?

It was as if he was just, slowly but surely, beginning to care less and less about Harry. Which was a terrifying thought, but was it selfish of Harry to think so? If the life debt had been what had kept Truls by his side all these years, then was it fair of Harry to feel abandoned now? Besides... perhaps they were just... relearning their friendship, in a way, right? Maybe he was just making up things, too caught up in his anxiety and thus thinking that something was wrong, when nothing really was?

”A sickle for your thoughts?” a familiar voice asked then, interrupting Harry’s thoughts. He turned to see Hermione, smiling at him nervously. He mustered up a smile in return, pushing the thoughts of Truls aside for now.

”Not worth that much, really,” he replied. ”Want to sit down? How was your holiday?”

”Oh, it was great,” the girl said quietly, and sat down after casting a quick look around them, in case someone was watching. ”I’ve been reading up on, well, the things we discussed last time.”

Harry felt sick, again, his anxiety returning tenfold. ”You mean...?”

”The train station,” Hermione whispered, leaning closer. ”It’s such a fascinating thing, Harry! The closest equivalent of it that I found was, well, a limbo. In numerous beliefs, there is a concept of a state between life and death - a place called limbo. I think that might be what the train station is.”

Harry, who had never expected to actually learn about the odd things in his life, was stunned. ”When someone dies, they go to the station, and from there they board a train that takes them... where?”

”I couldn’t find information on that, unfortunately,” Hermione admitted with disappointment. ”But there’s still so much I could research. I haven’t studied any of this before, you see - the subject just never seemed, well, relevant. But now it is, and oh, Harry— there are so many books and so many perspectives and theories! Plenty of them are humbug, of course, but, it is so amazing!”

”You’re amazing,” Harry blurted, deeply impressed. ”The way you just... find out these things, I... I mean, of course everyone writes essays and such, but you just... you do beyond that. Hermione, you’re amazing.”

”Thank you,” the girl replied, her smile wide and bright, a blush on her dark cheeks. ”I mean, between you and me, I think I have what it takes to get an apprenticeship or work for the ministry.”

”I’m sure you do,” Harry agreed. ”Which one will you try for?”

”Oh, neither,” the witch dismissed, her smile losing its radiance. ”They don’t let muggleborns— well, I mean, it doesn’t matter how smart I am, very few professors here would grade me well enough for me to qualify. They don’t... even if my assignments are perfect - and everyone knows, you see, the students know and they ask me for help - some teachers won’t give me anything above Acceptable.”

Harry, who hadn’t even realized that this was yet another way for Voldemort’s people to contain those they do not approve of, was stunned. ”That... that must be changed.”

”How?” Hermione asked, looking at him with a tired expression. ”There’s no way for it to change, not unless everything else changes first. And even then, it’s very difficult to prove that a teacher is
being unfair, you know. They would just say that perhaps I’m not as smart as I think I am, or didn’t do as well as I thought I would. That’s what they said to me in the beginning, before I stopped asking about it.”

”We’ll figure something out,” Harry replied, his anxiety giving way to deep, calming anger. ”You keep studying and doing your best - I promise that you won’t regret it in the end.”

”I trust you, Harry,” the witch said, looking at him with a serious expression. ”But as we discussed before, to generate enough influence to bring change, you must start by winning the tournament. The third task - whatever it is - must leave an even stronger impression of you than either of the two tasks before it.”

”That... I know. But I’m not sure how to do better than I did in the second task.”

”We need to start out with finding your niche, if you remember what we talked about,” Hermione reminded him. ”I will keep looking for information, of course, but I think that your ability to go to the train station is something that we can build on.”

”I think we need to find out the reason why I can even do it,” Harry said. ”If it is a branch of magic that I just happen to know, somehow, then sure... I could learn to use it. But if it’s something else...” He had asked Merope, a long time ago, if he could go to the train station due to the circumstances of his birth. He never did receive a clear answer.

”I’ve been thinking about that,” Hermione admitted. ”And, well, you told me something that I think you dismissed too early.”

”And that is?”

”You said that you when you go to the train station, you get this… sliding sensation, right? Like an energy of some sort.”

“Yes, more or less,” Harry replied, unsure of what she was going for.

“Can you re-direct that energy?” Hermione said. “Perhaps it could result in a… I’m not sure what, but if you held on to that energy, and cast a simple lumos – what would happen? Would you like to test it out?”
A few weeks into the second half of the school year found Harry just as lost and worried as he had been at the start of it. Even now, as he tried to focus on his homework, thoughts of Truls and their relationship kept distracting him. The situation was made worse, perhaps, by Harry’s doubts regarding whether or not this new distance was real, or simply something he had conjured in his mind. And if it so happened that he wasn’t imagining things, and that Truls had become more distant – did Harry have any right to be upset about it?

'I can’t even ask him if he felt anything happen while I was going through the ritual. Or can I? Should I? Would it be weird?’ Harry sighed, looking at the fireplace of the common room, and tried to think of a way to approach Truls and strike up a proper conversation without making everything awkward. But – if anything had happened – why hadn’t Truls approached him to talk about it?

"I can’t believe that this all will be over in a couple of months,” Maria said suddenly, lying down on one of the couches. ”I miss Durmstrang.”

"Won’t you miss Hogwarts at all?” Mette asked, seemingly brushing her brows. Harry hadn’t even known that brows ought to be brushed. Was this another thing that everyone knew about except him? Should he have been brushing his brows all this time, too? “Didn’t you manage to make a single friend?”

"Sure I did,” the other witch replied. "I made quite a few friends. But I still miss Durmstrang. Hogwarts is nice but it’s so… social.”

Harry missed Durmstrang, too. And he missed Filippa, and Clemens, and Björn and everyone else. Although... he had found a friend in Hermione, and he suspected that if he was going to miss anyone aside from Luna, it’d be the muggle-born witch. Merlin, how smart could a person be – she was brilliant, and it was maddening how it all went to waste due to people’s prejudice against her blood. Ridiculous! If only he had Hermione with him at Durmstrang... Harry couldn’t help but feel that his life would have been quite a bit easier. For Merlins’s sake, the research she had done about the train station! Sure, Harry had known that it was a stop before death, a limbo, as Hermione had called it, but still! And then... her suggestion...

Harry wasn’t sure how easily he could grab a hold of the energy that allowed him to go to the train station. He could feel it; it was hard not to differentiate such an unusual kind of energy from the norm. But using it? Where on earth could he practice that? What if it ended up being dangerous? Was it a risk he was willing to take, with the third task still ahead of him? What if something went wrong? Then again – what if nothing happened, at all? Harry couldn’t imagine what casting a lumos with that other energy would be like. Would it make the spell stronger? Or different in some other way?

The third task would be his best chance to make a lasting impact on the public as a whole, including Tom. The thought of treating it like some sort of a show was repulsive, but that didn’t change that fact that that was exactly what the tournament was meant to be: a show for entertainment. Whether he liked it or not, he’d have to put up a show that even Delacour wouldn’t be able to match.

"Harry,” someone suddenly called, and the boy looked up to see Ingrid standing by the entrance of the common room.

"Yes?”
"Your presence is required at Headmaster Yaxley’s office."

"Is this about the third task?" Maria asked, clearly excited. Harry closed his book and set in on the table, before standing up and heading towards the doorway. "Tell us how it went, when you get back," the witch yelled after him.

“Sure,” Harry replied, anxiety burning like a pool of acid in his stomach. He knew the way to the Headmaster’s office quite well by now, and arrived there just in time to see Delacour opening the entrance. The witch, dressed in her school’s blue uniform, gave him a quick look, before clearly dismissing him and entering the Headmaster’s office. He followed her inside, ignoring the sting that came with being snubbed by someone he considered a rival of sorts, and wasn’t surprised to see George and Sirius already there. What he was surprised about, however, was that neither Karkaroff nor Madame Maxime were present.

His godfather was lounging on one of the chairs, looking well-rested and delighted. Harry envied his ability to care so little about the things that this tournament had brought to light. Harry loved his godfather, but it was hard to deal with the disappointments that he had been faced with regarding the man. Did he even have the right to be disappointed?

“You’re here, wonderful,” Yaxley said, and with a wave of his hand, the entrance closed. He eyed the three champions briefly, before sighing heavily. Harry suspected he wasn’t the only one unhappy with the event, although he doubted that Yaxley shared his reasons. “Now – do take seats, everyone – it’s time for you to learn more about the upcoming third task. Of course, you are strictly prohibited from revealing this information to anyone. We are informing you this early of the event due to the amount of preparation each one of you will be doing. Black here will explain the task itself in more detail.” Yaxley then nodded towards Sirius, who grinned, and sat up properly in his seat.

“The task will take place during the second week of March,” Sirius said, offering Harry an encouraging smile as he took charge of the conversation. “From Monday, the sixth, until Sunday, the twelfth. Almost exactly a month from today. Your task is to find a Rebel – a real member of the resistance – and defeat them in battle. Whether you dispose of them, or bring them for questioning, is entirely up to you. You will have a month to plan your course of action in private, and then a week to complete your mission. There are some practicalities that you must know—”

The thought of tracking down a Rebel and fighting them was terrifying.

Harry, after the classes were over, had quietly left his things on his bed, and opted to take a walk outside. Alone. His head felt like it was too full for him to be able to rest, and his inability to sort out his thoughts was distressing. He didn’t know where he could find a Rebel, and even if he did… he didn’t want to fight one. Harry knew that whoever he would end up fighting would most likely fight to kill him – after all, why not? As far as Rebels would know, he was just yet another Death Eater out to get them.

Did he have any chance of beating one them, anyway? Perhaps if he found that niche of his, but time was going by fast and he still had no idea of any special, hidden talents that he may have. He hadn’t been able to try out Hermione’s idea yet, and Harry didn’t know when he would be able to do that. Or where. He didn’t want to do it inside the castle – who knew what kind of spells they had monitoring the activities happening there – but he couldn’t exactly do anything outside by the lake, either.

‘Perhaps I could ask for permission to go home for a few days,’ Harry thought. ‘Karkaroff might allow it, if he thinks that it’s what I need to do to win.’ But would he alert Tom? If he did manage to
come up with something amazing, then Harry didn’t want Tom to find out about it beforehand. He wanted to… surprise the Dark Lord. Impress him. Do something even Delacour couldn’t.

Deep in his thoughts, it took Harry a while before he realized that there was someone following him. Even so, he kept walking forward aimlessly, reluctant to turn and confront whoever was trailing behind him. He hoped it wasn’t Skeeter – no matter how much she allegedly liked him, her presence was exhausting.

Eventually, however, Harry came to a stop by one of the large windows of an otherwise empty corridor, and whoever had been following him, came to stand by his side. Anxiety washed over Harry the instant he realized that it was Truls. His dread towards the third task was overwhelmed by the feeling he got when he saw his friend.

“We haven’t spoken in a while,” Truls said, after a moment of hesitation. “Spoken properly, I mean.”

“Yes,” Harry said, not knowing how to continue from there. Was Truls upset? What did he want now? Was there something he wanted for Harry to say, at this point? “I… I expected us to talk sooner, but you didn’t seem injured… or otherwise hurt.” Or willing to spend time with Harry alone.

“I’m not,” Truls confirmed, and there was a look in his bright blue eyes that Harry couldn’t quite decipher. “You got rid of the life debt. That was a painful experience, at the time, but… I thank you for it.”

“So he did feel it,” Harry thought, and took a deep breath. Was this something worth confronting Tom about? The man had said that Truls wouldn’t feel a thing, hadn’t he? ‘He’s thankful. Does it meant that something has changed? He was against it before…’

“I don’t want to lose you,” Truls said suddenly, his voice low but clear. “I care about you. So much. But it’s… different, now.” The boy took in a shaky breath, before he continued: “Before, there was this… compulsion. I thought about you every single time I had a decision to make. I needed you to be happy, and I needed you to be… I needed… I wanted you to make me… I wanted you to feel that too. About me. I wanted to be the center of your universe, like you were mine.”

“And now?” Harry asked, feeling numb and cold and wishing for nothing more than to disappear and hide under his bed. Hide, with a good story that he could be absorbed in, and ignore the world. He wasn’t sure of what was happening between him and Truls, but he was afraid, and strangely hurt, and he didn’t know what he ought to do about any of it. It didn’t help that Truls seemed just as lost as he was.

“Now, there’s still you,” Truls replied, shrugging. “But there’s also a whole world beyond you.”

The two fell silent for a moment, and Harry fought the urge to be sick. He desperately tried to think of something to say; anything that would make the situation better. In the end he sighed, and shook his head. “I knew… Well, feared, that when the life debt would be erased, you’d… that we’d no longer be the same,” Harry said, hoping to not sound as tearful as he felt. Truls nodded – he knew that. After all, Harry had made him swear an oath of secrecy just in case. He wouldn’t have done that if he had expected nothing to change.

“Not the same is not a bad thing,” Truls told him, and raised his hand to touch Harry’s cheek lightly with his fingertips, turning Harry’s face towards him. “It just means we have a lot of things to figure out. I told you – I care about you. That is not going to change, with or without the life debt.”

Harry mustered up a smile, and nodded. He couldn’t help but feel, however, that something wasn’t right. There had been a strange fluctuation in Truls’s behaviour since the life debt had been erased,
and Harry wasn’t sure what that meant. There were moments when his friend was, just like now, gentle and sweet. There were light touches and a few small smiles. And then, more and more often, there were moments when he looked at Harry like a stranger.

It was… alarming. And no matter what Truls said, Harry knew that more had changed than what the other boy thought. The question remained, however: what to do about the situation?

Harry hated himself – just a little bit – for the faint feeling of regret he had. Having let the life debt remain would have kept things as they were, no matter how wrong it was. Now, Harry was left with a friend he might lose due something neither of them had any power over, really.

Worst of all, for Harry, there was also a decision to be made.

With the kind of life he had, the ambitions he held, and the people he associated with… did he have any right to hold on to Truls and drag the other boy with him into all that danger? Should he just… let go, and hope for the best, or should he look into the impact of life debt on them? Harry cared about Truls, and he had gotten used to having Truls there for him, but did he have any right to count on that?

Especially now, when Truls wasn’t as invested in him anymore?

* *

Harry wasn’t avoiding anyone. He just… had something to do at the library. Early in the morning. Very early in the morning. He had plenty of homework to do – assignments he wanted to get done now, well in advance, rather than rush them later on when he’d be distracted even more by the tournament. The only good thing about immersing himself in homework, the quest to find his “niche”, and Hermione’s suggestion, was that it helped him push thoughts of Truls aside. Who had time to sort out complicated relationships, when there was an entire foot-long essay on sentient fungi to be written?

Harry was startled out of his thoughts when someone set a napkin, a cup of coffee, and two muffins in front of him.

“You skipped breakfast,” Mette said, sitting down next to him. Harry quickly glanced around them, fearing to see the librarian anywhere nearby. Were they allowed to bring food into the library?

“I came to read before the breakfast started,” Harry replied. “And then I just forgot about it.”

“What’s on your mind, then?” the witch asked. “Because no homework should keep you too busy to eat.”

“Noth—“

“Is it’s whatever is going on with you and your boyfriend?”

Harry hastily stuffed his mouth with one of the muffins, in a sad attempt to delay the inevitable discussion. He knew that if he told Mette that he didn’t want to talk about this, she’d accept it and let him be, but…perhaps talking was… good?

“I hope you won’t tell anyone about this,” Harry said after he had finished one of the muffins. “I mean, it’s not exactly a secret, really. But it’s just. It’s private. I guess?”

“All right,” Mette said with a nod, and flicked her wand to cast a privacy charm on them. “Go on.”
“Years ago I saved Truls’s life,” Harry started, hesitantly and quietly. “The life debt… we didn’t know what it’d do, you see. So we just let it be. Eventually, though, it kind of… festered.”

“Festered,” Mette repeated, her voice wary.

“Something like that,” Harry sighed, nodding. “His feelings… what I was told was that the feelings he had, they were… the life debt amplified them tenfold. Or something along those lines.”

“Oh,” Mette gasped softly, her eyes widening in realization. “I see. Oh, Merlin, that’s why you’ve been so uncomfortable. And I can’t imagine our teasing helped. Sweet Circe, what a mess. Did something change, now? Is that what the fight is about?”

“We’re not fighting,” Harry said, hunching his shoulders in discomfort. “During the New Year, I – don’t ask me how – got rid of the life debt. And he… I mean, I understand, you know? From his perspective, a life debt he got trapped into was making him feel things he didn’t really… feel. Who knows how different his life would be now, if he hadn’t been forced to care so much about me. So now… we… he needs a break. From me. He didn’t outright say it, but…”

“Oh, no, I understand,” Mette assured him, frowning with a concerned face. “And you’re feeling lost and lonely? Heartbroken?”

“Not exactly,” Harry admitted reluctantly. “I’m feeling lost. I don’t want him to leave me. I’m scared.”

“Can I ask you,” Mette started, leaning closer to the younger boy, “what are your feelings towards him?”

“We’re close friends,” Harry said, thinking of how safe and happy Truls made him feel. The thoughts of how suffocating his presence had been sometimes, he pushed aside. “He cares about me the most.”

“Hmm.” Mette pursed her lips for a moment, before asking him: “Do you like kissing him?”

Harry’s eyes bulged at the unexpected question, and he flushed red. “No! Yes! I mean, I didn’t hate it.”

“What about that ginger friend of yours, back in Durmstrang,” Mette said. “I’ve seen him kiss you once, last year. Do you like kissing him?”

“That’s Björn,” Harry hurried to say, thinking of the kissing practices he had done with the boy. “We just. It’s not… I mean, kissing is nice, but it’s not…”

“All right,” Mette said soothingly, before she continued: “What about the other friend of yours? The tall, angry German?”

And, oh. The thought of Clemens – tall and handsome, with thick arms and broad shoulders – kissing him made the feeling of something hit Harry like a punch in the gut. He swallowed a few times, his face heating up. There was strange tightness in his chest, and his— he felt— Hot. Warm. “Um.”

“Yeah, there it is,” Mette said, and laughed. “Now, see… the question is, do you really like Truls, or do you just keep him around as a back-up? A safety net. It’s easy to… fall into the trap of keeping people who love you one-sidedly and desperately near. We all want to be loved. That doesn’t make you a bad person.”
The words hurt, in some way, but it also made the world a bit clearer for Harry.

“I’m not going to say that I know much about love,” Mette told him. “But I’m beautiful, and people gravitate towards me. Some even think they’re in love. If I suddenly lost that, I think I’d be… upset, too. Removing the life debt has made it possible for Truls now to leave you. And, Harry, it’s not your fault. In fact, you did a very brave thing by breaking the life debt. But Truls did go through a trauma. And if time away from you is what he needs to heal, then I think you should give him that.”

Oh, Merlin. That hurt even more. Who will he have left, if even Truls disappeared?

Well, he’d have Tom. But Tom wasn’t exactly… it wasn’t quite the same, was it? The Dark Lord couldn’t… he wasn’t the kind of a man who’d Harry be able to have in his life in the same way he thought he could have Truls: sharing simple moments without worrying about the world. With Tom it was adventures around the world and beyond the grave and drinking poisons, and—

And washing his hair in a quiet bathroom. Reading by the fireplace while eating something sweet.

And if Tom was all Harry could have – not just as a mentor or a project, but as… someone. In his life. Someone he could share simple moments with, then… Then it was all the more important for Harry to win the tournament, wasn’t it? He had to win the third task, no matter what.


* *

Things got a bit better after that, though not enough for Harry to stop hiding in the library for hours upon hours. He and Truls had developed some sort of a wary balance, neither knowing how to fit together anymore, yet nowhere near willing to let the other go. Harry knew that the trauma he knew Truls must have – because really, how could it not be a traumatic experience? – needed them to have plenty of distance between them. And yet… it felt… it felt odd.

The only thing Harry could do to feel halfway normal, was simply keep himself as busy as possible. Which was, admittedly, easy. Even after he had completed all the homework that had been assigned so far, there was plenty of training for him to do. He had even managed to reach out to Gildy and talk him into teaching Hermione a thing or two.

He was being productive, and Harry only wished that he could have been happy about it.

There was also the issue of preparation for the third task. He still hadn’t figured out how to find himself a Rebel, and time was going by fast. The third task was weighing on his mind even now, as he was making his way towards the library at half past six in the morning. At this point he wasn’t even sure what he was looking for. There was nothing in the library that could lead him to a Rebel, surely.

“Harry,” a familiar, faint voice said behind him as he was crossing one of the open-window corridors. Harry turned, already knowing who it would be, and saw Luna standing there. The sight of her made him feel slightly less tense – she tended to have that effect on him, for some reason. There was a sheen of dew on her, and she looked pretty in the morning mist, with a pair of pink sunglasses on her nose and her hair a cloud of pale curls around her face. “You’re gloomy again.”

“I reckon I’ve got a reason to be,“ Harry replied, the smile on his face appearing with unexpected sincerity. “Why are you up so early?”

“I wanted to see you,” Luna said, walking towards him, and then slipping one of her cold hands into his pocket. “You always wander around at strange hours, so I thought I’d catch you on one. How
“Have you been?”

“As well as one could imagine of anyone in my situation,” Harry said evasively. “I was on my way to the library.”

“You’ve been spending plenty of time there lately.”

“It’s a good place to be.” Even if it didn’t have all the answers he needed.

“There could be better places,” Luna told him. “Do you know what the third task could be?”

“No,” Harry lied. “But… there’s something I want to do to prepare, and in order to do that, I need to find someone.”

“Who?”

‘I don’t know that yet,’ Harry thought, and shrugged. “It’s all right. I don’t want to bother you with the details.” Even if he wanted to, he really couldn’t. How could he locate someone he didn’t know? Theoretically, he could just… stumble around in hopes of finding a camp or something. Dueling a whole camp of Rebels would surely impress Tom.

“It’s all right,” Luna said. “We can go to the library. I can be quiet if you need to think.”

“Thank you,” Harry replied, already distracted by his own thoughts. Somehow taking on a whole camp would certainly be impressive. But. *Really.* Harry wasn’t going to even consider that. Not seriously. No, he’d be better off just focusing on finding one target that he could handle. He didn’t know how to go about it quite yet, but that’s what he’d do. Because, *Merlin,* he wasn’t delusional enough about his own skills in dueling to think that he could actually take down more than one Rebel at once.

If he could down even *one* Rebel, that was. Harry wasn’t too confident about that either. Merlin, he needed to practice his dueling more, didn’t he? Or perhaps just throw caution into the wind and look into Hermione’s advice regarding finding his niche. Whatever he’d do, he needed to find a Rebel and be able to defeat them.

‘*But which one?*’ the boy thought, as he walked with Luna towards the library. ‘*Is that what I should start with? If I could get access to a list of known and wanted Rebels, I could pick one, and look for them.*’ Would *that* be impressive to Tom? It depended on which Rebel Harry would find, presumably.

So he’d have to pick one from the most wanted list. But what if Delacour did the same? It wasn’t as if Harry’s idea was particularly unique or unexpected. If Delacour, who was probably better than him at everything, and was very attractive and impressive and older and more mature than him – all traits that were upsetting in a very strange way to Harry – was aiming for the most wanted… then…

She’d end up picking the most wanted Rebel, for sure. And that would leave Harry with the choice of either settling for the second most wanted – which would surely diminish his points, especially in Tom’s eyes – or fight Delacour as well as the Rebel. And that was something Harry was determined to *not* do. Not unless he absolutely had to, and was attacked by Delacour first.

‘*But what if she isn’t going to go for the list?*’ Harry thought then. Could he take that risk?

No. He couldn’t. *However*… what if the Rebel he aimed for *wasn’t* on the list? What if it was someone that Delacour didn’t know was alive? Someone that Tom wanted desperately to find, but *couldn’t.* Wouldn’t *that* be a victory unlike any other?
Harry knew who he wanted to find. It was just… a matter of, well… finding the Rebel in question that was bound to be tricky. He couldn’t ask Tom for help, could he? No, he needed to talk to Hermione. *She* always had the best ideas. She’d be able to help him track down his target.

“There are many locator spells for different situations,” Hermione said. “But don’t you think that the Dark Lord has tried all of them, by now?”

The two of them were once again in the old hut outside, surrounded by piles of books and parchment, quills and ink bottles swirling around, looking for a safe place to land. Hermione had tied her thick, curly hair into a bun atop of her head, and was browsing though some of her notes while Harry told her of the third task and his plans regarding it, trusting her not to spread the word further.

“Then we need to come up with something else,” Harry said. “Anything else, to track him down.”

“Yes, we’ll need to do that and work on your niche,” Hermione reminded him. “There’s no point in helping you find him if he’s just going to hurt you. Or worse, kill you!”

“I’ve been thinking of your suggestion regarding using that energy,” Harry said. “I want to try it, but I’m not sure when. I don’t want anyone else to know about it, and I can’t trust there to not be any wards that could signal something to Yaxley. Or worse – the Dark Lord.”

“You said that Headmaster Karkaroff is really pleased with you,” Hermione said, pursing her lips thoughtfully. “Perhaps if you ask him for a quick weekend leave on Friday, he’ll allow you to go home.”

“Perhaps,” Harry agreed, knowing that proceeding with the plan as it was, would mean disregarding all the caution that had kept him alive so far. He didn’t have any other options, however, and was willing to take the risk. Reluctantly. “I just… I don’t know. I’m scared.”

“I think it’d be stupid of you not to be scared,” Hermione said, before suddenly smiling at him brightly and reaching for her bag. “Oh! I just remembered… if it makes you feel even a bit happy, I’ve been in touch with a few muggle-born business owners. Most of them are in Knockturn Alley, of course, since only British purebloods are allowed to own businesses on the main street, but that doesn’t make them bad. Siraj Trunks produces amazingly sturdy trunks that are easy to shrink and carry – I wanted one, but it was too expensive. I was in touch with the owner, however, and he said that he’d be willing to sponsor you at any point—” The witch paused to take a breath, and hand Harry a few folded papers she had retrieved from her bag.

The trunk in the picture seemed very… normal. It looked quite a lot like the trunk he already had, but with what appeared to be metal latches rather than leather straps. He looked up at Hermione, who kept smiling at him with a proud expression. Harry wasn’t exactly sure about switching trunks, but if it made Hermione happy and gave one of the muggle-born owned businesses some promotion, then why not?

“Thanks,” he said. “I think I could use it. I don’t know if I’ll get access to any of the basic amenities, and—”

“That’s a whole house, you know,” Hermione interrupted, clearly unable to contain her excitement. “You didn’t read that part, did you? Siraj specialized in trunks that, when you go into them, turn into actual houses. You can have your own library there. And, well, everything else.”

“Even a training ground?” Harry asked, suddenly interested. He’d still have to practice developing
his niche at home, but for future reference… wouldn’t having a trunk like that solve plenty of his problems? “Merlin, think of the possibilities!”

“Exactly!” Hermione shrieked, giving in to her excitement. “Such exciting magic, isn’t it?”

“Speaking of exciting magic,” Harry said suddenly, “how’s everything going on with, uh…”

“Professor Lockhart?” Hermione finished for him, and smiled brightly again. “Oh, Harry, he’s brilliant! Thank you so much for recommending me! You know, he agreed with the need to get you some sponsorships – not that I told him why we’d want them, of course. He said it’d make you appear more professional, which is also a good thing, I suppose.”

“Has he taught you any spells yet?” Harry wanted to know, thinking of the memory charm. “Or is it too early to ask him?”

“It’s a bit too early,” Hermione said with a grimace. “But I was thinking of rereading all of his books – especially Waltzing with Wendigos, where he uses that spell a lot – and ask him to teach me it, as if I was inspired by his adventures. I’ll try to get that done as soon as possible.”

“Great,” Harry said, nodding. And then, in an effort to be as productive as his friend, he said: “And I’ll go today to ask Karkaroff about going home on the weekend.”

Hermione looked at him for a moment, with a very serious expression, before she nodded slowly. “Yes, I think you need to do that as soon as possible. Just to know if it’s even a viable option. I mean, my hypothesis says that it is, but there’s no knowing without trying it out first.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed with a sigh. He thought about Delacour again, and felt a touch of unease at the pit of his stomach. He could bet anything that unlike him, she knew already what she was going to do in order to get the best points. “I can’t wait for this to be over.”

“I know,” Hermione said sympathetically. “If it’s worth anything, I think you’re amazing.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, and then thought about Tom. What would he need to do for Tom to think that he was amazing? Would winning the tournament be enough?

What if Delacour did better?
Chapter 42

If there was one thing that Harry could trust, it was Karkaroff’s hunger for success. Getting the man to not only allow Harry the freedom to go home for a weekend, but to also not inform anyone – Sirius included – of his whereabouts, took less than five minutes.

“I’m glad to see that your previous victories haven’t made you take the third task lightly,” Karkaroff said at the end of their brief discussion. “Remember, Mr. Potter, those who bring honour to Durmstrang will be allowed greater privileges. Leaving the premises like this is a privilege you have earned. You can still earn more. Good luck.”

“You can still earn more?’ Harry thought, shaking his head as he left, wandering aimlessly in the corridors to kill time before dinner. ‘Did that mean that if I win this all, there’ll be… perks of some kind that I would get?’ He doubted that – Karkaroff’s promises weren’t particularly reliable. In all likelihood it’d just mean more work for him, more responsibilities, and more things to worry about. He didn’t trust lucky breaks, such as unexpected privileges.

Karkaroff hadn’t offered him a portkey, and Harry wondered if the man had simply not thought of it, or if he had just deemed it unnecessary. Either way, Harry was glad that Tom had taught him how to apparate – not only long distances, but several times in a rapid sequence – despite his complaints at the time. Now, all he’d need to do was wait until Friday, before leaving for Hogsmeade, from where he could apparate home.

He wasn’t going to even pack a bag. Why would he? He was going home, after all. Even if he hadn’t been there since— since James— For a very long time. Even if he hadn’t been there for a very long time. He wouldn’t need to pack anything.

Should he tell anyone that he was leaving? Should he tell Truls? Had their relationship been the way it was before the life debt had been severed, then Harry most certainly would have. But now? Now it felt more like a bold assumption on his part to think that Truls would care. Because no matter what Truls had said about still wanting to be his friend, Harry wasn’t sure if he could believe that. Harry wasn’t exactly a fun person to be with. Other people were just… better.

Harry had never really considered himself insecure. He just… he knew he didn’t really have much to offer as a person. He wasn’t the smartest, or the strongest, in his group of friends. He wasn’t particularly funny or cheerful either. He was just… he was just Harry. Harry with a plethora of problems, trying to somehow survive despite all the confusion and stress that was so heavily marking his life. And now that Truls no longer would see him as someone amazing and special, what reason did he have to stick around Harry? Wouldn’t it be easier to just find new friends? People who were easier to be around?

What if, when they went back to Durmstrang, Truls would… start hanging out with Nikolai, or something?

‘I need to stop thinking about this,’ Harry decided, taking a deep breath. ‘I need to focus on one thing at a time, and get them all done. First, finding that niche of mine. Second, finding my target. Third, winning the tournament. I’ll keep worrying about Truls after everything is over.’

He wasn’t worried about sneaking out without alerting his peers from Durmstrang. Not needing to take any bags with him, it wasn’t as if anyone was going to think that he was leaving for a few days, even if they saw him exiting the school grounds. Besides, it wasn’t as if he was going to stay at home for a long time. People likely won’t even notice that he was gone. And even if they did, well, he had
‘I do need to make a plan for my stay there,’ Harry thought, then. ‘All I have is an idea – not even mine, but Hermione’s – about somehow taking hold of that energy and using it.’ He wasn’t worried about whether or not he could do it. He could tell the difference between that energy and everything else. What worried him was that he didn’t know what would happen.

Or rather: what if nothing happened?

He could still try his best to track down his target and make the battle impressive. It was just that… Tom wasn’t an easily impressed man. And yet Delacour had stood out to him. Harry wasn’t sure why that bothered him so much, only that he really, really, really didn’t like it. Delacour was older than him, and likely better trained as well. Unlike Harry, she had kept her composure even in tough situations. Merlin, if he could just… be a bit more like her.

‘Perhaps not,’ Harry then thought, remembering the cruelty that the witch had displayed during the tasks. ‘I don’t think I could… I… not like that. Not the way she did it.’ He just hoped that cruelty wasn’t the thing that Tom respected in her. Because if it was, then Harry really had nothing to compete with.

“Harry Potter, is it,” a feminine voice he didn’t recognize called, startling him out of his thoughts. Harry looked up to see a witch standing in front of him in the corridor. Sylvia Nott gave him a smile that showed the dimples on her cheeks, and the crinkles at the corners of her eyes spoke of nothing but sincere friendliness. Harry knew better than to trust any of it. Wasn’t this the girl Anthony Lestrange was allegedly in love with?

“Yes,” he said, wary. An hour before dinner, the corridors were mostly empty. He didn’t think she would have approached him if there had been more people around. “Can I help you?”

“As I’m sure Erling has already told you,” the witch said, referring to Mette. “I am Sylvia Nott. I’m one of the sponsors of the Triwizard Tournament, and I wanted to introduce myself to the most successful competitor so far.”

“Oh,” Harry said. He wasn’t sure what else to say, really. “That’s nice?”

A shadow of a smile appeared again on Nott’s face, and she took a step closer. “You are a good wizard, Mr. Potter, but you are not a politician.”

“I’m not involved in politics,” Harry instantly replied. The witch shook her head, and sighed. “You are. Of course you are. You’re from Durmstrang, the son of a pureblood with an adequate inheritance, and the most likely champion of the Triwizard Tournament. And best of all – you’re an orphan, with a godfather who doesn’t appear to be particularly concerned about you.”

Merlin, Harry hated everything that had led him into this situation. Besides, he didn’t appreciate any of what Silvia Nott had just said. ‘Not that I can do much about it,’ Harry thought, remembering the things Mette had told him about this particular Nott. “Either way, I’m trying to stay out of it all.”

“I’m not here to threaten you or make you feel uncomfortable,” Nott said, though they both knew that the words meant nothing. Harry was already uncomfortable. “I know that people like you would rather be faced with the truth, so that’s what I’ll offer you. There are… words to be had… about certain people, working hard behind the scenes, to make sure they gain custody of you the moment they succeed in making Black appear unfit to be your guardian.”

“Why would you offer me anything?” Harry asked, this unexpected new disaster making the pit of
his stomach clench painfully. Merlin, what was he going to do—

“Consider it social investment,” Nott replied, still smiling pleasantly. “I’ll make sure you end up either with your godfather – or even emancipated, if you’d like. But I want something in return.”

Did he have any choice, really? Harry looked at the witch and nodded slowly. “Tell me what is it that you want, first, and then I’ll consider it. I can make you no promises, but I will consider what you say.”

Circe, he wanted out and away from here. He couldn’t wait for Friday to come.

Eventually, Friday arrived.

Going back to the Potter Manor was... different. It was odd to be there and be so aware of the fact that he was the only one walking those halls. The sole ownership of his family home felt heavy, and the countless rooms he knew now to be empty bothered him more than they had ever before. The whole place was dark and silent. Sirius had clearly done... something over here. The furniture was covered with white sheets charmed to preserve it all, and no house-elf was in sight. Harry was well and truly alone.

He was quiet, despite there being no need for such silence: even if he screamed, no one would hear him. The stairs didn’t creak when he walked upstairs, and headed to his room. Or, well, the room that had always been his. Technically, they were all his now. The furniture there had been covered as well, but the protective spells were easy for him to wave off. His books were untouched, familiar stories waiting for him, ready to take him somewhere safer, where the adventures weren’t his to deal with.

Circe, he was tempted.

Rather than take one of the books, Harry sat down on his bed, feeling a heaviness in his body that had become regrettably familiar by now. And yet, despite the heaviness and the melancholy, there was also a sense of clarity, slowly surfacing and taking over him like a blanket. It was easier to distance himself from hurt feelings and a sense of fear when he was here.

Breathing in. Breathing out. His heartbeat was steady, and for once he felt… almost calm.

Before Monday, he’d have to pull two miracles: the first was to find his niche of magic and weaponize it, and the second was to somehow do what the Dark Lord hasn’t been able to: locate Regulus Black. Harry wasn’t a miracle-maker. He wasn’t one of those people who could make amazing things happen. Everything about him that others admired had been a result of something he hadn’t had a choice in. His ability to converse with the dead, the events that had followed, and the people that had gravitated towards him. Even Truls had been pushed by the life debt. The championship, too – he had been recommended by Tom, hadn’t he? And Harry’s value to Tom lied in his ability to go to the train station.

It was as if there were two Harrys. One that everyone else saw: a special wizard with a list of friends and achievements, and a bright future as a Death Eater of high rank. And then there was the Harry that he knew he was. Just him, a boy with nothing that he could hold truly dear anymore. He felt now more alone than ever.

And that was why he needed to make these miracles happen now. Because they would be the fruits of his efforts. These two miracles would his choices to make – he could enter the third task with
another plan, but no. He chose this plan, and he was going to make it happen.

Harry took a deep breath, and allowed himself to slide into the train station, and then return within the same breath. It was strange, being able to come and go so easily, with such control. It was stranger still, to go there with no one to meet or to look for, and only for a fraction of a moment. He did it a few times, the energy building inside him easy to identify, but slightly harder to get a hold of. The change between his room and the station – the cold and wind and rain, and then the quiet dry warmth of his bedroom – was surprisingly jarring when experienced so many times in a row.

It didn’t help that thoughts of Regulus Black, and how to find him, were distracting him. There was no point in asking Sirius for his blood to perform any rituals for discovering locations of family members. The Dark Lord had likely already done that, and even if he hadn’t, Harry didn’t want to give anything away by asking Sirius for help.

‘Don’t think of that now,’ Harry thought to himself, taking a deep breath, sitting up straight with his wand in hand. ‘Don’t lose focus.’

He did it again. And again. And again. Each time improving his hold on the energy building up inside of him. He didn’t take breaks, and there was no one to tell him to, either. Harry sat for hours on his bed, mustering up all the desperation and hope he had, knowing that if he could get this one thing right, it could perhaps make his future a bit easier to handle.

Just. Finding his niche. His own little corner in magic, something only he could do. Something that no one could take away from him. A sprout, if not a branch, of magic that he could cherish as his own.

He could tell, the moment he got the… the right kind of grip on it. The energy that had been there, but so hard to grasp, was almost solid under his hands, before it swam somewhere under his fingernails and up his arms. Harry dropped his wand and held his palms open, feeling suddenly so full of something—a feeling so overwhelming it almost made him burst into tears.

Instead, what he did, was look at a lamp on his desk with a lumos already on his lips, before his gaze slid to a small framed picture of his mother. The Lily in the picture was smiling at him, tying her hair into a braid and then untying it again, repeating the action in an endless loop of movement. Harry searched for words to say, any words that would help the unknown spell out. Nothing came to mind, and when the pressure grew too much, all he could do was look at his mother’s picture and whisper: “Please.”

Lily’s picture froze for a second, her eyes in the picture glazing over for a moment, before turning to him in revulsion. A moment later they glazed over again, seeing nothing anymore. Harry looked at it, his heart heavy and hammering fast in his chest, feeling like the word had suddenly shifted on its axis, and that something was wrong. Something was really, really wrong.

And then the picture screamed.

Fuck. Circe smite him, what had he done?

Lily was still screaming. He didn’t know how to stop it. The walls were strange, the floor wasn’t straight anymore, and nothing made sense. There was a strange… well, not odour, but something, in the air. Harry stumbled out of his room, his ears ringing, and fell on his knees somewhere between his room and the stairs.
He could hear a loud, wheezing sound, and was vaguely aware of it being him trying to get as much air into his lungs as possible. He was sure his heart would explode with the pressure building inside of him. His magic and the energy that he had summoned were mingling inside of him, making him feel hot and sick. He was barely aware of himself as he hastily took off his clothes, finding brief relief in the coldness of the floor.

And yet… under all the panic, there was also a feeling of stillness. A corner of his mind was… standing aside. Detached. He latched onto that part of him with all the strength he had left, and clung to it, closing his eyes, as his magic raged around him.

Harry didn’t notice when the cold began sinking into him, burrowing into his bones like it had never before. He didn’t notice that the heat he had felt was gone, not until he was shivering instead. His thoughts, jumbled as they were, did nothing but give him a headache. Eventually, Harry gave up any attempts to stand up or move, and lied there on the floor, shaking, scared and confused by what had just happened.

He… he was afraid of having done something he couldn’t reverse.

Despite this, he found comfort in the determination he had had earlier. He couldn’t afford regrets if he wanted to do what he knew he had to. No matter what the results of this ended up being, Harry knew that he really had nothing else to do but to push forward. He wasn’t going to lose to Delacour, or to anyone else, for that matter. And if Truls didn’t want him anymore, then, fine. Harry was fine, and he didn’t need anyone, anyway.

This time, when the tears came, Harry did nothing to hold them back. He was too tired to not cry. He remained lying down on that same hallway he had walked through for so many years as a child, his bare back against the polished wood, shivering from a cold he didn’t know the source of, and cried. Big, loud, heaving sobs. Because, Circe, he was tired. What had gone so wrong about him, that had made him live a life like this? Where were his parents? Why didn’t he have an easy life like Ron and Draco did?

Merlin, why was this his life?

*

When Harry snapped out of his— whatever that had been— he wasn’t sure what time it was. He felt exhausted, but simultaneously as if he had just woken up from a long nap. Not that he hadn’t already been disoriented, but everything felt… strangely isolated from the world. It would be so easy to just… hide at home, and forget about the tournament and everything.

Lily had stopped screaming. Harry couldn’t remember when that had happened.

But he couldn’t do that. He needed to get himself back on his feet, and find out how much time he still had left before he’d need to go back to Hogwarts. No matter how his body ached and his head spun, he couldn’t afford wasting any more time than what had already been spent lying down.

Standing up required more effort than he had expected, and though hungry, Harry didn’t have enough energy to go out and buy anything to eat. Not yet. Not when there was a strange thrum inside of him, as if his magic was humming. The energy he had called earlier was somewhere there, entangled into his magic now, and Harry wasn’t sure what that could possibly mean. Would Hermione know?

Why had Lily screamed? Pictures didn’t— they weren’t alive enough to scream. They weren’t like portraits.
Was this worth all the trouble? Was he going to... be better than Delacour, now? Harry didn’t know. He didn’t even know what had happened, what was going on. If this was him finding his niche, then Merlin, it certainly wasn’t enough. He had found... something. Something he didn’t even know how to use. The energy clearly wasn’t just... energy. It was some sort of magic, Harry could feel that well enough now. But it wasn’t... it wasn’t normal. It wasn’t the way magic usually felt.

*It didn’t work the way magic did either. What about it had made Lily scream? What could possibly be so wrong about it—*

It didn’t feel bad, really. It was, in a way, similar to the feeling he’d get when standing in the train station. Perhaps more like how that felt before, years ago, when the air was still clear. He felt odd, and he was... he was afraid. Again. Funny, how fear never left him, it just changed and expanded. Now he was fearful of what he had done. Whatever this was... what were the consequences? He had taken a gamble, but unlike the time he drank the poison Tom had handed him, the risks now were unknown.

Merlin, he was cold. And tired. He had so much to do, and likely not enough time to do most of it. He still didn’t know how to find Regulus Black. He couldn’t afford

   falling

   asleep.

*#

When Harry woke up, he was lying on the couch by the stairs, vaguely remembering somehow managing to get there on his own. He lied still for a few moments, his thoughts much clearer now than they had been earlier, and slowly sat up. He wasn’t injured. The weird thing about his magic was still there, but when he hesitantly cast a levitating charm on the shirt he had thrown aside earlier, nothing out of the ordinary happened.

A *tempus* charm told him that it was now Sunday, a bit past three in the morning, and Circe – he had lost his entire Saturday. What had happened to him? What was that energy that he had so recklessly allowed into him?

‘*I don’t think I can undo it anymore,*’ Harry thought, looking down at his hands, before sighing heavily. The hallway was dark, and he was starting to shiver with the cold again. He was hungry, too, but didn’t know if he would find any place open at this hour to buy some food from.

Circe, he was a mess. How could anyone trust him to win any competitions or save the world or anything equally ridiculous, when a bit of unexpected magic disoriented him so much? He hadn’t managed to even feed himself yet, and he had lost a whole day without knowing how exactly. Merlin, he’d never be this reckless again. What if he ended up accidentally killing himself?

‘*Would that be a bad thing?*’ The thought flickered through his mind fast, and was gone before Harry had even fully realized that it was there. In the darkness of the hallway, and the silence and solitude of his world right now, the thought didn’t bother him enough to make him think of it further. Instead, Harry kept leaning back on the couch again, knowing that there was no one around who’d tell him to go to his room or seek a more comfortable place in the house.

Not even a Merlin-forsaken house-elf.

‘*I need to do something. Anything.*’ Harry thought then. ‘*I can’t let this stop me.*’ He couldn’t allow his old – and new – worries and fears hold him back. When Tom was his age... had he held himself
back just because he was *afraid*? Unlikely. Harry doubted that anything had ever held that bastard back. He just… people didn’t achieve the things the Dark Lord had by being hesitant and allowing things to stand in their way.

‘*I need to be more like that,*’ Harry thought, and lifted his hand, feeling the energy intensify around his fingertips. He needed to be more like Tom, and the first step to achieving that was to throw caution aside, once more, and dive into experimenting on… whatever this was. He couldn’t afford worrying about himself. What was the worst that could happen? Death?

The time was nearing four, now. Harry was fairly certain that bakeries in the area would begin opening their doors in a few hours. Meanwhile, he could shower, change his clothes, and think of what he’d do next. He’d need to return to Hogwarts on that very evening, and if he wanted to use the rest of his time wisely, he needed a plan.

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It was freezing when he left his house at ten past seven in the morning. The air was crisp and clear, and without a warming charm, Harry was sure that he’d enjoy it a lot less. As it were, the early morning walk to the bakery, through the familiar roads of Godric’s Hollow, was exactly what he needed to feel a bit more like how he wanted to be, and less like the confused wreck he knew he was.

The closest bakery was one that Harry’s family had rarely visited. Lily hadn’t liked it. His sweet mother who’d defend society’s poor at the drop of a hat, didn’t like stepping into small, dingy shops frequented by the same poor folk. Harry didn’t have the desire to think more of that than he had to, and he didn’t dwell on the memories when he stepped into the bakery.

The woman standing behind the counter looked surprised, clearly not expecting to see anyone that early. After a few moments of curious staring, she smiled, dimples appearing on her round cheeks.

“Good morning,” she said warmly. “Fresh bread?”

“And some other pastries as well, I think,” Harry replied, mustering up a smile in return. “Good morning. Um, Mrs. Willis, was it?” Merlin, *sure*, he hadn’t been in this particular bakery before, but he had walked past it enough times as a child that he ought to have known the woman’s name by now.

“Wilkins,” she corrected, letting out a short laugh. “Amy Wilkins. So, what has brought young Mister Potter here at this hour? Haven’t seen you in years. How is your father doing?” And, oh yeah, the downside of being a well-known, somewhat Pureblood family, in a small village – everyone knew the Potters in Godric’s Hollow, even if they weren’t really relevant elsewhere. It didn’t seem like the town knew everything, however, and Harry took a deep breath before he said:

“Well, um, he passed away last year,” Harry said, words heavy and clumsy in his mouth, an unexpected wave of shame causing him to break in cold sweat. “In a… there was… a mission. He… he passed away there. We couldn’t… there was no funeral held.”

“Oh, merciful Medusa,” Mrs. Wilkins gasped, clearly shocked by the news. At least now Harry knew that she didn’t read the Daily Prophet. It felt odd however, to talk about James, when his death had happened so long ago. “My dear boy, how are you holding up?”

“I’m keeping myself busy,” Harry replied with a shrug, not wishing to elaborate. “I’ll be going back to school tomorrow, and back to my studies. That’ll help.”
“Indeed,” Mrs. Wilkins said with a look of pity on her face. Harry thought of James again, and resisted the urge to scratch his palm – and itch there was becoming increasingly distracting, and Harry couldn’t wait to be done with his purchase and leave the place.

He just. He really didn’t want to think of James. Not now.

He couldn’t stop thinking about James. Even when he sat alone in the dark kitchen, eating the food he had bought, thinking of going back to Hogwarts, he couldn’t completely push thoughts of his father aside. He had thought that he wasn’t angry anymore – not at James, or at Sirius for the way he had handled the aftermath. But every now and then, there were these… bursts of bone-deep anger. And he didn’t know what to do about them.

‘At least Sirius is alive,’ Harry thought, leaning back on his chair. Alive, but so distant he felt invisible. Did Sirius think that Harry didn’t need him anymore? Harry did need him. He just… there so many things about Sirius that Harry didn’t know how to deal with. And while things such as Sirius’s evident dislike towards less fortunate creatures was disturbing, there was a bit of a difference between him saying so, and him somehow locking countless of muggles into cages for entertainment.

No matter his flaws, James hadn’t had that… cruel streak. Harry knew that out of Lily, Sirius and James, James had been the… well… the one without prejudices like those of Lily and Sirius. In fact, had things done differently, Harry couldn’t help but hope that he could have confided in James about everything that was going on in his life. But then alcohol and depression had gotten the best of James – the best of them both, really, because while James suffered, Harry had failed to understand what he had been going through. But. If things had gone differently— If he had been more understanding. If he had confided in James earlier, perhaps—

Merlin, he really missed his dad.

The bread tasted stale in his mouth when a sudden wave of cold washed over him, making Harry shudder. The energy inside of him was making his skin prickle, and before he had realized it, Harry had stood up. He walked past the few closest windows, and stopped at one that had been sealed shut a long time ago. He peered through the charmed glass, and didn’t realize what he was doing, until he had already been staring at his family graveyard for nearly ten minutes.

What was he doing?

Should he go there?

Harry wasn’t sure if there was merit to what he was about to do, but something inside of him made it seem reasonable. The energy that was intertwined and sunk into his magic by now, hummed and made him shiver once again. The warming charm that he renewed now didn’t keep him warm anymore.

Harry moved quietly away from the window, and headed towards the front door. His wand was in its holster on his arm, his soft boots not making a single sound as he walked. It was freezing outside still, and Harry could feel the wind, but the cold that was making him shiver didn’t seem to come from the outside. No, it came from inside of him.

The graveyard was familiar, but it also appeared… different. Harry didn’t know what about it was different, and he wasn’t sure what he was going to do there. The energy inside of him welled up, and without thinking much of it, Harry spread his hands, and let it go.
He knew now what that energy was. *Circe*— he wished he hadn’t— he didn’t—

He knew now why Lily had screamed, and Merlin, he was *so sorry*— he hadn’t *known* that it. That. He hadn’t *known*—

Why wasn’t there anything— Why was *nothing* good in his life?

Why—

The skeletal arm that had pushed its way through a rotting coffin, and dug its way to the surface, lied still on the grave of a relative Harry had never known.

Slowly, it sank back into the soil, never quite making it back to where it used to be.
"I didn’t see you during the weekend," Truls said during breakfast, his voice calm and controlled, though with an undertone that made Harry’s skin itch. “Did you sleep in the ship?” Harry had returned so late on Sunday night, that the rest of his peers had already gone to bed. He hadn’t thought that he could’ve survived any amount of questioning then, and he didn’t want to test himself now, either.

“I went home for a bit,” Harry replied evasively, wondering what Truls had done in his absence, and if the other boy had tried to look for him. He didn’t appear to have been too worried, which was a relief in one way, and sad in another.

“Do you feel ready for the third task?” Maria asked him suddenly, while reaching for a breakfast muffin. “Rumour has it that Delacour has been training day and night.”

“Surely not that much,” Ingrid said dryly, “though I must ask, Harry, did you get permission from the Headmaster?”

“Of course,” Harry said. His hands were wrapped around a lukewarm cup of tea, though for some reason the mild heat felt almost… too hot.

“And, though I hate to repeat Maria’s question, do you feel ready for the third task?”

Necromancy wasn’t seen the way an Unforgivable was. It wasn’t within the reach of just anyone to master. You either could, or you couldn’t, and most people couldn’t. Throughout history, there were only a few who could practice true necromancy. The closest common wizards had come to replicate it was by creating inferi.

But necromancy wasn’t like it.

Necromancy was seen as something much, much darker. Because you couldn’t be just anyone to learn how to raise the dead. You had to be born a necromancer. That darkness couldn’t be taught – it had to be there to begin with.

“Ready enough,” Harry said. “There isn’t much I can do about at this point, really.” Except locate his target, which he still hadn’t been able to do. What he was now able to do, however, wasn’t something he particularly wanted. Merlin, would he have any friends left after the third task, if he decided to… do something with it?

“You look very pale,” Mette observed. “Did you sleep at all?”

“A bit.”

“Clearly not enough.”

“Not much I can do about it now,” Harry said dismissively. Usually this would have caused Truls to lavish him with attention and care, but now the boy just… patted him consolingly on the shoulder, and said:

“The stress getting to you?”

“I’d imagine,” Lestrange snorted. “He’s been doing fairly well so far, and if he does anything less impressive, it’ll be a disappointment. People have expectations, now.”
What would Skeeter write? What would Sirius say? What would Tom think?

What about the adoring public that Hermione wanted him to use to his advantage, somehow? Necromancy was feared in ways most things weren’t. It wasn’t... it wasn’t exactly reviled, but there was an air of taboo around it. People rarely spoke of it, and some considered the mention of it an invitation to evil of some sort.

And necromancers... they were the monsters under the bed. They were the skeletal beasts in the closets, covered in markings of mystic origins, ready to snatch up any misbehaving children and eating them alive. When the last known necromancer had died a bit over a century ago, it was noted in the history books.

And now there was Harry.

“Well, there’s no use worrying about that now,” Mette said. “Just focus on pulling through the task, whatever it ends up being. Do you know what it is? All we’ve been told is that it’s yet another long-distance thing, that we will be observing through the big screens on the pitch during the day, and then the small portable screens whenever we’re not interested in sitting out there. And oh, Merlin – then it’ll all be over! Exciting, isn’t it?”

“Very,” Harry said.

“And then we’ll go back to Durmstrang,” Maria sighed happily. “And back to our usual lives, eh?”

“Not this celebrity here,” Lestrange said, pointing at Harry with his fork. “I bet you that he’ll be dealing with interviewers and public appearances for quite a while after this!”

“I might not win, you know,” Harry cut in, imagining himself dead in some ditch, far away from home. Like his mum, really. The thought made him feel hollow on the inside, his stomach clenching, chasing away imaginary pain. “What can I do in a duel that the others can’t?”

Raise the dead.

Or launch his magic at them, not knowing what would end up happening. Only knowing that whatever it’ll be, it’ll be horrible, and death would be better.

“I’m sure you’ll manage somehow,” Mette said. “We saw how good of a duelist you are during the second task. Now those were some unexpected moves. The Killing Curse, for Circe’s sake!”

“Oh, I’d forgotten you did that,” Lestrange pitched in, his sneer wilting away. “Where did you learn that one?”

“Does it matter?” Harry asked, feeling like eating a single bite more would have him heaving. Shouldn’t he be going to class soon, anyway? Why were they still in the Great Hall, talking? The last thing Harry wanted to do was talk.

Truls was quiet. Sometimes he’d speak with Krum. Otherwise he was quiet, and Harry didn’t know how to deal with it. He desperately wanted to have their previous relationship back, and felt guilty for wishing for it despite what the life debt had done to Truls. It didn’t help that there was so much that he simply didn’t know, and no matter how right the decision to distance himself from Truls seemed, he wasn’t sure if it really was the right thing to do.

Except… that was probably wishful thinking, wasn’t it? The distance was important. He couldn’t trick himself into thinking that it wasn’t, especially when the blind loyalty that he had learned to trust and lean on, was no longer there. And no matter how much he cared about Truls, Harry couldn’t
afford trusting him anymore. With Hermione, he had the vow, at least. With Truls? The oath only was to keep all of Harry’s previous secrets safe, and wouldn’t help with anything he’d reveal in the future.

He wasn’t the type to gamble, and if there was one person he’d take a risk on, it’d have to be Tom. He couldn’t… couldn’t afford anyone else.

After a morning full of barely interesting classes, and a lunch made of a sandwich and a muffin, Harry received a folded note from a vaguely familiar owl. The note began by telling him that he had been excused from the remaining classes of the day, and then finished by instructing him to head to a classroom in the dungeons, in a part that was rarely used for anything but the occasional independent work projects.

Harry knew who, and he knew why, and he didn’t hesitate.

When he made it to the classroom in question, he saw Tom leafing through a book, and remembered then that oh, right – there was an appointment on Sunday that he had missed.

“Sorry,” Harry said, unprompted. Tom looked at him, a mocking sneer ready on his face, before something about Harry made him stop whatever he had intended to say. He put down the book in his hands, and with no traces of the sneer left, he gestured for Harry to come towards him.

“I suppose you might have a reason for making me wait for you yesterday,” Tom said. He noticed the skin that was paler than it had ever been before, the dark smudges under Harry’s eyes, and… and there was something else, too. Something that hadn’t been there before. A feeling of sorts, a new flavor to the boy’s entire existence that made Tom take notice. Whatever had happened during the weekend had clearly left its mark. “What did you do?”

“Trained,” Harry replied with a half-hearted shrug. “The third task is approaching, and I needed to train. So I asked Karkaroff if I could go home for a bit, and he said yes.”

“And informing me didn’t cross you mind?”

“I’m sorry, I… it…. I forgot. I’m sorry. I’ve got a lot to worry about recently—"”

“More than the third task?”

“Yes, actually,” Harry said, and looked at Tom. It was odd that no matter how exhausted and sickly he looked, the boy’s green eyes were clear and bright as ever. “You know Truls? My friend with the life debt? As soon as we severed it, we’ve been… different. We’re not as close anymore, and—"

“Well, now you sound jilted, and that bores me. You’re not smitten with him, are you?” Tom interrupted, the mocking tone of his voice cruel in ways that made something inside Harry twinge in pain. “Surely you’d know better than that.”

“And if I were, would it bother you?” Harry asked, his voice louder than he had intended it to be. Merlin, he was tired of so many things, and though he didn’t want people to know these private things about him, he also didn’t want to listen to Tom making fun of him. Not about this. Not about something that was so personal – a part of him that had nothing to do with power or his aspirations. A part of him that would still be there, regardless of the life choices he had made and the people he had lost. “If… if it’s not Truls, but another boy. Would that bother you? Is that a bad thing?”

“Pardon?” Tom asked, feeling suddenly out of his depth. This was not a conversation he had ever
wanted to have, and certainly not a subject he had expected to discuss with Harry. The mere thought of it, and the feelings involved in addressing it, made him feel unpleasant and uncomfortable.

“If I liked boys,” Harry clarified, his heart thundering in his chest. “Would that make you think less of me? That the person I like is a… is a boy, and not a girl.”

“Well, I suppose I’d just feel general disappointment that you’d allow yourself to be distracted in such a way at all,” Tom replied with a grimace. “But I do not care about whether the unfortunate distraction is a male or a female, if that’s what you were worried about.”

“I was,” Harry said, sitting down. “I’m always worried about something, and that… that was one of those things.”

“If you win the Triwizard Tournament, that is an issue you’ll need to be able to deal with properly in public,” Tom told him. “It is part of Pureblood traditions to secure marriages early on, and should you be the winner, you’ll receive offers from families you cannot hope to turn down without revealing why.”

‘Would they want a necromancer?’ Harry thought, and sighed. This wasn’t something he wanted to talk about with Tom, but it wasn’t as if he knew any other reliable adults. Except… well… there was one, but Harry wouldn’t be able to reach out to him anytime soon.

“Do you know what you’ll become?” Tom asked him then, leaning forward. “When you think of your future, Harry, what do you see?”

“I don’t know,” Harry whispered. He didn’t think of the future. It gave him anxiety.

“You’ll win this tournament,” Tom said. “And you’ll go back to Durmstrang, where you’ll keep flourishing. You’ll be singled out time and time again for opportunities and challenges handed to you by the people you’ve managed to impress. Then you’ll graduate and join the Death Eaters officially. Your rise in ranks will be fast, and you’ll eventually be expected to settle down with a Pureblood witch, regardless of your preferences, produce an heir of some sort, and drift ahead in your life, following the predictable patterns of what someone of your background will have, until the day you die.”

“When I die,” Harry said, feeling the cold seep into him once again. “You’ll still be here.” He hadn’t – they’d never discussed Tom’s immortality. Harry had never even mentioned it, despite how much it mattered to the both of them – for different reasons.

“Yes,” Tom replied. “I’ll still be here.”

*

His meeting with Tom had been… different. But not in a bad way. Something about it had made some of the restlessness welling inside of him settle a bit, and his life felt a bit less hopeless than it had before. It was easier to focus on the third task now, too, and somewhat more tolerable to think of using necromancy in front of all the people who’ll be watching him compete. If it scared off any hopeful suitors, then good. What was left for him to focus on now, was to find out a way to locate Regulus Black.

He really hoped that Hermione could help him. Or would help him, even after telling her about the necromancy thing. Because none of what they had expected had been anything as… rotten as what his ability – his Merlin-forsaken niche – had turned out to be. Should he even tell her? No, yes. He had to. Besides, she too would find out anyway.
It was odd to think that people would know. And that would make them look at Harry differently, no matter what. Would anyone want him endorsing their companies then?

‘I need to practice it a bit more,’ Harry then realized, feeling sick. Doing what he had done back home only once wasn’t enough. He hated the mere thought of this, but he wasn’t going to spare himself by avoiding everything that he didn’t like. Besides, being hurt meant that at least something was happening. He could do that tonight. Not at Hogwarts, but perhaps in the Forbidden Forest. At night.

Because what did it matter even if something did lunge at him from the darkness? He was going to war, avoiding fights wasn’t going to help him in any way. Besides – despite all the preparation and how good everyone said he was at dueling, Regulus Black was likely better, and would butcher Harry anyway.

Throughout the rest of the day Harry did his best to not be drawn into any conversations with the other Durmstrang students – or anyone, really. If he didn’t think about any of them, he could also pretend that the hurt in his heart due to his dissolving friendship with Truls didn’t exist. He could pretend that Lestrange’s insensitive jabs and aggressive comments weren’t aimed at him. He could just wrap himself in Tom’s belief in him, and focus on surviving the third task.

“Why weren’t you at dinner?” Mette asked, as soon as she and Ingrid returned from the Great Hall. “There’s still some time, if you run to grab something.”

“I’m not actually hungry,” Harry replied, and refused to acknowledge the disapproving tilt of her mouth. “I can drop by the kitchens later.”

“You shouldn’t rely on the kitchens,” Ingrid pointed out. “It’s not meant for students to go to.”

“Then I won’t,” Harry said calmly, the words leaving a welt in his heart. Couldn’t she just leave him be? Why were they talking to him anyway?

“I didn’t mean that you should go hungry,” Ingrid clarified with a sigh. “I’m saying that you shouldn’t skip your meals, and then expect to receive access to meals outside the regular serving hours.”

“Ingrid,” Harry said, closing the book he had been reading, and leaning forward. Lestrange, sitting on a couch by the fireplace, looked up as well. She was right, Harry knew it, but Merlin… why did she have to talk? He wasn’t sure why he felt so damn fragile on the inside, but every word felt like salt on an open wound. And he didn’t want to hear it. “I know you mean well, but please – I don’t need your input on my life right now.”

“You’re a Durmstrang student,” Ingrid began. “Your behaviour will reflect badly on all of us.”

“No,” Harry said, tossing his book aside and standing up, deciding that leaving was the best thing he could do right then. “It’ll reflect badly on my parents, but it’s not like it matters – they’re dead. Or they will reflect badly on me – though I wouldn’t consider it worse than murder. But what do I know, right? After all I still have the nerve to go and ask for a sandwich from a house-elf.”

“Harry—,” Mette started, her tone soothing. Harry waved her away, and headed towards the door. There was nothing but silence behind him as he left, and while a part of him regretted being so harsh with Ingrid – she wasn’t wrong, after all – he just… didn’t care. So much else was wrong in his life that dropping by the kitchens hadn’t seemed like an issue, but apparently it was.

He’d need to apologize to Ingrid after the third task. If she’d still want to talk to him then. It wasn’t…
it wasn’t really him to be rude or aggressive. And yet… an odd mood had struck him. Nothing mattered, including people. Him, too. Why was he doing any of this anyway? He should just leave. Go far, far away. Drop everything, including his name, and go somewhere so far no one would ever find him.

‘Ridiculous,’ he thought then, walking quietly down a set of stairs. ‘So stupid. I’m stupid.’ He really ought to keep his focus on the task ahead. He’d need to meet up with Hermione as soon as possible: his time for locating Regulus Black was running out fast, and no matter what, Harry needed to find the man. Perhaps if he could do that, people wouldn’t judge him too harshly for the necromancy bit.

Merciful Circe, he had only hope left at this point.

Hope, and Hermione.

*I*

"I’ve been dying to hear what happened,” Hermione said as soon as she had locked the cottage door behind them. “Did you try what I suggested? Did it work?”

“Yes I tried, and yes it worked,” Harry replied, and then gestured for her to sit down. “I don’t think you’ll like any of it, however.”

“This isn’t about either one of us liking anything,” Hermione pointed out as she sat down. She then began pulling out parchments and books from her bag, and arranged a stack of what looked like important envelopes on the table. “This is about what is useful, and what isn’t.”

“Well, it’s useful,” Harry said, sitting down. “But… it’s hard to talk about.”

“We can discuss something else first,” Hermione said, and Harry fiercely loved her for that. “There’s plenty for us to get through. Remember when I told you about the sponsorships? And since you told me that the third task will also require travelling, I scored you a sponsored— Well, remember when I told you about Siraj Trunks? If you promise to use it during the upcoming task exclusively, he’ll give you for free one of the trunks he has. The one in the picture that I showed you, actually.”

“The one that has a house on the inside?” Harry asked, interested. “I’m certain that once again our every action will be broadcasted to everyone, so people will definitely see it. Do I have to mention that it’s by him?”

“At some point, yes,” Hermione replied. “We just need to somehow figure out a way to include it in a way that appears natural. If it sounds too rehearsed, it’ll appear insincere.”

“I think we can do that,” Harry thought, his mind already coming up with possible ways to make that happen. “Except, instead of making me say anything, could he have his name somewhere on the trunk? In the handle, for example? Made by Siraj Trunks?”

“Oh! Yes! Brilliant!” Hermione said, her dark eyes shining. “That is such a good idea! I’ll tell him to include that. Good. Excellent. We’ll need to then negotiate with him what kind of components we want the interior to consist of. Some people have specific things in mind, such as mansions or lakes or even mountains. Do you?”

“A hospital wing,” Harry replied immediately. “And a small house, of course. It doesn’t need to be big… I just… I need to have what regular houses do, you know? A kitchen, a bathroom, a bedroom.”

