**Twist of Fate**

**Summary**

Harry is taken the night Dumbledore is about to leave him with the Dursleys. With someone meddling in the timeline, Harry and Tom become the Riddle brothers. Follow the boys from their entanglement in World War II and Grindelwald's reign, to canon years and a much changed future.

TMR/HP Slash.

**AUTHOR’SNOTE 28/12/2019:** Some readers have asked me to upload this story to AO3. It is fairly advanced in Fanfiction.net. I will finish uploading it on this site as well, as requested, in the span of a few weeks. It is a story written some years ago and it has not been revised since then.

I will do my best to revise it and finish the story starting mid2020.

Thank you to all of those who have reviewed, it is due to you that I finally decided to get back to writing after such a long absence. Studying, working, family - in short, life, has kept me pretty busy. But you have convinced me to give it a go and try to finish this :) As for that, which would you prefer I tackle first, Twist of Fate or Vindico Atrum? Ideally I would like to do both but given my time constraints I will probably just be able to focus on one for a while.
Part I: Chapter 1

A lizard, unnaturally still, observed the proceedings from its inconspicuous position on the front fence of the muggle house. It was attentive, yet inwardly sneered as it watched as the tabby cat transformed into a severe-looking woman dressed in green robes, her black hair drawn into a tight, strict bun.

Lucius Malfoy didn't move a muscle of his animagus form, while Minerva McGonagall wasted no time in making her opinions known as soon as the old fool reached her after having put out the lights from the lamps of the muggle street.

Her conversation with Albus Dumbledore, in that most ominous of days for dark wizarding kind, flickered in and out of his awareness as he awaited for what was to happen.

"You'd be stiff too if you'd been sitting on a brick wall all day," said the witch, looking distinctly ruffled.

"All day? When you could have been celebrating?" said the old goat, his blue eyes twinkling, which provoked a small spasm of fury in the tail of the unseen and undetected lizard. "I must have passed a dozen feasts and parties on my way here."

"Oh yes, everyone's celebrating, all right," she said impatiently. "You'd think they'd be a bit more careful, but no - even the Muggles have noticed something's going on. It was on their news." She jerked her head back at the dark living-room window of house number four of Privet Drive. "I heard it. Flocks of owls... shooting stars... Well, they're not completely stupid. They were bound to notice something. Shooting stars down in Kent - I'll bet that was Dedalus Diggle. He never had much sense."

"You can't blame them," said Dumbledore gently. "We've had precious little to celebrate for eleven years."

"I know that," said McGonagall irritably. "But that's no reason to lose our heads. People are being downright careless, out on the streets in broad daylight, not even dressed in Muggle clothes, swapping rumors."

She threw a sharp, sideways glance at Dumbledore here, as though hoping he was going to tell her something, but he didn't, so she went on. "A fine thing it would be if, on the very day You-Know-Who seems to have disappeared at last, the Muggles found out about us all. I suppose he really has gone, Dumbledore?"

Lucius didn't bother paying attention to the doddering old fool's reply. With icy calculation, he was wondering the same thing. He pondered about the sequence of events of the last months which had brought him to be there, in a filthy muggle street, in his animagus form on the fence of a house which belonged to the relatives of the mudblood Lily Evans. The mudblood who had been killed,
along with her husband, last night – murdered by his Lord. And if rumors were to be believed, it was her one-year-old son who had brought upon the death of his Master.

He knew very well that part of it had began over a year ago, when Severus Snape had barged in a Death Eater meeting, gasping about something he had overheard, something about a prophecy. Neither Lucius nor the other Death Eaters had been allowed to hear anything about the matter, since their Lord had instantly commanded them to leave him alone with Severus.

But it had started then, with the Longbottoms and Potters going into hiding, with the useless rat, Peter Pettigrew, somehow gaining favor with his Lord, with a strange wizard in hooded grey cloak visiting the Dark Lord behind closed doors, and with the news that Alice Longbottom and Lily Potter were pregnant, with his Lord becoming uncommonly interested in such a mundane and irrelevant matter.

Lucius hadn't quite known what to think regarding his Lord's change in attitude - the Dark Lord's obsession with the spawn growing in the mudblood's womb.

Yes, for many Death Eaters, it had all began over a year ago, but for him, it started exactly thirteen years ago – the day he had seen his father for the last time. The day his father, the wizard he revered and admired above all others, had told him things he didn't quite understand, when he had been given his father's grimoire, with instructions about the ritual he had to use on his family and those he considered worthy.

And he had done so many years later -precisely last night- even when he didn't understand the reason or importance of subjecting his wife and one-year-old son to the strange ritual. Even after he had bestowed the same favor on his sister-in-law, the Lestrange brothers, and others attached to his family, there were many things he still didn't comprehend, despite following his father's orders without any hesitation.

Indeed, what had happened last night only served to perplex him further, since in the precise moment he had felt his Dark Mark flaring painfully on his left arm, knowing that something terrible must have happened to his Lord, the pensieve his father had left him so many years ago had suddenly been unlocked.

Restraining his unhinged sister-in-law from going out and taking vengeance for their Lord's demise, knowing that it would pain Narcissa if something happened to Bellatrix, Lucius had commandeered the Death Eaters and ordered them to wait, to bid for the appropriate time in which to take any measures and actions.

Despite taking the mantle of leadership with icy determination and cool calmness, Lucius admitted to himself that he was none the wiser about the events which had transpired. The moment he realized the wards on his father's pensieve had dropped, he had wasted no time in plunging into the memories which had been left for him so many years ago, but they had only served to confuse and flummox him further.

Nevertheless, there he was, awaiting to witness something his father had foretold so that he could, at last, understand his father's motives and course of action, and indeed, the very reasons for many of his own actions which he had taken following the orders his father had so long ago given him.

Lucius pulled out of his musings when a low rumbling sound echoed in the night. Scrambling in his animagus form, the lizard quickly dashed along the fence to have a better angle from which to observe the proceedings, at the precise moment in which a huge motorcycle fell out of the air and landed on the road in front of McGonagall and Dumbledore.
He recognized the oaf immediately. It was the Groundskeeper of Hogwarts, whom he had tried, as one of the Governors of the school, to sack repeatedly and which Dumbledore had always prevented. Lucius repressed an inward sneer of disgust and merely kept absolutely still as his small lizard eyes fixed on what the half-giant was holding in a bundle of blankets with depicted snitches flying across the cloth.

"Hagrid," said Dumbledore, sounding relieved. "At last. And where did you get that motorcycle?"

"Borrowed it, Professor Dumbledore," said the giant, climbing carefully off the motorcycle as he spoke. "Young Sirius Black lent it to me. I've got him, sir."

"No problems, were there?"

"No, sir - house was almost destroyed, but I got him out all right before the Muggles started swarmin' around. He fell asleep as we was flyin' over Bristol."

The lizard watched how the old fool and McGonagall reached the half-giant, catching sight of Dumbledore carefully plucking out a letter from his robes' pocket, undoubtedly addressed to the filthy muggles living in the house behind them.

For a moment, Lucius felt a twinge of disgust and pity for the baby – a baby who none, other than the Potters' closest friends, could have seen, having been born, as it was, when the Potters had been in hiding. Dumbledore, given the old fool's expression of gentle expectation, had certainly never laid eyes upon the baby.

If the baby wasn't the spawn of a mudblood and a Potter, and hadn't been the reason for the Dark Lord's downfall, Lucius thought he would have seriously considered snatching it away to bring up the whelp like a magical child should properly be raised, instead of being left with despicable muggles.

However, he remained still in his animagus form as he observed how Dumbledore and McGonagall bent forward over the bundle of blankets. Inside, just visible, was a baby boy, fast asleep. Under a tuft of jet-black hair over his forehead, a curiously shaped cut, like a bolt of lightning, could be seen. Even from his position, Lucius could feel that it thrummed with Dark Magic, and his lizard body twitched as confusion settled in his mind and as yearning to feel that intoxicating magic trickled on his skin.

Suddenly, it happened the very moment, the very instant that Dumbledore's eyes widened when his gaze zeroed in on the cut on the baby's forehead, one of the wizard's fingers shakily coming forth to touch it.

Lucius felt it acutely, a constriction of air as magic abruptly seemed to snap and thunder around them in rolling, blistering waves. He felt it in his very being, in his soul, mind and body, and he haphazardly fell to the ground, twitching while he suddenly found he could no longer maintain his animagus form.

"Harry Potter," gasped out Dumbledore, swaying on his feet, an expression of deep pain etching on his face as his pupils dilated behind his spectacles, looking as if his mind was being torn and split apart. A shaking finger still poised on the cut on the baby's forehead, just as shocked realization seemed to sweep across his aged features. "Harry Riddle."

'Harry Riddle', the words reverberated in Lucius' mind, but not in the old fool's voice. No, it was in the cultivated tenor of his father's voice, echoing in his mind like in the day they had been spoken, thirteen years ago, when his father had told him about the boy he had known. It was the same
name which had been imprinted in his mind last night, as were the images of the green eyes and beautiful face, when he had seen the memories his father had left for him.

A chilly fear of being discovered and undoubtedly captured as a Death Eater swept over him, but none of those present seemed to even notice that a wizard had just appeared on the grass, transforming from a lizard.

McGonagall, the half-giant, and clearly Dumbledore, seemed to be experiencing the same as he was. They swayed and teetered where they stood, their eyes became clouded, their expressions one of deep pain, looking as if their minds were being ravaged, as his own was. Yet his experience wasn't a painful one. And he started to slowly realize what it all meant; the memories he had seen, the instructions his father had left for him, the ritual he had underwent and made others go through as well.

"No – can't be 'Arry Riddle!" the oaf cried out, stumbling on his large feet as he protectively pressed the baby against the coarse material of his coat.

But whatever the half-giant was frantically blabbering about with anguish and disbelief, it was ignored the moment they were all blinded by a flash of light.

Lucius, crouching on the muggles' lawn, in a position he would had never found himself in, being on hands and knees, froze and simply stared at the wizard who had materialized before them, instincts of one having been raised in Slytherin House coming forth to ensure his own survival.

He recognized him immediately as the eerie man who had previously been visiting the Dark Lord – dressed in a grey cloak, with a hood which cast his face in shadows and, in one finger, with a strange ring flashing under the moonlight, a symbol in the black gem he couldn't quite discern.

Lucius might be certain that the wizard was the same one he had seen entering his Lord's study, some months ago, but he surely didn't know the man's identity. Dumbledore, on the other hand, seemed to recognize exactly who the man was and what his intentions were.

Not a word was spoken, but Dumbledore's expression turned thunderous and the old wizard immediately whipped out his wand. It soon proved to be useless - no matter what spells the old fool cast, the cloaked wizard was evidently protected by layers of shimmering magical shields.

In the bat of an eyelash, as Dumbledore swept forward to drive the unknown wizard away, a loud wail pierced the night as the bundle of blankets in the half-giant's arms flew from the oaf’s grasp, the baby rushing across the air towards the cloaked wizard.

The silent man brought up something in his hands, his ring flashing under the moonlight, as clouds of wispy air wrapped around him. In the next second, as the wailing baby was about to clash against the wizard's chest, the man threw up something in the air and specks of golden dust showered down on the baby.

An incantation in a strange language Lucius knew not, was spoken, and in that instant, the baby who now floated amidst blankets in mid air, was encompassed by a globe of golden light. With a bright flash of whiteness, Harry Potter disappeared into thin air, silently, only a puff of golden specks remaining. Along with the baby, just as quietly but much more inconspicuously, the strange wizard had vanished.

It was in that very same second, as soon as the baby had been taken away, that everything seemed to ripple around Lucius, an avalanche of images and memories raging in his mind – that which should be painful, the very shifting of a timeline, the adjustment of his own previous memories,
came to him as nothing more than gentle additions in his recollections.

He finally understood the reason for the ritual his father had written in the Malfoy grimoire. He felt it in his very being – the winds of change, the twisting of fate that was rippling across all the wizarding world, leaving him and those who had underwent the ritual, to adjust to such shattering modifications in lives and pasts with gentle ease, keeping their memories and their very existence intact, only adding more recollections to their minds, of things that hadn't happened but now, had.

Lucius didn't spare a glance at Dumbledore or the other two remaining, not caring what would become of them, yet having the inkling that one as powerful as Dumbledore would survive and cling to his own memories and what was now his past reality – never to be true again.

With an inaudible ‘crack’, he instantly apparated to his manor, to the side of his wife and one-year-old son, Draco. Later that night, those who had undergone the ritual and others who had been similarly protected, gathered in Malfoy Manor to celebrate the Dark's soon-to-be reign over Europe, for their Lord had been all-knowing and all-powerful. Their Master had planned everything with utter perfection.

And Lucius would receive a wizard who many had previously believed to be long dead, struck down by dragon pox at an old age. He would hear the story of how Harry Potter came to be Harry Riddle, named as such by a muggle girl, of all twists of fate – a girl who was, unbeknownst to her, the daughter of a squib, a girl who would die in anonymity and whose only impact in the Wizarding World would be the bestowing of a surname to a baby who captured her gentle and tender heart, the repercussions of it stretching out and rippling through time and throughout the lives of all.

That very same night, as the winds of change swept over the Wizarding World, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy would conceive their second son.

Alice Jones inwardly sighed as she did her best to present a chastised and contrite expression on her face while Mrs. Sharpe continued yelling at her and Kathy. She reminded herself that she couldn't afford to hurl her apron at the nasty woman and quit her job there. It had been a miracle, by itself, that she had found the position in such precarious times, even if the wages were dismal. She needed all the pennies she could scrap together to put food on the table, for her sister and brother. Furthermore, it was her duty - she felt in the bottom of her heart- to make the lives of the children there as happy and merry as possible.

It had taken her a year to find a job and by the end of such period of time she had been so desperate that she had taken whatever was offered. She was literate, thanks to her mother who had been a school teacher and who always insisted that she would go nowhere without an education, and therefore had hoped to find a post as a bookkeeper in some shop. But no one wanted to employ a young girl, no matter if she knew her letters and numbers.

Alice covertly glanced around the room she was standing in, her cheerful optimism not being daunted by what she saw. The home was a ghastly place, with wallpapers torn and peeling from the walls, the walls themselves moldy and stained with black spots of humidity, the many bedrooms in the house tiny and grim, with meager, shabby furniture. But at least everything was spotlessly clean – thanks to her and Kathy's efforts, that was, because Mrs. Sharpe certainly didn't care if the children in the home rolled around in grime and fell ill from unsanitary conditions.

She had been employed a month ago and her heart already swelled with compassion for the children who lived there. What chances did any of them have to be adopted? Slim to none, she
thought. Yet her naturally cheerful disposition brightened when she reminded herself that she had persuaded Mrs. Sharpe to allow her to teach the children their alphabet and how to read and write. She didn't think Mrs. Sharpe had agreed out of the kindness of her heart, but because the Matron was gaining a teacher for free – Alice's wages certainly hadn't been increased.

 Abruptly, she locked gazes with Kathy and her lips momentarily quirked upwards in a covert grin as Mrs. Sharpe kept railing at them. In Kathy's eyes, she saw the same abhorrence she felt for the Matron of St. Jerome's Orphanage. Kathy had been working there for over a year and they had instantly become friends, being the youngest of the caregivers.

 Kathy and she had often speculated what Mrs. Sharpe did with the money the British government granted to the orphanage. Why was there never meat for the children to eat, why was there nothing to drink but water from the tab, and why the only clothes that were bought were second-hand frayed ones which looked about to shed to pieces?

 Well, they knew why. Mrs. Sharpe liked her gin and liked to have a proper bed in her room and other comforts, while the children slept in ratty cots. But, Alice also had to admit, it was very possible that the funds for the orphanage had been cut short, as many things had in London during the past few years. She didn't like to badmouth or think the worst about her employer.

 Suddenly, Alice's head jerked upwards when she thought she heard the wailing of a child coming from the outside. A strange tingling sensation prickled on her skin – the kind of thing she had long ago learned to pay attention to.

 Some time ago, when her little sister had been crossing a street, playing with her friends, she had felt the same thing, just in time to see a motorcar about to run over her sister. She had saved her in time. From them onwards, no matter why her skin tingled, she always became alert and took seriously that eerie perception.

 "Did you hear that, ma'am?" said Alice politely, interrupting Mrs. Sharpe's drunken and bellowed rants about their lax and forgiving hand with the children under their care.

 "Hear what, girl?" spat out Mrs. Sharpe, her beady black eyes narrowing with distaste and anger.

 "I think-" Alice stopped and then gasped when the wail sounded clearly through the window of Mrs. Sharpe's office. "There's a baby outside!"

 "Well, go get it, lass," snapped Mrs. Sharpe, briskly waving a hand at her and Kathy. "I'm not paying you to stand there gaping."

 Alice didn't have to be told twice, and Kathy soon followed after her heels, undoubtedly relieved of being spared from the presence of their employer.

 "Nasty old crow," grumbled Kathy under her breath as they quickly made their way along the narrow corridor, the hem of their worn, grey dresses swishing as the floorboards creaked under their feet.

 "She does her best, I'm sure," murmured Alice with an apprehensive frown on her round face. "None of us has it easy nowadays, with poverty, unemployment and hunger all around."

 Kathy's expression turned grim. "The Americans are doing worse from what the radio says – flinging themselves from the windows of their tall buildings, I've heard…"

 "The newspapers are calling what we're living the Great Depression," muttered Alice under her breath as they dashed around a corner. "I never thought that after the Great War things could be
bad again. I was just a little girl then, but I remember clearly how my dad-

She clamped her mouth shut when Kathy shot her a pitying glance. She wouldn't say more. She had already confided in her friend about how her father had come back from the Great War, perturbed and violent. Disfigured, having lost an eye and an arm in the war, her father couldn't find a job when he returned to England and things just spiraled downwards from there on.

She still thought that it was a blessing that her dad had left their shabby, small house in Cheapside, five years ago - to make fortune in America, he had said. But neither she, her siblings nor their mother had ever seen or heard from him again. And she thought it was for the best – the man who had been so gentle and loving once, had turned into a nightmare to live with, and her mother had sustained the full brunt of his unbalanced temper.

Her mother… it still pained her to think about her. She had been a caring, smart woman, a teacher in a school for children of well-to-do families. But after her dad had left and the school had gone bankrupt, her mother's mind had snapped when they had been plunged into poverty after her mother had been dismissed from her job.

It was the only plausible explanation Alice could find regarding her mother's behavior. 'Crazed', their neighbors had started calling her mother, when her mother began going around saying that her parents would soon come for her and her children and take them away to their mansion, to a world of wealth, where there was no hunger or desperation, no people groveling and begging in the streets, but palaces and castles where food appeared on tables, where little green creatures cleaned with a snap of their fingers, where portraits spoke and horses had wings.

A year ago, when her mother had been dying from pneumonia, still in her deathbed did she feverishly speak about it, reassuring Alice and her two younger siblings that their grandparents, whom they had never met or known about, would come for them and take care of them. That they would forgive their mother for not being like them and take her children to live with them in wealth, like princes. Of course, that had never happened; Alice had never seen hide nor hair of these estranged grandparents or received any letters.

"Oh my, you were right!"

Alice snapped her head up when she found that they had reached the front door and that Kathy had opened it and was now staring at a squirming bundle of blankets on the steps – and strange blankets they were.

Without another hitch of breath, Alice bent downwards and gently took hold of the baby that had been abandoned at the orphanage's doorstep, first marveling at the soft texture of the blanket the baby was wrapped in with, then curiously eyeing the small golden balls with wings that were depicted in the fabric.

A gurgle issued from small pouty lips and Alice gasped, astounded and mesmerized, when the squirming baby opened his eyes – luminous emerald orbs peering at her.

"Kathy – look!" breathed out Alice, her blue eyes widening as she kept staring into the baby's eyes, utterly enthralled. "Such beautiful eyes! Have you ever seen the like?" The baby in her arms flailed tinny chubby hands towards her and she chuckled, tenderly bringing a finger to tickle the baby's cute little button nose, as she cooed softly, feeling that her heart had just been stolen away, "Aren't you a charmer, baby boy… so beautiful, so handsome… you'll be a heartbreaker, you will…"

Kathy snorted, glancing at her friend, dryly amused, though she had to admit that the baby was uncommonly handsome. "How do you know it's a boy? We haven't checked yet-"
"Because of this," said Alice, grinning widely as she parted the blanket to reveal what she had caught sight of – on the chest of the baby's one-piece, bright red letters spelling 'Harry' were woven, with a picture of a lion cub sitting on top, with a small golden crown between the cub's ears.

"So Harry is his name..." trailed off Kathy, eyeing the baby's clothes and then the blanket. "And his surname? Is there any letter?"

"No," replied Alice once she had carefully searched the blanket as she tenderly rocked the baby against her chest, her expression becoming crestfallen. "What family name will we give him? Oh, why would anyone abandon such a beautiful baby? And leaving no information behind! Poor sweet thing..."

"His parents must be wealthy folk," said Kathy with utter conviction, while she closed the door shut against the cold London night and followed Alice as they made their way to the nursery. "You can tell by the quality of the blanket and his clothes." She frowned musingly, as she added, "And by his delicate features. He must be gentry. No common folk would have such a good-looking baby, and looking so healthy and well-fed – his cheeks are plump and rosy!"

"Yes, he's a little prince, isn't he?" cooed Alice enchanted, as the baby peered at her with almond-shaped, bright green eyes while his tiny chubby hand grasped her finger, a giggle gurgling from his pouty lips. "Harry... It means home ruler – king, did you know, Kathy?" She smiled down at the baby. "Your parents named you well, didn't they?"

"What do you think happened to him, with that cut he has on his forehead?"

Alice shot Kathy a glance, and then smiled as she gazed back at the baby in her arms. "Some sort of accident, I suppose. It looks fresh, but I'll clean it in a jiffy and it will heal and fade in no time."

The moment they stepped into the nursery, Alice made a straight line towards the only cradle in the tiny room, ignoring Kathy's appalled gasp behind her.

"Surely you don't mean to keep them together-"

Alice halted when she reached the cradle and shot her friend a stern glance. "And why not, Kathy Shear?"

Kathy puffed like an affronted pigeon, briefly glancing at the silent baby in the cradle before she peeled her gaze away, a shiver running down her spine. "You know why not, Alice Jones. That baby gives me the creeps – never crying, always so still and fixedly looking with those dark eyes of his. He's not normal – there's something strange about him, something bad."

"Upon my word, saying such things about a mere baby, Kathy!"

Kathy took a step forward, her jaw setting with curt stubbornness as she looked at her friend with a grave expression on her young face. "I told you about his mother, didn't I? I was there when she gave birth to him – and she was so strange, with eyes looking in different directions, so ugly and dressed so weirdly-"

"Yes, you did," interrupted Alice, lifting her chin up. "It was the first thing you gossiped about the day I came to work here. But I don't see why you dislike baby Tom so much."

Her expression softened as she rocked the baby she had in her arms and gazed at the other in the cradle, being instantly pierced by unfathomable dark blue eyes that stared at her as if they could look into her very soul. She repressed a shudder, not wanting to give Kathy more reasons to say
such cruel things about an innocent baby.

All the caregivers in the orphanage seemed to dislike little baby Tom and at first she hadn't understood why – such a well behaved baby who never cried and made no fuss. But she did admit to herself that Tom didn't act like any normal baby she had ever known. Nevertheless, he was just a baby, deserving love, tenderness and affection like all the other children in the orphanage. She wasn't going to discriminate just because the child was spooky.

Without any hesitation, with resolved determination and a plan unraveling in her mind, she carefully placed baby Harry in the cradle, next to Tom.

She gazed at them with a soft smile on her face, as she whispered quietly, "Harry is smaller, but he can't be older than a year, just like Tom. It will do them good to be together - I doubt anyone will adopt them straight away, not with so many wealthy folk having lost their fortunes. In a few years, they'll be taken in by some well-to-do family when this Great Depression is over…"

"What are you rambling about?" interjected Kathy, soon reaching one side of the cradle to stare at her friend with a suspicious gaze. "What mischief are you plotting now, Alice?"

"They are the youngest in the orphanage, Kathy," murmured Alice softly, feeling as if her heart was painfully clenching in her chest, "and you know how cruel children can be to those younger than themselves. They should have each other as long as they are here - they should be like siblings. I don't know what I would do without my younger sister and brother. I would be so lonely. I don't want that for these two babies."

Her blue eyes sparkled as she gazed up at Kathy, and she added with steely determination, "We don't have a surname for Harry, so let them be brothers to each other. Let's give them a common past in which the abandonment from their parents will not matter as long as they know that they are together-"

"You want to say that they are brothers?" gasped out Kathy appalled. "To lie to them when they grow up and ask-"

"Of course not!" interrupted Alice, her expression turning dismayed. "If they ask we will tell them the truth - that we don't know about Harry's origins and that we only know Tom's full name. But it will matter little to them when they ask, if we bring them up to be as close as siblings. They have no one else but themselves, Kathy! And they look alike, don't they? Both uncommonly beautiful babies – gentry, as you said…"

She trailed off and blinked as she gazed at the two babies. "Oh, look at them!"

Baby Harry, who had been peering with immense curiosity at the baby at his side, suddenly gurgled happily and then snatched in his chubby hands a silky black strand of hair from Tom's head. Alice, having expected a wail or some sort of protest from Tom, could only gape as the strangely solemn baby locked his dark-eyed gaze with the green one of Harry, one of his small thin hands, with unusual dexterity in a baby, slapping on Harry's tuft of messy hair – as if dishing out as much as he got.

But when Alice was certain that Tom would yank on Harry's hair in retribution, as the baby often did to her when displeased, the baby strangely stilled, his short thin fingers having brushed against the open cut on Harry's forehead.

Alice didn't dare intervene, too perplexed with the interaction, especially when a gurgle, sounding like a puzzled question, issued from Tom's lips, the baby tilting his head to a side as he fixedly
stared at Harry. The new baby in the orphanage, for his part, merely let out a soft giggle, his green eyes fluttering close as he placidly snuggled in his blanket, as if Tom's touch felt soothingly familiar.

In a few seconds, after a mighty yawn, Harry had curled up against Tom, fast asleep, while little Tom remained unblinkingly gazing at the slumbering baby, his expression one as if he didn't quite know what to make of the creature that had invaded his cradle and as if he was gravely pondering about his uninvited guest who had no qualms in drooling and draping himself all over him.

Alice chuckled happily, her eyes gleaming as she gazed up at Kathy. "If that's not a sign, what is? That's the first time Tom has done something like this - he cannot stand the presence of other children around him."

"Signs, indeed," scoffed Kathy, rolling her eyes, not looking at all impressed. "Well, as you like, but it will be your task to convince Mrs. Sharpe."

"I don't think it will be hard. She won't care what surname we give Harry, one way or the other," said Alice cheerfully, her voice lowering to a soft whisper as he gazed down at the babies again. "Tom and Harry Riddle."

The tickling sensation prickled over her skin, for a second time in that night, and Alice simply knew that she had done a good thing. As she went around the cradle, to tug on Kathy's apron and leave the nursery for the babies to peacefully sleep in quietness, she caught sight of something from the corner of her eyes that made her pause.

But in the next second, she inwardly chided herself in her mind, 'You will not be prone to flights of the imagination like your mother, Alice Jones."

Indeed, it was clearly her imagination doing tricks on her when she had thought that she had seen the lion cub, depicted on the chest of Harry's one-piece, letting out a silent roar. And such a beautiful one-piece it was. Pity. As soft to the touch and as of good quality as they were, Harry's blanket and one-piece would have to go and be replaced by frayed grey clothes like other babies before him in the orphanage had worn. Mrs. Sharpe would certainly be selling the rich clothes at the first chance she had.

"Now, Kathy Shear," said Alice quietly as they left the nursery together, "I believe you mentioned this morning that you had something very important to tell me."

Kathy shot her a large smile, with airs of good-natured smugness. "I won't be Miss Shear for long. I'll be Mrs. Cole to you, soon."

"You agreed to marry Mr. Cole?" Alice gawked at her. "But he's so old! He's forty and you're just two years older than myself – you're just nineteen, Kathy."

And as the two friends discussed the advantages and disadvantages of marrying before turning into old maids, and most importantly, marrying someone like Mr. Cole, the owner of a shop and thus able to provide to his bride the certainty of knowing where her next meal would be coming from – an unusual luxury in such times of financial turmoil- two one-year-old babies were left behind, their lives already irrevocably changed further by a soft-hearted caregiver who believed that imaginary bonds of brotherhood were better than none at all.

Alice would never know what her actions had provoked and the profound consequences of it. And in years to come, when Tom and Harry Riddle stepped into the Wizarding World, many would have much to say about the ties that bounded the 'brothers' together, one Transfiguration professor
in particular – the very same wizard who would be awaiting in the future, remembering and knowing how the timeline had changed and the Wizarding World with it. That which should never have occurred, happening. But he would be there, to make it right again, for the greater good of wizarding kind. However, so would the Malfoys, raising their second son.
Part I: Chapter 2

It was a marvelous summer day, with the sun shining high up in clear skies and a pleasant London breeze bringing some comfort against the heat. The sounds of children enjoying their playtime in the backyard rose high and muffled the sounds from the street beyond and the passing motorcars.

The orphanage's backyard was nothing to boast about, with dried yellow grass and patches of muddy soil here and there, but at least it offered the children an open space in which to play under the sunlight and get some fresh air.
Alice always enjoyed her task of watching over them as they played the games she had taught them.

Some girls were jumping a rope, a few boys were casting stones to see who could throw them further, some others were jumping on one foot from one square to the other, drawn with a stick on the ground.