“And a library,” Hermione said with a nod. “The hospital wing may be a bit tricky, but I’ll sort it
“Okay,” Harry said. “I’ll… trust you with the trunk thing. And everything else, really. And, Hermione, I… I don’t even know how to thank you—”

“Oh, Harry,” the witch said, shaking her head. “I’m not being selfless when I help you, you know. I mean, I would help you no matter what, but in this particular case? You know this cause is my cause too.”

“But, still—”

“Besides,” Hermione continued. “You introduced me to Lockhart! He’s been brilliant! I’ve learned so many things from him already, and he’s promised to teach me even more. He was very impressed by my knowledge of his books, you see, and said he’d teach me any spell he had mentioned there. Of course, I asked to start right away with the obliviate, as it’s his signature spell, right? So, he first made me go through some other exercises, and he said that we’ll build up to it, but that we’ll soon get to that point because I’ve been doing so well, and Harry—I’m having the time of my life, you know!”

He speech was fast, and her arms were gesturing wildly. Harry had never seen Hermione this enthused about anything, and it warmed his heart. He felt that maybe, for once, he had managed to do something good for someone else.

“Now the only thing left for us to do is to find Regulus Black,” Hermione said. She looked hesitant, before leaning closer to Harry, and lowering her voice. “Um. The thing is… I… I did something.”

“That already sounds great, because I still have no idea how to find him, and I have done nothing,” Harry said.

“But you see, I don’t think what I did is legal,” Hermione admitted, clearly worried. “It’s… well… Every locator spell works based on the magical signature of the caster. Some, more serious spells, use the blood of a relative of some sort. If Regulus Black is alive, him being such a well-known Rebel, for sure the Death Eaters and the Dark Lord have tried many, many ways to locate him. Including the ones that require blood and a bit of Dark magic. Do you, um, follow?”

“Yes,” Harry said, nodding. “Please continue.”

“But what if we don’t locate Regulus Black?” Hermione asked. “What if we locate his wand? Wands aren’t traced anymore. Especially after the rule banning minors from casting magic outside of Hogwarts was abolished a long time ago made it so that wands no longer had a pre-existing trace on them. This is a small and mundane thing, and fairly easy, too, but I’ve noticed that wizards often overlook simple solutions.”

“How would you be able to trace Regulus’s wand, though?” Harry asked.

“Well, this is where the illegal part comes in,” Hermione admitted shyly. “You see, in order to be able to cast a memory charm with precision that makes it untraceable, Professor Lockhart had me practice mind arts first. Do you know what legitimency is?”

“Yes,” Harry breathed, stunned by the things his friend apparently now knew how to do. Merlin, how did Hermione learn so fast? If she had been given half the opportunities Harry had, he suspected that she’d have truly made something amazing already.

“I asked for a note from Professor Lockhart to access the national records,” Hermione said. “I said it was for a project concerning wand lore, and precisely if Rebels are naturally dispositioned to have
lesser wands. That’s absolute hogwash, of course, but you know they like that kind of propaganda. The officers at the national records institute loved it.”

“You used it to soften them up,” Harry said, thoroughly impressed. “So? Did you get access?”

“But, Harry, access wasn’t what I was there for,” Hermione said. “They gave me access to low-level Rebel information, but I asked specifically for someone high-ranking and infamous. And the first person that springs to mind usually when someone like that is mentioned? Well, there are a few people, but all I needed was to hold up a conversation for less than a minute to find what I needed about Regulus Black—"

“Hold up,” Harry said. “Explain that again?”

“Well, talking about something highlights that information in the mind,” Hermione said. “Talking about wand lore and who owns what kind of wands brings up that information in the speaker’s mind. So when I made the official at the national records assembly think of Regulus Black’s wand components, that information was highlighted in her mind. If it had been any deeper, I don’t think I would’ve been able to get it. That’s why I had to make her think of it first.”

“Oh.”

“I already knew they wouldn’t give me access to really useful information,” Hermione continued. “The records that I did get to see were all about muggle-born witches and wizards with very plain wand components.”

“You’re amazing,” Harry said honestly. “I don’t think I would have ever come up with the idea of looking into wand components, let alone found out a way to access that information.”

“I have even better news,” Hermione said. “This is by no means accurate, but, well… I did find out the location of his wand. It’s in Cyprus, in an area called Famagusta.”

“If he’s in that city, then that’s all the information I need,” Harry said, feeling more excited than he had in quite a while. “A point-me spell works if the hidden target is nearby, even if they’re warded or protected in any other way.”

“To have a better chance, stay near the southern end of the city,” Hermione advised. “Call it a hunch, but I think that’s the more likely part of town. Now you just need to figure out a way to win that duel. That… niche.”

“Well, here’s the thing,” Harry said, and took a deep breath. “Hermione… I’m a necromancer.”

“Are you nervous?” Mette asked. It was the morning of the Third Task, and Harry would soon have to grab his trunk and go meet Sirius at the Headmaster’s office. His new trunk had arrived only a day ago, and Hermione had been busy making sure that it had everything Harry needed.

He had a plan, but so much could go wrong that he couldn’t find it in himself to relax.

“Quite a bit, yes,” Harry finally replied. Truls’s silence was heavy on his heart, but he focused on Mette and tried to not think of anything else for now.

“You’ll be fine,” Maria assured him. “You don’t even have to be the best, really. Just be adequate, and you’ll still win. Just be prepared and don’t lose any duels.”
Not losing any duels was a promise he couldn’t make. Even with the manticore shirt tucked under his robes, and the dagger Sirius had given him strapped to his thigh, and the new lethifol-leather boots that Gildy had sent him… Harry just didn’t know if he could land a single hit on Regulus Black.

Circe, he couldn’t believe that he was going to do this. If he succeeded, then… Tom would surely think better of him, right? And no matter what Delacour would do… it wouldn’t be the same, would it?

‘What if she comes up with a brilliant idea that impresses everyone?’ Harry suddenly thought, worry creeping into him once again. ‘What if there’s a better target than Regulus Black out there?’ But could there be a better target? Most people thought Regulus was dead. In fact, even Tom hadn’t been sure that the man was alive until very recently.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Ingrid said soothingly. Harry had been relieved to see that she didn’t appear to hold his earlier behaviour with her against him. “You’ve performed excellently so far, and though I would advise you to aim higher than to be merely adequate, you needn’t go well above and beyond the standard as you had done before.”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake,” Ingrid said, clearly unimpressed. “Anthony—”

“He has a point, you know,” Truls – Truls! – said, not looking up from his breakfast as he ate. Lestrange looked surprised, then smug and pleased. “There will be expectations by now. People will want more from him than from the other two.”

Harry’s heart hurt in ways he hadn’t known before. He felt… betrayed, even, though he did wonder if he had any right to feel so. Either way, he took a deep breath to keep his composure, and said:

“I don’t think the audience expect from me more than what I expect from myself,” he said. “The benefits of maintaining a certain standard of performance has been made clear to me.”

“Oh, did Karkaroff really get to you?” Mette said, sounding sympathetic. “I heard him mentioning it to someone that you two spoke.”

Truls looked up for a second, clearly not having expected that. Harry refused to look at him. Not now. Not anymore. Instead, he focused on Mette, and said: “It’s not just Karkaroff. Silvia Nott and I had a talk a while ago, and if what she said holds true, I’ll be seeing her more soon enough.”

The blow was low, and he knew it. He knew that Lestrange had some sort of feelings towards Silvia Nott, and the expression that the older boy couldn’t manage to hide fast enough revealed a world of jealousy and shock. Harry finished his coffee, and put his cup down. The table was silent as he then stood up, and readied himself to leave.

“The third task will begin in a few hours,” Harry then said, and looked at Lestrange, feeling reckless enough to show his own built-up anger and disappointment. “If you have the nerve to challenge me to a duel after what you see, Anthony, then for Circe’s sake, do so. If you don’t, then keep my name off your mouth. I’m tired of you, and tired of your entire existence by now.”

If he lost to Regulus Black, he’d die, and nothing would matter.

If he won, well.
Gildy had told him that it’d be like putting together a character. Pick and choose what he wanted to show the audience, and dress accordingly. Hermione had reminded him that no matter what his goals were, the third task was also a performance, and a promotion, and so much more than a competition to be won. Which was why, rather than wear his usual Durmstrang robes, Harry was wearing the funeral robes that he knew suited him much better. The dark robes were adorned with the Potter coat of arms – that ridiculous thing that his mother had insisted James bring back to use a lifetime ago – and the pair of boots Gildy had given him. His Durmstrang ring was hidden by a pair of gloves, his wand holster secured around his arm, Sirius’s dagger tied around his thigh, and he wore the trunk Hermione had gotten him as a small, golden earring.

Overall, he knew he looked… polished. More like Sirius, less like James. A bit more like a pureblood with a dash of money was expected to look. Not just a student. Something Gildy liked to call ‘sellable’.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Sirius’s voice echoed, rousing a loud cheer from the audience. “The moment we’ve all been waiting for is finally here! A task unlike anything you’ve ever seen before will conclude the Triwizard Tournament!”

Harry looked at George, who kept his eyes solidly on someone in the audience. Harry didn’t know who, but suspected it was his likely his twin. Delacour looked composed and confident, and though Harry wished he was a bit more like her, it didn’t seem to matter much anymore. So much else was at stake – more than just winning the tournament – that caring about individual people who weren’t Tom just… didn’t seem relevant or important anymore. He also didn’t know how Sirius would react if Harry somehow did manage to win against Regulus, but decided then that he couldn’t waste time dwelling on that. He knew what he needed to do, and nothing else mattered until the deed was done.

Merlin, the less things mattered, the clearer his head would be, right?

Harry closed his eyes and let Sirius’s voice wash over him, as the man described to the audience once again how the champions would be under constant surveillance for their viewing pleasure. He then carried on explaining that the task would send each champion to “places not even they could predict” in their hunt for Rebels. People were cheering, and some were throwing roses and even galleons onto the pitch.

When he opened his eyes, it was purely by coincidence that he found his Durmstrang peers in the audience. They were too far for Harry to make out their expressions, but he didn’t much care to, either. Whatever they thought of him would surely change after this task. He didn’t look forward to it.

“Each champion will be sent off to a different starting point,” Sirius said, “and we’ll watch their every move as they prove to us, once and for all, who among them is the best! Let’s give all three of our champions a round of applause!”

Harry could see Tom sitting in his private booth, with all three judges seated near him. The Dark Lord’s face was covered with a hood as always, and the battle robes he tended to wear at events and ceremonies were a blue so deep it almost looked black. Even a muggle would have found it easy to see who was the most important person in attendance.

And that was the man Harry would need to impress.
“To save us all the trouble of waiting,” Sirius said, holding three differently designed bracelets in his hands. “We’ve sorted beforehand the drop-off locations of each champion, and as before, the portkeys we have here will take them there, and bring them back once the task is finished. Any movement that happens during the task will be their own responsibility.”

‘I suppose I should thank Tom again for teaching me how to apparate,’ Harry thought. As much as he hated apparating, it was turning out to be a useful tool of transportation for him. Better than a broom by far.

“Harry, your portkey,” Sirius said with a carefree grin, as he handed Harry his bracelet. It was a thin golden bangle, and looked like something Petronella would wear. “Now, don’t lose that one! All three of you can keep your bracelets once the Tournament is over, of course! Consider it a gift for participation.”

“We’re honoured by these gifts,” Delacour said, smiling brilliantly. People were cheering for her in the audience when she spoke, and Harry couldn’t fault them for that. People like Delacour should surely be leaders; war generals and ruling ministers. She was so confident and composed, her voice pleasant, her magic strong. “Such generosity is humbling. Thank you.”

“Oh, yes,” George agreed, slightly stumbling over his words. Unlike Delacour, he was clearly uncomfortable. “Thank you.”

Harry, then, thought of Hermione and her wishes, and mustered up a smile of his own. He then said: “I’ll aspire to deserve this.” Was it wrong of him to hope that Skeeter would do what she had done before, and latch on to his few words and make them somehow better?

“Beautifully said, all three of you,” Sirius said loudly, his voice further amplified to reach the whole audience. “As I’m sure everyone is eagerly and impatiently waiting for the third task to begin, I won’t keep you here for much longer. However, before I send you off, I’d like for all of you to answer one simple question! If you win, what is the first thing you’d like to buy with the prize money? Fleur Delacour, let’s start with you!”

“Oh, goodness,” the witch replied, and though she didn’t seem angry, Harry could tell that she wasn’t pleased either. “Who knows, really? I wouldn’t dare to assume that I’d win. What about Mr. Weasley? I heard you’re interested in opening up a business?”

“Yes, yes I am,” George said, shifting nervously a bit. When had he become so nervous, anyway? Harry knew that he used to be a boisterous, confident wizard. Once. A while ago. “My brother and I do plan on opening a business, but as Fleur here said… I wouldn’t dare to presume anything, either.”

“Well said, well said,” Sirius said, before turning to Harry. “And you, Mr. Potter? What would you do with the prize money?”

Harry, who had forgotten that there was even money to be won, said: “I don’t know. I’m open to suggestions.”

And, Circe, who knew people could scream so loudly? The smile on Sirius’s face seemed confused for a bit, but the man carried on as if his godson hadn’t just thrown out a bone to the press that every witch and wizard with an agenda would be greedy to gnaw on. Open to suggestions? Harry could feel Tom’s frustration despite the distance. Merlin, he felt like an idiot.

When Harry’s portkey was activated a few minutes later, the crowd was loud and unruly, cheering for all three champions. The noise was still ringing in his ears when his feet hit the carpeted floor of his destination.
The portkey left him in an empty room, with a window facing the Eiffel Tower. If Harry hadn’t been told beforehand that he’d be sent to France, he certainly would’ve known it anyway, with that scenery right in front of him. Not that it mattered – he knew where he’d need to go, and wasn’t about to waste any time in Paris, regardless of how much he liked the city. He was already feeling sick with anxiety, and the sooner he could just get this done, the better.

However, the problem with apparating – well, the problem that he faced with it – was that he didn’t have enough experience to apparate to locations that he hadn’t visited before. Therefore, going to Famagusta straight away was not an option. The only thing he knew how to do, however, was to get a bit closer.

Istanbul was familiar and made Harry feel… welcome. Warm, too, in ways that had nothing to do with the weather. There was something about the people – and how nobody gave him more than passing glance despite how differently he was dressed – that made him feel a bit more at ease. Hermione had made him a plan of action, and Harry wanted to follow that plan to the best of his abilities. None of this seemed too complicated, though some parts of it relied on his own resourcefulness and a fair amount of luck. Neither of which Harry trusted, really.

He had shown people the Killing Curse, and now he’d show them another one of the Dark Lord’s favourites. Hermione had told him that he needed to show off more, as that would win him more favours from the audience. She had told him to be more aggressive, without becoming reckless. Keeping her words in his mind, Harry moved with a sense of purpose, his wand in his hand though hidden by his sleeve. He wandered around the Taksim square for a while, watching people and weighing their merits as targets. He didn’t want anyone who appeared local, or anyone who was in the company of others. Lone travelers disappeared all the time, according to Hermione, and he didn’t want to pick a target that would be missed anytime soon. Therefore, as soon as he saw a tourist-looking foreigner standing alone, he headed towards the man and said:

“Hello! Speak English?”

“Sure I do,” the man replied, smiling at Harry. He was tall, with light brown hair, and spoke with an American accent. He smelled good, and had broad shoulders and thick arms. Harry felt breathless for a moment, before brushing off the strange feeling, and focusing on the task at hand. “What can I do for you?”

“I need to rent a car,” Harry said, shrugging with feigned nonchalance, and let out a short laugh. Delivering the words Hermione had written out for him felt odd, and so unlike himself, but he did his best. “I’m planning on travelling a bit, and those cabs – mate, I can’t even begin to tell you.”

“Don’t need to,” the man agreed instantly, leaning forward. He took off his glasses and eyed Harry with a look that made the boy suddenly less keen on his company. The man notably didn’t comment on why a boy, who was clearly a mere teenager, was travelling alone. Would he do that later? “I’ve been here for three days so far, and let me tell you – the best part about travelling alone is that you can skip the cabs and just use whatever the locals use. I do know where to rent a car, though. Considered it a bit myself, actually, but I can get anywhere using trams and subways, really.”

“I wish I could use those,” Harry said. “I’m planning on travelling south, however. Not even sure of the directions, to be quite honest with you, but I’ll see how it goes.”

“A bit too young for a car, though, aren’t you?” the man said, and rested a warm hand on Harry’s shoulder. “You alone?”
Harry licked his lips and allowed the touch, though he couldn’t help but think that there was something off with it. He sighed and said: “Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

“Well, if you somehow do get to rent a car and don’t know the way to wherever you’re going,” the man told him, “make sure to ask for a car with a GPS. Or rather, make sure to ask to rent a GPS alongside the car, and that’ll help you get there easily enough.”

And oh, wasn’t that all that Harry needed to know? He lifted the tip of his wand a bit, and watched as the Imperius Curse took over the man with no resistance. He stood then quietly for a few moments, watching the glassy blue eyes and wondering if anyone was judging him for this. Determined to not think of the audience at Hogwarts, the boy told the muggle to take his hand off Harry’s shoulder.

“Rent a car and pick me up from here,” Harry said then. “Make sure to rent, uh, a GPS as well.” Harry wasn’t sure what a GPS was, and how it was supposed to help him get to Tasucu – his next destination – but he decided to go along with whatever the muggle was saying.

As the muggle – Harry had been careful to not even ask his name, as he didn’t want anyone to suspect him of sympathy towards muggles at this point – left, Harry couldn’t help but think of how much he was relying on Hermione. He knew he couldn’t burden her much more than what he had already done, but who else could he trust? With Truls now gone as an option – who did he have left?

His friends at Durmstrang were amazing, and he loved them, but... he didn’t think they’d help him the way Hermione did. Oh, they wouldn’t expose him to anyone – some like Filippa and Björn could perhaps even lie to protect him, but to risk themselves and actively help? No. Not with how much they could lose, should anyone catch on to what they were doing. And even if they would, Harry didn’t have the right to ask them for that.

For now, it’d have to be him and Hermione. And whoever he managed to imperio into obedience, apparently.

* *

George found himself in Dublin, and couldn’t have been happier about it. He knew that there were numerous small villages surrounding the city that sympathized with rebels, and that most people here lived lives that were far too intertwined with those of muggles. The wizarding village of St. Rosepark-Diggle, for example, was a short distance away, and George promptly opted to apparate there. He could only hope that the locals weren’t somehow aware of the ongoing tournament, though with the Daily Prophet doing the most to turn them all into celebrities, it was unlikely. Well... luckily, he was the least likely to be recognized, what with Delacour being who she was, and Harry... well.

George wasn’t under illusions regarding his own performance and position in the tournament. He knew better than to assume the he would win. And no matter how much that stung, he took comfort in being at least self-aware enough to know that there wasn’t much point in competing against Harry. Whatever they taught at Durmstrang was clearly different from what was being taught anywhere else. It was odd, however, to look at Harry and think of how much the boy had changed during the past few years. He used to be a quiet, shy kid with books around him. Now... he was still quiet, but... he wasn’t the same. He wasn’t the same at all.

George, after the second task, had sat with his family in the hospital wing and watched a recording of how the tasks unfolded. He watched Harry duel, and saw him cast the killing curse, and to this day George didn’t understand how someone who was so young could have magic like that. Was everyone from Durmstrang like that?
People who had dismissed Harry in the beginning, were certainly looking at him now. The Potter name hadn’t really amounted to much in the past, but it wasn’t an obstacle to Harry’s success either.

‘He’s nothing like Ron,’ George then thought, before shaking his head. He shouldn’t spend so much time thinking of the other champions. Not now, when he was yet to be done with his own battle.

St. Rosepark-Diggle was a picturesque town with towering trees surrounding it. The cloudy sky and rain-wet streets made the shops and inns and pubs look almost irresistibly inviting, though George made a point of not entering any quite yet. He doubted that he’d find a Rebel just loitering around with a sign identifying themselves. No, he needed to come up with something else in order to identify his target.

‘I wonder what the others are doing,’ he couldn’t help but think again, despite his earlier decision. ‘How will they identify Rebels?’ This was, to him, the more annoying part of the task. At least he knew what to do in a duel. But searching for someone? Someone he didn’t even know? Not his thing at all.

George sat down by a fountain to watch people as they passed by, wondering if any of them could be a possible Rebel. There weren’t many out and about at this time, and everyone looked utterly normal and uninteresting. Which meant that if he couldn’t figure out who to approach, he needed to simply make himself a target, and lure a Rebel out. And that was much easier to do, really, especially in towns like this that didn’t serve as Death Eater strongholds.

There was a pub nearby, with crowds of people inside and a sharp-eyed barmaid serving drinks at the counter. George headed straight towards her, and signaled to get her attention.

"What can I get you?” the witch said.

"I’m not here for a drink,” George replied, trying to come across as haughty and commanding as he spoke. "I’m here on business.”

"I don’t sell much else aside from drinks,” the witch said then, narrowing her eyes and shooting a quick glance at someone behind George. "Don’t know how to help you, sorry.”

"I can tell you how you can help me,” George said immediately. "We have received reports of increased Rebel activities in the area, and my team and I are here to investigate.”

"Don’t know anything about that,” the witch denied, her right hand disappearing behind the counter. "Maybe you should look elsewhere.”

"Do you know what being part of an team means?” George said, and smiled brightly at her. "It means that I’m not alone. So I recommend that you stop reaching for your wand right now. You see, you acting like that when I’m asking a harmless question is making you seem really... suspicious to me. You understand?”

The witch swallowed, and glanced again somewhere behind George. She looked alarmed and slightly afraid, before nodding and moving to rest both of her hands on the counter. "I don’t know what is it that you’re talking about,” she insisted. "I’m just here all day, making drinks. I don’t know a thing about Rebel activity, and don’t want any trouble.”

"I can help, mate,” someone said, and a wizard appeared by George’s side. The man was smiling at him as he put down a galleon on the counter, and moved to rest one of his hands on George’s shoulder. "I’ve heard there’re some signs of a camp right outside the village, by the woods. If you think it’s important enough, we could go and take a look."
'And here you are,' George thought, feeling both relieved and anxious. There was no doubt in his mind that this man was trying to lead him somewhere secluded, and attack him there. Now all he needed to do was follow him into the woods, and attack him first. "Very well. My companions—"

"Oh, it might be better to confirm that it really is a Rebel camp, before bothering everyone," the man said smoothly, nodding his head and solidifying George’s conclusion. He wasn’t being particularly subtle, really, but there surely were benefits to be reaped from being underestimated by enemies.

"Lead the way, then," George said, leaning back from the counter and noting how the witch relaxed all of a sudden. "The sooner the Rebel infestation is dealt with, the happier we all will be."

"Sure," the man agreed easily. "Tell you what? I’m fairly good with a wand. If we meet anyone there, I can even help."

'Good to know,' George thought, and nodded. He then gestured towards the door and said: "Lead the way."

It was about time that he did this, and wrapped up his part in the tournament. He wanted nothing more than to go back home and not worry about any of this anymore. He was done.

The car drive lasted for hours.

Harry had, as a safety measure, cast a spell to repel the attention of muggles. It came in handy every once in a while, but it didn’t change the fact that muggle cars were much slower than any transportation method that Harry usually used. It didn’t help that he didn’t feel comfortable with the muggle man driving the car - despite the imperius curse controlling him. There was just… something unpleasant about the way he had spoken to Harry earlier. The boy wasn’t sure exactly what it been, but he didn’t like it.

He was also very aware of how boring this must be to the viewers. The only saving grace was that the prime time for watching the events unfold from the arena had passed hours ago, and though many would follow his every step through the smaller screens, most people wouldn’t see him again until next morning. Hopefully by then he’d be at his destination, despite needing to rely on muggle transport methods. The speed at which the muggle was driving was much faster than what Hermione had advised, but Harry didn’t want to waste too much time on the road like this. Not to mention that there was a ship leaving in four hours from Tasucu, and him being on that ship was necessary for the continuity of his mission.

He had a plan - well, Hermione had made him a plan - for the ship as well. But knowing what he would need to do didn’t make the waiting any less agonizing. Could this be considered build-up for what was to come? He could imagine already how people would complain about the slow start of his performance, but... perhaps by the end of it, they wouldn’t care anymore?

Either way, his plan was clear: when they reached the harbor, he’d let his trunk take the shape of a suitcase. He’d then order the muggle to board a ferry that would take them to Kyrenia, where he would then rent another car, and keep driving until they reached Famagusta. It’d also give Harry enough time to hold up his end of the bargain, and promote Siraj trunks without making it distastefully obvious.

Once he reached Famagusta... that’s when his task would truly begin. There was no way to predict how the events would unfold, and the entire success of the mission relied on Regulus Black still being there. Harry didn’t want to even think of the possibility of him not being there. What would he
do then? Fail the third task? But no, Hermione had been the one to figure out the man’s location, and
Harry wasn’t about to start doubting her now.

'I'll just go where I’m supposed to,' Harry told himself, 'and deal with what happens when it
happens.'

"Reducto!"

Fleur took pride in being prepared. Even for this task, she knew where she wanted to go, regardless
of where the portkey would take her. It wasn’t as if she could afford taking it easy, not with Potter
doing so well with his tasks so far. Which was why, the moment she had found herself in an English
town, she had apparated straight to Zaventem in Belgium. From there, she had tracked down the
small Rebel camp she had studied and prepared for, and promptly surrounded the area with
temporary wards that not only locked everyone in, but also ensured that her back was protected.

Now, nearly an hour into the battle, Fleur was beginning to feel tired.

It wasn’t that her opponents were outstandingly skilled. However, there were many of them. Every
time she took two down, there’d be two more just a few feet away, ready to attack. She didn’t know
how many were already lying down on the ground, but it wasn’t as if they mattered - what mattered
was that those who were up and fighting, wouldn’t do so for much longer.

But, holy Charlemagne, there were so many.

A blasting curse hit a tree behind her, and Fleur slid on the slippery mud, dodging another spell that
flew right over her head. She sent a wave of fire towards the three people flinging curses at her, and
backed a few feet away to regroup for a second. Not a moment later the place she had been kneeling
at was hit by another blasting curse, which she responded to with one of her own. Somewhere
behind the curtain of fire, she could hear a woman’s scream being cut short. Good.

She had decided shortly after being told of the task, that nothing short of a small camp could make
her outshine Potter. She knew that technically she was done already, but apparating back before
wiping everyone out would just make it seem as if she couldn’t have taken them all down. The
English media would do her no favours, and wouldn’t praise her for any half-made efforts. No, she
needed to see this to its end, and not take a single step back until there were no more Rebels alive.
She could kill them all, and she was going to do it, too.

The next three spells that she shot at the Rebels - cutting curses that she had personally cultivated to
perfection while still at Beauxbatons - each hit their targets, and by the time the fire and smoke were
dealt with, only a handful of Rebels remained. She could do this. They had nothing on her. They
were much weaker, less determined to win, and trusted their numbers too much. Fleur would get rid
of them soon enough, and wrap this show up. She had made sure to use flashy spells that would
wow the audience and ensure they wouldn’t so much as glance at what the other two champions
were doing.

Beat that, Potter.

Oh, how lucky the boy was, to have won the favour of the press and the public so easily. How lucky
was he, that the journalists had latched on to him as their favourite. The child knew nothing of true
hardship, of struggling against the odds like Fleur did. Sure, he had performed exceptionally well in
the tasks so far, but Fleur knew how soft the boy really was. And that kind of softness meant that he
would do his best to avoid hurting more people than necessary. Which, in turn, meant that he
wouldn’t even think of taking down *an entire camp*.

Fleur didn’t hate Harry, really. She didn’t even dislike him. He was clearly better than his peers, and wasn’t entirely upsetting to look at even by her standards. But there was something undeniably off with him. Something in the way he skulked through the hallways like a shadow, acting like he wasn’t as much of a cutthroat as everyone else. The way he used spells such as the killing curse with ease was already alarming, but during the second task he had... the way he had just tracked down his target with single-minded determination... it made Fleur’s skin itch. It spoke of something dark that ran deeper than the facade of polite decency that the boy upheld so well. Fleur didn’t trust any of it. It reminded her too much of the blood hounds that her father used to raise – those vicious things that would follow the trail of their prey for eternity if necessary.

A spell whizzed past her, and the witch took a deep breath before ducking behind a tree again. She was tiring, and knew that she couldn’t use too many advanced spells before she’d completely exhaust herself. The wards were beginning to weigh on her, and lifting up a *protego* to deflect incoming curses would only tire her faster. Fleur grit her teeth and shot an *aquamenti* at the remaining Rebels, distracting them by drenching them and the entire area in water, before following it up with a blasting curse that swept two right off their feet. Three were left, and she could almost *taste* her victory at this point.

She wasn’t blind to the way people looked at her, or deaf to what they said. She knew how many would condescendingly congratulate her on her performance, and that each one of them wouldn’t miss out on the opportunity to remind her that she had lost to a boy much younger than her. They wouldn’t think of her successes so far - it’d all be for nothing if she didn’t win this round. Never mind that none of those fools would do better than her against Potter. Whatever was going on with the boy, it was clear that he was well beyond the reach of most other students.

Fleur’s next cutting curse severed the head of the closest Rebel, and she gathered up all her energy to deal with the remaining two. She knew she had put on an amazing show for the audience, and wasn’t about to let this fizzle down into a simple, anticlimactic attack. Even if Potter ended up winning the tournament, Fleur wasn’t about to make his victory an easy walk in the park.

atables*}

What was the boy doing?

Tom didn’t remain longer than necessary in the audience, but followed Harry’s journey through one of the smaller screens Black had given him. He wasn’t sure what Harry was up to, and it seemed that neither was anyone else. Someone had remarked that the boy was a fool for not simply heading towards one of France’s many known Rebel camps, and while a few had murmured in agreement, Rodolphus had disagreed.

"It’s quite clear to anyone with an ounce of sense that the boy is looking for someone specific,” Rodolphus had said condescendingly. "No one crosses all that distance to a small muggle town so far from the original location without a good reason.”

And while, yes, that was true, it did leave Tom with a question.

Who was Harry going there for?
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Congrats on surviving until now! I know that xmas time is absolute shite to a lot of people for various reasons, and the temptation to do something permanent can be pretty strong around this time of the year. So, thank you for deciding to stay. My next update will be a few days after the New Year, so please stick around for longer.

Also, The Annie Paradigm made amazing fanart and I'm just??? shook??? At loss of words??? IDEK I just keep going back and sighing over the picture because it's just so damn good and I'm humbled and undeserving. Thank you!!!

The drive from Kyrenia to Famagusta was considerably shorter than the drive from Istanbul to Tasucu, and they arrived at Famagusta early on the second day of the third task. Harry sat by the man and, despite how wary he was of him, couldn’t help but feel bad. He had essentially kidnapped him, and once he lifted the imperius curse, who knew how easily the man could make his way back to where he wanted to be? Should Harry make things easier for the muggle and keep the curse on him until the man had returned to Istanbul?

“Drive to the southern side of the city,” Harry ordered, as soon as he saw a sign indicating that they had just entered Famagusta. “After that you can make your way back to where you came from. What were you planning on doing, when you saw me? You could just… go back to your earlier plans.”

The imperius wasn’t like the veritaserum potion, but it did make people speak the truth if they were so ordered to do. The muggle fiddled a bit with the GPS before he continued driving, and said: “I was planning on doing what I do every year here.”

What an odd way to respond. Wouldn’t people usually just say what they were planning on? Visiting a museum or meeting friends, for example? Perhaps this was just the more efficient way of responding, if the man’s plans were somehow complex? Harry pondered if he should ask for the muggle to elaborate, when the car was suddenly stopped in front of a rusty fence, a few feet away from signs declaring “Stop!” “No Man’s Land!” and “Free zoom telescopes and free binoculars at the viewpoint”. There were other languages in the signs as well as English, and Harry wondered what kind of a place he had arrived to. In the far distance there were tall buildings, and Harry knew that that was the area Hermione had meant. Maybe? Well, he was as sure of his conclusion as he was sure of anything – which was, not much, but he did hope for the best.

He exited the car and turned to the muggle, still wondering if he should keep the imperius on him, still. “What was it that you said you wanted to do when I approached you,” he asked again. The least Harry could do was send him back to doing whatever it was that he interrupted, right?

“When I saw you, I wanted to fuck you like a bitch in heat,” the man replied, and the response was so unexpected and out of place that Harry, for the briefest moment, didn’t quite process what he had just heard. He stood still, staring at the man with wide eyes, stunned.

“Excuse me?”

The man, with his glassy eyes and blank face, started again: “Fuck you—”
“Be quiet,” Harry cut him off, and took a deep breath to remain calm. He wasn’t going to think about this, and he wasn’t going to put up with this. He had enough on his plate already, and whatever this meant – well, it was obvious, what it meant – he wasn’t going to dwell on it. Was the muggle in the habit of… doing that… with boys his age? Had he done it before? Should Harry do something about it?

It wasn’t even worth it to ask about consent. Harry had felt a punch of attraction towards the older man for a moment too, but it didn’t mean that he would have wanted to actually… do anything about it. Right now he was attracted to pretty much anyone with broad shoulders and thick arms, but it didn’t mean anything, really. He took another deep breath, thought about the brutality that the audience at Hogwarts was expecting, and said: “Drive to the closest shore, and keep driving into the water for as long as you can. Don’t leave your car. Ever.” He knew the man would end up drowning, and he wasn’t sure if having sex – or wanting to have sex – with a fourteen-year-old boy was worth the death sentence, but… Merlin, he couldn’t stomach letting the man free.

He stood for a while by the rusty fence, watching the car drive away, before he turned to look at the buildings in the far distance. With what waited ahead of him, it was easy to push away the thoughts of the muggle for now. Apparating to where the buildings towered was an easy thing to do, and it was only when he was standing there, right by the tall building, that he realized the condition of the area.

A sign identifying the area as Varosha stood nearby, the letters peeling off the rusty metal it had been painted on. The buildings were dark and dirty, clearly having been abandoned for a long time now. Harry didn’t know what had happened here, but the city seemed eerie in its silence. Was Regulus Black truly hiding somewhere here? Would he be alone? How could Harry find him? Harry doubted that an ordinary locator spell would work, even if it was done at such a close distance to the target, but he tried anyway. Though he wasn’t surprised, he was still disappointed when his wand spun aimlessly. He knew that Hermione had told him to use his other magic during moments like these, but Merlin, he didn’t want to.

Regardless, the likelihood of him finding Regulus any other way was low. Harry reminded himself that he wasn’t planning on keeping his necromancy a secret anyway – not that anyone would be able to tell what kind of magic he was using now – and recast the spell. The wand spun for a moment, before settling, pointing towards the center of the city.

Harry felt sick. He wasn’t… he wasn’t ready. Sure, knowing that he had found Regulus Black had been the whole point of this, but now? Now the tough part would start. He hadn’t actually expected to find the man, though he hadn’t expected to not find him either. It was odd, and he felt sick, and he didn’t want to do any of this anymore. Somehow the danger of his situation now felt much more real than during the previous two tasks.

‘I pulled through then, and I can pull through now,’ Harry told himself. He forced himself to remain calm, and tried to latch onto any soothing thought that crossed his mind. The comforting darkness of his home, Hermione’s friendly smiles, snapping back at Lestrange… and Tom, of course. Tom was watching, and Harry felt… less alone when he thought of that. He wasn’t going to turn back now – of course he wasn’t. He was going to go there, and do what no one else had been able to do, and he was going to strike Tom speechless.

And maybe, for once, he wanted to impress himself too.

Harry was somewhere in Cyprus. Why on earth would he go there?
Tom was watching the boy’s every move as he walked further into the abandoned muggle town, unsure of what kind of a show he was planning on putting up. There were Death Eaters squabbling nearby, discussing the performances of each champion, and betting on whether or not Harry would be more impressive than Delacour. The witch had done away with an entire Rebel camp - a small one, but a camp nonetheless - and had been ready to return to Hogwarts, when she had been ambushed by a handful that she had failed to notice earlier. She had retreated for the night, and was now back to kill them too. Tom approved of her determination to carry out what she had decided to do, and had no doubt of her receiving an excellent score from the judges. Weasley’s opponent had proven to be a tricky one, and while the boy had managed to overpower his opponent after a long battle that lasted well into the night, he was still unconscious, bleeding profusely, barely hidden behind a cluster of bushes in the woods. Whether or not the friends of the Rebel found him and killed him before he woke up, would be entirely up to the fool’s luck.

"He’s a bit soft with those muggles, isn’t he?" Araminta Meliflua said, gesturing towards the screen that depicted Harry’s process. "A bit too friendly, I’d say."

"Friendly?" Rodolphus sneered. "He ordered a muggle to drown itself. Is that your definition of friendly?"

What was it with Rodolphus’s new interest in Harry? Tom had noticed that yesterday too the man had been quick to jump into the boy’s defense. Should he be worried? Bellatrix had already expressed some sort of interest in Harry, but Tom couldn’t quite figure out what motivated that interest. She didn’t know nearly as much about Harry as he did.

"I wouldn’t mind Delacour winning this round, to be quite honest," Walden Macnair said, letting out a booming laugh. "Stone cold bitch, but those legs do go forever!"

"She’s a veela," Araminta said dismissively. "Looks is all they’re good for. Weasley could have had promise, but, well, the family is what it is. It would have been nice to have a proper wizard participating. Our Cassius, for example—"

"Potter’s a tough act to beat," Rodolphus interrupted, and really... again, what was it with him and his interest in the boy? Had Bellatrix said something to him? Neither Rodolphus nor his wife had ever been particularly fond of children, and Tom knew they barely tolerated their own nephews most of the time.

"Let’s see after this task," Parkinson said soothingly. "The other two have done well, but I must admit to being curious about what young Mr. Potter is planning on doing. Considering his previous performances, I expect quite a lot from the boy."

"Your granddaughter is his age, isn’t she?" Araminta said. "How’d you reckon she would handle this?"

"Hard to tell," Parkinson replied dismissively. "Do keep in mind, however, that we are also evaluating here the fruits of their education. Considering Weasley’s performance, while it is good, we perhaps should consider... updating the Hogwarts curriculum."

"I disagree," Narcissa Malfoy, who was seated nearby with her husband, said. "Hogwarts provides a fine education, no matter how young Weasley had been showcasing it. Durmstrang, however, provides a very specialized education, with an abundance of resources. Expecting from other students what one expects from a Durmstrang student is rather unfair, isn’t it?"

"Surely you would want Draco to be a bit more like Harry?" Bellatrix asked. "Circe knows that Rabastan’s boy, Anthony, ought to learn a thing or two. And he is already at Durmstrang."
"Anthony is a fine young man," Araminta snapped. "He’s friends with Cassius, and I’ve met the boy. A proper young man, he is. It’s a pity that he wasn’t the one representing Durmstrang. As well as Potter is doing, he couldn’t possibly hold a candle to someone like Anthony. Surely you know that, Bellatrix. Potter is hardly as outstanding as you and Rodolphus seem to think he is."

Bellatrix grimaced at her fellow judge, and shook her head. "I disagree."

"I disagree as well," Parkinson said. "Young Lestrange is a decent wizard, we all certainly know that. But he lacks certain qualities that Potter has, that make him such a good... well... hunter, I suppose."

"A hunter?" Bellatrix repeated. "Is that what you think he is?"

"The lot of you, you’re young," Parkinson said. "You as well, Araminta. None of you know warfare the way I do, and whether or not you choose to listen to me when I speak, is up to you. But what that boy is doing, is nothing short of hunting. It’s what my peers and I - your late father and brothers as well, Araminta - used to do, when there was someone specific we needed to deal with. It’s not an easy thing to do, either. Usually hunters have teams backing them up, helping them at every step. Now the only thing that I’m yet to see, is what he’ll do with his prey once he corners it."

"I wonder why he’s aiming for that specific target, whoever it is," Macnair said. "Why would he even know any specific Rebels, anyway?"

"His mother was killed by some Rebels when she was working in Italy," Narcissa said, her tone mild. "My son attended the funeral. Perhaps the boy somehow found out who was responsible for her death."

"Oh, revenge," Bellatrix sighed approvingly. "That boy never disappoints me. I hope he makes it good."

"I can’t guarantee that that’s who he’s been hunting so far," Narcissa reminded her sister. "But it is the only possibility that springs to mind."

In his seat, Tom resisted the urge to shake his head. Despite how much they gossiped about the boy, they clearly didn’t know what kind of a fool he was. Though Harry had surprised him with a few ruthless moves in the past, the boy wasn’t the kind to set out on a revenge quest. Or, even if he did do that, he wasn’t the type to make a spectacle out of it. He’d do it on his own, quietly, with no one knowing what he was doing.

This? This was something else.

* *

It wasn’t long after Harry had began following the direction to which his wand was pointing, that he saw a man walking alone. It was odd how, despite never having so much as seen a picture of Regulus Black before, Harry could tell that it was him. Something about the man - even from behind - reminded him of Sirius. The way his hair was pulled back, the way he walked, the way he just... was.

Harry reinforced the disillusionment charm he had cast on himself, and held his wand in his hand. He felt breathless, sweaty, and entirely unprepared. He didn’t know if he should wait or attack now, so all he could do was follow his godfather’s brother further into the city. They walked past crumbling buildings with broken windows, rusty playgrounds with lopsided swings, and through gardens of overgrown, unkempt greenery. Harry was tempted, on several occasions, to attack, but never
mustered up the nerve to actually do it. Eventually Regulus came to a stop at what looked like an abandoned backyard of a large mansion, with large trees but no bushes. Harry, hiding a few short feet away, held his breath.

"Whoever you are, step out," Regulus said, and Harry felt his heart nearly stop. "How long have you been following me?"

"It’s interesting that that’s your question, rather than who I am or why I’m here," Harry replied, undoing the disillusionment charm. He prayed to Merlin that the wizard couldn’t see how afraid he was.

“I have no interest in who you are, and can guess what you’re here for,” Regulus said, turning to look at Harry. Merlin, he really looked like Sirius, except his voice was much softer. "Now… how long have you been following me, child?"

“A while.”

“Quite the talent you have there, then. I didn’t know you were there until a few minutes ago.”

"You know I’m here now," Harry pointed out, "so it’s not like that matters.”

"You’re young," Regulus said, pulling out his wand. "I don’t want to kill you, boy. I can obliviate you and send you back home.”

"You can certainly try," Harry replied, and instinctively cast a shielding charm even before he saw the man’s arm move. "Expelliarmus!"

"Cute,” Regulus observed, before sending a cutting hex so strong it ripped the branches off a tree to Harry’s left. Harry responded to that with an entrails-expelling hex that had his opponent scrambling for cover.

"That,” Regulus said, "was less cute. What do they teach kids nowadays?"

'He’s not taking me seriously,' Harry thought, and it felt... humiliating. He hadn’t crossed all this distance and worried himself sick, just to be treated like a harmless nuisance. 'Deep breaths. He can’t be better than Barty. Use anything and everything available. Don’t go easy on him.’

It was funny, in a way, how focusing on dueling made his fear ebb away. He didn’t think of his life, didn’t even think of Tom, for a second. All Harry thought of was which spell he’d use next, and how to defend himself from the spells that Regulus was shooting at him. He sent a bombarda at the man’s feet, a confringo at the grass he was standing on, and kept him constantly moving from one side to another. He got lucky with a cutting hex, and managed to hit Regulus’s left arm with it, which didn't really slow the man down much.

"I’ve got a question, if you don’t mind,” Regulus said, seemingly unaffected by the wound he had received. "I know you know who I am. How? Most people don’t even know I’m alive.”

"Regulus Black," Harry replied, not allowing himself to be distracted. The man was faster than him, and who knew what kind of spells he was capable of casting? "You have a reputation.”

"One that I’m proud of, despite what they teach you at... wherever young Death Eaters like you study.”

"I don’t know much about pride," Harry said, weighing his words carefully despite the conversational tone he did his best to maintain. "But, you know, a muggle drove me here all the way
"Did you kill him?" Regulus said, and grimaced as he dodged another cutting curse. "Your kind usually does that."

"You know nothing of my kind," Harry replied, stepping away from the way of a confringo heading his way. "But he did say he’d like to fuck me like a bitch in heat. What does that mean?"

Regulus faltered, and his shield slipped just enough to let one of Harry’s incoming hexes through. A blinding pain hit his left leg, and a fleeting thought of apparating away crossed his mind. Eventually, he managed to say: "What?"

"I know what you’ll say," Harry continued, wondering if the man was trying to lull him into a false sense of security. "That not all muggles are like that. Maybe you’re right. Actually, you’re most certainly right about that. But Regulus, I’m fourteen. Maybe I don’t care about what’s wrong and right. Maybe I only care about what I’m supposed to do."

Regulus cast a second, stronger, shielding charm, and took a step back. "Who are you?"

"Now you’re curious?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Harry Potter," Harry replied. "I don’t expect you to recognize the name."

"I knew a Potter, once," Regulus said. "My brother’s best friend. A decent man, as far as I know."

"Thanks. That’s my dad," Harry replied easily, resisting the urge to wipe his sweaty palms. "Sirius is my godfather."

A complicated expression crossed Regulus’s face, and he let out a bitter laugh. "Is this about family, then? Did Sirius somehow—"

"Of course not, don’t be stupid," Harry cut him off. "This has nothing to do with family, and everything to do with your work with the Rebels. Your actions have caused the deaths of countless people."

"You are a child," Regulus said. "What do you know about death?"

"I really wish that people would stop assuming that the answer to that is nothing," Harry said dryly, not yet sure how to reveal his... that. The thing. The necromancy thing. Merlin, he could barely even think of it. "For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. Bombarda!"

Regulus. Regulus Black.

Sweet, merciful Circe. That was. That... that was unexpected.

Those in the audience who recognized the name were screaming. Sirius stood in the arena, too stunned to speak. His mouth was hanging open as he watched his godson duel his brother. His brother! And oh, Merlin, what a duel it was! It was horrifying to watch, but Sirius couldn’t look away. He was vaguely aware of the need to snap back into his hosting task, as both George and Fleur were expected to return sometime soon. But he couldn’t, not yet. Not when Harry had hunted down his brother, and was dueling like a seasoned warlock, rather than a mere student. Where had
he learned all that? What had Harry been doing? Why wasn’t Sirius there with him?

The moments leading up the confrontation had been tense. Harry had walked briskly to where his wand had led him to, and followed an unknown man for quite a while through the ruins of the city. Sirius had gotten momentarily distracted by the tail end of Fleur’s fight, before the identity of Harry’s target had been revealed. Now… nothing could draw his attention away from what his godson was doing.

He knew, without the shadow of a doubt, that even if Harry hadn’t won the previous two tasks… his performance right now would have gotten him the victory. This went beyond defeating a common Rebel. It went even beyond wiping out an entire camp. Regulus was… different. He was the kind of an opponent that the Dark Lord would send Rabastan or Evan Rosier or even Sirius himself to combat.

’That’s my little brother,’ Sirius thought then, startled by the idea. Though their philosophies differed greatly, it wasn’t… entirely pleasant, to see his brother as the enemy. He never did quite manage to stop loving his brother, really. He followed the Dark Lord and enjoyed plenty of privileges in his life today, but it wasn’t as if he was like Bellatrix or Araminta - a firm believer of the ideologies that upheld their societies. Regulus, on the other hand, had opposed the injustice and inequality from the beginning. It had done him no favours.

He… he didn’t want Harry to die. As hard as it was to stand there and see his brother as the villain, Sirius didn’t want Harry to die. Not for the sake of the tournament, and for the first time since the beginning Sirius felt repulsed by the thought of considering this entertainment. How could he enjoy any of this when he knew Harry, he knew the kind, soft-spoken boy who had only ever wanted peace and love and fairytales of faraway lands in his life. No matter the distance between them now, or the arguments and disagreements they had had, Sirius knew without the shadow of a doubt that if Harry died, he wouldn’t have a reason to live, either. He had lost James, and foolishly managed to alienate his own godson by being an insensitive prick, but Merlin… if only Harry would get back home safely, Sirius would do anything to keep him safe. He’d accept anything the boy told him, and protect him against anyone - including the Dark Lord himself, if he had to.

It took Sirius a moment to realize that Weasley’s portkey was activating, and though he knew that hardly anyone in the audience would care, he went through the motions of declaring the boy’s return. The poor Gryffindor – it wasn’t his fault that no one cared. It wasn’t Fleur’s fault either, really. They would have been amazing had the third champion been an ordinary person. But as Sirius gestured for the mediwizards to step in and treat Weasley’s wounds, he couldn’t help but accept the fact that Harry was not an ordinary person.

’James, I’m sorry,’ Sirius thought as he looked up at the screen showcasing his godson’s performance. ’I’ve let your son down more times than I even know. I promise I’ll try to do better.’ It didn’t matter how Harry had even found out about Regulus. It didn’t matter if Harry ended up killing his brother. Well, fine. It mattered, but not… not in a way that made Sirius blame the boy. Regulus had chosen his path a long time ago.

What was a matter of concern, however, was that… if Harry won. He was fourteen. If he won against one of the most infamous Rebels at the age of fourteen, where would that take him? Sirius could only imagine the purebloods in the audience, salivating for a chance to get their hands on Harry. Not… not physically. Not the way that muggle had clearly wanted to do. But rather, the way the Malfoys would clearly want to do - manipulate him and use him as their own tool of some sort, to gain political advantage over everyone else.

’Then again, I somehow doubt that Harry would allow himself to be manipulated like that,’ Sirius
though, as he watched one of Harry’s curses blow an entire tree off its roots. ’Watching Lucius try could be funny.’

Regulus’s spellwork was excellent, but the wounds he had suffered were a clear hindrance to him now. It was... it was unbelievable that Harry had been able to land any curses on him at all. Spells of all kinds bathed that previously green backyard in various colours, burning off parts, exploding or cutting down others. Sirius managed to turn away for a moment, to look at the audience, and as expected... watching Harry duel was captivating. Near him on the ground Weasley had been enervated, and the healers were trying to convince him to move to the hospital wing. The boy declined, batting their hands away. He, too, was watching Harry’s every move.

”Let the boy be,” Sirius told the healers. ”Just fix him as well as you can here. He’ll go to the hospital wing once the battles are over.”

Weasley shot him a grateful look, to which Sirius responded to with a smile. He then turned again, just in time to see a hex flay a part of Harry’s left arm, causing the boy to pale dramatically and gasp in pain, blood cascading down his arm and onto the ground.

When he was hit, Harry knew that he’d have to finish the duel as fast as possible. He had learned plenty of healing charms already, but the best he could do during a battle like this was to slow the flow of the blood a bit. He couldn’t heal a wound that big, but even a little bit was good. Harry knew how much blood he could afford to lose, and he knew that the amount was much less than what a grown adult like Regulus could lose without beginning to feel its effects. He was lucky that he had already landed a few hits on the other wizard, because it didn’t seem likely that he would get so lucky again soon.

”You do realize that if you keep fighting, you won’t walk away alive from this,” Regulus said, jumping over an exposed root of one of the fallen trees. ”Whatever that Dark Lord of yours has told you, fighting to the end is not worth your life, boy!”

”I’ll be the judge of that,” Harry replied, because he thought that he had been holding up pretty well so far, and it wasn’t as if the situation could get any worse, right?

’Why do I always jinx myself like this,’ the boy thought less than five minutes later, when much to his dismay, another Rebel apparated behind Regulus. The newcomer gave Harry a look of contempt as he cast a shield between them, before looking at Regulus. ”Black, you’re needed by the shore. I’ll take care of this.”

”Oh no you won’t,” Harry breathed. The thought of Regulus escaping his grasp, combined with the protective shield he knew ordinary spells couldn’t pierce through, was enough to make him throw caution to the wind. In his panic, Harry latched on to his other magic with much more force than he had intended. The ensuing... whatever it was, resulted in a surge of movement from the trees, and suddenly a branch lunged at the newcomer cutting straight through his neck. The man let out a gurgle, before falling down just as another branch shot through his thigh. Regulus stared at the body for a few stunned seconds - seconds that Harry desperately needed to compose himself again - before he turned to Harry with a look of pure fury.

”That... wasn’t a mere spell,” Regulus said, readjusting his hold of his wand. ”Is that why they sent you? Young as you are, with a few tricks up your sleeve?”

”Is anything ever that simple?” Harry asked, relieved to have somehow killed the other Rebel unexpectedly so fast, but increasingly worried of whoever else would come seeking Regulus next.
He really, really needed to figure something out soon, but he felt that nothing short of a miracle would make that happen. Another miracle, that was, because he still couldn’t believe how fast he had dealt with the other Rebel.

"He was a good man, you know," Regulus said, as if that meant something anymore. "You had no right—"

"Right?" Harry repeated, before letting out an incredulous, if a bit hysterical, laugh. "Does anyone have any rights to kill people? How naive can you be? People don’t kill people because they have the right to do that. No one has that right. People do it despite not having the right, for whatever reason."

"Your reason—"

"Did you think he’d stun me and let me go? Really?"

"I’m sorry that this is what your life has become," Regulus said quietly. "And I’m sorry that it’ll end here, but I can no longer just let you go. Not after what you did."

"As opposed to everything you have done?" Harry shot back. "Rebels killed my mum. Who’s going to pay for that? No one, that’s who."

"Isn’t that what you’re doing? Avenging someone?"

"No."

"You’re telling me that you came all the way from England to kill me, but not for revenge?" Regulus repeated, clearly not believing Harry. "Why, then? Humour me with a response, if you will. It’s the least you could do after proving to be such an inconvenience. I’ve wasted hours of my day, now. Hours that I could have used much better."

"You still think that you’ll win," Harry said.

"You still think that I won’t?" Regulus responded. Harry sighed, and shook his head. He then looked at the man for a few moments, before glancing briefly at the body of the other Rebel. He absently grasped at the tendrils of the other magic, waiting eagerly to be used again. He hadn’t expected to feel much aside from that, and felt a jolt of surprise when suddenly he felt... different. He felt like there was... like he had somehow bypassed his wand, and that there was something else right within his reach. It didn’t take him long to figure out what it was.

And at that moment Harry realized what no one else possibly could: he had the advantage. So long as there was a dead body near him, he’d always have the advantage.

It was then that the _expelliarmus _hit him, right in the face.
Chapter 46

When Fleur arrived, she knew immediately that something was amiss. She could see Weasley on the ground, a mediwizard treating him on the spot as he stared at the screen showcasing Potter’s performance. When Black, fumbling and clearly uninterested, announced her return to the audience, few clapped. With a bitter taste in her mouth, Fleur was tempted to allow the approaching mediwitch to take her to the hospital wing, but she decided to take a leaf out of Weasley’s book and get treated there on the field as well. If she was about to lose to Potter, at least she wanted to know how he was doing it.

It didn’t take long for her to begrudgingly accept that perhaps she had underestimated the boy. His spellwork was spectacular, and while she didn’t know the man he was dueling, it was clear by the audience’s reactions that he was someone significant enough to be known here in England. Which, well, kudos to the kid. If he survived that ordeal, then perhaps he was worth knowing.

It was then that the *expelliarmus* hit the boy in his face.

Up in her seat, Bellatrix lurched forward, a loud gasp escaping her when she saw Harry falling down to his knees, clearly dazed. Worse still, his wand was now with Regulus Black. Thoughts of upholding a pretense of nonchalance were long gone, as Bellatrix watched the boy try to orient himself and fight back. It was a miracle that her foul cousin - *who should have been dead!* - was far too soft to take advantage of the situation to kill Harry.

"If the boy somehow survives that," Araminta said, sounding both gleeful and alarmed, "then perhaps he has earned his victory."

"There is no perhaps," Parkinson replied. "Even if he dies, he has still uncovered the existence of a previously unknown threat. Regulus Black is a dangerous lunatic who was thought to have died a long time ago. The fact that he is alive is troubling, and must be dealt with swiftly."

Few feet away from the judges, Tom was doing his best to not order Walden to take his team and go to where Potter was right then. He’d certainly do it after the boy’s battle was over, to deal with any Rebels that could possibly lurk in the area, but if he did it now it would be seen as interference. And while a part of him wanted nothing more than to bring the boy back alive, a bigger part of him wanted to see how Harry would handle himself. He had already proven himself to be clever and even more ruthless than Tom had anticipated, which made him... feel strangely delighted. The *boy* was delightful. He was so *clever*, when he wanted to be.

Tom absently caressed Nagini’s head as he watched Harry’s battle unfold. Harry had crossed countries and hunted down an impossible target... because he knew that *Tom* wanted Regulus Black dead. Tom knew that this entire show that Harry was putting up, it wasn’t for the audience or the wizarding world. It was solely for *him*. And *that* struck Tom breathless.

Despite how impressed he was, however, he couldn’t quite ignore a tendril of unexpected concern that made its way to the forefront of his mind. What had Harry been *thinking*, trying to confront someone of that level? As much as Tom hated it, Regulus Black was someone he’d send a seasoned Death Eater to deal with, not a boy who had only just managed to figure out how to apparate. The fact that Harry looked calmer than he had any right to be in that situation didn’t soothe Tom’s nerves at all. Didn’t the fool worry about dying at all?

‘*That cannot possibly be the case,*’ Tom thought immediately, frowning. ‘*The boy has never shown any suicidal tendencies before.*’ But what if this was it?
Black was twirling Harry’s wand, before lazily pointing it at the boy. He hadn’t killed Harry yet, and Tom wondered if he was waiting for something. For Harry to surrender? Surely he knew by now that that was impossible. Besides, hadn’t he given up on that as soon as Harry had killed the other Rebel?

‘The boy has technically passed his task already,’ Tom suddenly realized. It just didn’t count, because that hadn’t been the Rebel that Harry had aimed for. Although the way he had killed the man was nothing short of amazing. Using the surroundings in unexpected ways? Barty’s teachings had clearly been well-learned, and Crouch Jr. would certainly be quietly smug for the rest of the year.

"Do you think that his performance is something anyone from Durmstrang could do?" Yaxley suddenly asked. Karkaroff, who had been silent until then, turned to stare at the man. Tom didn’t know how to read his expression, but after a moment of silence, the Headmaster of Durmstrang simply shrugged.

"The first and second tasks? Perhaps. This third one?" Karkaroff shook his head. "I don’t know." Harry had now managed to stand up, but still looked slightly dazed. He looked at Regulus, before opening his mouth to talk.

"What are they doing?" Walden muttered. "Are they seriously having a chat right now? Is this the time for it?"

"If the boy can talk his way out of that situation, I’ll hand him an internship at the Ministry as soon as he comes back," Carrow hollered from his seat a few rows behind Macnair. "It doesn’t look like he’ll be able to do that, though. Look at him, the kid’s facing death."

'Realistically, he is facing death,' Tom thought, watching Harry’s face. The boy still didn’t seem worried in the least. Since when had he become so adept at reading him anyway? Could he trust Harry’s lack of concern? Did they boy have something else up his sleeve? He didn’t have a second wand, did he? Tom would have to get him one when he came back.

And then, Harry moved.

Taking an *expelliarmus* to the face was... momentarily blinding. For that instance, Harry had felt a fear unlike anything else grip his entire being, and thoughts of every mistake he had made in his life, and all the things he had missed out on, flashed through his mind. When he blinked his eyes open again, he was on his knees, and his wand was in Regulus’s hand.

"Noble enough to not kill me when you could?" Harry asked, trying to not look as worried as he felt. Luckily, it didn’t seem like Regulus was the kind of a man who was fine with murder. It made Harry feel even worse than before for what he’d have to do.

"I can kill you whenever I want," Regulus shot back. "As atrocious as that would be."

"Your people have killed children before,” Harry told him, trying to both calm himself down and focus his hold on his other magic at the same time. He had things to do, but for now distracting Regulus with inane chatter to buy himself more time was the priority. "How is this any different? How are you any different?"

"Is that what they tell you at Durmstrang? That we kill children?"

"It’s the reality that is reported.”
"You're naive," Regulus sighed, shaking his head. "You could have been an incredible wizard in time, but instead you've thrown away your entire future just for... what? A suicide mission?"

"Your spies don't keep you up to date if that’s what you think this is," Harry said, strengthening his grip on his magic, while discreetly moving his hand towards the dagger that Sirius had given him. Harry had strapped it to his thigh, and he was happier than ever for having done that. The kneeling position that he was in right now didn’t make it obvious that Harry was intentionally inching his hand towards the weapon. "Although, I have to ask you, is what the English papers print somehow above your attention, now?"

"What?" Regulus asked, a frown appearing on his face. He then sighed again, and shook his head. His own wand was held loosely in his left hand, while Harry’s wand was in his right. His grip wasn’t that of a man about to cast a spell, though he did appear to have finally run out of patience. "Never mind. What is reported to me is none of your business, and I will not indulge you with that knowledge no matter how little you’d understand it. I’m afraid that nothing is, anymore. I’ll break your wand and I’ll send your body back home. You’ve been an amazing opponent, considering your age, and I will allow you to be buried in England rather than here.”

"Oh, Regulus," Harry said, curling his fingers around the hilt of the hidden dagger. "I’m not the one who’ll die here today."

There was an instance of confusion, before Regulus felt movement behind him. He turned to see the unimaginable sight of the body of his comrade standing up. A wave of horror he hadn’t known to brace for washed over him, causing him to let out a startled shout of alarm and take a few steps back. He let go of Harry’s wand and readjusted his grip on his own, absently noticing that the boy didn’t make a single gesture to retrieve it. Just as well, what could the boy do against a... against this, whatever it was?

The corpse - the corpse! - lunged at him, and Regulus couldn’t stop himself from letting out another startled curse, before taking a few steps further back. What he hadn’t realized what that the corpse had left him between it and Harry, and that every step Regulus had taken backwards, brought him closer to the boy. And it wasn’t until he felt a kick at the back of his knees that he realized the danger he was in. By the time he felt the cold press of a dagger against his bare throat, and the wetness that came after, that he began making sense of the unimaginable series of events that had just taken place. It wasn’t a latent curse of some sort or simple rotten luck that had reanimated the body, it was... it was the boy.

In a matter of seconds, Potter had turned the tables on him. But that... that wasn’t the issue, not really.

Regulus’s heart was beating fast, and though he tried to wave his wand and croak out the simplest healing charm that came to his mind, he couldn’t cast a single spell to somehow make things better. He had already lost plenty of blood from his previous wounds, and this last one was making his world lose colour rather fast. Now it was just a matter of whether he’d choke to death or bleed out, wasn’t it? Merlin, the boy was vicious.

A bloody necromancer. Of course he was vicious. Regulus should have killed him as soon as he saw the boy. Necromancers didn’t count as children, no matter how young they were. Regulus hadn’t known a single one in his life yet, but had heard and read plenty of the topic. His mother had had a great respect for the necromancers of the past centuries, but such arts were thought to be no longer in existence. How had Voldemort found one? Had he deliberately sent out a necromancer to kill Regulus? How had he even known that Regulus was alive?

The corpse - the fucking corpse - stood on its bleeding and mangled legs for a few moments longer,
before it sunk down into a heap again. Regulus collapsed forward, trying to heave himself at least to a sitting position. What little he could see of the ground in front of him was now covered in his blood.

He barely felt the thin arm that draped itself across his shoulders, but the warmth of the boy’s cheek as it pressed against his own was almost too hot to bear. And through the sound of his heavy choking and the rush of blood in his ears, the boy’s words were clearer than the icy wind that cut him to the bone.

"You have less than a minute before your time runs out,” the boy said. "Before that happens, there’s something I must tell you, Uncle Regulus."

\*

Shock wasn’t something he was accustomed to. For a moment it was as if he was underwater, only vaguely aware of the roar of the audience around him. His breathing was heavy and loud, and he could feel his hands grip the armrests of his chair so strongly that his bones ached. He watched, wide-eyed, as the corpse of the other Rebel moved to attack Regulus Black. Black, in his panic, forgot that the real enemy was the one that he had just turned his back to. And who could blame him, really? Harry’s wand was still on the ground, and he had animated an actual corpse to fight for him. What kind of a threat could the boy be?

A serious one, it seemed. Because, no matter how hard it was to believe, he was a necromancer. Sweet Merlin, Harry was a necromancer. Harry was a necromancer.

He had known about Harry’s abilities, but even he couldn’t have imagined— Necromancers were born, not made, and they had always been immensely secretive. After Gondoline the Gruesome had developed the inferius curse in the 1500s, necromancers became downright vicious when it came to protecting their secrets. That left the rest of the wizarding society without much knowledge about the art at all, and even Tom didn’t know where the limits of that branch of magic ran. Were all of Harry’s abilities tied to the necromancy? Could every necromancer go to that station that Harry spoke of? What of the unspeakable terror that the boy refused to elaborate on, but was clearly haunted by - was that, too, tied to necromancy somehow?

Off to the side, Bellatrix had given up any pretense of not having a favourite among the champions, and was leaning so far forward from her seat among the judges that only her husband’s hold of the back of her robes from the seat behind prevented her from falling down. She was screaming something incomprehensible, with an expression of glee on her face. Parkinson looked more alive than he had for the entire time that Tom had ever known the man, and even Araminta had been struck speechless. The old witch detested everything that wasn’t English, wealthy, and pure of blood. But above all, she knew power when she saw it, and knew to humble herself before it. It would be interesting to see how she would interact with the boy later.

As for the rest of the population, Tom knew better than to assume that everyone would see Harry’s newfound abilities - well, newly revealed abilities - as something good. Rebels aside, even among his followers there were people who shied away from Dark magic, no matter how ridiculous doing so was. Those people could possibly cause some trouble, if they had the courage to do so. He would have to warn the boy when he came back.

'Not many have the courage to go against a necromancer,' Tom thought, unable to stop a smirk from appearing on his face as he watched Harry take control of the battle once again. The boy pulled out a dagger that he had had the sense to take with him - unexpectedly sensible - and lunged at Black. The swift kick to the back of the man’s knees put his throat within Harry’s reach, and, well, that was it. It was a move so brilliant and ruthless that Tom desperately wished that he could watch it
again right then and there. The audience that had barely quieted down after the corpse had moved, was once again screaming.

Somehow Tom doubted that even Black could have anticipated the show that would become of the third task. Who could? People had already been greatly entertained by Harry, but it wasn’t as if they had been taking him seriously enough. He had been impressive during the second task, but not like this. Even Tom, who knew Harry better than most others, if he said so himself, felt like he was seeing the boy for the first time. This amazing, brilliant, kind-hearted fool who had used magic so dark no one else but Tom could even fathom it. This child, this brilliant duelist. Merlin, he had known that Harry had been worth his time from the beginning, but he had never expected to see it proven like this.

What he’d need to make Harry understand, however, that revealing this aspect of his abilities didn’t mean that he’d have to tell the world about everything else. Just because they knew now that he could raise the dead didn’t mean they should know about him being able to converse with the dead the way he could. Some would perhaps assume that he could, just by being a Necromancer, but it wouldn’t be wise to confirm it.

When Black collapsed, blood pouring from his open throat, Tom felt a flash of surprise when Harry knelt right by him. The boy’s face was hidden, but it was clear that he was speaking to Black, his thin fingers soothingly patting one of the man’s hands. There was something... odd about the scene, and Tom wondered if Harry really was comforting the man he had given a killing blow to. It was such a typical Harry thing to do, and really... if he didn’t stop doing things like that, no one would consider him a proper Death Eater.

Then again, Tom wasn’t sure if he wanted Harry to be a proper Death Eater. The boy was far too exciting to be given a role similar to that of Macnair or Dolohov or even Malfoy. Especially if Bellatrix decided to somehow force her way into the boy’s life, the way she clearly wanted to do. What would become of Harry in the end, Tom didn’t know, but he wasn’t against just... waiting and seeing. Harry hadn’t disappointed him terribly yet, so perhaps he could trust the boy to plan his own life appropriately.

After all, his loyalty was one of the few absolutes that Tom could trust.

* *

Despite heaving, coughing, and slowly choking on blood, Regulus heard every word Harry said to him. The mere idea of being called ‘uncle’ by this beast befuddled and repulsed him, and if he wasn’t nearly dead, he would have moved away. He regretted nothing as much as the sympathy he had felt towards what had looked like a child at first. But no, no matter how young he was, Potter was a necromancer, and that changed everything.

"I know you think you’re doing the right thing,” Potter said, and the thought of the boy attempting any kind of comfort was ludicrous, "And I know you won’t like hearing this, but there’s something else much more important to be done, if you truly wish to change the inhumane society that breeds and fosters us.”

The words made no sense to him at first, and the mere thought that Potter was suddenly against the Dark Lord in any way was impossible to believe. Regulus closed his eyes, feeling the last tendrils of strength leave him. And yet he wasn’t dead - the boy was holding him too hard to allow even his soul to leave. What an abomination. Humans weren’t meant for this kind of power.

"Work doesn’t end when you die,” Potter continued, that arm of his that he had thrown over Regulus’s shoulders becoming heavier by the second. "I need help in neutralizing the Dark Lord,
and I have no doubt that you’ll be able to help me.”

Wait, what?

What was the boy doing?

It couldn’t possibly be a trap. What would anyone gain from trapping a dead man? Surely not even a necromancer would care about that. Then again - what if the boy wanted to be the next Dark Lord? Could he really be that delusional? He hadn’t come across as such, but who knew, right? What other reason would a necromancer have to try and neutralize someone who would clearly celebrate having them in his ranks?

”When you die, you’ll end up at a train station,” Potter told him with far too much confidence for someone who was clearly still alive. What did the boy know of afterlife, really? ”It’s not scary, and it won’t hurt, but it will be crowded. People will be boarding trains leaving to infinities beyond what I know. Regulus, you must not board a train, do you hear me? Look for... look for a bench, or something. Wait for me there. Just... just don’t board any of the trains. Can you hear me?”

He could hear the boy all right, despite having probably bled out more blood that he had thought there would be in his whole body. Not that it mattered - he couldn’t respond, after all. It didn’t seem to matter to Potter either, however, as the boy tightened his hold on Regulus momentarily, before repeating ”Do not board any of the trains there!” one more time. He then let go, and what followed was a floating sensation that felt nearly nauseating, much like a feeling of pressure in his shoulder that had been lifted.

It was disorienting, seeing the back of his own head and knowing that his life was now over. There was no sensation in any of his limbs, and he felt neither cold nor hot. Instead, he felt a pull of some sort tugging at his body - or whatever he was, now - as he watched the boy stand up. It was clear that despite being a necromancer, Potter couldn’t see him in this form. The boy was now standing still, looking at Regulus’s body, and the man wondered if his remains would be packed up somehow and carted off to the Dark Lord. Potter was surely going to be rewarded greatly for this.

Much to his surprise, however, what the boy did was simply walk to where his wand was, and then levitate Barton’s body closer to Regulus’s own. The boy then set them both on fire, heating the flames further with his magic, turning the bodies into piles of ash in a matter of minutes. Smart of him, in a way, although if the boy didn’t leave soon, someone else would find him eventually. People would certainly be wondering where Regulus was, by now, and with his still bleeding wounds, Potter wouldn’t be much of a hardship to defeat anymore. Even necromancers weren’t invincible.

The boy’s face was pale, but determined. Something about his expression reminded Regulus of a childhood spent in England, and sacrifices he had made a long time ago. Regulus watched as the boy twirled a golden bracelet that had been around his wrist, before he readjusted his grip on his wand. Regulus couldn’t remember the boy’s mother, but he remembered James Potter. The boy resembled his father greatly, although his features had clearly been softened by his mother’s blood – or perhaps it was just his young age. None of the darkness inside him could be seen on that face, and when Potter took a step back from the piles of ash, Regulus couldn’t guess what the boy would do.

What he ended up doing was point his wand up at the sky, and stand still for a moment longer. At that point, Regulus knew, ever before Potter said the word, that he’d be witnessing a sight that he hadn’t seen in a long, long time.

Soon enough Lord Voldemort’s Dark Mark - a relic of a signature that only his most loyal Death Eaters used anymore - rose above the ruins of Varosha.
Regulus wondered if the dead could feel sick. In the end all he could do was succumb to the pull that was tugging him towards the unknown, Potter’s words still ringing in his ears.

Tom had never been punched – a fact that he was secretly quite proud of. And yet, when Harry lit up the sky with his mark, he felt as if someone had punched the breath right out of his lungs. The view of the Dark Mark was cut short as the boy’s portkey activated, and he was brought back to Hogwarts, but the mere knowledge of it being there… was… incredible.

Harry, on his end, felt dizzy. When the portkey took him back, all he could hear was the roar of the audience, and Sirius’s loud - though oddly enough, less enthusiastic than ever before - voice.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, with the arrival of the last champion, the action part of their adventure is over! Let’s give them a well-deserved round of applause!"

Harry shook his head to clear his vision, and was faced by two mediwitches who helped him sit down without falling. The cooling and healing spells that were cast on him next felt heavenly, and he couldn’t wait to crawl into his bed and sleep for a month. He looked up at the audience, and someone specific, and saw Tom in his seat. The man wasn’t clapping but Harry hadn’t expected him to. Tom knew that Harry’s whole third task had been for him.

"We have patched you up now temporarily, ” one of the mediwitches said, tilting Harry’s head towards her after a few moments of work. "But you and your fellow champions must go to the Hospital Wing right after this is over."

"Yes, thank you,” Harry managed to reply, and struggled to focus on Sirius again.

"While it is with no doubt that we know who the winner is,” Sirius was saying, letting out a chuckle that Harry didn’t know how to decipher, ”we must allow our honourable judges the opportunity to speak. Let’s begin with Hogwarts’ own champion: George Weasley!” Another round of deafening applause tapered down eventually, when the judges showed their scores. Bellatrix and Araminta had given George 7 points each, while Parkinson had given him 9.

"It was a solid performance, ” Parkinson said. "You did very well, young man. It is often that people forget, but wars aren’t won by the handful that are capable of incredible feats, but by every good wizard or witch capable of carrying out their orders, with or without injury. Well done."

The words brought a small tired smile on George’s face, and to Harry, Parkinson instantly became more likable. The old wizard was right, and it was wonderful to hear him say such a thing out loud for everyone to hear.

"Next,” Sirius then announced, and… he wasn’t rushing, was he? Harry couldn’t help but feel that Sirius wanted to wrap this up as fast as possible. ”Beauxbaton’s beautiful Fleur Delacour!”

Harry had no idea what kind of a performance Fleur had put up, but he doubted that Araminta’s 8 was entirely fair. Bellatrix and Parkinson had both given her 9s, and Harry took a moment to wonder what kind of a grade Tom would have given her.

"You were very good,” Parkinson spoke again. ”Your performance was truly flawless. However, while impressive, you were also reckless in choosing to take on an entire camp. While we strive for excellence and reward power, we do not encourage Death Eaters of no proven track record to deliberately take on such large quantities of targets at once. You did well, but I did wish I could see some more strategic thinking in your performance.”
Amidst another round of applause, Harry saw Delacour smile. There was barely contained rage in that smile of hers, and Harry couldn’t help but sympathize. From what he had understood from Parkinson’s words, she had gone for an entire camp of Rebels. Why was she being penalized for that? Was it because she was a woman? Or a veela? Or would they have penalized him, too, if he had taken on an entire camp as well? It just didn’t make any sense.

Then again, it also didn’t make any sense to him to kill an entire camp of people, for Circe’s sake.

”And finally,” Sirius said then, ”to the champion who has surprised us time and time again, and shown us unimaginable feats of magic: Harry Potter of Durmstrang!”

There were people who were actually standing up. Not just other students, but adults. People of status who were now standing up and clapping for him, and Harry didn’t know what to feel. Strangely enough, he wasn’t particularly happy. Just relieved, really. Relieved that there was yet another thing that he had now wrapped up and finished. He’d never again participate in any competitions, and he’d stay as far away from Rebels as possible.

It wasn’t entirely surprising that Bellatrix and Parkinson had both given him 10s, but it was a bit unexpected that Meliflua had done so as well. Odder still was that Sirius, despite how upbeat he tried to sound, was still somehow... off. What did he think of Harry now, after the whole necromancy thing? What if Harry ended up losing him completely because of this?

’You’ll have Tom, still,’ Harry reassured himself quickly. ’Tom and Hermione.’ Merlin, he’d need to give Hermione a gift of some sort. No matter how much the girl insisted that she didn’t need anything, not since she had her own horse in the race too, it didn’t feel right to not thank her with a gift. He’d have to get on that as soon as he possibly could.

”Your performance, Mister Potter, was extraordinary,” Parkinson said, his enhanced voice carrying easily over the audience. ”Not only did you eliminate a dangerous enemy we had thought dead a long time ago, but you did so using magic so ancient that our very traditions pale before it. The Potter family has never been one to seek riches or glory, and yet perhaps precisely because of that, I couldn’t imagine a better family for the gift of necromancy. Today you have done not only your school proud, but also your entire line, may they rest in peace. Well done.”

The cheers from the audience got even louder, as Sirius declared Harry to be the winner of the Triwizard Tournament. The boy was helped to a standing position by the two mediwitches who had been healing him, and he bowed slightly in gratitude. He was barely holding on to his consciousness, and everything was becoming chaotic and blurry. Sirius was about to wrap up the event - finally, after what had felt like an eternity - and was telling people of a celebratory ball hosted by Hogwarts in two weeks. All three champions would be honoured then, and those who attended the party would have a great opportunity to meet the three there.

Harry closed his eyes, and leaned heavier on one of the mediwitches.

It was over.
Waking up felt like surfacing from a deep, dark, comforting lake. He was aware of waking up long before he opened his eyes, and even then, he remained still, listening to Sirius’s voice as the man read aloud a familiar story that warmed Harry’s heart. He felt safe in the bed he was in, with a blanket over him and a soft mattress underneath. There was light seeping into the room from a pair of large windows, washing everything with a golden glow, and making him squint his eyes as he tried to open them.

Harry felt clean and relaxed, with no traces of injuries or soreness in his body. He didn’t know how much time had passed, but waking up to Sirius reading to him was something he hadn’t expected. It put him at ease; surely his godfather didn’t hate him, if he was willing to read Harry’s books aloud by Harry’s bed?

"—his head rang, his eyes blurred. He saw Bran standing over him with the sword flaming blue in his hand—"

"Silver on the tree," Harry said, his voice coming out as a croak. He slowly moved to sit up, and turned to look around him. He was in a small, separate hospital room, with a table and a few chairs nearby. The table was covered in gifts and flowers, while one of the chairs was occupied by his godfather. "Susan Cooper. I loved that whole series. I still do."

"Harry," Sirius breathed, and put the book aside in favour of moving closer. His face was tired, older than Harry remembered, and the expression on it was an unfamiliar mix of worry and gentleness. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," Harry replied honestly. "The tournament is over now, right?"

"Yes," Sirius said, lowering his head and sighing deeply. His shoulders sagged. "Harry. I’m so sorry."

"I’m sorry too," Harry told him, not sure if they were sorry about the same thing, or if Sirius was about to give him some bad news. "I killed your brother."

"I lost my brother a long time ago," Sirius said immediately, looking at Harry again and reaching for his hand. "Regulus was dead to me long before you were born. Hardly anyone even knew that he was alive – I have no idea how you figured it out. But, Harry... you’re not the one who needs to be sorry. I could've... I could've made you do anything else, you know. Duel each other, fight wild dragons, survive an enhanced maze. But I chose this. Do not feel guilty for what you had to do to survive my idiocy. That is my fault, and mine alone."

"You wanted to make a good show," Harry muttered, hunching his shoulders. "I know that. So, I guess you don’t need to say sorry either, because... because it probably was, you know. Good entertainment."

"Yes," Sirius said, but he didn’t sound happy about it. "But at what price?"
"What’s going to happen now?” Harry asked, quietly and hesitantly. ”You saw... you saw what I can do.”

"Necromancy,” Sirius began, his voice low and soothing, ”may have a bad reputation among the less educated. People fear death, and everything related to it. And yet, Harry, death is the only certainty that any living being has - we all will die someday. Your abilities do not change that, since not even necromancy can truly revive the dead. You have nothing to fear, and nothing to be ashamed of.”

"I tried to find books to read about it,” Harry said, unsure if Sirius’s comfort was a reflection of reality, or if he was simply aiming to alleviate Harry’s concerns. ”I couldn’t find any.”

"I have a few at home,” Sirius replied, his voice still calm and soothing. ”I’ll bring them to you later. But for now, we have some other issues to prepare for. You’ve been asleep for almost two days, you know. The celebratory ball is in ten days, and unfortunately you have some obligations to go through before that. Not to mention all the people who have been dying to visit you. Lockhart has made me promise to not let anyone else in before him, due to what he calls PR management.”

"I suppose I’ll need that,” Harry muttered, feeling a splash of amusement. ”What about Skeeter? Will she want to... talk to me?” Harry suspected that she would want some sort of an interview, if only to wrap up her coverage of the Triwizard Tournament.

"She’ll definitely want to talk to you,” Sirius confirmed. ”She has already had one interview with Weasley, and is scheduled to have another interview with Delacour tomorrow. Yours is likely to be a few days after that. She’s probably going to write more about you than the others, however, considering that you won the Tournament. Congratulations on that, by the way. It’ll be officially announced in the ball.”

"I feel like there’s so much I need to be careful with, now,” Harry admitted. ”What I say, how I look, how I sound. What will people expect of me, after winning the Tournament? After the whole... necromancy thing?”

"You had an outstanding performance,” Sirius said. ”My suggestion to you is that you don’t agree to anything people try to offer you - no contracts, no favours, no alliances - until you’re a bit steadier on your feet. The nurse will likely want to keep you here for a bit longer, and considering how hard it is to get a moment of privacy outside, I’d say you take her up on that offer.”

"Thanks,” Harry said. Sirius ruffled his hair, and stood up.

"I’ll go let Lockhart in now, if he’s still lurking outside,” he said. ”Do keep in mind, however, that no matter how much your mum liked him... if he suggests something you don’t like, tell me, and I’ll sort him out.”

"I’ll do that,” Harry promised. He then watched Sirius leave, feeling more at peace with the world than he had in a long, long time.

When Gildy swept in, his pale pink robes lined with white fur around the collar, silver boots clacking loudly against the floor, he was closely followed by Hermione. The witch was carrying a pile of books, trailing behind Gildy in a way that appeared almost subservient, making Harry’s skin itch with worry. When the door swung close, and the girl put the books down with a resounding thump and a glare towards Gildy, Harry knew that it had all been an act.

"So people won’t question me being here,” Hermione whispered to him when she saw his
questioning look. She wrapped her arms around him, pulling Harry into a tight hug. "Oh, Harry! I’m incredibly proud of you! You were wonderful!"

"That said," Gildy interrupted, "Harry, darling, we have plenty of things we need to go over before you start accepting more guests here. Miss Granger here has told me that you are aware of how important portraying a certain kind of public image is, and oh, I could not have been happier to hear it!"

"I’ve been told that I still have one more interview to sit through," Harry said. "If you could... help me with that..."

"Oh, sweetheart," Gildy tutted, a wave of his wand resulting in some sort of tugging in Harry’s hair. He didn’t even want to know what the man was doing. "You’re a celebrity now. This interview is just the beginning. From now on your activities will be monitored by the public, your words taken out of context to generate controversy, your appearance scrutinized and criticized... but fear not! I have had years of experience in dealing with that, and I am going to make sure that you follow in my footsteps! Miss Granger, a shorter haircut suits him better, doesn’t it?"

"Yes," Hermione said, looking at Harry critically. Was Gildy giving him a haircut? "Maybe you can go with the ponytail when you’re older, but I think the short hair suits you better.

"The best thing you did was wear black for that last task," Gildy continued, and levitated a box that Harry hadn’t noticed before, onto the bed. "These are black robes as well, although not ones suitable for a funeral. A bit less formal, but will bring your eyes out wonderfully. Although - and I can’t believe I’m saying this - we have to leave the gloves."

"But more importantly," Hermione cut in, shoving a piece of paper into Harry’s hands. "The robes were sponsored! Mathilde Higgs herself, from Higgs and Haas, designed the robes!"

"Well, it is a rather bold move to wear robes designed by a muggleborn," Gildy said, "but I suppose we can play the liberal angle for now. Being a necromancer will matter too much for people to reject you for that. Besides, her work is quite good."

Harry bit his lip, unsure of what to say. He didn’t know how much Hermione had told Gildy, but it was clear that the man wasn’t quite aware of where Harry stood, exactly, in the issue of blood purity. He also didn’t seem to know anything of the plan to promote muggleborn business owners, and it was lucky that he wasn’t opposing the ‘liberal angle’ that he thought Harry was aiming for. Not that Harry had expected him to. Gildy may have been a man of many flaws, but he had never expressed the sentiments of prejudice that Harry had found in many others.

"Your life with be full of people vying for your attention," Gildy said. "You can’t trust any of them, of course. As soon as you get out of here and rest a bit, I’ll teach you all about the vows and contracts and privacy spells you need to master. And always be very, very careful of what you say. One wrong move and you’ll have people accusing you of things you didn’t even know existed. And, oh, never agree to anything outright. Always say that you’ll consider it, and that you’ll get back to them with a response soon. That way no one can strongarm you into a rushed decision with unpleasant consequences."

"Those books that I carried in," Hermione started, leaning forward on the chair that Sirius had left vacant. "They’re really good reading! One of them is about wards and how to send letters safely without interception. The only ones who can get around such wards are, of course, the Aurors and some higher level Death Eaters, but—"

"But no journalists," Gildy cut in, looking satisfied. "That’s what matters. And Harry... I know how
much you care for your friends, but you must be careful with them as well.”

‘As if I wasn’t, already,’ Harry thought, and nodded. As much peace Sirius’s presence had brought him earlier, he was now beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed. He wanted to speak with Hermione, but couldn’t do that freely with Gildy there. And as useful as Gildy’s experiences as a celebrity were bound to be, Harry didn’t know yet what kind of things he’d need to ask about. All the advice that he could extract was to simply be careful, and trust no one.

“I suspect that some people will try and come see you after lunch,” Gildy said. “St. Mungo’s has sent few of their healers to help out at Hogwarts for the time being, so I’m not sure who exactly will bring you your food and check up on you, but... be careful. And... before we leave, say, do you know how to test your food for potions and hexes yet?”

“No,” Harry admitted. Gildy’s smile was wide and bright, though not entirely happy as he proceeded to show Harry what to do. He held his wand forward, and slowly moved it in a gesture that resembled an upside-down letter A, with a few more loops and flicks.

"Fiet revelare,” the man said. "An ordinary revelo may help you some, but this works better with consumables. If contaminated, your food will have a blue glow for a few seconds. If not, the glow will be white.”

"Thanks,” Harry managed to say, before he glanced at Hermione, who gave him an encouraging smile. “I’ll, um, see you two later?”

"At the ball, my boy,” Gildy promised. "Come, Miss Granger. There are some sponsorships you asked to review with me, and there is no better time to do them than now.”

"Yes, Professor,” Hermione said, following the man. When she turned to close the door behind her, she winked at Harry with a mischievous smile on her face. It was, perhaps, the most comforting thing the witch had managed to do during that whole meeting.

When, moments later, a mediwizard walked in with a tray of food floating behind him, Harry felt ready to face the world.

No one had come to visit Harry for the rest of the day, perhaps due to the mediwizard’s insistence on ensuring Harry as much peace for now as possible. Harry went along with it, and was let go early the next morning.

His return to the common room he shared with the rest of the Durmstrang students was met with cheers and general jubilance. Mette and Maria both had hugged him, Ingrid and Krum had warmly congratulated him, and even Truls had mustered up a hesitant smile with a few words of praise that Harry was far too happy about. Even Lestrange, sulking and scowling, had told him that he had done well.

"Oh, he’s just nervous,” Mette said, after Lestrange had hurried out. "He thinks you’ll revive his grandfather to hex him, or something. Which, Merlin, you don’t do anything half-way, do you? Necromancy! No wonder you were so confident!”

Harry, who had felt many things, none of which even remotely close to confidence, sighed. "You know that’s not something I can do, right?”

"Can’t you?” Ingrid asked, curious. Harry shrugged, feeling uncomfortable.
"Anyway," Mette, bless her heart, carried on. "I’ve already chosen my robes for the final celebration. You know, I’m glad that we’ll be done with this Hogwarts visit soon. This academic year has felt like a century. Now we’ll go back to Durmstrang where we will be able to settle back into our own apartments, and just... live better. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t dislike Hogwarts. It’s just... it’s clear that we have much stricter standards and better resources. I miss our dueling arenas and gardens."

"And the Quidditch pitch," Truls pitched in, to which Krum nodded enthusiastically.

"Even our food is better," Maria said, leaning back on the couch she was sitting on. "Soon! One last party, and then we’ll leave this place! Do you guys have any plans for the summer?"

'I’ll get to go home,' Harry thought. He would certainly visit Sirius every now and then, but he didn’t... he didn’t want to live anywhere else but in Godric’s Hollow. He’d call back one of his house-elves, and just settle down there. Perhaps he could have the wards reinforced by Tom - if the man had the time to help him - and live there quietly. Every now and then he could, perhaps, send a letter to his friends and exchange news.

And then there was, of course, Regulus. Harry hadn’t been able to go to the train station yet, and he didn’t want to go there until he knew he was somewhere safe, where no one would disturb him. He desperately hoped that the man had done as asked, and was waiting for him. Hopefully he had managed to, despite the crowds, somehow bump into Albus.

Merlin, it had been a lifetime since Harry had last seen Albus or Merope, hadn’t it?

'I wonder what they will say about what I did,' Harry thought. 'But, well... my goal hasn’t changed since the beginning. I need to make Tom mortal again by somehow reuniting the Horcruxes, at least according to Merope. I don’t even know how to start with that. What are his horcruxes? How can they be united? What will happen to him if I do that?' He was terrified of alienating Tom the way he... well, the circumstances, really... had alienated Truls. Harry missed Truls, and he didn’t dare to imagine how awful he’d feel if Tom decided that they were better off as strangers after all.

"What about, you, Harry?" Mette asked. "Any thoughts regarding your robes?"

"I have a new set that I received recently," Harry said, thinking of the box that Gildy had brought him. "I’ll be wearing that. Does anyone know what will happen during that ball? When does it start? What will we be doing, exactly?"

"Oh, yes, you weren’t present," Ingrid suddenly said. "Headmaster Karkaroff informed us yesterday of the upcoming program. All of us are, of course, expected to properly represent Durmstrang in both behaviour and appearance. The event will be held in the Great Hall, and once we have been seated, the Dark Lord himself will give a speech. Then, I believe, your godfather will take over and declare the winner. Which, well, we all know is you."

"Tom will give a speech?" The thought was a bit funny to Harry, as Tom didn’t often give such public speeches. "Will we be expected to dance?"

"Likely," Ingrid said. "Luckily for you, however, you won’t be expected to do the opening dance. I suppose they weren’t sure if you’d pull through the third task with your limbs intact. Either way, even though you will not be formally requested to bring a partner and dance, you will still be expected to do so."

"Great." Because looking for a partner for the ball was exactly what Harry wanted to do.

"You’ll have to be careful," Mette said, her voice teasing. "I’ve overheard some girls making plans
Harry grimaced, not happy about what he had just heard. He couldn’t help but think of the last ball he had attended, with Truls, and doubted that he’d be able to go with his friend again. He couldn’t even ask Hermione - not unless he wanted attention and questions, and he really, really didn’t. Luna... could he subject her to any possible public scrutiny? Would she want it?

"You don’t need to worry,” Maria said placatingly. "No matter what Ingrid says, at this point no one has the right to expect anything of you, really. If you haven’t got a person you want to attend the ball with, then go alone. Plenty of people do it, and considering how busy you’ve been so far, it’s not a surprise if you go alone.”

"Sure,” Harry said, wondering if people would think less of him for turning up alone. Wasn’t being dateless embarrassing? "I’ll do that.”

But before that, he had an interview to survive.

Skeeter interviewed him at one of Hogwarts’ greenhouses. The elves had set up a round table for them, with a generous breakfast and an abundance of porcelain decorations.

"Very French,” Skeeter said, sounding pleased. Harry, who had been to France a few times, wasn’t entirely convinced by the Frenchness of the situation, but didn’t dare to voice an opinion on the matter. The witch offered him a wide smile as he sat down, and with a flick of her wand filled his plate with treats of all kind. "Sit and eat, dear Harry! I’m so delighted that you had time for me - you are the winning champion, after all. I can only imagine how busy you have been!”

Oh, but Harry could see that trap coming miles away.

"I always have time for people I respect,” he said quietly, hesitant to take a bite of anything he had in front of him. What if there was veritaserum in the food? He couldn’t possibly check on it - not with Skeeter watching him like a hawk.

"Oh, you flatter me,” the witch tittered, which prompted Harry to say:

"It’s not actually a matter of flattery,” he elaborated, honest in his words, despite his calculated intentions to earn her continued favour. ”I have watched, from the sidelines, how many talented witches have been treated unfairly. How much work you have had to do to get the recognition you deserve. I’m here today, not because I’m eagerly waiting to see my name in a paper, but because if there is an interview that I must give, you’re the one person I want to give it to.”

Skeeter gave him a long look, her wide smile losing a bit of its edge. She then reached for her cup of tea, and took a long, loud sip of it.

"Well then,” she said, soon as she had put the cup down. "I already spoke with your fellow champions, but I’d like this interview to be a bit more... relaxed than that. You and I know each other better after all, right?”

"Right,” Harry said, mentally bracing himself for what was to come.

"Let me start with the one question that everyone is dying to know,” Skeeter started, leaning forward. "Regulus Black. An infamous Rebel everyone thought to be dead. How did you know he wasn’t?”
"I’m a necromancer,” Harry said, knowingly leading the woman to misconceptions. "I cannot elaborate much on how, but it is not beyond me to know if someone has truly died."

Skeeter faltered then, and was clearly struggling to find her next words: "oh yes, necromancy. That’s quite the... ability."

"It is what I was born with,” Harry said, hoping that he wasn’t about to make her uncomfortable. He needed her support. Or at the very least, he needed her to not be against him. "It’s not that helpful, to be quite honest."

"Helped you with the third task, though, didn’t it?” Skeeter was quick to say, her smile returning. "I haven’t said it yet, have I? Congratulations on winning the Tournament, Harry. You were wonderful."

"I received a lot of help,” Harry said. "Durmstrang is the kind of an institution that truly brings out the best in its students."

"Now that the tournament is done,” Skeeter continued, as if she hadn’t heard Harry’s words, "what are your future plans? There’s a ball coming - is there a lucky lady we can see you attending it with?"

"Not yet, no,” Harry replied with a shrug. "As for my plans for the future... I don’t know yet. I’ve been very busy for quite a while now, and I haven’t had the time to really think of the future. I wasn’t sure I’d survive the tournament, you see."

"You’re the only champion who has said such a thing,” Skeeter suddenly said. "Neither one of the other two seemed to doubt that. Oh, they knew they weren’t likely to win, but they never thought that they would die. And yet it is you, the winner, who seems to have such doubts. Why so?"

"I...” Harry scrambled to find the right words, before opting to go with honesty once again. "I’m surrounded by very powerful people. Every day I interact with wizards and witches who could defeat me with little effort. I guess I’m trying to say that I’m... I’m just very, very aware of the fact that there will always be plenty of people who are stronger than I. I have no reason to assume that I am not at risk whenever I leave on a mission or a task, especially when I know that I’ll be looking for a Rebel."

"Wise of you,” Skeeter murmured, before smiling at him again. "It is so hard to imagine that such a handsome and intelligent young man doesn’t have a girlfriend somewhere. Are you dating someone you perhaps left in Durmstrang?"

"Goodness, no,” Harry hurried to say, thinking fleetingly of Clemens. Merlin, he wished. "If I did have someone, I think I’d gladly attend the ball with them."

"How about we find you someone?” Skeeter said, and Harry felt that they had well and truly entered dangerous waters. "What kind of a witch are you looking for?"

"Um.” Harry could feel himself seize up in a bout of unexpected shyness, a flush crawling up his neck. Circe, what was he supposed to say? Hadn’t she tried to ask him something similar before? How had he managed to avoid this part of the conversation before? "I... I don’t know."


"Brown hair,” Harry managed to say. "Tall. But... I don’t really... it isn’t something I particularly focus on. I just... someone with ambition?"
He couldn’t wait for this to be over. Circe, he’d rather be anywhere else but there right now. Skeeter didn’t seem to be ready to give up on asking him about any possible girlfriends - which, well, wrong avenue - and Harry hoped that she wouldn’t squeeze out of him more information than he wanted to give.

Between this and the ball, surely this was worse.

The Great Hall looked amazing.

The walls of the Great Hall were covered with sparkling white curtains, colourful birds flying in and out of the shining folds. The curtains not only reached the floor, but also served as tablecloths for the two, long, food-filled tables that stood at both ends of the hall. The center of the hall was empty, slowly filling up with dancers, while couches and chairs were scattered around for any partygoers in need for a moment’s rest. It looked stunning, wintery without the cold, and Harry loved it.

The ball, however, was terrible.

The first part wasn’t too bad. The part where Tom had stood up at the elevated platform where the teachers usually sat, and given a short speech he clearly had little interest in. He expressed his pride in not only the champions, but specifically in the ’product of Durmstrang’, the school whose development he had personally been involved in. He had then praised each champion separately, before calling Harry to the platform, and handing him the Triwizard Cup. Inside the cup there was a monetary prize that Harry hadn’t bothered to check the amount of, eager to leave the platform and fade in obscurity the moment he could.

As soon as Sirius’s part was over as well, Harry tried to shy away from the attention. He knew that people were looking at him, and there were plenty of those who perked up if he so much as glanced in their direction. A witch, likely younger than him, was heading his way with a terrifyingly determined expression, until suddenly Silvia Nott intercepted. Harry didn’t know if that was for the better, considering that the other witch was unlikely to be a threat equal to the one now standing in front of him.

”Mr. Potter,” Nott said, offering him a warm smile. Why did dangerous people have dimples, anyway? ”Your performance was superb.”

”Thank you,” Harry replied warily.

”I’m sure you’re eager to spend a moment with your fans,” Nott continued, clearly knowing that he liked nothing more than to do exactly the opposite of that, ”but allow me to ask you... have you thought of our last conversation?”

’Enough to not trust it,’ Harry thought. He had, at first, thought that he didn’t have a choice. That in order to remain independent, he’d need her help. But now... he didn’t think so. He wasn’t about to let anyone question Sirius’s ability to take care of him, and now he had something he could use to scare people away with. ”I have, yes.”

”And?” Nott urged, a satisfied smile appearing on her lips.

”I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t wish to burden you with such an issue,” Harry said, making the smile disappear. The witch didn’t so much as frown, but the mere absence of her smile spoke volumes of her displeasure.

”Helping you wouldn’t be a burden,” she said. ”Not to me.”
"Miss Nott," Harry said, lowering his voice and stepping closer. He was a bit taller than her, but something about the look in her eyes told him that between the two of them, she was the stronger one. "You don’t know what you’re signing up for by associating with me. And I’m not talking about some odd concept of celebrity, or the mundane squabbles of the society’s finest in the circles you frequent. I’m talking about the dead, Miss Nott. I’m talking about corpses that crawl out of their graves and haunt your corridors. I’m talking about ghosts unlike any you’ve seen. When I say I don’t want to burden you with my association, I mean that I don’t want you to associate in any way with who I am. For your own sake."

"That doesn’t scare me," Nott replied, looking Harry straight in the eyes. The sudden smirk on her face surprised him, and made him uneasy.

"It should," he said. "It scares me."

"Surprisingly weak of you," the witch said, before taking a step back. She didn’t appear mad anymore, which Harry found to be a relief. At the same time, it was alarming, as she was likely developing some other plan that would result in no good for Harry. "Have it your way then, Mr. Potter. For now, at least. I’ll see you soon again."

The moment the witch left, with the sea of people parting before her, Harry sought out a hiding place. He had no interest in talking to anyone, if that was the kind of interaction that he’d have to expect. A quick disillusionment charm allowed him to make his way away from the center of the hall undisturbed, though he was sure that some of the visitors - those who weren’t students, anyway - took notice of him regardless. He was thankful that none of them saw it fit to approach him. Eventually, he ended up under one of the refreshment tables, hidden by the tablecloth, refusing to acknowledge the occasional "has anyone seen Harry?" that he could hear in the distance. He had no doubt that Nott could figure out where he was - she seemed the type - but luckily, she clearly wasn’t directing anyone towards him.

He curled up, tucking his legs close, with the Triwizard Cup on the floor next to him. Surviving this ball was the last thing he’d have to do, and in two days he’d be on the Hogwarts Express, on his way home. He could leave all this behind him, and regroup in peace at Godric’s Hollow. He could take a whole week just to rest and forget about the world if he wanted, and no one would be able to demand anything from him.

He was sick of worrying about the things he’d have to somehow succeed at.

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Stepping into the Hogwarts Express felt unreal.

It was odd to think that the event that had been a problem for so long, was now a thing of the past. Sure, it came with its own consequences, but the disappearance of such a looming, heavy responsibility made Harry feel a bit better. The other Durmstrang students didn’t treat him any differently – although Lestrange didn’t seem half as quick to throw his snide remarks around – and even Skeeter’s article had had nothing but praises for him. Everything was as well as he could hope, and yet the crumbling of his friendship with Truls made him unable to feel happy.

"I’m happy it’s over," Mette said, taking a seat in the compartment they had found for themselves. "I mean, it was an interesting experience, but Merlin, I am happy that it’s over."

"You’re telling me," Harry said, choosing to sit next to the door. "I miss Durmstrang." What if the others had become closer during his absence? What if they had become so close that they wouldn’t want to include him anymore? Did he have the right to worry about such a thing?
"Aw, I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you say that,” Maria said, sitting next to him. "Hey, Ingrid, what’s up ahead for you? This was your last year, wasn’t it?"

"Yes,” the older witch replied. "Headmaster Karkaroff has arranged for me to take the final exams at Durmstrang in two weeks. If I pass, I’ll be able to join the other graduating seventh year students on the first of July. So I’ll just Floo from the Kings Cross station to Durmstrang straight away, and focus on studying.”

"Fun,” Lestrange drawled. "I, thankfully, have no such worries. I’ll be going with Cassius to Switzerland.”

"Cassius Meliflua,” Mette said, turning to Harry. "You’ve never met him, have you? He graduated from Durmstrang already, and let me assure you that his presence was not missed. By anyone.”

"He’s a strong, influential wizard,” Ingrid said, her tone mild yet chiding. "I’m sure he’d love to meet Harry at some point.”

"I don’t know,” Lestrange interrupted, clearly not liking the idea. "I don’t think they have anything in common.”

"Yes, because that’s what Cassius would be thinking about when meeting Harry,” Mette said, her voice sugary sweet. "All the things they have in common.”

Harry, who had no interest in meeting anyone who sounded remotely like trouble, eyed the doorway with contemplation. The train had begun moving already, and the corridors were likely to be emptier now than earlier. Should he just... have a quick walk around? Was there a place on the train that would be void of people?

"Does the Bulgarian team have plans for you this summer?” Truls asked, turning to Krum. Krum nodded, looking very pleased.

"Training,” he said. "My last game went well, but there’s a lot I still need to learn. We—”

Krum’s words were cut short when the door of the compartment was abruptly shoved open, and Delacour leaned in. The expression on her face was a vaguely familiar mixture of resentment and resigned determination, and it became, if possible, even more determined when she saw Harry.

"Potter,” she said. "A moment, if you could.”

"S-sure,” Harry replied, and followed her out of the compartment. Was it wise going with her? Harry didn’t know, but he couldn’t possibly refuse, could he? The witch didn’t say a word as she led him a short distance away, to another compartment that she had clearly been occupying on her own. When the lock of the door clicked behind Harry, he felt momentarily nervous, unsure of what Delacour has asked him to come here for.

"I’m sure you’ve heard this many times now,” she started, "but congratulations. You did an amazing job.”

"Thanks,” Harry replied. "So did you.”

"Yes,” she agreed, and gestured for him to sit down. "But that is to be expected, as I have been to battles before. You are... only fourteen. You haven’t been to battle before the tournament, yes?”

"Yeah,” Harry muttered, hunching his shoulders and looking down at his feet. He didn’t want to dwell on the tasks. They were done. He didn’t want to think of any of that. He heard Delacour sigh,
and was surprised when he felt her thin fingers lift his face up. Her eyes were very blue, and very clear. They didn’t have the hesitation that Harry had lived with for so long.

"I don’t know if you will have nightmares,” she said. "I know that many others would. I also know that I am not the right person to comfort or encourage anyone, but I don’t know if anyone else will do it for you.” Harry’s heart lurched, and he wasn’t sure why this unexpected act of... what? Kindness? Why was it bringing him closer to tears than the possibility of harsh words that he had expected? What kind of a loser felt like crying just because someone was being nice to him? Merlin, Harry felt pathetic.

"Being alone is not good,” Delacour said, her voice low and firm. ”You will be asked to do many things, many bad things, Potter. And you will do things you’re not proud of, just to survive. Bad decisions in order to avoid worse ones. I know all about that. I understand doing everything you can, in order to be the best. These are the cards dealt to us. But don’t... don’t do it alone.”

"I don’t know who I have,” Harry whispered, ashamed. "I don’t know who to trust. I’m not likable.”

"You’re not difficult to like, Potter,” Delacour said. ”But you need to give people chances. You must try. And... more than anything else, you need to give yourself a chance. Learn to like yourself. I’m not... I’m not the best person to say these things. I know you and I are not friends, but you are alone, and I don’t think you deserve to be alone.”

"I don’t know what I deserve,” Harry admitted, his feelings of shame growing stronger. Delacour sighed, and slowly pulled the boy into a stiff hug, pressing his face against her shoulder.

"Happiness is hard work,” Delacour said, ”but it is something we all deserve. It is also not something other people will give you, so you must take care of it. You must make yourself happy, Potter. Trust no one else with something that important.”

But, Circe, how could Harry do that?

Chapter End Notes

A quick note for people asking how long this fic will be (both in terms of chapters and the event timeline) and what kind of an update schedule I have: 1. TTN is going to be about 95 chapters long, 2. Harry will be around 20 yrs old, so we’ll be going a bit beyond his Durmstrang days, and 3. My personal life is very busy, so I cannot maintain a regular updating schedule, as I can’t predict when I have a moment to sit down and write.
Chapter 48

Sirius had wanted Harry to go to Grimmauld Place, and not back home. Harry had refused. For him, there was only Godric’s Hollow.

He knew that his godfather wanted to try his best now, wanted to spend time together and make amends, and Harry appreciated it - no, really, he did. But when he was faced with the reality of having to spend time at his godfather’s house, it just... it made him feel trapped. It wasn’t as if Harry didn’t want to spend time with Sirius, but he needed to know that he’d be able to return to his own space at the end of the day if he so wished. He could - and would – visit Sirius often. He promised himself that he’d visit Grimmauld Place regularly, to talk with Sirius or Remus. He wanted to rebuild his relationship with his godfather, and every time he met Remus, he felt like the world was a bit less confusing that before.

’Sirius and Remus,’ Harry thought, shrugging his jacket off and throwing it onto a chair near the entrance of his home. ’Now that... is... weird.’ Sirius had told him that the werewolf was still living in Grimmauld Place, and that he would likely stay there for as long as he wanted. Sirius, surprisingly, didn’t seem to mind that at all. Which was good, but also unexpected.

It took Harry a while, but he had managed to convince his godfather to let him return to Godric’s Hollow on his own. Sirius had finally relented, but insisted on sending two house-elves with him. ”And if anything alarming happens,” he had said, ”one of them will bring you to me.”

The sad thing was that Harry couldn’t promise him that nothing alarming would happen. Merlin knew what was up ahead. Surviving the Triwizard Tournament was great and all, but there was so much else that Harry needed to work on next. So much that he could barely keep track on them.

’Hopefully Hermione will remember whatever I forget,’ the boy thought, walking slowly towards his room. He wanted to shower, and to eat something good, and then just... do something. He knew that in order to alleviate the anxiety inside of him – the desperate need to not waste time, he didn’t have time enough to waste, he needed to do things now now now – he’d have to start working on all the unfinished business he had, but...

But, damn it, he didn’t want to meet Regulus. What would he even say? What could he say to convince the man that Harry wasn’t evil? Harry had killed him, for Circe’s sake!

On his way to the bathroom, after collecting a fresh set of clothes, Harry passed by his desk. Much to his surprise, he saw a neatly folded note there that he knew hadn’t been there when he had dropped by before the third task.

”Vurney!” Harry called. The house-elf appeared with a pop, its large eyes bulging out of its narrow face.

”Yes, Master Harry?”

”What’s this?” Harry asked, pointing at the piece of paper. ”Do you know if anyone has been here while I was at Hogwarts?”

”M-master Harry received mail, Master Harry,” the thing replied, nodding its head eagerly. ”Master Black hadn’t told Vurney where to take Master Harry’s mail, so Vurney put it where Vurney has always put it before.”

”When did this arrive?” Harry asked, curious. He still wasn’t touching the paper, not sure if it was
cursed. "Do you know who is it from?"

"It arrived two weeks ago, Master Harry," the house-elf told him. "V-vurney doesn’t know who sent it."

'Sirius might get his alarming incident sooner than he expected,' Harry thought, reaching for the piece of paper. He relaxed, however, when he read it.

[Dear Harry]

He recognized Filippa’s handwriting instantly, and something inside of him settled. He continued reading.

[Lyuben told us we can’t write to any of you guys at Hogwarts. Karkaroff thinks it’s distracting. Dietmar had actual monitoring wards set up, so I (we) couldn’t write to you. Or well, we did, but after the fifth letter signed by Björn and I, Dietmar caught us and took us to Lyuben (who really seems to like the position of a deputy headmaster. Reckon Karkaroff will have trouble with him in the future) who said that we can keep trying if we want to spend all of next year in detention. We didn’t, so we stopped. Then Björn suggested that we write something to you and send it to your home rather than the school, because even if you wouldn’t get the letter right away, at least you’d find it waiting for you as soon as you came back home. Just in case, however, we’re sending it disguised as a note so that Dietmar doesn’t catch us again.

That said, Clemens used one of the numerous and highly suspicious tricks that he’s so well-known for, and did something in relation to firecalling to tap your floo? I’m not clear on the details, but he said that the moment you open your house’s Floo again, he’ll know. And then we’ll visit. Because we miss you. We’re so, so, so proud of you, and we can’t wait to see you.

Love,

Filippa (and all the others too)]

Harry put the letter down, his heart beating fast. A smile crept on his face and he wanted nothing more than to go and open the fireplace right away, and get Godric’s Hollow connected to the Floo System again. Instead, he rushed to shower first, and only afterwards – with his hair still dripping wet – did he go to do so.

"Vurney," Harry called, while digging the tip of his want into the soot of the fireplace. "We might be getting guests soon, so make sure there are some snacks on the table or something."

Merlin, he couldn’t wait to see his friends again.

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They didn’t arrive as fast as Harry had thought they would. In hindsight, it made sense. Of course they wouldn’t be sitting together, waiting for Harry to read their message and activate the fireplace. Now he felt a bit ridiculous for thinking so.

It ended up taking nearly three hours before Tinka – his other house-elf – came to inform him that there were guests waiting for him in the front hall.

"Harry!" Filippa gasped in delight, her voice loud and bright in the gloomy house. She wrapped her strong arms around him, and her hug felt nothing short of a healing spell that fixed him into a put-together package again. "I’ve missed you!"
"Way too soon after you guys got to Hogwarts, we were told that all communications are to be put on hold," Björn said, pulling Harry into a quick hug as soon as Filippa let go of him. "But fret not, my friend, I’ve been watching you."

"Less than a minute into the meeting, and he’s already being creepy," Petronella said, her voice faint and tired. She felt like a bird, thin and fragile, when Harry held her. Her skin was cold, too, but her smile was bright and lovely.

"Where’s Truls?" Clemens asked. Despite his question, however, he didn’t seem too bothered by the other boy’s absence. It took Harry a few moments to respond, as the sudden proximity to Clemens’s body was distracting. When he hugged Harry, one of his arms wrapped around the boy’s back pulling him closer, and the other rested at the back of Harry’s head. Pressing his face - no matter how briefly - against Clemens’s bare throat was not something Harry had expected he’d be doing.

Circe, he needed warnings for these things.

"We had a falling out," Harry managed to say after a moment, stepping back. His whole body felt warm, and he wondered briefly if it was normal to feel so electrified by someone else’s body. Probably not.

"You and Truls had a falling out?" Filipp said skeptically. "What achieved that?"

"The removal of the life debt," Harry admitted with feigned ease, before herding his friends towards the kitchen, and the set table. "I can explain more later. Merlin, I have so many things to ask. How have you guys been? Has anything interesting happened at Durmstrang?"

"You’re the one with the interesting events," Björn said cheerfully. "I hope none of them were with my beautiful Mette. Did you mention me to her?"

"I forgot if I did," Harry admitted. "It would have been great to get letters from you guys. I didn’t even know that it had been forbidden. Do you know if they forbade it for everyone, or just the mail coming to me?" He could’ve sworn that Maria had received some letters from Durmstrang.

"They probably let some letters slip through," Filippa said, taking a seat. "But first: congratulations on winning! Everyone was so impressed!"

"That necromancy bit was beautiful," Björn added, and the casual way he spoke of it made Harry feel so much better. "Have you tried animating things other than people? Or things that aren’t dead? How did you move that tree? Was the tree dead? Can you move dead things even if they’re not people? I mean, from a theoretical viewpoint that would be absolutely feasible, I just never thought before—"

"Before we go there," Filippa interrupted, eyeing the food on the table before pulling a bowl of berries closer to her. "Truls? The life debt? I expected to see him here before us."

"I got help from a professor to remove it," Harry said, not wanting to reveal the truth of who actually helped him. "The debt was successfully dissolved but... I think Truls needs a break from me."

"It makes sense, I suppose," Björn said with a frown. "Unfortunate, though."

"Or fortunate," Clemens said. "Depends on how you look at it. Sure, he needs to figure out where he stands now without the life debt, but you also can now look at yourself and choose for yourself what to do, without needing to take him into account all the time."

"It’s still tough," Petronella said, cradling a cup of warm tea between her hands. "Losing someone.
Having someone leave you. No matter how justified it is, it still hurts. I’m sorry, Harry. I’m sure that Truls won’t abandon you for good.”

"Thanks, but I’d rather not think about it right now,” Harry replied, choosing to eat something instead. Merlin, he really felt hungry. "Going back to Durmstrang is going to be brilliant. Hogwarts is nice and all, but it’s not the same.”

"Not surprised,” Clemens said. “We’re better.”

"You missed some hot gossip last year,” Filippa said with a grin. "Some students say that some parts of the grounds are haunted now. Haunted! How is that scary? Not only that, but how is it even possible? No ghosts are allowed at Durmstrang!”

"I believe it,” Petronella said, though she did smile as well. "I was walking back from dinner with Heidi, and there just... I don’t know if haunted is the real word. I mean, we know what ghosts are like. We didn’t see ghosts, but there was just this… really terrible feeling that we got on our way to the apartment complex.”

"It’s not as creepy as some of those tasks you had were, though,” Björn joined in. "Merlin, that first one? I would never!”

"At least the door was locked,” Filippa said, and then shuddered. "But when that thing came busting out of that wall during the second task... Sweet Circe did I scream.”

"Was it entertaining?” Harry asked, thinking of how the whole tournament had been set up as such. "Did you find it fun to watch?”

"No,” Petronella said instantly, though Clemens clearly disagreed with her.

"I liked it,” he said, but the girl shook her head.

"I... I don’t know how to explain it,” she ended up saying. "But I felt like there was something wrong.”

"Hurting people for sport just isn’t my thing,” Björn said, agreeing with Petronella. "Those people in cages? I actually liked Delacour when I saw her, but after that— yikes!”

"It’s not a matter of whether or not you like hurting people,” Clemens pointed out. "It’s just the reality of how things are. A lot of people who lead normal lives far away from battles and fights still hurt each other all the time. What’s the difference between hitting someone with a blasting curse, or_dooming someone to a life of poverty by paying them the absolute least for their work? Sure, the pain you inflict is different, but the end result is the same: people are miserable.”

"We can’t live life fearing when we’re going to hurt someone by accident,” Filippa argued, but Clemens cut her off.

"Doing something by accident is one thing, but I’m not talking about that,” he said. "You know, I’m not even saying to not be nasty to people. Hell, I enjoyed the tasks. I found them great and entertaining! But my problem lies with the people who say that they haven’t deliberately hurt anyone, but still have. If you’re going to hurt someone, accept that it’s wrong, and do it anyway.”

"But keeping up the cycle of hurt isn’t sustainable,” Björn said. "You have to start forgiving at some point.”

"Well, what other response to violence can you give but violence?” Clemens asked, and to Harry it
felt as if he wasn’t talking about the task anymore. "The people who attacked you when you weren’t harming them aren’t going to stop just because you keep on not harming them. Sometimes you have to put an end to it, like Harry did with that guy in the car.”

With a jolt, Harry remembered the man. So did, it seemed, everybody else.

"How do you end up finding people like that?” Björn said with a snort. "I can’t imagine that people like that are too common.”

"People like what?” Petronella asked. "Pedophiles, or people who throw around the kind of comments that he did? About... you know... doing... what he said. To Harry.”

"Well, I know pedophiles are out there,“ Björn said. "But it’s what he said what really threw me off.”

"You’d be surprised by how many people think comments like that are okay.” Filippa said. "And if it felt weird and out of place for you, then that’s just simply how it is. I had a guy once just come up to me and as how good my mouth is. I didn’t know what to reply at the time, because that kind of comments aren’t expected, you know. They’re always absurd and out of place."

"It’s still kind of unbelievable how crazy the tournament was," Petronella said. "But Merlin, that third task took the cake, didn’t it? You’re amazing for pulling through, and I hope that you have no adventures planned for the summer. You need to rest.”

"Sure,” Harry said, already knowing how unlikely any rest would be. He didn’t know for how long his friends were staying, but there were so many things he wanted to talk about with them that dwelling too much on the tournament felt like a waste of time. "So, how were the classes?”

They didn’t stay overnight - not really. They just... didn’t leave until the early hours of the next day. It wasn’t intentional – rather it was simply due to how much catching up they all had to do. For Harry, the more time he spent with his friends from Durmstrang, the more distant his responsibilities became. It was... nice. It was nice to enjoy moments of peace like this, but also dangerous - he couldn’t exactly afford relaxing and forgetting.

"This summer is going to be the best,” Filippa promised as she got ready to leave. "My birthday is in August, and it’s going to be amazing. Make sure you have proper robes for it. And be prepared to visit me in Italy every now and then, okay?”

"I will consider this invitation to include me as well,” Björn said cheerfully, before winking at Harry. "I can’t wait to take you to some of the places I go to. Have you ever tried to smoke a hookah?”

"You will not encourage such behaviour,” Petronella gasped, appalled. "That is unbelievable! Besides, why are you smoking anything at all?”

"Imagine the scandals,” Björn said, leaning towards Harry, who couldn’t help but smile as well. "Harry, man, promise me that if you ever want to, you know, redo your public image, let me help you.”

"Oh, get out already,” Clemens groaned, pushing the redhead towards the fireplace. "Harry, I’ll visit you soon again, okay? Without this guy here, though.”

"I’ll be busy next week anyway,” Björn sniffed. "I’ll be fornicating my way through Europe like Lord Byron before me.”
"I don’t believe that for one second," Clemens said mercilessly. "Hurry up, you nuisance. I want to go home and sleep, but I don’t trust you to leave if I don’t see you actually flooing away. Get to it."

"It was so lovely to see you," Petronella said, hugging Harry again. "We missed you, and we all wanted to support you throughout the tasks. I’m sorry that we couldn’t."

"It’s okay," Harry assured her. "We have all summer to make up for all the days we missed, and next semester everything will go back to normal again." Petronella nodded, and took a fistful of the Floo powder. Moments later, only Filippa was left standing with Harry.

"Make sure you take care of yourself when you’re on your own," Filippa said, a serious expression on her face. "What’s happening with Truls... and all the things that happened during the tournament. Harry, that kind of stress, I think warrants a few visits to a mind healer."

Harry didn’t have the courage to ask her if she had experience in that; he suspected that she did. "I’ll consider it, I promise. Thank you."

"See you," were the last words the witch said, before stepping into the fireplace. Harry, now alone, stood still quietly for a moment. There were a million things he needed to do, but none of them urgent. None of them needed to be done now, at almost three in the morning.

He could go to sleep. And for once, he wasn’t going to wake up early.

Harry didn’t know what he had dreamt of, but when he woke up, he knew: he had to go and talk to Regulus.

The days since the end of the third task were going by fast, and even if Regulus was still waiting for him by the trains, he likely wouldn’t wait for much longer. Harry, as anxious as the thought made him, had to go and talk to him. Avoiding what needed to be done wasn’t going to help him at all in the long run. He knew that, but the knowledge didn’t make him feel any less anxious.

'What would I even say?' Harry thought, still lying in his bed. 'Sorry about killing you, it was supposed to be entertaining?' Besides, it seemed that Regulus had been much more bothered by necromancy than the prospect of dying, really. That wasn’t something he could change.

Harry had never thought of himself as a procrastinator. After all, surely showering, eating brunch, and having a short walk outside were perfectly reasonable things to do before attempting a lengthy negotiation with someone who had all the reasons to hate you? However, when three hours later found him lying on a couch, doing nothing but staring at the painted ceiling, Harry knew that enough was enough: he’d have to do it now.

"Vurney," Harry called, making his way slowly back to his room. "If anyone drops by for a visit, tell them that I’m out with a friend.” He wasn’t sure if there was anyone who’d visit him today - he wasn’t expecting anyone - but there was always a change that someone would decide to come unannounced. Aside from Tom, no one would know to leave him alone if they found his body while he was at the train station, and if it was Tom who visited him, well... telling him about Regulus was
the last thing Harry wanted to do.

He took a deep breath and lied down on his bed. A few more deep, calming breaths later, with his hands folded on his chest and eyes closed, Harry focused once again, and soon enough he could feel the cold wind on his face, a few droplets of rain falling onto him, and the cold concrete under his feet.

*Merlin, he should have remembered to dress properly before coming here.* Harry shook his head, absently noting how thick with smog the air seemed to be. And, once again, the station was crowded most unpleasantly. The familiar sound of departing and arriving trains was something Harry hadn’t realized that he had had used to.

’Now, where to find him,’ the boy thought, making his way slowly closer to the tracks. The station was, once again, too full of people for Harry to find anyone specific there easily. In the end he decided to do what he had done last time: find a bench and stand on it, hoping that a better vantage point would help him.

When he approached one of the benches, however, Harry was startled to see Albus sitting there. Albus, who was talking with Regulus.

Harry stood still for a few moments, feeling suddenly wary and apprehensive. He didn’t know why, though. Surely Albus would understand why Harry killed Regulus, right? ‘And even if he doesn’t,’ Harry decided, ‘it doesn’t matter in the long run. If I’m the one who must do the work, then I should be the one whose opinions matter the most.’

The instant Regulus saw him, the man frowned. Albus, however, had a smile on his face when he turned to look at Harry.

"My boy," the old wizard said, "it has been quite a while, hasn’t it? You’ve grown."

"That’s what time does," Harry replied, and coughed. *Merlin, the air was really bad. "We grow. Regulus Black, thank you for waiting."

"I wasn’t going to," Regulus said, not bothering to hide his evident dislike towards Harry. "But Albus happens to be someone I respect greatly, and he convinced me to wait. I will say now, however, that I will not be sharing any information regarding Rebel activities with you."

"I’m not here for that," Harry told him. "Has Albus told you what I’m working on?"

Regulus narrowed his eyes, and slowly shook his head. "No."

"I’m hunting the Dark Lord’s horcruxes," Harry said bluntly. There was no need to hide this from Regulus - who would he tell? If he knew anything about horcruxes, hopefully he’d share what he knew with Harry. If he knew nothing, then he’d likely ask for more information.

"Why?" the man said, clearly caught off guard. "Aren’t you one of his faithful minions? Why would you want to find his horcruxes?"

'So he knows what a horcrux is,' Harry thought, pleased. "I do not believe in immortality. Everyone has to die at some point, and he is no exception to that rule. You’re correct in saying that I am faithful to him, but sometimes that means doing what one must, regardless of whether the object of the action agrees to it or not."

"That can be interpreted in many terrible ways," Regulus said, though he didn’t seem as hostile as earlier. "I do see your point, however. Did you kill me to gain his favour?"
"Yes," Harry admitted, not elaborating further on how that fit into the overall relationship he had with Tom. "If I have his favour, seeking his horcruxes could be easier."

"Or it could be harder," Regulus pointed out. "If he knows you, he can track your movements. How do I know that you’re telling the truth, anyway?"

"I’m not asking you for information that can be used to benefit him," Harry pointed out. "He already knows where his horcruxes are.” Not to mention that Harry was pointedly holding himself back from asking anything else.

"If I may," Albus cut in, smiling slightly. "Regulus, Harry’s mission to render Tom mortal once again has been issued by both myself and another person who frequents this station. I vouch for him."

Regulus looked down at his hands, processing what he had been told. Harry stood still, trying to breathe as shallowly as possible, and doing his best to ignore the cold that was biting into his skin and sinking into his bones. He’d have to leave soon - he was starting to feel faint and tired, and he didn’t know what would happen if he passed out while he was in this limbo.

"All right," Regulus finally said. "I don’t know much, mind you, but I do know that Slytherin’s locket is one of his horcruxes. Also, I’m fairly sure that his snake is another. I can only guess about the rest."

"Thank you," Harry sighed, feeling relieved. While it didn’t seem like much, knowing two was more than he had hoped for at this point. He wasn’t going to get them immediately: not until he knew what to do with them. But it was good to know. "I... I have to go now, but I’d appreciated if you didn’t board a train quiet yet.”

"I guess I won’t," Regulus said, standing up and stepping closer to Harry. He wasn’t as tall as Sirius, but almost a head taller than Harry anyway. "I don’t trust you yet, but I’m willing to try and help you out. Next time when you visit, however, I’ll have questions for you as well. And Potter, I expect answers."

"Of course," Harry replied, and took a step back. Dead or not, Regulus Black was intimidating. "Thank you. Albus, I’m glad to see you as well. I’ll visit soon again."

"Please do," the old wizard said, his blue eyes twinkling. "Till next time, my boy."

Harry nodded, and made the mistake of taking a deep breath. The coughing fit had him closing his eyes and nearly falling down, and he didn’t even realize it at first when the cold and damp environment of the train station changed into the dry warmth of his bedroom. There, Harry breathed the considerably cleaner air, before slowly sitting up.

There, in his room, a thought occurred to him: Albus had said that Harry wanted to make Tom mortal again. Did Regulus know that Harry intended to unite the horcruxes rather than destroy them? Would it matter to him?

It was as if his talk with Regulus – no matter how brief it had been – had unlocked something within Harry. A feeling of stress was still there, but it wasn’t as prominent and overwhelming as it had been before. The summer ahead of him didn’t appear unmanageably difficult anymore, and the thought of leaving the house and meeting people seemed fine. He was, for whatever reason, feeling better.
When Tom finally dropped by for a visit, Harry hadn’t been expecting him.

"You look better than I thought you would," Tom said, eyeing the boy. "It’s as if you’re sleeping and eating regularly. Well done."

"I can handle myself," Harry replied, though he wasn’t sure how truthful he was being. "You’re the one who looks like you’re dead on your feet. How do you expect people to not worry when you have bags under your eyes?"

"Worry for me is not what people feel when they see me," Tom said, stretching out on the couch. Harry looked at him for a moment, and wondered what kind of situation could cause the Dark Lord to lose sleep. "Not to mention that most people never even see my face. It’s a privilege that you’re carelessly enjoying."

"I’m humbled," Harry said, amused. "Is something bothering you?"

"Something is always bothering me," Tom replied immediately, before rolling his eyes and sitting up. "Did you go to that train station of yours after the third task?"

"Yes," Harry replied, the world slipping out before he even thought of it. Luckily, he managed to follow it up with a convincing lie: "I thought I’d ask Black about anything that could be useful. He wasn’t there, though."

"Pity," Tom muttered, frowning. "Then again, I doubt he would have told you anything useful, anyway. It’s good to know that he’s actually dead, however. Now we only have the hundreds of Rebel camps to deal with."

"Is a continued war truly the only option?" Harry asked. "It just... can’t there be some sort of societal reform that allows us to coexist?"

"No," Tom said, and there was something about the tone in which the denial was issued that made Harry startle, feeling a flash of fear. "There’s a difference between disagreeing on taxation or health care, and disagreeing on the social hierarchy and the human rights that each position in that hierarchy comes with. I do not think that all people are equal, and I do not think that most people deserve the same rights as I do. I have contributed to this society much more than they have, and I will continue to contribute much more than they ever will."

"Um..."

"Also," Tom continued, clearly growing agitated. "Let’s say I started allowing mudbloods and creatures more rights. You know very well that it won’t stop there. They’ll come back asking for more and more, inconveniencing the system and not being grateful for the things that they do get. They will demand things, and they will question things, as if they have any right to so much as breathe in my direction. As if they have any right to look at me. No, I will not compromise with them. In fact, I will not be satisfied until the last of them is a miserable husk, begging to die by my hand. It is what they deserve. It is the punishment they have called upon themselves for what they’ve done."

'Oh,' Harry realized suddenly, 'he’s very sensitive towards anything he considers disrespect.' And wasn’t that interesting? In hindsight, it wasn’t surprising – Tom had always wanted respect, that much was clear. Harry just hadn’t realized how much the lack of respect could enrage the Dark Lord, and how violent that would make him. How much it would bother him even when it came from people he thinks are worthless.
"There has to be a final solution to all of this," Harry said. "Tracking down camps and killing hundreds of people at a time isn’t going to solve anything."

"Oh, there will be a final solution all right," Tom said, as if remembering something particularly pleasant. "That, however, won’t be any of your concern for quite a while. You still have quite a few years at Durmstrang ahead of you, don’t you?"

"Yes, because I’m going to wait until I graduate before I start thinking of the faults in our societal infrastructure," Harry snarked back. "Anyway, you clearly need to sleep more."

"You’re happy that finally it’s you who gets to say it to someone else, aren’t you?" Tom accused. He then sighed, and shook his head. "I’ll be fine. Some of our newer recruits aren’t as competent as I had been led to believe, and we lost some ground in Bulgaria because of that."

"There are Rebel camps in Bulgaria?" Harry said, surprised. "How do you find them?"

At this, surprisingly, Tom grinned. He appeared to become instantly more awake, and infinitely more satisfied with himself. "Remember that thing you said, a while ago, about how I could use my name to reveal someone’s location?"

"No," Harry admitted. "Then again, if that was supposed to be an explanation, you need to try again and do better."

"Fine," Tom huffed, and leaned forward. "Settle down, this will take a moment. So, it’s similar to the Trace, except it’s triggered when my name is used..."

Harry held back a fond smile as he watched the man explain the curse that he had come up with. Harry himself had never been particularly interested in magical theory, but Tom’s clear enjoyment towards it was contagious. And though Harry spent quite a lot of time with people who enjoyed learning and researching and developing new things, there was only one who could match Tom.

* *

When Harry received an invitation for coffee from Hermione a few days after Tom’s visit, he had been admittedly surprised. He did remember that they had discussed meeting up during the summer, but the thought of going to a muggle coffee shop made him nervous. Harry hadn’t been to one before, and wasn’t sure if they had any specific customs he’d need to adhere to. He had heard from Björn – who had once tried to get into a muggle pub for some reason – that some places had guards at the door, asking questions. Harry didn’t want to be asked any questions, but he also didn’t want to miss out on visiting an actual muggle coffee shop.

To meet Hermione, Harry took a train from King’s Cross to Hampstead Heath, where the witch was waiting for him.

"Oh, Harry," Hermione said, hugging him tightly. "I know it has only been a few weeks, but Merlin, it’s good to see you again!"

"Likewise," Harry replied. "I’ve never been to a muggle coffee shop before."

"Never?" Hermione said, clearly surprised. She then smiled, and shook her head. "It’s all right, it’s not too different from the coffee shops in Diagon Alley. Just... with less flying things, I suppose. I’m sure that you’ll like it."

She was right. Harry did like it.
The lights weren’t too bright, and most tables and chairs didn’t match at all. There were paintings and mirrors on the wall, and even the tiles on the floor were mismatched. The coffee shop was cozy and noisy, which made Harry relax a bit. It would be very difficult for anyone to try and eavesdrop on them: if anything they said didn’t end up disappearing into the general ongoing murmur, any sounds were bound to be drowned out by the music that was loud enough to reach every corner of the place.

"They don’t have a menu, but I can get us both something," Hermione said as soon as she had sat Harry down. "My treat. Is there anything you don’t like?"

"Not really," Harry replied, and was startled to realize that really, he couldn’t remember any food that he didn’t like. "Anything is fine."

"Great," the witch beamed, and made her way towards the counter. Harry looked around him again, marveling at how no one seemed to be paying him any attention. And, Merlin, all of these were muggles! He really didn’t interact with muggles often.

'Mum had a muggle sister,' Harry remembered suddenly. He also vaguely recalled talking with Truls about going to see her. What was her name again? Petra, or something. 'Would she even want to see me? Does she know that mum died? Would she care? They didn’t get along, mum always said.'

"Here we go," Hermione said, setting down a tray on the table between them, and pulling Harry out of his thoughts. "I got us both cappuccinos, salmon quiches, and two blueberry muffins."

"This looks amazing, Hermione, thank you," Harry said, feeling stupid at having somehow thought that muggles here in England would eat food that Harry wouldn’t be familiar with. "How have you been?"

"Good," the witch replied, "reading a bit, relaxing, planning... How are you holding up?"

"Getting better," Harry said. "But I’m a bit... confused about what I’ll be doing next. Find the horcruxes? Do promotions? I don’t know."