And four-year-old, little Harry Riddle, as always a bundle of energy, was playing 'knights' with two other boys, with a stick in hand and a short 'cape' tied at his back, made from a torn and tattered pillowcase.

Observing them with a soft smile on her face, Alice kept stitching a ripped hole in a pair of knee-length, small, second-hand pants.

It was always Harry's pants she found herself mending day after day, she thought with bemusement. The cheerful, rambunctious boy never seemed able to go through a day without coming back with torn clothes, dirty smudges on his cheeks, and a beaming grin on his face.

The little darling of the orphanage, having charmed everyone with his easy-going disposition, impish grins and warm, joyful smiles, always seemed to use all his considerable boyish energy to embark himself in some imagined adventure or other, easily pulling others into following his lead.

"He's up to it again," said Kathy with a frown on her face, who was by Alice's side with her own pair of children's clothes to mend.

Alice shot her a glance and inwardly winced. The years hadn't been kind to her friend; at twenty-two years of age, Kathy looked as if she was in her forties. She had deep dark circles under her eyes and already had creases along her forehead and the edges of her mouth. Kathy's marriage to Mr. Cole wasn't a happy one.

Expecting to be the wife of a relatively well-to-do older man who owned his own shop, Kathy had soon discovered that her husband was a greedy selfish man who hoarded any penny earned. She had hoped to be able to leave her job at the orphanage and have a good living.

Instead, Kathy's husband hadn't allowed her to quit her job and also made her work at the shop during the weekends, added to all the cleaning and cooking she had to do at their home and taking care of two teenagers from Mr. Cole's previous marriage, who quite despised their stepmother and made her life hell.

Alice pitied her but knew that her friend was stuck with her lot in life. Only wealthy folk divorced, and even then it was scandalous.

"I wonder what he does there," continued Kathy in a suspicious tone of voice.

Alice sighed, already knowing whom her friend was referring to, and gazed at the row of scraggly bushes at the far end of the backyard. There, a boy was crouching near one of the bushes, taking care of not soiling his second-hand clothes and with his back turned towards them and the playing children.

At four years of age, Tom Riddle had grown to be a very handsome little boy, yet quiet and solemn, who never interacted with other children except Harry. And unlike his brother, Tom didn't participate in any games or 'adventures', but spent all his time reading some book or other. And when they were at the backyard, he always remained near the bushes, doing who knew what.

Alice had once approached him, frowning when she had believed to have heard some hissing
sounds. But as soon as she had reached Tom, the boy had frozen and then shot her a dark look, saying nothing and remaining crouched, his back straight and stiff.

"What are you doing?" had asked Alice in curiosity, her eyes darting towards the bushes, trying to see what could possibly be entertaining the boy.

"It's none of your business," Tom had said, his tone calm and his expression closed off.

His manner of speaking hadn't surprised her. Tom spoke like an adult, clearly enunciating his words and already having an extensive vocabulary from all the time he spent reading. And he always acted like an adult as well, which left many dumbstruck given that he still looked like a little boy. His conduct sometimes worried Alice, since such seriousness and cold behavior had no place in a boy so young. But she had become used to it.

Alice had hesitated then, but in the end she had left him to his own devices. Whatever he did, Tom hadn't even shared the secret with his brother. She had seen Harry trying to cajole his brother to join them in their playing, and Tom had always sent him away with curt and dismissive words.

"It's going to be Billy Stubb's birthday soon," said Alice, peeling her gaze away from Tom and changing subjects as she made another stitch on the pants she was mending. "I'm thinking about getting him a rabbit. Billy seems to like animals. Remember last time when we took them out, how he gazed at the display in the pet store-"

Kathy interrupted her with a disapproving click of her tongue. "You're always getting the children presents. You should better save your wages for yourself."

"I don't spend everything I earn on them, Kathy," said Alice coolly, her tone then mellowing as she sighed. "And they have so little that it makes me happy to see them enjoy the few things I can buy for them once in a while."

"Once in a while?" snorted Kathy, shooting her a pointed glance. "Maybe for the other children, but you certainly spoil your favorites-"

"I don't have favorites," interjected Alice feeling offended, halting her needlework to face her friend. "I love all children alike and treat them equally."

Kathy scoffed loudly. "You don't fool anyone. You treat the Riddle brothers as if they were your own. Buying sweets for Harry and always getting books for Tom. Gods knows why, the boy never thanks you for them."

Alice's cheeks reddened and she cleared her throat before she murmured softly, "Well, yes, but they're especial. Harry is such a sweet little boy and Tom is so smart." Her blue eyes gleamed with pride, as she added, "I think he's a prodigy, Kathy, the way his mind instantly absorbs and understands everything I teach the children. Just the other day he asked if he could have more books on Math and Science! Can you believe it? And only four years old-"

"Yes, yes," said Kathy drolly with a roll of her eyes, "he's exceptional, you always say that. But he's a weird one." She frowned darkly as she glanced at the far end of the backyard. "There's just something not right with him. Strange accidents happen when he's around."

"Tom will do well in life with a mind like his, mark my words," stated Alice joyfully, utterly ignoring her friend's comment, as she usually did when Kathy insisted that there was anything wrong with Tom. "And little Harry too, with the way he unwittingly charms everyone without even trying. With his sweet nature and adorable looks, people just seem to flock to him-"
"We need a princess!" a piping voice suddenly shouted with eagerness.

Both Alice and Kathy turned their faces to gaze at the little boy who was wielding a stick and had a pillowcase tied around his neck like a cape. The boy's delicately handsome round face was smudged with dirt, his messy black hair was sticking in all directions and his green eyes were wide with excitement. Even Kathy couldn't suppress a fond smile as they watched Harry. Though Alice's sharp eyes didn't miss the new tears and holes in Harry's knee-length pants, and she inwardly moaned - she had mended those pants just yesterday!

"Me, me!" instantly cried out Amy Benson, leaving behind the other two girls with whom she had been jumping a rope.

Alice chuckled at that. Amy, a year older than Harry, always orbited around the boy. Shyly blushing but always wanting to be the object of his attention.

Little Harry ran towards her in his dirty tattered pants, showing knobby knees and thin short legs which made him look like a springing young colt. While Tom was already one of the tallest boys in the orphanage, his brother was the shortest, which made Harry look even more adorable, in Alice's opinion.

Amy flushed when Harry beamed a smiled at her and eagerly grabbed her hand to pull her towards his group of playmates.

"What are we playing?" asked Amy as she peered at Harry coyly.

"Dragons, knights, princes and princesses," announced Harry cheerfully, "like in the stories Alice reads to us."

Then he turned to Billy Stubbs and Eric Whalley, the two boys who always went along with Harry's adventures. His small button nose scrunched in pensiveness as he added, "Um, I think we need something to make her look like a princess." He grinned impishly and waved his stick in the air, "We have swords and capes. Amy should have a…er…” He bit him bottom lip and then his eyes sparkled as he chimed, "A veil!"

"A veil?" said Billy dubiously in his high-pitched voice. "Princesses don't have veils. They have crowns or something like that, no?"

Harry looked crestfallen for a moment, before he cheered up in the next second and shrugged his small bony shoulders. "We only have pillowcases. We'll use that."

He widely grinned as he untied the one around his neck and stood on the tips of his toes to reach Amy's head, haphazardly placing the pillowcase on top of her mass of blonde curls. If possible, the girl's cheeks reddened even further but she remained silent as she shot Harry a small shy smile.

"She doesn't look like a princess," piped in Eric Whelley, eyeing Amy with an uncertain frown on his small face.

"I do so!" snapped Amy furiously, grabbing the ends of the pillowcase and tying them in a tight knot under her chin, shooting a glare at the other two boys, defying them to contradict Harry and say that it didn't look like a veil or that princesses didn't use one. She wasn't sure about either but she didn't care.

"Looks good enough," said Harry excitedly as he turned to his two playmates. "Who wants to be the dragon?"
Puffing his small chest out, Eric Whelley eagerly raised a hand in the air and let out what was intended to be a mighty roar. It came out as a frail, high-pitched wail of some kind, but Harry clapped his small hands with approval and flashed a satisfied grin.

"And you'll be my prince?" suddenly whispered Amy, her soft brown eyes fixed on him.

The tips of Harry's ears turned pink and he shuffled his feet on the muddy ground. But then he nodded and timidly smiled. "Sure."

Abruptly, a frown crinkled on Harry's forehead, and he rubbed it with his small hand, shooting a brief, confused glance at his brother who stood in the distance.

It hadn't escape Alice notice how, meanwhile, Tom had stood up and taken a few steps away from the row of bushes, to stare at the group of children with a dark expression on his handsome face as he narrowed his eyes at his brother's playmates.

It didn't surprise her. Whenever Harry played with Billy, Eric and Amy, or throughout the day spent more time with them than with Tom, the boy would have looks like those – of annoyance, irritation, or sometimes, very briefly, showing anger.

The boy was quite possessive of his brother and only looked content when Harry trailed after him and engaged him in some sort of conversation or other, or even when Harry simply sat and amused himself with other things while Tom read in silence. It was plain for all caregivers to see that Harry worshiped his brother and also preferred to be in Tom's company rather than any other's, basking in his brother's attention which always made him toothily grin with happiness.

But such an energetic and high-spirited little boy like Harry couldn't help getting bored with his brother's serious quietness and adult-like past-times. So more often than not, he ended up engaging the other children of the orphanage in some made-up game.

As she watched Harry rub his forehead, Alice wondered about it as she often did. The scar which she had been so certain would heal and fade in time, was still there on the boy's forehead, as fresh-looking as it ever was, as if the cut had been sustained but a few minutes ago. And she had often seen Harry rubbing it, and it usually happened when there were dark looks on Tom's face.

It perplexed her, and it certainly confused Harry too. She had once asked him about it but the boy hadn't been able to explain it to her. He had only said that he sometimes felt pain or headaches but didn't know why.

Alice pulled out of her musings when she suddenly felt that peculiar tingle on her skin and she snapped her gaze back to the children, abruptly feeling apprehensive, especially when she saw that Dennis Bishop had stop casting stones and was approaching the smaller children with stomping strides.

The twelve-year-old boy was the oldest in the orphanage and certainly the tallest and strongest. It didn't bode well when Dennis decided to start bullying the younger children as he often did. He had a mean streak which Alice hadn't been able to subdue, no matter what she tried.

"I'll be the knight, then?" muttered Billy Stubbs, not looking at all happy about it or sure of what his role would entail.

"Yeah, and we will rescue Amy from Eric!" declared Harry with fierce determination in his piping voice, already playing the part of the valorous prince and brandishing his stick like a mighty sword.
"What stupid game are you idiots playing now?" demanded Dennis, brusquely shoving Eric and Billy to a side as he stomped to tower over Harry, bumping his chest against Harry's head and forcing the small boy to stumble a few steps back.

"We're not idiots," snapped little Harry, glowering up at the tall, broad boy whom he hated more than anything in the whole world. "And our games aren't stupid. They're fun."

As they argued, Alice set her needlework to a side and started to stand up. She was instantly stopped by Kathy, who grabbed her by the arm as she said sternly, "Let them resolve it between themselves. You do Harry no good when you coddle him."

"But Dennis is thrice his age..." she murmured uncertainly, wariness coiling in her stomach.

"He has to learn how to deal with bullies," interjected Kathy firmly, tugging Alice's arm once more to make her resume her seat.

With battling feelings, Alice weakly nodded but focused her attention back on the boys, alert in case things got serious and she needed to intervene. Her skin continued to tingle and that wasn't a good sign.

"They're retarded. Only little children play games like that," sneered Dennis shooting the four children a contemptuous glance full of malice and disgust. "You're all babies and you--" he pointed a meaty finger at Harry, aggressively poking the smaller boy on the forehead and making him wince --"you're the babiest of all."

"That's not a word!" snapped Harry accusingly. He was quite certain that it wasn't. Tom always got angry and reprimanded him when he used words that didn't exist, so he was almost sure he was right. And using words that didn't exist was a bad thing according to his brother.

"It is if I say so, runt," spat Dennis, before his face contorted with gleeful malice as he added in a low, nasty voice, "You're a crybaby. I've heard you. At night, in your room, you cry and sob and wail."

Little Harry paled, his green eyes widening with hurt and no small amount of humiliation. Only Tom who shared his room knew about that, he had thought. And he didn't like thinking about why he cried; it still confused him, the things he saw when he was asleep.

"You have bad dreams and you scream and you cry like a little girl. You're a stupid little crybaby!"

"I'm not!" finally roared Harry angrily, in his humiliation feeling such sudden fury that he launched himself at the larger boy before he could even think about what he was doing.

A surprised yell tore from Dennis' throat as the two of them tumbled to the muddy ground, as Harry wildly failed his small arms and legs at him as he furiously shouted repeatedly, "Take it back, take it back!"

With a snarl, Dennis batted away the flailing limbs and swatted a meaty fist against the smaller boy's face, making Harry cry out in pain as he rolled on the ground.

The other boys and girls merely stood around with wide eyes and gaping mouths, too afraid to do anything.

"Dennis -- Harry!" shouted Alice in alarm, already speeding towards the boys. "Stop at once!"

Neither paid her any attention and she continued screaming at them to stop as she ran towards them
as fast as she could, while she saw that Tom stood motionless yet with an expression of building fury and hatred, his narrowed gaze fixed on Dennis.

The twelve-year-old boy had now gotten hold of Harry with an arm tightly wrapped around the smaller boy’s throat, making Harry haggardly gasp for breath, his expression one of panic. In the next second, with his forehead scrunched, his green eyes flashed angrily as he opened his mouth and chomped down on the meaty arm that was choking him.

Dennis roared in pain and tried to pry his arm away but little Harry chomped harder, sinking his small teeth in the flesh, and mulishly didn't let go.

Just when Alice reached them and when Dennis was aiming a punch to knock out Harry which would certainly injure him quite severely, the twelve year old suddenly screamed and doubled over, contorting on the ground and attempting to wrap his arms around himself as if to protect his own body from some unknown force.

It was such a scream that it made the small hairs of the nape of her neck stand up. Some of the rest of the children were now crying with fear and Harry had stopped biting the boy. To her perplexity, the small boy laid whimpering, clutching his scarred forehead.

Alice stood there, dumbstruck, as Dennis kept shrieking for unknown reasons while Harry's whimpers mellowed but still continued. And then she saw Tom, who hadn't moved an inch, his penetrating gaze still focused on Dennis. Yet now, the boy's expression was one of gleeful enjoyment and satisfaction.

"He's the Devil's child," echoed Father Patrick's voice in Alice's mind, suddenly making her feel dizzy.

It had happened a year ago. Back then, she took all the children at least once a month to the small church two blocks away from the orphanage. She wasn't a particularly devoted religious person but she did believe that it would do the children some good to attend mass once in a while to listen to Father Patrick's readings and lectures about morality.

Though, most of the children didn't pay much attention. Only little Amy seemed to enjoy it. Harry always ended up falling asleep with his head on Alice's lap, snoring, albeit gratefully it was softly. And the small boy always looked so beautiful and angelic in his sleep that she never had the heart to wake him up.

On the other hand, Tom always wore a bored and disinterested expression on his face and ended up taking a book with him, to read it while Father Patrick animatedly ranted about Good and Evil.

Alice had felt a bit abashed since Tom made no efforts to conceal that he read a book and utterly ignored what was being said. When Alice had once seen Father Patrick shoot the boy an irked look from the pulpit, she had politely asked Tom to stop taking a book to mass.

"Then don't force me to attend. It's a waste of my time," had replied Tom curtly, leveling at her a cold glance. "I don't believe in God."

Alice had been struck speechless. For a three-year-old to say something like that, as if he had gravely pondered about the matter, seriously analyzed it from all angles, and had come to his own unwavering conclusions.

Nevertheless, Father Patrick was a good and patient man, and she had asked him to have a word with the boy. After mass, the warm-hearted man had herded Tom into his office and Alice had
waited outside.

A mere fifteen minutes had gone by when the door was yanked open and Tom strode out, looking utterly composed and calm while Father Patrick stood trembling, his face pale and his expression horrified and fearful.

"He's the Devil's child," the man had shakily muttered to her as he thickly swallowed. Then he had pulled himself to his full height, pierced her with his eyes, and had added in a fierce and firm tone of voice, "Don't bring him to my Church again."

And with that, he had slammed the door shut on her face while Tom shot her a satisfied little smirk, which seemed to mock her for her efforts.

She never could pry from Tom or Father Patrick what had happened between them. But soon, the whole neighborhood was gossiping about how the Father had banned the boy from Church and they started giving the boy dirty looks whenever Alice took the children out.

That hadn't sat well with her. It meant that Father Patrick had said something about it. And her opinion of him had radically changed. No matter the reason, a man who could cause such discrimination against a child, however unintended, was no longer in her good graces. Orphaned children, especially, had to be protected from such prejudices.

She had never taken the children back to Father Patrick's Church but to another which, alas, was a bit farther away from the orphanage. And certainly, she hadn't insisted anymore about Tom coming with them. And since Tom didn't go, Harry had mutinously refused to attend as well. Where his brother led, little Harry usually stubbornly followed. It had made her sigh but she had yielded to the boy's wishes.

Alice believed in God or some sort of higher power, yes, but she wasn't quite sure that there was a Heaven and Hell. And no matter what Father Patrick said, she was sure that there were no such things as Devil's children. Children were born inherently good and innocent in her opinion, and no matter how Tom behaved, she would never believe otherwise – even now, when she was confronted with Tom's gleeful expression as Dennis laid on the ground.

Finally, Alice acted when she saw that Kathy was already tending to Dennis, helping the boy up and herding him towards the house. The boy still looked in pain and he walked awkwardly, but seemed too out of it to make any protests.

Kathy didn't leave before shooting Tom a glance, and then a pointed one at Alice, as if saying 'See what I mean?'.

But no matter the inexplicable strangeness of what had happened, her friend clearly wasn't seeing what Alice did as she gazed at the Riddle brothers.

Tom had carefully picked up Harry from the ground and was now embracing him, whispering hushed words into his smaller brother's ear as Harry whimpered against his chest. Tom's long fingers were carding the boy's mop of wild hair and it seemed to have a soothing effect on his brother, who soon quieted.

There was indeed inherent goodness in Tom if he cared so much for his brother, and that was enough for Alice.

At last, she cleared her throat, glancing at the other children who looked fearful and perturbed, and she said loudly with all the cheerfulness she could muster, "Who wants me to read to them a
"I do," said Amy softly, her brown eyes wavering from her, to the Riddle brothers, and back. Then she seemed to become even more confident and reached Alice, clutching Alice's apron with a small hand.

Soon, all the other children surrounded her, what had happened already forgotten in their eagerness for tales of doting parents who loved their princess daughter, and kingdoms filled with wealth where there was no poverty or hunger and the people were kind, and peasant boys who became princes and worlds filled with beauty and joy and laughter - everything they didn't have and yearned for.

As Alice started herding them back to the house, she glanced at the brothers and invited hesitantly, "Harry?"

Emerald eyes peered at her from above Tom's arms, and brightened. In the next second, little Harry was already squirming against his brother's hold, attempting to break free.

Tom shot Alice an annoyed, narrowed-eyed glance, but then nodded curtly, as if deciding to allow her to take his brother away from him - this time.

And with eyes which dried quickly and a skip to his steps, Harry joined the others, already piping his preferences, "I want the one of the house made of chocolate and candies and the bad witch that wants to eat the boy and girl."

Alice warmly smiled at him, though she now noticed the bruise around the child's left eye caused by Dennis' first punch. She would have to see if they had anything left to help with a blackened eye. The orphanage's supplies were scarce.

She chuckled and petted his wild mop of hair. "Then you shall have it."

"No! The one of the sleeping princess and the handsome prince and the kiss!" one of the girls voiced dreamily.

And amidst more requests for different tales, they left Tom behind. Alice knew better than to invite him to join them. While Harry was the child who most avidly listened to all her fairytales and bedtime stories, his green eyes sparkling as he envisioned himself as some prince with a life full of adventures with monsters to be defeated and princesses to be saved, Tom had disdained her storytelling from the start. And whenever she gathered the children for such purposes, he promptly vanished to his room to read some textbook or other.

A flickering flame from a short crooked candle bathed Tom's face as he flipped a page of his book. It was past midnight and absolute silence reigned in the orphanage; everywhere except in his small room, much to his annoyance.

A whimper reached his ears accompanied by the rustle of blankets, and Tom had to make a great effort to control his irritation. He focused back on the text, his handsome face with an expression of forced concentration and his dark blue gaze hungrily roving over the information.

Another sound of distress was heard and Tom's lips thinned. Nevertheless, he shot a glance at the small cot across from his. Harry was fast asleep but his eyes were moving wildly under their closed lids and his small body moved restlessly under the blankets.

Tom clicked his tongue but turned away and continued reading. A few minutes had passed by,
when a terrified scream resounded in the room, followed by a gasped intake of air, more rustling of blankets and then breathing that was fast and panted, accompanied by a muffled sob.

Closing his eyes with supreme annoyance for a brief moment, he snapped them open to glance at his brother once more. Now, Harry was awake and had tightly wrapped the blankets around him in a sort of cocoon-like bundle, with his face burrowed into the tattered pillow, which muffled the sobbed sounds that came from the small boy.

As usually happened, in the next seconds, a tuft of messy black hair stuck out from the blankets and pair of wide, pleading green eyes peered from under them, looking straight at him.

Tom let out a suffering sigh, held his book up with one hand and lifted his blanket to a side with the other, invitingly.

In a flash, little Harry scrambled out of his cot and jumped into Tom's, fidgeting until he was comfortably settled against his brother's chest. Tom wrapped the blanket around them and gazed down at the smaller boy.

"The same nightmare? The green light?"

Harry sniffled and nodded before he nuzzled his face into the crook of Tom's neck, as he mumbled with a hiccup, "And the – the red eyes. They scare me."

Tom tsked. His brother had had the same nightmare for as long as he remembered, but it was certain that Harry's overactive imagination didn't need any more encouragement from that damnable Alice and her fairytales.

"Monsters don't exist," he assured his brother sternly.

He felt Harry shrugging his small shoulders before the boy peered up at him. "They do in my dreams."

Then he winced and brought up a small hand to rub his forehead. Tom's gaze followed the motion and he frowned as he stared at the reddened scar on his brother's forehead.

"Does it still hurt every time you have the nightmare?" he murmured quietly.

Harry nodded and then seemed to think about it carefully before he answered in his piping voice, "It tingles. Like pricks of small needles." He then peered up at him uncertainly and said in a small voice, "You could do that - what you always do. It helps."

Tom shot him a little smirk and threaded his fingers through his brother's mop of hair before reaching the scar, tracing it with a feather-like touch. He frowned a little bit when he felt a sort of pleasant warmth suffusing his fingertips and trailing up his hand and arm, but he was used to it by now, so he simply allowed himself to enjoy it.

When Harry sighed placidly, Tom's touch evidently soothing away any lingering pain, he stopped the caress as his gaze focused on Harry's left eye.

"No – don't stop," complained Harry with a disgruntled moan.

"Hush, let me see something," said Tom shortly as he lifted his brother's chin up with a finger so that the candle's flame could fully illuminate the boy's face. He frowned down at Harry as he gently traced the boy's left eye with a fingertip. "It's not swollen anymore and the bruise has faded. What did you do?"
Harry blinked up at him. "Nothing. Alice said she didn't have more creams for bruises."

Tom's frown deepened but Harry didn't bother wondering what seemed to surprise his brother and made him look so pensive and bewildered.

Instead, he grabbed his brother's fingers with determination, pulling them from around his eye and onto his scar, as he said a little miffed, "Do it again. And don't stop this time."

Tom resumed the caress but he nevertheless scoffed, "Demanding little brat, you've become so spoiled."

"I'm not spoiled," grumbled Harry against his brother's chest. Then, with a snap of his head, he looked up and bit out fiercely, "And I'm not little!"

Shooting him a mocking smirk, Tom intoned superiorly, "You are. You're my little brother."

"I'm your twin!" snapped Harry taking deep offense. "We have the same age."

"But I'm a full head taller than you. So you are my little brother," declared Tom solemnly. "Age makes no difference."

"Not true," piped Harry sourly, and with a huff, he burrowed his face against his brother's chest once more. He hated being the smallest and shortest boy in the orphanage and he hated his know-it-all brother who was taller than him and never let him forget it.

"One day I'll be taller than you," he started muttering darkly, "I'll be taller than... than a tree! And you'll be sorry, because you'll be all jealous of me and I'll laugh and rub it in and I won't play with you anymore."

"Sure, as if that will ever happen," snorted Tom, then rolling his eyes at the idiocy of it. "Taller than a tree..."

Harry glared up at him and said with utter conviction, "Just you wait and see."

Tom scoffed dismissively and decided to ignore his stupid little brat of a brother. He opened his book once more and held it against the right side of his chest since Harry's mop of hair fully occupied the other.

"Not reading again," groaned Harry despondently. "You're always reading and it's boring." His expression darkened and he added accusingly, "And you promised you would keep touching my scar."

"I promised nothing of the sort," hissed out Tom with angered annoyance, his gaze not leaving the page of the book. "Now shut up, I can't concentrate if you keep babbling. Go to sleep."

"I can't sleep with the candlelight," pointedly remarked Harry with a huff. "So there."

"Too bad for you," drawled Tom utterly unconcerned, as he flipped another page.

Little Harry scowled at his brother before he edged closer to the book, peering at it from a side. "What are you reading?"

Tom gathered what little patience he had left and snapped acidly, "Can't you read for yourself, you moron? Stop pestering me with imbecilic questions."

"I'm not a moron," gritted out Harry, his forehead then scrunching up, "and what's imbe – imbecilic-"
"It's 'imbecilic'," bit out Tom shortly without looking at him as he kept reading. "And it's what you are. It means stupid."

Harry glowered at him but kept quiet as he squinted at the bookpage, now curious about what his brother was reading so avidly.

At the unexpected glorious silence, Tom shot him a glance and then frowned when he saw his brother pathetically squinting with a frustrated and confused expression on his face.

One of his eyebrows rose as he hummed calmly, "It seems you need eyeglasses."

Shooting him a wide-eyed glance, Harry scrunched up his nose. "I do?"

"Seems so," replied Tom dismissively. "I'll tell Alice. She'll surely buy ones for you next time we go out."

"I don't want Alice to buy me eyeglasses," whispered Harry in a soft voice, feeling bad and sad as he awkwardly shifted on their shared cot. "She's poor, like us-"

"If the woman is stupid enough to enjoy buying us stuff, then let her," said Tom crisply, glowering at his pestering brother, before his dark expression softened a bit - somewhat. "And no one is as poor as us, Harry. She earns a wage."

"But she has a younger brother and sister to take care of," mumbled Harry, playing with the hem of Tom's frayed pajama top.

"Fine, then remain blind for all I care!" snarled Tom, promptly turning to a side to face the wall as he stuck his book in front of his face.

There was a long silence as he heard his little brother shifting behind him on the cot. Then more rustling and more movement until Harry peeked his small face around Tom's shoulder to peer at him.

"If I have eyeglasses, I'll be called 'four-eyes'," he said with a little whine. "And Dennis will make fun of me-"

"Leave Dennis to me," Tom said briskly, but he couldn't refrain from casting a wholly self-satisfied and smug smirk at his brother.

Harry clammed his mouth shut and bit his pouty bottom lip, shooting Tom a glance and then looking away, and then repeating the action as he started scratching Tom's clothed shoulder with a short, bitten fingernail, nervously drawing little circles.

"What now?" bit out Tom impatiently as he observed his brother. "Just spit it out."

Harry glanced around as if expecting that some caregiver could be lurking in the shadows unbeknownst to them, and then took a deep breath before he pinned his brother with wide green eyes as he whispered, "What did you do today?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Tom shortly, turning his face back towards his book.

"Yes you do," said Harry stubbornly, still keeping his piping voice low and hushed as he insistently poked a finger into Tom's ribs. "What did you do to Dennis?"

After a moment of hesitation, Tom turned around to lie on his back once more, and he arched an
eyebrow at his brother as he said nonchalantly, "What makes you think I did anything?"

Briefly nibbling on his bottom lip, Harry curled up against Tom and gazed up at him as he murmured quietly, "Because my scar hurt when you did that. You know that - you soothed it later."

"So what?" said Tom coolly. "I don't see the connection-"

"My scar always hurts when you're mad," interrupted Harry a little impatiently, shooting him a scowl.

Letting out a mocking snort, Tom drawled unfazed, "Scars don't do that. It's all in your imagination-"

"No, it's not!" snapped Harry, glaring daggers at him. "You know it's not. We don't know why, but it happens. And my scar hurts even more when you're mad and do something. Like today."

Tom shot him a cold look before his face shuttered down with a closed off expression as he inquired calmly, "When I do 'something'? How would you know if I do or not do anything. Today was the only day in which I-"

"Liar," breathed out Harry, his small short fingers jerkily tugging on the collar of Tom's pajama top as he pulled himself closer to his brother, his eyes widening as he continued in a hushed and secretive tone of voice. "You also did something a couple of months ago. When I was angry at you because you said I was retarded because I didn't understand Alice's math lesson and you said you didn't want a brother as stupid as me."

Tom's eyes narrowed before he scoffed. "I don't recall-"

"And you kept saying bad things about me and you made me cry," sniffed Harry, his bottom lip trembling before it stiffened as he glowered at him accusingly. "You made me so angry that I didn't speak to you for a whole day. And you got angry too because I didn't pay attention to you and played with Eric."

He brought his face closer to his brother's, almost nose-to-nose, their gazes sinking into each other's, as he continued breathlessly, "And when we were playing by the staircase, Eric tripped. There was nothing he could have tripped over. But he tripped. And you were there hiding in a corner. I saw you. And you smiled when Eric was about to fall down the staircase and my scar was hurting a lot then."

Harry's eyes grew large as he added in a low, uneasy whisper, "If I hadn't grabbed him he would have fallen. He would have died."

"People don't die from taking a tumble down a staircase," said Tom in a smooth tone of voice.

"They could," said Harry vehemently nodding his head. "Alice told us not to run down the stairs because it was dangerous and we could get hurt. So if someone falls down a staircase then they could die." His eyes grew large again, as he repeated with a sort of fearful awe, "Eric could have died."

Tom's jaw tightened as he regarded his little brother coolly, remaining silent as his expression turned blank.

Scowling, Harry eyed him closely as he said firmly, "You did that, I know it. And you did something to Dennis today." He bore his gaze into his brother's and breathed out, "What did you do?"
After a long pause of silence, which had Harry clinging on tenterhooks, Tom's face became a stoic mask as he said nonchalantly, "I made him hurt. He was hurting you, so I hurt him."

Then, Tom intensely pierced Harry with his eyes, making his face turn expressionless as he waited for his brother's reaction. A cry of dismay, a fearful gasp, a shudder of revulsion... He didn't know what to expect, but however his brother reacted, he wouldn't allow it to hurt or affect him. But still, he couldn't help how his heart thundered in his small chest and how his breath stuck in his throat.

Harry's eyebrows furrowed and he cocked his head to a side. "But how?"

Tom blinked at him. An amazed and joyous smile started to grow on his face before he caught himself in time, coughed, and then curved his lips into a superior smirk. "Because I wanted it so."

Harry's little forehead scrunched even further, the boy still looking baffled, confused, and clueless. But more importantly, curious – and Tom should have known. He shouldn't have been afraid of Harry's reaction. They were brothers! So of course Harry would understand and of course he wouldn't think Tom had done a bad thing. His little brother would see it as something astounding and magnificent, just as it truly was.

Tom perked up and he sat up straight on the cot, easily pulling his brother to his lap -since Harry hardly weighted anything- so that they were looking at each other with their faces inches apart. He grabbed his little brother's hands and rambled excitedly, "I can make things like that happen if I want to. I think really hard about it, I concentrate and I imagine what I want to happen and I repeat it in my head and then – it happens!" His dark blue eyes gleamed as he added gleefully, "And I've been practicing a lot when I'm alone in our room. If I concentrate really, really hard I can move things!"

Harry's almond-shaped, emerald eyes impossibly widened in awe and Tom felt as if he was soaring on high clouds. But in the next instant, he checked himself in time and pulled a composed expression on his face; he nevertheless smirked proudly.

"Show me!" piped Harry eagerly, his eyes still wide and fascinated, gazing at him as if there was no one cooler or greater in the whole wide world. "Move something, Tom!"

Tom nodded and turned his face to glance around the room. His eyes settled on Harry's pillow on the cot across from them and he intensely stared at it, his eyes narrowing in concentration.

Out of the blue, before Harry knew what happened, a pillow came volleying towards him, slammed on his face and knocked him over.

With his short legs flailing over his head, he yelped as he teetered over the edge of the cot and landed on the hard floor with a cry, more of surprise than pain.

A bout of amused, delighted laughter rang in the room, and Harry groaned as he crouched and rubbed his sore elbows and knees. Gazing down at him from the cot, Tom shot him a smug and taunting smirk. But Harry merely threw at him a mild scowl before all annoyance faded as he excitedly jumped to his feet.

"You're an idiot," he declared, before he flashed his brother with a wide beaming smile and laughed, and chuckled, and giggled happily, as he bounced up and down, rocking on his heels. "But that was awesome, Tom!"

"Of course it was," said Tom coolly, the corners of his lips quirking upwards.

"What is it called what you do?" said Harry animatedly as he sat back on the cot facing Tom,
squirming with giddiness.

"I don't know," replied Tom, his face now turning serious. "I've read that there's something called telekinesis-"

"What's that?" demanded Harry instantly, unable to contain himself from the bubbling excitement he was feeling.

"The power to move things with your mind, supposedly," said Tom scathingly, waving a hand dismissively. "But I think it's a load of rubbish. The book said that there was no evidence that it was true. And I don't think so either, because I know no one who can do what I can and I haven't heard about it either. And because I can move things but I can also hurt people and speak to-"

He abruptly closed his mouth, pressing his lips into a tight straight line, before he shifted on the cot and then placidly rested against his own pillow as if he had said nothing at all.

Harry stared at him in confusion. "Speak to who?"

Tom ignored him and merely gazed up at the stained ceiling. But Harry was having none of that, of course. With a spring to his legs, he leapt on top of Tom, making his brother gasp and wheeze painfully and then snarl at him in fury.

But as Tom's hands shot forward to brusquely shove him off, Harry plopped the entirety of his body on his brother's, as if he was a sack of potatoes. Tom was larger than him but Harry had the advantage of gravity on his side and he effectively pinned his brother down in place.

"Get off, you little twit!" hissed out Tom angrily, making Harry's scar flare faintly with pain.

Harry disregarded it and pressed his small nose against Tom's, boring his gaze into his brother's dark blue one, as he piped with extreme curiosity, "Speak to who, Tom?"

"I'm not telling," spat Tom acidly, his eyes glinting with fury, "and it has nothing to do with you, anyway."

Harry darkly scowled at him, before he sat up on Tom's midriff, stiffened his back and crossed his arms over his small chest, looking away as he bit out, "Fine, see if I care."

Not one to lose a good opportunity, Tom shot up as he forcefully shoved Harry away from him. Utterly caught off guard, Harry smashed against the wall, his head painfully slamming against it. A loud cry of pain escaped from his lips as he then fell forward on the cot, clutching the back of his head which throbbed and felt like it was burning and as if knives were viciously plunging into it. Feeling his eyes watering and tearing from the hurt, he shot his brother a deeply wounded look.

His eyes widening slightly at his brother's expression, Tom reached out towards him, hesitated, and dropped his hand. He made his face contort with a contemptuous sneer, as he spat, "Dennis is right, you know? You cry an awful lot. It's pathetic."

At that, Harry's tears rolled down his cheeks and he tremulously said in a small voice, "I hate you."

Tom frowned, before he scoffed unconcernedly, "No you don't."

With his bottom lip trembling, Harry scrambled on his hands and knees and then swiftly turned his back to his brother. Facing the wall, he sat crossed legged on the cot, his spine and small shoulders stiff.
Tom stared at him in silence, seeing his little brother's small frame shaking as he heard the boy's breathing heaving amidst sniffs, hiccups, and muffled sobs.

"Harry…" he said quietly, trailing off.

Abruptly, Harry snapped his head around to mightily glower at him, no matter if his tears and heavings hadn't subsided, and spat, "What?"

Eyeing him insecurely for a brief moment, Tom shot out his arms and grabbed his little brother's shoulders, briskly pulling the smaller boy towards him.

He wrapped his fingers around Harry's small chin and lifted it up, clucking his tongue as he used one of his cuffs to wipe the boy's tear tracks, while he murmured, "You're a little fool."

Harry sniffled once and remained silent as he peered up at him, while Tom kept gently cleaning his face.

At his tender age, not a boy who dwelled long on insults and offenses perceived, he rubbed his nose, let out a last hiccup, and then swatted his brother's fingers away from his face with annoyance, his mind already jumping to more important and exciting matters.

He glanced at the pillow that Tom had made fly and then stared at his brother with wide, emerald eyes shining hopefully. "Do you think I can do what you do?"

Tom sat back on his haunches and regarded him consideringly if not a bit dubiously. Then he shrugged his shoulders and picked up the pillow, hurling it back to Harry's cot as he said calmly, "Perhaps. Try it."

Harry beamed before he turned to face the other cot, his green gaze zeroing in on the pillow and his whole face scrunching up, as he thought, 'Move, move, move.'

Nothing happened and he tried again harder. 'Move, move, move, move, move!'

Still, nothing.

Little Harry gritted his teeth, highly miffed, and thought again, as fast as he could; very, very, very fast, 'Movemovemovemovemovemove!'

"I can't!" groused out Harry, throwing up his arms in the air. He glared at Tom with all the power of his frustration and snapped angrily, "It's not fair!"

Tom's lips quirked but he took care not to let out an amused chuckle. Tom had a nasty temper, but he was able to curb it if he wanted to. And it was rare the occasion in which his temper got the better of him and made him lose his cool composure. But his little brother had a quicksilver and fiery temper and a very short fuse, and the small boy could throw such temper tantrums that could make Tom's ears ring and his head throb with mighty headaches. And he rather not experience that if he could.

"It doesn't matter. I can," said Tom in a mollifying tone of voice, pulling the boy back to lie down on the cot with him. "You've got me, so you don't need anything else."

"It's not the same thing," grumbled Harry, crushed with disappointment, as he wrapped a small arm around Tom and rested his head on the crook of his brother's neck.

Abruptly, he momentarily tightened his hold on Tom, and glanced up at him, as he said with a very
serious expression on his small face, "I don't want you to kill Eric."

Tom's eyebrows shot upwards before he rearranged his expression and drawled coolly, "And Billy?"

Harry's eyes widened and he quickly shook his head.

Arching an eyebrow and suppressing a quirk of his lips, Tom asked in a low, grave voice, "And Dennis?"

A small frown crinkled Harry's forehead, before he said slowly, as if giving it considerable thought, "No, don't kill him. That's bad and it's bad if you get caught too." He quickly looked up at him, a panicky expression on his face. "They would take you away!"

He breathed in deeply and then calmed down and slowly relaxed, before he continued quietly, "But, well... if Dennis hurts me, then you can hurt him. It's only fair." He let out a huff. "He's older and taller than me, so it's alright if you help me."

Anxiously, Harry quickly peered up at him to see if he agreed, and Tom merely shot him a wide smirk and nodded, as he started carding his fingers through Harry's locks of black hair, petting him just how the boy enjoyed so much.

As his little brother started to sleepily drift away, Tom threw the blanket over them and picked up his book, managing to flip it open with one hand while he kept threading his fingers through Harry's hair with the other. After all, the faster the boy fell asleep, the faster he would be left in peace to read at his pleasure.

"What you can do is just like in Alice's stories, isn't it?" murmured Harry quietly, letting out a small yawn. "With people who can do strange and wonderful things-"

"It's not," said Tom firmly, briefly glancing away from the text to shoot him a stern look. "Those stories are fantasy. None of it is true, Harry."

Little Harry remained silent, not at all convinced, but he was starting to get too sleepy to argue with his brother who could be really pig-headed and exasperating sometimes.

Tom enjoyed only a few minutes of blessed silence before his brother's piping voice was heard again.

"Your feet are cold," Harry complained with a whine, squirming his toes away from Tom's and not at all happy about it.

"Get out if you don't like it," snapped Tom shortly, his jaw twitching with irritation as he once more lost the sentence he had been reading. "Now shut up and let me read."

Disgruntled, Harry shot the book a nasty look, but in the next second his emerald eyes gleamed as his gaze flickered towards the candle. Faster than any little animal of the forest could move, Harry pushed himself up and forward and blew out the candle, and then quickly scampered back under the blankets, eeping as he ducked his head and hid under the covers.

"You little twerp!" roared Tom furiously, blindly flailing a hand around to grab whatever he could; if it was his brother's mop of hair, all the better - he would yank and pull and render him bald!

"I want to sleep!" chimed Harry, and with that, he quickly draped himself all over his brother like a determined octopus, clutched him tightly with all his might in case Tom made more attempts to
move, and tightly closed his eyes, as a little smile curved his pouty lips.

Feeling effectively bound and shackled to his bed, Tom's lips thinned with dark annoyance, but as soon as he heard soft, placid snores, he stopped attempting to break free and he glanced down at his little brother.

The moonlight which speared through the frayed curtains of their small window dimly allowed him to see that Harry was already fast asleep, or better said, pretending to; but he couldn't make himself disrupt him.

The mischievous little smile on the brat's face didn't escape his notice, but the smaller boy looked so awfully… Tom's lips twisted with disgust though his eyes softened - a smidgen. Yes, Harry looked so awfully 'cute' and 'adorable' -just like all the adults pathetically cooed about- that he ended up resigning himself to his fate.

He finally set his book beside the flameless candle on the tiny ratty nightstand, and closed his eyes with a defeated sigh. It was just his luck to have an impish little urchin for a brother.

Tom dozed off with his arms snuggly wrapped around Harry and with an upward curl on his lips, his sleeping sly mind already plotting his revenge.
The wide commercial London street was bustling with activity, motorcars rolling by at a sedate pace among delivery wagons pulled by horses, as matrons went around doing their shopping, maids carried out their task of buying supplies and food from butchers, bakers and grocery stores, and young couples and families strolled about eyeing window displays.

In the midst of it, Alice was herding the children of St. Jerome's Orphanage in their monthly expedition into commercial London. As she gazed at the passers-by with their bags of purchases, she felt a bout of cheerfulness.

England's economy had began a slow recovery; there had been a rise in employment levels in recent years, mostly in the South, where lower interest rates had spurred a house building boom, which in turn spurred a recovery in domestic industry. Apparently, the Great Depression had ended.

Alice didn't understand much about Economics, so the explanations in newspaper articles had flown over her head. But she did know that England was starting to do well, since her own sister had found employment as a maid for a well-to-do family and her brother was working in a shoe factory at the outskirts of London. And it was evident too, since people were now on the streets, spending again.

"King George V inaugurates the opening of the Queensway Tunnel beneath the River Mersey, Forty-one squadrons are added to the Royal Air Force as part of a new air defense program," was shouting out a boy, standing at the corner of the intersection of the bustling streets, waving newspapers in his hands and with a stack of them by his side. "Prime Minister Ramsey MacDonald assures that the Four-Power Pact signed last year by Britain, France, Germany and Italy still holds and ensures peace and stability in Europe… Read it all in The Daily Herald!"

Alice stopped for a moment by the boy's side, plucking out a couple of shillings from her apron's pocket and counting the necessary amount before handing them over to the boy.

"Thank you, ma'am," said the boy politely, giving her one of the newspapers, before he started
reciting the same news in a loud booming voice, once again.

As the children animatedly chattered, laughed and giggled around her, Alice quickly opened the newspaper to the section of International News and found the article she had been looking for.

It wasn't often that information regarding Germany could be found, and the articles that did focus on the subject were usually short and hidden away among other more cheerful matters of international politics and trade.

The British Government didn't seem to be particularly concerned about what was happening in Germany – at least, they didn't appear to be in front of their citizens.

However, Alice had her misgivings. She had been following news regarding Germany, and what she read had increasingly alarmed her for the last couple of years.

Two years ago, in 1932, the National Socialist party –or Nazi for short, and a right-wing party from what Alice understood - had gained almost forty percent of the votes in the German Parliament, called Reichstag or something of the sort. Then the party's leader, a chap called Hitler, had been appointed as Chancellor by the German President Hinderburg.

Not long after, the Chancellor Hitler had announced that his party's prime goal in foreign policy was to secure living space for the German race – that had perplexed Alice a bit, making her wonder just what that entailed.

Then, a fire had broken out at the Reichstag, supposedly caused by the Communist Party. As a result, that party, which was the second largest one in Germany, had been banned, giving the Nazis a clear majority in government in the following elections.

After this, matters seemed to worsen.

An Enabling Act had given Hitler power to make laws without consulting the Reichstag for a period of four years, Trade Unions were banned –which wasn't a good thing in Alice's opinion; England had its problems with Unions but Alice's brother had told her that if it wasn't for his Union leader at the factory, his salary wouldn't be enough to feed him- and they had started burning books which were considered to be 'un-German'. This latter seemed most atrocious to Alice, who loved books so much when she could afford them.

Moreover, later, all political parties except the Nazis were banned, Germany withdrew from the League of Nations –this had caused some anxious stirrings in England's political circles- and shops owned by Jews were vandalized, apparently because Jews were un-German and sought the ruination of non-Jews and the country as a whole.

Alice had been flummoxed by the latter. She knew several store owners and shopkeepers who were Jewish and she found nothing wrong with them. They stuck with their own, but they were smart merchants and friendly, and didn't overprice their wares and were honest and fair in all their dealings – they even gave credit.

Up until all these news, Alice had felt indignant or angered but not overly concerned. After all, the Prime Minister said that nothing was wrong and that the Germans didn't have intentions of causing any conflicts.

Her uneasiness had started three months ago, when she had been out buying supplies for the orphanage.

She had taken little Harry with her, who liked to accompany her while she went around the
neighborhood's shops. The boy simply loved being outdoors and in the streets, where the children playing outside their homes cheerfully waved at him and invited him to play with them, or the passing-by women cooed at him and petted his hair.

Most of the orphanage's children were looked down upon by the people in their neighborhood – most thought that orphans would end up being thieves or something of the sort- but little Harry was always the exception. He had charmed everyone since the first day Alice had taken him out.

That day, she had visited Mr. Hutchins' small convenience store, which sold groceries and all other sort of things.

Robert Hutchins, or Bob Three Fingers as he was called since his pinky and ring finger were missing from his left hand, was an amiable man in his mid-thirties, nearly ten years her senior. And Alice had to admit, she had been secretly fascinated with him since the moment the man had moved to their neighborhood and opened up a shop.

He was very handsome in a roguish way, with his dark curls and sky blue eyes, but also very intriguing.

From what she knew, he had worked up North in a coal mine when he had been a mere boy and then he had taught himself how to read and write –something she admired greatly. When he was in his early twenties, he worked in a factory, not only becoming a supervisor but also a Union leader. But for some reason, he had left the North and had come to live in their neighborhood five years ago.

Rumors said that he had opened his shop with money he had stolen from the owner of the factory he had worked in; that his employer had caught him red-handed and that they had fought, with the employer somehow cutting Mr. Hutchins' two fingers before Mr. Hutchins managed to escape.

Others said that Mr. Hutchins had led a Union revolt in the factory and that in the fight between workers, armed policemen and the employers, he had killed the owner of the factory and thus had needed to flee down South, to London and the orphanage's neighborhood.

Even more vicious tongues said that Mr. Hutchins had seduced his employer's wife, that the husband had found out about the illicit affair, finding them in bed, and that he had taken a shot at them, but Mr. Hutchins had moved quickly to take the pistol from the man's hand though the shot had nevertheless blown out two of his fingers.

And some, those who didn't like him at all, mostly some men of the neighborhood who saw how their wives longingly sighed at the mere sight of Mr. Hutchins, said that he was a Communist. The man did disappear several days a month, going who knew where – they said that it was to secret Red meetings in central London.

Nevertheless, Alice didn't pay attention to such rumors. What mattered was that Mr. Hutchins was a good man; his prices were fair and his wares of good quality, he never tried to cheat any of his customers, and he always went around giving children candies or bread for free.

They had become friends of sorts, as much as an unmarried young man and woman could be friends without causing scandal. The man apparently had a well stocked library at his house behind the shop, because he constantly lent Alice books and novels whenever she went to his store.

"Are you here for Mrs. Agatha Christie's latest novel, Alice?" had said Mr. Hutchins that day, smiling at her the moment she and little Harry stepped inside his shop.
Alice had felt herself blush faintly at that, but she had soon shaken her head. "Not today, Mr. Hutchins, I still haven't finished the last one I borrowed from you." She awkwardly cleared her throat, as she continued, "I'm needing a sack of beans and wheat, and two pounds of potatoes."

Mr. Hutchins smiled at her again, in that gentle way that always made her heart beat faster and something flutter in the pit of her stomach, before he went about gathering what she had asked for.

Alice had to chide Harry when the boy started playing around with some pans on a shelf.

"Oh, let the little fellow have his fun. He does no harm," had said Mr. Hutchins as he settled the sacks on top of the counter, making little Harry beam at him.

Mr. Hutchins had shot him a grin of camaraderie, as if he was a playmate and little boy himself, and added as he pointed a finger at one corner of the store, "I've just received some new toys. You can have your pick, Harry. I'll lend the toy to you for some months if you take good care of it."

"Really?" breathed out little Harry, his emerald eyes going wide as he gazed at the man worshipfully.

"Really," said Mr. Hutchins, his grin widening in a sort of fond and conspiratorial way.

"Thank you, Bob!" piped in Harry, before he dashed to the corner and started tinkering about with wood blocks, tin soldiers, toy motorcars and the like.

"Mr. Hutchins, you're too generous," started saying Alice, "You really shouldn't-"

"The child has no problem addressing me by my first name," interrupted Mr. Hutchins softly, waving a hand, good-naturedly dismissing her comment, as he pierced his kind blue eyes into hers. "When will you start doing the same, Alice? We've known each other for five years, after all."

Alice felt herself blushing from her cheeks to the tip of her ears as she stammered in an abashed, meek murmur, "It's – it's not proper-"

"Who would know? There's no one around," he said, gesturing at the shop, before he gently smiled at her. "And it would please me, Alice."

She felt herself flushing even more. And she hated that she couldn't stop doing that in his presence; she was twenty-four years old and she had to look like a silly little girl to him when it happened.

So Alice managed to raise her head and meet his gaze, and she nodded jerkily. "Alright – Robert."

Mr. Hutchins shot her a wide, gorgeous smile, his eyes glinting with… was it affection? Alice didn't dare hope, she knew that he could have any woman he wanted and most men weren't interested in girls like her.

She was well educated, far above most in the same station in life as hers, and she didn't have any money, she was just a caregiver in a run-down orphanage. She was pretty enough, she supposed; she had seen men eyeing her with interest, but they didn't want a young woman who read books and had her own opinions and who didn't wear nice dresses.

Some of it must have shown on her face because Mr. Hutchins then said quietly, as he intently gazed at her, looking uncertain and a bit nervous which puzzled her, "Say Alice… I know you're a smart lass, and I've recently seen you buying newspapers… Are you interested in what's happening?"
Alice stared at him in befuddlement. "With Germany, you mean?"

He nodded, his expression turning grave as he said in a low, hushed voice, "Would you like to know more? About things most people aren't aware of? If I showed you, would you keep it a secret?"

Now mystified, Alice vehemently nodded, wondering what the 'secret' was. Well, whatever it was she would take it to the grave with her. Even if Mr. Hutchins suddenly burst out that he had indeed killed his employer in the factory, she didn't think she would tell a soul.

Mr. Hutchins eyed her closely once more, and then seemed to decide that she could be trusted. In a few seconds, he had locked the door of the shop, turning around the sign hanging on the window so that it displayed 'Closed' and then grabbed her hand and pulled her around the counter, opening a door which led to the backroom of the store.

Once they made their way through piles of boxes and rows of shelves, he led her through another door which made them enter a small sitting room. Alice's eyes widened since they were now evidently in his house, and she began feeling a bit uneasy. She didn't think Mr. Hutchins would assault her, but still, it wasn't right to be alone in a young man's house. If anyone found out, she would be ruined.

But she didn't have time to protest before Mr. Hutchins had already led her into another room, and all thoughts about silly propriety rules fled from her mind as she caught sight of all the things in there. And she stood frozen, gaping.

There was a small printing press and piles and piles of pamphlets, and numerous posters on the walls, and shelves filled with books, the names of some authors ringing a bell: Marx, Lenin, Engels, Trotsky… and other names she had never heard of before.

She swirled around to stare at him, with both uneasiness and a bit of fearful anxiousness, and stammered, "You're a – a –"

"A Communist?" said Mr. Hutchins, looking at her with a bit of amusement. "Yes, I am. You've certainly heard the rumors." He chuckled at her expression and added amiably, "But fear not, I'm not about to launch a world-wide bolshevist revolution and 'steal people's private properties', as some say about us. We don't want that, you know. Well, perhaps some do want an armed, global revolution, but I'm not that kind. I'm a Marxist and a Leninist, I just dream about a better and fairer society."

He turned around to point at one of the walls, and Alice, still fretful and apprehensive, followed it with her eyes to see a poster of a man with a bushy mustache and a stern face, looking quite intimidating. There were words in some strange language written on top and a big X crossing the man's face – a face she now remembered having seen in some newspaper article.

"And I'm certainly not a Stalinist," continued Mr. Hutchins, his voice now grave. "Sergei Kirov has been assassinated, you know? He was popular, he was a threat. Stalin has launched massive purges against political dissidents, conducting rigged show trials and then having them executed or imprisoned in Siberian gulag labor camps. Bukharin, Rykov, Kamenev, Zinoviev... all gone."

Alice hadn't the foggiest idea about what he was saying. She had read a few things about Russia in newspapers articles, but not much. She had never taken a particular interest in it. And certainly none of those names rang a bell, except Stalin's.

He turned around to gaze at her, a sad tone in his voice while his face looked angered. "He's
disposed of the top political tier of Lenin's times. Trotsky was exiled, he's fled to Mexico, some
rumors say. If only he could go back to Russia... He was meant to be Lenin's successor. He's an
intellectual, you know, not a blood-thirsty butcher like Stalin..."

He shook his head and trailed off until he remained silent. Alice nibbled on her bottom lip, before
she armed herself with courage.

Mr. Hutchins had indeed revealed a great secret to her; something that could easily ruin him if she
spread word around about what the man had in his house.

She had never heard good things about Communists, they were widely feared, but she trusted that
she had not been wrong in her opinion of Mr. Hutchins and she couldn't censure someone for his
ideals when she actually knew so little about them.

And even if they were wrong ideals, as long as they didn't hurt anyone, then she wouldn't judge.
She liked to believe that she was an advocate of the freedom of thought and speech, after all.

And to repay Mr. Hutchins' trust in her, she could at least show some interest. And indeed, she was
quite curious about a small picture of an Asian man in his mid-thirties that hang near the poster of
Stalin. She had never seen an Asian man before, it was quite a novelty.

"And who's he?" she whispered, taking a few steps to look at it more closely.

"That's Mao Tse-Tung," replied Mr. Hutchins, as he eyed the picture with a critical and pensive
expression on his handsome face. "He's a young Communist leader in China, not very well known
outside of it except in Communist circles. We've been hearing many things about him lately. He
helped establish the Soviet Republic of China in the mountainous areas in Jiangxi, he's created an
army called the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army of China. A modest but effective army, guerilla-
lke. And he's undertaken experiments in rural reform and government, and provided refuge for
Communists fleeing the rightist purges in the cities."

He shot her a glance as he continued in a secretive, hushed murmur, "From what we've heard,
Chiang Kai-shek, the Chairman of the Kuomintang government, surrounded them with his army,
and they've been forced to retreat from Jiangxi. They intend to march to Shaanxi in the northwest
of China, if rumors are to be believed. It's nearly a six thousand mile journey - it will take them a
year at the very least. But Tse-Tung is gaining adherents, some of the Politburo of the Communist
Party of China are defecting to his side. I've read some translations of his writings... Some say he's
a young promise, others that he's ruthless and unscrupulous. It remains to be seen whether he'll be
another Lenin or a Stalin, or if he'll succeed and have any impact at all."

Alice blinked at him. He might as well be speaking Chinese to her. Not only did China seem to her
like another planet, but the names of the places and the terms he used were utterly foreign to her.
She had only grasped a few things. A Lenin or a Stalin, that was basically it.

Nevertheless, even though she had always known that Mr. Hutchins was her superior intellectually,
she did feel ashamed for knowing so little. She had only been interested about Germany, because it
concerned her. Now she realized that much more was going on in the world, and she vouched to
take an interest and start reading more about those matters in the newspapers.

Mr. Hutchins saw her confused expression, and chuckled. "Well, I didn't bring you here to bore
you with my ramblings. This-" he approached the small printing press and started gathering
pamphlets "- is actually what I wanted to show you."

"My fellows and I believe it's our duty to divulge the information that we've been receiving. We
correspond with Communists in other countries, even with some who're German and have been hiding whilst trying to do something from within, and with left-wing Jewish intellectuals in America – some of them received letters from relatives or acquaintances in Germany who somehow managed to get the letters across the border."

Mr. Hutchins paused to shoot her a grave and apprehensive glance, as he murmured, "And Alice, it's much worse than what the newspapers say or what is known by the politicians here. In Germany, they're not simply vandalizing shops owned by Jews, they are outright persecuting them. And not only them, but Poles and other Slavs that live in Germany, gypsies and political dissidents as well as the clergy, and people with physical or mental disabilities, and homosexuals-
"

A strangled, sort of shocked cough stuck in her throat, and Alice flushed to the tips of her ears in embarrassment.

Mr. Hutchins eyed her weirdly, before a look of understanding crossed his handsome face as he said gently, "You do know what a homosexual is, right? Men who love men-
"

"I know," mumbled Alice, still feeling awkward and uncomfortable.

She did know, she had heard rumors about people like that, but no one had openly spoken about it in her presence. It wasn't polite conversation, and much less something which was discussed with young women.

It seemed unnatural to her that men would like other men. Men were made to be with women. But then, as she usually did when she analyzed an issue, she placed herself in those people's shoes and admitted that if someone had the audacity to tell her who she could or couldn't love, she would tell them just where they could shove it.

And one of her favorite playwrights was Oscar Wilde. She had read about him, how he had died a decade ago, in poverty and rejected by society, after he had been tried as a sodomite and sentenced to two years of imprisonment and forced labor, a term which he had served before exiling himself to France.

She couldn't afford to go to the theatre but she had certainly bought his published plays whenever she managed to save some money. The man had been a genius, and if someone like him had been a homosexual, well, then it couldn't be that bad.

His plays were all the rage now. People still had an ill opinion of him -not enough years had passed to make them forgive or forget that Wilde had been a homosexual- but that didn't prevent them from enjoying his work. And Alice had always thought that was quite hypocritical and also very unfair.