"It’s good to know where the horcruxes are," Hermione agreed, "but unless we know what to do with them..."

"I know," Harry sighed. "I spoke with Regulus Black, and he said he can help us."

"Wait, you did?" Hermione leaned forward, her dark eyes shining with excitement. "Harry, that’s brilliant! I didn’t even think of asking him!"

"It’s just, I don’t know what to ask him," Harry said, "and it’s difficult to stay there for long, somehow the air keeps getting worse and worse. I barely had the time to ask him if he knows what any of the Dark Lord’s horcruxes are."

"You need a mask of some sort, then," Hermione said. "As for what to ask him, we can work together on that. First, though, I wanted to update you on the sponsorship offers."


"Yes, he’s fairly happy, although I did feel like he had perhaps wanted more visibility for his product. Regardless, he’s not dissatisfied, and that’s what matters. I’ve approached some other businesses, and while promotion opportunities are unknown at the moment, they seem to be interested."
"Okay,” Harry said. ”Then, what’s our next step?"

"Well, there isn’t much we can do right now,” Hermione admitted hesitantly. ”Aside from looking for the horcruxes, I mean. I’m still reading things - both law and economics, and it’s appalling that Hogwarts teaches neither! I think that the best thing for you to do for now, Harry, is to... recover from the tournament. So that when a chance for us to take action pops up, we’ll both be ready for it.”

"All right, then,” Harry said. ”You keep reading those things, and I’ll keep looking into the horcrux situation. Let’s just… go with that, and adapt when necessary."

"Sure,” Hermione agreed, before shyly continuing: ”we can still, uh, meet up for coffee anyway. I mean, I understand if you’re busy, I don’t know you schedule, but I’m mostly free, so we don’t have to have an agenda in order to meet. I’d be happy to meet up anyway.”

"I’d love that,” Harry said, and took a moment to bask in the silent happiness that came with being wanted company for no ulterior motives. Hermione just seemed to like him as a friend, and that was amazing. It made Harry feel likable. ”I’d really, really love that.”
"Here." Clemens shoved a drink into Harry's hands, and pushed him to sit down. He then sat down on the bench next to Harry, and only then did Harry notice that Clemens had foregone the glasses of champagne floating around, and opted for a whole bottle of what looked like red wine instead.

"I don't drink," Harry said, worrying over the things he might let slip if he ever lost his bearings.

"You could this once," Clemens told him. "Relax a bit. It's a party."

It was a party all right.

Filippa's birthday was every bit as extravagant as she had said it would be. The celebration was hosted at an estate that sprawled across acres upon acres across the hills of Umbria, with miles of greenery and colourful flowers surrounding the area. The beauty of the olive groves was matched only by the vineyards, completing the picturesque appearance of the location. The main building was built out of stone and glass, with large windows and a historic air to it. The whole place was filled with sunshine and warmth, and Harry felt as if he could easily live in a place like this.

"Why are you here?" Harry asked, considering taking a sip of the drink Clemens had brought him, but then deciding against it. He really couldn't afford slip-ups. "I saw you earlier talking to people."

To models of some sort. Filippa had indeed kept her promise and had set up an entire fashion show for the guests. After the show many of the models had remained, and Harry had seen Clemens talk to a few of them. It hadn't been a fun thing to see, but he also knew that he had no right to feel upset about it.

"You're always sad these days," Clemens said, swinging his bottle a bit. "Is this really all about Truls, anyway? He wasn't that good, you know. He's not worth being sad over."

"He was my best friend," Harry said quietly, hating the past tense he was using. "He... he was really kind to me."

"I can be kind too," Clemens said, and Harry resisted the urge to sigh. Oh, how he wished that Clemens could be even a bit like how Truls had been. "What do you want? I can carry your books or whatever. I can protect you, too. Not that you need it."

Harry did sigh then, and looked at the guests milling around, chattering and enjoying the beautiful afternoon. There was a large number of people in attendance, and trays of drinks and snacks were floating around, somehow managing to not bump into anyone. He couldn't see Filippa, but knew that she was somewhere with Petronella and Heidi, likely focusing more on the fashion items on display than socializing with her guests.

Harry had spent some time with the girls, earlier, but too many people had recognized him from the Triwizard Tournament and had insisted on congratulating him and shaking his hand. He had smiled, remembering all the advice he had gotten from Gildy, Hermione, and Sirius, but eventually the need to retreat to a quiet corner outside to collect his thoughts and calm down had won over. That had been where Clemens had found him.

"You know I don't have many friends," Harry said, trying to explain why Truls's absence was so difficult for him to handle. "And I need... um... I like hugs. And being hugged. And Truls never... he never made it awkward or weird, and he was always very comforting, and now that he's not with me anymore, I don't... I know it sound stupid, but, you know. It is what it is." What else could he say,
really? He wasn't ashamed of the fact that he wanted some sort of affection - wasn't that a normal human desire to have?

"Oh," Clemens said, and seemed to momentarily focus all his attention on the bottle he was holding. The wine was almost all gone, but he didn't appear to be drunk. "You know, if you were a girl, I'd do that for you."

"I'm not a girl though, am I," Harry said tiredly, trying his hardest to not acknowledge the twinge of pain Clemens's words had caused. "It's fine, I'll pull through. Or find someone else."

"I don't want you to find someone else," Clemens said, turning to Harry with a frown. "I don't think anyone is good enough for you, you know. It's weird to think that you'd fall in love and have a relationship with someone."

Harry was struck speechless, his jaw hanging open in stunned disbelief. Clemens didn't seem to realize how hurtful his words had been - or maybe he just didn't care. Instead, he carried on saying: "Honestly, if you were a girl, I'd treat you so well, Harry. I'd marry you a buy you a house just like this one, you know."

"I'm not a girl," Harry repeated, his voice just barely a whisper now. His hands were clenched so tightly that his knuckles were white, and every word Clemens said just hurt more and more. Merlin, he liked Clemens. Wanted to be liked by Clemens, too. But that clearly wasn't going to happen.

"I wonder if your name would've been Harriet," Clemens continued, as if he hadn't heard what Harry had said. "You know, I'm glad Truls is away from you. He got all your attention, all the time."

"Are you drunk?" Harry managed to ask, the hurt he was feeling nearly choking him. Merlin, why didn't Clemens stop talking?

"I don't know," Clemens said, and shrugged. "You know, sometimes I think of you in that big house, all alone. It's not good for girls to live alone."

"I'm not a girl, Clemens," Harry repeated again, hating everything that had ever led him to this situation. Why was Clemens even saying that? Why were those thoughts even in his head? Harry most definitely didn’t look like a girl – not even a little bit. He wasn’t even feminine enough for that to be an implication.

"I'm going to go home with you," Clemens decided suddenly. "No one's waiting for me at my place anyway, so I'll just go with you. Okay, Harry? Let's go. I'll go with you."

Harry, feeling trapped by something he didn't understand, only nodded. He didn't know what this would lead to, and wasn't particularly keen on finding out. But Clemens was his friend, and with as few friends as Harry had, he didn't want to lose another one. So he left a message with one of the house-elves for Filippa, helped Clemens up on his feet, and went back to Godric's Hollow.

When Harry had returned home with Clemens in tow, he had instructed Vurney to take care of the older boy, and get him settled into one of the guest rooms. Harry couldn't bear to do it himself, in fear of what else Clemens might say.

He couldn't remember ever wishing to be a girl. He had never felt wrong for being a boy, and for liking boys. He hadn't wanted to share that information with the world, but he'd never felt ashamed of it. Somehow Clemens had, perhaps unintentionally, made him feel like two pieces of a puzzle that didn't fit together. If he was a boy, he should like girls. If he liked boys - or wanted to be liked by
boys - he should've been born a girl.

It made him feel sick, and he didn't know what to do or say. It was hard to focus on anything else but the hurt and confusion. These thoughts were still on his mind next morning, when he was sitting alone eating breakfast, and waiting for Clemens. The weather outside was nice, but it did little to make Harry feel better. When eventually Clemens turned up, the other boy looked only mildly hungover.

"Whenever I drink, I end up regretting it," Clemens said.

'How often do you drink?' Harry thought, but didn't dare to ask. Instead, he said: "Are you feeling all right? You drank a whole bottle of wine yesterday."

"Two," Clemens said, sighing in satisfaction after the first few sips of coffee that he took. "I already had a bottle before I found you."

"You didn't look that drunk," Harry said, wondering if this was something to be worried about. Was it normal for anyone to drink that much? How often did one have to drink, to build a tolerance like Clemens? They were fifteen, when did he even have time to drink that much?

"I can handle my alcohol pretty well," Clemens said. "It's just by the end of the second bottle, that's when it all goes to shit."

"You didn't slur when you spoke," Harry said, feeling anxious again. Should he tell Clemens now to never call him a girl again? Or at least... just... not make him feel awful for not being a girl?

"Maybe," Clemens said, "but I also don't remember anything from what I said. Last thing I remember is asking you about being sad, or whatever. How are you?"

"I'm good," Harry said, the words slipping out amid internal chaos. Clemens didn't remember anything? Could Harry ask him about what he said at all, then? Was it a bad thing, anyway? Sure, it had made him - it still made him - feel sick to even think about, but maybe he was overreacting? Maybe he was being overly sensitive, and this wasn't something he should have dwelled on to begin with? Harry didn't know what the right thing to do was, and so he decided to do nothing at all. Pushing the memory aside for now was difficult, but made easier when he moved on to something else.

"We've got two weeks before school starts," Harry said, making Clemens focus on him again. "Do you have anything planned?"

"No," Clemens said. "Just training, probably. Flying, dueling... the things I normally do, but nothing's set on stone. Why?"

"I'm thinking of going to Egypt," Harry admitted, and continued before Clemens could ask him why again: "During one of the tasks George went to a museum of sorts, and... the mummy that he encountered... I don't know if you remember, but it was alive. Someone was trapped there, and..."

"And Weasley was too weak for a mercy killing," Clemens said, nodding. "I remember. You know, some guys almost admired how cold he was for doing that, until we realized that it really was just him not wanting to kill someone. Typical Hogwarts student, isn't he?"

"Regardless," Harry pushed forward. "I've been thinking about this for quite a while now, and I want to go back and... you know."

"Kill the guy trapped in that mummy?" Clemens asked. "Yeah, I'm in. I can even do it, if you don't
want to."

Harry nodded slowly, the tangle of painful feeling inside of him loosening up a little. At least there was something good that he would be able to do right away. If only all his problems were this easy to solve, his life would be much easier.

'Then again, now with the Triwizard Tournament over, I have that option,' Harry thought. He could just quietly work on looking for the Horcruxes while promoting companies that weren't owned by purebloods. Play the liberal angle, as Gildy had put it, and pretend it was a gimmick to avoid backlash from those in power.

"You could ask your godfather for the exact location," Clemens said, finishing his breakfast, and refilling his cup of coffee one last time. "That way we won't have to guess which museum that thing's at. All that's left is a portkey or, if we don't want to wait for one to be issued for us, we could just Floo there. It's a bit too far to apparate, which is why I'm not suggesting that."

"You know how to apparate?" Harry asked, surprised. He knew that Tom had made him learn it much earlier than other students, as people usually waited until they were seventeen or so, before focusing on learning it. Then again, usually apparating was taught in the course of a few months, not a few short weeks like Harry. People tended to have time for it only after their studies were done.

"Yeah, I had to learn it last summer," Clemens said, but didn't elaborate further on why and who taught him. "So, how about you write to your godfather, and then we prepare for our trip? We could kill the mummy, then have lunch there, and then come back by the evening."

"Okay," Harry agreed, calling Tinka and asking her to bring him a quill and some parchment. He didn't know if telling Sirius about his real reasons for wanting to know the place would be wise, and decided instead to simply give him another excuse. When he sent the owl, he hoped that his godfather would reply to him fast. Even if Clemens had forgotten the things he had said yesterday, Harry needed more things to do to be able to do the same.

* *

Tom was having a great week.

Not only was the camp that Harry had located during the third task been dealt with, but a few of the Rebels ended up revealing four more camps in Europe. Tom felt like he, perhaps, should reward Harry for it - this series of successes had been built on the boy's contribution, after all. Especially since not having found these new camps before implied that somehow they either were coincidentally never using his name - which he doubted - or they knew of the Taboo Curse that he had cast.

Them knowing about the Taboo, in turn, meant that someone likely revealed the information. It was too new for them to have just figured out.

'There aren't many who're aware of the Taboo,' Tom thought, frowning. Not many, but still too many to be able to identify a suspect right away.

"Thinking of the boy?" Nagini hissed, slithering across the table, carelessly knocking down anything she touched.

"Not really," Tom replied. He hadn't, not when Nagini had asked her question anyway. "Although perhaps I should. He's proving to be more and more interesting every time he chooses to do something." Because, really, a necromancer? Tom still wasn't over it. The Dark Mark? Merlin, he
didn't even know what would be a good enough reward for *that*.

Bellatrix had asked him - hesitantly, bowing down to the floor and apologizing in advance for her audacity - if there was a reason why Harry's dueling style was nearly identical to his. The only reason why Tom hadn't punished her for asking about things that clearly weren't hers to know, was how Lucius, Severus, and Sirius had all looked highly alarmed by the mere mention of it. It seemed to him then that if they had seen some kind of resemblance, none of them had thought much of it.

Regardless, he hadn't been interested in answering her question, and had simply ordered her to focus more on the things she was supposed to be working on. If any of them were to ask Harry, he didn't think the boy would talk either. He was good at keeping secrets.

Which brought Tom back to the whole necromancy thing. As much as he was delighted by it, he couldn't help but wonder if Harry was hiding anything else from him. Sure, the boy had mentioned that he had kept it a secret to surprise Tom, but *still*. What else? And how had he figured it out, anyway? Tom had seen Harry a few times since the end of the tournament, and yet he *still* hadn't asked the boy about this new ability that he had unearthed.

Tom wanted to know *everything* about it, and yet every time he was about to say something, he felt hesitant. It wasn't just a matter of where to start, but also what to even ask. He already knew that Harry could talk to the dead. Now he could animate dead bodies. What else could he do? Or rather: what else could he do that he wasn't aware of, yet?

"I should set up some sort of a training camp for him," Tom thought aloud, petting Nagini out of habit more than actual intention. "See how far I can push him before he figures out something else interesting." Or maybe he should send the boy with Bellatrix somewhere. Merlin knew the witch was ready to adopt him - a fact that Tom still didn't know what to think of. And though Harry would likely benefit greatly from become a Lestrange by adoption, it would also limit his free time greatly, and make it difficult for him to meet Tom in secret.

Would it be terrible if Bellatrix knew? Probably not, as she would most certainly not object to anything Tom wanted to do. Despite this, the thought of someone finding out how close he and Harry were made him feel somehow annoyed. He wasn't worried about Harry being in increased danger if he's associated with Tom closely - the boy knew how to handle himself - but the secrecy of their acquaintanceship was... it was *important*. Somehow. Tom didn't know how, but it was.

"I don't know what a camp is," Nagini told him.

Tom thought for a few moments of how to explain what a camp was, before he decided not to bother. "Suffer in ignorance."

"I bet your boy would tell me," the snake sulked, making Tom roll his eyes.

"My boy wouldn't understand you," he said, mockingly referring to Harry the same way Nagini had. It was only afterwards that he wondered if Bellatrix would be alarmed by him referring like that to a fifteen-year-old. *Merlin*, Harry was already *fifteen*. Or was he? If he wasn’t, he would be soon enough. Tom remembered how distracted by girls his first followers had been around that age, when they had all been at Hogwarts. Suddenly girls were more important than politics, and it had taken quite a lot to steer them back. With Harry, Tom had to be worried about boys, which was something that he hadn't quite expected to ever worry about.

Bellatrix hadn't given him any trouble, even when she decided that she’d be marrying Rodolphus. Hopefully Harry would be somewhat similar. Especially now that the other boy - the one whose life debt Tom had dissolved - seemed to have more or less disappeared from Harry's life. Surely the boy
wouldn't go accepting the continuous company of other men? Perhaps he should discuss this with
Harry, and make sure that the boy understood that he'd have plenty of time to date at the age of forty.
He didn't need to go looking for any relationships anytime soon.

"He's not going to wait that long," Nagini said, with the confidence of a barely literate reptile. "He's
going to want to mate soon."

"You're wrong," Tom said dismissively. He didn't know where Nagini got ideas like this, but she
was wrong. Harry was too busy to even think about boys, and if he wasn't, well... all the more reason
for Tom to increase his training, wasn't it?

Harry didn't think he had ever exuded sweat the way he was doing now: he could feel actual rivulets
of it going down his face and back. It wasn't just the heat that bothered him so much, but the
humidity that added to it, making even the occasional gust of wind warm. His hair was damp from
sweat, and his eyes were itching. Clemens wasn't faring any better.

"You know what this made me realize?" the German boy started. "That learning a spell to keep you
warm isn't the solution to all your weather problem. Merlin, I didn't know I'd need to learn a spell to
keep myself from getting too hot!"

"The problem is that those two spells don't address the actual issue," Harry said, wiping the sweat off
his face. "We need a spell that just regulates the air around you to be suitable for your body,
regardless of whether it's too cold or too hot. One spell that does that, rather than two separate spells
for two opposite tasks, you know?"

"That would be amazing," Clemens agreed, just as the two entered the museum George had visited
during the task. The air there was jarringly cold in comparison to the heat outside, and Harry felt so
relieved that he stood still, enjoying the drop in temperature for nearly a minute.

"Your hair's a mess," Clemens pointed out with a laugh. "Looks cute."

It was funny how if the events at Filippa's birthday hadn't happened, Harry would have fully enjoyed
being called cute by Clemens. Now, however, it reminded him of, well, what if Clemens secretly
thought that being cute was for girls only? Maybe it didn't make any sense, this new fear, but who
knew what kind of thoughts Clemens was holding back?

"We have to be discreet," Harry said, walking forward. "I don't want to explain to Egyptian
authorities why we're casting spells near their ancient artifacts.

"I doubt that's going to be an issue," Clemens said, a note of disgust in his voice. "These are
muggles. All we need to do is just... Actually, I can do it."

"Do what?" Harry asked, worried all of a sudden. He knew that Clemens did not like muggles at all,
and there was no telling how he'd go with providing them with privacy.

"Cast a repelling charm temporarily on us when we find the thing. That way you can do your thing,
and no one around us will see it. What are you planning on using, anyway? A cutting curse? I like
those."

"I think the body is so old and, well, mummified that it doesn't have any blood in it," Harry replied,
still trying to make sense of the map of the place. "Do you remember which room the mummy was
in?" he then asked, heading towards one of the wide doorways inside the museum that led to
different sections of it. The other people there didn't pay them any attention, and Harry wondered
what he would do if someone interfered with his mission. It wasn’t likely to happen, right?

"Oh, that's true," Clemens said, following Harry and thinking of the different spells that could be of use. "You could incinerate it."

"I can't guarantee that the soul will die with the body," Harry said. "There's clearly some sort of a curse keeping the soul trapped. If I just burn the body, the spirit could be left behind, still trapped. Also, an ancient artifact - do mummies count as artifacts? - suddenly being burnt in its case is bound to make people ask questions. I'd really prefer to avoid that."

"What are you planning on using, then?" Clemens asked, curious. "Do you have something in your mind?"

"The Killing Curse," Harry replied, just as they entered a room lined with statues of all kinds. At the far end he could see the mummy, wrapped in its yellowing garb, seemingly dead to the world. "This looks familiar. Look, I think that's the mummy."

"Its eyes are closed," Clemens muttered, leaning closer to the glass case the thing was held in. Suddenly, as if roused by their presence, the dark-lidded eyes opened slightly, as if to peek through eyelashes that were no longer there.

"Cast your spell, Clemens," Harry whispered. "Discreetly." He held his wand in his hand, holding it from the middle, with most of it hidden in his sleeve. It wasn't a grip he'd prefer to ever cast a spell with, but it was much safer than just pulling it out and making it visible to any accidental observers.

When Harry turned back from Clemens to the mummy, he almost took a step back. The mummy's eyes weren't narrowly open anymore - they were wide, and fixed on him with intensity that hadn't been there even when George had visited.

"I'm going to kill you," Harry whispered, and hoped that the relief he saw wasn't just his imagination. He then jammed the tip of his wand between the glass panels, pointing at the mummy. For a second green light illuminated the entire box, and when it was gone... the mummy's eyes were closed once again. Unlike before, there was a new kind of stillness to it - stillness that Harry hoped meant peace.

"We're done," he told Clemens, turning away from the mummy. "Let's go."

"That was beautiful," Clemens said, following Harry outside again. He seemed to be in a great mood. "Merlin, I wish I knew how to cast that spell. It's fantastic, and its colour is so vibrant. And it's very useful too - I should've known that it's what you'd be using."

Harry had used it because to him, it was the only spell that he could trust to truly free the soul trapped in there. He knew that many people shied away from its use, not feeling comfortable with the concept of the caster embracing the intent to kill. Harry knew though that sometimes... it was necessary. Sometimes it was the best thing someone could do.

With that in mind, Harry decided to focus next on another one of his ongoing problems that revolved around the dead: Regulus.

It was perhaps the first time that Harry felt relieved by Clemens leaving. How could he want the other boy gone as much as he wanted him near, he didn't know, but that was how it was. He still wanted Clemens’s arms around him, and the thought of being so close to him made Harry's face feel hot. Simultaneously, however, he was afraid of what Clemens would say or do next that would end
up hurting him.

Which was why focusing on his upcoming meeting with Regulus was a much better option than sitting alone in his house, thinking of Clemens or Truls. He didn't expect anyone to visit him: Tom was busy with whatever work he actually did, and with the beginning of his fifth year at Durmstrang being only a week away, none of his classmates would visit. He had received letters from Hermione and Luna, and neither had expressed any plans to drop by either. His day was his alone.

Harry made his way towards the bed, and grimaced when he accidentally hit his foot against the mask that Luna had given him. He had been looking for one of his old notebooks earlier, and in the process had ended up messing his room up a little. This resulted in the gas mask being on the floor, from where he now decided to move it onto his desk.

Right before getting into bed, Harry decided to wear a pair of shoes, and a light coat. He always went to the station dressed the way he would in his warm home, regretting it afterwards. This time, he wanted to focus on the things he needed to discuss with Regulus, and not be distracted by the biting cold that often ended up bothering him there.

Again, like many times before, Harry closed his eyes and relaxed into his bed. The first thing he could hear was the sound of a train leaving, and the heavy rain hitting the unprotected areas of the station. When he opened his eyes, everything was as it always has been: grey, grim, and crowded. As he made his way towards the bench where he had last seen Regulus, Harry congratulated himself on the shoes and the jacket. Now if only he could figure out what to do to start breathing properly here. He needed some sort of a mask. Hermione had told him that he'd need one, and—

Oh. A mask. Oh, Merlin. He was stupid. Luna's gas mask! Obviously.

"Potter," a displeased voice said from right in front of him, and Harry yelped in surprise when he saw Regulus standing there. "What are you doing here again?"

"We need to talk," Harry reminded him. Hadn't they already gone through this? "I understand that you dislike me due to, you know, me being the reason you're here..." Honestly, dealing with someone you murdered was very awkward. Harry didn't like it one bit.

"No, I dislike you because you're a necromancer," Regulus said, looking at Harry with an unfriendly expression. "Death is a necessity of war. It doesn't offend me."

"I was born a necromancer," Harry said, rolling his eyes in frustration. "What's evil about it, anyway? That I speak to dead people? Yeah, every minute I spend speaking to you is clearly making me more Dark."

Regulus frowned, as if the counter-argument hadn't been what he had expected. After a moment, he said: "You may have been born with it, and that is not something you can do anything about, but you choose to use it."

"Yes," Harry agreed, feeling impatient now. "Because I need all the tools I can get, and I'm not going to let some false sense of morality get in the way of that. Is this something you can accept and work with? Because I've told you what I need to do already, and you know I need your help."

The stubborn expression on Regulus's face reminded Harry too much of Sirius, but eventually the other man relented with a heavy sigh. He led Harry back to the bench, and gestured for him to sit down. Harry did so, briefly wondering where Albus and Merope were, and where they went when they weren't here.
“You know,” Regulus started. “When I was young, Voldemort was just a nightmare. He hadn’t taken over the Ministry yet, and most people knew that he was nothing but an ambitious criminal who’d lead our entire society into darkness and segregation. He was evil and cruel, and life under his rule would be nothing but horror and fear.”

Harry wanted to disagree, but he knew that Tom truly was all of that, though he hadn’t led their world into utter destruction quite yet. The way it was now, however, was far from how it should be. Fear was present, but Tom wasn’t cruel without reason. Usually.

“When he gained more power, people began resisting,” Regulus continued. “Eventually he took over the Ministry, and those who resisted him had to either change their opinions, or go into hiding. Those who went into hiding were hunted down and punished. And still, we resisted. Because we knew that he wasn’t a good leader.”

“That wasn’t enough, huh?” Harry muttered. Regulus grimaced, and shook his head.

“Of course it wasn’t,” he said. “Eventually those who were in hiding began forming factions. Their own chapters of the resistance. Down the line we became more organized, and that’s when they started calling us the rebels. With a capital R. Ever since the beginning, I’ve encountered many people who tried to get close to me, only to betray me later. He sent spies, clever and strong and cunning, up until I made him and the world believe I was dead.”

‘And then I ruined that for you,’ Harry thought, feeling guilty, but knowing that it had been the right move for him to make. As cruel and ruthless as that sounded.

“Albus trusts you,” Regulus said then. “His trust is very difficult to earn. I still need some time to believe in you, but I will try. Merlin knows I’ve got nothing left to lose. So please, Harry... don’t let me down. I’ll teach you magic your teachers won’t, but you must destroy the horcruxes. Will you? Will you destroy them, no matter who you have to give up to succeed in that?”

“That’s the plan,” Harry said, feeling nervous and excited. “That’s what I’ll do.”
Chapter 50

When Harry's fifth year at Durmstrang began, he thought of Hogwarts and felt happy that the previous school year was well and truly behind him. Nothing against Hogwarts, really, but he doubted he'd ever be able to feel comfortable there after the experiences he'd had last year. Besides, how could anything compare to the living environment that Durmstrang had provided them all with? Sharing a dorm just wasn’t as nice as having a whole apartment all to himself.

Harry unpacked his trunk, and made himself some tea in that familiar kitchen of his. Here, in this small apartment, he felt safe and in control.

'Evenings spent like this are the best,' Harry thought, enjoying his tea as he walked around, readjusting pillows and paintings, and opening some windows to let fresh air in. Merlin, he had missed this place so much.

When someone knocked on his door, Harry put his cup of tea down, and went to open it. Much to his delight, it was Filippa.

"Harry!" the girl said with a smile and hugged him tightly. "I feel like such a terrible friend for not spending more time with you this summer. How have you been?"

"Honestly, I doubt I would've been good company," Harry admitted, letting the girl in and making her a cup of tea as well. "Your birthday party was gorgeous. That place you rented? I honestly wouldn't mind living in a place like that."

"Oh, it's my aunt's," Filippa admitted, looking pleased by Harry's praise. "I heard you went early because of Clemens? How was he?"

"I didn't realize he was drunk," Harry confessed, still feeling strange about how well Clemens could hide signs of inebriation. "I mean, I was feeling a bit overwhelmed by the number of people, so I went outside to sit down and get some fresh air. Then Clemens came and drank a whole bottle of wine. Turns out it wasn't even his first bottle. And yet somehow... he just... didn't seem drunk."

"At all?" Filippa asked with a frown. "Two bottles is a lot to drink in less than three hours."

"I thought so too! Honestly, even one bottle is too much for one person, in my opinion. Anyway, he just said some stuff that was... uncharacteristic, I suppose," Harry said, though was it really? He didn't spend that much time with Clemens, so what if that kind of talk was something quite typical to him? Circe, why did he like him so much?

"Uncharacteristic how?" Filippa was still frowning, already suspecting that whatever Harry was about to reveal, wasn't going to be anything good. "Did he insult you?"

"I don't think he realized that he did," Harry muttered, feeling embarrassed. What if Clemens's words weren't a big deal, and now Filippa would think that Harry was just way too sensitive and insecure? "He just... he's happy that Truls doesn't spend as much time with me anymore, and he said that if I were a girl... well, that's... the thing that he kept repeating. If I were a girl, he'd marry me. If I were a girl, he'd buy me a house. And when he remembered that I live alone now, he said that girls shouldn't be living alone. It was just... so weird. And uncomfortable."

Filippa's mouth was hanging open, before she snapped it shut and shook her head. "That... that is awful. What does he mean by it? Why would you be a girl? I don't understand."
"I think it's because he knows I'm not into girls," Harry admitted, watching out for Filippa's reaction. The girl didn't seem to be surprised at all - perhaps she, like everyone else, had already guessed it - and merely frowned in confusion again.

"So he thinks you have to be a girl to like boys?" she asked. "What is this logic? He has never indicated that he's bothered by homosexuality before - I mean, for Merlin's sake, it's not like being homosexual is *that* uncommon!"

"I don't know," Harry admitted, and sighed. At least he wasn't the only one confused by Clemens's words, even if he didn't think that Filippa understood *how* hurtful they had been.

"Clemens has been a bit odd for a while now," the girl revealed. "I think I wrote about this to you at some point, but he's been spending a lot of time with some older boys. I think they're the ones that got him into drinking. Nikolai's been saying that Clemens has been downing more than just firewhisky, which is an *awful* thing to even suggest!"

"What do you mean more than just firewhisky?" Harry asked. "You mean..." he really didn't want to say it out loud, but, "...potions misuse?"

"Yep," Filippa said grimly, nodding her head. "I mean, we don't know anything for sure, but something's going on with him. He loses his temper so fast, too. Mind you, it could be just stress, but if he's now drinking *two* bottles in one evening, I don't know what else he's been doing."

"We can try to figure it out," Harry said, wondering secretly if it was selfish of him to feel strangely ignored after telling Filippa what Clemens had said. It really didn't seem to be a big deal to her, and maybe it meant that Harry really was overreacting. Maybe he, too, should just... move on and focus on the more important things, such as whatever trouble Clemens was getting himself into.

It was just... he had been *hurt*. And Harry didn't think that it was insignificant

"Are Heidi and Nikolai still in their own bubble?" Harry asked then, deciding to change the subject. Filippa let out a laugh, and nodded.

"It's as if they don't realize that they need friends aside from each other," the girl said, judgement clear in her voice. "But you know what, never mind that. Do you want to talk about your situation with Truls? I kind of feel that you didn't get to say everything you wanted when we all visited you."

"Oh," Harry thought for a second, before sighing and relenting. Honestly, what did he have to lose at this point, anyway? "Okay, so..."

Being back at Durmstrang was great, and not just because he got to spend much more time with Filippa than before.

Harry had enjoyed being back in class for precisely half an hour, before he was reminded again of how much *work* studying at Durmstrang actually required. At Hogwarts it had been slightly easier, and perhaps he had been allowed some leeway, as the teachers knew that he had had enough trouble with the tournament preparations.

"I'm dying," Björn, who was sitting next to him, whispered. It wasn't that Professor Didi's teachings of Ancient Runes were boring, it was just that he liked to keep them on their toes. Whenever he asked them a question, rather than wait for any volunteers, he simply pointed at a student and told them to answer him. It was stressful and made his class one of the most dreaded ones that Harry had. Hearing Björn's words and wholeheartedly agreeing with them, Harry bit his lip, barely containing
his smile, before daring to whisper in response:

"At least we have dueling next, that's always fun."

At least Harry hoped that it would be. Barty had been moved back to his previous job in the army, and they were now left to the capable hands of Petr Horák - a Czech dueling champion whose first lecture had focused mainly on nutrition and the importance of physical exercise. The man's approach to dueling was very practical, and Harry couldn't wait to see how much his classes would help them all. He had high hopes, and it didn't seem like he'd be disappointed. This time Professor Horák had prepared an obstacle course that they all were supposed to clear without the use of magic, and by the time Harry was done with it, he was so sweaty he felt itchy, and his legs and arms were sore and aching after all the running, climbing and jumping he had done.

"If I don't end up with actual muscle definition at the end of the semester, I'll throw myself off a cliff," Filippa swore, huffing and puffing next to Harry. When she stood up after regaining her breath, she looked around her, before turning to Professor Horák.

"Excuse me, Professor," she said. "Where's Petronella?"

"Miss Albin couldn't overcome some obstacles, and eventually had to give up," Horák replied, disapproval clear in his voice. "She didn't seem to be doing well, and is now recovering at the Hospital Wing."

"Did she injure herself?" Björn asked, surprised.

"No," was all Horák responded with before he gestured for everyone to gather around him. "Physically, you're all doing fairly well. There are some things that you must improve however, and most of these things relate to your postures and movement techniques. How many of you are familiar with yoga? Only two? Very well, listen up..."

Harry... hadn't been familiar with yoga. He wasn’t exactly sure what it was supposed to do. It also wasn’t nearly as much fun as the obstacle course had been, but it certainly was... something. Harry had never felt as guilty and conflicted as when he was watching Clemens on his hands and knees, slowly lifting himself up by straightening his legs, showing off his strong thighs. Next to Harry, Björn was laughing too hard to even attempt a similar pose.

"I hate you," Harry whispered, hoping that people wouldn't read too much into why his face was so red. They were exercising, everyone was more or less red in the face!

"Is it because I have skinny legs?" Björn asked, before cackling even louder. Professor Horák gave them a slightly disturbed look, before ordering them to focus on their poses more.

'He hurt your feelings,' Harry reminded himself, trying his best to not look at Clemens again. He succeeded, somewhat, despite Björn's continued teasing. By the end of the class, Harry couldn't flee back to his apartment for a shower fast enough. If only Barty had been there, they wouldn't have done any yoga, and Björn wouldn't have caught him watching Clemens like a creep.

Although, admittedly, the yoga did feel good.

Harry had just emerged from the bathroom, when there was a knock on the door, and he could hear Filippa's voice. When he opened the door, the girl gave him a slightly worried smile.

"Hey," she said. "Sorry if I interrupted anything, but I was thinking... do you want to go with me to check on Petronella? She's still in the hospital wing, and I'm a little bit worried."
"Of course," Harry said, agreeing instantly. He was ready to leave in a matter of minutes, and was glad to have something to do aside from ruminating over his hurt feelings and the idiocy of still liking Clemens. Filippa seemed to be deep in gloomy thoughts as they walked towards the hospital wing in the main building, and eventually Harry asked her what was wrong.

"This is probably going to sound weird to you," the girl eventually said, just as they were about to reach the hospital wing. "But I think Nella has serious issues with food. She... really doesn't eat as much as she should, and I don't know what to do about that."

"You mean she might have an eating disorder?" Harry gasped, reaching to open the door to the hospital wing. In a flash, however, Filippa's hand had taken a hold of his wrist, stopping them both from moving. It took Harry a moment to realize why she had done this: someone was inside, talking to Petronella. And by the sound of it, the conversation wasn't going well.

"Your health is not only your concern. This entire institution has invested in you, and you're being ruthlessly ungrateful by deliberately sabotaging your own well-being." The man's voice was instantly recognizable, and Harry wondered why on earth would Professor Dietmar bother with visiting an ill student. When their homeroom teacher continued, however, Harry belatedly registered what the man had said, and what he was still going on about:

"One of you is dead, one is too ill to become anything we could be proud of, and now we have reason to worry about your performance as well. Miss Albin, you need to stop crying and start shaping up. This behaviour is unacceptable."

"I think we should go," Filippa whispered, and Harry nodded. Petronella would not be happy if she knew they had overheard any of this, no matter how much they wanted to be there and support her. The last words that Harry heard Dietmar say, made him feel angry. Not just sick, but... angry. Merlin, he didn't know what to do with anger anymore, but...

"Recovery is only a matter of willpower, Miss Albin. You must decide to start doing better."

* *

"Attraction is a terrible curse, huh?" Björn said, entirely unsympathetic. He was browsing through a magazine while lying on Harry's bed, feeling far too comfortable for someone who hadn't been invited in the first place. How he had managed to weasel his way in, Harry still wasn't sure. "I know how that feels."

"Why are you here?" Harry asked. It's been a week since the whole yoga situation, and with both Petronella and Jakob going in and out of the hospital wing, his own worries about Clemens seemed much less important. Of course being told he'd be loved if he were a girl was insulting, considering that he wasn't a girl, but was it as awful as what Jakob was going through? No. And of course it was terrible to be told that the thought of him loving anyone - or being in a relationship with anyone - was strange, but was it anything like what Petronella was dealing with right now? No. No, it wasn't. And so Harry kept telling himself to get over his hurt feelings already, and focus on things that actually mattered. Merlin knew he had plenty of those lying around.

It just... wasn't that easy.

"I got this in the mail," Björn said, pointing at the magazine he was reading. Rather than elaborate further, he raised it, showcasing the cover. Harry let out a shocked gasp, which resulted in him almost choking on his own spit and needing an entire minute to clear his throat and collect himself.

“All right. That is... a chest. A woman’s chest. All right. Okay. No.”
Björn had gone back to browsing the magazine, with shamelessness that Harry couldn't help but reluctantly admire. "That's Calisto Skiffs, he said, pointing at another naked witch, who winked saucily up at them from the paper. "Gorgeous, isn't she?"

"I genuinely do not want to see any of this," Harry said, unable to look away from... everything that was bouncing and jiggling. Why was there so much bouncing and jiggling happening, anyway? "Why would you even bring this here? I don't care about these things!"

"Because you're the only guy here I can actually talk to about these things," Björn said, sighing with exaggerated sadness. "Nikolai's practically in a committed marriage, not to mention that we're just not that close, to be honest. Truls's dick is probably comatose after your break-up, and Clemens? I've seen him angry, and I don't want to see him horny."

"I don't care," Harry said, leaving the bedroom to go and get something cold to drink. "I don't want to see that."

"Sexual desires aren't a sin, Harry!" Björn hollered after him, laughing loudly. He then rolled out of bed and followed Harry to the kitchen. Thankfully, he left the magazine behind. "If you want, I can get you one of 'em with guys in it. I support you and your lifestyle."

"What lifestyle?" Harry huffed, trying to not get riled up again, and trying even harder to not think of Clemens being horny. "I have homework to do, and so do you. Get out, you menace."

"You'll miss me when I'm gone," Björn argued, but shuffled towards the door after grabbing his magazine. He then raised his voice and made loud smacking noises that had Harry almost laughing as well. "Remember, I'm here for you! We've already kissed several times! My lips are yours, Harry! I won't suck a dick, but my hands are—"

"Out!" Harry yelped, slamming the outdoor shut behind his departing friend. He could hear the boy laugh in the corridor as he started climbing up the stairs to go to his apartment. Harry found himself grinning as well, shaking his head and feeling warm and happy on the inside. He wasn't used to talking with anyone about these things, especially in this kind of a lighthearted manner, but he did appreciate the fact that Björn was the way he was: nonjudgmental, easy to talk to, and overall a great friend. Besides this kind of closeness that came with their friendship was just... it was good. It was really good. It was the kind of friendship that Harry had only read about.

Harry wasn't sure if he could tell him, though, that what he wanted the most right now was for someone to just... like him. He wasn't looking to... to do things with someone quite yet. He just wanted someone to compliment him a little bit, and ask him out on dates, and just... do all the stupid things boys were probably not supposed to want. He wanted all that from someone who wouldn't make him feel trapped, or guilty for not being in love with them the way he had felt with Truls. He wanted to be taken care of - and wasn't that something he would never, ever tell a soul? How embarrassing would it be if people knew?

Ideally, whoever it was, would be taller than Harry. Maybe older, too. No, definitely a bit older. Someone who wasn't an insecure mess like Harry. Someone reliable. Strong and smart, whose hugs were warm and firm. And he'd like Harry so much, praising him and bringing him flowers. They'd be very much in love, and they'd just... be so good together.

That was as far as Harry's imagination could go, before his embarrassment got too overwhelming. He buried his head against one of the cushions he had on his couch, and screamed. As flustering as seeing naked people was, this was somehow worse. He wasn't going to think about these things anymore - especially considering how unrealistic they were, what with literally no one ever liking him without a damn life debt hanging over their head. Instead, he was going to focus on all the
homework he needed to be doing. Maybe he'd start staying at the library from now on. At least then he wouldn't be ambushed by Björn like this.

Yeah. The library would be a safe place to stay at, so long as he had studying to do. And at Durmstrang, there was always more studying to be done.

Harry was proud of himself.

He had stuck to his plan, and stayed in the library until he was done with every bit of homework he had. It was very late, but now at least he was more or less free for the entirety of the upcoming weekend. He could rest and prepare for the next week's dueling class, which Professor Horák had promised would be grueling. Now he could go back home, sleep for as much as we wanted to, and not worry about anything aside from, well, everything that wasn't somehow linked to his homework.

Humming to himself, Harry made his way outside, and was slightly surprised by how dark it had already gotten. The road to his apartment complex was clear, however, and illuminated with a few glowing streetlamps. The night air was crisp and pleasant, and Harry wondered why he hadn't taken to walking late at night before. The area was safe, and peaceful walks like this were surely good for him, right?

It was very dark and empty.

And, Merlin, it felt as if he was alone in the whole world. There were no stars in the sky, and not a single living creature was to be seen or heard. Soon, however, Harry became aware of the sound of his own footsteps, the bottoms of his feet hitting the pavement in a steady rhythm. The thought of how the noise would surely make it easy to know his location in this otherwise silent space made him tense, and suddenly the darkness wasn't so pleasant anymore.

Suddenly, someone might hear.

Suddenly, the woods of the premises, located usually too far for Harry to pay attention to them, seemed to be too close for him to not worry about the things hiding between the trees. Things that waited for him to turn his back to them, or allow them to follow him home.

Harry had never feared the dark before, but now...

Now there was something.

It could see him.

He remembered that Filippa and Petronella had told him things about an odd haunting during the summer, but Harry hadn't cared to ask them for more details then. Even now, he wasn't sure if this strange, creeping feeling of fear was what they had meant, or if this was Harry's overactive imagination punishing him once again. He felt colder than before, and decided to hurry up a bit.

When he glimpsed something blue from the corner of his eye, he whipped his head so fast he heard the joints of his neck crack. In the woods, there had been... something blue. Something that had glowed faintly... and... yes, there it was.

It knows you. You specifically.

When Harry saw it, he wasn't as surprised as he expected to be. Towering almost at the height of the trees, thin as a rail, heading towards him, was another one of the Gone Tribe. Fading in and out of
view, Harry could barely make out its features. All he could say for sure what that is wasn't the one that he had seen in Turkey, or the one he had seen at the train station.

There were more. There were always more, and Harry knew now for sure that they were looking for him. He had been warned, hadn't he? The more he thought of them, the more aware of him they became? And now it was clear that they were trying to get to him, seeking him out whenever he was alone.

Harry turned on his heels, mind made, and ran as fast as he could towards the closest apartment complex. He knew that they were warded against malicious beings, and he desperately hoped that it would work on the thing following him as well. He didn't dare to turn back and look at it, in fear of what he might see - with its long legs it could catch up to him easily, couldn't it?

"It gallops behind you when you turn away."

When Harry entered the apartment complex that wasn't his, he hid by the doorway and peeked out. The blue creature was still glowing faintly in the distance, and Harry could've sworn that it was slowly walking closer. Merlin, how was he supposed to make it back to his own apartment with that thing patrolling the area?

"Harry?" someone whispered, making Harry's whole body shudder in fear. He turned to see the apartment door behind him ajar, and Mette peeking out. She looked at him with a concerned expression, and the mere sight of her was so welcome it brought tears to Harry's eyes.

"I didn't know you lived here," Harry whispered. The witch stepped out of her apartment, and looked past Harry at the forest where the creature still was. Unlike him, however, Harry knew that she wouldn't see it.

"Are you okay?" Mette asked, still eyeing the darkness outside. "You look spooked."

"This is going to sound stupid," Harry replied, still whispering. "But there's something out there. And it doesn't like me one bit."

The witch then looked at Harry with a grim expression on her face, before taking a hold of his hand, and leading him into her apartment. Once she had closed the door, Mette finally spoke again: "There definitely is something out there."

"Some friends warned me before," Harry admitted, wondering if he was the reason why this was happening now. Circe, of course he was. "I... I didn't believe them."

"I didn't believe it either when I was told," Mette said, gesturing for Harry to sit down on the couch. Her apartment appeared to be almost identical to Harry's, only with a different colour scheme. "From what I've heard, it's there only at night. You can stay here until the morning, I don't mind."

"How did you know I was outside?" Harry asked then, accepting gratefully the girl's offer.

"Living on the first floor makes me vulnerable to whatever comes in through the door," Mette said. "I've put a small rune on the front steps of the complex that alerts me whenever someone who doesn't live here, enters the building. I was relieved to see it was you, and not someone suspicious. Just in case, though, I'd advise you against walking out at night from now on. Alone, at least."

"Yeah," Harry said, sighing tiredly. "Thanks. I definitely won't."

Was the universe ever going to give him a break?
Bumping into Mette had been a lucky coincidence, and despite the events surrounding their meeting, Harry was happy to see her again. They spent a few moments catching up, before discussing whatever it was that was making the area so scary at night. Harry wasn't going to tell her - or anyone, for that matter - about the Gone Tribe, but he needed to know how long this ghostless haunting had been going on, and if Mette had heard anything else from her friends. When he left in the morning, he did so after she had made him promise to visit her again.

"We're not strangers anymore," Mette told him. "Consider this me calling back the favour you owe me: *visit*. Okay?"

"Okay," Harry said, hugging her tightly, before letting go and finally leaving. Returning to his apartment, he swore to not leave it for a while, unless absolutely necessary. The rest of the weekend passed by as peacefully as Harry hoped it would, though he didn't think that he'd ever stay that late at the library again. He had no desire to see any of the Gone Tribe, and didn't know what would happen if they ever figured out his precise location, rather than a somewhat broad approximation.

On Monday, Petronella and Jakob were both notably absent from Dueling class. While Jakob had been expected, Petronella's continued absence was clearly making Filippa worry.

"Did you talk to her afterwards?" Harry whispered. "I mean, after we saw what Dietmar said to her."

"I tried," Filippa said. "But she didn't want to talk. Not about *that*, at least."

"Students, I'd like your attention," Professor Horák said, pointedly looking at Harry and Filippa. "Today we will first spend time working on your muscles. After a break, we'll have a series of three-spell-duels. Mr. Potter, you will not be participating with us today."

"Uh... what?"

"A different tutor has been assigned to you," Horák said, giving him an encouraging smile. "They're a bit late, but I'm sure they will be here soon. Everyone else, please start warming up. We— Ah, Madam Lestrange. Welcome."

Bellatrix had arrived, dark hair styled as it always was, boots barely making a sound against the floor, looking every bit as beautiful and dangerous as ever. It took Harry a moment to notice how tense his other classmates were, which reminded him that people did still very much fear the witch who had just joined them.

"Harry," Bellatrix cooed, wrapping her arms around Harry's shoulders, hugging him tightly. "How have you been, my darling?"

"Better than last year," Harry admitted honestly, secretly happy about the hug he was getting. Maybe he should stop wanting hugs this much. Was wanting regular hugs normal? Probably not. "You're training me today?"

"Yes," Bellatrix said, leading Harry away from his classmates. "I've talked with the Dark Lord about your studies you see. Now, as a Necromancer, there are some things that you ought to know, but aren't necessarily taught as part of your ordinary curriculum."

"Like what?" Harry asked. Charms or curses? Runes or potion? He had a vast variety of spells that he knew already, but there was so much more that he could learn. Especially from someone as accomplished as Bellatrix. The witch looked at him with a wicked smile and extended her hand for him to hold.
"I'll apparate us both there," she said, not elaborating on where 'there' was. Numerous options, each worse than the one before it, flashed through Harry mind as he was pulled along the apparation. When they arrived, they were at what looked like a hospital room, with seven beds on a row. On each bed, there was a body.

He didn’t know if he was supposed to feel horrified or disgusted. Either way, he felt pretty much nothing. A body that was simply dead, without him having anything to do with it beforehand, didn’t mean much to him anymore. Not... not that he was indifferent. He just... he... just didn’t find them shocking, anymore.

"Are you going to make me revive these?" Harry asked, eyeing one of the bodies that was barely more than chunks of rotting meat hanging off drying bones. "I don't know if I can."

"Not yet," Bellatrix said, before guiding him towards the bed that had been furthest away from him. "However, it's important for you to know what kind of bodies you can animate, and what's best left alone. Here I've brought you seven bodies at different stages of deterioration. You're going to study each one of these, starting from this one. What can you tell me about it?"

Harry looked at the dead man on the bed. He looked absolutely ordinary in every possible way, and it was hard to tell how he had died. However, Harry suspected that he wasn't here to tell Bellatrix anything of how the man had died, but rather how long ago it had happened. "He's still a bit warm. Died recently?" There were stains near the orifices, and the skin was ashy. The body wasn't stiff yet, however. "Really recently."

"He was dead for less than three minutes before he was put under a stasis spell to preserve him," Bellatrix said, nodding. "The first few things that happen to the body when it dies are tightening of the skin, relaxation of muscles, and of course, the body starts cooling down. The bladder and bowels also empty themselves. What can you tell me about the next one?"

The man on the second bed was in a largely similar state, but his hands and feet were bluish, with white nails and lips. His muscles were fairly relaxed still, which told Harry he couldn't have been dead for long, either. "Dead for an hour?"

"Close," Bellatrix said. "Thirty minutes."

"What's going on with his hands and feet?" Harry asked, touching the waxy skin lightly. "Blood?"

"Yes," Bellatrix replied. "After thirty minutes, the blood has started leaving the rest of the body, and is pooling at the hands and feet. The eyes, as you can see, are sinking into the skull. What about the next one?"

"Rigor mortis," Harry said immediately. "Four hours, I think?"

"Yes," Bellatrix said, looking pleased. "Rigor mortis has begun to set in, and will continue for twenty-four hours. The skin is purpling and the pooling of blood is continuing. Here, in the next one - I'm not even going to ask you, as there isn’t much to say. Twelve hours after death, the body is in full rigor mortis, the muscles are all tightened up. The one after it, however, what do you think is happening, and how long ago did he die?"

The body was much more repulsive to look at than the previous ones. Harry did his best to ignore that, however, and focus on what was relevant instead. There was a pervasive smell of rotting meat that wafted from the corpse, and its neck and head were somewhat green in colour. "Is this the twenty-four mark?"
"Yes," Bellatrix said with a nod. "The body's temperature now is similar to its surroundings. In men, this is when semen dies. Which means that so long as you find the body before twenty-hours of its death have passed, you can take a semen sample."

Harry didn't know why he'd ever want a sample of anyone's semen, but didn’t dare to question what he was being told. He wouldn't have had the opportunity to, either, as they were already moving to the next two bodies. Luckily, they were both encased in glass boxes, as both were in horrifying conditions.

"I'm not going to ask you anything about these two," Bellatrix said, "but you must memorize what I tell you. This one died three days before being put under the stasis spell. You can see the large blisters - that's caused by the gas in the tissues. This is when the body starts to bloat and swell, and various fluids start leaking from the orifices again. This is not when you want to be finding a body."

Harry looked at the bloated, grotesque mess on the bed, and wondered if he ought to be slightly more disturbed by the sight than he was. In the end, he decided not to think about things that clearly didn't need answers, and focus on the last body.

"This died three weeks ago," Bellatrix told him. "This is when decomposition will truly start, and it won't stop until there’s nothing but skeletal remains. That process can take several months, depending on the temperature. The skin, as you can see, has burst open on many places, and the hair is very, very loose. Now..." the witch turned to Harry, looking at him with a smirk on her face. It made him instantly worried, and he dreaded what she was about to say.

"Now," Bellatrix said. "Let's see how well you can animate each one of these bad boys here."
Chapter 51

Somewhere around mid-October, Harry realized that his life had fallen into some sort of a routine. And life, he decided, was easier when there was a routine to keep everything in order. There were lectures during the day from Monday to Friday, lessons with Bellatrix on Saturdays, and the rest of the time was spent either working on assignments, or talking with friends. Memories of the Triwizard Tournament were pushed as firmly as possible to the back of his mind, alongside everything else that had happened during the past year.

Eventually, though, while writing about the ways to extract snake venom, Harry realized that he couldn’t live his life in denial for much longer, no matter the dread this knowledge brought him. There was so much that needed to be done, and even though he didn’t regret taking a few weeks to just focus on himself and nothing else – he had needed that, after all – he was feeling somewhat ready to try working on bigger issues again. It helped, also, to think of all the things Hermione was likely working on as well. Merlin knew the witch was somehow always ten steps ahead. The least he could do was contribute in some way, right?

Which meant that it was time to go back to the train station.

It wasn’t… it wasn’t something Harry particularly wanted to do, but now, at least, he had something else aside from meeting Albus or Merope that he looked forward to doing: testing out Luna’s gas mask. The heavy, slightly uncomfortable gas mask with two circular eye-windows, and a strange pipe-like contraption near the mouth (it looked like a closed faucet, for Merlin’s sake, where was the air supposed to come from? Well, magic, likely, but how odd did it look?) made Harry hopeful: perhaps now he wouldn’t spend half the time on the station coughing his lungs out.

Harry checked the lock of his apartment to make sure it was closed, and then switched off all the lights. He was warmly dressed, with shoes and gloves and the gas mask, as if he was ready to weather the wet, cold air of the world outside. He leaned back on the couch, closed his eyes, and—

— allowed himself to be swept away by the now familiar sensation of sliding, not opening his eyes until he felt the cold air against his bare cheeks. Through the eye-windows of the mask, the train station looked even darker, and it was so much harder to look for anyone in that crowd, really.

But, breathing was easier. There was no dryness in this throat, and his lungs were fine.

Harry startled and scrambled a few steps to the side when he felt someone try and take a hold of his arm. He spun on his heels, and came face to face with Albus. The old wizard looked surprised to see him, and Harry tried to remember when they had last met. Ah, yes, when Regulus had been there as well. Speaking of whom… where was Regulus?

“How have you been, my boy?” Albus asked, his voice kind as always. “I could hardly recognize you, but I suppose such mask has its uses in places like these, eh?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “I’ve been good. Okay. I mean, I’ve been worse, so there’s that. Nothing much has changed since last time we met. Unless you count the new hauntings at Durmstrang. Which is… not a good sign, I think.”

“Ghosts tend to emerge where great tragedies have taken place,” Albus said. “Has something happened recently at the premises of your school?”

“Well, see, here’s the thing,” Harry started, wanting to say what had happened without actually
needing to say it. That, unfortunately, wasn’t possible. “When I say hauntings, I don’t exactly mean
ghostly hauntings. More like… very… uh, tribe… thing… blue… you know what I mean?”

“Oh.” Much to Harry’s relief, it did seem that Albus knew exactly what he was talking about.

“They’ve been following me a lot, lately,” Harry continued. “They never do anything. Yet, I mean.
Haven’t done anything yet. I don’t think they like me, though, and them following me around isn’t…
good. I want to learn more about them now, because at this point it’s not like they won’t be coming
for me anyway, right?”

“You do not know what you’re inviting to your doorstep,” Albus said, sounding grim. “Merope
didn’t want you to take notice of them. Not yet, when you are still unable to defend yourself. They
are beings with knowledge of things we cannot begin to comprehend, Harry. But they are also very,
very… hungry entities, slavishly seeking something to consume.”

“I don’t think I’ll have the choice of ignoring them for much longer,” Harry said. “But if they have
knowledge of all kinds of things, wouldn’t they also know how to unite horcruxes without Tom
feeling remorseful? Because let me tell you, he’s… not really into that whole remorse thing. At all,
actually. He regrets nothing, I think.”

“Tom’s lack of remorse aside,” Albus said, “You mustn’t consider them when you look for
solutions, Harry. Greater minds have been consumed and burnt into ash by lesser beings, and I fear
the consequences of you so much as looking at them.”

“I wasn’t really planning on doing that,” Harry hurried to say. “Is there a way I can protect myself
from them, though? You mentioned that Merope may know?”

“She likely would,” Albus said. “I, unfortunately, lack such knowledge.”

“Where is she, then?” Harry asked, and felt his hope shrivel again when Albus gestured with his
hands somewhere towards the other end of the station.

“I’m not entirely sure, but likely somewhere near the front of the trains. She often prefers that area,
as it tends to be less crowded than the center here.”

“Okay,” Harry said, decidedly not asking about Regulus. With any luck, he wouldn’t bump into the
man this time - he really didn’t want to see him. Wasn’t it normal, anyway, to not want to talk with
the people you killed? “I’ll go and look for her there, then.”

“I don’t know how successful you’ll be in convincing her to give you any answers,” Albus said, “but
good luck.”

However, when Harry pushed his way through the crowds, slowly but surely heading towards the
other end of the train station, it wasn’t Merope that he found on the way.

It wasn’t Regulus, either.

It was Peter.

If there was one thing - one thing, in the deepest, darkest corner of his mind - that Rodolphus did not
like about the Dark Lord, it was the way he arranged his meetings with his most loyal Death Eaters.

The meetings were regular, which was fine. They were officially meant to start around eleven thirty,
which was… also fine. What wasn’t fine, however, was the unpredictability of when the meeting would actually begin. Sometimes the Dark Lord arrived at eleven thirty, and all was well. Most often, however, that wasn’t the case: sometimes he’d arrive at twelve, sometimes eleven twenty, sometimes twelve fifteen. In reality, the meetings could start at any time between eleven and one, which meant that a handful of the most volatile and difficult Death Eaters would be spending time in each other’s company - entirely unsupervised.

It would have been funny - it certainly sounded laughable - if it wasn’t for the fact that, well… his dear wife liked to remind Snape of all the ways the man was wrong, to which the Potions Master would always respond in one way or another. The situation would inevitably get worse when Sirius would arrive, and not even Lucius and Barty could diffuse the situation then. Evan, as per usual, would be of no help. Neither would Rabastan, who had early on adapted a very strict non-interference policy.

This time, however, when Rodolphus and Bellatrix arrived, his wife was in an unusually good mood. A mood good enough for her to ignore Snape’s presence entirely.

“This is new,” Rabastan said, eyebrows disappearing somewhere under his hopeful imitation of a fringe. “What has managed to put her into a mood that good?”

“The Potter boy,” Rodolphus replied dryly. “She’s been giving him some sort of extra lessons.”

“Oh, that’s… something,” Rabastan said. “Poor kid.”

“Why would she give Harry extra lessons?” Sirius asked, frowning. He had arrived shortly before them, and had been engaged in some sort of an argument with Snape earlier. “Bella? Why are you giving Harry extra lessons?”

“Because as a necromancer there are things outside the school curriculum that he needs to know,” Bellatrix replied. “And I happen to be a suitable person for providing such education. Why, Sirius? Jealous?”

“Why would I be jealous?” Sirius snapped, frowning. Bellatrix’s words had clearly hit a nerve, though, and going by Snape’s suddenly pleased expression, he had realized it too. “He’s my godson, for Merlin’s sake. I’m not going to be jealous just because you’re his teacher.”

“I prefer the term mentor,” Bellatrix said, smirking smugly.

“Have you really never trained him?” Evan asked suddenly. “If he was my godson—”

“Merlin forbid,” Snape cut in. “We all know how your tastes run.”

“Harry might be a bit too old for him, actually,” Rabastan quipped. “That aside, Evan does bring up a decent question. They boy is exceptionally skilled, and I thought you were the reason for it. Who’s been training him outside his regular lessons at Durmstrang?”

“I gave him some additional lessons,” Barty said, before gesturing towards Bellatrix. “She has, as well. I wouldn’t be surprised if Potter has managed to get a few odd lessons from several other people in addition to the two of us.”

“His style is far too efficient and precise to be the result of a handful of scattered dueling lessons,” Snape said. They all knew he hated the Potter boy, but even he couldn’t deny the truth of Harry’s capabilities. “Someone has to have been teaching him for a longer period of time.”

“His style is rather distinctive,” Lucius said, tone mild, as if he wasn’t implying something none of
them were ready to suggest aloud. “I’m sure some of you have also noticed it.”

“The Dark Lord recommended him for the Triwizard Tournament, didn’t he?” Rodolphus added. Sirius was frowning again, clearly displeased with the direction the conversation was going.

“I heard the Dark Lord visited the boy when he was recovering from his final task,” Barty said.

“Oh come on, that was not an unexpected gesture,” Sirius snapped. “Harry had just not only won the entire tournament, but also revealed himself to be a necromancer.”

“And he had killed Regulus Black,” Bellatrix added, looking at Sirius gleefully. “Come on, cousin, we’ve discussed this before.”

“No,” Sirius stubbornly said, shaking his head. “Unless you have actual proof of the Dark Lord himself associating with Harry enough to teach him, I won’t hear of it. It’s ridiculous!”

“I agree, it’s impossible,” Evan said. “Theoretically, sure. The dueling styles may be similar, but honestly… nothing else really adds up. I know thinking that the Dark Lord is somehow teaching the boy makes him sound even more interesting, but come on… that’s an impossibility, and it’s not worth further consideration.”

Sure, what Evan was saying was very reasonable: assuming that the Dark Lord would pay Potter any attention - or attention enough to train him - was absurd, especially since in order to train him, this singling out would have had to be done before the tournament. Before the boy was revealed to be a necromancer. Why would the greatest wizard of their time single out a simple Durmstrang student? The answer was obvious: he wouldn’t.

Except something - a gut feeling, really - was telling Rodolphus that that was still what had happened.

He knew it wasn’t an opinion based on strong evidence - even though he had been the one to bring up the Dark Lord’s recommendation, he didn’t actually consider it proof of anything. It all came down to two things: the dueling style and the very distinctive way of holding a wand in battle, and the way the boy would apparate. It was perhaps a bit ridiculous to focus on that as an indicative attribute, but… the ease at which he could apparate several times in a row, leaving before fully arriving at times… that was something Rodolphus had seen only one other person do: the Dark Lord himself.

No one who apparated like a regular wizard could teach someone else to apparate like that. There was also no way that Potter had taught it to himself - the boy was smart, but not a genius. A likable child with a decent set of skills, but nothing exceptional aside from his necromancy. No, someone must have taught him, and the only likely candidate was the Dark Lord. Bellatrix’s pet project was clearly neck deep in something that involved Lord Voldemort, and Rodolphus didn’t know if that was a good or a bad thing.

Perhaps he ought to follow his wife’s example, and get to know the boy better.

Just in case.

Seeing Peter here, so unexpectedly, made Harry feel as if he had been thrown into ice cold water. His whole body froze, and his thoughts scattered like a lethifold in light. All he could do was stand still and stare, hardly believing his eyes. There, a few steps ahead of him under one of the station’s large hanging clocks, stood Peter Pettigrew. Right there, in front of him.
The odd thing was that Harry barely remembered the man. In fact, he didn’t really know him. And yet, somehow, the mere sight of him brought to the surface a plethora of angry, ugly feelings that burned like acid inside of his belly. Feelings that were undeniably his, and yet somehow… not entirely?

“You’re letting your father drag you down.”

Harry was spared the task of making the first move, when Peter suddenly turned and saw him. The only sign of surprise was a series of few quick blinks, before the man gave him a lopsided smile.

“Harry,” he said, walking closer. Everything he did carried so much familiarity that Harry didn’t know the reason for. “You've grown. How much time has passed since I last saw you?”

“I don’t know,” Harry replied, not recalling any other encounter aside from the one at the restaurant, before the Triwizard Tournament, and before James had gone and done what he— “What are you doing here? And how did you know it’s me? This mask hides my whole face.”

“Oh, that’s not going to hide you,” Peter said, almost dismissively. “You’ve got… a very distinctive absence of a presence.”

Um. What?

Harry wasn’t going to unpack that.

“Who are you looking for this time?” Peter asked then, throwing Harry off his guard once again.

“Who says I’m looking for anyone?” How did he know? “Maybe I died.”

“Oh, no, that’s not going to happen to you yet,” Peter said. “You’ve got too much to do.”

“I doubt death cares about to-do lists,” Harry found himself saying, trying to make sense of the situation he was in. “What are you doing here?” he asked again.

“We’ll get to that later,” Peter replied with a shrug, “but let me tell you that death does care about your to-do lists.”

Harry took a few steps forward, standing almost too close to Peter now. Questions after questions flew through his mind, and he felt sick with the hope of finding out something that could explain the strangeness of his life. “What do you mean?”

“You know, I’m sure you’ve wondered about it before,” Peter said. “How different your existence is compared to everybody else’s. Being stillborn, and yet… not dying.”

Harry held his breath, not daring to trust his luck. He hadn’t had any expectations when he had decided to come to the train station today. Or rather - he hadn’t expected this. The circumstances of his birth were something Harry had given up on ever finding anything about beyond the little that Merope and James had told him. Was Peter - this stranger who was clearly somehow involved in things that were so damn odd - going to actually tell him anything new?

“I suppose you know that Merope took that fledgling soul that you were, and shoved it right back into the body it had left,” Peter said, tone way too casual for someone discussing death. Then again, Harry certainly knew, death always wasn’t as grandiose and final as most people thought it was. “Has she ever told you why she did that?”

“Do you know why?” Harry asked, feeling sweaty with nervousness.
“I’ve mentioned other universes and timelines to you before, haven’t I?” Peter responded. “When beings perish, some of us are… caught in loops of… existence, you could say. Very few are actually reborn into new people. But… before I get to that, allow me to explain the concept of a Mother Universe.”

Harry stood still and silent, consumed by his anticipation, when Peter continued: “There is one universe that is an entire lifetime ahead of all others. That is what is known as the mother, as it is what we believe has spawned all these other… realities. Mind you, that does not make any of the other universes any less real.”

“You keep saying we,” Harry asked, reluctantly interrupting Peter. He didn’t want the man to stop talking, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking: “Who’s we?”

“Those of us who’re aware of the universes, and have been caught in this loop,” Peter said. “Mind you, I only know a few, Merope being one of those few. Her case is a rather common one: she hasn’t lived through multiple lifetimes, but… every time a consciousness of hers perishes, the consciousness merges with her current existence here on the station. Her story, you could say, stems from the Mother Universe. She was Voldemort’s mother there too, of course, and every incarnation of hers so far has made those exact same mistakes that ended up turning her bitter and angry after death.”

Things were starting to make sense now, though Harry knew that he’d need some time to truly come to terms with whatever he was learning now.

“She doesn’t know everything, however,” Peter continued. “She rarely knows how her precious son dies, only that he does. I know, however, that it’s usually you who kills him. That leaves… a connection. A connection she has subconsciously learned how to recognize, and has latched on. It made her decide to keep you alive, if only to ensure that you would someday reach him and help him. What she didn't realize then, however, that this action of resurrecting a stillborn baby was all it took for magic to warp enough to make you a necromancer.”

“Why do you know these things, and she doesn’t, if both of you are… caught in this loop?” Harry asked. “How are you two different?”