Nevertheless, discussing such matters still made her feel discomfited and embarrassed.

Mr. Hutchins cleared his throat, now looking uneasy given her reaction. Seeing this, Alice damned her own foolishness. She didn't want to seem less in his eyes.

And truly, if such an extraordinary man as Mr. Hutchins could be so liberal thinking and open minded, and actually treated her like an equal by openly talking about such matters with her, then she would at the very least rise up to the occasion and behave like a mature young woman.

With determination to prove her worth, she pulled a self-assured and composed expression on her face, giving him a tentative smile as she said quietly, "I apologize, I didn't mean... I appreciate that you speak freely with me. Please continue."
Mr. Hutchins shot her a pleased smile and nodded, before his expression turned grave once again. "As I was saying, those people are being persecuted. Some are taken for 'interrogation' by the Gestapo and are never seen again, while most have been forced to leave their homes and are being reallocated to the poorest areas of some cities, all bunched together in small quarters. And the areas are being closed off from the rest of the city in question, by walls and barb wire – they're... well, like areas turned into prisons, with horrible living conditions and little to eat. Ghettos. And..."

He trailed off, before he suddenly took her hands into his, his expression turning into one of sorrow and pained impotence, as he murmured, "And we've recently heard that trucks have been seen leaving the ghettos. Trucks with people in them, Alice - to transport them to other cities or the countryside, supposedly. But they're never seen or heard from again. We wonder... We wonder where they're being taken and what's happening to them."

Alice's eyes grew large and she breathed out anxiously, "What do you think is happening?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Hutchins, deeply frowning as if angered with himself for not having more reliable information, dropping her hands. "I truly don't know. No one seems to know."

He shot her a glance, as he added in a mutter, "But I fear the worse. Stalin uses labor camps, so it wouldn't be a stretch of the imagination to think that Hitler might be doing the same. Yet... even from labor camps one hears news once in a while about the prisoners there. In this case, we hear nothing."

Alice frowned, confused and perplexed, but she was yanked away from her puzzled inner thoughts when Mr. Hutchins suddenly dropped on her hands a bunch of pamphlets, as he said, "It's all there. Read it but make sure to burn them after you're done with them. I don't want you to get into any trouble because of me."

He paused, before he shot her a piercing glance as he added, "And believe what Winston Churchill is saying."

Alice nearly gaped at him. No one paid attention to Churchill nowadays.

She remembered that he had been deeply involved in politics when she had been a young girl, serving in several posts in the government.

However, the man had started in the Conservative Party, then his own constituency had effectively deselected him, and so he became a member of the Liberal Party, and then he jumped back to the Conservative one. Later, he had created an independent one for himself before going back with the Conservatives once more. Afterwards, he had been given the cold shoulder by the members of his party and he had exiled himself from politics for several years.

A man like that was clearly unreliable, and only loyal to himself. And they said he was an alcoholic and an ill-humored, cantankerous man with barely any manners at all. Moreover, he was accused of being a war-monger.

Churchill had just returned to the political sphere last year, giving only one public speech regarding Germany that no one had taken seriously.

Mr. Hutchins wryly smiled at her expression. "Oh, I don't like him, personally. I think he's an Imperialist Fascist in many of his views, especially regarding India and Gandhi..."

Alice blinked at him with a smigden of confused wonder. Gandhi? Wasn't that the tiny man going around starkers preaching about having a nonviolent revolt to gain his country's independence?
And it was most improper for a man to present himself nearly naked, and India was the crown jewel of the British Empire, after all. Everyone was mighty proud of that. In the newspapers articles she had glanced at regarding the matter, the journalists always seemed to treat Mr. Gandhi with condenscension, ridicule, and scorn. Though it seemed Mr. Hutchins had an all together opposite opinion regarding the issue.

She was yanked away from her puzzled musings as Mr. Hutchins continued.

"...But we have a fellow who works in the Ministry of Defense and he believes that someone there is passing Churchill top secret information, and that some others in high positions in the government are too. So when Churchill said last year that Germany is rearming, contravening the Treaty of Versailles, then I believe he's right." Mr. Hutchins paused and pierced her with his sky blue eyes, his expression grave as his voice turned firm, "I don't believe it because he's the one who says it, but because his informers clearly have some evidence of it. And they're troubled enough, and courageous enough, to leak the information to Churchill even if it means losing their jobs. People like that, I trust."

Alice had left the shop feeling very perturbed, with sacks of beans, wheat and potatoes under her arms, the pamphlets stuck in her apron's pocket, and with little Harry trotting by her side, bubbling with excitement over his new toy.

And now, as she perused the articles in the International section of the newspaper in her hands, she found out that the German President Hindenburg had died and that Chancellor Hitler had combined his own post with that of the President, and was calling himself a Führer – whatever the word meant.

Well, according to a tiny article, it seemed to mean that the man had given himself totalitarian, absolute power. The man had become a true dictator, there was no doubt about it this time.

None of it bode well.

But, another article said that Prime Minister MacDonald insisted that the Four-Power Pact held true, and that there would be no armed conflicts in Europe.

It was all very confusing, with politicians reassuring the public, saying all was well, and some dissenting voices like Churchill's arguing against, and then what she had read in Mr. Hutchins' pamphlets...

However, surely things couldn't worsen even further. No one wanted another conflict after the Great War. It had been a carnage; so many millions had died and it had left them all sinking in an economic depression.

If Germany tried anything, surely the other European countries would stop them. And she had faith in her own government - she had to.

And thus, she inwardly reassured herself once more, as she had been doing lately quite frequently, and she folded the newspaper.

Glancing at the children, she didn't miss Tom's gaze fixing on the newspaper before he quickly looked away, and Alice had to conceal a smile.

The boy was now seven years old, but he had taken an interest in matters outside of the orphanage for the last couple of years. The boy had been barely five when Alice had one day seen him eyeing the newspaper she had been reading while she watched the children play.
Of course, Tom had simply given it a look of covetousness - and almost hunger, she would say - and then glanced away with an expressionless mask on his face before anyone could notice. But Alice had noticed, and she had felt extremely proud.

Nevertheless, she knew him well so she hadn't openly offered the newspaper to him. Instead, after she was done reading it, she had left it lying at the small table in the kitchen before going about with her daily duties in the orphanage. An hour later, when she returned to the kitchen, the newspaper was gone.

And thus, she had been 'lending' newspapers to Tom for the past two years, never seeing them again but knowing that the boy read them at night in the room he shared with his brother. For a boy so young to take an interest in world-wide matters and to even be able to understand newspaper articles, it was a wonder and a prodigal feat.

Ever since then, she had started giving him private tutoring classes after her usual lessons with all the children, teaching him subjects in levels well advanced for his age. Tom had never thanked her for it, and he was always quiet during their lessons; attentive but curtly polite, speaking spare few words to her.

But Alice was rewarded in her own ways when she saw how Tom further improved by leaps and bounds. And to her great satisfaction, it trickled down to Harry.

Harry was by no means dumb, he could be quite smart when he applied himself, but the problem was that the small boy could barely sit down for two minutes straight when she taught the children.

He was so full of energy and playful eagerness, that one minute he sat still, intently listening to her words, and in the next second he was fretfully squirming on his seat, eyeing some toy left on the floor or gently pulling on Amy's pig tails to make the girl giggle or doing some other mischief.

One day, it had all changed.

Alice and the children had been in the orphanage's small playroom; she had been reading a fairytale to the children, but that day Harry had barely left his brother's side. While Tom was seated cross legged at a corner reading a book, as usual, Harry was next to him, playing by himself with the tin soldiers with missing arms or legs that Alice had found in a dumpster in the streets.

Then, a roaring sound was heard coming from outside. And as frequently happened, Harry instantly leapt to his small feet and dashed to the window, pressing up his nose against the glass, staring with wide, fascinated eyes at the motorcar which rolled by.

"I want to be a mechanic!" he excitedly announced to the whole room as he turned around to face them, his green eyes especially focused on Tom, as if wanting to see if his words met with his brother's approval. "I'll make lots and lots of motorcars and I'll-"

"Mechanics only repair motorcars," interrupted Tom curtly, briefly lying down his book on his lap to give his brother a stern look, "they don't make them, you idiot."

Scrunching up his face in pensiveness, Harry cocked his head to a side. "Who do, then?"

"Engineers," said Tom shortly, picking up his book again with the clear intention of ignoring his brother and resume his reading.

"Then I'll be an ingini!" chimed Harry cheerfully, as if that settled the matter and it was already an accomplished feat.
Tom shot him an irritated look and clearly enunciated, "En-gi-neer."

"Yes, that," chirped Harry with a wide grin, nodding his head.

Tom rolled his eyes, before he settled his book on the floor and rose up, taking a few strides to reach his brother, towering over him as he said in a contemptuous and mocking tone of voice, "Don't make me laugh. You, an engineer? You're a halfwit. You could never be one."

"I'm not a halfwit!" burst out Harry in indignation, glowering up at his brother, puffing out his chest and standing straight, as if attempting stretch himself up to be taller and be able to match his brother's height. In the next second, he seemed to realize it wasn't enough and apparently decided to cheat by standing on his tip toes, glaring up at the still taller boy.

"Yes you are," sneered Tom scathingly, ignoring his brother's antics - who had began precariously swaying as he lost his balance and ended up on his flat heels again, pouting. "During lessons you barely-"

"Harry has a short attention span, that's all," interjected Alice from across the room, not liking when Tom undermined the little boy in such ways. Harry worshipped his brother and Tom could be so vicious and mean to the smaller boy sometimes.

She soon shot Kathy a glance, who was mending a pair of children socks by her side, and gave her the book she had been reading from. As Kathy continued reading the story out loud for the other children, Alice approached the two boys standing by the window.

Shooting her a narrow-eyed, annoyed dark look, Tom rounded on her as he drawled in a bored tone of voice, "Exactly, he has the attention span of a gnat. So how do you propose he studies to become an engineer?" He arched a sarcastic eyebrow at her. "Would we be tying him down on a chair and gagging him, so that he actually listens and pays attention instead of jumping around, babbling constantly?"

Alice chuckled and savored the feeling of having Tom speak more than three words together to her. Oh, she didn't delude herself. Tom only conversed with her when they were with Harry – he tolerated her for Harry's sake, because Harry liked her, and nothing else.

But she treasured these moments all the same.

"He'll be more mature in a couple of years," she said gently, shooting little Harry an encouraging smile, "and I'm sure he'll be able to be quite studious then, if he wants to."

"I wouldn't hold my breath," muttered Tom, casting his brother a disparaging look.

"But I want to make motorcars!" piped in Harry, with a mutinous and stubborn expression on his small face, his lips pouting out. "And I will, you'll see! And I'll drive all around the world and –"

"Do you?" said Tom slowly, his voice low, as he eyed his brother with a thoughtful and calculating glint in his dark blue eyes. Alice didn't know what crossed the boy's mind, but in the next second he seemed to come to a decision, and he added coolly, "I'm going to start teaching you, then."

At that, Alice's eyebrows shot to her hairline and little Harry gawked at his brother. Tom merely gave them a self-satisfied smirk and returned to his corner, with Harry silently trailing after him in the next second, still looking bewildered and shocked by his brother's unexpected generosity. Though, in the next moment, little Harry was already biting down on his bottom lip with dread, no doubt realizing that his brother would be a tough teacher and that it would actually be no fun at all for him.
That night, brimming with curiosity, Alice couldn't help spying on the boys when she was making her nightly rounds and heard their voices coming out from the parted door of their room. She covertly peeked a glance inside, seeing the two boys sitting crossed legged on Tom's cot, facing each other and with a book between them.

"I won't have a fool for a brother," Tom was saying sternly, giving Harry a harsh look, as he trailed a finger over the opened book. "It's embarrassing. You can barely read and your writing is atrocious."

Alice had felt a little bad for Harry at that. The boy had been only six years old then and at that age couldn't be expected to read and write well; the other children who were one or two years older than Harry didn't either. But it seemed that Tom had decided to apply the same high standards he set for himself, now on his brother.

Harry was biting on his lower lip, an indecisive expression on his face, as if battling between saying something to defend himself or to admit Tom's words as the truth. In the end, he hung his head low and peered at his brother through his eyelashes, and then simply nodded.

"I'll be teaching you the same Alice has been attempting to get through your thick skull during all these years, and much more," continued Tom in the same tone of voice. "This time, you'll pay attention and you'll learn." He shot Harry a most ominous look at this, his gaze fixing on Harry's forehead. "If not, you know what will happen."

Alice frowned when little Harry winced and rubbed his scar, but she put it out of her mind as they continued.

"From now on, you'll not be allowed to play until I'm satisfied that you've fully learned the lessons of the day," said Tom sternly, though at Harry's horrified expression he mellowed his tone of voice as he grabbed his brother's shoulders. "Listen, I don't expect you to become an engineer. I don't expect you to have to work at all-

"What do you mean?" piped in Harry, looking thoroughly confused. He played with the hem of his tattered shirt, giving his brother an uncertain glance as he said in a small voice, "We're poor, both of us will have to work-

"Not you," interrupted Tom curtly, before a gleam sparkled in his dark blue eyes and he jumped from the cot and onto his feet, looking at some point in the distance as if envisioning a glorious future for them, his voice turning excited. "I have it all figured out. We'll leave as soon as we turn fifteen-

"Leave here?" gasped out Harry, his emerald eyes wide. "But it's our home!"

"Home?" spat Tom, his lips twisting as he rounded on Harry, fury crossing his expression and making his face turn dark. "What, you enjoy wearing second-hand clothes and barely having anything to eat and being looked down for being in an orphanage-

"No," snapped Harry, setting his jaw in a stubborn expression. "But I don't mind it." He bit on his bottom lip and added in soft voice as he peered at his brother, "And I like Amy, Eric and Billy. And I like Alice very much. I would miss her. She's like our mother-

"She's not our mother, or a sister, or anything to us!" snarled Tom, his handsome face contorting with anger as he glared down at Harry. "And do you like Jenkins too, eh?"

Harry hunched his small shoulders and murmured in a tiny voice, "No."
Alice, still eavesdropping on them, had winced, feeling her heart ache. Besides Kathy and her, there had been two other caregivers: two widowed, sour old women who had little patience with the children and yelled at them rather than take the time to improve the children's manners in a gentle and sympathetic way.

Nevertheless, the two women hadn't been that bad; one had ended up doting on Harry and the other was merely indifferent to all children. Regrettably, one of them had suddenly died of a stroke and soon after, the other had retired to live with some niece in the countryside.

Given the orphanage's increasingly limited funds, only one person had been hired to cover for their absences. An old acquaintance of Mrs. Sharpe's: Tom Jenkins, a bitter cantankerous old man who hardly lifted a finger if it wasn't to box some ears, slap some heads, or roughly manhandle any child, for reasons so petty like the children being too loud.

Mr. Jenkins and Mrs. Sharpe were as thick as thieves and often spent their days sharing cups of gin in Mrs. Sharpe's office. The matron's vice had worsened with the years, and so had her temper. Moreover, the two of them were of a similar frame of mind when it came to the children, and corporal punishment had started being used, with Mrs. Sharpe's permission and encouragement and executed by Mr. Jenkins' vicious hands.

Since then, Alice had often found bruises in the shape of meaty fingers on some of the boys' arms and shoulders, especially on Harry and Tom. Mr. Jenkins seemed to have developed a hatred for them in particular.

But there was little Alice could do about it; Mr. Jenkins didn't use a belt on any of the children or punched them or caused serious injuries like cracked bones. The corporal punishment he doled out was permissible by English law and was applied by most schools, public and private both. It was brutal and savage in her opinion, but not many thought the same as her.

"Exactly," bit out Tom, still glowering at his brother, "so we'll leave when we turn fifteen. At that age I can find employment as a bookkeeper in a shop. They won't mind that I'm not of age when they see that I'll accept lower wages and when I prove that I surpass everyone in intelligence."

He pulled himself to his full height and continued fiercely, "Why do you think I study so hard? I can already write, read, and do numbers better than any adult, and by the time I'm fifteen I will already have learned as much as I can about accounting and trade. That ought to suffice, in the beginning. With a job, I'll be able to afford a small room for us in some cheap residence while I save as much as I can."

Harry gaped at him, his green eyes large and startled. A small frown crinkled his forehead when he whispered quietly, "And what will I do?"

"Cook and clean, and house-keeping stuff," replied Tom nonchalantly, before he shrugged his shoulders dismissively. "With the rest of your time you can do whatever you please."

"Clean? Cook?" said Harry, scrunching his nose with dislike. He then glowered at him and groused out, highly miffed, "Why do I get to do those things and you get to be the grownup?"

Tom scoffed and irreverently poked Harry's forehead with a finger. "Because I'm brilliant and you're not, you little twit. And you're too small and will probably still look small when you're fifteen. " He shot him a large, smug smirk, and added, "I bet that when I'm fifteen, I'll look like eighteen."

Harry shot him a dirty look, crossing his arms over his small chest and huffed, making the unruly
locks of hair of his fringe stick up. "Fine, and then what?"

"Then, when I've saved enough money, in a year or two of work by my estimates," replied Tom solemnly, like an emperor ruling over his subjects' fate in life, "we'll go to America."

Gawking at him and wide-eyed, little Harry breathed out, "America?", as if someone was telling him he would be going to the moon and beyond.

"Oh, I know they're going through a rough patch at present," Tom said calmly, shooting him a superior smirk, "but it's said to be the land of opportunity, isn't it?"

Then he clicked his tongue with irritated exasperation when his little brother looked nonplussed and clueless. "Well, it is. And as soon as I'm there, I'll know what to do." His smirk widened as he continued with supreme self-confidence, "I'll easily make a fortune, I know it."

Clearly jittery and worried, Harry played with the hem of his shirt as he nibbled on his bottom lip, glancing at his brother anxiously. "I'm not sure, Tom-"

Tom instantly narrowed his eyes at him, and demanded harshly, "Do you trust me?"

It didn't even take a second for little Harry to adamantly nod his head repeatedly, though he still looked fretful and uncertain about his brother's plans.

Tom seemed to relax and his lips quirked upwards, his expression content and satisfied as he sat down on the cot by his brother's side. He wrapped an arm around Harry's small shoulders and murmured quietly, "You'll see. I'll make a fortune, and I'll buy for us a great house and you'll have all the food and toys you could ever hope for, and we'll travel."

He shot his little brother a knowing smirk when Harry's eyes brightened at that. "Oh yes, I promise that we'll travel the whole world and we'll have all the adventures you want, and we'll see lots of strange places. And I'll keep studying and making more money, and I'll take care of you and we'll never have to worry about money or food or anything else again."

"Alright," said little Harry, beaming a wide joyous smile, as if the mere mention of faraway places and exciting dangerous adventures had clinched the deal for him.

As she saw the two boys curling up together on the cot to have their night of sleep, Alice had left, feeling highly perturbed.

She couldn't, in all consciousness, allow the boys to leave before they turned eighteen - the age in which they would be forced to leave the orphanage anyway. God knew what would happen to them if they left when they weren't legally adults, especially Harry who had such beautiful features and was still small for his age.

She shuddered when she thought what vicious and malevolent men could do to a boy like him. She wasn't ignorant about the cruelties of men and especially about what happened to boys and girls in reduced circumstances who had no adult to protect them.

At best, Harry would be abducted to become one of the many small-framed chimney sweeps who usually died at a young age due to starvation, since their 'owners' kept all the money they earned, rarely fed them and had them living in appalling conditions. And at worst, he would be nightly sold out for wealthy men's pleasures. And Tom wouldn't possibly be able to prevent any of that, as much as he tried; he was still a boy himself.

Yes, she would have a word with Tom and show him that there were other paths he could take. The
boy was very independent and also very suspicious and scornful of adults and any form of authority, but with a mind like his he could easily win a scholarship for a good university.

Indeed, Alice thought that the boy could easily end up in Oxford itself. It might not be the straightest road to assured fortune and success but at least it was a relatively safe one. America! So much could go wrong for the boys there…

Nevertheless, the immediate consequences of that day of a year ago were that Harry diligently spent three hours of every day in his room with Tom, learning everything his brother decided to teach him. And in her lessons with the children, Alice had noticed the vast improvement Harry had made in reading, writing, and his numbers. It was evident to her that Tom managed to get through his brother much better than she could ever hope to.

She knew Harry would never be as brilliant as Tom -Tom was a prodigy after all- but the child would be well prepared when the time came for the boys to attend the public school in their neighborhood.

As all of St. Jerome's orphans, they would be attending as soon as they turned twelve. Though Alice had already decided that she would visit the headmaster of the school to have Tom skip several grades.

It would separate the two brothers but they would still be together at the orphanage, so she thought it was best since she would be doing Tom a great disservice if she didn't.

Furthermore, after what she had heard that night, she was already looking into scholarships that Tom could apply to – she would do everything in her power to see him go through good schools and university, and none of that risky America nonsense.

Pulling out of her musings, Alice glanced at the children now with her.

Billy Stubbs still looked sullen because he had to leave his rabbit behind. Puffy the Bunny had been the orphanage's pet for three years and was much loved by all the children, with the exception of Tom who looked irritated whenever his brother played with Billy and the rabbit. But all children adored it, especially when the little animal made its frequent bids for escape and hopped all around the orphanage, the children shrieking with laughter and giggles as they gave chase to the poor bunny.

Her gaze soon zeroed in on Tom and Harry, the latter who was now eyeing the window display of a nearby pastry shop with large, longing eyes.

Suddenly, when Tom shot her a covert, calculating glance, Alice winced. The boy had been doing that for the past three months, and she knew why. It had been her own fault, her own careless absentmindedness.

That day when she had returned from Mr. Hutchins' store, she had instantly read the pamphlets in the orphanage's kitchen while Kathy was in the backyard with the children.

Abruptly, Kathy had called out for her, asking her to bring iodine and some bandages from the house, since Eric Whalley had scraped his knees whilst playing. Hurriedly, Alice had stuck the pamphlets inside the newspaper, hiding them and with every intention of burning them when she returned.

Alas, after tending to Eric, when she got back to the kitchen, the newspaper was gone.

Tom hadn't said a word to her about it, but she knew that he had found and read the pamphlets, and
she was aware of the troubles he could cause for her. He had since then been shooting her brief, sly glances that sometimes chilled her spine. As if he was indolently holding a scythe with which he could behead her if the whim struck him.

She glanced away from the boy, reassuring herself that there had to be an ounce of regard that Tom held for her, and then gazed at Harry who was by the taller boy's side.

Alice had to hide an amused smile when Harry's eyeglasses slipped to the tip of his small nose, before the boy pushed it up again.

The eyeglasses still looked as enormous on his face small as the day when she had bought them for him, three years ago. They were large, made for an adult not a boy, since she couldn't afford to buy new frames every year. She had to save money just to have the lenses changed every once in a while.

Thus, the eyeglasses covered the upper half of Harry's cheeks up to well pass his eyebrows, making him look even more adorable than ever before, not only because they were huge but also completely round.

"I want glasses like the funny man's!" Harry had chimed that day at the store.

Alice had chuckled at that.

In their neighborhood, there was an old man who had been an operator of the reel projector in a movie theater in London. He had retired, taking with him several reels of black-and-white silent movies which the cinema had no use for, along with a broken projector which he had later repaired himself.

The old man gladly invited the neighborhood's children, along with those of the orphanage, to his house a couple of times a year, putting his reels and projector to good use. More often than not, they all watched Charles Chaplin films.

But that day when they had gone to buy the eyeglasses, the children of the orphanage had watched a movie which had been released in the cinemas three years earlier, a Marx Brother's motion picture called Monkey Business. And Harry had laughed and giggled and clapped his hands the most. The 'funny man' was Groucho Marx.

Tom hadn't been happy about it, but as much as he told his brother that he looked ridiculous and stupid, Harry had mulishly refused to have any other eyeglasses but those. It was thus that Alice still chuckled from time to time when she gazed at Harry wearing his funny man's eyeglasses.

Finally, Alice clapped her hands twice, making all the children immediately surround her, looking up at her eagerly, knowing what was about to come.

"You have fifteen minutes of free time to look at the shops you like." She brought up a finger and gave them her best stern look. "Remember, you cannot cross the street or go beyond this block. Now go have fun and be polite."

The children happily cheered, earning some looks from passers-by, not all the glances friendly or sympathetic. And in the next second they were scampering away, already entering their favorite stores.

Alice could only give them a couple of pennies each from her own earnings, so there wasn't much they could buy except a candy or two, but most of them were simply content by admiring toys or, in the girls' case, dresses and hair ribbons.
Little Harry had instantly grabbed his brother's hand and was pulling him towards the pastries and candy shop he had been eyeing previously, before he gave Tom any chance to complain.

When they reached the window display, Harry felt his mouth watering as he stared at all the wonderful cakes, sweets, cookies and piles of chocolates of all sorts with pieces of almonds, strawberries, cherries and other confections, amidst colorful little boxes and ribbons and laces and similar decorations.

"You're such a glutton," said Tom contemptuously by his side.

Harry peeled his gaze away from the heavenly sight and shot him a glance. Utterly befuddled, he cocked his head to a side. "A what?"

"You like to eat too much," explained Tom barely restraining his irritation and already making a mental note to start forcing Harry to read a dictionary from front to back. The extent of his little brother's vocabulary still left much to be desired.

Harry blinked at him, wondering what could possibly be wrong with that. He was so hungry most of times that there could be no such thing as having too much food, in his opinion. And he rarely felt full with what they were given at the orphanage.

"You're getting fat," sneered Tom, his lips nastily twisting upwards, "and everyone will stop liking you because of it."

Harry's small brows furrowed as he glanced down at himself. He saw nothing but his too big shirt which hung low over one of his small shoulders, baring it, and his pants which he had to tie with a rope. He poked at his sunken belly and then huffed as he shot his brother a glower.

"I'm not fat. Besides, I'm-" To his mortification his stomach decided then to let out a loud grumble and he felt the tip of his ears turning pink as Tom shot him a mocking look.

But then he decided that it actually proved his point, and his eyes became large as he pleadingly peered up at his brother, as he said with a little whine, "I'm hungry, Tom."

Tom narrowed his eyes at him, crossing his arms over his chest as he gave him a cold, uninterested look. "What does that have to do with me?"

Little Harry shuffled his shoes on the ground, glancing at the small white cards around the assortment of sweets and chocolates which had a list of prices, and then glanced at Tom, and back, as he opened the palm of his hand to count the few pennies he had there.

"I don't have enough to buy anything," he started in a small, cajoling voice, shooting his brother another plaintive glance, "but if you lend me some of your money-"

Tom let out a loud disparaging scoff, looking down at him as if he was dealing with a brain-damaged idiot. "You're out of your mind if you think I'm giving you my allowance so that you can stuff candies down your gullet-"

"I just want a chocolate bar," said Harry softly, doing his best to look utterly miserable and despondent. "I've never tasted chocolate-"

"Neither have I-"

"And I've heard it's very, very good," continued Harry quickly, his green eyes widening with hope
and helpless need – he had discovered that his brother sometimes liked when he peered at him like that, as if Tom was the only person in the whole world who could provide things for him and he had no one else to turn to or who could possibly care for him. He made his eyes grow even larger for that very same purpose, as he added in a tiny, mournful voice, "And I just want to taste it once. Just once, Tom. I'll even share half with you-"

"I'm not interested in tasting chocolate," sneered Tom scathingly, giving him a suspicious, narrowed-eyed look. "Besides, chocolate bars are a luxury, they are expensive. I would have to give you all my pennies for that-"

"But I'll pay it back next time Alice gives us some!" said Harry vehemently, rocking on the holed heels of his worn down shoes as he tugged on the hem of his brother's shirt. "Please, Tom, please…"

Tom clenched his jaw, clearly another refusal about to come out, but then his expression changed as he gave Harry a calculating and assessing glance.

His dark blue gaze trailed from the tip of his brother's small tattered shoes, up the skinny legs and grey knee-length pants, to the small hips, waist and chest, passing over the exposed bony left shoulder, to the thin neck, and then the face, with the delicate jaw line, the plush, pouty pink lips, the small button nose, the delicate rosy cheeks, the long black eyelashes framing those almond-shaped, large emerald eyes, and those ludicrous humongous glasses, to the tip of his wild messy hair – even the latter, made adults smile fondly.

And the whole picture always caused admiration and bedazzlement in strangers' expressions, and marveled sighs and soft, gentle cooings, making them look as if they had been enchanted by some forest sprite, if such things existed. Which didn't, thankfully; with his little brother he had enough. Gratefully, the world was a rational place.

The corner of Tom's lips curved into a large smirk, his eyes gleaming darkly. "If I do you the favor of getting you a chocolate bar, then you'll have to do me a similar favor in return."

Immediately, Harry became alert, straightening out his back as he skewered his brother with a suspicious gaze. Nothing bode well when his brother had that look in his eyes. "What do you mean, exactly?"

"Just that," said Tom coolly, shooting him a superior look. "Those are my terms. Do you agree?"

Harry shot him another glance, nibbled on his bottom lip, and then glanced at him again. He would regret it, he knew, but he was just so hungry and he so longed to taste chocolate once and for all. Eric had tasted chocolate once and he wouldn't stop yapping about it and he really wanted to know if it was as good as his friend boasted about.

"Fine," he grumbled at last, giving his brother a dirty look before he extended an open hand. "Gimme your pennies."

"Oh no, you won't be needing them," drawled Tom arrogantly, looking entirely too pleased with himself, with a sly expression on his face which Harry didn't like one bit. Tom spread out his own hand, as he added commandingly, "Hand over your glasses."