“Our incarceration in this loop is not… Well, you see, the only thing we have in common is that we are in a loop,” Peter replied, somewhat stumbling to find the words to explain. “She chose this. I… I made a mistake when I was alive during the Mother Universe.” He stopped then, and took a deep breath. Whatever he wanted to say was clearly something he struggled with. It was fine - really, Harry was ready to hear anything, so long as the man continued to speak. And luckily, he did.

“In the Mother Universe, things were very different,” Peter started. “Dumbledore - that’s Albus, as you know - didn’t die until much, much later. Not until your… sixth, seventh year at Hogwarts, I believe. You both parents died when you were one, and you were raised by your muggle aunt. James, Sirius, and Remus - yes, Lupin - were my very best friends in Gryffindor.”

Harry didn’t think that Peter was crazy. He did, however, struggle with imagining the kind of a universe that the man was describing. Him, raised by muggles? Lupin attending Hogwarts? Being friends with Sirius and James? Being friends with Peter? What?

“Voldemort rose to power, well before you were born,” Peter said, his voice turning from hesitant to determined, as he wanted nothing more than to just… put the words out there, and deal with them later. “However with Dumbledore alive, the resistance was much stronger, and much more organized. The Order of the Phoenix fought against Voldemort at every turn. Your parents were some of the finest members of the opposition.”
His parents? In opposition?

“They were on his most wanted list,” Peter continued. “So they went into hiding. You were just a baby when the house was placed under a Fidelius charm, and they remained hidden for nearly a year. Until he found them.”

“How did he find them? The Fidelius is unbreakable,” Harry argued, frowning. Had Tom figured out how to look through the strongest secrecy spell known to man?

“You see, I was their Secret Keeper,” Peter said, looking at Harry’s masked face with his pale, watery eyes. “I told the Dark Lo— I told Voldemort where they were, and he went and killed them.”

The words felt like a punch in the gut. So unexpected, somehow so hurtful that Harry let out a gasp before he could stop it. Not acknowledging this - or perhaps specifically because he desperately didn’t want to acknowledge it - Peter pressed on.

“Some crimes can be forgiven,” he said. “Others, if they carry such… world-defining impact, cannot. After what I did in the Mother Universe, I was locked into an existence that will experience these countless universes, with the mission of ensuring that what I caused the first time around - you becoming an orphan before you set out to oppose Voldemort - comes to pass.”

“You knew James was going to kill himself,” Harry said, feeling numb. “You knew, and… more than that… you wanted it to happen.”

“Yes,” Peter agreed, and Merlin, a simple agreement had never felt this devastating before. “And that’s something I will travel across universes to ensure. That’s… my part in the loop. My sentence, you could say.”

“And that’s what you’re doing now,” Harry said, realization hitting him like a wave of nausea. “You’re going to board a train and move on. Find another me and make sure his parents die too early. Why did you wait this long before leaving? James… died a while ago.”

“I don’t know,” Peter admitted with a sigh. “I… nostalgia, perhaps. Or dread. Dread of doing this all over again.”

“Why can’t you stop?” Harry asked, heart beating hard in his chest. The mask, for the first time, felt heavy on his face. “Why can’t you just let me be?”

“Because Voldemort needs to be stopped, every time,” Peter said. “And you’re the only one who can do that. It’s not just I that can’t leave you be. The universe itself, Harry. The Mother Universe, you could say, is aware of you in ways mortals can hardly understand. And I know it’s unfair to you, but… if nothing else, please believe… there is nothing you cannot achieve. I know the problems you’re facing now seem like mountains, but you can overcome them. You can overcome anything.”

It was… a conflicting thing, to be encouraged by someone who had hurt you so badly. Harry didn’t want to accept Peter’s words. Didn’t want to accept Peter’s existence. And yet he was left to deal with the reality of it all, like an unwanted inevitability that had just been on its way to him. It felt, funny enough, like being hit by a train.

So goddamn funny.

* 

It was a bit… off-putting how getting his questions answered didn’t mean that Harry could leave it all behind.
He was sitting in his apartment alone, a week after his meeting with Peter, with an open book in front of him. The book had been on the same two pages for nearly an hour now, and Harry couldn’t recall a single sentence on either page. All he could think of was the unbelievable things he now knew about: other universes, life after death, people being trapped in loops for various reasons. It was all unbelievable, and Harry found himself often tempted to just… think of it all as a dream. Because what were the odds that he, out of every human being on earth, was the one who got to learn about these things?

The only way to really accept it, was to write it off as a coincidence: there was nothing special about him, and his position in the universe - *Merlin*, did it feel odd to even be aware of such things - was just purely accidental.

The sound of a few faint knocks on his front door pulled Harry out of his thoughts, and he set his book aside to go and see who was visiting him. Surprisingly, it was Petronella.

“I’m sorry to intrude,” the girl said, following Harry slowly, and then sitting down on the couch, pulling her legs up and wrapping her arms around them. “I was on my way up, but I got a bit tired.”

She’d never had a problem with the stairs before. There was something off about this picture, but Harry just… couldn’t put his finger on what it was. “You’re always welcome here,” he said instead. “Would you like some tea? It’s been ridiculously cold these past few weeks, and a hot cup of tea helps me put up with the drop in temperature.”

“Tea would be lovely,” Petronella said. Her smile emphasized the lines around her mouth, and the gauntness of her face.

“Nella,” Harry started, not wanting to overstep any boundaries, but also not willing to just… brush this off. “A-are you okay?”

There was a look that crossed the girl’s face, before she smiled again and replied: “Yes, Harry. Say, have you heard of the ghost rumours?”

“Someone mentioned something to me a while ago,” Harry replied, deciding to let Petronella have her secrets – maybe he could approach the subject again later, at a better time. Besides, he was curious to know if she had had any encounters with the Gone Tribe as well. “I was once coming back late from the library, and Merlin, I honestly felt like someone was chasing me. Have you felt something similar?”

Shit, should he have asked *Peter* about them? Probably. Damn it, that was one hell of an opportunity to miss!

“There’s definitely someone there,” Petronella said. “Or something. The problem is though that no one can figure out what it is - not even Professor Didi. Or Professor Bertham. It’s not an ordinary ghost, that’s for sure. And Professor Didi said it’s not a curse either.”

*I feel like I should apologize,* Harry thought, biting his lip. The things were there, after all, because of him.

“But it only happens at night, anyway, and no one has been hurt yet,” Petronella continued. “So they think it’s not urgent to deal with.”

“What do you think?”

“Honestly? Unless I’m out late, I don’t think about it at all. I have… Harry, there’s so much else to worry about, you know?”
“Tell me about it,” Harry agreed. “On top of everything else, I have to take extra lessons with Bellatrix Lestrange. I’m not lagging behind, for Merlin’s sake. Can’t I just… have a break?”

“I think it’s good,” Petronella said, moving to rest her hand on top of Harry’s own. “Harry… you know better than most, the world is not safe. For everyone sure, but especially not for us. The stronger you get, the safer you will be.”

Harry looked at his usually so quiet friend, before nodding slowly. “Did something specific bring this on? I mean, I don’t disagree. I’m just…”

“Nothing really,” Petronella admitted. “I just… I have a bad feeling, Harry. We’re here, safe and sound, training to become better witches and wizard every day. And that’s great! It’s good. But it’s also as if we’re waiting for something specific, and I just wish whatever dangers are ahead of us, would be over already. I’m sorry, this is so stupid.”

“It’s not,” Harry said immediately. “It’s not stupid. I know what you mean - we’re all just waiting for the other shoe to drop, aren’t we?” Because, he realized, everything has been so damn difficult, just managing to keep their heads above the water seemed like an unbelievable miracle to maintain.

“If everything just… turned into chaos, I think then at least I’d know that nothing worse is ahead,” Petronella said. “How messed up is that?”

“I’m right there with you,” Harry said. “There isn’t really much else to do but control what we can, and deal with what we can’t whenever we have to.”

“Exactly,” Petronella suddenly said. “We just need to control what we can.”

There was something about the way she said that, that kept bothering Harry long after the girl had left. He couldn’t shake off the feeling of dread that had appeared, but for the life of him he just couldn’t figure out what had gone wrong.

*"

“Fiendfyre,” Bellatrix said, twirling her wand. “What do you know of the spell in question?”

“It’s an advanced fire-summoning curse,” Harry said, wondering if the witch was really going to teach him anything that dangerous. “It’s Dark Magic.”

“Yes it is,” Bellatrix said with a nod. “Do you know why it’s a fire summoning and not fire conjuring curse?”

“Uh…”

The first semester back at Durmstrang had passed by fast, and throughout it all Bellatrix had consistently sought Harry out for more lessons. He didn’t mind, really. Even though he envied the free time his friends had, Petronella’s concerns about all the things that could be waiting for them made Harry grit his teeth and keep trying his best. Besides, he enjoyed Bellatrix’s company - the witch was temperamental and very cruel at times to people, but… sometimes she’d pull Harry against her side as they walked through Knockturn Alley looking for dead Hags to animate, and sometimes she’d brush his hair as they waited for an injured goblin to die. She’d be so warm and gentle with Harry that it was hard to think of all the things Bellatrix did wrong.

“It’s not a being, but it is sentient enough to chase its targets,” Bellatrix said. “Do you know why I’m teaching you this curse in particular, and not, say, some other advanced fire-based spell?”
“It’s more thorough?” Harry said hesitantly. “I know there’s nothing it can’t burn.” Supposedly, at least.

“It is true that there’s nothing it can’t burn,” Bellatrix said, “but I’m not teaching this curse to you to have you cast it on just anything. No, this is for something that you, likely more than anyone else, will end up dealing with: inferi.”

Ohhhh Circe. Harry had tried his best to not think of inferi, but apparently that denial was going to end now.

“They can be chased away with light,” Bellatrix continued, “but only killed with Fiendfyre. It’s fairly simple to summon, but very hard to control. Which means that what you’re going to struggle with the most is establishing control over it. Eventually, once you’ve managed to do that, we can go through ways in which you can protect yourself from someone else’s Fiendfyre.“

“How would it be possible in theory?” Bellatrix asked, curious. Harry shrugged, wondering if he was about to say something immensely stupid.

“I mean, sort of how the imperious curse works, right? You overpower the will of the caster, since that’s what’s guiding the Fiendfyre itself, right?”

Bellatrix smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling. She was so very different from how Lily had been, and yet Harry sometimes felt as if… as if she was, well, like a mother. In some ways. Sort of. Even now Harry’s fumbling explanation won him a friendly tug at his hair, and praise from the immensely pleased witch.

“Say,” Bellatrix said suddenly, twirling her wand in her hand. “Have you made plans for Christmas, darling? Will you be spending it with cousin Sirius?”

“Ah, no,” Harry replied. He hadn’t made plans, and certainly none to spend time with his godfather. They were on good terms, nothing wrong in their relationship, it just… Harry felt a bit awkward around him, was all. But they were good, honestly. “I’ll probably just stay at Durmstrang, Merlin knows I have a lot of studying to do.”

“Oh, that can’t be!” Bellatrix argued, shaking her head so hard her curls bounced. “Why won’t you join Rodolphus and I, hm? He has been wanting to spend some time with you as well, you know. We’ll have a wonderful Christmas ball this year, which you’ll get to experience the best parts of! Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

Harry didn’t know why Rodolphus Lestrange would want to spend more time with him, but it wasn’t something he knew how to refuse without risking Bellatrix’s ire. Some people loved conditionally, and despite everything, Harry suspected that Bella was exactly that kind of a person. This meant that all he could do was smile politely and nod, and hope for the best.

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” Harry said, “but, um… if you want to… I could? I mean, I’m happy to be invited.”

“Good, good,” Bellatrix said, tugging Harry closer to her once again. “You’ll see, darling, you’ll absolutely love Christmas this year. You like flying, don’t you? Rodolphus knows Randolph Spudmore, you see, and he can take you to fly Firebolts every day if you want. And you like books as well, I’ve heard! Your Uncle Rabastan is an absolute bookworm - he’ll take you all the way to
Egypt if you give him the chance!”

As Bellatrix chattered while setting up protective wards around them in preparation for the Fiendfyre casting, Harry couldn’t help but feel like he was slipping into dangerous territory. Why would Rodolphus want to take him anywhere? Why did Bella refer to her brother-in-law as if he was Harry’s uncle?

What did they want from him?
Harry had been to Malfoy Manor before. He had also been, many times, to Grimmauld Place. Both of those residences – much like many other houses owned by similarly positioned people – followed the pattern of appearing somewhat compact in terms of the grounds they covered, and were built many stories up towards the sky. Even the Burrow, in a much more modest scale, followed a similar pattern.

*La Maison Étrange*, as it was called, was very different. The building appeared to be a single-story one, yet it sprawled across the vast grounds like a cat stretching in sunlight. The large windows and doors – all ornately decorated – spoke of actual artisan handiwork that refused to overlook even the simplest screw or hinge. The rooms that Harry was led through followed the pattern of indulgent beauty and ostentatious luxury. The room that he was told to settle into, also, was much fancier than the one he slept in at home.

“And look, darling,” Bellatrix said, pushing him forward. She had personally picked him up from Durmstrang, and had visibly enjoyed how the masses of departing students parted before her. She had then promptly apparated Harry to her home, not thinking of – or simply not caring about – letting him say his temporary goodbyes to his friends. Harry had gone along with it all, deciding to just focus on surviving this holiday without somehow falling out of the woman’s favour.

“Look,” she now said, opening a large wardrobe at the end of the room with a wave of her hand. “This is what happens when the finest tailors work with the best materials. You’ll *finally* be dressed the way you should! I can’t believe how Sirius has overlooked this, but I cannot allow you to alternate between funeral robes and your school uniform, you see? Now you’ll fit right in with Rodolphus and myself.”

There were… many troubling things about what was going on, and Harry tried to stomp the panic welling inside of him away. “Thank you,” was what he said in the end, words feeling like dust in his mouth. “I… I don’t know how to…” Repay her? She clearly wasn’t in need of any repayment, and yet how else could Harry express his gratitude? Besides, what did she mean by him *fitting in* with her and her husband?

“Oh, sweetheart,” Bellatrix cooed, petting Harry’s hair as his suitcase unpacked itself. “What’re small gifts among family, right?”

No, not right. *Everything* the witch did and said made Harry more and more worried about the direction that their relationship was going. Maybe he was reading too much into what she was saying, but Harry was thoroughly tired of questioning himself over everything – if something made him concerned, he was going to consider it worthy of that concern. Doubting himself all the time was exhausting, damn it. And considering that he was dealing with *Bellatrix*, caution was advised no matter what.

“I hope your Christmas plans weren’t disturbed too much by having me over,” Harry said, noticing the empty frames on the walls. “I… As you know, I didn’t have any plans. Except maybe going for coffee with a friend or two. That’s… that’s okay, right?” Merlin, why was he asking for permission? When was the last time he had asked for permission? He wasn’t used to any of this, anymore, and didn’t want to get used to it again either.
“A friend?” Bellatrix asked, tone light with nonchalance in all the wrong ways. It made cold shivers run down Harry’s spine, and he knew that there was a wrong answer to this. There was no way he could admit to meeting Hermione, or even knowing her. Which – wasn’t that all the more reason for Harry to not end up in the Lestrange household permanently? He couldn’t imagine the hassle of needing to come up with an excuse every single time he wanted to do something Bellatrix didn’t approve of.

“Oh, yes,” he replied. “A few classmates of mine. Well, they’re older than me, so they’re in the years above.”

“Lovely,” Bellatrix said, nodding her head and tugging gently again at Harry’s curls. “It’s good that you know how to network. You’ll get more opportunities for that soon – the Yule Ball especially. It’s time for you meet people with influence outside the Dark Lord’s military. Political favours go a long way, but fear goes even longer.”

‘I bet,’ Harry thought, remembering the paralyzing fear Bellatrix was capable of instilling in others. “I don’t think I know how to strike fear in people, to be honest.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Bellatrix tutted. “You’re a necromancer! They’ll fear you whether you try or not. All you need to do is learn how to make it last. Your face isn’t particularly helpful with that, as pretty as it is, but we can make it work regardless.”

“Um.” Pretty? Harry had heard himself described as pretty a few times, but much like now – it didn’t seem to be meant in a complimentary way. It never was. “I’ll try my best.”

“You always do,” Bellatrix said, before moving towards the open wardrobe and picking out a set of robes. “Wear these for dinner, love. Rodolphus will be there, and Uncle Rabastan as well. Probably Sirius, the nuisance. And Evan, knowing him. A house-elf will come and get you when everything is ready.”

“Okay,” Harry replied quietly, resisting the urge to flinch back when Bellatrix walked past him towards the door. “I’ll… see you later?”

The thing about being left alone in that room, however, was that it still wasn’t relaxing. Harry didn’t trust those empty frames for one moment, and didn’t doubt for a single second that if he allowed himself the freedom to exhibit any signs of discomfort, his hosts would know about it immediately.

‘Why is it easier being with Tom than here?’ Harry thought, slowly undressing and folding his clothes onto a chair nearby. The thick carpet was impossibly soft when his bare feet sunk into it on his way to the bathroom. ‘Merlin, I really need to talk with Hermione. She’d know how to make the best out of this situation, too. I should have just said that I had things to do. I don’t want to be here.’

There was no changing reality, however, and Harry was stuck. All he could do was wear what Bellatrix had told him to, comb his hair as well as he could, and get ready to endure what was bound to be an uncomfortable dinner with some of the most dangerous people in the country.

Fun.

“You’re a necromancer! They’ll fear you whether you try or not. All you need to do is learn how to make it last. Your face isn’t particularly helpful with that, as pretty as it is, but we can make it work regardless.”

That was, genuinely, the most awkward dinner of my life,” Harry said, shuddering as he held a cup of hot chocolate between his hands. “As if I haven’t had enough of those already, you know?”

It was three days until Christmas – and the Lestrange Yule Ball – and Harry had finally managed to arrange his meeting with Hermione in a Muggle café somewhere in Fitzrovia. The place was warm
and cozy, illuminated dimly with Christmas lights and orange bulbs, appearing even nicer when contrasted against the falling snow outside.

“Were they trying to be nice, at least?” Hermione asked, the whipped cream on top of her caramel latte touching her nose every time she tried to drink. Her dark hair was held up in small buns in a way that Harry hadn’t seen her do at Hogwarts, despite it looking ridiculously sweet on her. “I’ve heard things about the Lestranges, Harry – spending time with them is dangerous.”

“I know,” Harry said. “I just didn’t know how to refuse without making Bellatrix angry. She talks about things I’d do with her and her husband – like travelling together, going hunting or flying or shopping… It just makes me feel so… constricted. Sirius wasn’t there, but instead there was a friend of theirs who attended the dinner with us… Merlin, he just… he kept staring at me. Every time I ate something, he’d just watch. And let me tell you, I’ve never seen a creepier bloke in my life.”

“Merlin, that is creepy,” Hermione said, a frown appearing on her face. She gave up on trying to drink her hot chocolate straight away, and had started eating the whipped cream with a small spoon. “Has he tried to talk to you since?”

“Thankfully, no,” Harry replied. “Not that he’s had the chance to even try, to be honest. But you know, maybe I’m just imagining it, because neither Bellatrix nor Rodolphus have taken notice—”

“Oh, I don’t think you should rely on that,” Hermione said. “They might notice and just not care, you know. Oh, Harry, you really need to get away from them as soon as you can.”

“I know,” Harry said again with a heavy sigh. Despite how nice Bellatrix had been to him so far, he didn’t think for a second that such gentleness was something she’d give him unconditionally. He also didn’t know what the Lestranges really wanted from him, and that put him on edge. It didn’t help that he couldn’t distance himself from them, in fear of causing any offense. “I just need to figure out how to stop her from adopting me without angering her.”

“Or disappointing her,” Hermione pointed out. “Theoretically, if you failed some obscure task she gives you, she might think that you’re not worthy of her time at all. But that would then make her stop teaching you anything again, right?”

“I love how nothing in my life is ever easy,” Harry huffed, leaning back on his chair. “But anyway, enough about me. How are you doing?”

“Well,” the witch sighed, rolling her yes. “You… actually, I don’t know how much you know about the living arrangements of muggleborn students. Do you—?”

“I know nothing,” Harry admitted. “So please, enlighten me.”

“Well,” Hermione started. “Before I even begin, I have to say that I disagree with the system, while simultaneously feeling surprised by the fact that it allows us as much as it does. I think it might be something that Headmaster Yaxley took from the previous headmasters – in regards to how to find and bring in new muggleborn students – but then just tried to make it stricter to maintain the exclusion of muggles from it, you know?”

Harry nodded slowly, wondering how likely it was that someday muggleborn students would be excluded as well. With Tom in the helm, it was unlikely – as much as he hated muggles, he knew better than to reject scarce resources. Someone else, however, acting on what they thought that the Dark Lord wanted… was likely to make a mistake like that, eventually. “Are the parents excluded, then?”
“Yes,” Hermione said bitterly. “They don’t ask for our opinions, you know. When I turned eleven, my parents were informed that a school representative would like to meet them. When the representative arrived, I had to give a secrecy vow, and my parents were… I don’t know what to call it, really. Hexed? Charmed? Into thinking that I was accepted into St. Pickery’s School for the Gifted on a full scholarship. It’s… it was difficult to adjust, you know? Into that kind of a thing. I didn’t even know if I wanted to attend Hogwarts – I mean, yeah, I did want to – but Merlin, it would have been nice to have been given a choice.”

“Wait, your parents don’t know about it even now?” Harry asked, horrified. Hermione grimaced.

“They haven’t got a clue,” she said. “You can imagine how isolated it makes students feel, when they have to hide such a large part of ourselves from the people who are most important to us. And we do have to hide it all – even if the oath wasn’t keeping us tongue-tied about magic, can you imagine what Death Eaters would do if a muggleborn dared to break the rules?”

Harry could imagine.

“Anyway,” Hermione carried on. “It could be much worse than it is, so I won’t complain about that too much. After all, what if they started taking us from our parents when we’re babies, or something? The only reason why it’s not being done now, is probably because of how expensive it would be. Oh, I can’t bear to talk about this, let’s move on. How are your plans going on how to handle the… you-know-whats?”

“Merlin, Hermione, that’s awful. I’m sorry,” Harry said, before shaking his head and focusing on her question. “Nothing yet, but… there’s a source that I’m considering. I can’t tell you who it is, but it’s kind of dangerous, and I need to really think if I want to go through it or not.”

“You’ll get to dive into plenty of danger later,” Hermione said, “so don’t feel the need to rush now. I think you’re better off focusing on how to get yourself out of the Lestrange household first, before anything happens that you cannot undo or deal with.”

“Okay, yes, that makes sense,” Harry agreed. “I need to get out of the Lestrange household and put a stop to whatever adoption plans Bellatrix has, without upsetting or disappointing her. Somehow.”

“Okay, okay. No pressure. Harry knew how to be subtle.

The Yule Ball was ridiculous.

It was a grander affair than the one held at Hogwarts a year ago. And from what Harry could remember, it easily rivalled the celebrations that the Malfoys were so fond of throwing. Everyone that Harry could think of – and many, many more that he didn’t know – were there, and he could see that in this company wealth was not only expected, but its overt expression was also demanded. He, despite wearing a set of robes that put to shame anything he had ever owned before, felt terribly out of place.

He had seen Tom earlier – hood and all, with Nagini draped across his shoulders like a warning – but had carefully feigned obliviousness. What was funny, however, was the realization that he had genuinely missed Tom.

‘I wonder what he does during these events,’ Harry thought while leaning against the wall. ‘He’s
It was then that Narcissa Malfoy approached him, smiling faintly in a way that reminded him of her son, and not at all of her sister. Her hair was tied back, and she was dressed in a dark blue gown with glimmering constellations woven into its shimmering folds. “Harry Potter,” she said pleasantly. “So wonderful to see you.”

“Likewise, Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry said warily. He hadn’t had many interactions with the woman, despite having known Draco for years, and felt slightly anxious in her presence. “Is there anything I could help you with?”

“Oh, that is not why I’ve sought you out,” Narcissa replied, her smile becoming a bit more genuine now. “I’m simply inquiring about your wellbeing. I know my cousin Sirius very well, and even though his heart is full of love, he… sometimes overlooks important aspects in relationships with people. After what you went through during the Tournament last year and early this year… has there been any… follow-up?”

Well, that was confusing. “Follow-up?” Harry asked, feeling dumb. “Like what?”

“If my Draco had gone through such tasks,” Narcissa replied, her voice maintaining its gentle and soothing tone, “I would have insisted on regular meetings with a mind-healer. Admirable performance as it was, it must have been very stressful.”

“Oh,” Harry said, wondering if he needed a mind-healer. Could he trust one? Sirius had mentioned something about setting up appointments after James had died, but… that just didn’t happen. “I’m fine, though. Sirius and I are okay, too. More than okay. I visit him at Grimmauld Place sometimes, and it’s always nice. We’re doing really well, in fact. He always hugs me when I arrive.”

There was, then, a very strange expression that flashed across Narcissa’s face. Harry couldn’t quite tell what it was about – pity? But did pity bring people to tears? Grief, then? What about him could inspire grief in others? She then turned to look at the masses of people dancing in the room, and drew in a long, shaky breath, before saying: “I’m glad that Bella invited you to spend the holiday with her and Rodolphus. I know they both like you.”

“And I like them,” Harry replied, even though he still didn’t know much about Rodolphus. “I’m really grateful.”

“I must say, however,” Narcissa continued, her tone remaining gentle, though now with an edge of firmness, “that you mustn’t feel the need to… accommodate the company of any of their friends, despite any gratitude you may feel.”

Just when Harry had thought that he knew what the conversation was about, he was proven wrong. Again. “Pardon?”

“I love my sister,” Narcissa started, and oh boy, that was always a great way to start an explanation, wasn’t it? “But there are things that she doesn’t understand the propriety of. And while you needn’t worry about this too much, I must take this opportunity to caution you about someone.”

“Okay,” Harry said, anxiously waiting for the rest of the explanation, and wondering if this was something he would need to react to.

“Evan Rosier,” Narcissa said, and nodded with a sympathetic look on her face when she saw
Harry’s reflexive grimace at the name. Evan Rosier was a frequent visitor at the Lestrange household, joining them during dinner time almost every other day, and then spending most of his time watching Harry eat.

“You don’t need to warn me about him,” Harry said with a shudder. He didn’t know what the man had done to make Narcissa Malfoy go out of her way to warn him, but it had to be something serious. Even if Harry didn’t know what he had done, however, there was just… something really, really off about him.

Tall and reptilian, Evan Rosier always moved with deliberate slowness that would make Harry sick with unease. At first glance Rosier could be mistaken for a young man, but a second look would, however, force the observer to realize that there was something very wrong with the frozen, wrinkle-free face. Whenever he spoke, the movements of his mouth were exaggerated, as if he was testing the limits of his facial muscles and skin. It was… unbearable to watch.

“If you feel cornered by him,” Narcissa said quietly, “and if you’re unsure of who to turn to, Floo to the Malfoy Manor immediately. Rosier has a reputation, and he might… find it easier to approach those without a family nearby.”

Because orphans were easy pickings, weren’t they? Merlin, it would be so easy to hate the world and forget about all that was good.

“Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry replied, hoping that this wasn’t just another scheme with ulterior motives. He liked Narcissa, and wanted to believe the best of her. “I just… thanks.”

It was well past midnight when Harry decided that surely he could spend a handful of minutes on his own, just to recover from the overwhelming presence of people still dancing, drinking, and celebrating. The Death Eaters who had been absent before – Bellatrix and the others – had returned a while ago to the party, and were now among the crowds as well. Harry had seen a glimpse of Sirius, but surrounded by witches as the man was, Harry had decided to not go and say hi.

Finding a quiet corner out in the snowy gardens was nothing short of a blessing, and Harry let out a deep sigh of relief as he sat down on one of the charmed benches. The snow was soft and up to his calves, the sky was vast and dark, and now more than ever did Harry value the silence he was surrounded by. He could breathe easier, at his own pace, and just… not worry about other people.

A short distance away was the large outdoor fireplace connected to the Floo Network that everyone used during events such as these - it was easier to keep track of who was coming and going if there was only one place they could go through, after all. A few people had already left, having stayed for the highlights of the celebration that didn’t seem to be winding down anytime soon. Harry envied them this freedom, as he wanted to go to his room and hide there until the morning, but didn’t know if that would be considered an act of disrespect of some sort. It was hard to keep track of things such as these when he hadn’t grown up into such traditions. There was, after all, only so much that Lily could teach him about the Pureblood society that had kept her – and James, by association – firmly out.

“Surprised to see you this close to where people can see you,” a voice said dryly, and Harry grinned when he saw Tom approaching him.

“I could say the same to you,” Harry replied. Merlin, he really had missed the man. “Is it okay if you’re seen with me?”
“There are spells to make sure nobody will,” Tom said, coming to a stop in front of the bench Harry was sitting on. “Not yet, at least. Why are you here?”

“I got tired of the party,” Harry admitted. “What about you? Now that your meeting with your Death Eaters is over, you’re sneaking out?”

“I don’t sneak,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. “I have things to do, is all. How is life with the Lestranges? Bellatrix is very fond of you, as you’ve likely been told many times by now.”

Harry bit his lip and shrugged, before standing up and reaching to tug at one of Tom’s sleeves. With the man being so tall, it was difficult to initiate a serious conversation with Harry sitting down. “I need a favour.”

The hood and the charms clinging to it hid most of Tom’s face, but Harry could tell that he was surprised. It was easy to understand why: Harry rarely reached out to anyone with requests of his own. Tom stepped closer, curling his cold fingers around Harry’s wrist as he said: “Go on.”

“I don’t want to be adopted by Bellatrix,” Harry confessed quietly. “It’s not that I don’t like the Lestranges – I do. I like spending time with her. But I can’t live in a household where I have to explain to people where I’m going and when and why. I won’t be able to go to the train station, or make any plans without taking them into account. It’s just… too much unnecessary effort, and I just…”

“Those are good points,” Tom admitted, but then said: “I could just keep them busy, allowing you more free time to do the things you want. You’d benefit greatly from the Lestrange name, Harry.”

“I don’t want to stay here,” Harry insisted, before desperately latching on to another explanation that he hadn’t considered before. “They’re close friends with Evan Rosier, too, you know. He keeps coming here at all hours, and he keeps looking at me. Tom, I don’t—”

“Okay, okay,” Tom interrupted him immediately, voice taking a surprisingly soothing tone to it. “I understand. Rosier is… well known. I can keep him away—”

“Okay, okay,” Tom interrupted him immediately, voice taking a surprisingly soothing tone to it. “I understand. Rosier is… well known. I can keep him away—”

“Tom, you’re not listening to me,” Harry hissed, yanking his wrist out of the man’s grip and stepping back. If he understood, then why was he allowing Rosier to… just… be there? “I don’t want to be adopted. It’s going to complicate everything in my life, and I don’t need more complications. Telling Rosier to stay away will just make him pay even more attention to me, and I don’t want that either. Just… please.”

“Okay,” Tom said again, and sighed. “I understand. Bellatrix will not adopt you. No one will. I’ll sort it out. Just… tell me. Has Rosier ever—”

“He hasn’t done anything,” Harry said, “but he just keeps looking at me, and sometimes when I eat he just kind of… does this thing where he breathes through his mouth really loudly, and I…” Tom made a disgusted sound and waved his hand in a dismissive gesture.

“Bellatrix won’t be adopting you,” he said then, this time with much more certainty. “You just focus on doing whatever you do at school. Keep learning, you might need those lessons sooner rather than later. This is your fifth year, right? The sixth will require more practical implementation that you – despite the Tournament – still will need to prepare for.”

“That’s fine,” Harry said, nodding. “I can focus on my studies. Yes. Thanks. I just… thanks.”

Tom huffed then, and reached forward. Unexpectedly, he ruffled Harry’s hair in a friendly gesture that caught the boy off-guard. “You’re ridiculous.”
“I’m not,” Harry replied, batting the man’s hand away. “And uh, by the way, since I don’t know when I’ll next see you, I’ll just… I mean, happy birthday? I know it’s not your birthday yet, but like I said, I don’t know if I’ll see you soon again, and… Merlin, this would be so much easier if we were at Godric’s Hollow, you know.”

“I know,” Tom agreed, amused. “But it’s funny watching how you behave around other people. Learn to deal with it, or I’ll make sure you’re invited to every single social gathering arranged by one of my generals.”

“I know that’s a joke,” Harry said, as Tom shook his head and turned to head towards the fireplace again. “That was a joke, right? Right? Tom! Was that a joke?”

Damn it.

As slow as it felt, time still went on.

Harry spent most of his days with Bellatrix, whose grip on his arm seemed to be ever-present. Her affection – direct and sharp and heavy and warm - was so different from the way Lily’s familiar, easy affection had been. Responding to affection was difficult, Harry found. Knowing the boundaries of familial affection was, also, sometimes challenging. In comparison, Rodolphus was much easier to deal with, as the man wasn’t physical in any way. He’d talk to Harry about travelling – something he seemed to be particularly fond of – and the importance of spell construction theory, without placing expectations of a response. It was nice.

Rabastan – who Bella insisted he should be calling Uncle Rabastan, but Merlin, Harry just couldn’t – was so different from his son Anthony. Where Anthony had been haughty and hostile, Rabastan seemed unbothered by the world, interested in the people in it without connecting to them, which was one of the strangest things Harry had witnessed. It was as if there was some sort of a layer between Rabastan and most people – even his son and wife – where he’d just… sit and observe them. How they acted, how they spoke, what they chose to eat and wear. He was proud of his son, clearly, but it seemed so… impersonal.

Harry remembered vaguely Anthony once saying that his father never punished him for anything. He was now starting to realize that it wasn’t that Rabastan spoiled his son, or even that he didn’t love his son. He did, definitely. But beyond the love and pride, Rabastan treated his son the way a potions master would treat one of his potions: cherish it when it was there, but if it were to fail and disappear, it would be replaced with something just as easy to cherish. It was love without the investment, and Harry had never even realized that that was… a thing.

“You’re deep in thought,” Rodolphus said, startling Harry. The boy was packing his trunk, preparing for his departure on the following day. It was finally time to go back to Durmstrang, where he could talk with Filippa about his holiday, and Merlin knew there was a lot to talk about. “You know you could have a house-elf do this for you.”

“I know,” Harry replied, turning to smile at the man. Despite all his thoughts and anxieties, it wasn’t as if he didn’t like the Lestranges. He did. He just liked his independence more. “I just… I like doing it on my own.”

“That’s good,” Rodolphus said, stepping into the room properly, but leaving the door open behind him. “It’s good to not rely on house-elves for everything. Have you got everything you need to take with you? We still have time to drop by Diagon Alley if there’s anything you want.”
“No, no, thank you,” Harry hurried to say. He still hadn’t even opened most of the gifts he had received – many of them from people he didn’t even know! “I have… I have already been given so much. Even the clothes… I…”

“You must forgive Bella for her enthusiasm,” Rodolphus said, smiling slightly. “She doesn’t often get the chance to shower someone in gifts.”

Harry tried to find the right words to say, before deciding to just go with the honest truth, no matter how pathetic it may make him look: “I just… I don’t think I deserve any of this. Or her time, really. So I sometimes get confused, because I don’t know why you both are being so nice to me.”

“Yeah, I thought that’s what goes inside your head,” Rodolphus said with a sigh, and shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. We like you, and that’s all there is to it. Anyway, are you hungry? It’s almost lunch time, and—” His sentence was cut off when a house-elf popped into the room, its large eyes darting nervously around the room as it spoke.

“Owl has arrived for Master,” the house-elf squeaked, an envelope levitating off its shaking hands and towards Rodolphus. “Most urgent message, Master.”

“Yes, yes, go,” Rodolphus said impatiently, and snatched the envelope and tore it open. He pulled out a folded piece of parchment that didn’t seem to have much written on it. “Who on earth would…? Oh.”

He stood still for a few moments, eyes scanning the paper, before sighing and tucking it back into the envelope. Harry, despite his curiosity, didn’t know if he ought to ask about what the man had been sent. In the end he decided to simply say: “I hope everything’s okay, despite it being something urgent.” Because urgent meant bad, right?

“Oh, don’t worry,” Rodolphus said dismissively. “It wasn’t that urgent – rather, it’s something that’s been under works for a while now. Arthur Weasley – I’m sure you know the Weasleys, he’s the father of one of the champions you competed against – was arrested a week ago and charged of treason, and has now been sentenced for execution. Anyway, lunch?”

Harry didn’t know what he responded - or how he managed to respond at all - because once he had managed to process what Rodolphus had told him, he felt as if his heart had stopped. For a moment he didn’t feel his arms or legs, only the anxiety-induced pain somewhere in his belly keeping him conscious. Rodolphus was talking to him about something in relation to lunch options, as if he hadn’t just— What in Merlin’s name was going on? If this charge was something they had been working on for a week, then why hadn’t Harry been told about it? Nobody had owled him about it – did people think he didn’t care? Did Ron think he didn’t care? Really? What on earth was going on? Why was Arthur being charged with treason anyway? Surely the man wasn’t guilty!

Harry couldn’t wait until he went back to Durmstrang, from where he could reach out to Hermione. Hell, he’d apparate to Hogwarts if that’s what it would take for him to get answers. Because, Circe, this was just… this was madness. There had to be something to fix this. He could talk with Tom. Because surely, surely this wasn’t going to happen.

Chapter End Notes

I got a lot of nice comments from y'all, so I really wanted to update as soon as I could.
Thanks!
Chapter 53

There was no relief to be found amid all the dread that welled inside of him, even as he closed to door of his apartment at Durmstrang, and could finally sit down without needing to worry about people in his vicinity. Harry didn’t even switch on the light, as occupied as he was with trying to figure out the right course of action to take next.

He and Ron weren’t particularly close - they were friends, but not the kind of friends that just hung out with each other, or even the kind of friends that would engage in regular correspondence. Perhaps, if Harry had gone to Hogwarts, they would have been closer, but it was just as likely that he’d have been close friends with Draco instead. Regardless, the way things were today, Harry and Ron weren’t particularly close, and Harry didn’t know how to approach Ron with his condolences. What could you even say to someone whose father had been sentenced to death?

Harry could still remember the execution he had been taken to witness a long time ago, with both of his parents standing there with him. Was Arthur going to be… was that what was going to happen? Why?

‘Rodolphus said it was something they’ve been working on for a while,’ Harry suddenly realized, heart jumping as he wondered if there was a bigger picture that would explain this. ‘What was Arthur Weasley doing?’ And why would they want to execute him, when the Dark Lord could’ve just ordered him to stop doing whatever it is that they didn’t want him to do?

Well, there wasn’t really an easy way for him to find out the answers to any of his questions. He couldn’t possibly owl Ron; with Harry being so clearly favoured by the system that was going to take away his father, Ron definitely would not want to hear from Harry. Hell, Harry wouldn’t want to hear from himself either, in that situation. Which, as understandable as it was, made him feel just worse. He liked the Weasleys, and the thought of them not liking him was just…

‘If only I was more likable,’ Harry thought, kicking off his shoes and curling up on his couch. If only he was someone people just liked. Someone who was witty and clever and not at all the burdensome mess of a person that he was. Someone who was confident and knew what to do, unlike he to whom hesitation and fear was like second nature. If only he could make people smile, or just be someone people liked to spend their time with. But the only person who had stuck by his side for years and given him unconditional love and support had done so because of a life-debt, not because he actually cared about Harry that much. Everyone else had a person they liked better, and sometimes he just wished that there was someone who’d look at him and think that he was their person. It’s just… what was he doing wrong? If being a person was a performance, then Harry was clearly doing it wrong, after all… if no one liked him well enough to be close to him, then surely he was at fault, somehow?

“Okay, no,” Harry said aloud, wiping hastily his tear-stained cheeks. When had he started and why was he crying, anyway? This was stupid. He was stupid. “There’s too much to do to have time for a pity-party,” the boy muttered, shaking his head and moving to make himself a cup of tea. He wasn’t going to send anything to Ron right away. After all, he didn’t know if the news regarding Arthur were public yet. If all people knew was that he’d been arrested, and Harry - due to his association with Rodolphus - were to send a condolence letter mentioning execution, then it would surely be terribly received. Besides, perhaps he could ask Tom about it first. With the way the system was, the execution itself wouldn’t happen until months later, anyway. There was time, and he could… ask Tom if this was necessary. Because maybe it wasn’t. Maybe there was a way out of this.

He had promised Tom to focus on his studies, and prepare for the practical assignments of the upcoming sixth year. Perhaps he could, as part of such preparations, ask about administrative things
and lead the discussion to what was going on regarding Arthur? It would be a long stretch, and the likelihood of Tom believing him was slim. And if Tom asked him about his sources and Harry told him it was Rodolphus, who knew how badly that could go.

‘There’s still time,’ Harry decided, putting his cup down with a frown. ‘I’ll wait until I see Tom again, and just ask him upfront about Arthur’s arrest. And then I’ll just… improvise.’ Merlin knew he’d need to get used to improvising, what with how uncertain everything was. He’d need to prioritize things, too, and just get to work - too much was needlessly left hanging, and frankly, Harry just wanted to put some things to rest already. The Gone Tribe, his plans with Hermione regarding the sponsorships, figuring out what to do about Lupin - the man couldn’t remain in Sirius’s custody forever - and how to find Tom’s horcruxes. He’d need to do all that, while simultaneously performing at school well enough to keep Tom from suspecting that Harry was doing anything worthy of attention. At least he wouldn’t need to worry about being adopted, since Tom said that he’d put a stop to that. With Bellatrix’s adoption plans out of the picture, there was no reason for Harry worry about Evan Rosier either.

And what came to his classmates, well… At least he had friends there, even if Truls avoided him like plague and Clemens struggled with Harry’s preferences. And that would have to be good enough, even if he was no one’s first choice.

Harry wasn’t so swept away by his thoughts that he couldn’t pick up on new developments around him, and especially the ones that became more and more obvious as days went by. A bit over a week since the semester started found him knocking on Filippa’s door, with questions he wasn’t sure he had any right to know the answers to.

“Jakob’s been absent a lot lately,” Harry said, leaning forward as the witch set down two cups of coffee on the table, and took a seat across of him. “Not just from duelling, but most of everything, really. Charms, transfiguration, Dark Arts… he doesn’t even turn up for magical theory or herbology.”

Filippa sighed, clenched her eyes shut for a moment and grimaced, before looking at Harry with a pained expression. “I know,” she said. “I mean, I know he’s been absent, obviously. And we both know he’s been sick for ages. And he’s been just… you know. In the hospital wing, even before Christmas. And… and I know that it’s been getting worse, but… who the hell knows for sure, you know?”

“What about Petronella?” Harry then asked, and if possible, Filippa looked even more miserable.

“I’ve got my suspicions,” she replied, “but how do you even ask someone if they have, you know, something going on?”

“She doesn’t eat,” Harry said quietly, but was surprised when Filippa shook her head hard enough to make her curls bounce.

“But see, Harry, I don’t think that’s really the problem,” she hissed. “I think her not eating is a symptom of something else.”

“Like… someone cursed her?”

“No, no! I mean that her not wanting to eat has more to it than her… not wanting to eat, you know?”

“Maybe,” Harry replied, and the hesitate in his voice was enough to make Filippa push their drinks
aside and lean forward to try and explain more.

“Well have you heard of a disorder that interferes with eating?” the girl asked. “I was talking with my aunt and she mentioned that that is something that sometimes happens to people. I’m not clear on the details, really, but… it’s complicated, I think.”

“But what is it?” Harry insisted, the concept sounding somewhat familiar, but not enough to clarify anything. “What did your aunt tell you?”

“There’re a few different ones, all, I think they’re called eating disorders,” Filippa said. “I think one of them - I forgot its name but should be easy to find again - is what Nella - maybe? - has. It’s where you eat very little and lose a lot of weight. And by eat very little I mean not much at all.”

“But why?”

“It’s… it’s part of the illness?”

“Is it an illness of mind or body?” Harry asked, thinking of what kind of healers they’d need to try and get Petronella to see. “It is treatable, right? Is it a jinx that’s making it difficult for her to eat?”

“I don’t think it’s a jinx or a curse. As for whether or not it’s treatable… sometimes? I don’t know,” Filippa sighed. “And mind you, I might be very, very wrong. It’s not like Nella has talked to me about this, you know. And I think both kind of healers would be needed? It… it doesn’t seem like something she can get herself out of on her own, but I don’t want to force her into anything or be invasive and presumptuous, you know? And yet I still worry that if we don’t step in now, it’ll just get worse.”

“If it’s not a jinx or a curse, then what makes it happen?” Harry wondered, frowning. “Or could it be like PTSD? A stress reaction of sorts?”

“I don’t know,” Filippa said for what felt like the hundredth time. Her eyes looked glassy, and she was clearly on the verge of tears. Harry sighed, and took a hold of her hand.

“Listen,” he said. “Whatever it is, at least we have an inkling of where to look at in order to make her feel better. We can—”

“Do you ever feel like we’re all just… unravelling?” Filippa interrupted, her mouth pursed in a bitter twist. “Nella’s dealing with that. Jakob’s dealing with his thing. Nikolai and Heidi live in their own bubble and oh boy is that bound to burst eventually. Then there’s Clemens whose issues could fill books, and Truls who’s just a giant issue himself. Then we have Bjørn who’s great at keeping up appearances so even if there was something terrible going on with him, we wouldn’t know. And finally, there’s you and I. I don’t know what I’m doing here. Why haven’t I dropped out yet? I don’t even want to be a Death Eater. I could just leave an have an easier life somewhere else. You probably can’t leave even if you wanted to.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, thinking of how that would go down with Tom. “Yeah, I don’t think dropping out at this point is an option for me. But Filippa, maybe you’re looking at this too broadly.”

“What do you mean?” the witch sniffed.

“Just that… if you look around you and collect all the problems you see and make one pile out of them, of course they’ll seem countless and unbearable,” Harry said slowly, feeling like he was heading towards a realization himself. “But if you just… look at the problems individually. Or not even just that, but against a realistic backdrop. Like, for example, other people’s issues aren’t for us to deal with. Not really. We can help if we’re needed, but I think that for now at least, Clemens and
Truls and Heidi and Nikolai can all just sort themselves out. As for Björn - we just have to trust that if he needs us, he’ll tell us. We are allowed to focus on our own issues and prioritize those over the issues of others.”

“But see, it’s that prioritization that everyone’s trying to beat out of us,” Filippa said. “No personal ambitions for us here at Durmstrang - we go with the high-standard flow, and deviation is a sign of inadequacy. The only right career choice for us is that of a Death Eater who’ll inherit the position of one of the big names when they retire.”

And, really, what could Harry say to that?

“How do we overcome that, then?” he finally asked. Filippa shrugged, and replied:

“I mean, if we want to go with what you said about learning how to prioritize ourselves… we just have to be a hell of a lot more selfish than we’ve been so far, I guess? And hope that the consequences of that will be bearable.”

Harry tapped his fingertips against his cup, and thought about Filippa’s words. He didn’t think that he had been particularly selfless - the secrets that he kept, the decisions he made, everything was for a purpose that he had determined for himself. Because in the end, he could ignore Merope and Albus. He could just go with the flow and become whatever Tom and Bellatrix wanted him to be.

He just didn’t want to. He didn’t want that for himself.

“Boundaries,” Harry said, realizing that that was what was making him feel better about himself. “It’s not a matter of selfishness, but a matter of boundaries, right? We can be there for other people, but only up to a point. We need to draw our own boundaries and take care of them.”

Which meant that maybe, just maybe, if he figured out his own boundaries, he’d be able to deal with people in the long run after all.

* * *

The decision to seek out Regulus again was much easier to make than before, especially after spending a few days thinking of his conversation with Filippa. Granted, it was already February by the time Harry got the opportunity to do so, but better late than never, right?

The train station was crowded as ever, but with the mask on and his school uniform keeping him warm, Harry didn’t feel like there was any rush to return to his apartment. Instead, he headed closer towards the train, wondering if he’d find Regulus somewhere there. Last time Harry had been this close to the train, he had bumped into Peter, and Albus had mentioned that Merope liked to lurk closer to the train as well. It wouldn’t be a stretch, therefore, to assume that Regulus preferred the proximity as well, right?

He was proven right when he spotted the man leaning against one of the pillars by the station’s clock. Harry hesitated for a second - he wasn’t keen on spending time with people who so obviously disliked him - but then made his way towards Regulus with as much confidence as he could muster.

“Hi,” Harry said, after spending the minute it took him to reach the man panicking over what to call him. They weren’t close enough for first names, and yet he was Sirius’s brother so calling him just Black felt wrong, too. “Uh, got a minute?”

Peter had kind of implied that the universe had picked Harry for something grand. Why couldn’t the universe have given him also the ability to say the right thing? At least once in a while?
“Potter,” Regulus said, tone dripping with disdain and face full of contempt. “I’ve already helped you.”

“You called me Harry last time I was here,” Harry said. “You also said you’d teach me things.”

“What do you want, Harry?” Regulus asked then, reluctance still very much present in his voice. “Mind you, I’m not entirely sure of my magical limits in this limbo, so don’t expect much beyond theory.”

“I don’t need spells right now,” Harry replied. “More like… just your opinions? Thoughts? Comments? I haven’t yet found the horcruxes, and I have no idea how to do that. Herm— um, a friend of mine has ideas on how to destroy them, but… I think I need to find them first, right?” Not to mention that Harry wanted to return Tom’s soul in once piece to the man, not destroy its scattered fragments.

“Well, you’re right about that,” Regulus said, sounding almost approving. “It’s good to locate every single horcrux before you do anything— the Dark Lord will know if anyone tampers with them, so you’ll have to proceed swiftly when destroying them. What have you tried so far, in terms of efforts to locate the items?”

“We’ve been looking for ways to identify a horcrux,” Harry said, “if it omits any kind of a presence or has a special magical signature, but there’s nothing on that. Everything we’ve found out about the impact of a horcrux on its environment implies that it’s corrosive over time, but that there’s nothing that makes it immediately recognizable.”

“You’re approaching this whole thing from an angle that is as predictable as it is incorrect,” Regulus said, and Harry tried to ignore the splash of annoyance he felt at that. “You’re not out there trying to detect a horcrux as if it’s an individual entity. It’s not going to have its own presence or a magical signature. No, you’re looking for the fragments of the Dark Lord’s soul. Which means that your entire starting point needs to be detecting the Dark Lord’s presence. Figure out what his soul feels like, and you’ll maybe be able to do this.”

“Great,” Harry said, his feeling of annoyance only increasing. “Feel someone else’s soul. That’s not doable.”

“Theoretically it is,” Regulus replied. “And you’re a necromancer, that—”

“What do you think being a necromancer is?” Harry cut in, scowling. “It’s the absence of a soul that makes something accessible to me. You’re asking me to use a branch of magic that is the exact opposite of what I do. Besides… soul magic is complex and invasive. If I want to take that approach, it’ll take me ten years to just figure out what I’m doing and how to do it. Not to mention that nothing has even implied that what you’re suggesting is possible.”

“That’s a problem you need to sort out for yourself,” Regulus told him. “I said it’s theoretical, didn’t I? If you haven’t got better plans in place, then be grateful and use that as a starting point, at least.”

‘Be grateful,’ Harry thought sullenly. How the hell was he even— He did understand why it made sense theoretically, but actually doing what Regulus suggested would require the kind of magic that Harry had never before even looked into. It wasn’t that soul magic was unheard of or Dark, but was… it was much like the life debt with Truls had been - unplanned, unpredictable, prone to going wrong in all the worst ways. It was the kind of magic people dealt with if it ever happened to them, but not something anyone deliberately sought out.

Also, just the thought of knowing Tom’s soul well enough to recognize its echoes in artifacts was…
it made Harry feel a bit strange. Not bad, exactly, just… strange.

“At Grimmauld Place there used to be a small section reserved for books on soul magic,” Regulus continued. “I don’t know if Sirius kept those - Merlin knows he was never too fond of reading - but you might find something useful there.”

“Have you ever tried it?” Harry asked, before continuing, unearthing unexpected frustration that he hadn’t realized had been lurking in his mind. “I mean, people keep talking about different kinds of magic - Dark, Light, neutral, soul magic, and whatever the hell necromancy could be. But if all that is so impressive, why is no one else doing it?”

“Because powerful magic is difficult,” Regulus said, now sounding more tired than bitter. Almost resigned, really. “Powerful magic is difficult to cast and complex magic is difficult to control. If an average person wanted to do half the things you can apparently do without a passing thought, they’d have to undergo rituals just to make their magic capable of such things.”

“How do you even know what I’m capable of?” Harry snapped. Regulus grimaced.

“See, that’s the thing,” the man said. “I know only a fraction of what you can do, and I’m disturbed by it. I don’t know what else you’d be capable of - I don’t think even you know, yet. And frankly, I don’t want to know. Look into soul magic, if you can, and try to not come back for me unless it’s entirely unavoidable.”

Harry nearly relented and left right then, but his conversation with Filippa before held him back for a few moments longer. “You know,” he started, “I’m tired of people treating me terribly while still expecting me to sort out their problems. I don’t need to do anything about the Dark Lord, you know? I could take the easy way out and let the world go to whatever state of darkness it’s heading to. But I am. I’m doing the work you and Albus couldn’t do, so don’t tell me to be grateful, Regulus, when I need your help in sorting out something you were such a big part of.”

Staying just long enough to see Regulus’s expression - he had clearly been taken aback by Harry’s outburst - the boy finally allowed himself to be pulled back into his apartment, where he sat for a few moments collecting his thoughts.

Snapping at people wasn’t something he enjoyed doing. He didn’t like arguments and confrontations. Even now he felt slightly regretful – he had killed Regulus, after all.

‘It’s not that I wanted to do it for fun,’ Harry thought then, removing his mask, and making a note to look for anything involving soul magic. He could afford the lack of secrecy, as his past with Truls would make his curiosity excusable.

Funny, wasn’t it, how even when he wasn’t around, Truls was still making things easier for Harry?

★

Just as he had told Regulus, it wasn’t that Harry didn’t know about soul magic. It just… wasn’t that interesting. The thought of using it to somehow figure out what to do with Tom’s horcruxes just hadn’t been a serious thought to Harry. Regardless, he eventually found himself spending evenings at the library, trying to discern between relevant and irrelevant information.

‘The problem is,’ Harry thought, huffing loudly in frustration. ‘The problem is that every book keeps repeating the same few sentences that explain what soul magic is. No one talks about how it can be used intentionally.’ Actually, Harry noticed, nobody seemed to consider the deliberate use of soul magic an option. Which was weird, considering how wizards were prone to pilfering anything they
could from every other branch of magic.

“There you are,” Björn said, appearing suddenly from between the shelves, heading towards Harry’s table. The library was mostly empty at such a late hour, making his voice seem even louder. “What have you been up to, my gloomy little friend?”

“I’m reading,” Harry all but whispered in return. “Why are you here? It’s almost midnight.”

Björn sighed loudly, throwing himself on one of the chairs and tugging at his red hair with an unusual level of agitation. “Couldn’t sleep. Felt too restless to stay in my flat, and came here and then suddenly, would you believe it, I saw a tiny little necromancer hunched over a bunch of books like the good little nerd he is, and thought - ow! Careful, I bruise like a peach!”

“A terrible peach,” Harry said mercilessly, before asking: “Why couldn’t you sleep?” Björn rubbed the spot in his arm that Harry had sent a small jinx at, and shrugged.

“Heard Jakob being taken to the hospital wing again,” he said. “I was already up, so I heard it when the healers came from upstairs with the stretcher, or whatever they’re using the carry him around. He’s been getting worse and worse, man. I couldn’t sleep, thinking of… I mean, it’s been a long time since his health started, you know, deteriorating. There’s been a constant stream of healers and experts coming and going, and he just keeps getting worse. Why can’t they heal him?”

The words made the familiar weight of misery fall onto Harry’s shoulders again. “Björn,” he said, wondering if his voice was as shaky as he felt. “Jakob’s been in the hospital wing for two days straight now. Whoever was taken to the hospital wing couldn’t have been him. You live on the eight floor, don’t you? Who else lives on the floors above you?”

Björn stared at Harry with wide eyes for a moment, before lurching forward and scrambling up. “Petronella,” he breathed, before turning on his heels and leaving just as abruptly as he had arrived. Harry watched him go, wanting to follow him but unable to muster up the willpower to do so. Instead, he tried to focus on his reading materials once again but found it equally impossible. Eventually, when the clock was nearing half past one, he finally gave up and decided to head back to his apartment.

The night was unusually bright, moonlight illuminating the snowy grounds as Harry walked towards his apartment complex. A light gust of wind made the night even colder, but it wasn’t that what made the boy shiver. The trees were swaying, and the leaves were rustling, and once again Harry felt like he was the only person in the world… except… not quite. He stopped suddenly, ankle-deep in the snow, and looked around him. He could see the other student housing complexes towering nearby, and the darkened quidditch pitch in the distance. The woods, dark and deep and unfriendly, were too close for Harry to convince himself that nothing was wrong. A faint smell of perfume reached him with the gusts of wind, sometimes there, sometimes disappearing, making him question if the scent was real or if it was a memory.

Something moved in the dark. He couldn’t make out a silhouette - but it was something. Something that was even darker than the darkness surrounding it was moving in the woods, and Harry knew - he knew - it was looking at him.

He turned towards it, wand slipping into his hand, ready for use. Eventually a faint glow of blue emerged, and he knew then that once again, it was one of them. It was watching him, again. Always.

“If you have knowledge in the matter of souls,” Harry said quietly, desperate and reckless, certain that his words would reach the creature even if it couldn’t hear him, “then tell me. I’m looking to unite a soul, and I can bargain for it.”
Another gust of wind - the scent of perfume so strong now it felt almost sickly sweet - ruffled his hair and almost pushed him back, before dissipating into nothingness. The thing in the dark was still there, and it didn’t seem inclined to move. Harry slowly took a step back, before turning nervously, and continuing his way. He didn’t know what he was doing, didn’t know if he had started something that would take him anywhere, but a small plan was already taking shape in his head. Or, well, not a plan. Not really.

Just a trick.

It wasn’t as if Tom being busy was unusual, and he had gone longer periods not talking to Harry for perfectly valid reasons. It was just that… this time the absence seemed to last so much longer, especially since Harry did have something he wanted to talk to the man about. It had been quite some time now since he’d found out about what had happened – and what was going to happen – to Arthur Weasley, but with Tom being too busy to drop by for a visit, Harry hadn’t had the opportunity to ask him about what was going on. It wasn’t something he felt he could bring up in a letter, either. Tom would never be swayed by a letter.

Harry’s subscription to the Daily Prophet wasn’t something he had ever felt particularly passionate about. The paper, a simple way to somewhat keep up with what was going on in Britain, wasn’t something Harry had ever bothered reading every page of. Sometimes he’d simply chuck it with the rest of the previous Daily Prophets, too busy to even skim through the first page.

The copy of the Daily Prophet that he received on an early March morning, however, wasn’t ignorable. There, with large and bold letters, stood the words ARTHUR WEASLEY ARRESTED FOR TREASON with the sentence right beneath it in a slightly smaller font stating THE FATHER OF A TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT CONTESTANT TO BE EXECUTED?

Harry was so incredibly glad that unlike Hogwarts, at Durmstrang everyone could enjoy their breakfasts in the privacy of their apartments, where all their mail was delivered as well. No one was there to see him read through the article and fend off an unbearable bout of anxiety and panic. He had missed out on talking to Tom about Arthur Weasley - he could have at least tried - and now the news of what was going on had already been sent out. There was no reversing accusations of treason - such things just couldn’t be undone without someone else paying a high price for it. And Harry knew that Arthur just didn’t have anyone in his corner who could push for a retrial of any kind. The Weasleys were well-liked by many, but in Voldemort’s world, they weren’t a family of influence.

The article then went on to describe alleged support that Arthur had been giving to Rebels - none of which made much sense. The only claim the article made with certainty was that Arthur used to know, well in the past, some witches and wizards that defected and joined the Rebels. The more Harry read, the more it seemed that the whole thing was just for show - a show that was going to cost a good man’s life. And, Merlin, how was it that even after the Tournament, the brutality of these civilized societies still kept catching Harry off guard?

‘I wonder if anyone else will say something about this,’ Harry thought, finishing his breakfast and moving to get his shoes. ‘Clemens, maybe? Then again, it’s not as if anyone here knows the Weasleys, really.’ Unless someone recognized the name, this would be just yet another execution for the exact same reason as the dozens before it. It’s just… that the dozens before it didn’t happen to someone Harry knew. Besides, most people at Durmstrang were still hung up on what they thought were unknown hauntings of the grounds, which meant that Harry seriously needed to sort out the whole Gone Tribe issue - sooner rather than later. Somehow. It had been a while since his previous
encounter with them, and they were yet to do anything.

‘I need to owl Ron my condolences,’ Harry thought, before frowning and shaking his head. Would it be weird? Would that be an odd message to send, as if prematurely offering his condolences when Arthur was still alive? The execution itself would likely not happen until months later, so perhaps he should wait? Or maybe he should owl Hermione and ask her opinion on the issue? She was much closer to the Weasleys than Harry was, really. In fact, he ought to already set a date for meeting Hermione again - Merlin knew there was plenty for them to discuss, regarding soul magic and all the things Hermione said she’d work on.

Harry also hoped that Tom’s handling of Bellatrix’s adoption plans would keep the witch more or less at bay. He really didn’t want to waste too much time of his summer on trying to come up with excuses on why he was going somewhere, somewhen, with someone. Harry didn’t need anyone to control his comings and goings, least of all people who could make his life very, very difficult if they disagreed with what he was doing.

‘And Bellatrix most definitely would disagree,’ Harry thought, shaking his head. Never mind that, though. First, he needed to figure out the best course of action to take regarding the Weasleys - hopefully with Hermione’s help. And if the Weasleys didn’t want to see him, on the account of him being who and what he was, well… It wasn’t as if Harry expected anything else, really.
The change brought by time was inevitable and expected, and yet Harry couldn’t help but sometimes feel nostalgic over things that he knew would change soon. Things that didn’t really matter, but were part of a routine he hadn’t even aware of being comforting. Now his fifth year at Durmstrang was coming to an end, Metter, Viktor, and Anthony were about to graduate, Tom was still too busy to contact Harry in any way, and the Gone Tribe were flickering at the edges of his life like a breath held for too long. Jakob had all but dropped out of the courses, and Petronella spent weeks at a time at the Hospital Wing.

Harry hadn’t been able to find anything useful on how to utilize soul magic, but suspected that the Gone Tribe could provide him with the answers he needed. It was what would happen after that that had Harry hesitating - he needed a way to protect himself, as he doubted that the warnings of their kind devouring other living beings was an exaggeration. He just... needed to know how to sort that out on his own, since telling anyone else was an absolute impossibility. And... and it just... it was hard to care about his own physical wellbeing sometimes, with all the fears he had in his head anyway. With all the unravelling that Filippa had talked about. Trying to make a conscious decision to set boundaries had helped, but it was also exhausting – being deliberate in how he managed his thoughts was exhausting, as if he was constantly on guard.

He didn’t know what else to do, though.

These were the thoughts occupying Harry’s mind when he opened the door of his flat that morning, ready to head to the first class of the day. He could hear someone coming down the stairs from the upper floor, and was ready to greet Björn and join him on his way to Transfiguration, when he saw who it was. Truls, seeing Harry, stopped on his tracks as well, and Harry could feel sweat break all over his body. He desperately wanted to undo this moment, as much as he wanted Truls to just say something.

But when Truls opened his mouth, Harry blurted out: “I left the kettle on,” before stepping back into his apartment and slamming the door shut.

He stood there for a few long, silent moments. Staring at the wooden surface of his door, his heart beating so loud he doubted he could hear anything else. He was sweating, and there was a pain in his upper back that made breathing difficult. He didn’t know what Truls would’ve said, and he had wanted to hear him so badly, but he just… he couldn’t. He was scared. Of what Truls would say. Of knowing for sure that the other didn’t care about him anymore. That he was history for someone he wanted in his present.

Stupid. He was so stupid.

Why didn’t anyone just love him?

Harry didn’t know how much time had passed, but when he opened his door again to leave for class - he was almost running late already - Truls was nowhere to be seen. Wondering how far ahead the other boy was, Harry locked his door and bolted down the stairs, hoping that despite his rush, he still wouldn’t see Truls. That the other boy had headed straight to class and wasn’t somewhere waiting for Harry.

(That wasn’t what he wanted at all.)

Slightly out for breath, Harry reached the Transfiguration classroom just before Professor Kay’s
arrival. He saw Filippa sitting next to a pale and ill-looking Petronella, and headed to sit by Clemens instead. Jakob was nowhere to be found, Heidi and Nikolai were together as always, and Truls was sitting with Björn. Björn, who kept looking at Petronella with unrelenting concern.

“Cutting it a bit close, aren’t we?” Clemens said quietly as Harry sat down. “You’re usually early.”

“Got caught up in my thoughts,” Harry replied easily, and tried to not feel any sort of way about the fond smile that appeared on Clemens’s face at that. “Merlin, I can’t wait until we’re just done with Transfiguration.”

“It’s not like you’re bad at it,” Clemens said with a laugh. “You just hate the readings.”

“I do,” Harry agreed, sighing heavily. “I really do hate Transfiguration theory. I hate it so much, you have no idea.”

“I think I might have an inkling.” Clemens grinned, before turning to the front of the class when Professor Kay began his lecture. Harry would have preferred almost any other class over this one, especially now with the thoughts in his head. Duelling had a way of calming him down, Dark Arts made it easier for him to think clearly, and Potions kept him desperately focused on whatever he was doing in that class. Here, however, the theory was never so important that it would keep Harry’s wandering thoughts controlled.

Still, though, the conversation he had had with Filippa so long ago was helping him to this day. The world was easier to deal with when he tackled his problems in small pieces, rather than try and sort out the whole problem all at once. He couldn’t allow for himself to be distracted by his encounter with Truls. He had simply too much else to focus on, starting from what to do about the Weasleys. Luckily he had managed to arrange a meeting with Hermione almost right after the beginning of the summer break, and had even succeeded in inviting her to his house - it was unlikely that Tom would turn up there right away, and even if he did, Harry could just ask Hermione to stay hidden in one of the rooms while he handled the Dark Lord.

That was if Tom ever bothered showing up. He was clearly up to something, and Harry hadn’t seen him in months. What was keeping him that busy?

‘Then again, he did tell me to just focus on my studies and prepare for next year,’ Harry thought, absently doodling while Professor Kay explained the various approaches to liquid transfiguration. ‘He said the sixth year is going to be different, with more practical application.’ There had been a rumour, a long time ago, that older students were sent out with Death Eaters on missions. Was that what was going to happen? It’d likely be a bit different for him and his classmates, considering that they were the first batch of the perfect soldiers, or whatever Karkaroff thought they were.

‘So, if previously older students were sent out on missions,’ Harry thought, ‘whatever we’ll have to do is bound to be much worse. Something Karkaroff can brag about to Yaxley.’ But what on earth could be worse than being sent on missions with active Death Eaters?

Circe, Harry would need the entire summer just to emotionally prepare for whatever was looming ahead, wasn’t he?

* * *

The joy of returning home was overshadowed by the rapidly approaching date for Arthur’s execution. Harry had almost sent Tom a letter a few weeks ago, but knew that with there being no chance of the Dark Lord changing his mind, Harry speaking on behalf of someone accused of treason was only going to hurt him in the long run. He didn’t want Tom to think that he was too soft
or too rebellious - much of Harry’s current lifestyle depended on Tom thinking of his differing opinions as harmless quirks of thought, and not something dangerous or solid enough to put a stop to.

Harry didn’t want to, even by accident, give Tom any reason to make his life difficult.

“Master Harry,” Tinka squeaked, popping into the room. “Master has a guest at the front door.”

“Not the Floo?” Harry asked, though he knew exactly who it would be. It made sense that Hermione would use muggle means to come Godric’s Hollow, as her access to a Floo-connected fireplace was probably limited. Who knew what kind of traces were kept on the magical activities of muggleborns?

“Harry!” Hermione said, hugging him tightly in greeting. Her hair was in an array of small buns on her head, and Harry almost cooed aloud at how adorable she looked. “Merlin, it feels like a lifetime since I last saw you! How have you been? Your house is gorgeous. There’re so many plants and flowers - so beautiful!”

“Thank you,” Harry replied, ushering the witch in. He hadn’t ever really paid a mind to the greenery surrounding his home, but supposed it looked all right. “Would you like some tea? Vurney made some scones earlier.”

“Lovely!” Hermione said as she was led towards the beautifully decorated patio. “Tea would be great, thanks. But, tell me, how have you been?”

“Better than before,” Harry admitted sitting down comfortably on the chair across of Hermione. The day was warm, and the shade from the rose-wrapped vine trellis kept them from overheating. Soon enough Vurney brought them tea, scones, and bowls of berries for them to enjoy. It would have been a flawless afternoon, had it not been for the things they needed to discuss.

“You’ve heard of what’s going on with the Weasleys,” Harry started. Hermione grimaced, and nodded.

“They’re a wreck,” she said with a sad sigh. “No one knows what to do, really. It’s… Harry… it’s so unfair.”

“I wanted to send them my condolences,” Harry said, feeling strangely shy about saying that, “but I don’t know if they’d want to hear from me.”

“Why wouldn’t they?” Hermione asked, surprised. “Harry, why on earth wouldn’t they?”

“I mean,” Harry said with a shrug, feeling awkward. “I’m from Durmstrang, I’m - ” close with the man who ordered Arthurt’s exectuion “ - not as close to them as some others, I…”

“Harry,” Hermione interrupted, her voice so gentle it hurt. “I’ve been to the Weasleys quite a few times, and even though you don’t spend much time with them, Molly adores you. She has nothing but sweet things to say about you. If you want my advice, I’d tell you to skip writing a letter, and going to the Burrow in person to offer your support after the sentence has been carried out. It’s… it’s unlikely that they’ll be allowed to give him a proper funeral, so I suppose afterwards is when they’ll need the most support.”

Harry quietly munched on a scone and thought about his options. He did want to visit the Weasleys. He had always liked Molly, too. And Ron was great. Ron was brilliant.

“I’ll do that, then,” he decided. “You’re right, though – this is unfair.”
“There’s no way Mr. Weasley would’ve done something so reckless,” Hermione said. “Not when he had his family to protect. And, you know, if he’s half as strategic as Ron, he wouldn’t have been caught even if he had done it.”

“You’ve mentioned that before,” Harry said suddenly, his mind grasping onto a floating train of thought. “That Ron’s very strategic. Tactical, you called him once.”

“He is,” Hermione said. “He’s not the kind of smart that gets good grades, mind you, but he has this way of thinking that is really impressive sometimes. It’s not just Quidditch tactics that he’s good at, but generally seeing the big picture and playing the long game.”

“Doesn’t that make him great for us, then?” Harry asked suddenly, visibly startling Hermione. “If he’s good with the kind of strategy that neither one of us excels at—”

“Harry,” Hermione said, her voice almost disapproving. “His father is—, he has more on his plate than—”

“Than bringing down the system that broke apart his family?”

“I don’t think it’s right to capitalize on that when he’s vulnerable.”

“Isn’t it better to give him a direction with people he can trust – you and I – than risk him doing something stupid like actually joining the Rebels?” Harry asked. He didn’t even know why, but he just… the thought of having Ron join him and Hermione just felt right. Like a piece of a puzzle that would fit right in.

Hermione sighed, slumping down as she snacked on a handful of blueberries. “It’s just,” she eventually said, “it feels wrong, as if we’re capitalizing on his grief to get him to join us.”

“He doesn’t have to join us,” Harry said, even though he so badly wished for that to happen. “I’ll get him to swear an oath, and explain to him what we do, and then let him choose. That way if he ever get close enough to doing something on his own or joining the rebels, he has a better option: us.”

“All right, fine,” Hermione relented. “You can do that. If he agrees to it, we can all meet up for a cup of tea and give him a full explanation of everything we want to do, and see where he fits in.”

“Great,” Harry said, feeling hopeful. He really didn’t know if Ron would want to join them, because in the end it wasn’t as if Ron saw Harry as a particularly close friend. “Now, what about those sponsorships you mentioned?”

Whatever good mood Harry was in after Hermione’s visit was quick to evaporate when he dropped by Grimmauld Place to visit his godfather. Sirius had been eager to spend some more time with Harry, and Harry had - perhaps stupidly - expected their relationship to be as good as he thought it would become after the Triwizard Tournament. Which had been… *Merlin*, a year ago. A bit over a year ago, really. Circe, time went by fast.

But, yes, Harry’s mood. At first, everything had been fine.

“Every time I see you, you just become cuter,” Sirius said gleefully, poking Harry’s cheeks. “How is this the face of a dangerous necromancer?”

“I’m not dangerous, though,” Harry said, “and I’m barely a necromancer.”
“Oh, sweetheart,” Sirius sighed, patting Harry’s head and rolling his eyes. “Everything that Bella has taught you, and you think you’re not dangerous? I’ve seen you duel, little one.”

“That doesn’t really count,” Harry said, Sirius’s affectionate words making him want to squirm and smile. There was something about being called a sweetheart that just… really got to him. “I’m good for a wizard of my age, right? But if I were older, it’d be expected. So I’m good only conditionally, right? And before you bring up the, uh, older people I’ve fought —” such as Regulus “— I had the element of surprise working for me.”

“I disagree,” Sirius said. “But if you’d like, we can put that to test instead of just talking about it.”

Uh oh.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked warily.

“I could arrange for you to duel people with a bit more experience than your classmates, and who’ll know better than to underestimate you,” Sirius said. “Such as, hmm, Lupin?”

“You want me to fight Lupin?” Harry said, hoping for Sirius to clarify that in a way that wasn’t going to make him question the man’s way of thinking again.

“Yes, well, why not?”

“He doesn’t have a wand, Sirius!”

“He’s a werewolf, he doesn’t need a wand.”

“How do you think this will go?” Harry asked, baffled and alarmed. “How do you think he could defend himself? Being a werewolf doesn’t mean he’s resistant to curses—”

“I know that! I’m telling you it’s fine! He won’t underestimate you, and—”

“I don’t want to hurt him. We fight completely differently, and if we wanted to take each other seriously, I don’t think fighting to disarm would be the way to go.”

“Would you just stop being so sensitive?” Sirius asked, his voice rising. “Merlin, I can’t suggest anything without you just… reacting to it like that!”

“I’m not trying to argue with you,” Harry replied, wondering if Sirius was right and he was just overreacting. “But I don’t want to fight Lupin. I don’t want to have a serious duel with someone who doesn’t even have a wand, and would be probably arrested if he retaliated in any way.”

“It was just a suggestion,” Sirius huffed, clearly annoyed still. “Who do you want to fight then, hm? Me? You wouldn’t last a minute.”

“Okay,” Harry said, straightening up in his seat. “I’ll duel you.”

Sirius stared at him for a few silent moments, before laughing loudly. “Sure you will.”

“I’m serious,” Harry insisted. The more he thought about it, the more certain he was about needing to do this. “Duel me. Seriously. Set a time and a place, and I’ll be there.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Sirius dismissed. “I’m not going to even—”

“The winner can ask for anything,” Harry cut in. “Anything. Well, one thing. One question or a request that must be fulfilled truthfully.”
“So if I wanted you to move here, you would?” Sirius asked.

“Yes.”

Sirius narrowed his eyes as he looked at Harry, clearly considering the possibility of it. He then leaned forward and said: “And if I asked you to tell me what’s going on between you and the Dark Lord, you would?”

Harry felt his blood run cold, and could just barely maintain his neutral expression. He didn’t know what Sirius thought he knew, and Harry knew he ought to claim there was nothing going on, but if he could just… use this to lure Sirius into a duel…

“Yes,” Harry said. “I already said it once, right? The winner can ask for one thing - just one - and have their wish fulfilled. So, what do you say?”

“You know you’re going to lose,” Sirius said. “You said so yourself, earlier. That you’ve never duelled against someone who actually knows what they’re doing and doesn’t plan on taking it easy on you. You can be dangerous, but I know you.’

“I know,” Harry said. “But maybe it’s time I started believing in myself.”

“Not like this,” Sirius snapped. “This isn’t you believing in yourself. This is reckless stupidity.”

“In that case, it’s good that I’m duelling you, right?” Harry said. “Better than picking fights with strangers who’d actually be out to kill me.”

“Fine then,” Sirius said, voice still sharp. “Have it your way. If this is a lesson I need to teach you this way, then so be it. I’ll owl you the details once I sort them out. And Merlin, I do hope that after this we’ll be able to spend a damn evening together without it falling apart because of something I did that you don’t like. Again.”

“I thought we’d come to an understanding,” Harry said, fighting the urge to cry. “After the tournament—”

“I thought we did, too,” Sirius said. “But it’s really difficult to have a conversation with you when you keep getting upset about the smallest things.”

‘Boundaries,’ Harry thought, taking a deep breath. His thoughts sounded much like Filippa. ‘Communicate your discomfort.’

“I don’t get upset about small things,” Harry said then, feeling like an open wound and wondering why defending himself felt like he was scrubbing his very skin off. “But Sirius, every single serious argument you and I have had - including this one - boils down to us viewing the worth of the living differently. You found it entertaining to have muggles in cages. You think it would be entertaining for me to attack a werewolf who has no means to protect himself, and even if he did, using them would get him arrested and then probably killed. I don’t know if you’re being cruel or ignorant, and frankly, I don’t think there’s much difference between the two at this point. But you’re wrong.”

Sirius’s mouth was pressed into a tight line, and Harry knew that the man was grappling with some thoughts in his head. Sirius wasn’t a terrible person, Harry was sure of that. But he was reckless, and sometimes blind and self-centred and judgemental, and once in a while he was downright mean, even.

“I don’t want to be like that,” Harry continued, wanting to say what was in his heart as clearly as possible. Merlin, if only he could tell Tom this. “I don’t want to be the reason why someone else is
miserable. It’s inevitable sometimes, but I don’t understand why I would need to go out of my way to make someone else’s day worse.”

“You know, you do this thing,” Sirius said, pushing himself into a standing position. “You do this thing where you think you’re being righteous and good, but honestly, Harry, you’re just being pretentious and narrow-minded. And it’s *tedious*. If you want that duel me, I’ll owl you the details. You’ll find your way out.”

And, well, what was Harry going to do about that?

(Was it possible to be so sad as to not even feel *solid*?)

The visit to Grimmauld Place had been a bad idea, Harry knew that now. It had led to an argument that he didn’t think needed to be had, and resulted in a fight Harry wasn’t so sure about anymore. The things he had told Sirius were the exact same things they’d talked about before, and *every time* Harry had left those discussions thinking that Sirius understood. Now he was realizing that while Sirius had understood well enough to see the fault in specific contexts - such as caging people - he hadn’t apparently quite understood the concept of not putting his own convenience and entertainment above other people’s pain in general.

(Harry felt stupid. And he felt like there was nothing he wanted to do more than dissolve into nothing, burst into particles and just vanish from existence.)

Not just because he had apparently misunderstood his godfather, but because, again, what if he was right and Harry was… *tedious* to be around?

(Why did that word hurt so much?)

Harry didn’t want to feel upset, but there was a ball of discomfort at the pit of his stomach, and a fear of some kind had crept into him. He was lying on the floor, rolled up in a large, thick blanket, while dressed only in his underwear. He had nothing but his anxiety to keep him company, after all, so who cared what he was wearing? He couldn’t even remember the last time he had brushed his hair, to be honest, and he knew he looked terrible. It wasn’t just this argument that worried him, though, but also the duel that Sirius would arrange. Merlin, what was he going to do if he lost? Tell Sirius about the Dark Lord? Unlikely! If Tom found out, who knew what he’d do? Or what *Sirius* would do?

(Perhaps because if Sirius was right and Harry was *tedious*, it’d explain *so much.*)

Even worse though, was what would happen if he didn’t tell Tom and the man found out anyway? This was *exactly* one of those things that the Dark Lord would want to know about, wasn’t it? Then again, if Tom wanted to know how Harry was doing, why wasn’t he showing up? Were the Rebels really keeping him *that* busy? If so, then what were they doing? Was something big going on?

(It’d explain why no one loved him even if they found him likable, and why no one really seemed to prefer his company, because if he was *tedious* to be around, then why would anyone want to subject themselves to that?)

Also, realistically, could Harry really win? Sirius wasn’t going to go easy on him, because his godfather would definitely feel like he had a point to prove. Harry needed a plan to—

“What are you doing?”
The scream Harry let out when he heard Tom’s voice from the doorway didn’t mask the giggle that the Dark Lord let out, even if by the time Harry managed to roll over to look at his visitor there was no hint of a smile on the man’s face. In an instant Harry was reminded of the fact that Tom was a fairly handsome man, always well-dressed, and that Harry himself was neither one of those things. (Merlin, he didn’t know which part of himself to cast a *repario* on to feel less like he was falling to piece.)

“I’m sad,” Harry said. His eyes were suddenly itching again, and he was too tired to not sound tearful.

“I arrived at the wrong time, I see,” Tom said, but he didn’t leave. Didn’t even suggest doing so, much to Harry’s surprise. Instead, he said: “stand up. You can serve me some tea.”

“If you do something for me first,” Harry said, looking for words to express a need he didn’t quite know how to even define. “Just one thing.”

“Fine,” Tom sighed, rolling his eyes. “What do you want?”

“Lie on me,” Harry said, and the words were odd enough to startle both him and the Dark Lord. Tom, for the first time since Harry had seen him, looked unsure.

“Pardon?”

“I feel weightless,” Harry tried to clarify. “In a bad way. I just… I think that’ll make me feel better.” It wasn’t a hug, but it would at least make Harry feel solid enough to keep him from splitting at the seams like a water bottle broken by its contents when it freezes. There was a lump in his throat and he just…

With a soft sigh, Tom entered Harry’s bedroom, and kneeled down on the floor. He then hesitantly - still uncertain of what he was doing and *why* he was going along with such an odd request - leaned over Harry, one hand pressing gently against the blanket the boy was wrapped in, and the other one the carpet, supporting his weight. He then slowly adjusted his position - not putting his entire weight on the boy, but just enough to press his body into the soft carpet. For a few moments nothing happened, but then—

Then the boy exhaled, his thin and bare arms snaking out of the blanket and wrapping around Tom’s shoulders, fingers crossing behind his neck, and it… it didn’t feel bad. It didn’t feel bad at all. In fact, it felt kind of nice, and the only unpleasant aspect was that they were lying like this on a carpet, and not on a couch or something.

“Sirius and I will be duelling soon,” Harry said, his voice quiet by Tom’s ear.

“Did you want to tell me this way so you wouldn’t see the look of annoyance on my face?” Tom asked, quietly relieved by the fact that the boy didn’t sound like he was on the verge of tears anymore. If lying on him made him less likely to cry, then Tom supposed he’d need to start doing that more often.

“I’m scared,” Harry whispered. “I don’t want to lose.”

“You got his brother because you aimed to kill, not incapacitate.”

“I can’t kill my godfather.”

“Have a healer at hand, then,” Tom suggested, wondering how long he was going to have to look at
Harry’s carpet. Next time the boy needed this to sort his thoughts out, it wouldn’t be on the floor. “I can find you someone. So even if you injure Black, he won’t die if someone’s right there to attach his head back to the rest of him.”

Harry fell silent for a while, thinking of his options. He wasn’t going to aim to kill Sirius, but perhaps having a healer at hand wasn’t a bad idea. “Would… would that be okay? For someone to use their valuable time—”

“A bigger issue is how to prevent every idiot who hears about it from turning up,” Tom interrupted. “Don’t worry about things you don’t need to worry about. Just focus on your own capabilities. Do you even know how your Black duels on a good day?”

“Uh…”

“Right,” Tom said, pushing himself up, before reaching to pull Harry along with him. “Time for some memory sharing. Come along.”

“Wait, let me get dressed!”

“Be quick about it, will you? You owe me for what I just did for you, keep that in mind.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, but just… oddly enough… he didn’t mind owing Tom for this. Not one bit.

“Well?”

“Uh, what?”

Harry was visiting Bellatrix - he had been invited once again for dinner, but much to his relief there were no other but Bellatrix and Rodolphus in attendance this time. No Rosier, and no other weird Death Eaters. And no Sirius. Thankfully. After Tom’s visit, Harry had spent hours thinking of how to deal with his godfather – he hadn’t known how good the man was, which was… concerning.

The dinner was being served in a spacious room with white wooden furniture and pastel green decorations, its large glass doors opened to allow a soft breeze in from a small garden that Harry had never even seen before. He was glad that that was where they were dining, and not in the dauntingly large and formal-looking dining room they had been in last time. It helped, also, that Bella hadn’t brought up anything about any possible adoption plans.

Now, she was looking at him - bright-eyed curiosity making her demeanor appear deceptively bright and harmless - resting her chin on her palm and clearly expecting an answer swiftly.

“You’ve been upset since you arrived,” Bellatrix said, pouting. “Is the food not to your liking?”

“No, it’s good,” Harry replied instantly, not sure if he should actually tell her what was bothering him. In the end he decided to just go ahead - who knew if Sirius had told her already, anyway. “I had an argument with Sirius.”

“Most people do that regularly,” Rodolphus said, and Harry couldn’t imagine Sirius arguing with someone who seemed just… so unshakeable as Rodolphus Lestrange.

“Darling, there has to be something else,” Bellatrix said, glancing at her husband, before leaning forward and urging Harry to continue. So he did.
“I don’t like hurting people unless it’s necessary,” Harry said, despite knowing that that would be something Bellatrix herself wouldn’t agree with. “I don’t like it when... he puts me in certain situations, or suggests I do something, or. You know. Just. And now we have a bet - because he... I mean, I’ve been worried about whether or not I’d be able to hold my own in a duel against someone who’s experienced, and who won’t underestimate me, you know? So Sirius suggested I duel someone, but that someone won’t be able to defend themselves, and then we argued because he keeps doing that - I’ve told him I don’t like hurting people, but he keeps forgetting - and now he and I will be dueling instead, and I have no idea what to do about anything. I’m sorry.”

Circe, why did he want to cry?

Bellatrix was quiet for a few long moments, during which Harry already managed to tell himself off for expecting sympathy from anyone because - what if Sirius was right? What if Harry was wrong, and what if he was being too sensitive?

“Harry, darling,” Bellatrix said. “We’ve seen what you can do. You have no reason to worry. We know you raise the dead and do Dark Arts better than most people. I don’t see why you’d be bothered by what my stupid cousin says.”

“She doesn’t understand what I’m getting at,’ Harry realized, and was about to just nod and let things slide when Rodolphus put down his glass of wine and said: “So long as you complete your missions as well as you completed your tasks in the Tournament, whatever you feel about causing pain to others is of no concern to anyone else. That said, I trust you’ll know when to use violence to ensure that people will not see you as someone to be taken advantage of.”

“Yes,” Harry said immediately. “I don’t mind doing that.” And he didn’t. Usually. Sometimes. “I just don’t want to unnecessarily go out of my way to hurt someone who has done nothing to warrant it.”

“Good, good,” Bellatrix said, though Harry still wasn’t sure whether or not she had understood his concern. Perhaps it was better this way. Besides, surprisingly, Rodolphus didn’t seem to mind, even if he clearly didn’t agree with Harry’s point of view either. “Now, back to the most interesting part of this - you’ll be dueling Sirius?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “I’ve got a lot of practicing that I’ll need to do, and every day I learn more and more things that I might be able to make a use of while dueling.”

“Things like what?” the witch asked, eager to hear about his voyages into necromancy.

“I mean, the starting point is simple, right? If it was once alive and is now dead, I can do something about it. Not just people, but plants and... and animals, and anything that more or less has a body. I tried to do something about parts of bodies, but when things are too processed - like leather and such - it’s not in my reach. So I was thinking - is there a spell that can kill a limb but not the person?”

“Oh baby, sweetling, yes,” Bellatrix said, before waving for the house-elves to clear the table and bring in the dessert. “You’re wondering if you could control a limb, right?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “I don’t know how practical it would be, but I just want to see if it’s doable. But then also I was thinking that it’s not enough for me to be good at that. I need to be good at, you know, regular dueling.”

“You already are,” Bellatrix cooed. “And you’re good with a knife too. I saw you.”

“But not good enough to win a duel against his godfather,” Rodolphus said, nodding. “Not yet, at least. When will this duel happen?”
“Sirius owled me yesterday, and said it’ll be his birthday gift for me,” Harry said, not sure if his godfather really thought that or was just being mean again. “So in a bit over a month.”

“Do you still practice dueling with Barty?” Bellatrix asked, and Harry shook his head.

“No,” he said. “He’s probably busy, anyway.”

“Well, considering that I’m already teaching you other things, I might as well help you with this too,” the witch decided, clearly pleased with her involvement. “My cousin does deserve a bit of a knock, doesn’t he?”

“Do you have something in mind?” Rodolphus asked. “You sound like you might.”

“I do,” Bellatrix said, her lips curling into a smug smile. “Say, darling, how many hexes can you cast in ten seconds?”

It took nearly a week after Arthur’s execution for Harry to muster up the courage to visit the Weasleys. He apparated near the Burrow, dressed in appropriate black robes, his hair hopelessly messy despite his earlier efforts to comb it into some semblance of order. He was hesitant as he approached the front door and rang the bell by the door handle, and couldn’t help but think that at least with Bellatrix, there was no fear of causing her emotional distress of any kind.

When the door swung open, Harry came face to face with Molly Weasley, who took one look at him and pulled him into a tight hug.

“Oh, Harry,” she said, her voice tearful but strong. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Mrs. Weasley,” Harry started, and why was he feeling tearful when she was the one grieving? “I, um…”

“Come in, dear, come in,” Mrs. Weasley said, ushering him inside and towards the living room. He saw Ron there, as well as one of his two oldest brothers - Harry couldn’t quite remember which one it was - and, surprisingly, Neville. Ginny was also curled up in a chair, hugging her knees and looking at the fireplace.

“Harry,” Ron said, his voice tired. “Good to see you, mate.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Harry said, his voice quiet. “I—”

“Aren’t you a necromancer?” Ginny abruptly asked, turning to look at him with red-rimmed eyes. “Can’t you bring him back?”

“I’m sorry,” Harry replied, caught off guard and feeling sad and heavy on the inside. “I—”

“Can’t you at least try?”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

He could hear Neville sigh heavily, and something in the way he did it made it clear that the other boy was annoyed. At Harry, most likely. For some reason. He had known that Ron and Neville were close friends, but he hadn’t quite expected to see the other boy here as well. It wasn’t ideal, since Harry suspected that Neville didn’t like him one bit.

“Don’t ask that of him, Ginny,” Mrs. Weasley said, her voice sad but firm. “That is not fair to Harry.
Your father—"

“Died because of something he didn’t even do,” Ginny snapped, before her face twisted into a tearful grimace, turning back towards the fireplace. “He didn’t do anything wrong. He didn’t do it. He didn’t help Rebels, he wouldn’t.”

“Ginny,” Neville’s voice was tense, and Harry saw the boy’s eyes flicker towards him. What did *that* mean?

‘I shouldn’t have come,’ Harry thought, before he remembered why exactly he had made himself visit the Burrow. He let out a deep sigh, and said: “Ron, would you mind taking a walk with me?”

“Why just Ron?” Neville asked, and though he had always seemed kind of soft, he sure wasn’t now.

“Because I don’t trust you,” Harry replied bluntly. Ron was looking at him quietly, before slowly nodding and standing up. Neville made a sound of protest, but the taller boy shushed him.

“Just a walk,” Ron said, and led Harry towards the backdoor. “Mum, we’ll be back in a few.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Weasley replied, managing to look fond even as she looked at Harry. Harry didn’t understand how she could look at him like that, when even his godfather couldn’t.

“I didn’t know Longbottom disliked me quite like that,” Harry remarked as they left.

“He doesn’t.” Ron said. “Honestly, mate, he doesn’t. He’s just… I mean, you’re part of the crowd that’s, you know… the crowd that’s got the power, if you know what I mean? Anyway, that doesn’t matter right now. Did you really fancy a walk, or did you want to talk to me in private?”

“I wanted to talk,” Harry said. “But I need a vow of secrecy first.”

“A vow of secrecy?” Ron repeated, slowing down before stopping completely. They were far enough from the Burrow by then to be hidden behind a cluster of trees, and Harry was glad that the others wouldn’t be able to see them. “Why?”

“I trust you,” Harry said, “but I don’t trust the people you keep close.”

“Is it that Neville doesn’t like you, or that you don’t like Neville?” Ron asked then, tilting his head and looking at Harry with something sharp in his blue eyes.

“Don’t take it personally,” Harry said. “I don’t trust easily.”

“All right then,” Ron replied. There was no harm in taking a secrecy vow. He wasn’t planning on revealing any of Harry’s secrets anyway. “Let’s proceed with the vow, then. We won’t need a witness for this, will we?”

“No,” Harry replied, pulling out his wand. He had practiced this with Hermione enough times for the string of magic to flow out easily, wrapping itself around Ron’s throat and sinking gently into the skin, before disappearing entirely.

“I don’t feel any different,” Ron said, rubbing his throat.

“That’s good,” Harry told him, before continuing right away: “Ginny asked me if I believed that your dad had committed treason. Ron, I don’t think that matters. Whether or not he did isn’t the problem. Either way the punishment is unreasonably severe for the crime. He didn’t deserve to die even if he did associate with Rebels.”
Ron, clearly startled, looked at Harry with wide eyes, his mouth hanging open. “Um, what?”

“Hermione and I are creating a plan to neutralize the Dark Lord and change the government,” Harry continued, voice hushed and speech urgent. “We think you should join us.”

Ron stared at Harry for a few silent moments, his mouth hanging open, and eyes wide. He looked at Harry as if it was his first time seeing the other boy, and for the first time in months felt like there was a way to heal from what had happened. He didn’t know Harry as well as he wanted to, but he Hermione, and knew that if these two were working on something seriously enough to protect it with secrecy vows… it was bound to go somewhere.

Also, he had always liked Harry anyway. The other boy had always been quiet but calm, and very friendly despite how reserved he was.

“You know what mate,” Ron breathed, grabbing Harry’s thin shoulders with his hands, “let’s fuck some shit up, yeah? I’m with you.”
Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ron didn’t remember when he had first heard about Harry Potter. He didn’t even remember when he had first seen him, really. Harry had just always been there, the only son - only child - of a couple that his parents knew and liked. He had always liked Harry, who reminded him of Ginny at first. But then, later, where Ginny had grown up to be just as rowdy as her brothers, Harry had stayed quiet and composed, polite and friendly, if a bit distant. The distance only increased after his enrolment into Durmstrang, and for long periods of time Ron just… forgot about him.

Then the Triwizard Tournament happened, and with it they all got a glimpse of who and what Harry really was. And though there were many in Gryffindor - hell, quite a few people in all four Houses, even Slytherin – who shuddered at the thought of an actual necromancer surfacing in this day and age, it was also incredible, in a way. Harry, who was just as polite and friendly and distant as Ron remembered him as, was also strong and clever and sweet and so clearly uncomfortable with all the attention he was getting.

And now, after what had happened to his father, it was Harry who had brought Ron something he could hold on to and do, something concrete he could focus his anger on to, something to work on. Harry, who had been clearly taken aback by Neville’s hostility, whose quiet voice had been a bit shaky as he asked for a vow of secrecy and explained what he had been up to. Harry, who unexpectedly was working with Hermione, and now wanted Ron right there with him.

Of course he was going to say yes.

When they returned to the Burrow, Neville was quick to come to his side and ask what had happened.

“Don’t worry about it, mate,” Ron replied, before raising his voice enough for Harry to hear. “Harry, you’re staying for dinner, right?”

“Oh, no, no, I wouldn’t want to impose,” Harry said, eyes widening.

“Sweetheart, of course you’re staying,” Molly called from the kitchen. “I’m just about to get started, dear. There are brooms in the shed if you boys want to play Quidditch. Not you, Ron, it’s your turn to help me in the kitchen tonight.”

“Yes mum,” Ron hollered back, rolling his eyes. He then glanced at Neville, who was clearly not thrilled by Harry’s presence. Should he talk to his friend about it? Because Neville may have been a good friend, but Ron doubted that Harry deserved any of that hostility right now.

“I could help too,” Harry offered. “I haven’t done much in the kitchen, to be honest, but if it’s something simple, I could help?”

“I’ll help too, then,” Ginny suddenly decided. “We can peel the potatoes - we always have to do that by hand, because mum thinks we rely too much on our wands and not enough on our hands in the kitchen.”

“If only you lot were this happy to help out regularly,” Molly said dryly as she saw them. “All right! Neville, be a dear and peel the bagful of carrots on the table. Ginny, peel the potatoes, and Harry, if you’d like you could help her, but please don’t feel obliged. Ron, dish-duty.”
Ron would have preferred sitting around the table and peeling with the other three, but knew that with the amount of dirty dishes that would pile up during cooking for such a large group of people, he couldn’t even suggest that. Luckily, they were still close enough for him to be able to join any emerging conversation. So, he rolled up his sleeves and stood by the sink, waiting for the first dirty dish to come his way.

“Sorry about earlier,” Ginny said suddenly, eyes focused on the potato she was peeling. “About, you know. It’s just been… tough.”

“I know,” Harry replied. “I mean, not that I know what it feels like to lose a parent that way, but… both of mine are dead, so.”

There was something… upsetting about the way Harry spoke about his losses. Ron couldn’t put his finger on what exactly.

“You live with Black now, don’t you? He’s your godfather, right? Your father’s loss especially must have been terrible for him,” Molly said gently. “They were best friends, if I remember correctly.”

“They were,” Harry confirmed. “But no, I live alone.”

“Alone?” Neville repeated, frowning. “Since when?”

“Since dad killed himself,” Harry said, his voice steady as he spoke, and the ease at which he said that made Ron’s breath catch. Molly dropped a plate that Ron had to dive quick to catch, as she turned to Harry with an expression of shock on her face.

“You father—? But—?” The news of James Potter’s unexpected death had been briefly mentioned in the papers, but in times as turbulent as these, no one had really bothered to look into what had happened. To think that this was something Harry had been dealing with for years—

“You live alone,” Ginny repeated, frowning. Glossing over James Potter’s suicide because how could they even begin to discuss that? “But… what about after the Tournament?”

“I don’t understand,” Harry replied, looking genuinely confused. “What about the Tournament?”

“It was terrible!” Ginny exclaimed. “George still has nightmares about it. Surely you weren’t left alone after all the things you went through?”

“Life is terrible,” Harry said, as if such a view was nothing but a simple truth. Ron felt hurt. “I’m fine living alone.”

“But do you at least see your godfather regularly?” Molly asked, sounding distressed.

“Well, not really,” Harry replied, but then hurried to continue: “But I’ll be seeing him on my birthday.”

“It better be so!” Molly huffed, turning back to check on a simmering pot while shaking her head. There was something, though, about how Harry didn’t elaborate on his birthday meeting with Black that made Ron feel… a bit off. So, he asked, even though he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer:

“What have you guys got planned for your birthday, mate? Going to go and watch some Quidditch with your godfather?”

“Uh.” Harry’s pleasant expression faltered, and Ron had a horrible sinking feeling that he really
wouldn’t like what he was about to hear next. “Not really? We’re just… there’s this thing, and we’re planning… you know, just. A bit of… friendly dueling, I guess?”

Okay. Friendly dueling. Didn’t sound too bad.

“Why?” Ginny asked, frowning. “What kind of a gift is that?”

“Oh, we just made a bet,” Harry replied with a shrug. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Of course, dueling friends and family is perfectly normal,” Molly suddenly said, causing Ron to almost snap his own neck with the speed at which he turned to look at her. He saw the warm smile on her face, but knew that she most certainly did not believe a word of what she was saying. “What kind of a bet is it, dear?”

“I mean, it started with this whole thing of testing me in dueling to see how good I really am at it,” Harry said, relaxing when Molly didn’t sound accusatory or appalled. “So, Sirius is going to go all-out on me and whoever wins gets to ask the other for one thing - anything - they want in return.”

“All-out,” Molly repeated, her voice steady and light and void of anything that could be understood as judgement. Ron’s eyes met Ginny’s, and they both knew that that tone meant that their mother was trying to not let on how she was processing news she hated from the bottom of her heart.

“Friendly, all-out duel?”

“It’s fine,” Harry said dismissively, finishing his portion of the potatoes and dropping them into a bucket of cold water for a rinse. “It’s not like he can kill me, you know? He’d get in trouble.”

He’d get in trouble. As if the only reason why his godfather wouldn’t kill him was because he’d get in trouble, not because he loved his godson. Ron felt sick, and he didn’t know how in Circe’s name could this conversation with Harry make him feel worse for the boy than he felt for himself after his own father had been… yeah. Ron looked at Neville, who had kept his head down even after he had finished peeling the carrots. From the slant of his shoulders Ron could tell - he was feeling bad. For Harry, maybe, because was there anything sadder than resignation to a life like the one Harry had just unwittingly described?

“I see,” was all Molly said, before she took a deep breath and focused back on cooking. “How about you kids - yes, Ron, you as well - go play Quidditch for a bit? I’ll… I’ll take care of everything here, yes? Off you go, off you go.”

Ron didn’t consider himself a particularly protective friend or sibling. Ginny had always been able to take care of herself, and no one he spent time with had ever needed his protection in any way. Harry didn’t need protection either, really, even if he was so much shorter and thinner than Ron. He was probably stronger magically than anyone else Ron knew, and yet… there was this… hurt that Ron felt whenever he tried to imagine what Harry’s daily life was like.

When Ron had been informed of his father’s arrest and inevitable execution, he hadn’t known how to cope. He was angry, so goddamn angry - and he still was. Hurt and furious, and every time he saw his mum sitting alone late at night when she thought nobody could see her grieve, he felt even more hurt. People’s condolences hadn’t been much of a comfort, but then Harry arrived and gave Ron something to direct all this helpless frustration into. His dad had been executed and he was going to avenge him, in some way.

And then Harry had shared these little glimpses of his life, revealing more than he probably realized simply by talking about what had to be suffering without an ounce of sadness, and Ron just… didn’t know what to think. He hadn’t known that James Potter had killed himself, hadn’t known that Harry
was living all alone, hadn’t known that his relationship with his godfather was the sort where all-out duels were a thing that happened. Circe, Ron was self-aware enough to know that he wasn’t perhaps the most level-headed bloke out there, and he had certainly made more than his fair share of stupid mistakes, but the thought of the way Harry lived his life was just…

Surely other people knew about this? Or was the way he was living simply something they expected out there in Durmstrang? It wouldn’t surprise Ron if all the pureblood pricks Harry was surrounded by didn’t care well enough to want him to be safe, but, Merlin, no wonder Harry was as reckless as he was. Going for all the grand gestures in the Triwizard Tournament, risking his life as if it didn’t matter.

Was suicide hereditary? It wasn’t, right? Ron didn’t know, but he felt scared in a way he’d never quite felt before.

When Harry was preparing to leave after dinner, Ron offered to walk him to the door. “I don’t want to wash the dishes again,” he murmured, pretending that that was the reason why he did so. “You’re going straight home?” To that empty, massive house.

“Yes,” Harry said, before lowering his voice as he continued: “I’ll arrange a meeting for us two and Hermione as soon as possible. There’s a lot we’ll probably want to discuss. And, Ron, if you ever change your mind, please don’t worry—”

“You don’t worry, mate,” Ron interrupted with a grin. “If I don’t like something, I’ll tell you, yeah?”

“Good,” Harry muttered, sounding so pleased. “Great. It’ll probably happen only after my duel with Sirius, though. Maybe? I could try before, actually. I’ll owl you about it later.”

“Yeah, mate, listen,” Ron said, stalling a bit just as they reached the front door and stepped out. “I just… are you going to be okay? I mean, that duel with your godfather… mate, I don’t know if you’re just staying calm about it to not worry mum, but you can get hurt, you know? Badly.”

“I know,” Harry replied with a sigh, and there was something like dread to be read in the sad little twist of his smile. “But it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine, that’s what I’m trying to say,” Ron insisted, feeling like he was explaining himself terribly. “No one wants to see you get hurt. If not for your own sake, then can you imagine how upset the people who love you will be if you get hurt?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Harry replied, again sounding dismissive. “No one loves me that much, so it’s fine. I’m a really useful person to know, but if something happens to me, I don’t think more people will care beyond that.”

Ron couldn’t get a word out. Merlin, there it was again - that fucking resignation. What was he supposed to do? If Harry expected some kind of sympathy, it certainly didn’t show in the matter-of-fact manner the things he said were delivered. Ron didn’t know what to do or what to say, and when Harry finally apparated home after a quick smile and a goodbye, his heart felt like it was breaking.

He needed to think about this.

Because. What the bloody fuck.

*

Spending time with the Weasleys, no matter how brief it had been, had felt… nice. Really nice. And having dinner with them was also nice, although at first it had been kind of awkward, with Neville
visibly uncomfortable and not sure how to react to him, and Ginny clearly feeling bad for being kind of rude earlier. Harry didn’t think she needed to feel bad - she was still grieving, after all, and grief did strange things to people.

Harry knew quite a bit about that.

He had told them about how James had died, and in a way… that had made him feel good. He didn’t know when the pain of losing his dad in that way had dulled into quiet acceptance, but saying that his dad had killed himself without feeling angry was so oddly liberating. Empowering, even. He had wanted someone to know, and now they did, and he felt so much lighter for it. He had told them about Sirius, too, and had felt a bit worried at first - what if they thought he was being stupid for getting himself into that kind of a situation? But when Molly had spoken, she hadn’t sounded judgmental at all, which made Harry feel better about talking. Better about everything. And that feeling remained for a good while, even when he left to visit Bella the next morning for a quick training session.

“Trickery is not going to work with him,” Bella had said. “He’s quick, cunning, and powerful. But he’s not invincible.”

“Okay,” Harry said. “So what can I do about it?”

“The way people duel is by casting a spell, waiting for the magic it manifests to exit the wand, and then cast another spell,” Bella explained. “That leaves a gap between spells in which you’re vulnerable, and no matter how short that gap is, there is always someone who’ll figure out how to exploit it. Especially someone like your godfather. That gap cannot be erased completely, but it can be decreased.”

“How?” Harry asked, frowning. “Decreasing it would mean that the second spell would need to be formed before the first one is out?”

“Exactly,” Bella replied, a gleeful smile on her face. “That’s exactly it.”

‘That’s impossible,’ Harry thought, and wanted to say, but then decided not to. “Okay. How?”

The practice that had followed left Harry exhausted, especially since Bellatrix liked to keep him in motion even as he tried to cast his hexes. He’d be running up a set of stairs while trying to cast various spells as fast as he could. Once he’d needed to even drop down on the floor and roll under a table, while still trying to send a heating spell on the biting ice that Bellatrix was sending his way, and a dehydrating hex at an unusually aggressive Venus flytrap trying to get at him.

By the time he returned home his whole body ached, but at least he felt like he was doing something to get better. He didn’t know if it was enough to let him win against Sirius, but at least it was something.

“Vurney,” Harry called, slumping down on one of the couches in the living room. “Run a bath for me, will you?” He had already done his best to stretch the way he had been taught at Durmstrang, but he doubted it would be enough. With a groan he hauled himself up from the couch, kicking his shoes off before even reaching the staircase. He knew he shouldn’t be relying on his house-elves so much when it came to picking up after him - and literally picking up the trail of dirty clothes he left behind him on his way to the bathroom - but he was much too tired to care.

He stepped into the bathtub, water splashing over its rims and onto the floor. A large drop of scented mint oil made its way shyly from a cabinet nearby, hovering above the water until Harry allowed it to dive and dissolve into it. He himself sank down into the water as well, letting out a loud moan as he
relaxed into the warmth surrounding him. He then leaned back into the water and—

_James died like this._

The thought of his father flashed through his mind, fleeting yet jarring at the same time. James had died, and now he was going to fight Sirius, and what in Merlin’s name was he even _doing_, anymore? His family had fallen apart and now he was going to chase away the last remnants of it, apparently.

He’d told the Weasleys about him, hadn’t he?

Why was he thinking of James so much now, anyway? He wasn’t angry anymore.

“Master Harry,” Vurney squeaked, popping into the bathroom and startling the boy. “Master has a guest in the—”

“Since when do you expect me to _wait_ in the hallway before you deign showing up?” Tom said, stepping into the bathroom. Harry blinked, before lazily waving his hand in greeting.

“I’m not moving from here,” he said. “Don’t expect me to move, seriously. I just got in here and I’m too comfortable to go anywhere.”

“Right,” Tom muttered, and after a moment of speculation, sat on the edge of the bathtub. “Right,” he repeated.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, trying to shake off his drowsiness, thoughts of James pushed aside. “I can help, you know.”

“I know,” Tom replied. “I just need to… think for a bit. Feel free to talk in the meanwhile.”

“Okay,” Harry said, wiggling his toes in the water. “Is something big going on? I wanted to talk to you since… since forever, January, and you just… you never came to see me. At all. Before our last meeting, I mean. Which, thank you, by the way. I really appreciate what you did for me.”

“Why did you want to talk to me for months? If it’s something about your godfather, you could’ve asked me last time.”

“It’s not about Sirius, no. I just… the way Arthur Weasley was sentenced was… strange. And I’m curious.”

“Ah.” Tom’s expression cleared as he nodded to himself. “You know, that does tie to what I came here to discuss with you. And it answers your other question as well, in a way. In short, we’ve identified yet another spy in our ranks, but rather than apprehend him directly, I’ve chosen to lull him into a false sense of security and use him as an informant without him knowing.”

“Okay,” Harry said, frowning. “What did Arthur Weasley have to do with that?”

“By the time we identified the spy,” Tom explained, “he knew already that we were going to continue the investigation until we found him. To throw him off the direction of the investigation and convince him that he has not been discovered, we needed a believable scapegoat.”

“You killed Arthur Weasley for _that_?” Harry breathed, feeling upset but not wanting to - what if he alienated Tom too by getting upset by news such as this? “He was _innocent_?”

Tom looked at Harry for a moment, and to avoid a fallout, lied: “No. He wasn’t. He just wasn’t an actual spy - all he did was sympathize and turn the other way if he saw Rebels doing something
criminal. Which is what made it believable that he could have been a spy as well.”

“Oh.” Harry sighed deeply, sinking further into the water. “What did you want from me, then?”

“I have reason to suspect that Rebel ideology has made its way to Hogwarts, and is spreading among students,” Tom said. “Their peers may not realize it, and the children taught there today aren’t exactly the brightest, but I need you to somehow look into that.”

“You want me to spy on the students at Hogwarts,” Harry repeated. “I don’t even go there.”

“Just make friends with one or two, and get the information out of them. You do know people at Hogwarts, don’t you?”

“Not well enough for that, no,” Harry said, resolutely not even thinking of Ron and Hermione, before continuing: “But I could try to reconnect with some? I haven’t seen Draco Malfoy in ages, but we used to be…sort of friends? On friendly terms, at least.”

“Malfoy’s boy isn’t too bright, I’ve heard, but I doubt even he would just accept you wanting to reconnect out of nowhere,” Tom said. “Unless, hmm, you know what? I know what to do. You just listen to my orders when I give them.”

“Don’t I always?” Harry huffed, reluctantly curious. “You’re not going to tell me now even if I ask, right?”

“Absolutely,” Tom said, standing up. “Good talk. Stay alive and don’t be stupid. I’ll see you soon again.”

* *

The best way for Harry to distract himself from whatever Tom was clearly plotting was for him to find something else to focus all his attention on. He couldn’t think of his upcoming duel with Sirius all the time, which meant that inevitably he ended up going to his family’s library and summoning every book that so much as mentioned soul magic. And, after a moment of hesitation, he took Haines’s notebook on the Gone Tribe with him as well.

_He wasn’t going to—_

_Not yet, he just—_

_He had a trick up his sleeve if he was pushed into a corner, but he didn’t want to think about it, so—_

So, soul magic. The kind of soul magic that would let him find the fragments of Tom’s soul, no matter where they were. _Surely_ something like that had to exist, no matter how unreal it sounded, right? He just… couldn’t quite imagine it. Not _once_ had he heard of magic quite like that, and he just…

Magic developed as it was needed - spells were created by witches and wizards who needed magic to serve specific functions. Wanting to find fragments of a soul… had anyone wanted to do that before?

‘If magic exits to split the soul, then surely there has to be something about finding those split parts as well, right?’ Harry thought, browsing through yet another book that had nothing but vague speculations on soul magic, and nothing solid enough for him to infer anything from. Merlin, it was frustrating. Regulus was also frustrating, for suggesting something like this. How _useless_ was he anyway? He had promised to help out as much as he could - well, he hadn’t put it quite like _that_ - but
so far had only given Harry some uncertain ideas on things nobody knew for sure. Was he being deliberately unhelpful?

‘I did kill him, so I’m not sure how upset I am allowed to be about this,’ Harry thought then, biting his lip and feeling slightly sheepish. Circe, why couldn’t the Black brother just give him a break?

‘I want to scream,’ Harry thought, pushing the books aside rubbing his eyes. ‘What am I doing? Just reading these books and not getting anywhere.’ He needed to figure a way forward from this, especially now that Ron had joined him and Hermione. It would be terribly embarrassing if Ron, who had joined them in hopes of seeking justice for his father, was disappointed by them not getting anything done.

‘I don’t think I can tell him about why Arthur was executed, really,’ Harry thought. He wouldn’t know how to explain where he got his information from, and wasn’t sure if it was something that would make Ron feel any better, anyway. To know that his father had been executed so that the actual traitor could live…

‘There will be more of that if what Tom told me about Rebel ideology at Hogwarts is really true,’ Harry thought. ‘It’s not hard to imagine - Yaxley runs that school so differently from Karkaroff.’ Mainly in that Yaxley didn’t seem to much care about what his students were doing. It of course didn’t help that there were so many of them. Harry could easily imagine Gryffindors joining Rebels, but didn’t know if anyone from the other Houses would. Surely no one from Slytherin?

Except.

‘With that logic, no one from Durmstrang would find anything disagreeable with the Dark Lord,’ Harry thought with a scoff, and shook his head. Look at them all now. The only ones who seemed to be thriving were Truls, Clemens, Nikolai and Heidi. Björn too, on most days. Filippa was struggling - not academically, but in every other way. Petronella was ill with whatever illness it was that Filippa had told him about. Jakob was… he… Merlin, the fact that he hadn’t dropped out yet was so odd. Why hadn’t his parents pulled him out yet?

Harry shook his head and took a deep breath, pulling the books back towards him, and resolutely trying to refocus on what he was doing. If he was going to do something reckless and dangerous to get his answers, at least he was going to exhaust every other source available to him first.

* 

It’s been days since Harry’s visit, and Ron couldn’t get it out of his mind. It was kind of weird how someone he used to barely think about was now filling his thoughts, much like the way Ginny did before she learned to take care of herself. Years ago. When they were young enough to not be begrieved by anything. He knew that Harry could take care of himself, but the thought of all the things Harry said, and that his dad had killed himself— and did anyone even know about that? The thought of it made Ron just sick to his stomach because Harry was so damn nice, and George had told them that Harry was even nicer than they thought he was, and it just…

Harry knew how to keep himself alive, but not really how to take care of himself, did he?

“Mum,” Ron said quietly, walking into the living room on a late Saturday night. Everyone else was either asleep or somewhere else, and Molly was there, alone again, sitting by the fireplace. She looked up from the sweater she was knitting when Ron called for her, and gestured for him to sit down.
“Yes, dear?” she asked.

“There’s something I want to talk with you about,” Ron replied, voice quiet in fear of being overheard even by accident. “About Harry.”

“Of course,” Molly said, putting her knitting needles aside. Ron briefly wondered if focusing on Harry helped her deal with what had happened with them - if it was the reason why he was focusing so much on Harry - but decided not to dwell on that. Not now. Not when grief itself was still so alive in his heart, ready to pluck at his eyes till he teared up.

“There’s something wrong about the way he… thinks,” Ron started, not really knowing how to explain what bothered him so much. “There’s this… disregard for his own self, you know? And I worry what it means, because if his dad killed himself, then…”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Molly whispered, pulling Ron briefly into a tight hug. When she spoke, she sounded almost tearful. “You know, Ronnie, I’m so proud of you. I know I don’t always say it, but… I’m so incredibly proud.”

“Mum,” Ron said, flushing red and glad that no one else was there to see it. “But, you know what I mean, right? You know when he left, he said… he said it’s okay if he gets hurt because no one’s going to worry. And I just… mum, that’s wrong, yeah? That’s not right.”


“And he says it like it’s a fact, too,” Ron continued. “Like it’s just something we’re all supposed to nod at and agree with and say, yeah of course, Harry, no one cares about you. And I just… mum, what’s been going on with him? Who’s taking care of him?”

“I don’t think anyone is, darling,” Molly said, taking a shaky breath and wiping the tear tracks off her face. “I don’t think anyone has for a long time now.”

“But why?” Ron asked. “He’s… he’s nice. He’s kind. He’s helpful. He’s funny, too, sometimes. He’s polite and plays quidditch, and is smart, too. What’s so bad about him that no one wants to be there for him?”

“I don’t think it’s a conscious decision on anyone’s part,” Molly explained quietly. “It might just be that no one who could do something about it is close enough to know that action needs to be taken. We didn’t know until now either, and we only found out because we happened to have the kind of a conversation that we did.”

“Yeah,” Ron sighed, leaning heavily against his mum’s side, and looking at the roaring fire. He couldn’t imagine a life in which he didn’t have this. “Think we can do something about that?”

“I think you already are,” Molly said, sounding pleased. “He’s a good boy, isn’t he? I think he’d really appreciate a brother.”

“I think so too,” Ron agreed, before sitting up straight. “I’ll start visiting his place more often. And I’ll invite him over here more often, too. I think his company will do George some good too, right?”

“Oh, that is wonderful,” Molly said. “Ginny also seems to quite like him. And Neville softened up eventually, didn’t he?”

“I think Neville thought that Harry was like the people he allegedly spends time with,” Ron said. “I mean, especially after the Tournament Malfoy bragged quite a bit about knowing Harry, and how Harry spends a lot of time with Bellatrix Lestrange and Crouch Junior and all those people. And… I
mean, you saw what he did in the Tournament. We knew better than to take that at face value, but I
don’t think most other people know Harry beyond what he did there.”

“We’ll make sure he has us, then,” Molly decided. “And if he wants, he can even come and stay here
for a couple of weeks. You like spending time with him, don’t you?”

Ron nodded. Even if Harry hadn’t decided to involve him in his grand plans, it wasn’t as if he hadn’t
enjoyed his company before. “Yeah. And I think there’s a lot about him that I want to know, now.
He said he’d invite me over sometime soon, I could talk to him then about staying overnight?”

“You do that,” Molly said, petting her son’s hair, glad for the happiness she had with her family
despite the loss of her husband. Arthur, she liked to believe, would have wanted to see them like this
- together, doing their best to remain true to who they were.

“You do that,” she repeated quietly.

No matter how much time he spent at the Lestranges, there was always something that would
surprise him. Harry had just flung himself through an open window and into the garden, fleeing six
of Bellatrix’s animated paperweights, each requiring a different counter-curse to dispel, when he
realized that no matter how useful the results of this training would be in the long run, it would likely
do nothing - or not much, at least - when it came to his duel against Sirius.

More importantly, though, when the sight of a flaming hawk diving towards him made him hope for
a spell to somehow disturb the amount of oxygen around the fire, that a thought occurred to him: if
he used gas in his duel against Sirius, he would catch the man possibly off-guard long enough to
defeat him, right?

“It is possible,” Bellatrix said after Harry, lying on the floor with sweat cooling against his face,
explained his idea to her. “But there’s precisely one person who knows how to do that, and that’s
Rosier.”

“Of course,” Harry sighed, closing his eyes. Of course it’s Evan Rosier. Because somehow, for some
reason, the same stars that aligned for his fortune earlier, were now conspiring to make him suffer.

“Are you sure you want me to summon him?” Bellatrix asked, and even though the words could be
mistaken for a sign of concern, Harry couldn’t help but think of it as a test instead. He didn’t want to
see Rosier. He didn’t want to be anywhere near the man, to be quite honest. But if refusal to work
with him was going to make him appear weak in front of Bellatrix, then what choice did he really
have?

“I don’t like him,” Harry said, slowly getting back on his feet again. “But I can learn from him.
Think he would teach me?”

“Oh, that’s not the problem you’d have with him, sweetheart,” Bellatrix said, summoning a house-elf
with a wave of her hand. “It’s how to get him to stop that you’ll need to work on. He’s going to—
elf, tell Evan Rosier that he’s wanted here.”

“He’s going to what?” Harry asked, though he suspected he knew what she would tell him.

“He’s going to do his best to attach himself to you.”

“I’ve heard the rumours about him,” Harry said then. “I’m almost sixteen. Isn’t that too old for him,
anyway?” Which, Merlin, why was Rosier even allowed to be free and do what he wanted when
that was a sentence that truthfully implied everything that was wrong with the man? That it could even be a conversation point was sickening.

“Oh, darling,” Bellatrix cooed, touching Harry’s cheeks gently with her fingertips. “Oh, darling, you’re much too pretty for men like him to not want you.”

Harry resolutely refused to think about that further, and simply said: “Is he going to ask for anything in return?”

“Who knows,” Bellatrix said with a shrug, just as they both heard the sound of footsteps coming closer, and Rosier appeared in the doorway. The man was just as disturbing to look at as before, and Harry held back the urge to cringe.

“That was fast,” Bellatrix said.

“I deemed it important to not dawdle,” Rosier replied, stepping further into the room and smiling at Harry. “Hello there.”

“Hi,” Harry said, conscious of how tightly he was holding his wand.

“The boy wants to learn how to manipulate gas,” Bellatrix said. “Want to be useful?”

“Aren’t I always?” Rosier said, not turning away from Harry. “I’ve heard your godfather talk about this duel of yours that’s coming up. You’re in for a treat.”

“I know how he duels,” Harry said. “Which is why I want to know how to use something he can’t see and doesn’t expect in order to win.”

“When have you seen him duel?” Bellatrix asked, curious.

“I haven’t seen him personally,” Harry explained, and then continued: “but someone I know showed me a memory.” Bellatrix narrowed her eyes and titled her head, but didn’t ask further questions. Harry didn’t know if she suspected something, but… how could she? The thought of the Dark Lord showing him a memory had to be too much of a leap for anyone to consider.

“ Conjuring gas would require a much deeper knowledge of potions and alchemy than what you possess right now,” Rosier said. “All I can teach you is a shortcut: how to evaporate a liquid that is already there, and control its movement once it’s gas. Will that be sufficient, love?”

There weren’t any other options, were there? Harry nodded. “That’ll do.”

“Now, for what you’ll be giving me in return,” Rosier started. Harry nearly grimaced, before he thought of Mette all of a sudden, and kept his expression neutral. Bordering on pleasant, really. He sighed, took a few steps closer - close enough to be almost within Rosier’s reach - and said: “Spending time with me isn’t enough?”

“Oh, come on,” Rosier sneered, but Harry saw his gaze flicker. He was considering, and that was enough. Björn had told him all about his… experiences and theories and, just. Björn had told him a lot of things about things men did, about things men wanted when they were— and Harry was desperate enough to push. “Of course no—”

“And if I call you Professor?” Harry offered, disturbed and amused. The amusement drained quickly when Rosier’s body shuddered, and the man momentarily closed his eyes as he let out a loud, harsh, moan. Harry glanced at Bellatrix, confused and disgusted.
“Don’t ever become that pathetic,” Bellatrix warned him. “Look at him. He’d offer to kill himself if he could hump your leg. Don’t let him.”

“Why would I let him?” Harry asked, frowning. “I can barely tolerate him as it is. There’ll be no physical touching between us.”

“You’ll probably need to convince him not to touch himself, you know,” Bellatrix said, sneering at Rosier who was still breathing heavily.

“Do you ever have to put up with this?” Harry asked. “I mean, I don’t know that many girls, but you’re very beautiful.”

“Oh, darling,” Bellatrix cooed again, pulling Harry into a hug. “What a sweetling, you are. People learned very fast to be careful. You could practice on him, you know. Once he’s taught you what you need to know, do what you want.”

Harry relaxed against the witch, eyeing Rosier contemplatively. He didn’t like hurting people - that’s what had gotten him into trouble with Sirius anyway - but if he had to cause pain to show people what he could do if pushed, then maybe a target like Rosier was the best option.

But first: he needed to handle his godfather.

*  

If he never saw Rosier again, it’d be great.

The man was a surprisingly competent teacher, but the whole… his… thing, the way he looked at Harry and just— Even though it had been funny at first, how calling him Professor was enough to make the man’s knees shake, eventually the reasons to why that was happening just… became too much. The hilarity of how enslaved to his own wants Rosier was turned into acidic disgust that just settled at the pit of Harry’s stomach and stayed there.

Harry had returned well after sunset, his house empty and dark as it always was. When he closed the front door behind him, he made sure that every other window and door was locked as well. Just… just in case he was being followed. He didn’t regret taking the time to learn what Rosier managed to teach him in those few hours, but Circe, he was not going to spend any more time with the man if he could help it. He was going to - hopefully - pull one over Sirius and win his duel, and that was it.

‘Can I really trust that?’ Harry thought then, frowning. He had so many things to do, and who knew what kind of people he’d need to ask help from… what if he needed Rosier’s help again? The man wasn’t going to be satisfied with titles and fantasies every time. He’d definitely want something more, and just the thought of that made Harry grimace.

In comparison…

Harry, still dressed in his robes and shoes, sat down on the stairs near the front door and thought about the things he needed to do. The things he didn’t know how to do, despite how important they were. He had promised himself to not fall back into the habit of fear and hesitation, but here he was - afraid and hesitant, wasn’t he? He knew what he could do, had even an exit plan if things got awry, and yet… here he was, not doing anything.

It was dark out. Even the stars were hidden behind the clouds. The moon was distant and dull, and the summer night felt unusually cold when Harry unlocked his front door again and stepped out. He had his wand in his hand, ready to apparate if things went terribly wrong.
“I wonder if the Gone Tribe would help me,” he murmured, feeling awkward for speaking out loud to himself. “I wonder if they know the things I need to learn. I wonder if they know how to find fragments of a soul and unite it.” He had seen them already, many times. Enough times to recognize the blue glow when it began emanating from seemingly nothing but the darkness of the night around him. There was the sound of a shuffling quick movement in the distance, and Harry tensed.

The blue glow spread in thin tendrils across the grass in front of his home, and it took him a moment to realize that at the end of each tendril was a small, spasming hand, its chubby fingers lax and swinging every time the palm twitched. It was disturbing and repulsive, but Harry found himself unable to take a step back. A cold feeling of fear sank into his skin, making him shiver despite the robes he was wearing.

It will change you.

Harry startled violently, turning his whole body to look around him when he heard a voice speak. He could’ve sworn he heard a voice, someone had just—

What you ask for will change you, little one.

“Who’s talking to me?” Harry said aloud, his voice shaky. “Where are you?”

You called us. You’ve been calling us for a long time now.

Teasing us, really.

Harry held his breath, trying to get a grip on his fear. He was sweaty all of a sudden, and the blue little hands with their endless thin arms were writhing on the grass in front of him. He didn’t know where to look, so he simply turned his gaze towards the darkness, and said: “A-are you someone from the Gone Tribe?”

We do not know that name, little one.

“What are you then?”

Is that what you called us here for to know?

Harry bit his lip, not daring to speak. What if every time he spoke, every time he asked a question, he became more and more indebted to them? Despite the voice not knowing what the Gone Tribe referred to, it wasn’t impossible for it to be yet another term given by a person without them knowing — How much could he trust Haines’s assessment, anyway?

‘Enough to be doing this, I suppose,’ Harry then reminded himself, before shaking his head and speaking again:

“I need to become stronger,” he said. “I need to learn the kind of magic that I haven’t been able to find in books. Can you… can you give me that?”

Of course we can. That is easy.

Harry took another deep, shaky breath, feeling reluctantly hopeful. He saw something moving in the dark - a large, hunched figure that he hadn’t noticed before. It shuffled closer, and once again he could hear movement that sounded too quick for the motions of the figure.

What is difficult, little one, is what will you give us in return?
And Harry, his little vanishing trick hidden in the corner of his mind, said: “You can have me.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank u all for the comments and the support. I'll start working on the next chapter on Tuesday (I've got a deadline on Monday lololol), so pls look forward to this fic *not* plunging into an indefinite hiatus for the nth time.
“Seventeenth lesson: pain is always real.”

A needle sank into his arm, pushed by an invisible hand. When it emerged through his skin again, it did so without drawing blood, but the thread it dragged through the hole hurt more than the needle itself. Harry’s arms were burning, and he couldn’t look away from the thread slowly binding his limbs together. What were the sixteen before this?

“I don’t know what else did you expect,” said the voice that had spoken earlier, and Harry didn’t know where it came from. Couldn’t raise his head to see. “You’ve been told before all about how violent games end.”

Harry was in a room, on a rocking chair. Then he was on a boat, stumbling from side to side. Finally, he was on a swing, going up and down. He never moved, never spoke. The thread holding his arms never vanished.

“You’ll learn,” the water told him, splashing against the window of the room and the edges of the boat and the grass under his swing. “You’ll learn. It’ll change you, but you’ll learn.”

Harry— Harry sat up, coughing. He was in his room, his bed. His arms were burning, and all he could think of was getting some cold water on them, as fast as possible. He didn’t know what time it was, but it was still dark outside. He kept coughing as he shakily made his way towards the closest bathroom, stomach clenching and throat hurting. In the end the only thing that distracted him from the pain in his arms was when he ended up vomiting on the floor of the bathroom, before reaching the toilet.

“Master Harry,” Vurney wailed, popping into the bathroom, clearly alarmed by what was going on. Harry could smell it when the vomit was vanished by the house-elf, and he quickly stripped out of his sweaty, dirty clothes as well. “Master Harry is sick. Should Vurney call a Healer?”

“No, no,” Harry croaked, finally managing to rinse his mouth, then hands, then face, and then finally arms with cold, cold water. It didn’t help with the burning - his skin didn’t hurt, his bones did. “Just… just get me a pain-relieving potion, could you?”

His eyes hurt. His head hurt even worse. His stomach was tender, and his arms were aching and all he wanted was to just feel better. Harry doubted, however, that this was something that would pass as easily as a common cold. He knew it was different - he could feel it. It had something to do with the nightmare, even though he couldn’t quite recall what it had been about. He suspected it had much to do with the Gone Tribe, anyway.

Last night… he had offered himself to them. Because if there was one thing that needing Rosier’s help had showed him, it was that Harry didn’t want to be so desperate for someone’s aid that he’d need to indulge them the way he had indulged Rosier. He knew - had vague ideas - of things people could ask him, and the thought of not knowing how low he could go when desperate enough terrified him. Being hurt physically was a thought easier to bear than doing the kind of things people like Rosier would want from him.

“You’ll need to convince him not to touch himself,” Bellatrix had said. What if that wasn’t what Rosier would want next time? What if he wanted more? What if he wanted Harry to do something? He couldn’t, and he didn’t want to, and he wasn’t going to. The thought of it made him sick in a way that was only slightly different from how Clemens made him feel for not being a girl.
Harry turned off the tap, and looked up at his reflection in the mirror above the sink. *Merlin,* he looked tired. He didn’t know if he could fall asleep again, but there was too much for him to do later on in the day to not try and get some more rest now. He’d need to owl Ron and Hermione and set up a meeting - invite them both to Godric’s Hollow, probably - and have one of his house-elves keep an eye out for any unexpected visitors. He didn’t want Tom barging in when he had people here, especially a Weasley and a muggleborn. Not after Harry had pretended to not be close to anyone at Hogwarts.

‘*If word gets out of Rebel ideology spreading at Hogwarts, Yaxley will take it out on the muggleborns,*’ Harry thought, absently deciding to brush his teeth to get rid of the taste of vomit still lingering in his mouth. ‘*Karkaroff will just egg him on, and they won’t want to cause a potential scandal by targeting purebloods, even if they’re suspicious.*’ Tom had most probably concluded the same, and even though the man didn’t care one bit for muggleborns, it was likely that he wanted to avoid disrupting a functional system like Hogwarts when he had so much else to focus on first. Which was why he had turned to Harry.

‘I wonder what he’s planning,’ Harry thought. ‘*He told me to just be ready to take orders. Merlin, I hope he doesn’t send me to Hogwarts again. Spending a whole year there was enough, and I don’t want to go there again. Especially alone.*’ Where would he even stay? Likely with the Slytherins, and Harry didn’t know any of them - not even Draco, really - well enough to be comfortable spending a whole year with. Also, Hogwarts’s shared dorm rooms just… sounded *awful.* How could he be expected to sleep in a shared room with six other people?

Harry paused his train of thoughts to spit out the foamed-up toothpaste and rinse his mouth again, making sure there was no remnants of a foul taste in his mouth. He then imagined sleeping in the same room with Björn, Clemens, Jakob, Truls *and* Nikolai every night for years. Circe, that was… just… No. No, he was better off at Durmstrang.

Harry wiped his mouth with a towel, and decided to go back to bed. He then finally turned to leave the bathroom, not noticing that in the mirror, his reflection was still facing forward.

Watching him.

* It wasn’t Ron’s first visit to the Potter House in Godric’s Hollow - he’d been there to attend Lily’s funeral - but it had been a long time since his last visit, and he had somehow forgotten how large the place was.

“It looks so pretty when you approach it by foot from the bus stop, rather than use the Floo,” Hermione said, walking next to him. Soon after Ron had received an owl rom Harry - about a week ago, just a few days after the boy’s visit - Hermione had owled him a well. They had agreed to meet a bit beforehand, and make their way through Godric’s Hollow together. That way Hermione could quickly brief him on whatever he needed to know before meeting Harry again.