"What for?" burst out Harry in alarm, his eyes widening as he instinctually grabbed the sides of his glasses with his small hands.

They were his most precious possession, and he greatly took care of them since he knew Alice
couldn't afford to buy him new ones; he always took them off and put them someplace safe before he played around with the other children of the orphanage.

"Do you want a chocolate bar or don't you?" bit out Tom impatiently, his expression growing angered.

"If you break them, I'll make you feel sorry," Harry promised darkly, glaring at his brother with all his might as he carefully withdrew them from his face and gently placed them in Tom's hand.

"You're more liable to break them than I am, little twerp," shot out Tom with a sneer, sliding the glasses into the front pocket of his pants. Then he unceremoniously shoved his brother forward, pushing him towards the shop's door. "Get going, we don't have much time left and you still have to repay the favor after this."

Without his eyeglasses, Harry could still see things; they were blurry but it wasn't that bad, and if he squinted really hard he could even read words. So it wasn't any trouble to yank open the door and trot inside. And soon, he stopped wondering and worrying about what his brother was up to, as his gaze travelled over all the shelves loaded with boxes of all kinds of sweets and confections. It was paradise; even the tingle of the doorbell sounded like angels chiming, to his ears.

He barely paid attention to the matronly woman who was behind the counter, who simply gave them a distracted, cursory glance as she continued stacking some cookie jars on the shelves behind her, evidently having deemed them harmless and as just some little boys wanting to buy a couple of candies.

Meanwhile, Harry was utterly enthralled by everything in sight, to such point that he was caught off guard and unprepared to react in time. Utterly unexpected to him, a foot shot forward from behind him, tangling with his own, and with a cry of surprise and alarm, little Harry went crashing forward, flailing his small arms.

He hit the floor hard and slid forward a few feet; clothed bum sticking in the air, his knees scraped, his elbows aching under the weight of his body, with his jaw throbbing and his tongue hurting awfully – his teeth had bit down on it with the force of the crash.

"Oh my God, little brother!" cried out Tom looking dismayed and terribly concerned as he rushed to Harry's side. "Are you well? Are you hurt?"

The shopkeeper by then had swiftly turned around, gasping when she saw a small, skinny boy sprawled on the floor, the boy's brother, apparently, panicking. The woman instantly went around the counter in order to reach them, as she murmured worriedly, her gaze fixed on Harry, "Oh my, oh my, poor child…"

Tom crouched by Harry's side, with his back turned towards the woman as he tucked a hand under his brother's belly. He pinched the skin there and twisted, hard, as he hissed out into Harry's ear, "Cry, you idiot."

Little Harry didn't need any encouragement; everything hurt, and his brother kept twisting with his pinching fingers, and it seemed to burn there, and his eyes were already watery and tears soon started to roll down his cheeks.

In the midst of the pain, he felt confused and dizzy, and he glanced at Tom with an extremely betrayed and hurt look in his eyes, but he could barely speak, his tongue felt swollen and thick. His brother twisted again, and Harry gasped and let out a sob, wanting nothing more than to kick his tormentor away, but he couldn't move, his knees hurt so much.
"I'm so sorry, ma'am," babbled Tom, ignoring any looks his brother shot at him, as the shopkeeper knelt by their side looking flustered. "He's so clumsy, he never looks where he's going and he constantly trips and-"

"Oh no, no, the floor must have been slippery," said the woman, as she gently and very carefully turned Harry face up, her eyes widening when she saw lovely emerald eyes filled with tears, the boy's beautiful face in pain, as little sobs escaped the pouty lips. Her heart ached in her bosom at the mere sight of it. "Oh you poor sweet boy, Rose will make it all well, you'll see…"

She started crooning softly as she plucked out a handkerchief from her apron and started dabbing it on Harry's small face. "Do you hurt anywhere, child? Just nod or shake your head if you can…"

As the woman fussied and kept rambling and tending to Harry, completely focused on him, Tom stood up and backed away against the shelves, one of his hands hiding back, while his other clenched and unclenched at his side as if with apprehension, his face the picture of concerned anxiousness and helplessness, as if he could do nothing but watch the woman take care of his little brother, he himself hoping for the best.

A couple of minutes passed by, Harry merely answering to the woman's gentle solicitousness as best as he could, feeling some of his aches slowly fading away while his tears subsided and his head began to clear.

The woman helped him to stand up, still looking terribly concerned and Harry finally spoke, his cut, heavy tongue making him stumble with the words, "I'm gud, thak yo. Relly, I'm ph'ine."

The shopkeeper tenderly patted his head as she said softly, "What did you want to buy, dear child?"

"Oh, nothing, ma'am," interjected Tom then, his tone sweet and polite, reaching them and shooting Harry a very worried look as he wrapped an arm over his shoulders, protectively. Harry twitched but remained silent and still. "We only wished to look around." He hung his head low and added in an abashed mumble, "We have no money, you see. We're from an orphanage. Forgive us for-"

"An orphanage!" cried out the woman, bringing a hand to her ample bosom as she looked at them pityingly but also with a warm-hearted expression on her face. "Oh you poor boys... And there's nothing to forgive, nothing at all!"

She instantly swirled around and made her way towards her side of the counter, clattering with jars and boxes until she fixed two small paper cones with a few candies in each, handing them over to Tom with a gentle smile on her face. "Here, for you and your brother."

Tom widened his dark blues eyes as he held the cones, gazing at them in awe, as he whispered reverently, "Thank you, and for helping my younger brother-"

"Hush, hush, I did nothing," said the shopkeeper, shooting Harry a tender look. "I hope you come into the shop next time you're around these parts."

"We certainly will, ma'am," said Tom, beaming a gorgeous smile at her. "Thank you again."

The woman looked thoroughly entranced by them, delighted and pleased as she watched the two boys leave her shop; such polite and breath-taking handsome boys – the younger one in particular, such sweet beauty- and they were orphans at that. If not for their clothes, who would have guessed given their manners and comeliness.

Tom dropped his arm from Harry's shoulders the second they left the store and couldn't been seen by the shopkeeper any longer, pulling his brother's glasses from his pocket and distractedly
offering them back, not sparing his brother a glance as he gazed at the people in the street.

The glasses were swiftly taken from his hand, and Tom clicked his tongue when he saw that many of the children were already back with Alice. "We have no time left. You'll have to repay me next month-"

Abruptly, he was forcefully yanked by a small hand fisting his shirt, and before he could gather his wits, he was aggressively pulled into the small alley at one side of the street.

His eyebrows shot upwards as he stared at his little brother, who was shaking with fury, his emerald eyes flashing, his teeth gritting. Promptly, Tom pulled a nonchalant expression on his face and arched an eyebrow at him.

"You z'ithead!" spat Harry furiously, seeing red as he shoved Tom against the wall with all the strength he could muster. "I cou'd haff brok'n a bon'!"

Tom snarled when his back hit the wall and he took a steadying step forward, but then he was pushed again, and again, every time he tried to steady himself.

By the fourth time, when a flying small fist came towards his face accompanying the shove, he pushed his little brother back in return, as he snapped angrily, his eyes narrowing, "Do you really want to come to blows with me? You'll be left in much more pain than you were before, that I promise."

Harry had stumbled a step back, still glowering at him with a hateful look in his eyes, and Tom pulled himself up to his full height and added coolly, "Besides, you wouldn't have broken any bones when I made you trip. You're resilient and you heal abnormally fast."

Shooting him his darkest glare, Harry then sniffled and rubbed his small nose with the cuff of his sleeves. The place where his brother had pinched him and squeezed and twisted still ached painfully and he pulled up his shirt, seeing a dark violet and blue bruise already forming. He purposely exposed it to his brother's sight, throwing at him a poisonous and accusing look.

"It will be gone in a few hours," said Tom utterly unfazed. "As I said, you heal quickly."

Harry spoke at last, when his tongue had stopped throbbing and no longer felt like an impediment for his speech, "So what? It doesn't mean you can hurt me when you like!" He glared up at his brother. "You should've told me what you wanted to do, you should've asked-"

"Your nattering is getting tedious, little brother," interrupted Tom in a bored tone of voice, before he shot him a wide smirk and dangled the two paper cones in front of his nose. "Here, your reward, brat."

Fuming, Harry shot out his hands and yanked the cones away from his brother's hands, promptly unraveling the papers and sticking the four candies in his pocket, as he groused out darkly, "Candies wasn't what I wanted-"

"And this," interrupted Tom smugly, plucking out a large chocolate bar from his pants' pocket.

"And this," interrupted Tom smugly, plucking out a large chocolate bar from his pants' pocket.

Little Harry's eyes widened and he froze, staring hungrily at the bar as he breathed out, "You filched it… From the shelves? While-"

"While 'Rose',' said Tom scathingly, his lips twisting with disgust, "was tending to you like a flustered mother hen." He shot him an arrogant smirk as he taunting waved the chocolate bar in the air, way above his little brother's reach. "Do you want this, eh? Do you?"
With flash-like reflexes, Harry leapt in the air and instantly grabbed the chocolate bar, giving his brother a little push – just because he was still highly miffed- as he then proceeded to ravenously peel the wrap away.

He broke the bar in half and stuffed the largest piece into his awaiting mouth, very quickly, just in case his brother attempted to steal it from him. Then his eyes fluttered shut, as he savored the explosion of sugary sweetness that burst in his palate, letting out a joyful sigh – it was all that Eric had said and much, much more. He had died and gone to Heaven, little Harry thought happily.

He slowly opened his eyes and worshipfully gazed at the other half left, as he carefully broke it into smaller pieces, soon sticking one of the small squares into his mouth, twirling his tongue around it. As soon as he swallowed, he frowned, looking from the chocolate squares in his sticky palm to his brother, and back.

Finally, he shot his brother a stern and accusing glance as he piped, "You stole. You shouldn't have, it's wrong. Alice says so-"

"When will you stop parroting what that stupid woman says," bit out Tom acidly, narrowing angered dark blue eyes at him, "and start thinking for yourself?"

"I do think for myself," snapped little Harry, squaring his small shoulders as he glared up at him. "I know – I know that stealing is against the Law too, so there!"

"Do you actually think I care two straws about that?" sneered Tom contemptuously, looking down at his brother as he towered over him. "I'm not stupid enough to get caught. I don't care about laws or Alice's or anyone else's rules of conduct, understand?"

Harry shot him a glower. He understood but he didn't agree. Nevertheless, he had more important matters on his mind – namely, to satisfy his sweet tooth. With a wide toothy grin, he munched down the remaining couple of small chocolate squares, his pink tongue flicking out to lick the traces of it left on his lips.

"You're such a little hypocrite," hissed out Tom as he watched what his little brother was doing with a mix of abhorrence and wry disgust, "you have no compunction in gobbling down the chocolate and you go preaching about the wrongness of stealing-"

"You stole it, not I," pointed out Harry sensibly, as he began licking the smudges of chocolate left in his sticky palm and fingers, very much like a little kitten contently licking its paws, purring with satisfaction.

Tom scoffed, but before he could continue saying anything nasty, Harry dropped his hand from his mouth and shot him a grave frown, as he intoned, "And I know you've stolen other stuff. Eric's mouth organ, Billy's yo-yo, Alice's sowing thimble…"

He trailed off as he remembered the day he had discovered his brother's 'treasure box'. A week before, he had gone into their room and he had seen Tom sitting crossed legged on his cot, a cardboard box on his lap as his fingers caressed whatever was inside, his expression one of glee and self-satisfaction. The moment Tom had noticed Harry's presence, the boy had swiftly closed the box, rolling on the cot to give Harry his back as he pulled the sheets over himself and the box he hid.

Naturally, after that, little Harry had used all available time in which he was alone in the room to search for the mysterious box. He had finally found it in the depths of their wardrobe, in a corner under piles of hidden newspapers which had been mutilated with scissors, apparently articles being
clipped off from them – those newspapers were another thing.

Harry had wasted no time in opening the box and he had been dumbstruck by what he found inside; mostly, presents that the other children had received for some of their birthdays one year or other, and which had promptly disappeared, none in the orphanage having any clue of who was the perpetrator of the crimes. Though Kathy did shoot Tom suspicious dark looks once in a while, Harry wasn't blind to that.

But he still didn't understand why Tom did it. His brother couldn't possibly be interested or value any of the things he had nicked. And Harry didn't like that his brother was stealing; all the children had cried when their things had gone missing and Harry didn't like to see his friends cry. And he especially hadn't been happy when he had seen Alice's thimble inside the box.

"You dared…" snarled Tom, his expression ominously darkening with mounting fury as he took a threatening step towards him. "…you went through my things?"

"We share the same wardrobe and your cardboard box was there," snapped Harry as he squared his shoulders, his expression utterly unrepentant. "It's not my fault if you left it lying around. I was curious so I peeked inside." He pierced him with his emerald eyes and demanded sternly, "Why do you do it?"

"It's none of your business," spat Tom glaring down at him, his spine and shoulders stiff.

Little Harry cocked his head to a side, eyeing him with puzzlement, his brows furrowing. Truly, there were many times in which he didn't understand his brother at all. "You steal Alice's newspapers too-"

Tom swiftly interrupted him, sneering at him scornfully, "She thinks she's being so smart. She leaves them behind on purpose, you dolt." And without pause, he loomed over his little brother, skewering him with eyes narrowed to slits, as he hissed out in a low, menacing tone of voice, "You better not be thinking about telling anyone about my box-"

"I'm no tattle-tale!" piped Harry with indignation, feeling deeply insulted as he pulled himself up to his full, yet still short, height. And then he added simply, as if it was self-explanatory, "Besides, you're my brother."

Momentarily stumped, Tom stared at him; clearly Harry's sentiments of implicit and unwavering loyalty to a brother something unexpected and foreign to him. Then his lips slowly curved upwards into a wide smirk, his dark blue eyes gleaming with pleased satisfaction. However, all positive feelings he was holding for Harry at that very moment soon vanished when his little brother flapped his gums again.

"I want you to give them back," said Harry with a stubborn expression on his face, his small jaw tightening. He nibbled on his bottom lip pensively, as he added, "You can leave them under the old couch in the playroom. It could look as if Puffy had been stealing them to make a nest or something." He then shot his brother an uncertain look. "Rabbits do that, don't they?"

"I'm not returning them," snarled Tom venomously. "They're mine now."

"You don't use them, you just stare at them!" bit out Harry accusingly. "And it's not right. Alice was so sad when she 'lost' her thimble, you know. It's made of silver and it's expensive." He shot his brother a mighty glower. "It was her mother's, one of the few things she has left of her."

Tom scoffed loudly, shooting him a bored look as he said coolly, "Do I look like I care?"
Harry glared daggers at him, before he thought quickly and then shot his brother a nasty grin. "Fine, then see if I return the 'favor', as you called it. I've had my chocolate already, after all."

And with that, he spun on his heels with every intention of leaving the alley and go back to the street to join Alice and the other children.

Instantly, a hand landed on his small shoulder, squeezing hard, and he was forcefully swirled around to be confronted with Tom's furious face, the taller boy hissing out, "We had a deal, you little urchin, so you must uphold your end of the bargain--"

"Says who?" chirped Harry, toothily grinning at him.

"Me!" snarled Tom, his rage mounting when Harry shot him an utterly unimpressed glance. He forced himself to rein in his temper and then superiorly smirked at him, as he added pointedly, "And surely Alice says that deals can't be broken, right? It's a matter of honor or some such thing--"

"She does," interrupted little Harry, his grin widening vindictively. "But I must 'think for myself', don't I? And I'm thinking..." He made a show of humming pensively, tapping one finger on his chin. Then he shot his brother a glower and snapped, "That you can stuff it!"

Tom's fingers sunk into Harry's shoulders, making the smaller boy wince even as he was already rubbing his scar which had started to throb painfully.

"I'll return the thimble," gritted out Tom as he if he had to make an unimaginable effort to push those words through his teeth.

Feeling quite cheerful and pleased with himself, Harry beamed and said eagerly, "And the other things too--"

"Just the thimble - take it or leave it!" spat Tom harshly, his tight jaw clenching with infuriated vexation.

A mutinous expression crossed over Harry's small face for a moment, before he deflated and grumbled, "Fine." He shot his brother a look full of apprehension, and added, "What do I have to do to return the favor?"

Tom dropped his hands from his little brother's shoulders and gave him a smug smirk, as he said smoothly, "It worked quite well, didn't it? You 'tripping' and crashing on the floor, averting attention from me as I nicked the chocolate bar." His smirk grew larger as his dark blue eyes gleamed. "I want us to do the same thing, only in a bookstore next time. I won't trip you, you can just stumble on some shelf or something like that – I don't want you whining to me about how I 'hurt' you."

He shot Harry a sneer at this, before he continued, his voice now turning eager and excited, "I'll be able to tuck a book behind my back, under the waistline of my pants, if it's small enough. And we can take turns. One month you decide what you want and which store to hit, then next time I choose, and so on. Alice takes us to different commercial areas often so we won't be caught and no one will suspect."

Gaping at him, Harry stared with wide eyes, before he swallowed thickly, finding his voice as he whispered, still shocked, "You're talking about stealing again. Stealing every time Alice takes us out." He frantically shook his head. "I won't steal, Tom!"

"Ah, but as you pointed out before," interjected Tom, giving him a superior look as his lips twisted upwards, "you won't be stealing, only I will."
Furrowing his brow, Harry shot him a dubious glance. "But I'll still be your accomp-
 accomp-

"Accomplice," bit out Tom impatiently. "Yes, you will." He then pierced his little brother with livid, smoldering, narrowed eyes, and spat, "You can't refuse. You had no scruples about eating your chocolate so you can't refuse now. It's the same thing."

"I dunno…" trailed off Harry uncertainly, shifting from one foot to the other as he fretfully played with the hem of his tattered shirt. He bit on his bottom lip and peered up at his brother anxiously. "What if we get caught, what if the shopkeeper doesn't care when I fall, what if-

"They will care, because of your face, and your eyes," snapped Tom briskly, glaring at him with annoyance. "They are…" His lips twisted with disgust and he spat harshly, "Pretty. And when your eyes are all watery and teary they make the adults' pathetic little hearts melt. Get it?"

Harry stared at him. And ever so slowly, his pouty lips curved until he was toothily grinning. "I know."

Momentarily dumbstruck, Tom stared back at him. Then his eyes dangerously narrowed, piercing the small boy, as if wishing to painfully dissect him to see his insides and all his inner thoughts.

Utterly unfazed, Harry merely broadened his grin roguishly. Really, what did his brother think? He wasn't that thick. Over the years he had seen how the grownups reacted to him; he would have to be blind and stupid not to notice.

And he had learned stuff being around Tom; like how Tom became all polite towards Alice when she was giving him private lessons, and how he sweet-talked to strangers to get things he wanted when they went out, just like what had happened a few moments ago with the shopkeeper, Tom being all nice and innocent…

Well, little Harry had come to understand that what his brother did was acting and that he manipulated people like that. And thus he had known that his own weapons were his so-called adorable good looks and, particularly, his eyes.

He didn't use the tactic often, only sometimes, and it always worked, especially if he cried and looked helpless and vulnerable. Why, it even worked on Tom and his brother never seemed to be aware when he purposely used it with him.

Little Harry inwardly grinned devilishly at that thought.

"So you knew…" muttered Tom trailing off, still skewering him with his gaze. Then he scoffed loudly. "You little imp."

"But it doesn't mean that I want to do it," snapped Harry instantly, crossing his arms over his chest, then huffing. "And why should I be the one who falls? That hurts. We should take turns-"

"It won't work if I fall," hissed out Tom, looking just as stubborn as his little brother. "I'm not 'cute'-" he said this with evident stoic pride "-only you are. So you have to be the one who falls."

Harry scrunched his nose, not at all pleased, before he mumbled, "Fine, I'll think about it, then."

"No," bit out Tom angrily, narrowing his dark blue eyes at him. "You must agree now, and commit to it and-"

"HARRY - TOM? HARRY?" Alice's panicked shouts reached their ears at that moment, the woman evidently having been searching for them for some time.
Harry shot his brother a toothy grin and made his bid for escape, trotting out of the alley with a cheerful skip to his steps.

His brother soon followed after him with a darkly vexed expression on his face – but that was just fine, Harry wanted Tom to seethe and simmer for a while, it was only fair since his brother had been so mean to him that day.

Eventually, little Harry did cave in to Tom's relentless insistence, and cajoling, and threats. And the Riddle brothers soon perfected their act.

For the following four years, shopkeepers and owners all around London would be puzzled when they discovered that one or two of their wares had gone missing. They would ponder about bad management or thieving customers or even shop attendants who filched at their workplace.

But they would never think about the two orphan boys who had visited their shop except to remember lovely tearful emerald eyes amidst beautiful features which mesmerized and captured their hearts and dark blue eyes in an elegantly handsome face which made them let out a fluttery sigh.

That night, as Tom reread his collection of newspapers clippings about Germany and the Nazi ideology, as he pondered about the happenings in the world, as he darkly smirked when he eyed Alice's Communist pamphlets, and as he gazed down at his little brother who was sleeping curled up beside him, he came to many conclusions and some decisions.

Many of them were based on what he knew about his little brother, who had proven to be just as special as he himself was. Indeed, three years ago, and a couple of months after Tom had hurt Dennis, Harry's special abilities had burst forth. The boy had been five years old.

Musing about this, and about what he knew loomed in the near future for England and Europe, Tom felt too restless and excited to be able to sleep. And he decided to take a stroll around the corridors of the orphanage. It would help him clear his mind before attempting to rest again.

That night, in his wanderings around the orphanage, what he would overhear and then would be told, would shake him to the core, the consequences of it being many and profound throughout the years.
Part I: Chapter 4

As Tom silently strode along one of the dark corridors of the orphanage, hearing the distant sounds of the caregivers bustling about as they finished their nightly duties, his mind swirled with tumultuous thoughts which refused to be abated from everything he had been reading lately.

He mused, most particularly, about the Nazi's ideals. Aryan race, they called themselves, and some journalist said the distinction of this assumed ethnic superiority was based primarily on coloring – blue eyes and blonde hair which denoted pure German ancestry.

Yet Tom thought this was a flimsy notion at best; at least a third of the German population were dark haired or dark eyed - their leader, Hitler, most conspicuously. However, the Nazis declared that not only such coloring indicated who belonged to their master race, but they also gave importance to handsomeness, to symmetric and pleasing facial features and to physical perfection, such as height, and strong and sturdy limbs, which gave way to excellence in sports.

Moreover, and most importantly, they attributed to themselves an unparalleled acuity and sharpness of mind. They even said that their superior intelligence could be evidenced in the shape of their heads.

This too was utter folly in Tom's opinion. Indeed, he knew himself to be a prodigal genius, probably the greatest one in the whole world, and yet the shape of his skull was as normal as could be.

There was nothing particular about it, he mused as he pensively touched his temples and then the back of his head, while he continued with his distracted amblings around the orphanage, taking the flight of stairs to reach the ground floor.

And if intelligence and physical perfection were the parameters on which the Germans based their superiority, then Tom thought that if there was anyone who could be hailed as 'superior', it was only him.

Well, and his brother as well, he supposed - not only because of their breath-taking handsomeness,
as it was called by others, but due to their 'special abilities'. As far as he knew, they were the only ones in existence who wielded such strange and unexplainable 'powers' – to call them something. That alone already marked them as unique and vastly superior to everyone else in the world. This idea deeply pleased and satisfied him, since it made sense and seemed logical and rational.

However, not for the first time, he wondered if there could possibly be others like him and his brother. Ever since he had discovered that Harry was special too, he had pondered about it, his feelings warring and clashing, still making him indecisive on whether he wanted them to be the only ones or if it would be best if there were others like them.

Nearly three years had passed since Harry's 'powers' had manifested, and Tom still hadn't reached a conclusion regarding the matter. He remembered the incident clearly, it had happened a few months after he had hurt Dennis and had explained it to Harry.

They had been five years old then, and since it had been summer, all the children had been playing in the orphanage's backyard.

Ever since he had hurt Dennis, the older boy had stayed far away from him. The other children also gave him a wide berth given that they had become even more fearful of him since the 'incident'. Tom had been quite satisfied with this outcome.

That day, Tom had gone back inside the house to pick up one of his books, leaving Harry playing with his friends.

Later, Tom had heard his brother's own account of what had happened.

Harry hadn't paid much attention when Tom had left, since Dennis had so far avoided him. But it seemed that the bully instantly noticed when Tom was missing, because Harry had been cheerfully giggling one second as he played with Eric and Billy, and in the next second, stones started to pelt down on him.

It was Dennis, who had taken the opportunity to start hurling at him the stones he had been playing with. It had hurt a lot, and as much as Harry tried to cover his face and body with his arms, it wasn't enough.

The other children who were also scared of Dennis, as usual, didn't do anything. So little Harry had been forced to run for cover, but that seemed to incite the bully even further, since Dennis started hurling at him even larger stones as he gave chase, shrieking with laughter and spewing mocking insults.

And then, suddenly, as Harry continued running and he cried because his whole body seemed to ache from the hits, as he wished and wished that everything could stop and that he was somewhere safe, then, one second he was there and in the next moment, he landed somewhere else. Harry had gawked when he had abruptly found himself in the middle of his room.

Tom had seen it, of course. With book in hand, he had been going back, taking a step to cross the threshold between house and backyard, when he saw his little brother running away from Dennis, flailing his small arms to attempt shield himself from the hurled stones.

He had felt an instant bout of tremendous fury and was about to unleash it on his brother's tormentor once again - and this time to make Dennis hurt beyond all endurance of pain, so that the bully would be left as nothing but a mindless, empty-eyed shell – when the most extraordinary thing happened.
His little brother simply disappeared, right in front of all the children's eyes. Tom had gaped.

He had wasted no time in swiftly looking around for Harry, his mind spinning with clashing thoughts and emotions. At last, he found his little brother standing in the middle of their room, his shoulders shaking.

When Tom had thought that Harry was crying and trembling with fear, his expression softened and his mind cleared, leaving him simply feeling jubilant that his brother was special, just like him. He had been exceedingly proud then, and even excited.

But soon, he had seen that Harry wasn't fearful.

The moment Harry glanced up and saw him, he jumped up and down as he rambled eagerly and joyously, "I disappeared, Tom! I was running and then I was wishing to be somewhere else, and then I felt as if I was squeezed through a rubber tube, and then I was here!"

And just at that very moment, Tom's emotions had drastically changed. He had felt rage and contempt and envy; he had been unique up until then, only he could do extraordinary things, and now his little brat of a brother had suddenly done something he hadn't.

Tom had never vanished from one spot to another, and it galled him that Harry had accomplished something so amazing first, before it even crossed his mind that such thing could be possible. Harry had bested him in that regard and it was not something he could stand.

And his little brother had kept yapping about it as if it was the greatest thing since sliced bread, and it had only made him feel even more furious.

Tom had shot him his most withering and scornful sneer and had turned around on his heels, slamming the door shut behind him.

For the following three months he had utterly disregarded his little brother, he hadn't even spoken one word to him; he had shoved him away every night when his little brother attempted to get into his cot so that Tom soothed his scar after the nightmares, and he had ignored all his little brother's confused, wounded and pleading glances.

But even though he did all those things, he hadn't stop observing Harry from afar and what he had seen over those three months had made all of his dark emotions increase and mount and pile up and flare.

He had seen Harry doing other things, as if something had opened and burst forth from within Harry, more strange abilities blooming and pouring out.

One day he had awoken and he had seen Harry sitting up on his cot, the boy's hair suddenly reaching his shoulders and with a pair of scissors in hand. The boy had cut locks of his hair and in an instant they grew back, and his little brother giggled and did it again. And then he shortened his hair without the need to do anything and then made it long again, and so forth.

Once he had seen Harry sitting by the row of flowers at the backyard, and the boy had had a closed bud in his hands and it suddenly bloomed magnificently, gorgeous big petals unraveling open, as leaves grew and fluttered along the stem.

Sometimes when Harry had his nightmares, their cot frames would shake and the nightstand rattled and their wardrobe's doors would flap open and shut. Snarling with anger and vexation, Tom had been forced on those occasions to hurl a book at his brother's head, to brutally wake him up. And without uttering a word of comfort, Tom had always shot him a contemptuous sneer before rolling
over to give Harry his back and go back to sleep, ignoring his brother's sniffles.

It had gotten worse when the rabbit had been brought to the orphanage. During those three months of estrangement between Tom and Harry, when Harry played with his so-called friends with the animal, the bunny would suddenly jump, flip in the air and land back, or flick its ears as if in synchrony to some tune, or stand on its two hind paws and take steps forward – all things that were clearly abnormal, that his little brother was clearly making happen.

The boy's friends soon realized it, but they didn't look at Harry with fear, but with wonder and fascination. And they quietly whispered among themselves, encouraging Harry to make the rabbit do more funny things when there were no adults around.

To add insult to injury, a couple of times when his little brother was playing with his friends, some toy would simply fly into Harry's hands or disappear from its place and pop right beside him, and his friends clapped and cheered even more.

It had been the last straw for Tom when he had seen his brother playing with that stupid little simpering girl, Amy, who was always around Harry, blushing and staring at him like a love-struck mooncalf.

The girl had been playing with a hair ribbon, and Harry had taken it from her hands, widely smiling at her as the string of cloth suddenly fluttered into the air and started coiling itself, soon forming a pink bow which Harry had then timidly presented to the girl as if he was some sort of gallant knight wooing his demure and abashed princess.

The second Amy had gazed wide-eyed at Harry, entranced and worshipfully, her rosy cheeks flushing and her lips puckering into a beaming, coy smile, Tom had jumped to his feet, taken a few strides to reach them and had grabbed his brother by the scruff of his shirt, forcefully yanking him out of the room.