Or, as he had found out, it was Hermione’s opportunity to make sure that he wasn’t up to no good when it came to Harry.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you,” the witch had told him. “We’re friends, of course I do. It’s just… Harry’s softer than you’d think.”

“No, I get it,” Ron had assured her, and the two had reached an understanding quickly. A part of him had felt relieved that it seemed that at least *one* person in Harry’s life wanted to keep him safe. It was a good start. Now, as he was walking closer to the large house towering in the distance, he couldn’t
help but think how living alone in such a place couldn’t be a good thing, no matter how beautiful it was. “Reckon Harry can tell we’re coming?”

“I’m sure he has some sort of wards around the place,” Hermione replied, hesitating only slightly when walking past the gates and approaching the front door. Much to their surprise, however, the door opened before they could reach to knock it. There stood Harry, with a pale face and tired eyes, and a tiny but warm smile on his face.

“Hi mate,” Ron said, pulling Harry into a tight hug. “Good to see you again.”

“How have you been, Harry?” Hermione asked, when it was her turn to hug him. “I brought cupcakes with me, from that coffee shop we visited last summer, remember? I remember you liked them, so I got a few.”

“Oh,” Harry said, biting his lip as his smile widened. “Thank you. Come in, I’ve got coffee and tea ready. And snacks. How have the two of you been? Ron, Hermione said she’d tell you what we’ve been up to—”

“I did,” Hermione hurried to say as Harry ushered the two of them in and led them towards the kitchen. “I was brief about it—,” most of the time she had spent interrogating Ron about his intentions, really, “—but he knows the general overview of what we want to achieve.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Harry said, sighing happily, and Merlin, he was so precious. Ron wanted to fight someone. “Is there anything you’d like to start with? Questions, comments…?”

“Yeah,” Ron said, sitting down and promptly helping himself to some of the food on the table. “Both of you are smart but your plans are scattered and disorganized, partly ineffective and none of your goals are defined well enough to clarify anything in terms of how to get them done.”

“Excuse you,” Hermione said, sounding miffed. “Our aims are clear enough, I think? Equality and justice for everyone?”

“But what does that mean?” Ron asked. “Equality for everyone? In what way? Humans, werewolves, vampires? Muggleborns and halfbloods? And what kind of equality? Economic? Legislative? Social? Tackling any of these will need its own plan, you know? And… this whole thing you mentioned earlier about changing the government. I agree, I do, but I think you guys don’t really realize how slow that process needs to be to appear natural. We’re not going to act like the opposition - if we do this correctly, the Dark Lord won’t even know we’re an opposition, you know? We’ll change things so subtly they won’t realize that the changes are deliberate and directed.”

“That sounds brilliant,” Harry breathed, leaning forward. His smile is even brighter than before. Hermione was nodding, now looking pleased as well. “Do you have any ideas on how to get things started? We’ve got sponsorships - Hermione told you about those?”

“Yes, and I think those are great, but you need to be a bit more… shrewd with how you use them,” Ron said. “Also, as students, none of us can really do much, you know? Not yet. What we can plan for are the kind of careers that would give us a leverage through which to change things. And considering that most of what we need to change is legislative, it means that at least one of us has to go into politics and study law to influence regulations. And we will need people whose thinking aligns with ours working in education. And as many journalists as we possibly can have. That’s the tough part, you know - getting our people into those positions without causing alarm.

“Okay,” Hermione said, writing down everything Ron had just told them. “I can go through the current Wizarding World legislature and find the specific regulations we need to change. There’ll
probably be a lot of them.”

“Find the ones that are most discriminatory,” Ron advised. “The rest we can work on later.”

“What can I do?” Harry asked.

“You need to get as much political power as you possibly can,” Ron told him. “I know it sounds ambitious, but we have to have that power. No matter how careful we are, we’re bound to eventually piss some people off. We need people with power and authority to make some things easier. The thing is, though, we can’t trust the people who have that power and authority right now. Which means that one of us needs to take that role, and mate, you’re the only one who can. The sponsorships you’ve been getting since the Tournament are good and all, but they’re not what you need. You need more visibility, and you need to show off more power.”

Harry looked at him, lips pressed into a tight line. He was clearly worried, but accepting of what he was hearing. Ron grabbed a cupcake and handed it to Harry.

“You’ll be fine,” he said. “Not because of some luck, but because you have us now, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, and Ron could see Hermione nodding as well.

They were going to be just fine, the three of them.

* *

The morning of Harry’s birthday arrived, and with it a plethora of contradicting feelings. He was happy that soon this would be over - that the worry of an upcoming duel with someone he loved would be there no more. What he dreaded was the aftermath that would inevitably push them further away from each other. Harry would truly have pushed away the one adult his parents had wanted him to trust.

Sirius had owled him a location: one of the dueling rooms one could reserve from the Auror Training Center. A Healer would be nearby as well, though Harry suspected his godfather didn’t expect their duel to reach the point of needing one. Harry wasn’t as optimistic, mainly because he knew that if he wanted to win, he couldn’t afford holding back in fear of hurting Sirius too badly. If he allowed the man any chances to gain the upper hand during the duel, it would be incredibly difficult to turn the tables. Sirius was quick and vicious.

But, Harry could also be just as quick and just as vicious, couldn’t he? His nightmares kept leaving him with bruises and aches that made his temper unusually volatile, and at times he caught himself dwelling in the urge to truly curse Sirius. To just… teach him a lesson. Just once, drive his message through so damn well the man couldn’t unlearn it.

‘I’ll have to get going soon,’ Harry realized when the clock struck eleven. He had had a late breakfast, made sure his robes were well-runed, and tried to imagine all the protective spells Sirius would have on him. He had then soaked a pair of gloves in a dizziness-inducing potion, while tucking two anti-nausea pills into his own pocket for later. He couldn’t keep the potion in a bottle as Sirius would definitely notice it, so… Harry improvised, and used the gloves, He had considered other potions as well, but mild pain and drowsiness potions were often neutralized by adrenaline during battle. Dizziness, however, was more effective.

‘I can do this,’ Harry thought as he holstered his wand, carefully tucked the damp gloves into his pocket, and apparated to the Auror Training Center. He had a lot to prove - certainly too much to lose now.
The Auror Training Center was a large building, tucked away under London, in a gap between East Putney and Southfields. No natural light could reach it, and no muggle construction could accidentally graze it. It was there that Harry apparated to and found himself face to face with Sirius, who had been waiting for him.

“You’re early,” his godfather said. The man looked calm and poised, as if he had nothing to worry about. For all he knew, he didn’t.

“Just in case,” Harry replied, feeling awkward. Last time they had talked, Sirius had been so upset with him. “If everything is ready, though we might as well start.”

“You can still back out,” Sirius told him, turning on his heels and leading Harry further into the building. “Nobody would hold it against you.”

“I know,” Harry said, “but I don’t think I should.”

The room Sirius ended up taking him to was large and empty. In one corner he could see a small booth, with a nervously smiling Healer already sitting inside it. By the door he found a few hooks, presumably for him to hang his cloaks and bag. He did so, leaving the damp gloves to hang out of his cloak’s pocket and tapping them discreetly with the tip of his wand. Simultaneously he slipped the two anti-nausea pills into his mouth, and made his way towards the other end of the room, leaving Sirius standing closer to the gloves.

“Last chance,” Sirius said, looking at Harry.

And Harry

He has it coming.

just

He’s not treating us like a friend.

felt

We need to teach him a really good lesson.

resigned.

“Thank you, Sirius,” Harry said, tensing when his godfather rolled his eyes and was clearly about to cast a hex of some sort “but we ought to sta—”

“Locomotor Mortis!”

“A first year spell, Sirius, really?” Harry asked, darting to the side to avoid the incoming charm. “Don’t go easy on me. You promised you wouldn’t. Confringo.”

“I see now that I shouldn’t,” Sirius replied. “A blasting curse? Are you trying to kill me, Harry?”

He won’t learn without getting hurt.

Thirteenth lesson.

“Crucio!” Harry knew his godfather would dodge that curse too, and would likely manage to evade the next few ones as well. It would take a few minutes before the now slowly evaporating dizziness-inducing potion would begin to affect Sirius, and until then anything could happen. He could lose,
which… which wasn’t… He couldn’t lose. He had to win. Had to try and hit him with a blood-boiling hex and an eye-vanishing curse and not think of what he’d do if one of those actually went through.

No one learns without pain.
So we better hurt him.

Sirius was quick on his feet, and the incendio he shot at Harry’s shoes almost hit its mark. The boy jumped - forward, deliberately going against instinct the way Barty had taught him - and was pleased when Sirius’s next spell - reflexively aiming few feet behind where Harry had initially be standing - missed him completely.

Hurt him.

A stinging hex – Sirius was still going easy on him – made Harry hiss in pain, but he could now finally begin to see the effects of the dizziness on Sirius. He was slower than before, and when Harry replied to the stinging hex with a cutting curse, it nicked Sirius at the shoulder. The man grimaced, and something angry flashed across his face. He was likely done with taking it easy on Harry.

Which – good. He shouldn’t have been going easy anyway.

Look at the shadow he leaves. See something blue?

Pull at it.

Harry’s eyes flickered down at where Sirius was standing, his shadow dark under the bright lights. Not wanting to be too distracted by his own odd thoughts – were they his own? – Harry focused on sending as many blasting curses in a row as he could, eventually managing to make Sirius stumble. The man responded with a cutting curse of his own, which Harry barely managed to dodge, spraining his ankle in the process.

“Imperio,” he grunted, stumbling back onto his feet and feeling like he was burning on the inside. His eyes flickered to Sirius’s shadow again, and he noted that somehow, he did see a blue hue of some sort at its edges. He quickly dismissed the thought, however, and focused again on recasting the imperius, missing Sirius for the second time. He had a knife – the one Sirius had given him. The one he had used to kill Regulus with. If he could just get Sirius under an imperius, he could use the knife to—

—to what?

He didn’t want to kill his godfather!

Because of him, you couldn’t even bury your father.

Pull at it!

Harry’s eyes flickered at the shadow again. It was only due to Sirius still trying to shake off the effects of the potion that Harry had turned into gas that he had the moment he needed to stand still and just… reach out. With his magic. At Sirius’s shadow. He wasn’t even sure how he was doing it, only that the blue hue gave him a similar feeling as the dead body of Regulus’s friend that Harry had animated so long ago. It felt similar to every other dead thing Harry had touched. Similar, but not identical, and he didn’t understand why.

He hasn’t been there for you, has he? Selfish man. Vile creature.
And Harry pulled. He didn’t know what was it that he had expected, but it certain wasn’t the sudden, short-lived wail of pure agony that came out of his godfather. The man’s eyes were bulging all of a sudden, his mouth hanging open as he crumpled down onto the floor. Harry let go of the shadow, of the blue tint around it, and it snapped back like a rubber band.

‘What did I do?’ A feeling of dread pooled at the pit of Harry’s stomach, and the boy felt worried. What if he did something that couldn’t be fixed?

Harry’s hand rose in a flash, though Sirius was clearly not about to move. He hesitated for a moment, before the same anger that had been plaguing him earlier resurfaced, as if pushed by a pair of invisible hands through the haze of concern he had fallen into.

“Confringo!” Harry cast the blasting curse again, hitting Sirius’s ankles, causing an explosion of blood and bone, making the man roar in pain. Harry, still stuck in thinking of what counter attacks he’d be hit with, followed that up with a—

A cutting curse hit him somewhere in the abdomen, and he could see Sirius’s face turned towards him, his tear-stained face twisted into a grimace, the tip of his wand shaking as it pointed at Harry, but Harry was—

“Crucio!”

Harry lifted the curse, and stood frozen still, trying to breathe. He could feel the warmth of his own blood - the cutting curse that Sirius had hit him with had been too weak to be anything but skin-deep - and the only irrational thought in his mind was that he couldn’t let Sirius know he had succeeded in injuring Harry like this. His heart was hammering wildly in his chest and his lungs were burning, and he couldn’t— What had he—?

Sirius was moaning in pain, the pool of blood under his legs growing every second. Harry gestured for the Healer to rush and help him, ending the duel without knowing for sure what Harry had done for it to end up like this. Harry himself had only vague ideas, each of which were too horrifying for him to want to dwell on right then. He knew what the blue hue was, and he wanted to… not know it. He wanted to just… not think of what he had done.

“Isn’t this entertainment, Uncle Sirius?” Harry asked, walking closer to his godfather, words slipping out almost unintended. The man squinted at him, still in agony despite the Healer’s pain-relieving efforts. “Or does it stop being fun when you’re the one hurt?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Sirius wheezed, looking at Harry as if he had never seen him before.

“Funny,” Harry replied. “That’s what I’ve been thinking all this time. Since I won, I’ll be picking up Lupin tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll send him your way,” Sirius said, clenching his eyes shut. “Just go to your… home.”
“Goodbye,” Harry said, and turned on his heels. He paused long enough by the door to grab his cloak and bag, before leaving the room. He couldn’t help but feel that he was leaving a part of himself behind, too.

‘Don’t think about. Don’t think. Don’t think—’

Somehow, the victory didn’t feel like winning at all.

*

Go to your home, Sirius had said.

Harry couldn’t. Didn’t want to.

Instead, the moment he reached the apparition point, he apparated to the Lestrange Manor. He didn’t know if his wound was still gushing blood – it likely was – but he couldn’t find it in himself to care as he made his way towards the entrance. The burning pain the wound was causing made him feel a bit better, like he was being punished for the terrible thing he had just done to his godfather. He deserved it.

“Master Potter,” a house-elf squeaked, appearing in front of him. “Mistress shall be informed of your arrival!”

“Just take me to her,” Harry said tiredly. “Or better yet, point me to where she is.”

By the time he found Bellatrix, she was in one of the sitting rooms Harry remembered running through during his training, enjoying tea with Narcissa Malfoy. Whatever talk the two witches were having didn’t appear to be serious, and hopefully wasn’t something too important to handle interruption. Luckily, when Bellatrix saw Harry, her face brightened into a wide smile.

“Darling!” she all but shrieked. “How unexpected! Come, come, sit down!”

“I’m sorry to intrude,” Harry said, nodding towards Mrs. Malfoy – Narcissa, as she had once told him to call her – in greeting. Harry liked her. He still remembered how she had told him to Floo to the Malfoy Manor if Rosier ever tried to attack him, last time they’d met. He hated the thought of disturbing their gathering but couldn’t bring himself to leave. Instead, Harry sat down, and grimaced when the motion disturbed his wound. It was only then that the two witches noticed his blood-soaked abdomen.

“And what’s this, little sweetling,” Bellatrix asked, pulling out her wand and poking Harry’s wound with it. It hurt. “Been to a fight?”

“A duel,” Harry replied, wondering if it was normal for a wound to emit so much heat. “The duel.”

Bellatrix’s eyes widened, and she looked delighted when she said: “Oh, it was today? Happy birthday, darling. Did you win? Did you teach the mean man a lesson?”

“Bella, you can ask him questions later,” Narcissa cut in, sounding agitated. “Heal the boy first, for Merlin’s sake!”

“She gets nervous around battle wounds,” Bellatrix sighed, before casting a cleaning spell on Harry and mending his wounds with a few sharp gestures. He should’ve known how to heal himself, really, but he hadn’t used healing spells in so long he had forgotten he could. “There you go, right as rain. Now, did you kill your godfather, sweetling?”
Narcissa didn’t drop her cup of tea, but it was certainly put down fast enough to clack loudly against the plate. “Excuse me? Did he—”

“Sirius challenged me into a duel,” Harry said, not wanting to elaborate further than that on how this mess had started. “We duelled today - it was a birthday gift, you see. I turned sixteen. Anyway, I won.”

“Of course you did,” Bellatrix cooed, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. “How did you do that, my love?”

“No,” Narcissa cut in again. “Before you tell us how you did, dear, could you tell me why you were dueling Sirius?”

“We had a disagreement,” Harry replied quietly. “We agreed the winner would get to ask for anything—”

“Cousin thought he’d win,” Bellatrix cackled, but Narcissa didn’t look amused at all.

“Cousin thought dueling a minor is a good argumentation tactic, apparently,” she said instead, her voice dripping with disagreement. “That—”

“Cissy, no, he’s not a minor, he—”

“Bella,” Narcissa said again, her tone now sharper. Rather than continue talking to her sister, however, she turned to Harry again. She attempted a gentle smile and poured the boy his own cup of tea before handing it to him. “Now, Harry, please… has this happened before?”

“You mean dueling?”

“I mean cousin Sirius dueling you.”

“No,” Harry assured her. “No, no. We don’t really see each other often, and even when we argue we just usually put a bit of distance between us. This has never happened before.”

“You don’t see each other very often,” Narcissa repeated, the tone of her voice neutral. “I knew you didn’t live with him, but… he’s your guardian, no?”

Oh, right. “Yes, but it’s not like it means anything, right?”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Bellatrix said, patting Harry on the arm. “It’s just a technicality, dear.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Narcissa said, sounding tense. “He’s supposed to— Oh, never mind now. You said you won, right? That’s impressive. Cousin Sirius is quite the duelist, you know. How did you win?”

“He had a neat little trick up his sleeve,” Bellatrix said, clearly proud. “Tell her, sweetling.”

“I soaked my gloves in a dizziness-inducing potion and evaporated it near him,” Harry explained, not bothering to even try and feel proud of what he had done. He wasn’t.

“That’s a neat trick,” Narcissa said. “Did Bella teach you that?”

“Evan Rosier did,” Harry replied hesitantly. Narcissa’s gaze snapped back to her sister, clearly becoming more and more bothered by what she was hearing.

“Rosier?”
“Harry handled him just fine,” Bellatrix replied, patting Harry on the arm again. “Knew just what to say. You know how weak Rosier is against a pretty face. You should’ve seen him, Cissy. Rosier was on the floor with his tongue out—”

“The boy is fifteen, Bella,” Narcissa snapped, the anger in her tone catching Harry off-guard.

“Didn’t you hear? It’s his birthday today. He’s six—”

“Fifteen when that happened.”

“This is why we don’t tell her the fun things,” Bellatrix sighed, leaning more against Harry. “You never know what will upset her.”

“Harry,” Narcissa said, her voice somehow calm and soothing again. How did she do that – just.. change so quickly? “Be a dear and go home now, yes? Clean up, rest well, and eat something. My sister and I… we ought to have a discussion.”

“We ought to go and visit Sirius, that’s what we ought to do,” Bellatrix cackled. “Merlin, this is a delight.”

“Harry,” Narcissa said again, looking at him and ignoring her sister. “Whatever happened today – with Sirius – is his responsibility for behaving like a teenager when he is, in fact, an adult.”

‘You don’t know what I did,’ Harry thought, but nodded.

“Go home now,” Narcissa said, “and please do as I suggested. And… and try to find something else to do, today. Go to town in the evening, have some cake. Okay? School will start again in a month and you’ll be back there in a good environment, but until then… try to not think of Sirius, yes? If you must talk to him, owl me first, all right?”

“Sure,” Harry said. He didn’t know how seriously to take Narcissa’s words, but it wasn’t as if he was going to meet her soon again, anyway, so agreeing just seemed like the easiest and fastest way out of the conversation. He definitely wasn’t going to owl her if he needed to talk to Sirius, though, that was just weird. He didn’t know why she’d want him to do that. “I’ll… I’ll just head home now. Sorry for the interruption and thanks, uh, for healing me. And the tea. Thanks for the tea, I mean. Bella, I’ll see you soon again?”


So proud of him.

Well, at least someone was.

* 

It wasn’t unusual for Narcissa to be visibly upset after spending a whole day in her sister’s company, but there was something in the way she was getting ready for bed that made Lucius suspect there was something more than that bothering her. He watched her quietly for a while, waited until she had slid into the bed by his side, and the said:

“Had a terrible day today, my dear?”

“You could say that, yes,” Narcissa murmured in response, sighing as she lied on her back, looking up at the dark ceiling. “I’ve known Bella to be incredibly irresponsible, but sometimes I just… forget
how irresponsible she can really be.”

Lucius hummed in agreement, but didn’t say anything, not wanting to interrupt his wife as she sorted out her thoughts. Eventually, she sighed again, and continued:

“Harry visited Bella today.”

“Potter?”

“Yes, of course. Him. He… I was aware that she liked him, and had invited him quite a few times to visit her, but I hadn’t known how close the two were, really. He was right at home with her, you know. And she adores him. And, Lucius, I fear for the boy.”

That was not what he had expected her to say. “You… fear for him?” The boy was a necromancer. Why would she fear for him?

“He has lived alone in that house of his since his parents died,” Narcissa continued, voice quiet in the darkness. “I thought Sirius was at least taking care of him, visiting him sometimes, but that’s not… that’s not what has been happening, at all. I should’ve known better than to believe in my cousin’s sense of responsibility. The boy was left alone, and it seems the only adult he interacts with regularly is Bella.”

Oh. Well, now Lucius was starting to see her reasons for concern.

“Today’s his birthday,” Narcissa carried on. “Sirius’s gift to him was a duel. And a serious one, at that. Harry won – by some miracle, I suppose – and when Bella and I went to see Sirius at St. Mungo’s, the damage done to him was extensive. He was missing both of his feet and the healers were still working to restore his nervous system from the damage caused by a very aggressive bout of Curciatus. And I know you’re thinking now— why would I worry for the boy if that’s what he can do?”

“No, I—”

“No, I—”

“Lucius,” Narcissa interrupted, turning to her side to look at him. “The boy was trained for this duel by Rosier. He was supervised by Bella. His opponent was his own godfather. And I’m starting to think that that’s the environment he’s been stuck in, for Merlin known how long. Is no one bothered by how that child is treated? Sirius and Bella don’t understand because they don’t have children. Why is the boy surrounded by people who have never had to prioritize anything above themselves before? Of course, they wouldn’t be able to care for him!”

“Dear—”

“He’s Draco’s age! Younger, even! Could you imagine our Draco growing up around people who’d treat him like that? Bella laughed about how Rosier had acted around Harry – laughed about it, Lucius! You know what Rosier is like!”

“Wait, has he— Do you know, if he—”

“I don’t know!” Narcissa snapped, and Circe, Lucius could hear her distress. She sounded almost tearful. “The boy came in bleeding from a wound on his stomach – clearly from a cutting curse. Sirius wasn’t going easy on him, and if he could bring himself to correctly aim a curse at his teenage godson like that, can you imagine what else he has probably done to the boy?”

Lucius didn’t really want to imagine. He had always found Black irritating to be around, but he hadn’t expected the man’s relationship with his godson to be so… violent, if Narcissa’s assumptions
were correct. If the Potter boy wasn’t practically a stranger, he’d feel bad for him.

“He’s Draco’s age, Lucius,” Narcissa repeated.

“He’s a Durmstrang student, dear. And a necromancer. You saw him during the Tournament—”

“He’s a child.”

“But not ours,” Lucius replied. “We have our son who’s safe and sound. What’s been happening to Potter is unfortunate, certainly, but not something for us to get tangled in.”

Narcissa turned to her back again. She didn’t appear sleepy, and Lucius almost expected it when she sat up and moved to leave. “I just need to clear my thoughts,” she said, pulling her robe on. “You can go to sleep, dear. We can talk when the morning comes.”

‘Talk about what?’ Lucius thought, but didn’t want to ask. It wasn’t that he disliked the boy – he didn’t – but he also didn’t want to discuss Potter’s life any more than he had already. Potter was moderately interesting – the way any necromancer would be – and that he had apparently bested his godfather so violently in a duel made him even more curious. But… not enough for Lucius to really care, and the sooner Narcissa stopped feeling sorry for him, the better.

Potter wasn’t their business, and Lucius wanted to keep it that way.
Harry slept badly.

It wasn’t unexpected - anxiety weighed heavily on his chest, dread bubbling like acid in his gut. No matter how much he tried, he couldn’t refocus his thoughts on something positive, or even neutral - instead they kept stumbling from one vividly imagined worst case scenario to another, highlighting everything Harry had done wrong, making him feel worse and worse as minutes passed. Tears were gathering in his eyes and he didn’t even know why because… because he wasn’t sad - he was just tired of not getting things right. He wasn’t sad at all, and yet there he was, teary and weak.

He fell asleep at some point, and then kept waking up sporadically, before dozing off again in a cycle of frustration-filled failed attempts at resting enough to fend off the headache building up in his head. Even in his room he could hear the loud ticking of the grandfather clock in the corridor, the sound echoing with almost unbearable loudness in the otherwise quiet house, beating like a hammer at his skull in a never-ending rhythm.

“I’ll be fine,” Harry whispered, looking at the ceiling. He’d have to be fine, because it wasn’t as if he could just… not be. What would he do, then? Just lock himself in his room and disappoint everyone who still cared in some way about his existence? Not likely! “I’m already sixteen. Practically an adult.” He’d have two more years of the structured life at Durmstrang, and after that he would be truly on his own. He had to figure out how to live, otherwise things would take a turn to the worse.

With a resigned huff, Harry rolled out of bed and made his way towards the kitchen. It was just barely past five in the morning, but he wanted a warm cup of tea, and it wasn’t as if there was anyone who’d stop him, right? Certainly not Sirius, who was probably still in the hospital, because Harry went and hurt him that badly. He had heard of St. Mungo’s facilities and the greatness of their Healers, and there were potions to regrow bones and such, but what about limbs? What about feet? Why had Harry even done that? He hadn’t planned it, it had just occurred to him, and he just—

‘Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it. Don’t think—’

What would the next year at Durmstrang even be like, what with the practical lessons that Tom had told him about?

It was funny, how a lifetime ago stories had given Harry all the comfort he had needed. He had read tales of heroes going through hell and had enjoyed them all from start to finish. Back then he hadn’t had friends, but it hadn’t seemed like such a big deal. Loneliness hadn’t felt real then, not the way it did now.

‘But at least I have Ron and Hermione,’ Harry thought, taking his cup of tea and sitting by one of the large windows of the dining room. The sight of all the colourful flowers made him think of Hermione even more, and amid all the worrying thoughts, he couldn’t help but latch onto the feeling of warmth he got from that. He really did have Ron and Hermione as friends, and so far they seemed like good friends. He didn’t need to worry about them, and he could trust them with his secrets, and Merlin that felt good.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t have other people as well, it just… Tom was so important to him, but there
were too many secrets between them for Harry to expect acceptance from the man. Filippa was amazing, but had so many other things to worry about. Luna was nice, but they weren’t that close anymore. And Lupin… well, Harry would just have to wait and see, right? He had asked Vurney earlier to prepare a room for the werewolf, but what if Lupin - well, *Remus* - didn’t want to be here? Harry had recklessly made a decision about relocating him without asking his permission first. What if Remus got along with Sirius? What if he would’ve preferred staying with Sirius? What if Sirius would have liked to keep Remus with him?

*Circe, why couldn’t he have asked for something else? Anything else?*

Harry shook his head and turned away from the window, not noticing his reflection bend its neck to the side in a quick, violent snap after shaking its head twice as long as he had. Harry didn’t know when Remus would arrive, but it surely wouldn’t be for a few hours still. He could go fix up the basement, make sure it would be good for the nights of the full moon when Remus wouldn’t be able to stay just in his bedroom. Or maybe prepare a really good breakfast - well, ask Vurney to do so, Harry wasn’t… he… he *could* cook a little bit, but it was the kind of food that *he* liked to eat. Simple things he could prepare for himself at Durmstrang. Not something he would serve to a guest or someone he wanted to impress.

Harry washed his cup and wandered back to his room, deciding to change his attire and be get ready in case Remus would arrive early. Time passed by slowly when he had been counting the minutes earlier, but now it was already nearing seven. The sun had risen a long time ago and he felt almost all right again.

By the time he could hear the sound of apparition coming from outside, and saw Remus approach the front door with a small suitcase in tow, there were no signs of his earlier misery to be seen anywhere. Because Harry was *fine*, and even if he wasn’t, he was going to be. Because he was so thoroughly *tired* of not being okay.

*Remus had a very calming presence that Harry had almost managed to forget about. There was gentleness about him that was almost unbelievable, considering what he was.*

When Harry had led Remus to his room and then showed him around the place, he had received a kind smile in return, and a few softly spoken words of gratitude. Remus had then retreated to that room to rest for a few hours and didn’t emerge until lunch. The lunch which Harry had requested to be served in the dining room, like his parents used to when they had proper guests over, and not in the kitchen where Harry usually ate all his meals.

“If there’s something that you would like to have, and isn’t around here, you can tell me and I’ll get it for you,” Harry said, not looking up from the roasted cabbage he was poking with his fork. “Or, you know, you could ask the house-elves. They’ll listen.”

“I’m grateful,” Remus replied, but there was something bitter hiding in the depths of his voice. Harry looked up at him, not daring to question it aloud. He knew the man had plenty to be bitter about.

“I’ll be going back to Durmstrang in a few weeks,” he said instead. “Godric’s Hollow is a, well, it’s mostly a muggle town with a few magical households here and there. If you want something to do, you could find a job here? I know the bakeries are always looking for extra help.”
“I don’t think that’s allowed,” Remus pointed out, though he seemed to be more at ease after Harry’s suggestion. The boy shrugged.

“No one needs to know,” he said. “A lot of the places are small shops owned by the people who live here. There is no bigger picture for you to be noticed by, you know? And wizards don’t care about what happens in the muggle world, you know. It’s just… I mean, you don’t have to. I just—”

“I’d love to,” Remus interrupted, smiling. “I’ve spent years living from basement to basement. I think working in a place where I can see the weather as it changes would be… wonderful.”

Harry hadn’t even thought— “Would you, um, do you want a room with bigger windows? I’ve got a few? I mean, most rooms aren’t used here anyway, so—”

“Harry,” Remus said, letting out a short laugh. “Harry, the room is wonderful. I hate to impose my presence on a child, but I have seen more sunlight already today than I’ve seen since your godfather set me up in his basement. And, well, your parents before him. If my presence here proves to be an inconvenience, however—”

“No, it won’t,” Harry said, voice unexpectedly loud with the desperation he didn’t want to feel. He didn’t want to be alone. “I’m… listen, I’m sure you’ve been… told about me, right? I mean, all the bad things. The necromancer thing and killing Regulus and hurting Sirius. I’m bad. I’m not… I—”

“Harry,” Remus said, voice gentle and firm. “The things you’ve been pushed to do because of the wrong decisions made by the adults around you are not your fault. The ways you survive aren’t going to be always pretty, because the world as we live it today isn’t. That doesn’t make you bad, Harry.”

“I don’t know how long you can hold on to that opinion,” Harry said quietly, before looking at Remus again. “But… if you see something that you think is unacceptable, and if you see something that makes you think the worst of me, you’ll tell me, right? You’ll tell me before you leave?”

“Oh, Harry,” Remus said, and something about the way he said it made Harry want to cry. And then feel ashamed, because honestly, why was he on the verge of tears every time someone did something nice to him? “I think, rather than seek the acceptance of people whose moral understandings aren’t thoroughly known to you, you should decide for yourself what are the things you can live with. Just… learn to forgive yourself a bit, and accept that none of us has lived a life so noble as to grant us the right to judge the people around us.”

“But I—”

“Master Harry!” Vurney squeaked, popping into the dining room and startling both Remus and Harry with its sudden appearance. The house-elf looked unusually panicked when it continued: “A guest has—”

“Why is it that every time I come, your house-elf acts like it has never seen me before?” Tom said, sweeping into the dining room. He then noticed Remus, and sneered. “Ah, yes, that is something we need to discuss.”

“He introduces everyone as a guest,” Harry said tiredly, before turning to glance at Remus. How was he going to undo this disaster, now? The werewolf was pale, his eyes wide in alarm as he stared unblinkingly at Tom. Harry didn’t know if Remus could tell that this was Lord Voldemort, but it certainly seemed like he could. Well, there was an easy way to make sure that he did, at any case. “He can’t exactly pop in and say that the Dark Lord is waiting in the hallway, could he? We’ve just about finished lunch, would you like some tea?”
“I want that in whatever room you’re keeping it,” Tom said, sneering at Remus, who flinched. “He’s what, your godfather’s age? Did you replace—”

“Tom,” Harry said, and he didn’t know what his own voice sounded like, but Tom fell silent, turning to look at him with an unrearable expression. “Tom, you’re hurting me.”

“I’m not touching you,” Tom replied. “I’m not—”

“Remus, I’m sorry, but could you…” Harry, helpless to do anything else and out of ideas, gestured towards the entryway to the dining room, and the staircase that could be seen from where they were sitting.

“Of course,” Remus replied instantly, still tense, still fearful, the signs of earlier ease and warmth gone. When he left the room to allow them some privacy – or get out of harm’s way, really – Harry looked at the Dark Lord again and said:

“I didn’t know you hated werewolves like that.”

“Do you not know what a risk it is?” Tom snapped. “For you to have him here? Forget about the full moon - do you comprehend how many werewolves have sided with the Rebels? How long did you think you could hide my association with you from someone who lives in your damn house, and can discern by smell alone who’s visiting? If he did send any information to the Rebels, what do you think they would do if they knew about us?”

“How did you even know he was here?” Harry asked, feeling like his lungs were collapsing. His chest hurt. Could he just do anything right? Avoid conflict, just once? “He’s been here less than a day, Tom, I—”

“Bellatrix went to see your godfather,” Tom replied, before pulling Harry out of his chair and leading him towards the living room. “I had her ask what he lost to you.”

“So Bellatrix knows I—”

“Not anymore, obviously. Leaving that kind of information in her head would have been… complicated to deal with later. So, you’re welcome, I made sure she and her sister have no knowledge of your new pet.”

“I’m not sending him away,” Harry said, allowing himself to be pushed down to sit on the couch. “I invited him here, and I want him here.”

“No,” Tom argued. “That’s a security risk. Besides, you’ll be starting school soon and won’t be here keeping an eye on him, he—”

“Tom, please,” Harry insisted, standing up again and walking to where Tom was still standing. “Please, don’t take this away from me. I’m already feeling like the world is ending.” That gave the man a pause, and took a long look at Harry’s face.

“You’re upset because of your godfather,” Tom said, frowning. “His inability to protect himself is no one’s fault but his own.”

“I didn’t have to hurt him as badly as I did,” Harry replied. He could feel his eyes watering up, and leaned forward to press his face against the fabric of Tom’s robes. Hopefully his tears would disappear and be forgotten. When he continued, his voice was muffled: “Did you see him? Do you know what I did?”
“Bellatrix said you exploded his feet,” Tom said, sounding far more satisfied than appropriate. “Nice.”

“No, not nice,” Harry sniffed, moving just enough to have his ear pressed against Tom’s chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. “Before I did that. Bella thinks it’s only the potion thing - you know, the plan I had about evaporating a dizzying potion. It worked a bit, but what really hurt him… Tom, I… I think I pulled his soul. It… I think that’s what it was.” Harry swallowed, and clenched his eyes shut in the silence that followed. Eventually Tom let out a heavy sigh.

“I… this is not the place to have this conversation, what with your new houseguest likely hearing every word we say. I will look into what you just told me. Don’t do it again until we discuss it more, all right?”

“Okay,” Harry muttered, sniffing again. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tom scoffed. “That aside, I didn’t come just to talk sense into you about keeping a blasted werewolf in the attic. I’m here to tell you that I’ve sorted out an opportunity for you to re-establish your connections with a student from Hogwarts.”

“I thought you had done that already.”

“I hadn’t been sure of the exact logistics of it, but now everything is set up properly.”

“Okay,” Harry sighed, still leaning against Tom and feeling almost sleepy while doing so. “Who is it?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” Tom said, sounding so unbearably smug that Harry didn’t expect the splash of sheer endearment he felt. He felt drained of his earlier worries, and simply hummed in response, before saying:

“I’m still keeping Lupin.”

“You’ll regret it in the long run,” Tom told him, “but I suppose that’s the only way you’ll learn.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, tilting his head up and looking at Tom. “You know, you’re so good to me.”

Tom, whose expression had been almost amused before, seemed to freeze for a heartbeat, and the look in his eyes – just for a fleeting instant – was an unfamiliar one. It made Harry almost shiver, and had him struggling between stepping away and somehow – impossibly – stepping even closer.

“Of course I’m good to you,” Tom replied eventually, a slow smile appearing on his face. “Now don’t go forgetting that, Harry, all right?”

And Harry wouldn’t. Because as much as he and Tom disagreed, and despite all the problems in Harry’s life that stemmed directly from Tom being who he was and doing what he did, he still wouldn’t dream of his absence. Wouldn’t dream of just forgetting him. Because times like these… he was so good to Harry, wasn’t he?

Something had changed, and Harry wasn’t sure of what it was. Something felt awkward between him and Remus, though not necessarily so awkward as to be bad. It just… after Tom’s surprise visit and everything that had transpired, the likelihood of the following few days to end up slightly off-kilter had been high anyway. It wasn’t as if Harry knew how to normalize visits of the Dark Lord to
a werewolf who had probably heard them talk, had probably heard Harry say—

—you’re so good to me—

—with so much heart in his words. Merlin, he hadn’t even gotten a vow of secrecy out of Remus yet, and he wasn’t sure if the werewolf would even agree to it.

A few days before Harry was set to leave for Durmstrang, however, he managed to invite Remus to dine with him again. The man didn’t look uncomfortable, although Harry wasn’t sure if he knew him well enough to be able to tell even if he were.

“I… haven’t seen you in a few days,” Harry started. “Has everything been okay?”

“Of course,” Remus replied pleasantly. “I’ve spent most of my time in the library. You have quite a unique collection.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, trying desperately to think of a question that could lead to an actual conversation. “Have you thought about going out and taking a look at the town? Godric’s Hollow is really nice. You could even see the bakeries I told you about?”

“I… I have to admit that I’ve been quite hesitant in that regard,” Remus said. “I’m a bit… concerned, you see. Your frie— the Dark Lord was clearly displeased by my presence here, and—”

“He’s not going to make you disappear,” Harry told him, and realized with a start that this was the first person who knew—well, not really, but had some sort of an inkling to how close Harry and Tom were. “He promised me he wouldn’t. He doesn’t like it that you’re here, but he’s just worried.”

Remus looked at his dinner quietly for a few moments, and Harry doubted that he was really assessing the meat with such focus. Eventually the man looked up from his food and said: “He’s… older than you. Has more power, too.”

“In most ways, yes,” Harry replied. “Why?”

“I don’t think having… relations with a man of his age and station is wise,” Remus said, as gently as possible. Harry choked on the spinach he was eating, and spent the next few minutes coughing, his face becoming increasingly red as he tried to both regain his breathing and his composure.

“Relations!” he shrieked. “That’s not—, no! What makes you think that?”

“You two are very… close,” Remus replied hesitantly. “It is bound to come across as slightly odd, Harry. He’s not a relative, and he’s not a friend of your own age. He’s an adult man that you are not related to, yet are fully comfortable with both emotionally and physically. He’s… very much… he has much more power than you do and can therefore do things you cannot necessarily object to. You do realize that this is not a conventional friendship by any means? Your parents wouldn’t—”

“My parents are dead as you know, and Sirius doesn’t care about me anymore,” Harry said, and words have never felt like broken glass in his mouth before now. “If Sirius cared - if I knew, if I had believed even once that Sirius would have my back in the face of any adversity, if I’d ever thought that I could trust him, I would’ve told him. But I couldn’t, and I’m glad I didn’t, because look at us now.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Remus said, aiming for a soothing tone but not quite getting there. “He’s terribly upset, and—”

“He doesn’t have to hate me,” Harry interrupted. “I know my godfather, and I love him, but I’ve also
known him to be reckless, and cruel in his recklessness. He doesn’t have to hate me, all he has to do is convince himself that hurting me will make us even and that I deserve it. And if I let him, he’ll hurt me badly. And if he does that, Tom will get involved, and I don’t want to know what else that would cause. It’s not… it’s not Sirius being hateful. It’s him not thinking.”

Remus looked at Harry for a long time quietly, before sighing and nodding his head. “I understand. Pride has a way of making people cruel without them realizing it.”

“Do you want me to obliviate you?” Harry asked, suddenly. “Would you rather not know that the Dark Lord visits me?”

“I’m fine knowing,” Remus replied. “Just… please don’t express it like that. And be mindful of how physical the two of you get.”

“We don’t,” Harry said, not sure what Remus meant by physical. The only thing he could think of was fighting, but Tom definitely wasn’t the type to wrestle to get his points across. Not that Harry was, either. “We don’t get physical. He’s just… Neither one of us is the type to do that.”

“It’s, no, dear, it’s not about being a type to do it,” Remus said, stumbling over his words as he tried to explain. “It’s fine to… explore being physical with peers that you’re on an equal footing with, who are also agreeable to it, but—”

“Of course, they have to agree to it, otherwise it would be assault,” Harry pointed out, fleetingly imagining himself punching Clemens out of nowhere. Yeah, not likely. Clemens could quite literally break him. “I’m just… not into such things.”

“You’re still young,” Remus said, “but it’s good to define your own boundaries when it comes to such things and stick to them. Don’t allow anyone - not even a friend you respect - to pressure you into doing things that you do not want, all right? It’s better to lose a friend over such matters than go along with them and lose your sense of security.”

“Of course,” Harry said again, not sure anymore if he and Remus were talking about the same thing. He genuinely doubted that any of his friends would attempt a physical fight without so much as a warning. If they wanted to hurt him, they’d just use their wands, wouldn’t they? “I know that Tom wouldn’t hurt me like that, either.”

“And I believe you,” Remus assured him, though he didn’t sound entirely convinced. “All I ask for is for you to be a bit more careful, and think twice before you do anything.”

‘I’m still not sure what this has to do with Tom,’ Harry thought, nodding his head nonetheless. Remus was a bit odd, it seemed, but honestly… that wasn’t a bad thing at all.

* 

When Harry finally made it to Durmstrang, it was quite late in the day. He was feeling better only due to his resignation to how hopeless life apparently was, and whether or not existence and human life had any meaning anyway. In his little apartment where he had experienced already so much, it was easier to push aside thoughts of his godfather and the events that had transpired during the summer. He hadn’t even tried to set up a meeting with Sirius – he knew that he’d be rejected, after all, how could he not be? So, why bother trying?

It was only after Harry had finished unpacking his trunk that he noticed a small but beautifully designed invitation on his table. The text it contained was brief, and went directly to the point:

To All Sixth Year Students of Durmstrang,
Your presence will be expected at the Headmaster’s Office today and hour before dinner, at 17:30

Tardiness or absence would be highly ill-advised.

And not a clue as to why they were all expected to be there. Plenty of important things before had been communicated to them in settings less formal than what was being implied here; neither the Triwizard Tournament nor Lorenzo’s death had warranted this level of care. Which meant that this had to be something more important, which meant… what, exactly? At the same time… if it was truly as important as Karkaroff wanted to claim it was, why were the invitations delivered like this? Why hadn’t he been owled yesterday so he could prepare better?

‘This sounds terrible,’ Harry thought, sighing heavily as he put the invitation down. He hadn’t yet seen any of his classmates, and wasn’t sure if he had the energy for that, but it wasn’t as if he had any options, right? So he washed his face and hands, smoothed the sleeves of his uniform jacket, and headed out early enough to make it to Karkaroff’s office without hurrying.

‘I wonder how Remus is doing,’ Harry thought, before shaking his head. ‘I know Tom’s wrong about him communicating with Rebels – he would’ve have had the chance. And I told Vurney to keep an eye on him just in case, anyway, so even if he tries, I will know. Tom’s just… a bit paranoid.’ Besides, if Remus even tried to tell anyone about what he had witnessed – the meeting between Tom and Harry – it wasn’t as if anyone would believe him. Harry had never really thought of how him revealing his friendship with Tom would unfold – had dreaded doing so after his bet with Sirius – but the way it had happened was just… unexpected. He still didn’t know what to think of it.

He put these thoughts aside when he arrived at Karkaroff’s office, and found himself the first one there.

“Potter,” the man said, noticing him. “I’m glad to see at least someone bothering to turn up early. Come in.”

“Hello, sir,” Harry muttered, feeling terribly awkward. Karkaroff’s office was large, with heavy and dark furniture, and a collection of strange paintings depicting what looked like jugs pouring water on rocks, from different angles. Three statues of nude women were standing in different parts of the room, and Harry found them a bit too realistic to look at for too long. He didn’t know why Karkaroff had decorated his office this way, and frankly, he didn’t want to know. All he wanted was to not be alone with the man for long, and luckily, he was spared that when the rest of his classmates began trickling in throughout the next fifteen minutes.

“Do you know what this could be about,” Filippa whispered just as she sat next to him. “We’re not being reprimanded for anything, are we?”

“Honestly, no idea,” Harry replied just as quietly. “It could be anyth—”

“This is the beginning of your sixth year here at Durmstrang,” Karkaroff said, his loud voice cutting Harry off, and silencing the whole room. “As you may have noticed, not everyone who started out with us is here today.” It was only then that Harry, after a reflexive glance at the people who were present, realized that he couldn’t see Jakob or Petronella in the room.

“Mister Eckart has made the decision to leave the program,” Karkaroff continued, “and Miss Albin has been suspended for… a pattern of misbehaviour that has made her unable to uphold the standards we value here. Once she has rectified her behaviour, she might be allowed to return.”

Filippa’s nails dug into the back of Harry’s hand, and she was clearly struggling to process what she
had just heard. Harry understood her fully – he, too, didn’t feel reassured by anything Karkaroff had just told them. Was Petronella really suspended for being sick? Why? Why suspend her for and illness when Jakob had been allowed to remain until he had chosen to leave?

“You have done well so far,” Karkaroff continued. “Some better than others, but that is simply the nature of competition. This year, your courses will be more specialized, and though attendance isn’t as frequent, the work will remain as intensive as before. This is due to a mentorship placement that you will be taking part of in order to advance your practical capabilities and prepare you for the future.”

‘Oh,’ Harry realized. ‘This is about that. Merlin, I should’ve guessed.’

“Each one of you has been assigned a mentor,” Karkaroff continued. “All of them are held in high esteem, and assigned directly by the Dark Lord to train you – that is an honour that you must prove to be worthy of. On Friday you will come here again at one in the afternoon – not a heartbeat later, if you know what’s good for you – and you will accompany your assigned mentor on a short mission. I’m sure I needn’t stress how important it is that all of you represent this institute the way it should be represented, yes? Good. Now, as I allow you to join your fellow students in the dining hall, I expect you to reflect on your own capabilities, and what each one of you can do to ensure you’ll live up to everyone’s expectations.”

‘What a prick,’ Harry thought, nodding his head and then following Filippa out. The witch was deep in thought, and clearly upset.

“How are you holding up?” Björn asked, coming to walk next to Harry. “You all right there?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Harry replied, sighing. “I’m fine. Not hungry, though, so I might skip dinner.”

“How about this,” Björn said, “I’ll get us dinner from the hall, and we can crash at your place and eat there.”

Harry thought about it for a few moments, before nodding slowly in agreement. Björn was an easy to person to spend time with, and Harry had always felt comfortable around him.

“Sure,” he said. “Let’s dine together, then.”

* 

Somehow dinner had turned into a sleepover.

It wasn’t entirely surprising - Björn had started steadily shedding his clothes the moment he stepped into Harry’s flat with a few containers of food floating obediently behind him, and had taken over the left side of the bed for a nap right after eating and cleaning his teeth. The problem with napping at such a late hour, however, was that it tended to not be a nap at all in the end.

Harry, lying on his back on the right side of the bed, decided that there was something he really liked about having another person so close like that. It was as if the terrible thoughts that slipped into his mind so easily disappeared somewhere between the heavy breaths and the rise and fall of Björn’s chest. What was better than sleeping like this next to a good friend?

‘I wonder if Tom sleeps alone,’ Harry suddenly thought. He couldn’t imagine Tom sleeping next to someone else as peacefully as Björn right now, but…surely he sometimes did? This was too nice of an experience to not have, wasn’t it? ‘Then again, he’s pretty paranoid. I don’t think he would feel comfortable lowering his guard like that.’
“Still awake?” Björn’s voice was thick with sleep when he suddenly spoke, and his eyes were barely open when he turned his face to look at Harry. “What’s keeping you up?”

“Did I wake you?” He could’ve sworn that the other boy had been asleep.

“No, no. I’ve been drifting in and out, and not once did I hear you sleeping.”

“I’ve just… got a lot on my mind,” Harry admitted. “A lot has been happening, and I just… don’t know what to think.”

“The Jakob and Petronella thing, you mean?” Björn asked, sounding now more awake. “Or is there something else?”

“Well,” Harry hummed, “that too. Merlin, why can’t we just have a normal life, you know?”

“I know,” Björn immediately agreed. “I’m yet to have a single long-time girlfriend, and I’m already sixteen. Sixteen, Harry. My youth is quite literally dripping away like good honey, and here I am, a single man.”

Dating hadn’t been what Harry had thought of, but it made him briefly think of Rosier. “Hey, can I ask you a really personal question?”

“I’m all ears,” Björn said, rolling to lie on his side to look at Harry more comfortably. “Go on.”

“Have you had sex yet?” Harry asked. It felt weird, talking about things he had barely even thought of before.

“No,” Björn replied, frowning. “I’ve wanked enough to fertilize a garden, though.”

“Why is that a sentence you just made me listen to,” Harry groaned, clenching his eyes shut for a moment, while Björn laughed. “I haven’t had sex, either—”

“Obviously.”

“—and I was just-, hold up. What do you mean obviously?”

“I mean,” Björn started, “you don’t exactly strike me as someone who’s been living the wild life, you know? Who would you be having sex with, out there, anyway?”

“I don’t know.” Harry said, still frowning. “But I’ll have you know that people do find me attractive. Sometimes. Evan Rosier’s been looking at me all kinds of ways. I was visiting Bellatrix once and he was so hard he couldn’t even stand up.”

“Are you serious? Circe,” Björn muttered, and bit his lip before inching slightly forward. “He’s not easy on the eyes, though, you deserve better. And he’s like, sixty, isn’t he? Don’t brag about that. We could try a bit of something, you know?”

“Like, us two?” Harry asked. “I don’t know if I can, you know, get, erm, hard. For you? And I wasn’t happy about Rosier either, I’ll have you know.”

“Oh come on, look at me,” Björn gasped, feigning great offense. “I’m attractive! Unless…”

“Unless what?”

“Well, I mean, I’m not a head taller than you like a certain someone.”
“Uh…?”

“Thick arms, thick thighs,” Björn said, grinning. “Blonde hair, sexually repressed? Trails after you and looks at your ass while thinking that’s what straight men do?”

“You’re not talking about Clemens,” Harry hissed, pinching Björn who shrieked in glee. “He doesn’t— Merlin’s balls, you shit, he’s never looked at my— Besides, aren’t you straight? Why do you even want to have sex with me?”

“I’m gay for pay,” Björn replied immediately. “No, no, stop pinching me! I’m sorry!”

“You’re a menace,” Harry said. “Go home.”

“All I’m saying is that we’re at an age where people experiment,” Björn said. “And while some people prefer to experiment with someone they love and cherish and want to spend the rest of their life with, I don’t know if I’m going to live that long, frankly. So, I’d rather get this show on the road with a good, pretty friend that I’ve already made out with before.”

“Please don’t call it a show,” Harry huffed, rolling his eyes. “I see your point, though. I just… need to think about it. Don’t tell anyone else, though, okay?”

“My lips are sealed,” Björn promised. “I’m just happy to think about it. Don’t be surprised if I call you Mette or Susan or Janice, all right? You can call me Clemens if you’d— ow! Again?”

“Why would I call you Clemens? That would make things so awkward!” Harry argued, and very carefully avoided thinking of the other boy in Björn’s position. Oh, Merlin, he needed to stop thinking about it now.

“All right, you can just look me in the eyes and praise my face,” Björn allowed. “In all seriousness, though, I think this could work out, you know? You don’t love me like that, I don’t love you like that. We could just have a good time and remain great friends, forever, right?”

“I’ll think about it,” Harry said again. “I’ll consider it, seriously.”

“We could roleplay,” Björn continued, sounding again like he was holding back a laugh. “Professor Potter, I’m failing Charms, could I have some— ah!! Why are you— stop pinching me!”

“You’re the one who needs to stop saying stupid things!” Harry said, voice becoming increasingly high-pitched. “Professor Potter? Are you out of your mind?”

“You need to liven up a little,” Björn said. “I’ve got some magazines, I’ll show you. Or I can just show you my dick, and—”

“I promise I’ll tell you when I decide I want to see your dick,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Just go to sleep. Merlin, this is not what I expected today to be like.” He didn’t mind, though. He didn’t remember when was the last time he had laughed like this.

“I don’t know what else did you expect after asking me about sex,” Björn giggled. “Dream of me, yeah? I might be shorter than Clemens but I bet I have a bigger dick.”

“Don’t make me think of Clemens’s dick, please,” Harry said, clenching his eyes shut. “Please.”

When Harry finally managed to drift off, it was to the sound of his friend’s quiet giggles, bringing a smile to his face as well. And in that moment, somewhere between wakefulness and slumber, Harry felt almost happy again.
Sirius hadn’t expected Narcissa to visit him a second time and wasn’t sure what to expect. Last time he had seen her, she had been visiting him at St. Mungo’s. Now he was home, recovering from the spellwork it took to attach a supportive contraption to his legs that were meant to compensate for the absence of feet he was still suffering from. Last time where Bellatrix had been gleeful and contemptuous, Narcissa had been quietly disapproving but sympathetic. She hadn’t spoken much, and Sirius couldn’t begin to guess what she wanted to discuss with him now.

“Your godson,” she started, making Sirius grimace.

“I don’t think my situation with him is something you should get involved in,” he said. “I mean, if you need convincing - just look at me.”

“You are the cause of your own pain, Sirius,” Narcissa said. “The boy is - was - fifteen. He needed your guidance and support, not a showy duel meant to beat him into obedience. I would’ve thought that you would have appreciated that about him.”

“I don’t know where I went wrong with him, then,” Sirius said, leaning back on his chair. “When did he turn into someone who could do this kind of things.”

“You didn’t, Sirius. You didn’t go wrong with raising him, because there’s nothing wrong with the boy,” Narcissa said sharply. “You cannot fault him for responding the way he’s been taught, not when you contributed to that upbringing with the whole design of the Triwizard Tournament. What did you expect, really? You can’t teach someone for five years to use violence to solve problems, and then be surprised when that violence turns on you.”

“I don’t think you really understand the big picture,” Sirius said, waving his hand in dismissal. “I think you should go.”

“I can go,” Narcissa said, shrugging her slender shoulders and smiling slightly, “but first, as I’m sure you’ll appreciate later, I’ll make you an offer.”

“For what?”

“For your godson.”

Sirius blinked, and straightened up in his chair, a look of alarm crossing over his face. “What?”

“Transfer his guardianship to me,” Narcissa said. “You don’t want him, and he probably doesn’t want you. So, cousin, why not take the easy way out?”

“Did he speak to you?” Sirius asked, his tone mean and brittle and rough, heart shivering with anger and hurt. “Did he really ask to— The audacity, after what he did!”

“Think about it,” Narcissa said, standing up. She didn’t comment on the mistaken conclusion he had clearly drawn from what she had said. What could he do about it, after all? “Owl me when you’ve made your decision. I’m sure you know what the right one is.”

“Oh, I know,” Sirius replied, taking a few deep breaths to try and regain his composure. “Don’t worry, Cissy, I know exactly what to do.”

Friday came too fast, and yet Harry felt like had been waiting for it forever.
“I wonder who I’ll be getting,” Filippa sighed, leaning against Harry’s shoulder as they all waited outside to be picked up by their mentors. Petronella’s absence had been difficult for her - they had kind of expected Jakob to leave eventually, but to lose Nella as well? It was rough.

“I’d like to have Bellatrix Lestrange as my mentor,” Heidi said suddenly. “It’s kind of obvious that all the mentors are some high-standing Death Eaters, people we’re expected to emulate. The Dark Lord’s inner circle, if you may call it that.”

“That means they’re all British?” Clemens asked, frowning. “I mean, Circe, would’ve liked a bit of variety there.”

‘Is Bella really going to mentor someone?’ Harry thought. It’d be great if she’d mentor him again, wouldn’t it? Would Tom allow that? “I wonder if they will arrive all together, or one by one.”

“Probably one by one,” Björn said, nodding towards the apparition point a bit of a distance away. “Look there. First one in.”

Harry had seen Walden Macnair before, but every time the sheer size of the man seemed overwhelming. He was tall and built like a brickhouse, with a mean face and sharp eyes. When he approached the students and looked at them, he did so with the disdain of a man who had no tolerance for children whatsoever.

“Jöran,” he said, and Heidi looked visibly startled. She traded a quick look with Nikolai, before walking to where Macnair was standing. The Death Eater waved away her greetings and introductions, took a tight hold of her arm, and apparated the two of them away.

Harry felt… cold. Anxious. Again.

“He did not look like a pleasant fellow,” Björn muttered, just as three more people apparated in. Harry perked up, recognizing the Lestranges. A moment later, Lucius Malfoy arrived.

“Potter,” Malfoy said, and for a wild moment Harry thought that the man was just greeting him. He realized soon, though, that no, Malfoy was there for him. It was almost laughable - Tom had told him he’d find a way for Harry to reconnect with someone from Hogwarts, hadn’t he? This way he could contact Draco again and it’s just be seen as normal.

“We’ll be going on a simple retrieval mission,” Malfoy said as soon as Harry was close enough for him to speak without raising his voice too much. “Keep your wand ready, and do not interfere unless I tell you to do so, yes?”

“Sure,” Harry replied, eyes flickering to where Bellatrix was standing. The sight of her coming to a stop next to Truls was almost as bad as noticing Evan Rosier - when had he even arrived? - talking to Clemens. Harry felt sick. “I can take care of myself.”

“That’s not what I’m here to teach you,” Malfoy told him bluntly. “You’ve survived this far - I’m already assuming that you know how to take care of yourself. I’m here to teach you how to take care of your duties as a Death Eater. That involves not only these little missions you’ll be coming with me to, but also the related administrative work which too many people routinely neglect. How’s your penmanship?”

‘Not the question I was prepared for today,’ Harry thought, and said: “Terrible.”

“Of course it is,” Malfoy sighed, though he sounded more resigned than upset. “We’ll work on that later. Come along, now, there’s a lot we’ll need to do before I bring you back for dinner.”
‘He’s funny,’ Harry thought, allowing himself to be pulled into a side-along apparition. ‘I don’t think he means to be, but he is. I need to tell Tom about this. The clever bastard.’
Malfoy was, surprisingly, pretty decent company.

Harry had never spent time with Draco’s dad before, but remembered how intimidating he had seemed years ago. Now, though still an impressive figure, Harry couldn’t help but be surprised by the absence of feelings of intimidation. Instead he felt appreciative of being in the presence of someone who didn’t seem to be interested in testing him the way Bellatrix seemed to enjoy doing. Now he had the freedom to simply trail behind the man and not think too deeply of all the ways he could slip up and make a mistake.

“The task is fairly simple,” Malfoy said, having apparated them to what Harry first thought was a room in a library. The room was large, its white walls rising three stories up, glass and arches and pearl-beaded pillars merging together in a light-sunken vision. The rows of low bookshelves - with a handful of tables and chairs here and there - covered the room from its left side to the right, only split once in the middle by a carpet than went from the front of the room to its back. The ceiling was made of glass, and Harry could see nothing that would indicate an alternative source of light if it ever got cloudy.

On second thought, it couldn’t have been a library.

“What is this place?” Harry asked.

“The backroom of the Basilica Aurelia,” Malfoy replied, leading him towards one of the bookshelves that were barely high enough to reach his waist. “We’re here to retrieve a certain item that has been transfigured into a book.”

“How do you get assigned on missions?” Harry asked, watching as Malfoy kneeled, pulled out his wand, and brushed its tip across the rows of books on the lowest shelf. “I mean… you probably get them from the Dark Lord, but who would I—?”

“Have you been taught anything about the structure of the Dark Lord’s army, Potter?” Malfoy asked, before sighing and continuing: “No? Of course. Amid all the reckless wand-waving and curse-casting, too many ignore the fundamentals. People complete missions, come back, and neglect to submit a full well-written report in a timely manner, which leads to oversights – which can lead to serious problems if there are any follow-up missions to be assigned.

Harry, who suspected there was some sort of a long-standing resentment towards specific people who did exactly what Malfoy’s hypothetical situation described, remained quiet.

“The way our society maintains itself is through institutional practices, and yet somehow people never think about it,” the man said, pulling out a book, opening it, browsing quickly through it, and putting it back. Oddly enough, he did that four more times as he spoke, each time to different copies of the exact same book. “Our active forces - the Death Eaters on duty - inside and outside the United Kingdom amount to seventy-five thousand individuals. Those who enter the forces from the very bottom join teams of six witches or wizards, who are led by a lance corporal. Every two lance corporals – and their teams by extension – report to a corporal responsible for their section. Every three sections form a platoon, which is led by a lieutenant. Every three platoons form a company, led by a major.”

Harry hadn’t realized there were so many Death Eaters in the ranks. He didn’t think there were that many magical folks in the entirety of the United Kingdom. “How come there are so many?”
“One quarter are British, the rest are forces we have recruited from the rest of the world. Mainly Europe, but some from the Americas, some from Asia, a handful from Africa. Anyway, from majors up, we speak of bigger numbers: battalions are formed – depending on their purpose – by three to seven companies, led by a lieutenant colonel. Every two lieutenant colonels answer to a colonel, who answers to a brigadier general, who in turn is responsible for a brigade that consists of three to five battalions. Is this understandable so far?”

The problem wasn’t if what he was hearing was hard to understand, Harry thought, but being probably difficult to remember. He didn’t dare to ask for a written description, however, and would likely just ask Tom later. “Yes.”

“Every two to three brigades form a division led by a major general. In total we have eight divisions in the Dark Lord’s army. Every two major general answers to a lieutenant general, and every two lieutenant generals answer to a general. That is where the biggest differentiation truly happens, as the whole army has two generals: one for defence and one for offense. Everything under these generals – every battalion, every platoon, every soldier – is oriented to answer the needs for either defence or offense. These two generals answer to the Dark Lord himself, who occupies the position of a field marshal and ultimately commands the army in its entirety.”

Describing the hierarchy like that made Harry comprehend, for the first time perhaps, just how important Tom really was. Circe, now wonder the man never rested if he had to deal with all that on top of politics, or whatever else was it that his work consisted of.

“So, where do you us Durmstrang students fit in this picture?” Harry asked. “Do we start from the very bottom?” Somehow, he doubted that.

“No,” Malfoy said, finally standing up with a book in his hand. “Well, not exactly. Once you have graduated from Durmstrang, you will enter the forces and spend one month occupying each position on your way up to a brigadier general. After that, your ascent will have to be earned. That amounts of eight months of experiencing the different levels of the army, before settling into a position for which you have been trained.”

That… sounded doable?

“Every position you occupy will be supervised by someone, to whom you will answer. For now, however, you’ll be answering to me.”

“Okay.”

“I have a very particular way of getting things done,” Malfoy said, visibly contemptuous towards those who did things differently. “And I like to have all the reports submitted to me written in a certain way. The first thing that you’ll be learning is how to write reports.”

“Okay,” Harry said again. He wasn’t going to argue against not going out and fighting.

“This means that next Friday you will be Flooing to my office in the Ministry, and we will begin your lessons there,” Malfoy said, sounding satisfied with that decision. “Anything you want to ask?”

Harry shook his head, not knowing if it would be insulting to ask Malfoy - this late in the game, essentially - what his role was politically, and why did he even have an office in the Ministry of Magic if he was an army officer. Harry had thought that Malfoy held some sort of a governmental position, but could he do that and be an army official as well?

“Good,” Malfoy said. “Now, we’ll Floo to my office and I will discuss the details of this mission
with you, before we continue. We have quite a few things we need to cover before you can be sent out on your own.”

Harry wasn’t sure if Malfoy thought that that would upset him. He didn’t care about going on missions for the purpose of hunting Rebels down, and didn’t care about engaging in dramatic duels to prove himself when there was no real reason for such things anymore. No, this wasn’t a punishment or a disappointment at all, and he couldn’t imagine it going wrong in any way.

* *

When Harry returned to his flat, it was later than he had expected. For a day that had been spent with relatively few things to actually do, time had still somehow passed in abundance. Malfoy had seemed to derive quite a bit of pleasure from having someone who couldn’t object to hearing about the correct way to file different kinds of mission reports for hours on end, and Harry found himself strangely comforted by how mundane the man’s concerns were.

When he entered his apartment, the first thing he saw was Tom, feet propped up on the coffee table, reading what looked like Harry’s transfiguration homework that he had been assigned to do the day before.

“Why are you reading that?” Harry sighed, taking off his coat and shoes. “That’s just… not only is that my worst subject, I haven’t properly even thought out my points yet.”

“Looks like it,” Tom replied, putting the parchment down. “How was your day with Lucius?”

“Good,” Harry said. “I don’t mind him. He’s… not overwhelming.”

“What a compliment,” Tom said, and gestured for Harry to sit down. Harry did so, sitting next to Tom and pulling his knees up. “He’s never been the aggressive combat-type, that’s why I put him in defence. You’ve had plenty of teachers who have taught you how to duel, but there’s benefit in knowing how to navigate through bureaucracy without causing alarm to others.”

“I appreciate the forethought you put into that,” Harry said. “Dinner?”

“Have a house-elf bring us something,” Tom told him. “Anyway, I went to see your godfather. You’ll be happy to hear that he’s back on his feet again. Well, not literally his feet, but he’s up and about.”

Harry startled, and he couldn’t help the flutter of hope in his heart. Thoughts of dinner were forgotten in an instant. “His feet?”

“More delicate parts of the body have been successfully replaced before,” Tom pointed out. “Don’t be too impressed - giving him a pair of new feet is hardly an accomplishment or a magical miracle. All you need to know now is that he’s fine, and you shouldn’t think about him anymore.”

“Easier said than done, but I appreciate it, thanks,” Harry huffed, relaxing into all the cushions he had on his couch. “The only way we could fix our relationships is if he feels he has gotten even, you know? Because I know how his brain works, and he thinks he lost. He needs to get back at me, and I should probably let him, and only then can we work on repairing our relationship. Maybe. Hopefully.”

“That is utterly idiotic,” Tom said. “Why work so hard to repair such a terrible relationship? You’ll voluntarily suffer for the sake of something that will last only until he finds another reason to feel upset. Why are you still holding on to him?”
That— that last question was something Harry had asked himself before. Or, rather, variations of it. Sometimes he’d wonder how greedy was he, to want his godfather’s love even after what had happened between them. And then other times there was a part of him that resisted the thought of reaching out and making peace because - dare he think it - how could he accept being the one to ask for forgiveness, when it had been Sirius who saw nothing wrong in hurting people who couldn’t defend themselves?