Without saying a word, as a perplexed and alarmed Harry attempted to fight against his brusque hold, Tom had started dragging him towards the staircase, to reach their room in order to have a private 'chat' with him.

However, his endeavor had been interrupted when Alice had burst through the corridor, running and picking up toys and things littering the hallway, as she beamed and shouted urgently and excitedly, "Children, gather around in the parlor, we have visitors!"

Awestruck and startled, everyone had gaped at first; Harry's friends poking their heads out the door to stare at her, gobsmacked. Then everything had exploded in a flurry of activity, as Alice grabbed Tom's and Harry's hands, pulling them back inside the room, and as Kathy quickly arranged the rest of the children in one neat row.

That had been the first time that St. Jerome's Orphanage had received any prospective adoptive parents and most of the children were too nervous and surprised to do anything but stand in place whilst fretfully attempting to tidy up their ruffled and tattered clothing and their scruffy appearances.

All the while, Alice and Kathy finished tidying up the room, just as Mrs. Sharpe, clearly having had one too many glasses of gin, had entered the room with an unsteady step, a couple following behind her.

Tom had narrowed his eyes at them, scrutinizing them, seeing the expensive clothes, the air about them of elegance and wealth, the pinched expression of mild disgust on the man's stern face as he
eyed the peeling wallpaper and the ratty furniture and the expression of reserved expectancy on the woman's delicate features.

Alice soon took command of the situation when it was evident that Mrs. Sharpe wasn't clearheaded enough to do her job, and she quickly chatted with the couple in a hushed and brief conversation before she started introducing them to the first child on the line, in descending order of age.

And then, Tom had glanced at his brother who was standing by his side, both of them the last in the line. Harry's emerald eyes had been wide with awe and excitement, as he cheerfully waved a hand at the visitors, rocking on his feet and widely grinning.

It hadn't come as a surprise for Tom when he saw the couple halting in mid progression along the line of children, their gaze snapping to Harry, the woman's eyes lightening up, a soft smile forming on her painted lips as her expression softened, while the man's eyebrows rose and his gaze turned calculating and then satisfied and pleased by what he saw.

It had been then that Tom had known how to best teach his brother the important point he had wanted to drive through Harry's thick skull that day.

Meanwhile, the couple had reached them and the woman had been already cooing at Harry as the boy answered one of her questions by puffing out his chest, grinning toothily as he stuck out four fingers as he chirped proudly, "I'm five!"

Even the stern-looking man had given a small smile at that, and the couple soon pulled Alice to a side as they started murmuring amongst themselves. By then, Mrs. Sharpe was slumped on a chair at the other side of the room, sleeping off her drunken stupor, while Kathy made sure that none of the children broke the line or misbehaved.

Inevitably, some parts of the conversation between the couple and Alice reached Tom's ears, but none of it fazed him. He impassively stared at them, shooting Alice a calm smirk when their gazes met.

"... yes, Harry is a dear, sweet boy, but you see, they're twins," was saying Alice fretfully, as she shot a perturbed glance at Tom. "It wouldn't be right to separate them... now, if you wanted them both..."

The man's gaze briefly landed on Tom. "... he's handsome, I grant, but we only want one child and my wife is quite set on the small boy-"

"Tom's very studious and astoundingly smart," quickly interjected Alice. "A prodigy, I would say, and he's very... er, well-mannered and polite-"

When it became evident to him that Alice would go any lengths to ensure that Harry and he would not be split up, Tom decided to act before the caregiver started to outright lie and spout that he was a sweet, good-natured child or some such thing.

After all, he had no intention of being adopted by anyone. The orphanage was a ghastly place which he despised with all his heart but at least he was just one of many children, and thus wasn't too closely supervised. Having adoptive parents, though it certainly entailed having a better lifestyle and could open more doors to a glorious future, also meant having two people butting their noses in his affairs and watching what he did, constantly.

He wasn't about to swap one form of authority for another. It was independence from any adult that he wanted, and of course, where he went, Harry followed. He didn't even consider that he could be
robbing Harry from having a better life. His brother's place was with him, always.

Swiftly, Tom pulled Harry towards him, leaning down to whisper into his brother's ear, "Go to them before they change their minds and leave. Tell them you want to speak to them alone, to get to know them. Take them to the backyard -it's sunny outside- and then show them what you can do. Do the flower thing."

"What?" Harry gaped at him, evidently at first startled that his brother was talking to him after being given the cold shoulder for three months, and then looking nervous as he stared at him with wide eyes, as he mumbled, "You know? You've seen-

"Of course I know about the things you've been doing, you idiot," hissed out Tom angrily, before he quickly composed himself and rearranged his features to a pleasant and calm expression as he soothingly patted his brother on the head, his voice turning soft, "But we'll talk about that later. Now go and do as I said."

"You want me to show them? With the flower?" whispered Harry, gazing up at him uncertainly as he bit his lower lip fretfully. "Are you sure? Won't they-"

"Yes, I'm sure," snapped Tom with annoyance, then sweetly smiling at him as he continued gently, "They'll see that you're special and they'll like you even more for it."

Little Harry gazed at him dubiously, mulling over it, before he apparently decided that his brother had to be right. After all, Tom was way smarter than him. He beamed, already excited about the prospective of doing something nice for the couple and chirped cheerfully, "Alright."

And with that, Tom merely inwardly smirked with satisfaction as he watched how Harry bounded up to the couple and tugged on the woman's skirt, peering up at the rich lady as he started babbling and pointing a finger in the backyard's direction.

Tom didn't even pay attention to what was being said. In a few minutes, the couple and Harry made their way outdoors, leaving Alice looking a bit perplexed. The caregiver even shot him a concerned and sad glance, as if worrying what would happen to Tom if the couple decided to adopt Harry and take him away right there and then. He simply answered by calmly gazing back at her with an unperturbed expression on his face.

Soon Alice had other things to worry about when the rest of the children finally figured out that Harry had won and that they were indeed not wanted or liked. And as some of them broke into tears and sobs and others sullenly sulked or scowled, Tom slipped away from the room and down the corridor.

Reaching the kitchen, he stood at its farthest end, right in front of the window above the sink, gazing out through the glass panels with an unencumbered view of the whole backyard.

Tom's lips twisted as he gazed at the sickeningly sweet picture the trio made; the stylish and well-to-do couple doting on a poor little orphan boy, happily yapping as they all sat on the old bench amidst the shrubbery, no doubt already making plans about the wonderful life they would give to their little Harry.

By the looks on their faces, the wealthy couple appeared to be already enchanted by Harry. And by the gentle and loving way the woman was gazing down at his brother, it was clear to Tom that they indeed intended to treat Harry well and give him all the boy could ever need or want. Not that it really mattered.
A self-satisfied smirk curled Tom’s lips as the events unfolded as he had hoped for. Good little brother that Harry was, the boy was doing exactly what Tom had instructed him to do.

Crouching down, Harry plucked a small flower bud from the nearest plant, presenting it to the woman. The lady beamed, clearly finding it adorable that she was being gifted a flower in such a sweet gesture, but before she could accept it, Harry shook his head as he widely grinned, lifting up his palms to display the nice thing he could do. In an instant, the bud in his hands unraveled in a gorgeous array of colorful petals, as leaves burst from the stem, and the flower floated up into mid air, as it kept growing and blossoming even further.

The woman's horrified shriek interrupted the display, the couple jumping to their feet, the woman staggering backwards and almost toppling over the bench. Her husband soon pulled her upright and then away as the woman's scream continued, their faces pale and terrified. In the next second, they turned tail and ran as if the hounds of hell were after them, the man's booming voice reaching Tom's ears as the couple entered the house.

"… I don't know what kind of twisted joke… what kind of demented circus you're running here... we're never setting foot in here again!"

Wiping the smirk from his face as he calmly strode into the corridor, Tom saw all the children and caregivers huddled near the entrance door, having heard the screams and no doubt perplexed when the man spat those words at Alice before he yanked his pale-faced and stammering and mumbling wife out the front door.

Tom had a second to savor the conclusion of a plan well made, before Harry burst out from the door leading to the backyard, instantly catching sight of him.

Sobbing uncontrollably, looking scared, crushed and miserable, he yelled at Tom, "I did what you said – you knew, you lied – I HATE YOU!"

Wretchedly crying and hiccupping, Harry turned his back on everyone and swiftly scrambled up the staircase, the sound of a bedroom door being slammed shut resounding seconds later.

Alice swiveled around to stare at Tom in confusion, as if asking for some sort of explanation to Harry's strange and incomprehensible accusation, while the rest of the children animatedly burst with questions. Tom didn't even miss the way that Kathy Cole was gazing at him with narrowed eyes, suspicion and condemnation in them.

Looking extremely concerned and troubled, Tom stared back at them with wide eyes as he murmured apprehensively, "I'll see what happened. I'll calm him down."

And with that, he quickly made way towards his bedroom. He found Harry huddled on his cot against the corner, his body curled up in a small ball, with his head bowed and tucked between his knees as he sobbed quietly.

Tom tsked and approached the boy. Staring down at Harry's heaving and trembling shoulders, he drawled in a severe tone of voice, "Have you learned the lesson?"

Harry's sobs stilled and the boy gave one last hiccup, before he lifted up his head to hatefully glare at Tom with a tear-stained face, as he said hoarsely, "What?"

Tom skewered him with an unforgiving gaze as he said curtly, "The lesson, you pea-brained idiot, that you must never show to others the things you can do." He contemptuously sneered at him as he added, "For three months you've being parading around, doing stuff around your friends-"
"No one saw!" yelled Harry as he unfurled from his curled up position to glower at his brother. "I never did anything around the grownups-"

"But your so-called friends can blab about it," snapped Tom angrily, sitting down on the cot by Harry's side. "You cannot trust them-"

"They promised they wouldn't say anything," snapped Harry heatedly as he wiped his eyes with his shirt's cuff. "They like the things I can do-"

"Because they are stupid and don't understand, because they're amused by it, but they will soon realize that what you do is not normal." Tom pierced him with his dark blue eyes as he added sternly, "When they're older, they'll know, and they'll tell on you."

"They won't," gritted out Harry, though he eyed Tom uncertainly as he nibbled anxiously on his lower lip. Then he frowned and glared daggers at him as he said accusingly, "But you made me do the flower thing! You say now I shouldn't do that stuff but you-"

"Because I wanted you to see the consequences of it," interjected Tom impatiently. He shot him a superior look as he demanded curtly, "How did they react?"

Harry's eyes teared up as he mumbled softly, "I think they were afraid..."

"You think?" sneered Tom with condescension. "They were afraid of you, and what's more, they hated you for it."

"Hate me?" echoed Harry in a tiny voice as he stared at him with wide eyes, his expression miserable as his small shoulders hunched.

"Yes, that's how people will react if they know," said Tom sharply with utter conviction, pinning his brother with an unrelenting harsh gaze. "And they would lock us away in a loony bin, too. Do you want that?"

Harry's eyes impossibly widened with fear as he quickly shook his head, and Tom was momentarily pleased by it. Indeed, the latter he had said was no lie - not in its entirety.

He had once overheard Kathy Cole telling Alice that they should call some doctor to check his head. Apparently, Mrs. Cole was quite certain that he suffered from some dangerous psychological problems and that a stint in an asylum was the best remedy for him.

The day when he had overheard that, he had known fear for the first time in his life, imagining what it would be like to be alone, cooped up in a small room without seeing daylight for the rest of his existence.

Granted, Kathy Cole had never said anything about having Harry checked by any doctors, but it was best if his brother was scared of it all the same. It was a miracle that, in the three months that Harry had been 'entertaining' his friends, none of the caregivers had seen anything unusual going on.

It was thus that Tom had extracted from Harry the promise that he would never again do anything 'special' in front of others, and thankfully Harry obeyed and only did things when they were alone in their room.

It was that way, too, how in the subsequent years in which several couples came to the orphanage, Harry never again drew attention to himself, and simply stood in line, with a bowed head and staring at his shoes, without saying a word when the couples attempted to speak to him.
Tom had thoroughly convinced his brother that if any couple liked Harry, then that they would be torn apart and never see each other again, and that the couple would end up carting him off to the loony bin if they ever adopted him. Not that Harry had needed to be further convinced about any of it – for the little boy it became stuff of nightmares to imagine any life away from his brother's side.

Nevertheless, that day after the disastrous affair with the first couple that had visited the orphanage, Harry had still moped around the house, looking dejected and miserable.

It had been that night when Tom had decided to finally introduce his companion to Harry, as a way of cheering up his brother and also because he had been very curious about the outcome of the meeting. For some years he had kept her only to himself, possessive of her and with no wish to share her with his brother, but after Harry had given evidence that he could do special things just like Tom, he had wondered how far their similarities reached.

Just before the caregivers started rounding up the children to force them into their bedrooms for a night of sleep, Tom had slipped to the backyard in search for his companion's nest in the depths of the shrubbery. Carrying her back to the house, coiled around his forearm under his sleeve, he had uncovered her before Harry's gaze.

"What's that?" had gasped out Harry in awe, staring at the small, scaly creature with wide eyes.

"A snake, you idiot," drawled Tom with irritation, unimpressed with his brother's limited wits or deductive abilities. "What else could she be?"

"It's a she?" murmured Harry softly, now staring at the slim creature coiled around his brother's arm, no longer than Tom's arm from wrist to elbow and no thicker than a finger.

His wonder and eager curiosity was plain on his features as he took a step closer to admire the gleaming, tiny green scales which had a bluish or black hue to them.

"Yesss, I'm a girl," hissed the little snake proudly, as she reared forward to flick her tongue out to taste the boy in front of her.

With a yelp of alarm, Harry jumped in the air, tripping and landing on the floor on his bum, panting out a haggard breath as he stared up at the creature with huge eyes.

Pointing a shaky finger at her, he gasped out, still startled out of his wits, "It speaks!"

A thin smile of satisfaction stretched on Tom's face, his gaze fixed on his brother, as he hissed quietly, "You do understand her, then?"

"What? Of course I do – it speaks in English!" sputtered Harry, gawking at the creature as he picked himself up from the floor, his eyes as wide as moons. In the next second, an expression of sudden understanding and fascinated awe crossed his expression, as he chirped happily, "Are you a princess turned into a snake? Like the princess in Alice's story that became a swan because the evil witch cursed her?"

"A princess?" hissed the snake, swaying her head to a side, giving the impression that she was seriously pondering about the matter, though it was evident that she didn't fully understand the notion.

"She's not a princess," snapped Tom with irritation, not for the first time damning Alice and her stories, for filling his brother's head with moronic ideas."People don't turn into animals, Harry." Then he transferred his glower to the snake and hissed sharply, "And you're not a girl, you're a female. That's the proper term since you're an animal and not a person. How many times
"do I have to tell you?"

"I understand, Master," hissed the small snake, her tone contrite as she settled her head back on Tom's hand.

"Master?" Harry gaped, his emerald eyes flickering from his brother to the creature and back.

Tom superiorly smirked at him as he slowly trailed his fingers along his companion's length, caressing the small, smooth scales. "Of course I'm her master. It's only proper she addresses me as such. She's mine, after all."

Harry blinked and then stared at him with a dubious expression on his face, finally simply giving a shrug as he wrapped his mind around the fact that his brother had discovered a snake that could speak – and in English to boot!

"It's amazing," he breathed out, his awed gaze fixed on the beautiful snake. A wide grin grew on his face, as he rambled excitedly, "How did she learn how to speak? How did she learn English? And are there others like her?"

"Learn English?" hissed Tom, a low chuckle escaping from his lips as he shot his brother a smirk. "She doesn't speak English. She doesn't 'speak' at all, not in the strict sense of the word. And you haven't been speaking English either, you little twit."

He pierced his brother with his dark blue eyes, his expression turning arrogant and self-satisfied, as he added, his tone turning quiet and slow, "She hisses, just as you have been hissing all this time. Just as I'm hissing right now. Listen carefully to my voice, to my words... what do you hear?"

Little Harry's expression of confusion soon turned into one of startlement as he did as his brother asked, for the first time really concentrating hard out of his own will.

"What are you hearing, Harry?" continued Tom, his smirk widening as he gazed down at his brother's awe-struck face.

"Hissing," mumbled Harry, his small forehead scrunching with a perplexed frown, "but English too... like... the words being on top of it... like hearing both at the same time."

"Exactly," hissed Tom with satisfaction, as he nonchalantly continued petting the snake, gracefully sitting down on his cot.

"But – but, I don't understand," spluttered Harry, as he also took a seat on the cot, yet in sharp contrast to his brother, just plopping himself down on it. He peeled his gaze from the snake to stare at his brother, bewildered, as he said nervously, "What's going on?"

"I thought it would be quite plain to you," said Tom, shooting him a sneer before he continued stoically, "We can speak to snakes – understand their language and speak it as well, when we're looking at a snake or thinking about one." He shot him a wide smirk, as he added gleefully, "No one else can, Harry. I tested it. It's clear, this is just one more special thing we can do."

"Oh!" breathed out Harry, his eyes becoming wide as he gazed back at the snake. In the next instant, a giddy grin broke on his face, as he chuckled happily and comfortably stretched himself on the cot, to peer at the snake closer.

In no time at all, the small snake was oozing contentment and satisfaction under Harry's pampering ministrations, with the boy giggling as he caressed and tickled her scales, and chuckling when the snake's tiny tongue flickered out to taste his fingers.
"What's your name?" hissed Harry as he adoringly scratched the snake under her belly, as she had requested.

"I named her Nagini," said Tom curtly, eyeing their interaction with a reprimanding expression on his face.

Harry's gaze snapped up to him at that, and he snickered as he declared gleefully, "You took it from that story that Alice read to us – from The Jungle Book, Rikki-Tikki-Tavi! Nag and Nagaina were the two bad snakes-"

"I most certainly did not take the name from that stupid tale for silly little children," snapped Tom in indignation, shooting him a contemptuous sneer before he continued sternly, "I made the name up, from the Greek term Naga, which means snake, and the term-"

"Yeah, sure," interrupted Harry with a snort, "whatever you say."

Tom fulminated him with a poisonous glare, but before he could continue defending his unparalleled intellect, Harry was already yapping happily with the snake, no longer paying any attention to him.

If Tom had known what a bad influence on Nagini that Harry would prove to be, he would have never introduced them to each other. The little snake became a chatterbox, just like Harry, and not a cold night went by when the two of them wouldn't chatter away until the wee hours of morning.

At least Tom managed to forbid Harry from interacting with Nagini during the day – it would garner unwanted attention and raise suspicions if Harry began sitting in front of the shrubbery in the backyard, as Tom did, instead of playing with his so-called friends.

However, during winter nights, with the excuse that it was too cold outside for Nagini's health and comfort, Harry always snuck the snake into their bedroom.

The boy had whined and pleaded and cajoled until Tom had had no other choice but to yield to his brother's wishes if he wanted to spend a night in peace, and he had grudgingly allowed Nagini to coil herself in between their bodies to bask in their warmth.

Such was the enjoyment that they derived from each other, that Nagini even came to display some of Harry's mannerisms, which irritated Tom to no end. At least Tom made sure that the snake retained the proper respect due to him when they interacted with each other. With him, she behaved accordingly, not forgetting who owned her, and acting as the sensible, serious, and cunning snake that Tom had first known.

Nagini was still somewhat of a mystery to Tom. In the years that had passed since then, she had barely grown and he was quite sure that it wasn't normal.

On the other hand, he didn't know much about snakes – she was the only one he had ever seen and he knew that it wasn't usual to find snakes in London. He also knew that her first recollections were of breaking out from a cracked egg, in a pile of rubbish in London's docks.

He could only deduce that she had been shipped in from some distant country, her egg no doubt being one of many inside a crate that must have endured some damage and must have had a crack in its wood boards. He imagined that as the dock workers loaded the crate onto a cart-wagon -most probably destined for the London Zoo- her egg had slipped out from the crack and ended up rolling into a pile of litter.

She had found her way to the orphanage's neighborhood, since it was quite close to the docks, and
had soon made it her home, finding bountiful prey, since being as poor as it was, their neighborhood had quite a large population of rats and mice.

Regardless, the thought that swam around his mind as he remembered those events was that something was not right in what was happening in the world.

From everything he had read in newspaper articles, and from what he had found out about from Alice's Communist pamphlets, a vague, foggy thought had been growing at the back of his mind - not fully formed, but tickling him like an itch he couldn't quite reach and scratch to his satisfaction.

As he halted to gaze out the window by the orphanage's entrance door, seeing all those rows of houses with their inhabitants placidly and cozily sleeping with not a care in the world, Tom scoffed snidely.

Everyone out there was carrying on with their lives as if all was well, naively believing whatever the government said. What did they think it meant when the Germans said that their prime goal in foreign policy was to secure living space for their race?

They were all mindless, half-witted sheep, but he had always known that about the masses. It didn't bother him at all. It didn't even concern him that Jews were being persecuted and carted off to labor camps – as Alice's Communist pamphlets speculated. He really couldn't care less about the Jews and those other types of people who were disappearing.

It seemed quite logical to him that the Nazis would employ the strategy of blaming someone for the disastrous circumstances in which their country had been reduced to after losing the Great War. And he fully understood their motives.

They had chosen the Jewish race as their scapegoat, just as plain and simple. It was the oldest tactic in the world, and one that always worked. It was human nature to be so petty, cruel, selfish, and opportunist, and he prided himself to be the one person who saw people in their crude reality.

Thus, he wasn't like every half-brained imbecile out there. He knew what was coming: War.

And it filled him with a blazing feeling of exhilaration and excitement. Wars always caused interesting changes; they shaped nations and caused the rise and fall of empires, they gave rise to fortunes for those who were smart enough to take advantage of it, they stimulated the formation of new ideas and innovations, they rearranged social structures, and they always ended up having the same consequences, the doom of many becoming the prosperity of some.

He wanted to be one of those 'some'. He would need to figure out how to benefit from it, because it was quite clear to him that he couldn't let such a precious opportunity pass him by.

And suddenly, just as that thought contently spun in his mind, it all became sharply clear to him. The revelation that had eluded him for some while and which had kept him sleepless that night, abruptly blossomed in its full glory: everything was staged too perfectly and seamlessly, the timing too precise to be natural or just mere coincidence.

Mussolini and his Fascist government in Italy; just recently, a civil war bursting in Spain, with a General called Franco leading an African Army against the insurgents, a man who clearly supported the Fascist movement as well; and then, the Nazis in Germany. Those three were natural allies given their similar ideologies, and he wouldn't be surprised if their leaders were already secretly negotiating their terms.

And of course, to all that, adding the Communists in Russia, with the Industrialists in Britain and
the Capitalists in America fearing that it would spread to their lands, and with a Communist uprising in China as well, if one of Alice's pamphlets were to be believed.

The world seemed to him like a giant chessboard in which all the pertinent pieces were being moved with uncanny precision across the squares, by a great invisible hand which knew exactly how to arrange matters to have it all explode in one blazing war which would be far more encompassing than the last one.

And without a doubt, much more devastating. After all, this war would be carried under banners of ideologies. And when it came to ideologies, religions, and such self-righteous notions, everyone became much more ruthless and vicious. Oh, yes, someone knew precisely what they were doing.

Tom's lips quirked into a wide, gleeful smirk, his expression one of both bemusement and satisfaction. Yes, now he finally understood. There had to be some actors orchestrating things behind the scenes. A group of people, surely, for no one man could plan and execute something so great by himself. Not unless he was a genius, and Tom couldn't conceive the notion that anyone could be such a prodigy as he himself was.

He was intrigued, thrilled and excited, but above all things, he was deeply pleased with his discovery. The whirlwind of his thoughts finally settled itself to become a calm mantle in his mind, thrumming contently. And he exhaled, ready to finally go back to his room for his night of rest.

Tom was about to turn on his heels to take the flight of stairs up to his floor, when something caught his attention out of the corner of his eyes – a shadow moving, a light at the end of the corridor.

His curiosity piqued, Tom instantly moved towards it, careful to make no noise with his footfalls. He soon saw that the 'shadow' was Billy Stubbs clutching his rabbit against his chest – no doubt the creature had escaped from the boy's bedroom and Billy had been roaming the corridor in search of the little beast.

What made Tom frown, however, was that the boy was frozen in place, standing beside the parted door of the kitchen from which a dim light could be seen.

As Tom made his way towards the boy to find out what was going on, the voices from the occupants of the kitchen started reaching his ears.

"... if Harry has asked you to know more about 'their' parents, then this time you must tell him the truth, Alice!" came Kathy Cole's voice, stern and sharp. "It was what we had agreed upon initially. I said nothing when you told the boys that they were non-identical twins, that first time. But now they are old enough to be told the truth."

"It would crush him! Harry is so attached to Tom, he worships him, and he's not mature enough to-"

"It's not Harry you worry about in this case, Alice. You don't fool me," snapped Kathy Cole impatiently, her tone now harsh and relentless. "You don't want Tom to know, because God knows that he won't take it well and that once he knows, Harry won't be able to appease him any longer or to keep him in check. But I think it's worth the trouble, precisely because Harry adores Tom. That can't be allowed to continue. Tom is a bad influence on the boy and Harry deserves to know that they aren't brothers!"

"In a few years I'll tell them, Kathy," said Alice pleadingly, her voice soft. "Listen to me…"
A sort of strangled squeak issued from Billy's throat when he finally saw Tom standing beside him, as still as a statue and with a horrible expression on his face. Billy alarmingly paled, his eyes growing wide with dread and fear as he saw the dark, ominous look on the taller boy's face.

Instincts of survival kicking in, Billy took one more look at Tom, and before he gave a chance for the other boy to realize it or do anything about it, Billy squashed Puffy the Bunny against his chest and turned tail, dashing down the corridor and soon disappearing from sight.

Tom noticed, but for once, he didn't care. Kathy's last three words were still echoing in his mind with stabbing force – 'they aren't brothers!'. He felt such a tempest of clashing emotions, with such intensity as he had never experienced before, that for several seconds he wasn't able to move or even think; burning rage, mingled with a sharp pang of loss and grief and bitter disappointment, meshed with fiery hatred, they were all coiling and raging within him.

Yet, in the next second, all of it was abruptly doused under a chilly mantle of terrifying fear, shaking him to the core.

The very idea of the consequences, of knowing that the bond that had tied them together would be inevitably weakened, that Harry would no longer have reason to always remain by his side, to be always there, loyal, steadfast and needing him, wanting his company and preferring it to all others, yearning for his approval and attention. Imagining how Harry would grow apart from him, how the boy would carry on easily making friends as always and no longer dreading being separated from him…

He couldn't let it happen.

Harry was his brother; they were alike, they were both special and unique. That counted more than any ties of kinship. Harry had always been his, since the beginning of his awareness and as far as he could remember. His brother, his companion, his counterpart - his to teach, to mold, to protect, to ridicule, to hurt, to torment, and even to twist and corrupt and destroy if he wanted to. That was true possession and ownership over someone and he had always had it over Harry. And he wouldn't let anything or anyone pose a threat to it.

The very idea of it instantly prompted him to act.

Tom unceremoniously slammed the door to a side and strode inside the kitchen, the two arguing women freezing as their gazes landed on him.

"You won't tell him – ever," spat Tom, his voice as hard as grating rocks as he skewered them with a dark blue gaze burning with contempt and seething hatred. "But you will tell me, right now."

Kathy Cole was the first to gather back her wits after her startled shock, and with a stern expression on her face, she said curtly, "What are you doing up so late? And you have no business spying on us-"

"I wasn't speaking to you, woman," hissed out Tom, his eyes narrowing to slits as his expression turned darker. "You'll do well to remain silent if you know what's good for you." His gaze flickered back to Alice. "Speak."

Mrs. Cole, not one to allow to be spoken to in such tones, casting to a side all lingering sense of prudence, pulled herself up to her full height, pinning him with a hard gaze of her own. "Look here, child, you'll show proper respect and-"

She choked. Suddenly she was being squeezed and crushed, all air heaving out from her lungs as
she gasped for breath, her eyes bulging, her frame shaking so violently that she stumbled backwards and crashed against the table of the kitchen. Frantically clawing at her throat with her fingers, in a state of absolute panic, she tried to scream – it only came out as a gurgle.

"Kathy!" Alice instantly reached her friend and grabbed her by the arms, steadying her. "Kathy, what's happening? Are you ill, are you-"

"It seems she's having a fit of some sort," came Tom's cool, nonchalant voice. "Perhaps she's having a stroke?"

Alice's eyes snapped back to him, wide and bewildered, her gaze then flickering from him to Kathy and back. Nervous, frightened and uncertain, she nevertheless made her friend take a seat and started unbuttoning the first buttons of Kathy's shirt, as she fanned her with a hand.

"You-" gasped out Kathy, her voice raspy, hoarse and still struggling to come out from her throat, as she pointed a weak, shaking finger at Tom, her bulging and watering eyes fixed on him. "I know – this, is your doing-"

Tom arched his eyebrows at her, his expression utterly blank. "Oh?"

"Somehow-" croaked out Kathy, but in the next instant her eyelids fluttered shut and she slumped over the table, her head loudly banging against the hard wood.

Alice cried out in alarm, fretting frenziedly over her, ripping open Kathy's shirt, leaving only the undershirt beneath, checking her pulse with fingers on Kathy's throat and pressing her head against her friend's bosom, searching for the heartbeat, as she muttered, mumbled and rambled without knowing what she was saying.

"It seems that she simply fainted," said Tom impassively. "I'm sure she'll be fine in a few minutes."