“Anyway,” Harry said, not wanting to discuss his godfather anymore, “you assigned me to Malfoy’s care so I could get close to Draco again, didn’t you?”

“Obviously,” Tom replied. “I expect you to socialize with Junior, no matter how boring you may find him.”

“I don’t find him boring,” Harry said, “I just don’t know him very well.”

“He’s boring,” Tom said, as if to solidify his opinion as fact. “I’ve never heard anything about him, about anything remarkable that he has done, which means he’s not noteworthy on a good day. Not Durmstrang material at all.”

“That reminds me,” Harry said, suddenly remembering another thing he wanted Tom’s opinion about. “You assigned Rosier as one of the mentors? Really?”

“Everyone in your year is sixteen,” Tom replied dismissively. “He has no interest in teenagers that old.”

“The fact that you let him live when you know that about him is repulsive,” Harry snapped, frowning. “And we’re definitely not too old for him. Right before my duel with Sirius I had to ask Rosier’s help in teaching me how to evaporate liquids and use them to my advantage in a duel, and Tom, he called me pretty and was very visibly— he was on the floor moaning and he was— I called him Professor and his knees literally buckled.”

Harry wasn’t sure what the reaction he had expected from Tom was - another dismissal, or a vague promise to keep an eye on Rosier, perhaps. What he got instead was a long moment of utter silence, during which Tom stared at Harry - first in shock, then with a dark expression on his face. Slowly Tom moved to kneel in front of Harry, who was still sitting on the couch with his knees up, and tugged at the boy’s ankles to have him put his feet down. Harry felt tense all of a sudden, and didn’t know what this could lead to - he didn’t want any additional trouble.

“Why don’t you let me take a look at that memory, hm?” Tom asked, and Harry, after a moment of hesitation, nodded. He pushed the memory of his lesson with Rosier to the forefront of his mind, and ignored the slight pressure that came with Tom’s presence in his head. When Tom withdrew, the dark look he had before had gained an undertone of barely suppressed tension. He stayed silent for a moment longer, not moving.

“He doesn’t respect you,” Tom said eventually. “And, neither does Bellatrix, it seems. They need to learn their limits, but Rosier more urgently.”

“Okay,” Harry said, trusting the man’s assessment, and ignored the sting of not being respected by Bella. “How do I do that?”

“You hurt him,” Tom instructed. “The next time he takes liberties with you, you hurt him so badly the lesson ingrains itself in his head. And the more people you have seeing you do that, the better. People must learn that you are not accessible to them, do you understand?”
Harry wasn’t fond of hurting people, but Rosier wasn’t… he… It wasn’t the same.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “I understand.”

“Good.” Tom then stood up, and patted Harry on the head. “There, all sorted out. I’ll visit you tomorrow again to discuss the things I want you to watch out for when getting information out of Malfoy’s boy, all right?”

“Yeah,” Harry breathed, feelings of warmth and contentment bubbling inside of him at the warm touch he could feel on top of his head. He wanted to hug Tom, wanted so badly, but held himself back. Instead, he just nodded, already looking forward to the next evening.

Next morning at breakfast the mixed feelings of his classmates could be visibly discerned. Though usually their breakfast conversations were lively and centred around the upcoming lectures or weekend activities, that morning the mood was generally rather dark. Even Björn, who usually was the first one to lighten up the atmosphere, didn’t seem to be able to bring himself to do that now. When the discussion eventually started - halting and stressed - Harry, who didn’t mind being mentored by Malfoy, found himself to be one of the lucky ones.

“The problem is,” Filippa said, viciously sinking her fork into a pile of pancakes, “that apparently I’m just not good at combat, so Crouch recommended me to a non-combatant mentor. And I’d usually say good, but Circe’s tits he’s an asshole.”

“I got Rodolphus Lestrange,” Björn joined, using a spoon to mix the milk into his coffee rather aggressively. “A surprisingly pleasant fellow until you see him use fish hooks to pluck someone’s eyes out. The Lestranges are all in this, aren’t they? Nikolai and Truls, you both got one, didn’t you? Must’ve been great, eh?”

“Yeah, I got Rabastan Lestrange,” Nikolai said, hand resting on top of Heidi’s. “He’s okay. Hard to say anything about him at this point, really.”

“I got Bellatrix,” Truls said, and Harry resisted the urge to turn and look at him. Merlin, it felt like ages since he had even heard his voice. And yet… he still couldn’t bring himself to face Truls, despite how much he missed the older boy. So instead he focused on the empty seat between Björn and Heidi and tried to not think of where Petronella was and what she was up to. It was what everyone was doing, as if they were afraid of acknowledging her absence. “She’s pretty decent. Knows a lot more than she’s willing to teach, that’s for sure.”

“I would’ve loved to have her,” Heidi said, looking more upset than Harry had ever seen her. “Macnair is… uncomfortable to be around.”

“You know who’s uncomfortable to be around?” Clemens snapped, “Rosier. The fucker’s a lizard. Slow until he suddenly just moves too fast. His whole demeanour is odd and repulsive. Merlin, if there’s one murder I could get away with…”

“Did he do anything to you?” Harry said, question slipping out before he could stop it. Clemens’s eyes met his, and Harry could tell that something was wrong, but the other boy just shook his head. It didn’t look convincing to Harry, perhaps because he knew there was something to fear from Rosier. Clemens was a head taller than Harry, and broader too, but he doubted that Rosier was intimidated by physical appearances.

“Macnair kept telling me that pretty little things have their purposes,” Heidi said, leaning more
against Nikolai. “Like there’s any doubt of what he means by that. Disgusting, vile, pervert.”

“In comparison, I may have less to worry about,” Filippa sighed, rubbing her eyes and looking exhausted. “Snape’s a dick, but at least I don’t worry about things like that with him. He did tell me - five times! - that since he’s a professor at Hogwarts, he won’t have much time for me, and that I should be appreciative of the fact that I’ll be taking over his Fridays for the time being. As if I asked him to!”

“Wait, you’ve got Snape teaching you?” Harry said, recognizing the vaguely familiar name. “He used to be friends with my mum. Hated my dad, though. I never spent enough time near him to figure out if he hated me, too.”

“You got Malfoy, didn’t you? Lucius Malfoy?” Björn said. “How fun. The guy looks like he’s going to read policy documents to you aloud for fun.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we ended up doing exactly that,” Harry replied. “I got a lecture on hierarchy and bureaucracy, and will be next learning how to write reports properly.”

“Sounds exciting.” Nikolai said, his voice indicating the exact opposite.

“I don’t mind,” Harry clarified. “I just… I don’t know.” Even though he doubted that Malfoy wanted to play mind-games the way others did, he still didn’t know if the man had an ulterior motive. It could be just that Tom had assigned him to give Harry the chance to get closer to Draco, but who knew if Lucius Malfoy saw that as an opportunity to use Harry somehow? The only comforting thing that spoke against that assumption was that Malfoy genuinely didn’t seem to be interested in Harry in any way. Which was great.

“I kind of liked our sessions with Professor Crouch more,” Filippa said. “That wasn’t theory, it was all practice. Why wasn’t it enough? Why did we have to stop that and start doing this instead?”

“Probably to get rid of the adjustment shock now when we can still afford being less than perfect at practical work,” Björn said. “I’d rather deal with it now than later, to be honest.”

“I still think we should’ve gotten a more balanced introduction to the practice side of things,” Filippa argued. “Assigning us to wildly different mentors is going to shape us all differently, and someone with a terrible mentor isn’t going to benefit as much as someone with a good one. It’s unfair.”

“You can bring it up to Karkaroff if you’re that bothered,” Clemens said, rolling his eyes. “Rosier is a freak, but he isn’t holding me back, so whatever.”

“I agree with Filippa,” Heidi said, surprising Harry. He didn’t know why he was surprised, but she rarely really agreed with anyone during their conversations. “At least I think we should be allowed the right to ask for a different mentor if the one we were assigned to isn’t good.”

“They’re all good, Heidi,” Clemens said. “They’re the best Death Eaters the Dark Lord has. If he wanted to send us mediocre options, we wouldn’t be limited to British wizards only.”

“I didn’t mean good as in is he a good Death Eater,” Heidi snapped, scowling. “I meant good as in is he someone capable of teaching anyone without being a creep about it. You wouldn’t understand because you’re not a witch. Boys don’t have to deal with that kind of harassment.”

When Clemens’s eyes flickered towards Harry right then again, Harry couldn’t help but feel a cold feeling of dread wash over him. He was sure that Rosier had done something, but how on earth could he ask about that? Clemens refocused on Heidi quickly, and said: “That’s a bold fucking statement, isn’t it? Anyway, I’m done talking about all this gloominess - is anyone up for a game of
Harry, who still hadn’t finished his Transfiguration homework, joined the others for quidditch until lunch, but excused himself afterwards to go and work quietly in the library.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Filippa had asked, but Harry had politely declined. Part of why he wanted to go to the library and not his own apartment was to avoid easy distractions. Besides, Tom had promised to visit him again, and it’d be better to clear his thoughts with a quick walk from the library to his apartment right before they met up.

Much to his surprise, however, when Harry packed up his bags and exited the building that evening, he saw Clemens waiting for him outside. And how was it that despite everything, just the sight of Clemens made Harry’s heart flutter?

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked.

“I wanted to talk to you about something, and didn’t want to have the others with us when we did that,” Clemens replied, shrugging with what could’ve come across as nonchalance had his concern been less obvious. “So, I thought – why not walk you to your apartment, yeah?”

“Okay,” Harry said, feeling pleased, and getting annoyed at himself for it. “Something on your mind?”

“Well,” Clemens hedged, before taking a deep breath and continuing: “It’s about what we were discussing this morning. Rosier, more specifically.”

“Oh.” There went his good feeling. “What about him? Did he… did he do anything to you?”

“No,” Clemens said, before suddenly taking a hold of Harry’s arm and pulling him to a stop. “But has he done anything to you?”

“He’s said some things,” Harry admitted readily, looking up at Clemens and trying to see if he was being honest. “But he must have done something for you to be this bothered.”

“He’s been talking about you,” Clemens said, lowering his voice and pulling Harry closer. Had the reason been anything else but what it was – a talk about Rosier – he might have enjoyed the proximity. “He kept asking me… things. About you.”

“Things like what?” Harry asked, suddenly worried. Why was Rosier so interested in him?

“Don’t go near him,” Clemens replied instead of answering. “He’s a sick fuck who shouldn’t be allowed to even see you, yeah? The shit he says— I’m going to handle it, all right?”

“If he says something about me, I should be the one to sort him out,” Harry said immediately, narrowing his eyes. “Clemens, what has he been telling you?”

Clemens swallowed, his eyes flickering down to look at Harry’s mouth before refocusing on his eyes again. “You know people think you’re gay, right? If you don’t stop those rumours, men like Rosier will keep entertaining ideas about you. All he could talk about was how pretty you’d look on his— how pretty you are, I mean, and Harry— you’ve got to cut that shit out, you know?”

It was strange how surprise could wash over him the way it did now – like a tidal wave that was blinding and deafening at the same time, making his own voice sound like that of a stranger’s when
he said: “Cut what out?”

“You are very pretty,” Clemens explained. “He’s right about that. And there’s nothing wrong about being, you know, pretty. But you’re also very sweet and soft, and when you hug someone you get really close to them, and that’s confusing, you know? Confusing because guys don’t really do that, yeah? Guys aren’t like that.”

Harry was aware that his mouth was hanging open when he looked at Clemens, and he felt for an instant as if he was about to burst into tears. Instead, he said: “Would that bother you?”

“Would what bother me?” Clemens asked, taken aback by the unexpected question.

“If I was gay?” Harry said, heart hammering so hard in his chest it felt painful. “I’m not interested in Rosier, obviously, but you know what? Brace yourself because this is going to freak you out, apparently: I am gay. If that bothers you, you can take a step back and keep your distance.”

Clemens looked at him and didn’t seem to be able to get a word out. Harry continued: “I appreciate you warning me about Rosier, because he is messed up. Not because he’s… not because of the gay thing, but because he’s so obviously interested in minors who are too young to protect themselves against him. So, you’re right – he’s a terrible person. And you know what? Maybe I’m a terrible person too, for some reason or another. But whatever that reason is, it’s not because I like other boys.”

Clemens’s hands were cold and rough when he took a hold of Harry’s face, and turned it to look at him more firmly. Harry flinched, not used to aggressive physical contact, but managed to meet the taller boy’s eyes anyway. Clemens’s expression was undecipherable, but eventually he said:

“No.”

“No what?” Harry asked, frowning. He almost flinched again when Clemens rubbed one of his thumbs against Harry’s lips.

“No,” he repeated. “It’s fine if you’re sweet – I’ll sort Rosier out. But you’re not— you’re just not, okay?”

“Why does it bother you that much?” Harry asked, hurt drowned somewhere under confusion. “Last time – when Filippa had her birthday party – do you remember? You got drunk and told me I should’ve been a girl. But I’m not, Clemens. I’m not a girl, and I like boys, and I’ll say it as many times as you need to hear it for you to understand. You’re being hurtful, and I don’t know why.”

“Please,” Clemens replied, his voice lowering to a whisper. “Please, just… you’re not. I can’t… I can’t think of you running off with some guy, sucking his dick. So, you’re not, yeah?”

Harry took another long look at his friend, realizing that whatever his issues were, they ran deeper than this. No matter how hurtful Clemens’s words were, Harry was beginning to suspect that there was more than just ignorance motivating them. “Stop thinking of me sucking dick, then,” Harry finally said. Clemens let out a sound that was neither a laugh nor a growl – just an odd sound, full of derision.

“Yeah,” he said, letting go of Harry and turning away. “That’s not going to happen. Do what you want, I’m going for a run.”

Harry started after Clemens, unable to shake off the discomfort he felt from the encounter. He couldn’t believe that Clemens had brought up his odd concerns so explicitly, and Harry regretted ever saying the word dick aloud. This whole discussion was so different from the one he had had
with Björn, who had made him feel like sex wasn’t a thing that he wouldn’t need to feel guilty about. Now, however, he was starting to suspect that perhaps not everyone shared Björn’s ease with sex.

He couldn’t be even upset at Clemens – hurt by him, yes, but not angry. Because how the hell could he feel upset when Clemens clearly didn’t even know why he was so bothered by Harry’s interest in men? It was clear that Clemens didn’t dislike Harry, and in his own way wanted to help him, but… something was just amiss. Something wasn’t right, and Harry didn’t know if he wanted to know what it was.

When Harry reached his apartment complex, he was still deep in thought. Shadows around him were growing longer as the sun began to set, and flickers of darkness began stretching in ways he refused to acknowledge. Somewhere in the distance - just barely visible - something humanoid ran across a gap in the woods with an inhuman speed. Harry made a conscious effort to not think of it, and continued his way up the stairs. When he entered his flat, he noticed Tom right away - once again lounging on the couch - reading a book Harry didn’t recognize. Unable to stop himself, he blurted out:

“Does the way I hug you disturb you?”

Tom looked at him and blinked. Pursed his lips. Tilted his head. “No? Is that an actual question you’re wasting breath on?”

“Someone told me today that I hug people in a… well. He was bothered by me being gay,” Harry said, taking off his shoes and refusing to feel hurt by the echo of Clemens’s words. “He said it bothers him to think of me sucking dick.”

“Uh,” Tom said, putting down the book with an uncertain expression. “Uhh?”

“I told him to stop thinking of me sucking dick,” Harry continued, now talking more to himself than to Tom, really. “Why is he even thinking of me sucking dick? I’ve never even— I’ve been busy! When would I have had the time to even look at someone’s— And besides, why is everyone so interested in sex all of a sudden? Last year things were just fine - no one cared about things like that! This year? It’s been barely a week and I’ve been subjected to these kinds of talks twice already! What if I just don’t want to talk about sex?”

“Right,” Tom said, wide-eyed. If Harry had paid him any attention, he would have noticed the alarm on the man’s face. “Twice?”

“I just, I don’t have the time,” Harry continued, pulling out a kettle and filling it with water, before slamming it aggressively on the stove. “Merlin, I hate this. I’m sixteen, and I know - I mean, Merlin knows I’ve been hearing it enough - I know it’s normal for people my age to start doing things, but when would I have the time, hm? Pencil in a dick or two between talking to the dead and trying to pass transfiguration, is that it? And also— how is that anyone else’s business, anyway? People should just let me be and focus on themselves!” Harry’s voice had risen to a shout by the time he was done, and afterwards he stood silent for a few moments just trying to regain his composure. Eventually he turned to Tom, smoothing his expression to an almost calm one.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to yell. I’ve just… been frustrated. Annoyed. I like being here but sometimes I wish—I mean, leaving for a couple of hours would be nice. I can’t apparate home because even though we’re allowed to apparate out, if we do it too often Karkaroff will complain about it, and he’s just annoying to deal with.
“I can give you a portkey if it makes you less prone to... whatever that was just was,” Tom said. “He can’t trace the use of those. Not that it would matter anyway - I don’t think he’d bother questioning you, what with the people he knows you know.”

“I just...” Harry paused, looking for the right words as handed Tom his cup of tea. “I don’t need to be noticed by everyone more than I already am, you know? Not for any reason, really, it’s just that people being so aware of me makes me feel kind of uncomfortable at times.”

“You have odd things to feel uncomfortable about, but giving you a portkey won’t be a problem,” Tom said. “Just... try to contain your emotional outbursts, or just limit them to once or twice a year.”

“I just,” Harry sighed, leaning back against the soft cushions and trying to make sense of the conversation he had had with Clemens. “I think there’s something more to his reaction than just him not wanting me to be gay, you know?”

“What did I just say?” Tom said, rolling his eyes. “Can’t we just talk about your work with the Malfoys? Not with Lucius, but his spawn. Have you thought about getting in touch with him yet?”

“No,” Harry replied, allowing the change in conversation. “I thought I’d wait for a little bit, maybe an opportunity will come out that would allow for a more natural reason to reach out to Draco, you know? Or at the very least - have a few more sessions behind us before I start making use of him. Just to know what I’m dealing with.”

“So long as you get me what I want in the end, proceed however you wish,” Tom said, sitting up and leaning towards Harry. “There are a few specific things I want you to keep an eye on, however, the first of which is to make note of everyone who is loudly against Rebels. You know the type - a bit too aggressively against something to not be hiding doubt in their hearts.”

“Oh,” Harry said, nodding. He hadn’t thought of asking about that, but it made sense. “What else?”

“If there’s anyone who receives regular mail through owls that are unusually large - those tend to be international correspondence owls, bred to be more fit and capable than the ones intended for domestic mail,” Tom continued. “And finally - if there are students who have recently become more proactive in asking question during class. Students who have begun taking interest in subjects they previously didn’t seem to much care about. Try to figure out how to get Malfoy Junior to give this information without knowing he’s being questioned.”

“It’ll need a handful of casual conversations,” Harry said. “It’ll be easier to spot these kinds of inquiries in letters, so I’d rather meet him in person.”

“The Lestranges will throw a ball on Christmas again,” Tom said. “And if they don’t, the Malfoys will. You will definitely be invited, so make sure to be ready to do this when that happens.”

“With that much time, I suppose this isn’t urgent?”

“Rather than say it isn’t urgent,” Tom said, “I’d like to just have it be done well, without causing alarm. If Malfoy Junior knows why he’s being questioned, it’ll be a matter of time before he tells his peers and word will get around. We must avoid that.”

“Don’t worry,” Harry promised. “I think I can manage it. Now, before you go and forget - get me that portkey, because with the way stress has been building up in my class, I’m going to need it sooner rather than later.”
Even though he hadn’t used it, the weight of the portkey Tom had given him was very comforting. The heavy ring hanging from a delicate silver chain, both transfigured from the tie Tom had been wearing, and all but thrown at Harry when the man was done, had a strangely soothing effect even when he was in class. The sight of Clemens - and the boy’s visible discomfort around Harry - didn’t bother him as much when he could just take a breath and focus on the portkey. It was easier to push aside thoughts of Petronella and Jakob and Sirius, too, when he could just curl his hand around the ring and focus on the available option of just leaving. By the time it was Friday again, and Harry set off to meet Malfoy in his office, he felt unexpectedly well put-together.

It wasn’t a mental state he could take for granted.

“Today you will be reading through previously submitted reports,” Malfoy said, pushing Harry to sit at a table in the corner of the man’s large office room. There was a stack of papers on the desk, and nothing else. “All you need to do is read and memorize patterns. How people title their reports, where they put their names, what kind of information they include in the identification of both events and locations. I’ll give you an entire hour to memorize all of that.”

‘An entire hour,’ Harry thought, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. ‘How kind.’

“After that, you’ll be correcting the reports that weren’t filled the way they should have,” Malfoy continued. “You’ll write on each paper what information is missing, and if the report has been structured wrong. Feel free to correct spelling as well, Merlin knows some people are barely literate.”

“And then?” Harry asked, not wanting to imagine spending the entire day doing just that.

“We’ll see,” Malfoy replied, which didn’t seem encouraging at all. “Just get to work. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

‘He might not be a prick the way Snape is, but Merlin he’s annoying,’ Harry thought, sitting down and pulling the first report closer for him to read. ‘I wonder what this mentorship would have been like if I had Tom supervising me instead. I liked having him as a teacher.’

“Your peers will doubtlessly tell you tall tales of their missions,” Malfoy said suddenly, after watching Harry read for half an hour. “And you might miss your usual adventurous life.”

‘Just what kind of life does he think I’m living?’ Harry wondered.

“But you’ll learn that there’s benefit in quiet moments like these,” Malfoy continued. “Impatience is a man’s downfall.”

“Sure,” Harry said, not knowing what to say, but fearing that silence would make the man think he was being ignored. “I think I’ve had quite a good taste of adventure so far. I can do without for a while.”

“Yes,” Malfoy said, still eyeing Harry with blank look on his face. Circe, he was impossible to read. “I can imagine.”

“It’s not the necromancy bit,” Harry clarified. “It’s… a lot of other things.”

“Yes, I’ve heard,” Malfoy said. “That duel you had recently, for instance.”

Yikes. Harry didn’t want to think about that. “Uh. Yeah.”

“My wife was very upset by it,” Malfoy continued, as if it was somehow Harry’s fault. “She doesn’t think it was proper of Black to challenge you to a duel like that. Our son would never get involved in
something so reckless.”

“Yeah,” Harry said again. “But Draco has both of his parents to help him with things like that, you know? Sirius is my guardian - if he says it’s okay for me to duel someone, to duel him, then I’m going to go for it.”

“Black has never been a source of sound advice,” Malfoy said, looking annoyed. “Following his lead will only take you to an early grave.”

“It’s not like that’s a terrible thing,” Harry told him. “Dying, I mean. I wouldn’t really know, though.” Because, now that he thought about it, he didn’t really know where the train was taking all the souls that boarded it. “But so far no one who’s died has complained about it.” Not much anyway.

Malfoy sat frozen in his chair, looking at Harry with unfamiliar wariness for a few long moments, and for the first the Harry wondered if the man was bothered by necromancy. It didn’t seem to bother any other Death Eaters, but he also hardly ever mentioned it in casual conversation. “I don’t go see the dead often,” Harry clarified, hoping to ease the alarm. He wasn’t about to explain his trips to the train station to Malfoy, but there was hardly any harm in implying that Harry could converse with the dead. More than likely it was something people already expected him to be able to do. “Usually only when I’m told to.”

“Right,” Malfoy said. “I see.”

“I’ll just go back to reading, now,” Harry said, feeling incredibly awkward. Malfoy nodded, but didn’t stop looking at Harry with that blank expression of his for a good fifteen minutes. Eventually when he did turn away, he still remained very much alert, as if expecting Harry to do something unexpected. It was odd. Unexpected. Should he ask Tom about that?

His day with Malfoy continued much like it had started: spent reading and correcting reports, trying hard not to feel out of place in that office. By the time Harry was allowed to return to Durmstrang, he felt exhausted despite not really moving or using magic all day.

‘I hope it won’t be like this all the time,’ he thought, making his way towards the apartment complex from the apparition point. He stopped in surprise when he saw Filippa sitting outside, looking at nothing in particular, clearly lost in her thoughts. She looked distressed, and Harry hesitantly made his way towards her.

“Filippa,” he said, wondering if Snape had done something to upset the girl. “Is everything okay?”

“I don’t think anything is, really,” Filippa responded, her voice quiet and sad. She turned to look at Harry and continued: “I came back an hour ago and found an owl waiting for me. Jakob’s dead.” And wasn’t it just awful - awful, awful - that the first thought that flashed through Harry’s mind was ‘of course’. He knew that Jakob’s illness couldn’t have ended any other way, and he had thought that he would’ve been quietly accepting of the inevitable. And yet… and yet, the news hit him like a punch in the gut, because—

“And another one down, huh.”

“I know,” Filippa breathed, a glassy look in her eyes. “I wonder who’s next. Do we need to start preparing for loss all the time, now? Because who knows which one of us will disappear next. I… I hate this. I don’t want to be here. I hate this so much, Harry. And now we’ll all be going to yet another funeral, look pretty and unaffected and stop expecting a happy ending, because happy endings aren’t for people like us.”
“They could be,” Harry said, but it was half-hearted.

“If we stay in Durmstrang, not a chance,” Filippa replied. “But if we don’t - where would we go anyway? We’ve got nowhere to run to. They put us on these fast tracks to success, but our trains are going nowhere, you know? We’re just caught in this fucked up wheel of living up to fulfil other people’s ambitions, and in the end we will all die miserable.”

And Harry, as much as he wanted, couldn’t find it in himself to claim otherwise.

He hadn’t thought about happiness in a while, after all.
"The boy can visit the dead, Narcissa! Visit the dead! What are even the practicalities of that?"

"I thought that would’ve been obvious," Narcissa said, looking over the top of her book at Lucius as he got ready to join her in bed. The man had returned late from work on that day and was visibly distressed. He had been huffing and puffing and refusing to open up throughout dinner, but it seemed that now he would finally deign to share the thoughts that bothered him so. "Surely it was implied somewhere in him being a necromancer, dear?"

"Maybe so," Lucius replied, "but then he has also this... this odd way of talking about death. Doesn't seem to mind it one bit."

Narcissa pursed her lips, remembering again Harry's appearance after his duel with Sirius. The boy's disregard towards his own survival was something Narcissa couldn't believe she hadn't picked up on earlier - it was obvious, in hindsight, considering how reckless the boy had been during the Triwizard Tournament, and even clearer these days. "I hope you corrected that."

"How could I even begin?" Lucius muttered, sighing as he settled next to her. "I told him that Draco would never get into a duel such as that— and would you believe it? All that little Potter said was that Draco has parents who can prevent him from such things, as if he couldn't have decided, on his own, to not fight his godfather!"

"Lucius." How Narcissa managed to pack so much disappointment into a single word would've been admirable, had it not been aimed at him. "Lucius, you cannot honestly tell me that you hold the boy responsible for what happened? How would he know? He's a child!"

"Draco would nev—"

"Draco knows to ask us for help because he has us. Who does Harry have? Sirius, who has proven to be just as thoughtless and reckless as he was in his teens? Or Bella, who adores Harry but doesn't understand that children his age - teens his age - need more than the ability to get away with murder to have a good life? Who else does the boy have around him, really?"

Lucius sneered, feeling slightly uncomfortable. "It is not my responsibility to care."

"The Potters were a decent pureblood family," Narcissa said, remembering James Potter back when he had been alive. "And Harry, even though his mother was a muggleborn, has proven himself many, many times, hasn't he? Would it be so terrible to be kind to that boy?"

"I'm not hired to mentor him to show him kindness," Lucius argued. "I'm there to show him how to handle his duties after graduation."

"And what's the worth of those lessons going to be if the boy walks into his death before he graduates?" Narcissa asked. She didn’t think that Harry was suicidal, not exactly. Just... not particularly invested in staying alive. "I'm not asking you to care for him the way we care for Draco, but perhaps offering the boy some compassion wouldn't go amiss? I'd like to have him stay with us for Christmas, and I'm sure that Draco would love to have him here."

"If I bring the boy here, you sister will be following right behind him," Lucius said. "So, before you go making decisions about having Potter stay with us, just make sure you're ready for all the baggage he drags around."
"He's—Merlin, Lucius, I'm not asking you to fight the boy's battles for him," Narcissa snapped. "But he's not a bad child, and I think he deserves to have some stability - or at least, to have adults around him who act decently. What do you think would've happened to Draco had he grown up only with Sirius and Bella as role models?"

Lucius sighed, and was silent for a few moments, thinking. Then, he said: "But you see, Cissy, I don't see much of Bellatrix or Sirius in him. Whoever that boy looks at as a role model, it sure as Circe isn't either one of those two. I agree that he isn't a bad kid - Merlin, he's much easier to handle than teenagers of that age usually. Me opposing his inclusion in our family isn't because I dislike him, but because I know, perhaps better than you do, that Potter comes with terms and conditions I don't think we should try to tackle."

"Explain," Narcissa said, putting her book down, not even noting the page she had been on, and turning to her side, looking at Lucius's face as he continued:

"No one's been talking about it openly," he said, "but a few people have already commented that his duelling style is remarkably similar to that of the Dark Lord's. When he was recommended for the Triwizard Tournament - before anyone knew he was a necromancer, before anyone knew how special he was - the Dark Lord himself had recommended him. And then, during the third task - how did he know that Regulus Black was someone the Dark Lord wanted to see dead, if he wasn't already? Not only that, but also the Dark Mark. Not even your sister would've thought about that, because no one thinks the Dark Lord still cares about it. But he did. He does. And somehow, Potter knew. Doesn't that make you think?"

Narcissa looked at her husband in silence for a few moments, eyes wide as the horrifying realization made itself know. "You think he's somehow... involved with the Dark Lord? Mentored by him?"

"I don't know for sure," Lucius admitted. "And I won't be the first - or second, or tenth - one to say it aloud to anyone else. But there's something going on with the boy - something bigger than just these silly little lessons. Something even bigger than Durmstrang, I think."

"Do you think others have realized all of that?" Narcissa asked. "Do you think others have also figured out that Harry is connected to the Dark Lord somehow?"

"Some must have," Lucius replied. "To what extent, I do not know. But some definitely have, your sister being one of them. Perhaps Potter has received a mission from the Dark Lord, and that is why he is being treated the way he is. I cannot imagine another reason."

"Then isn't it even more important to have the boy with us?" Narcissa said. "To have him... think fondly of us? If even part of what you said holds true, then he is, for certain, going to grow into a wizard of power and influence. Wouldn't you want someone like that be a friend to Draco?"

Lucius sighed deeply once more, and didn't reply. He couldn't sleep, either, plagued by these thoughts and worries as he was. It was true, what Narcissa had said - even if he didn't want Potter to get too close to them, perhaps being at least acquaintances with him would help Draco in the long run. Besides, he hadn't lied - whatever grievances he had about Potter's baggage, at least the boy himself was fairly decent.

'We'll see about Christmas, then,' Lucius thought. 'And we'll see where everything goes from there.'

Jakob's funeral was on a Saturday that was neither warm nor cold, sunny nor rainy. Everything was grey - the sky, the ground, the stones, the people. At least, that's what it looked like to Harry.
It hadn't been long after the mail Filippa had received that everyone who had been in Jakob's class had received an invite to the funeral, arranged in three days. Harry hadn't know what to feel or think - had simply followed Filippa's example in everything she did, and by the time he was standing right next to her, dressed in black, watching Jakob's casket that it really sunk in - 

*Jakob was in there.*

Harry and Jakob hadn't been particularly close, but the other boy had always been a nice person to be close to. Harry hadn't gone out of his way to be friends with him, yet knew that there was no one who disliked him. Why was someone who clearly intended no harm to anyone around him the one to be struck down for good by an illness? Was there sense in how good people died and bad people didn't? How much strength did people need to keep on living when their loved ones died needlessly like that?

Harry glanced at Jakob's mother - a short, slight woman with hunched shoulders and greying hair. Harry had lost his parents, but wasn't it even worse to lose a child? He didn't know. All he knew that it was unfair, *everything* was unfair, and there was no one to blame for this one.

Filippa's arms were around Petronella, who had joined them right after they had arrived to the funeral. She was, if possible, even thinner than before - her face so gaunt it had lines around her mouth that hadn't been there before. She was crying so hard she could barely stand up, and Harry didn't know which was worse - her inability to stay on her feet or the ease at which Filippa held her up.

*Merlin,* Harry thought, feeling like he was suffocating. *Filippa was right. Is this all we have to look forward to? Circe, what a life.* Was it even a life, really? The feeling of suffocation remained with him, even when later the guests were led to help themselves for some food. Harry didn't know how common it was to treat funerals like networking events, and couldn't help but feel a bit resentful towards the people who were able to talk to one another amid bites of food that Jakob would never get to eat again. As if they would just carry on with their lives, unaffected by--

"Mr. Potter," a gentle voice said from behind him, startling Harry enough for him to almost drop the slice of quiche Filippa had handed him, before she had left to help Petronella find a seat somewhere. Harry turned, and nearly took a step back when he saw Jakob's mother wanting to talk to him. He put the bit of quiche down on a napkin and left it on a table nearby, before refocusing on the woman in front of him.

"Ma'am," he said. Her face looked tired - *Circe,* so tired. But how could a parent rest when something like this happened? "I'm sorry for your loss." Not that his words could ever be of much comfort.

"Jakob mentioned you a few times," the woman said, and it didn't seem as if Jakob had spoken badly of him. "I haven't met many of his friends - Filippa and Petronella a few times, but that's more or less it. He did mention you quite a few times, however - he appreciated you quite a bit."

"Thank you," Harry replied, swallowing around the sudden lump in his throat. "I... I wish I had been able to show him how much I appreciated him in return. H-how are you holding up, ma'am?"

Jakob's mother sighed, her eyes glazing over for a fleeting moment, before she mustered up a lopsided smile. It looked like she was about to cry, despite it. "We knew this was coming. We - my husband and I - are grateful for the time we got to spend with our boy. We're... we love him. Loved him. Love him. *So much.* You understand, don't you? You lost both of your parents, didn't you? The love doesn't die with them."
"Yeah," Harry said, nodding, and was it normal for him to feel relieved that his parents' death allowed him a point of reference in this conversation? "I..."

"Will it ever get easier?" Jakob's mother asked, and Harry shrugged after thinking about it for a little while. Who was he to say? He had never had the opportunity to dwell over his losses for long periods of time, because Tom— Tom had been there to keep him busy. Stop him from overthinking. Maybe he owed Tom for that.

(Merlin, he was glad for the portkey.)

"I don't think loss is something that everyone processes within a similar time-frame," he said. "I mean, I still miss them. I will always think of why I didn't get to spend as much time with my parents as the other kids did. But every now and then I hear of terrible people who did terrible things to their own relatives, and I think that if I had to lose them, at least I never lost the opportunity to love them, you know? Whatever flaws they had, at least none of those flaws were that bad by the time they died."

"Oh," Jakob's mother said, and let out a watery chuckle. "That's... that's a good way of looking at it. You're a necromancer, aren't you? Do you think... will you be able to talk to my boy?"

Harry hesitated for a moment, wondering whether or not he should explain he train station to Jakob's mother, before deciding to just go ahead and do so - what was she going to do, anyway? It wasn't as if people would know anything more than what he told them, anyway. Besides, by now, he was strong enough to keep himself safe if anyone did decide to come and bother him over the things he could do. "It's... I mean, the afterlife, if you want to call it? You go to a train station. It doesn't hurt, I promise. He won't be in pain. He'll stay there in the station for a little while, and then he'll board a train and go to a better place. He'll be fine, I promise."

"Have you ever seen souls that haven't been fine?" Jakob's mother asked. "Or do you only see souls that are fine? I mean, I just.. I'm just wondering if... if there's a chance...? Do you think that he might..."

Harry thought of long limbs in darkness, thought of blue hues and people trapped in paintings and arms sown into each other and pain so bad its echo rattled his bones every morning. "I know what happens to bad souls," he said in the end. "Don't worry, Jakob's going to be all right."

* The thing about feeling all messed up on the inside was that sometimes it was hard to tell if he was okay or not, and which part of him was the one that wasn't okay.

Returning to Durmstrang from the funeral felt like closing a door for good. As if they had shaken off Jakob's existence from their shoulders, reached closure without asking for it first. Harry saw Filippa's shoulders shake as she walked in front of him towards their apartment complex, and wondered if it was the same for her, or if this was something only he felt. This disconnect that despite the grief of loss made everything feel muted and distant, as if it belonged to someone else. His talk with Jakob's mother had hopefully been of comfort to her, but Harry couldn't tell if it had made him feel any different.

'Who's next?' Filippa had asked him a few days ago, and Harry wondered that as well - who next? Would it be Petronella, who had been picked up by her parents and whisked away right after the funeral, as if she'd have snuck with them to Durmstrang if they hadn't been quick enough. Or would it be Filippa herself, who had already told him that she didn't want to stay there?
'It's not going to be Clemens,' Harry thought, thinking of the taller boy. They hadn't talked since their argument, and Harry didn't feel bad about it. He didn't know if what he had told Clemens was going to change anything in the long run, or if the boy would get over his issues and talk to Harry again. Merlin knew Harry couldn't afford losing more friends, what with Truls still--

"Hey," Björn said, pulling Harry out of his thoughts. "You all right?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, not sure if it was true. "I'm okay, I think. How are you?"

"I don't know," Björn admitted. "It's all... it happened so fast, I think I'm still kind of... not really believing it? Circe, I mean, Jakob, man. He was pretty fun to be around and I just... I don't know."

"Yeah," Harry sighed. "I think we're all going to be reeling from what happened for a while, in one way or another."

"Well, not all of us," Björn said, lowering his voice. "There's something going on with Heidi and Nikolai - I swear I've heard them argue twice last week alone. And let me tell you - they've never argued in public before."

"I... uh, I hope they're okay?" Harry said, unsure if Björn expected him to say anything else. "I don't really know them that well, to be honest." Mainly because neither one of them had expressed any interest in getting to know him, either.

"The not knowing what's going to happen next is the worst," Björn said quietly. "You know? This constant fear of not being prepared enough for anything and everything that could go wrong. Jakob’s gone, we’re all falling apart in one way or another. Merlin, it's like we can never just take a damn break and breath a little."

"I know," Harry agreed, the suffocating feeling returning in mild waves, making his throat hurt and back ache. Breathing wasn't difficult, but it wasn't too easy either. Filippa had told him once that they were all unravelling, and now Björn was telling him the same. Circe, he didn't want to imagine the hours he'd be spending alone in his flat with only these thoughts and worries for company, but he couldn't bear the company of others, either. He felt awful for it, but he didn't think he could bring himself to muster up the energy to comfort Filippa when he himself felt like a paper doll, or an ornament made of glass so thin a breath could break it, just wobbling forward fearing everything from rain to wind to the slightest of shoves.

When Harry finally entered his apartment, he didn't even take his shoes off before - without thinking about it, really - he curled his fingers around the portkey Tom had given him, and allowed himself to pulled into another place - somewhere unknown, a safe location that Tom had picked for him.

(He just needed to get away.

He couldn't stay there.

Not now.)

Once Harry was standing on solid ground again, he found himself in a large room with a thick carpet, a beautiful fireplace, a heavy-looking desk, and a long, soft couch. Bookshelves covered the walls, and though there were some windows near the ceiling, there was no door to be seen. Harry, whose feeling of weightless disorientation had been made worse by the whisk of the portkey, staggered towards the couch and sat down. He didn't know where he was, and he didn't care. He felt terrible. He felt too much like he had back home during the summer - the feeling of panic and anxiety that had left him yearning for an anchor that would bring him back to solid ground. His head was
buzzing and wasn’t even sure why he was panicking right then, just that he was, and—

It was perhaps this reason why, when he saw an impossibly large snake make its way from underneath the desk, Harry merely stared at it with detachment. He knew, on some level, that he ought to be afraid, but couldn’t manage to bring himself to latch on to that awareness enough to turn it into an actual feeling. The thing didn't seem to care about his presence much, and chased the small squares of sunlight that the windows allowed in.

'Snakes like warmth, don't they?' Harry thought, and an idea - a stupid, reckless idea - formed in his tired, lonely mind. He took off his jacket and folded it, pushing it under his head as he laid down on the couch. He looked at the snake from where he was lying and said: "I'm warmer than that, you know? You can come here and lie on me." Did it understand human speech, anyway?

If the snake ended up choking him, then honestly, did it matter? Harry was ready to go.

'Okay, that's a stupid thought,' he then told himself, and felt ridiculous. He didn't really want to die. He wasn't like James had been - he had too many things he needed to get done, and-- oh, that felt nice.

While occupied with the thoughts in his head, the large snake - the one Harry now remember to be Tom's pet of some sort - had made its way to the couch, and had slithered to lie on top of him, its body tucking itself warmly - and solidly - against his body. It was heavy, but felt so... so nice.

"That's good," Harry murmured, finally feeling like he could relax. Without realizing it, his hand had moved to pet the snake's large head, and he hoped that he was warm enough to make this new position as comfortable for the snake as it was making this lie for Harry.

"I have to ask Tom what your name is," Harry said, his petting coming to a halt. Why was he so tired, all of a sudden? Sure, he hadn't felt this relaxed in ages, but he had been sleeping fairly well. "I probably should know it, but I can't remember. You're such a good snake, you know. So warm, so heavy. Such a good snake."

Harry closed his eyes, feeling drowsy. He didn't know if the snake even understood him, but there was something in the comfort that an animal could give that Harry found unmatchable by anything else. Unlike people, animals never expected anything back. Animals were straightforward, they weren't scheming or—

"I don't know many reptiles," Harry told the snake, his words slurring together in his drowsiness, "but even if I did, I'm sure you're the best." Because surely such a creature deserved to know how good it was, right? Besides, Tom didn't strike him as the sort to praise his pets, and if his pet was nice to Harry, then the least Harry could do was make up for Tom's neglect, right?

"So good," Harry breathed, before relaxing further, and slipping into slumber without noticing it.

On top of him, Nagini was delighted.

"We're keeping your dead-alive boy," she hissed the moment Tom stepped out of the fireplace. By then her new resting spot had been asleep for quite a while. Tom, startled, looked at the two of them with a frown.

"What are you doing there?" he asked, impatiently gesturing for her to move. "Shoo."

"He's warm," she protested, not moving. "And he's the one who offered to have me lie here. Such a good little dead-alive boy, knows his place in this world and shows respect like he should. You should learn from him."
"You're going to be intolerable," Tom muttered, before stepping closer to take a look at Harry's face. Didn't the child sleep or what was going on, exactly? "Did you find out why he came here?"

"We didn't talk," Nagini replied. "We don't have that kind of a relationship. He did praise me, though. Many times. Such a good boy. Teach him how to talk to me."

"Impossible," Tom said, casting a diagnostic spell on the sleeping teenager, just to check. If he had turned up due to some attack, then Tom deserved to know, right? He wasn't concerned - he just wanted to know if the boy was dying. "It's not a language that can be taught just like that. Also, why on earth would he want to talk to you? Or, rather, why on earth would he want to understand what you're saying? Circe knows I wish I didn't."

"Rude," Nagini hissed, before curling up against Harry again. "Don't wake us up. I like him."

Tom scowled at his snake again, and took a step back after the diagnostic spell revealed nothing to be concerned about. He didn't know why Harry had chosen now of all times to make an appearance, but it wasn't as if Tom minded - even if the boy had turned up for no other reason than sheer boredom, Tom wouldn't have minded. At the very least he would've had the chance to ask him about how Lucius was faring as a mentor.

'He's been out of combat for a while now,' Tom thought. 'He hasn't been in battle since his clash with Black, has he? There's no way to tell if his duel with Black has made him less likely to attack, but if it has... if he hesitates in fear of doing what he accidentally did to his godfather, it'll be something we need to deal with swiftly. I'll have to initiate that - no matter how much I wait, I know Lucius won't take the boy to battle anytime soon.' Merlin, if only Lucius was just a bit more like Bellatrix. Just enough for the man to not be held back by the fear of breaking things that were in his care. Usually Tom didn't really care much - the man did get his work done excellently - but Harry really did need to be pushed to evolve.

'He just needs a bit of a... something to energize him,' Tom decided. He wasn't sure who to pick, yet, but he could assign Harry to hunt down yet another Rebel and take his frustrations out on whoever that ended up being. That way, maybe, he'd regain his bright-eyed enthusiasm that Tom remembered from few years ago.

"He told you to lie on him?" he asked, then.

"Yes," Nagini hissed in response. Tom sighed, sitting down on his chair and tapping his fingers against the polished surface of his desk. It'd raise questions, for sure, but if it made Harry feel more functional - because that had to be the reason why, didn't it? Why he had asked Tom to lie on him then, and why he asked the same from Nagini now. Having someone weigh him down like that was obviously making the boy feel better - somehow, Tom didn't know how to even begin understanding the concept - but at least if he let Nagini do that to Harry, he'd know that there would be no other people misunderstanding the boy's need of proximity. If he needed someone to lie on him and Tom wasn't nearby, how bad could that go? Besides... even if people were to question Nagini's presence, it wasn't as if anyone could do anything about it.

He... he needed to think about this. Not yet, though. First, he needed to ask the boy about his missing godfather.

* * *

"Well, this is unexpected," Bellatrix said. "You rarely visit me unannounced, Cissy. Let me tell you, I’ve been doing great today. Wang Lei, you know him? Sold me a defective trunk two weeks ago? Well, he’s not selling much of anything, anymore. I had Rabastan turn him into a trunk, and—"
"We need to talk," Narcissa said, sitting down next to her sister in the latter's lounge, refusing the cup of tea that a house-elf floated towards her the moment she settled. "This is about Harry."

"Again?" Bellatrix said. "Merlin, what is this interest you've taken in him, sister?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with, really," Narcissa replied, "though I do wish for your input in regards to this particular... issue."

At that, Bellatrix sat straighter, more alert, and looked at Narcissa with calculative contemplation that was rarely seen outside of a fight. "And how can I help?"

"What is Harry's connection to the Dark Lord?" Narcissa asked, voice hushed. She didn't think they'd be overheard in the Lestrange estate, but it didn't seem like the kind of a question that should be spoken with too much volume. "Lucius wants to stay as far away from the boy as he can, and told me that his duelling is remarkably similar to that of the Dark Lord. He also told me about the recommendation Harry had received for the Triwizard Tournament--"

"Bleeeh," Bellatrix said, rolling her eyes dismissively. "Old news."

"Then tell me what the new ones are," Narcissa snapped. "Is the boy connected to the Dark Lord somehow?"

"I don't know," Bellatrix replied, still putting up a front of mockery. "How would I know, really? Much like Lucius, I never bothered asking. It doesn't seem like something anyone ought to look into, you know?"

"Sure," Narcissa allowed. "If you were conversing with someone you didn't trust, I'd let this go. But I need to know, Bella. Please."

Bellatrix huffed, and pretended to focus on a painting on the other side of the room, as if that would remove her from the conversation. Narcissa resisted the urge to pinch her - _Merlin_, her sister's mannerisms hadn't changed a bit since they were little girls. "Come on, Bella. Please," Narcissa said again.

"Fine," Bellatrix hissed, before leaning closer again. Her apparent reluctance to discuss the Dark Lord and Harry didn't fool Narcissa at all - she knew the spark in her sister's eye was nothing but love for the speculations she was about to indulge in. "During the Yule Ball at the Triwizard Tournament, I had a dance with Harry, you know. He certainly cares for our Lord - much more than your average Death Eater."

"Of course he does, if he's casting the Dark Mark still in this day and age," Narcissa hissed in response. "But do you know if he's in touch with the Dark Lord?"

"Not for sure, no," Bellatrix admitted. "But he has to be. How else would he have learned half the things he knows how to do. I asked Barty once about his lessons, but what Barty taught Harry doesn't amount to a quarter of what the boy knows. I've taught him, Rosier has taught him, and even if you added a few more Death Eaters who would've taught him, there are still skills that are entirely unaccounted for."

"Like the Unforgivables?"

"No, those he could've learned on his own. I'm talking _apparition_, Cissy. You can't learn that on your own, but you also can't teach it to just anyone - you have to be licensed so the Ministry keeps track of those things. And yet when I looked - there's no record of who taught Harry to do so."
"It could be anyone, though," Narcissa said, but Bellatrix shook her head.

"No one would dare to do it if they knew the consequences," she said. "And whoever taught him had to be either incredibly stupid and reckless to do so without worrying about treating splinches - or capable enough to heal him if that were to happen. Again - the number of people who could do that is limited, and if you narrow it down to how many would dare to do that without informing the Ministry... there's only one."

"Have you tried asking Harry?" Narcissa wanted to know. "All this is speculation - no matter how much sense it makes, it still is just speculation. Do you have anything concrete? Have you seen anything?"

"No," Bellatrix huffed. "And how in Circe's name would I ask the boy about it? Or, I could, but what if we were right and he did - somehow - have a direct link to the Dark Lord. How would I explain that bout of curiosity to the Dark Lord, hm?"

"Lucius suggested that Harry might have been given some sort of a mission by him," Narcissa said. "That would explain... if they did interact, that would explain why."

"And if he's right, then it's clearly a mission we're not supposed to know about," Bellatrix pointed out. "He'd have had to assign it to Potter right before the boy's fourth year, right? When Harry was thirteen. If there's something that's been going on that long without us being told about it, there has to be a reason. I'm not going to go digging into my Lord's designs if he doesn't want me there."

"I know, it's dangerous," Narcissa sighed. "That does make me wonder, however... what is the boy supposed to do, in the end, with everything that he knows? He's not going to be an average Death Eater who'll replace some soldier in due time. If he's already that deeply involved, the Dark Lord must have something different planned for him."

"Which is why I'm keeping such a close eye on him," Bellatrix said, sounding smug. "I was denied the chance to have him become part of my family - and Circe, did I try - but it doesn't matter. I'll be near and make sure I will know whatever he's up to."

"That leads me to another point," Narcissa said, turning to look at her sister fully. "Bella, I would love for Harry to spend more time with Draco. I want to have him over for the Christmas break, and see how he enjoys his time with my family."

"You want to adopt him, Cissy?" Bellatrix asked, letting out a snort. "Not a chance, the Dark Lord himself put a stop to..." Halfway through what she had been about to say, Bellatrix realized what exactly the implications were.

"The Dark Lord stopped you," Narcissa whispered. "He didn't want Harry in your care."

Bellatrix didn't often feel surprised, but now... how could she not? "Why? My Lord must know that I'd be loyal--"

"I don't think that's it," Narcissa interrupted. "Listen, I'll try to adopt him as well. If the Dark Lord puts a stop to that attempt also, we'll know that the matter goes beyond whether or not he finds us loyal and reliable."

"It'd mean he wants Harry alone," Bellatrix whispered, leaning back on her seat again. If they were right the implications of the Dark Lord wanting Harry to remain alone were... curious. Unclear. "Try it, Cissy."

"I will," Narcissa said. "But until then - tell no one of this, all right? Not even Rodolphus. Just... let's
keep this between us two."

The less people knew, after all, the less likely it was for the Dark Lord to find out about it.

When Harry woke up, he felt… good. The weight on him was still there, and he couldn't help but wonder if there was any hope in asking Tom if he could borrow his snake from time to time. Tom didn't appear in public with it often, which meant that he didn't need the snake by his side all the time, right? Maybe he could—

"Had a good nap?" he heard the man in question ask. Still somewhat drowsy, Harry just let out a deep sigh and turned his head just enough to see Tom looking at him from a chair behind the massive desk he had seen before. The man was still dressed in very official looking robes, and having just learned what kind of a militia he was at the top of, Harry wasn't surprised by how fancy he looked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I just... I was at a funeral. Another one of my classmates."

"I read about it," Tom said. "Karkaroff sent me a report."

"I didn't know him too well, you know," Harry continued, moving his hand to pet the snake lying on top of him again. "It still doesn't feel... I mean, I didn't think I'd be okay, but... I guess I didn't expect to feel this upset about it."

"I see," Tom said, clearly not seeing Harry's point. "Did Nagini frighten you? Her manners are questionable at best."

"No," Harry replied, glad to be reminded of the snake's name. "I think she's great."

"I told you," Nagini hissed. "I'm great."

"She doesn't need her ego stroked," Tom said, narrowing his eyes at the gleeful reptile. "She's barely tolerable as she is."

"Let's agree to disagree," Harry grinned, before pushing himself up to a sitting position. "Merlin, I really needed that nap. I feel like my brain's working for the first time in weeks."

"The couch isn't that good."

"I don't think it was the couch, I think it was Nagini."

"You've... done that before," Tom said. "Wanted something - well, me - on you. How does it help?"

"The weight feels grounding," Harry tried to explain. "So, thanks. Anyway, you're probably very busy, so if you want me to go, I can--"

"No, there's actually something I do need to discuss with you," Tom interrupted, gesturing for Harry to remain seated. "You see... And mind you, I know your sensitivity to bad news, so try to not do that thing where you... have all these feelings and tears, all right? Because, who knows, in the big picture, this could be really good?"

"What could be?" Harry asked, his good mood now tinged with concern. "Tom, what happened?"

"I don't know," Tom replied. "What I do know that though your godfather has been cleared for - well, not active duty, but he's reported to be in a good enough condition to attend our meetings... he hasn't."
Harry fell silent for a few moments, mind suddenly conjuring a wild scenario of his godfather running away and joining the Rebels and becoming a fugitive just to get back at Harry. He wouldn't.

"He hasn't been responding to owls or calls," Tom continued. "The wards at Grimmauld are still up, but keyed so that no one can enter the premises - not even Bellatrix or Narcissa anymore. It doesn't tell us anything of whether or not he's still there, as the wards aren't reliant on his presence - merely held up by the magic of the house itself."

"You want me to try and get in," Harry realized, before shaking his head. "No way is he allowing me in. He definitely has already blocked me from entering, you know."

"That is a possibility," Tom agreed. "But I'd like to test it."

'Maybe he's not there,' Harry thought, not believing that the scenario he had imagined earlier - the one in which Sirius became a fugitive and wanted to avenge himself in some way - was preferable to the thought of talking to the man again. But-- what choice did he have?

"Fine," Harry said. "But in return, I want to borrow Nagini sometimes."

The look Tom threw at the snake was downright disgusted. "That... I would've allowed you to do that anyway. You're lucky you don't understand her."

"You're lucky the dead-alive boy is too warm for me to come over there," Nagini hissed in response.

"In that case, okay," Harry said. Reluctantly, the large snake slithered off his shoulders and lap when Tom hissed at it pointedly. The Dark Lord then pulled his hood up, the charm attached to the hood making his face somehow unrecognizable.

"We'll apparate to the street right outside the front gate," Tom said, taking a hold of Harry's arm. "Get ready."

The thing about getting ready for apparition was that Harry couldn't. He hated apparating, hated side-along even more. And yet, for once, when his feet hit the ground in front of Grimmauld Place, the nausea he felt wasn't entirely due to the mode of transportation. He could tell - right away, with the absence of anything that repelled his magic from the boundaries of the residence - that Sirius hadn't blocked him from entering.

"What on earth," Harry murmured, stepping through the wards, and pulling Tom physically with him to get him in as well. Hesitantly, he unlocked the front door and entered the dark hallway.

"No signs of struggle," Tom noted. "But no presence to be detected. Why would he leave his home like this?"

'He didn't defect, no way, he wouldn't,' Harry thought, feeling sick. 'Not because of me, Circe. Even Sirius isn't that reckless.' But his brother had, hadn't he? No, that wasn’t a right comparison, Sirius and Regulus were nothing alike, and Sirius didn’t share his brother’s motives—

Harry headed towards Sirius's study - if there was any sign of his plans to be found, it'd be there. "Where would he even go?" Harry asked over his shoulder, while pushing the door of Sirius's study open. "He doesn't even like travelling. France is pretty much the only-- oh."

He found Sirius.

\"
Björn wasn't a confrontational person - no, really, he wasn't. But sometimes someone needed to be confronted, and if no one else was about to step up to the task, then he would do it. Not gladly, but he would. Now, as he knocked on Clemens's door, he couldn't help but think of all the sad things Harry had whispered to him during their sleepover - and all the things he had told Björn about later, after his latest talk with Clemens.

In some ways that confrontation had been for the best - at least Harry knew that harbouring a crush on Clemens of all people was bound to end up in tears. Moreover, in a drastic change from previous years, Harry had lost the hesitation that had tended to accompany his hushed claims of homosexuality. It did Harry good, that certainty, especially when it often looked like Harry wasn't certain about too many things in his life.

"What do you want?" Clemens asked, opening his door. Björn, taking full advantage of his pointy elbows, made his way further into the apartment and sat down on one of the chairs by the dining table. There was an opened bottle of whisky on the kitchen counter, but he graciously ignored it.

"We need to talk," Björn said.

"Uh, about what?" Clemens asked. "Not for nothing, man, but I wasn't close to Jakob. So if you're here about that--"

"No," Björn replied. "This isn't about Jakob. This is about Harry."

There was an odd twitch that twisted Clemens's expression for a fleeting instant, before he shook his head. "You're going to talk about Harry right after Jakob's funeral? Cold."

"I'm going to talk about Harry right after Jakob's funeral because I can, because Harry's with neither one of us right now, and because no one is going to interrupt us today. Not when everyone has so much else they need to be figuring out, whether it's Jakob’s death or something else."

"Okay, fine," Clemens said, rolling his eyes and crossing his arms. "Harry. What about him?"

"You're bothered by him being gay, that much is clear even if you hadn't outright told him," Björn said. "He doesn't understand why, and honestly - I don't know why either, but at least I do know it's something that happens. For whatever reasons, people are bothered by other people being different. What I don't get, however, is how you still lurk around Harry like a lingering hex. If you're bothered by him, why do you want to spend so much time with him?"

"I'm not bothered by him," Clemens snapped, but then shrugged, clearly not knowing how to continue from there. Björn, who didn't believe a word in what the other had just said, took the opportunity to continue:

"All right then," he said. "Let's say he decided that despite being very clearly gay, he's going to marry a girl, yeah? Imagine that."

Clemens blinked, his mouth falling open as he looked at Björn again. The other boy continued: "You see, I don't think you're going to be any happier with Harry dating a girl as you are with the thought of him dating a guy. And, you know what? This isn't the first time a person has found themselves liking their friend a bit more than what's common - it happens. It's normal. But what isn't normal is the fucked up emotional roller-coaster you've been dragging Harry through because of your feelings."

"Everything you're saying is just speculation," Clemens said, scowling. "You don't know fucking anything, do you? Are you projecting, is that it? You don't know how I think or what I feel, you
don't know anything about me, really. Yeah, I think Harry's pretty. Yeah, I think he should find himself a bird and settle with her. Because his life would be so much fucking easier if he did that. You're not blind, you idiot, you can see how he is most of the time - barely sleeping, always on the move, always working on something that's clearly burning his candle from all ends. You think him shacking up with a guy is going to make that life any easier? He'll be picked up and apart by the press and treated like a bitch in the military."

"That's his fight to win or lose," Björn said. "You're not entitled to make any decisions-- And, if that was your concern, what's with crying over him being a guy, huh? And not a girl? Can you even imagine how his life would be like if he was a girl? Or what, you would've fought his fights for him then?"

The oddest thing - most unexpected, surprising thing - happened then: Clemens's sharp inhale seemed to be almost involuntary, and his eyes fluttered before he focused on Björn again. "You know what, if he'd been a girl, then yeah - I would've fought his fights for him. What about it? But he isn't, and I know that he isn't."

"So why do you keep thinking about it?" Björn insisted. Clemens shrugged.

"I've got a lot of thoughts that tangle up in my head," he said. "I know my words have hurt Harry - a few times, at least. I know. But every time I think of him and some guy, I just think - why?"

"I can't control your thoughts, but I can think they're stupid," Björn said. "But listen - Harry's gay whether or not you have your issues. But whether or not you leave those issues unresolved is what will determine what kind of relationship the two of you will have down the line."

"It's not that easy," Clemens said, shrugging. "You can go. Thanks for the talk, I guess, but it's always easier to give advice when you don't understand the consequences fully."

"Then tell me."

"It's none of your business."

Björn narrowed his eyes as he looked at Clemens, before he sighed and stood up. "Have it your way, then."

"I always do," Clemens replied, not moving when the other boy headed to the door. "I always do." For better or worse. He'd wait and see if Harry wanted to talk to him first, because Merlin, he didn't know what he would even want to say to make the first move. He didn't want to even think about it.

Circe, he needed a drink.

*Sirius was sitting behind his desk, head tilted back, dried drool marking the sides of his mouth. There was a cup of cold tea in front of him, with most of the drink still there. In front of him, there was a letter.

Oh.

Oh, this was a nightmare. Merlin, they became more and more realistic every time Harry lived through one, and now they almost tricked him, and how did that even happen because that's just crazy, and how--

Tom yanked Harry out of the study, and left him standing in the corridor. "Don't move," the man
Harry wanted to laugh. Move? He wasn't moving. He didn't think he could breathe, let alone walk somewhere. Sirius had-- why? How? Sirius wasn't the type to-- Sirius wasn't like James? Was this Harry's fault? It definitely was his fault, wasn't it? Circe, what had he done? Being right wasn't this important. He shouldn't have--

"Breathe," Tom's voice snapped at him, but it seemed to come from a distance, even though he was just few steps away, and the door of the study had remained open. Harry slid down the wall, struggling to breathe, struggling to hold in a scream he didn't know he had been keeping inside of him.

In Sirius's office, Tom looked at the man's body with disbelief. Had Black really killed himself? It didn't make any sense, and it couldn't be the case. Something else must be going on, and the sooner he figured out what, the better it was for everyone. A few moments later, not having found anything that could explain what was going on, Tom decided to take a look at the letter Black had left on the desk in front of him. The first few words were enough to make him want to curse.

Circe, Black was really vicious, wasn't he?

Blaming his godson in a suicide note?

'There has to be more to this than that,' Tom thought, frowning as he checked the letter for forged handwriting. No matter how upset he was about the loss of his feet, surely the man wasn't suicidal? Angry and spiteful and downright crazy, yes, but Blacks rarely turned suicidal.

Cautiously, Tom reached for the cup, and cast a quick spell to differentiate between the liquids in it. With confusion and dread, it had belladonna extract in it. He couldn't tell how much - for that, he'd need Severus.

"Harry," Tom said, stepping out of the room again. He hesitated for a moment, and grimaced. "Never mind." He tended to summon his followers through owl these days, but using the Dark Mark would be a much faster way of getting Snape where he needed to be. Getting the man through the wards without Harry's help was a trick and a half, but it was worth it when all he needed was a sniff to tell Tom about the belladonna extract.

"Enough to knock him unconscious," Snape said, the pinched look on his face only getting worse when he saw Potter huddled in the corridor. Smart man as he was, he didn't ask questions. "But not enough to kill him."

"How did it kill him, then?" Tom snapped. "Was it used to mask another way?"

Snape hummed in contemplation, and moved behind the desk to take a better look at Black's body. For a moment it didn't seem like he found much, but when he pushed the chair a bit, his expression cleared, before souring again. "Ah."

"Elaborate," Tom demanded.

"His feet, my lord," Snape said. "Are they the result of the St. Mungo's standard prosthetic operation?"

"Obviously," Smart man? Tom took that back.

"They use quicksilver," Snape continued. "It wouldn't usually be a problem for us with the magic in our bodies, but it does have the unfortunate side-effect of amplifying the toxicity of belladonna extract."
Tom frowned, his fingers involuntarily curling around Black's letter in his pocket. So, Black was dead. He had ingested poison - but a non-fatal amount had he not had his prosthetics attached. What did that mean? His letter indicated suicide, his actions didn't, unless... "How common is that knowledge, Severus? About quicksilver and belladonna?"

"Not particularly, as they are ingredients that do not interact in any known potions," Snape replied. His dark eyes flickered over Black, and he continued: "My lord, I don't think this was a murder."

"Neither do I," Tom murmured. It wasn't a murder, and it wasn't really a suicide either. Black hadn't intended to die - he had only wished to appear as if Harry's actions had driven him to attempt suicide. He had meant to survive this attempt and live to see Harry eaten alive by guilt.

Tom wasn't used to feeling angry on behalf of anyone, but now...

Circe. He had said it before, but… the man was vicious.

"You will not speak of this, Severus," Tom decided, startling the Potions Master. "If I hear so much as a whisper of what you have seen or heard in here today, it will be the end of you, yes?"

"Of course, my lord," Snape replied, voice hesitant. When they exited the study once more, Tom moved to where Harry was still sitting on the floor.

"Did Sirius kill himself because of what I did?" the boy asked, his face stained with tears. Tom swallowed, thinking of the letter in his pocket - this wasn't kindness, he just didn't want the boy ruined - and said:

"Too many things don't align. This looks like a badly covered-up murder. The timing is unfortunate, but it has nothing to do with you."

He could see, from the corner of his eye, Snape tilting his head - the only sign of surprise the man allowed to slip through his usually so stoic appearance. Harry bit his lip, and nodded slowly, before saying: "But was it possible to kill him because of what I did?"

"Listen to me," Tom hissed, reading to take a hold of Harry's chin and lifting his face up so he could force the boy to look into his eyes. "Listen to me, Harry, he was murdered. Whoever did that was clever, and I doubt they were engaged in a duel. Black was killed through trickery and it wouldn't have mattered even if he did have his two feet in place, do you understand?"

"He's gone now too," Harry breathed. "Mum and Dad and Sirius, my whole family's gone."

"You'll be fine," Tom assured him quietly, hating the fact that Snape was still there, watching everything. "You'll be fine, Harry."

"Don't leave me," Harry said then, raising his hand to take a hold of Tom's wrist. "If you... if you die, I'm going to kill myself."

Snape, then, let out a chocked gasp that almost had Tom turning around and obliviating him. Thankfully, Harry didn't seem to notice it, still occupied with looking at Tom like a blink would have him disappear. Tom didn't think that now was the time to feel flattered, and pushed that particular tickling feeling down. Instead, he stood up, pulling Harry with him.

"Severus here will handle your godfather's funeral arrangements." Served the nosy prick right. "Won't you, Severus?"

"Of course, my Lord," Snape replied, sounding satisfyingly put off by the order. Harry turned his
head to look at the Potions Master, but couldn't muster up so much as a thank you.

"I want to go home," he said instead. He wanted to cry. He wanted to disappear. He wanted to stop making mistakes and being wrong all the time. He wanted his mum and his dad and his godfather and he wanted to just be okay. He wanted to die. He wanted to just... just... not be him for a second.

"Of course," Tom agreed smoothly. "I'll take you home. Severus... as I said - not a word, yes? Handle the funeral as it ought to be when one of my own gets murdered in his own home."

"Yes, my Lord," Snape replied. "I'll handle it."

"See that you do," Tom said, but the words were an absent-minded threat as the man's focus returned to the tearful boy by his side.

* 

Lucius had hinted, some weeks ago, that a change was coming. Now, as Severus watched the Dark Lord and Lily's son, he suspected that change had begun a long time ago.

Works inspired by this one

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