Alice shot him a glance with wild eyes, but there, faintly, she suddenly felt Kathy's pulse and she deeply exhaled with relief. Still badly shaken after the experience, she gripped the edge of the table with white knuckles, suddenly feeling very out of her depth.

"What else should we do? I don't think it was a stroke, the symptoms weren't those of a stroke, I don't know what happened, I don't know what it could be, maybe-"

"Nothing, she's fine. As I said, she just fainted," said Tom curtly, cutting short the caregiver's scared ramblings and not even sparing the unconscious woman a glance as he took slow steps to stand right in front of Alice, piercing her with intense, dark eyes. "While she recovers, you can start speaking."

Alice shot him a disconcerted glance and sputtered, "But Kathy-"

"Tell me the truth now!"

Alice felt the boy's voice like a whip lashing against her flesh and shattering her bones, and she unwittingly took a step back, jaw slack, before she came to her senses.

Taking a steadying step forward, her expression crumbled into one of pained compassion, as she said softly, "I will tell you the little we know."

Tom listened to her attentively, his face showing nothing but a composed expression as the words seemed to burn themselves into his mind, as he grew angrier and more furious by the second. What he and Harry had been told was that they had been left at the orphanage's doorstep, wrapped
together in blankets, that they were twins, non-identical, and that nothing was known of their parents.

"… 'Tom', after your father, and 'Marvolo' as a middle name, after her father. 'Riddle' as a surname since she said it was your father's family name. Your mother died not much later after that. That's all Kathy knows. Regarding Harry, we know nothing about his parents. There was no letter left with him when he was placed outside our door, only his first name embroidered on his clothes… " Alice trailed off as she finished relating the events in a quiet tone of voice.

"Marvolo," said Tom slowly, a glint shining in his dark blue eyes as he tasted the name on his lips, rolling it on his tongue. But any gleam was soon gone as his gaze flickered back to Alice, his expression turning impenetrable as he said curtly, "So my mother simply died? You didn't mention if she was ill."

"She wasn't. At least none of the caregivers who were present at the moment noticed anything wrong with her health," muttered Alice in a quiet tone of voice. "But it's clear that…" She cleared her throat uncomfortably, before she met Tom's piercing eyes and continued in a mellow tone of voice, "When terrible things happen to people, when they are unable to overcome them, sometimes it happens that they lose the will to live."

She gazed at him with a compassionate and warm-hearted expression on her face, as she continued gently, "There's no doubt in my mind that your mother loved you greatly, Tom, and you shouldn't hold it against her that she died. Some bad experience must have broken her spirits-

"Save your pity and your paltry platitudes and sentimentalities for yourself," hissed out Tom acidly, piercing her with contemptuous, narrowed eyes, before he stood straight and took one menacing step forward, his voice lowering ominously, "You'll say nothing to Harry about this. I'll tell him my own version of events – where, obviously, he'll be my twin, just as you have made us believe all this time. Do you understand?"

Alice looked uncertain for a moment, feeling warring emotions inside herself – after all, she had always had every intention of telling the boys the truth when they were older. But to keep quiet about it, to never tell Harry…

"Do you understand?" repeated Tom harshly, with such ringing force that it seemed to crash and resound against the walls.

A sudden chill ran down Alice's spine, abruptly making her feel extremely cold. She even had the impression for a second that her breath had come out as a puff of white air. She felt herself inching away from the boy before she became aware of it, and something prompted her, something in the child's ominous expression, just made her nod her head – her promise given.

"And you'll convince her to keep her mouth shut as well," added Tom, disdainfully gesturing at the unconscious Kathy Cole.

Alice nodded jerkily once more, remaining mute, her wide eyes fixed on him.

"Good," said Tom curtly. Then, abruptly, he shot her a thin, satisfied smile.

Alice was only able to blink as the boy strode out of the kitchen.

"Where have you been – what happened?" Harry instantly demanded the moment Tom returned to their room, as he rubbed the scar on his forehead which still throbbed with lingering pain. He shot his brother a miffed scowl, as he added, "Your anger woke me up. So spill the beans, you owe
Tom scoffed, though he took his place at his brother's side, snuggling against him to keep warm under the covers, and then started relating his own version of the story in a curt tone of voice.

The moment Tom finished and the room was encompassed in absolute silence, Harry bit down on his lower lip, peering up at his brother as he said in a wobbly, sad little tone of voice, "So mum died after she had me and didn't have time to give me a second name?"

"Yes," said Tom coolly, as he stretched an arm under his head and stared up at the stained ceiling.

He shot a side-glance at his brother, seeing Harry's sorrowful expression- the boy's bright green eyes were even shining with tears- and he had to bite on his tongue to not lash at the sentimental little fool.

Deciding to derail the conversation, he cleared his throat and shot Harry a smug look. "But since unlike you, I do have a middle name and I rather like it, from now on you'll call me Marvolo."

"Will not!" retorted Harry heatedly, for a moment forgetting all mournful thoughts to shoot his brother a resentful scowl. He huffed as he added, "It's a strange and stupid name and it's not fair that you have a second name and I don't-"

"It's not stupid," hissed out Tom indignantly, darkly glaring at him. His eyes narrowed as he spat out with disgust, "'Tom' is stupid. 'Harry' is stupid. Both are common names. There are thousands of people out there with our names-"

"I don't care," snapped Harry, "I still like our names and I won't call you Marvolo-" his small button nose scrunched with dislike- "ever, so there. Besides…" He trailed a finger over his brother's clothed chest, drawing little circles, as his voice lowered into a soft tone, "… our names are like our mum's gift to us. It was the only thing she could give us before dying…” He peered up at his brother with huge, uncertain eyes, as he added in a small voice, "She must have loved us a lot, right? Since she came here to have us, and she named us and all-"

"If she had loved us, she wouldn't have died," interjected Tom curtly, shooting him a harsh, chiding glance. He narrowed his eyes and hissed out acidly, "She was weak, she was a wretch and she was pathetic-"

"Don't talk about mum like that!" bit out Harry hotly, instantly jumping to roll over Tom and squash him under his weight, pressing his nose against his brother's to glare at him. "Take it back!"

"You deluded little idiot," spat Tom, forcefully shoving Harry off him as he sat up to skewer him with an incensed glower. "You don't even know what type of woman she was. I bet you anything she was something horrible – it wouldn't surprise me if she had been a whore or some such thing. Only whores have babies in orphanages, after all."

He shot him a sneer when he saw Harry's crushed expression at those words, and added with cold relish, "And our father is either dead or he's alive and couldn't care less about us and left us here to rot."

"Not true," mumbled Harry, his expression downcast as he gazed down at his small, fisted hands. "I know it's not true." He glanced up at Tom, new hope shining in his emerald eyes as he piped in, "I bet that dad is out there looking for us. Maybe bad people have been stopping him from finding us. And all these years he must have been fighting them and looking all over the country for us. And soon he'll find this orphanage and he'll see us and-"
"You're pathetic," sneered Tom with disdain, rolling to a side to give Harry his back. "Believe whatever idiotic little fantasies you like." His voice turned low and quiet as he added in a curt whisper, "The truth of the matter is that we're alone. We only have each other."

At his brother's hushed statement, Harry's anger faded away and he remained seated at one side of the cot, eyeing Tom's back as he bit down on his lower lip.

He soon stretched himself at his brother's side, pressing his small chest against Tom's back as he threw a short arm over his brother's shoulder, murmuring softly, "Don't be mad."

Tom didn't answer, his shoulders and spine still remaining stiff, and Harry eyed him uncertainly before he gave his brother a brief squeeze as he pressed his forehead against the nape of Tom's neck, the silky locks of black hair brushing and tickling his nose.

Not wanting to argue again about their parents, since it was obviously a touchy subject for both, Harry voiced another hopeful thought that had crossed his mind, "So... I was born minutes after you – are you sure? Maybe I was first, and Kathy doesn't remember well-"

"You're the little brother, Harry, not I," scoffed out Tom, without turning to face him. "Facts are facts. Now go to sleep."

Harry harrumphed, his hopes of being able to rub in Tom's face who was the real big brother among them dashed, but a small grin broke on his face all the same, for Tom had relaxed under his arm and seemed to be pleasantly dozing off.

Nevertheless, no matter what Tom had said, that night Harry vouched that if their dad never appeared at the orphanage, then that one day he would go out in search of him.

That night, his dreams were filled with vague images of a tall man with a joyous expression and a big loving smile on his face as he hugged Harry and Tom and took them away to a small, cozy house. For once, terrible, menacing crimson eyes and flashes of blinding green light didn't spear through the foggy clouds of his dreams.

The following morning, Tom slipped out of their shared cot, taking care of not waking Harry up. He was one of the few early risers in the orphanage and never waited for one of the caregivers to come by, like Harry did, who always lazed about in their bed for as long as he could.

However, that morning, Tom had a specific reason for quickly making his way to the ground floor and the orphanage's playroom, since Billy Stubbs was one of the others who was out and about before the caregivers made their rounds - not willingly, but because that rabbit of his was squirming for freedom and wanting to hop around by sunrise.

As soon as Tom entered the room, he saw what he had expected and hoped for. Billy Stubbs was already there, sitting crossed-legged in the middle of the floor, with Puffy the Bunny on his lap, being petted and worshipped.

Throughout the years, Tom had had a vast number of reasons for wanting to show Billy Stubbs his place, but he had so far refrained from tormenting the boy. He didn't like to admit it, but he had done so for Harry's sake. Now, however, circumstances had changed.

"Hello there, Billy," said Tom placidly, as he took a step to tower over the sitting boy.

Billy's head shot up so suddenly that it seemed as if some bone in the neck must have cracked. The boy's brown eyes were immense as he stared up at Tom, his mouth parted open, the lips now
trembling as he stuttered out, "H-hullo T-Tom." An attempt of an ingratiating smile wavered on the boy's face as he paled.

"You must know what this is about, yes?" prompted Tom calmly, though his eyes narrowed as he pinned the boy with his dark blue gaze.

"I didn't hear anything – I swear!" burst out Billy, as he shot up to his feet, tightly gripping his rabbit against his chest, and clearly ready to take flight as far away from Tom as possible. "I won't say anything to anyone – promise!"

Tom's hands immediately shot out, with one grabbing Puffy the Bunny by the ears and ripping her out from Billy's protective embrace, with the other harshly gripping the boy by the neck to keep him in place, as he hissed out ominously, "I know that you won't say anything." He shot him a dark smirk as his eyes narrowed menacingly, "Because if you do, your fate will be the same as Puffy's here."

"What are you going to do with her!" cried out Billy as he attempted to recover her from the other boy's clutch as Tom held her up high in the air. "Leave her alone, she's done nothing to you-"

Billy Stubb's pleads and shrieks went deaf to Tom's ears as his gaze quickly scanned the room. His smirk widened when he caught sight of one of Amy Benson's hair ribbons lying on the nearby table, the piece of cloth unknotted, long and thin – perfect.

A second later, rabbit and cloth shot up in the air, rising fast towards the ceiling. In the bat of an eyelash, the string coiled itself around the bunny's soft, fluffy neck and then its end spun around one of the wooden rafters. Gravity seemed to be restored in the next moment when the rabbit dropped a few inches, the coil of cloth twanging like the release of a tense string of a drawn bow, as a frantic yipping sound came from the bunny as its white limbs jerkily flailed in spasms.

"NO!" wailed Billy as he sobbed wretchedly, but Tom halted any movement by brusquely holding the boy by the jaw, forcing him to watch the rabbit's strangulation.

"That will happen to you if you ever say a word to anyone about what you overheard last night," hissed out Tom, sinking his short fingernails in the boy's sunken cheeks. "Is that clear?"

Billy froze, his eyes wild as he stared up at Tom. Soon, Tom's nose scrunched when a pungent odor reached him, and he glanced down at the boy's pants in disgust, seeing a wet stain spreading over Billy's crotch.

Suddenly, as noises reached his ears of the footfalls of the running children that had awoken and were making their way to the playroom, Tom was forced to violently shake Billy to yank him out of his terror-induced stupor.

"Is it clear!" snapped Tom harshly, skewering the boy with narrowed eyes.

"Y-yes," stuttered Billy simply, his frame now trembling.

Abruptly, the door was yanked open and a chirpy voice said with curiosity, "What are you two up to – PUFFY!"

Harry dashed by Tom's side like a flash of a blur, crying out in dismay as he leapt forward towards the dangling bunny. In the next instant, the piece of cloth snapped and the rabbit dropped into Harry's awaiting arms, unmoving. A second later, children and caregivers poured into the room, no doubt their quickness encouraged by all the yells coming from within, and Tom instantly stepped backwards into a shadowed corner.
"What's all this ruckus about?" demanded Mr. Jenkins gruffly, his small black eyes narrowing as his gaze flickered from Harry and the rabbit, to Billy who still stood petrified in the middle of the room, face pale and tear-streaked, pants stained with urine, and then to Tom, who never escaped the brute's notice no matter where he hid. "What's happened here?"

No one answered. Harry was now eyeing the caregiver with dread, any grief for the bunny's death and anger towards his brother due to it, now at the back of his mind, as his gaze uneasily flickered from Tom to Billy to Mr. Jenkins and back.

"Well, explain yourselves!" bellowed Mr. Jenkins as he towered over Harry, his gaze lowering until it landed on the bunny. His small beady eyes narrowed as vicious glee crossed his ugly features. "The rabbit's dead. Who did it?" He licked his lips as his eager gaze snapped from Tom to Harry, then to land on the petrified Billy. "Who killed your pet, boy?"

Billy remained silent, his shoulders hunched and his head ducked as he stared at his shoes, unmoving.

Anger soon swept over Mr. Jenkins' face as he spun around and approached the mute boy, raising up a meaty hand, clearly with the intention of delivering a backhand to slap the truth out of the boy.

Alice sprung into action that instant, moving forward and planting herself in front of Billy, facing the other caregiver with a hard expression on her face. "You will not hit the boy. He's clearly not at fault here."

Mr. Jenkins eyed her with smoldering contempt as he snarled, "You'll do well to mind your place, lass, or you'll soon find yourself kicked out to the streets, jobless and with not two pennies to your name."

The threat seemed to have no effect on Alice other than keeping her in silence, since she bravely remained standing protectively between child and man.

Sensing that things would soon be spiraling out of control and take a turn for the worse, Harry armed himself with valor. Mr. Jenkins was the one person he truly dreaded and even feared, but he hoped he could find a way out of the mess.

He realized that the piece of cloth that he had somehow snapped, and was still dangling from the rafters, hadn't been noticed by anyone, except Kathy Cole who was eyeing it with a frown on her face, her suspicious gaze flickering from it to the corner where Tom stood.

"It was me," murmured Harry quietly, pressing the dead bunny to his small chest before he raised his head to meet Mr. Jenkins' narrowed eyes, his voice gaining strength as he continued, "I killed Puffy. It was an accident. I tripped and stepped on her, and her neck must have broken-"

"It-t wasn't H-harr-y," came Billy's whispery, stuttering voice.

Harry bit his lower lip in sheer frustration, not at all happy that his friend had decided then to stand up to his defense.

Mr. Jenkins' limited patience was clearly coming to its end, as he spat, "Then who, boy? Speak up!"

However, it seemed that Billy feared someone else much more than he was afraid of the caregiver, and the boy clamped his mouth shut with such force that his lips turned white.

Harry deeply sighed and turned around to gently lay the dead rabbit on the nearby table. Squaring
his shoulders, he swiveled around once more to face the man, as he said insistently, "It was me."

Suddenly, a hissed exhalation of displeased annoyance resounded as Tom took several steps from his corner to stand in the middle of the room, his expression blank as he stared up at Mr. Jenkins and said coolly, "Harry's lying to protect me. It was I who accidentally stepped on the rabbit."

Harry's eyes grew large as he stared at his brother in utter astonishment.

Cruel glee and eagerness swamped Mr. Jenkins' face once more as he grunted with relish, "Thought so. It's always you, ain't it?" A meaty hand latched itself to the back of Tom's neck and he started to brusquely yank the boy out of the room, as he added with a satisfied snarl, "You know the drill, boy."

"No!" burst out Harry, spurred into action and rushing to their side, remembering the state in which Tom always came back when Mr. Jenkins punished him. Granted, Harry himself wasn't immune to the man's vicious brand of disciplinary action, and it terribly hurt all the times when the palms of his hands had been canned until they bled, but he at least healed fast. "It was me, I tell you-"

"Enough!" growled out Mr. Jenkins in fury, glancing back at him with a glower. A nasty gleam suddenly shone in his eyes as he bit out, "If you're so set on sparing your brother then at least you'll watch and learn from your brother's mistakes." His small beady eyes then bore into Alice as he spat, "Bring him."

Appalled, Alice's blue eyes widened as her hand automatically grabbed Harry's shoulder as if she could somehow whisk him away to someplace safe. "I don't think this is necessary-"

"Bring him along, girl!" bellowed Mr. Jenkins, before he turned around and harshly gripped Tom by the nape once more.

With her jaw clenched and a look of pained impotence on her face, Alice gently grabbed Harry's hand and proceeded down the corridor, following Mr. Jenkins' steps. She left Kathy behind to take care of the rest of the children, and particularly Billy Stubbs who was still alarmingly pale and didn't seem to be in full possession of his senses or in control of his bodily functions.

Mr. Jenkins reached Mrs. Sharpe's office and yanked the door open without bothering to knock, brusquely shoving Tom inside, like a victorious conqueror who brought amusing prey to torment.

As they all stepped into the room -Harry fully dreading what would happen, Tom looking impassive and indifferent, and Alice praying to God that someday they could all be rid of Mr. Jenkins– it became clear to all that Mrs. Sharpe had spent her night slumped on her desk.

Bottle and glass of gin were knocked over the table, its liquid contents spilled all over a disorderly mess of papers and documents, her hair a disarray of grey curls haphazardly dangling from a bun, and her face plastered on a newspaper on which drool had formed a small puddle.

Mr. Jenkins took one look at her and then proceeded to bang the door shut with a resounding slam. Instantly, Mrs. Sharpe jumped in her seat, eyes foggy and unfocused for a second as her gaze roved over them, disconcerted.

Mr. Jenkins grabbed Tom by the scruff of his shirt and yanked him forward giving him a violent shake, as he announced gleefully, "The boy has killed Billy Stubb's rabbit."

Mrs. Sharpe's eyes sparkled with interest at that, and a small, thin-lipped smile curled her painted lips as she said with a raspy voice, "I see. He must be punished then, of course."
"He certainly must," agreed Mr. Jenkins, sounding as if it was a well rehearsed script between them as a prelude to a mutually enjoyable spectacle. Then he shoved Tom forward, making him nearly bang against the sharp edge of Mrs. Sharpe's desk. "Assume position."

Harry's hands tightly clenched into fists as he saw Mr. Jenkins reach for a birch cane which had its own special perch on top of a chest of drawers. As Tom calmly unbuckled his shabby belt, starting to pull his pants down, Harry took a step forward before he knew it.

He halted on his tracks when Tom snapped his head to a side to shoot him a piercing look of warning, clearly conveying that Harry was not to interfere or else. Harry sank his small teeth on his bottom lip as Alice, who stood by his side, became as tense as a bow-string.

"You're a bad seed, just as Father Patrick says," spat Mr. Jenkins as he returned to stand before Mrs. Sharpe and her desk, cane in hand while he yanked down Tom's pants and undergarment until they hung loosely under the boy's small, taut buttocks.

Tom gripped the edge of the desk without saying a word, and a wide, nasty smile filled with rotten teeth spread on the man's face at the sight, as he continued, "There's the Devil inside you, boy, there is. But we shall beat Him out of you, won't we?"

No reply came and it was clear that Mr. Jenkins didn't need any to motivate him.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Sharpe was sitting straight up on her chair to afford her a direct view, her dark eyes shining with enjoyment, as she waved a hand and declared importantly, "You can proceed."

Mr. Jenkins graced her with one of his twisted smiles as he raised the cane in the air.

"I'm doing this for your own good, boy."

Harry winced and his teeth sank deeper into his lip as he saw his brother gritting his teeth, but not a word came from Tom. The only evidence of pain was the knuckles of the hands that gripped the desk turning white, and the line of raised, red flesh that now ran along Tom's backside.

A nasty chortle came from Mr. Jenkins as he announced, "This time we will make it twenty and not our standard ten. What do you say?"

Harry gasped and looked at him, aghast, and his expression only turned even more horrified as Mr. Jenkins employed the full strength of his meaty arm to keep delivering blows which became more savage and brutal as the minutes ticked by.

Alice, by his side, had her eyes tightly shut, her own expression one of pain, her lips pressed into a thin, pale line, with her hands clenching and unclenching jerkily.

Grunts were ripped from Tom's lips as his buttocks became a crisscross lattice of bleeding rows of broken skin, and Harry felt his breathing coming out as haggard pants. Not only seeing it happen was much worse that merely seeing the results, but his scar was flaring in pain with all the seething hatred and murderous rage that was blazing in his brother's mind. And suddenly, Harry could only see red and he became strangely dizzy and frenzied.

"Twelve!" declared Mr. Jenkins with a crow of laughter, as Mrs. Sharpe eagerly clapped her hands in approval of a punishment that was being well executed. "Eight more to go, boy – you'll learn your lesson, mark my words!"
"STOP!" yelled Harry frantically, the words tearing out his throat before he knew what he was doing.

"You, clamp your mouth shut or you're next-"

Shards of glass suddenly pelted forth in a blast, and Mr. Jenkins' threat was lost in the exploding sound that reverberated in the room, as Mrs. Sharpe shrieked and dropped for cover under her desk.

Alice had immediately reacted instinctively, not only throwing herself to the floor but pulling Harry with her as she used her arms to cover as much of the boy as she could. Tom, with his ankles entangled in his pants and undergarments, had also leapt to a side and to safe cover. And it was thus that Mr. Jenkins was the only one who received a face-full of volleying shards of glass.

The man bellowed in pain as he rolled to the floor, making a greater mess of his face by attempting to rip out the shards with his meaty fingers.

"Wh- what- wh-" sputtered Mrs. Sharpe, her eyes wild as she took everything in, though not moving an inch to help anyone.

"You fool!" hissed out Tom with livid anger, briskly pulling his drawers and pants up and buckling his belt, before he dug out Harry from under Alice, brusquely pulling his little brother up to his feet.

Alice gawked at the blasted window behind Mrs. Sharpe's desk, which had no glass panels left, and when Tom's hushed, furious words reached her ears, her gaze snapped to Harry, her eyes growing wide.

She didn't quite know what had happened and she couldn't make sense of the crazy thoughts rushing through her mind, or of the way that Harry was looking deeply contrite or how Tom seemed to believe that his brother was to blame, or even of Kathy's belief that last night Tom had somehow attempted to suffocate her to death.

But as Mr. Jenkins kept bellowing in agony and fury, and as Mrs. Sharpe kept shrieking for some sort of explanation and the name of the guilty party, Alice rose to her feet and found herself pointing at the broken window as she said loudly, "A boy in the street hurled a stone, I saw. Then he ran away."

Momentarily shocked with herself, though knowing what had motivated her as her gaze landed on Harry and Tom who were now staring at her in surprise, Alice then gathered back her wits, knowing they had to leave the office as soon as possible.

"Mrs. Sharpe, I think it would be best if you could tend to Mr. Jenkins' wounds, if you will?" she said quickly, as she grabbed both boys by their arms. "And I'll take Tom to the Punishment Room and Harry to his bedroom-"

"Yes, yes, take them away," snapped Mrs. Sharpe with angered annoyance, dismissively waving a hand at them as she crouched to peer out the window, as if expecting to see the urchin who had dared to throw a stone at her window.

Alice didn't waste a second in pulling the boys out of the office, and the three of them remained awkwardly silent as they made their way up the staircase.

It was Harry who broke the tense air surrounding them as he said in a small voice, "Do you have to take Tom to the Punishment Room? He hates it."
"Shut up," snarled Tom at his brother, making Harry hang down his head like a scolded puppy who was fully aware of all his misdeeds.

"I have to take him there because it's what Mrs. Sharpe and Mr. Jenkins expect," said Alice reasonably, finding strength in the mere act of following procedure. "If I don't, it will only be worse for Tom."

They reached the boys' bedroom and Alice opened the door and gently pushed Harry's back to make him go inside, as she said, "Get in your bed and wait for me. I'll be right back."

"Bed?" Harry gaped at her. He was almost eight years old already – practically a grown-up! Harry fumed. And grown-ups weren't told they had to go to bed, and besides...

He stared up at Alice and then said with a small whine, "But it's morning-"

"A bit of extra rest, given recent events, will do you good, I'm sure," interrupted Alice, then shooting him a stern glance when Harry mutinously pouted at her. "Go."

Harry huffed but obeyed nonetheless, and Alice proceeded to take another flight of stairs with Tom, to reach the attic and the small, lightless cupboard at its end which was known around the orphanage as the Punishment Room - the one place which Tom, in particular, was vastly acquainted with.

Neither of them said one word to each other, and Tom for his part felt relieved. His backside felt like a mass of burning, flayed skin, but not even the feeling of rivulets of blood trickling down his legs prevented him from concentrating all his efforts in walking as if nothing was the matter with him. He would be limping if not. Though, he knew that no great amount of willpower would spare him from being unable to sit for a whole week.

Tom gritted his teeth as he climbed up another step. And for all that, he had his little imbecile of a brother to thank.

Harry was fretfully turning on his cot and already dreading any questions Alice might ask, when the caregiver came back to his bedroom.

Alice seemed to be calm as she took a seat on the cot, eyeing Harry pensively for a moment without saying a word.

Then, she gently caressed the boy's wild mass of hair as she murmured quietly, "What happened in Mrs. Sharpe's office?"

"Nuthin'," muttered Harry, staring up the ceiling, though he couldn't help fluttering his eyelids shut in contentment as Alice kept soothingly carding her fingers through his hair – there was nothing he liked more than that.

"Harry…" she said chidingly, but then she trailed off uncertainly, not entirely sure if she really did want to know.

She deeply sighed and then warmly smiled at the small boy when she saw his expression, like a little kitten being gently petted and purring in pleasure.

"Alright, I will not ask," said Alice at last.

Harry's bright emerald eyes cracked open at that, and he graced her with a beaming smile.
Alice chuckled as she caressed his cheek. "And just for that smile, it's worth keeping my questions to myself and not think about the matter further."

"Thank you," whispered Harry, clutching her caressing fingers and giving them a soft squeeze as his smile turned into a grin.

Alice nodded and then cleared her throat as she inquired dubiously, "Is Tom clausrophobic? Or is he afraid of the dark?"

"Clastro-what?" Harry shook his head and piped in, "He isn't scared. He just doesn't like small places or the dark." He shot her an impish grin, as he added, "He never admits it, but I can tell."

Alice had to repress a wince. It was clear that Tom's stint in the Punishment Room wouldn't be a pleasant one for the boy. Alas, there wasn't much she could do about that.

She shook her head and then pulled the covers up to Harry's chin, as she said softly, "Now try to sleep for a bit."

"But I'm not sleepy," mumbled Harry, his lips pursing stubbornly.

"Shall I sing to you my mother's nursery rhyme?" offered Alice gently. "It's your favorite, and it always works like a charm and makes you sleepy."

"Alright!" chimed Harry, an eager sparkle in his green eyes as he burrowed placidly under the covers, to then peer at her expectantly.

"Once upon a time, there was a good little wolf, mistreated by all the lambs," began to sing Alice softly, her voice slowly raising and then lulling like soothing, cradling waves. "Once upon a time, there was a bad black unicorn, a little ugly fairy, and a shy dragon. There was also once, an evil prince, a beautiful witch, and an honest pirate. There were all these things, once upon a time…"

She trailed off, waiting for Harry to sing the last part of the rhyme, as had became a tradition for them.

"When I dreamed of a world turned upside down," murmured Harry sleepily, as his eyes fluttered shut and a yawn escaped from his lips.

Satisfied, Alice smiled and waited during a few more minutes until soft, peaceful snores could be heard, and then she gently pecked Harry on the forehead before she took her leave.

The instant Alice left the room and Harry heard the sound of her footfalls fading away, he jumped out of the cot.

He grabbed pillow and blanket and then carefully cracked the door open, poking his head out and peering at both sides of the corridor to make sure no one was wandering about.

With a wide grin on his face, Harry scampered up several flights of stairs until he reached a small, short ladder. Haphazardly climbing it with pillow and blanket under one arm, he managed to open the trap door at the end of the ladder and climbed into the attic.

Sneezing once as dust tickled his nose, he made his way through old, broken furniture and all sort of miscellaneous, abandoned items of no value which littered the floor. Finally, he reached a small door no higher than his chest. He placed his pillow and blanket on the dusty floor, quickly making full use of them by lying down, resting his head on the pillow as he attempted to see something through the crack under the door.
He tentatively knocked softly on the small wooden door, as he whispered quietly, "Tom, it's me."

"Go away," snapped Tom's voice acidly.

"No," bit out Harry mutinously, glaring at the door. "I'll stay here all day and night with you."

An aggrieved groan came through; muffled, but the irritation conveyed was unmistakable.

"Alice won't mind when she finds out," continued Harry, ignoring the sound, his tone now cheerful. "So I'll keep you company."

"Hn."

Not at all discouraged by his brother's less than gracious grunt, Harry babbled on eagerly, "So what do you want to do? Maybe we can play some game or tell each other fairy tales or make funny animal noises and guess which animal it is or I can bring Nagini if you want and we can play with her-"

"Don't you ever stop talking?" hissed out Tom's voice with annoyance. He paused for a brief moment before his voice turned hasher and angry, "You realize the idiocy of what you did in Sharpe's office, don't you?"

"I didn't mean to blow up the window – it just happened," piped in Harry defensively. "I couldn't help it!"

"Be glad that Alice covered for you," snapped Tom's voice curtly.

"She was great, wasn't she?" declared Harry proudly. "She will always protect us, no matter what." He started scratching the door with a fingernail as he added in a cajoling tone of voice, "So maybe we could tell her about the things we can do-"

"I didn't mean to blow up the window – it just happened," piped in Harry defensively. "I couldn't help it!"

"But she loves us, Tom!" insisted Harry stubbornly. "She would never tell-"

"Perhaps," came Tom's reply, his voice soon turning sneering. "She's the type of soft-hearted, sentimental fool who would always make excuses for us and help us out. And you're right, pathetic people like her are meant to be used and exploited by others. And so we should. It's her own fault for being so stupid-"

"I never said that!" interrupted Harry hotly, glowering at the wooden door in front of him, not liking one bit how his brother viewed Alice – apart from Tom, she was his favorite person in the world.

Tom scoffed snidely. "Never mind. My point is that she's useful, and only that. We won't be telling her anything."

"Fine," groused out Harry.

Silence spread between them, Tom perhaps wishing that his brother had relented and left him alone, and Harry for his part fuming before something caught his eye. An idea sprung in his mind as he watched a little spider climbing up a web not three inches away from him.

"I'm sending you a friend to cheer you up," he said excitedly, as he made the spider jump to the floor and scramble towards the crack under the door. When the spider vanished, he said eagerly,
"Are you seeing her? I'll make her dance – watch!"

The sound of a shoe sole slamming against floorboards and a squishy noise alerted Harry to what had happened to the nice spider, and he cried out in indignation, "You killed her!"

"Yes, I did," came Tom's relishing voice.

Scowling, Harry huffed as he protested, "You're such a sourpuss. What do we do now, then?"

"Remain silent."

Harry's dissatisfied scowl deepened before he started eyeing the crack under the door with a speculative and assessing look. A grin soon spread on his face and he tested the waters, sticking his fingers through the crack. His grin widened as he easily managed to put his hand through till midway.

Chuckling, he wriggled his fingers, knowing that his brother could see them. "Look – you could grab them. Come on, you know you want to..."

Harry abruptly yelped when his fingers were painfully squeezed and twisted. "Let go!"

"What you did today," came Tom's menacing voice, "promise to never do something like it again. I can take care of myself, is that clear? So promise or I'll hurt you even more."

Vainly attempting to get his fingers back, Harry yielded and mumbled out his promise, but it was a moot point. He knew that he wouldn't be able to control himself if someone tried to truly harm his brother, and it wasn't something he regretted.

As the grip on his fingers relaxed, Harry immediately started withdrawing his hand, only to halt when Tom said quietly, "If I hold your hand, will you stop your nonsensical chattering and remain quiet?"

Harry blinked in surprise, but then a wide, triumphant grin spread on his face. Though, he made sure of not conveying it, as he said shortly, "Sure."

It was thus that, out of sheer boredom in Harry's case and out of a much needed rest to dull his pain in Tom's, both ended up falling asleep, holding hands through the small crack of the cupboard's door and with equally satisfied and placid expressions on their faces.

Countless miles away, amidst a dense forest near the German-Austrian border and hidden under heavy, powerful layers of wards, a dark wizard with curly locks of blonde hair peppered with grey at the sides and with hazel, hawk-like eyes, was pacing in his office in the highest level of his tower.

A tower the wizard had built himself, brick by brick, and enchantment after enchantment; the many hidden passages and chambers and the secrets it held only fully known by its creator. Though the motto etched on the entrance gateway of the tower, 'Für das Größere Wohl', was already widely known throughout the wizarding world; sometimes fully advocated and supported, other times murmured with wariness and dread.

It was an afternoon in which the Dark Lord Gellert Grindelwald found himself pacing as he waited for his guards to bring him his latest prisoner and recent acquisition, who had been 'softened' by a one-month stint in Nurmengard's underground dungeons.
In this occasion, the Dark Lord was sporting his best muggle civilian clothes, since it had been one of those days in which he had apparated to muggle Berlin and participated—as he regularly did—in an exclusive meeting in the Reichstag, where the lead members of the Nazi party knew him as one of the country's most prosperous factories owner and as the Führer's personal advisor. Knowledge, of course, which would disappear from the minds of those muggles the day when Gellert Grindelwald had no more use for them.

As he impatiently awaited for his prisoner's arrival, his hazel eyes swept across his vast office; clustered with countless books of any variety of magical and muggle topics, added to his personal library and collection consisting of only the most unique Dark Arts texts, with numerous magical artifacts scattered among shelves, and detailed maps of Europe, the North of Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

It was in the maps of Europe, hanging from walls or stretched across tables, in which his plans for the War were revealed: with figurines representing troops, divisions of tanks and artillery, and even squadrons of battle-airplanes; with magically drawn lines representing battle fronts and trenches, and arrows depicting the planned deployment of his muggle forces; even with notations regarding the sequences and timing of the conquests, so that his strategies for the muggle war were executed precisely in time with his tactics for the wizarding war.

For such purpose, sometimes, superimposed on the map of muggle Europe, Grindelwald liked to place his map of wizarding Europe, with the marked locations of all the Ministries of Magic or similar governmental facilities, depending on the country, and with notations of the magic to be used, the negotiations to be held, and the names of leaders to either kill, imprison or persuade.

There was one map, however, which wasn't openly on display but rather hidden in one of the office's many secret compartments. This was the map which represented years of historical and archeological research in the quest of finding the one magical artifact which Grindelwald coveted the most.

An artifact lost millennia ago and believed by most to have been long since destroyed. It was such the ancient age of the legendary artifact that Grindelwald's quest in search of it lacked any progress, in stark contrast with his quest of locating the two companions to the wand he held in his hand.

Nevertheless, that evening, Grindelwald expected his luck to change, for he was certain he would rip the truth from his prisoner and finally obtain some leads regarding the artifact's location. After all, for years he had plotted in detail both the wizarding and the muggle war that were about to come, both of which would avert attention from his true quest. With the benefit along the way of having muggles kill themselves in the millions, if everything went according to plan, and with having the Nazis do the tedious work of storing all valuable Jew belongings in warehouses, so that his followers could covertly go through them in search of clues.

Nevertheless, such matter wasn't the only one which he hoped to be enlightened about.

Gellert Grindelwald's hazel eyes roamed over the immense sphere which occupied a vast corner of the room; the Globe, with a diameter as long as the height between floor and ceiling, was a much cherished magical artifact, created by himself from the instructions in a journal of a Dark Lord long forgotten.

It was Gellert's means of keeping track of all magical beings—humans and creatures—all depicted in the Globe's watery-like surface by flames, of varying sizes, colors and degrees of brightness.

How it had amused him when he had seen that, recently, his old 'friend' had increased the
frequency of his trips to the French countryside.

It seemed that when Gellert Grindelwald was on the move, Albus Dumbledore didn't leave anything to chance, even believing that Grindelwald could be interested in something so lackluster as Nicholas Flame's Philosopher's Stone.

Immortality had never particularly appealed to a hedonistic wizard like Gellert, who knew himself well enough to foresee that an eternal existence would only end up making him cry out of tediousness. No, Gellert was all for the 'next, great adventure' as his one and only true lover had called it, and would joyfully embrace Death with a crow of chortles when it came, as long as it didn't take him before he accomplished his aims.

Nevertheless, he had been entertained by the comings and goings of the bright orange flame that represented Albus Dumbledore. It was the one flame in the whole Globe which was as large and which shone as powerfully as Gellert's own.

And a flame which never, not once, had moved across the Globe to appear in Germany, but which had been orbiting around other countries - Albus had certainly been busy lately, attempting to form alliances for the British Ministry of Magic in an unofficial capacity, no doubt, and certainly being the only one who had the foresight and depth of understanding to know some of what Grindelwald had planned.

The most powerful light wizard in the world – as evidenced in the Globe – was clearly making preparations to thwart him. But not to confront him directly, Gellert knew that well.

For the same reason that he would leave England and his quest for the two remaining Deathly Hallows for last, he knew that Albus would never set foot in Germany and confront him face-to-face, not unless it became the wizard's last, desperate measure.

Thus, it wasn't Albus' orange flame which he was concerned about, not even some other flames which Gellert had keep tabs on, since those bright flames represented powerful witches or wizards who could be somewhat of threat to him, or possible allies if he so wished.

Rather, what had piqued his curiosity for some years were two flames right smack in the middle of the docks' neighborhood of muggle London.

One of those flames had just, some minutes ago, flared up brightly. The child had done magic, and with some measure of control over it; quite a feat given the child's young age.

He was most puzzled by this bright blue flame in particular, though the black one vastly intrigued him too. It was the latter which he had seen being 'born', and just a year later, a small blue flame had popped right next to it, as if out of thin air.

Gellert was interested in them not only because of the brightness and intensity of their flames – indicating vast and unprecedented magical potential in children who, by his estimates, hadn't turned eight yet- but due to their flames' characteristics.

The flame of the child which had been born nearly eight years ago was almost pure black, denoting a strong ancestry of a dark pureblood line and a rather staggering potential for the Dark Arts.

Nevertheless, it was the other flame which befuddled him the most; bright blue and yet with a strong core of black from which a tendril flared out and connected with the other flame. It perplexed him. Never had he seen such 'connection' between flames on the Globe, and its meaning utterly eluded him.
His pensive musings were abruptly cut short when the door of his office was opened and two guards stepped inside, dragging a witch by her arms.

Gellert immediately strode forth and soon halted in front of her, his lips quirking upwards into a twisted parody of a charming and courteous smile, as he intoned pleasantly in a faultless Greek, "My esteemed Oracle, I hope your accommodations in my humble abode have been to your satisfaction?"
Part I: Chapter 5

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AN:

Thank you all for your reviews, they always keep me motivated!

Now, I would like to clarify some points brought up by some reviewers:

First, Tom and Harry have the same age. When Lily and James Potter were killed, Harry was a one year old baby –I'm following canon here-, and it was that night in which –in this fic- someone took baby Harry and left him at the orphanage's doorstep, as described in the first chapter of this fic. Tom was one year old as well. Alice and Kathy estimated that both babies seemed to have the same age and thus, later, Alice came up with the story that they were twins, given their similar looks, etc.

Second, Harry will be a powerful and independent wizard, but not yet. Some readers are annoyed with Harry's personality, but you have to remember that he's still just a child. We've seen him from ages 4 to 7, so of course that he's going to be childish and immature, he's acting his age.

You can't expect him to be like Tom, who is so adult-like given his innate personality and prodigal mind, nor can you expect him to be like canon Harry who was so moody and broody, and 11 years old in the beginning, by the way.

This Harry wasn't raised by the Dursleys like an outcast in his own home. He was raised in a ghastly orphanage, yes, but with many that adore him. He has been loved and cherished, and he's well liked by all his friends in the orphanage, thus he's much more sociable, outgoing and kind-hearted.

Alice and Harry's friends in the orphanage have shaped Harry's personality in this way, but we can also see how Tom has influenced Harry in the way in which Harry is mischievous and cunning and knows how to use his tears, whining, and innocent looks to get what he wants.

We can also see that he's not easily ruffled by the things that Tom does, he takes them in stride. For example, when Tom kills the bunny, Harry was angered but he didn't cry and have a hissy fit. He's become used to things like that and they don't frighten or scare him. This is part of the beginning of his 'darker' nature, to call it something, and of course, Tom is the cause of it.

On the other hand, we have Tom, who speaks and acts like an adult, for the simple reason that he, unlike Harry, is an outcast in the orphanage. Only Alice and Harry like the boy, and Tom never socializes with the other children, thus he doesn't act like them. He spends all his time reading and studying and thus has the vocabulary and mind-set of an adult. And since he spurns Alice's affection for him, he hasn't been influenced by her. But we can see the way Harry has affected his personality in many scenes, primarily in the one in which he admits to having killed the bunny so that Harry wouldn't take the blame. Also, every time Tom has done something 'nasty', he has had a good reason for it, so I don't think he's being sadistic just for the joy of it. Oh, he enjoys taking revenge and causing pain, but he only does so when he has reason for it, and this is certainly proof of how Tom has been influenced by Harry.
So, in short, we have Harry who is nice, 'cute and adorable' and loves his 'big brother' unconditionally, and we have Tom who is mean and harsh with Harry most of the times, but it doesn't mean that Harry is Tom's pet or that he's a doormat.

I think their relationship is pretty well-balanced. Tom can be mean and harsh, but more often than not, he ends up doing what Harry wants, and he's easily softened when Harry starts crying and whining and cajoling – and Harry knows this well.

However, both their personalities will change and develop as they grow up, Harry's in particular. And it is then when we will see how he comes to be a 'powerful and independent' wizard, but for that we will have to be a bit patient.

Third, the boys' 'flames' in Grindelwald's Globe indicate Tom's vast potential for the Dark Arts, and also that both boys have the capacity to be uncommonly powerful - this, and the 'strange link' between the flames, is what has piqued Gellert's curiosity. But it only indicates potential, given the size and intensity of the flames, so it is up to the boys if they become powerful or not. In this fic, like in my others, innate magic has to be nurtured and exercised so that it can grow and be strong and powerful.

Also, Grindelwald will certainly have a major part in the story, mostly by the things he will be doing in the background. Though, it's safe to expect that he will be directly involved with the boys at some point.

And finally, what Tom knows about the Nazis –the details about their oppression of the Jews, homosexuals, communists, and etc- comes from the info he read in Alice's Communist pamphlets. As we all know, the general public, even the Germans, were unaware of the things that went on. It only came to light during the Nuremberg trials after the end of the war, so Tom is dealing with privileged information here, and much of it –especially regarding the 'labor' camps- is mere speculation from Mr. Hutchins and his Communist associates. But all of this will also play a major part in Harry and Tom's lives.

Note:

All OC scenes and background info, such as the ones of Alice -and of other characters that will appear- are important to the plot, so I recommend not to skip them, even if it doesn't seem that interesting or relevant.

In this fic, the Wizengamot will not only be the Court of Justice of wizarding Britain but also like a Parliament, where laws and important government decisions are discussed and then approved or rejected- I don't know if this was also so in canon, but it will be in this story. And the Minister of Magic, when it comes to governmental decisions, has the last word.

 Italics will always denote foreign languages or parseltongue.

That said, I hope you enjoy this chapter and let me know what you think!

Part I: Chapter 5

Gellert Grindelwald's hazel eyes gleamed when he received no response to his taunting welcoming remark, and he simply watched with unrepressed eagerness as the woman was forcibly dragged further into his office by the two burly guards at her side.
Dressed in clothes that were now nothing more than filthy rags, with trails of dried blood running down her legs and many bruises and infected cuts on face and arms, Gellert could still appreciate the witch's sturdy beauty in the curves that still lingered on her emaciated body; the ample bosom, the small waist and the wide hips, added to large black eyes, a mass of riotous dark curls, a prominent straight nose and a manly squared jaw which only lent more strength and appeal to her Grecian features.

Always one to admire beauty in all shapes and forms, Gellert's lips curved into a smile as the woman was brusquely dropped on an armchair.

Gellert waved his Elder Wand once, and abruptly, magical chains erupted from the stone floor, instantly wrapping themselves around the woman's legs, arms and torso, pinning her in place.

"Leave us," said Gellert shortly in brisk German, gesturing dismissively at the guards.

With just a sharp nod of their heads and a click of their boots as they snapped their heels together, the wizards then spun around and soon shut the door behind them.

"Look up at me, dear," intoned Gellert pleasantly, switching to Greek as easily and casually as if he had been raised with it, while he leaned against the edge of one of the tables to be directly in front of her.

Piercing black eyes snapped up to his, and Gellert's twisted smile widened when he saw the fiery spirit in them. No, this witch hadn't been broken by her one-month stint in Nurmengard's dungeons, nor by the prison guards who had had direct permission from Gellert to do whatever they pleased with her, and who had evidently, by her looks, not only tortured her but violated her to their hearts' content.

"Sibylla Spyros," he said with relish, as he slowly caressed his Elder Wand, "what a pleasure it is to have you here at last." He arched an eyebrow at her, as he continued placidly, "And to think that at first, when rumors reached my ears that a female descendant of Cassandra's line existed and lived, I did not believe it."

Gellert chortled under his breath, as if finding his own foolishness amusing, and then graced her with a blinding smile. "Yet that you are, the proof is that your body rejected the Veritaserum plied in your food. I heard that you were ill for many days due to it. Yes?"

"Yes," came the response through gritted teeth as if against her will, the witch's voice raw and hoarse.

Gellert's eyebrows hitched upwards, and a sudden gleam entered his hazel eyes as he said gleefully, "The legends regarding your line are correct then, you can only speak the Truth. Cassandra's Curse-"

"The Curse is not that we can only speak the Truth," said Sibylla tartly, her jaw tightening as the words spilled out of her dry mouth, "or that our prophecies sound like lies to all ears or that we are never believed. The Curse is that all our prophecies are of doom and destruction and no matter what we do or how hard we try, they always come true. That's the Curse that has always plagued the females of my line."

"I see," said Gellert as he hummed low under his breath, before he pinned her with his hazel gaze, arching an intrigued eyebrow. "And yet, you chose to live. He gestured at the room and at both of them, as he continued, 'You must have Seen this. And from what I've been told, when my followers went to Greece to capture you, you were waiting for them in your home, sitting alone in the middle
of your room – expecting their arrival and not resisting capture. Why?"

Sibylla’s expression smoothened, with no trace of pain or grief on her bruised face as she replied calmly with a sardonic smile on her lips, "As you said, I chose to live."

Gellert narrowed his eyes at her, before he chuckled and said amiably, "You'll have to give me a more enlightening answer than that. After all, I'm well aware that your husband and fifteen-year-old son are hiding somewhere – undoubtedly per your instructions. You wouldn't want to force me to hunt them down, would you?"

For a moment, Sibylla tightly closed her eyes shut, breathing haggardly as she forced her mind to repeat the answer she had already given. It was the truth after all, and the cause and reason for everything that had happened.

Indeed, as the wizard before her was well aware, she was the only female of Cassandra’s line that had been allowed to live past her infancy. When Sibylla had been a seven-year-old girl, living with her mother in an isolated little hut, she had begun having visions and started to understand her Curse and the danger of her existence.

She had Seen, with her Inner Eye, how it had all started with her unfortunate ancestor, a woman who had had a life more wretched and miserable than that of any other.

Cassandra, daughter of King Priam of Troy, had been one of the first true Seers in history, and to date, the most powerful one. As legends went, at the tender age of thirteen, one of her tutors, an old lecherous wizard who was one of the King’s priests of the Temple of Apollo, had fallen in love and lusted after the girl. His courtship rejected by both Cassandra and her father, the wizard had cursed her and her descendants before mysteriously disappearing.

Soon after, Cassandra had begun having visions and bespeaking prophecies regarding the destruction of their kingdom. She had been disbelieved, ignored, ridiculed, and even her own family had thought her mad and had imprisoned her. And yet, it all came to happen as she had foretold.

The young girl ended up being a war prize for the victorious King Agamemnon of Mycenae, who forcibly took her as a concubine and had two children with her. It was the man’s wife, Clytemnestra, who killed him when he returned to his kingdom. And Cassandra, knowing beforehand her fate, had entrusted her children to a slave and ensured that they would escape unscathed. Then, the young Seer had calmly met her death at Clytemnestra’s hands.

How Sibylla had suffered through those visions, feeling her ancestor’s piercing grief and sorrow, her wretched impotence and her bottled, burning rage. How Sibylla had further grown embittered as she Saw what came of Cassandra’s descendants; all of them with that uncommonly powerful Seer trait, but it was the females who inherited the ‘gift’ most potently, along with the Curse, and thus, it was the females who were most feared and therefore who were killed at birth. The males’ fate throughout history hadn’t been a joyful one either; captured by wizards who knew of their line, who forced them into becoming Oracles, or even by muggles of old who still believed in legends.

All of them had had wretched lives. And all of them had made sure that if they spawned a baby girl, they would kill her before she could grow up to be a Seer who would only bring doom and misery with her prophecies and Truth-speech.

It was so, that at the age of thirteen, Sibylla had dared ask her mother why she still lived.

Her mother had married a wizard of Cassandra’s line; a poor wizard who had managed to avoid
detection and suspicion by working as a mere peddler, never revealing his Seer abilities. And he had been a wizard who, when his wife bore him a daughter, had instantly and fearfully instructed that the baby was to be drowned the following day. But by morning, his wife had disappeared, taking baby Sibylla with her.

"Why?" she had asked her mother, so many years ago when she had been a girl of mere thirteen.

"Because I wanted you to live," had been her mother's loving and simple reply.

Her uneducated, dimwitted mother who didn't fully understand the consequences of her actions, who was only moved by her profound love for her daughter, it had been her who had irrevocably altered things.

And soon after, when her mother had died, ill and impoverished, Sibylla had taken her words to heart, and had done exactly that – she had lived. She had always strived to live her life to the fullest, with no regrets, with no culpability and owing nothing to anyone, not to wizards or muggles who had done nothing but use and torment the ancestors of her line.

Even knowing how it would all end, and the devastation that her existence could bring, Sibylla had lived for herself, finding love in the arms of a kind-hearted man and only doing one thing to ensure that the Curse of her line would come to an end – she had poisoned her womb before conceiving her son, making sure her child would carry only a weak modicum of Cassandra's Seer trait, making sure, thus, that the Curse would lose most of its potency.

And indeed, her now fifteen-year-old son would be a mediocre Seer at best, and Sibylla knew that her line would end with her son's daughter, and it gave her a deep sense of relief and peace.

It was so, that she was now able to meet the gaze of the dark wizard before her, knowing that her life would end that day and that what she would reveal would further change the future into that which should not have happened.

"I didn't resist, and I didn't kill myself before being captured," said Sibylla calmly, as she made her tortured body relax against the chains and chair, "because I chose to live. And because I don't owe the world and its people anything." Her large black eyes pierced into the wizard's hazel ones, as she continued in a strong voice, "I have no regrets, no burdens upon my shoulders. I am at peace with myself and my decisions. What you will learn from me and what you'll do with it, will be your choice. And what comes of it, is the choice of many others as well. The choice my mother made, and the choice I made, only play a small part in it."

Gellert Grindelwald stared at the woman, first with frustrated irritation and then with dark amusement – Seers were known to be annoyingly vague and cryptic with their answers. But it mattered little; soon he would acquire all of her knowledge directly from the source. His gaze flickered from her forehead to the bottomless pensieve on his desk - quite a unique one he had recently acquired for that day in particular.

He waved a hand dismissively, already bored with their topic of conversation. He didn't care about the Seer's motives or where her family was, after all. He had no need for that information, but he still needed other answers before he could proceed with what he had planned. He rather hear it from her directly before seeing it. It was much more amusing and satisfying that way; he always did like to play with his prey for a little while.

Gellert stood up and gracefully made way towards the end of the vast room, flicking his wand, which immediately made Sibylla, in her chair and chains, drag after him. He halted before the immense magical sphere which encompassed a full section of his study, and then turned around to
glance at the Seer who now sat before the Globe.

He gestured at the sphere as he said placidly, "I'm sure you already know what this is. You must have Seen it, hmm? It's how I managed to find where you were, after all." He shot her a crooked smile before he pointed at two bright flames with the tip of his wand. "Use your abilities and tell me about them – are they worthy future followers that I should mold or just children who will amount to nothing significant?"

"Will they be followers? Not quite," said the Seer coolly, her lips stretching into a harsh smile which seemed to want to mock him. "Will they be significant? Oh, very much so, I dare say."

Gellert's lips thinned into a humorless flat line, and he asked again, now in very simple terms, "Who are they?"

The taunting expression on her face vanished, and Sibylla's mouth hung open as words spilled out of her mouth as if her tongue was being pulled by a pair of tongs, "A Slytherin. And a Potter."

Gellert's blonde eyebrows jumped to his hairline, his expression one of speechless disbelief. A second later, a deep frown furrowed his forehead as he said harshly, "It cannot be. The line of Salazar Slytherin's bastard son died out centuries ago. And I would know if there was a Potter meandering about. I've kept close tabs on the members of that family for many years-"

"Slytherin's last descendants disappeared from wizarding society many centuries ago, they became recluses, hermits," snapped Sibylla, her expression hard and dark as she gritted the words out, "but they still live. That boy is the lost Slytherin Heir." Her lips contorted into a sneer of derision as she bit out, "And I am well aware of the reason for your interest in the Potters. I Saw that summer night, so many decades ago, when you revealed the deepest of your secrets to your paramour, the details of your quest for the Hallows, the clues you had gathered. How Albus Dumbledore loved you then - such a profound and blind love, such a synchrony of minds and longings, such a perfect match of magical cores."

Suddenly, she paused and let out a harsh bout of snide laughter, her black eyes gleaming nastily. "Young, infatuated Albus Dumbledore was able to piece the clues together, he even remembered the slab of tombstone he had seen near his mother's grave the day of her funeral. He took you there, that night, to Ignotus Peverell's tomb, you both saw the symbol there-"

Abruptly, she choked on her words when Gellert suddenly poked her throat painfully with his wand's tip, his face contorted in a fierce and wrathful expression, his lips pulled back from his perfect row of white teeth.

In the next second, just as abruptly, his features smoothened and he chortled under his breath, a tight smile twisting his lips. "Yes, I dare say I owe Albus for that."

He ripped his wand away from the Seer's throat and calmly stroked it, though his eyes narrowed as they remained fixed on the witch. "As you evidently know already, after that night, we both soon discovered that the Potters are Ignotus' descendants, his Hallow passed down as an heirloom from father to son, the Cloak's mastership bounded by blood to them. Only a Potter can be its master, only a Potter can hand its ownership to me." He shot her a crooked, gallant smile, as he added amiably, "Thus, you can understand my interest in knowing about this Potter boy. Is he a bastard son?"

"No, he's a true Potter," said Sibylla hoarsely, her hands pulling against her chains when she absently attempted to massage her aching throat. "He's out of place, out of time."
Gellert frowned as he skewered her with his hawk-like hazel gaze. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

"I mean just what I've said," snapped Sibylla shortly, her lips curling into a contemptuous sneer.

Suppressing a spike of frayed annoyance, Gellert chose to simply jump to his next question, his mind -already supplied with some astonishing information- was rather occupied in many plans and plots. "What about the peculiar connection between the two boys?"

"It's a link that has not yet been formed," replied the Seer tartly, once again settling herself in her prison of chair and chains with an air of supreme indifference.

At that nonsensical reply, now irritated beyond the limits of his patience, Gellert dismissively waved a hand at her. However, before he could say another word, the Seer bore her eyes into his, as she said gleefully, "What you secretly yearn for, will never happen. He will never come back to you."

Arching an eyebrow, Gellert stared at her, his strained smile relaxing into a nonchalant one as he batted away bittersweet memories and said pleasantly, "We will see."

"You will lose the war as well," said Sibylla as if she had not been interrupted at all, her tone now satisfied, "both the muggle and the wizarding one."

At that, a bout of hearty, crowing laughter erupted from Gellert's mouth, as he shook his head with amusement. "Indeed?"

When his chortles subsided, he shot her a wide, crooked grin. "But with countless casualties, no doubt, hmm? Splendid news, then. The wars are nothing but a smokescreen, a sideshow, amusing entertainment with some added benefits to help my Quest along." He eyed her with a viciously taunting expression on his handsome face, as he quipped, "Surely you didn't expect me to break into tears when you disclosed that to me? Or when you mentioned Albus' 'profound love' for me in the past? Or that he wouldn't be mine, once again?"

Sibylla countered his words not with an expression of disappointment but with one of utter boredom. "This is getting tedious. Ask the question – the reason for why I am here, and let's be done with it."

"With pleasure," said Gellert shortly, before he pinned her with his eyes and demanded curtly, "Where is the Vessel?"

The Seer's lips curved into a wide smile, her dark eyes gleaming, as she intoned cheerfully, "Where, indeed. The Jews' greatest treasure has long since been hidden, not even my Inner Eye has the capacity to pierce through the shrouds of magic that keep it concealed. I can tell you this, however - it will not be you who finds it." Her black gaze flickered to the Globe, her hard smile widening. "It will be the boys."

With his narrowed-eyed, hazel gaze flickering from the two flames on the Globe to her and back, Gellert finally took a step forward, aiming his wand at the Seer, as a crooked grin spread on his face. "I'm afraid that's an insufficient answer. You know what will happen now, do you not? You must have Seen it, hmm? Yet I dare say that you won't be prepared for it, as much as you must have already armed yourself with valor."

Sibylla's bruised face paled alarmingly, though she didn't speak a word, her jaw merely tightened as she balled her chained hands into white-knuckled fists.
At her reaction, Gellert cocked his head to a side, his twisted grin widening with relish, as he continued placidly, "I, on the other hand, am quite looking forward to it. It was a tradition of old, was it not, to rip out the eyes of Seers so that their Inner Eye instantly became more powerful? Undoubtedly, you'll be able to 'pierce through shrouds of magic' once it's done and divulge to me the Vessel's precise location."

Not wasting another breath, Gaelic words sprung from his lips as he swished his wand in her direction. In the bat of an eyelash, ghostly, skeletal hands erupted from his wand's tip, becoming larger as they spread forth like black tendrils of smoke, the fingers soon sinking into the flesh of the woman's face, delving into her eye-sockets.

And as much as she had foreseen it and prepared for it, Sibylla couldn't help the endless scream that tore out her parched throat, her limbs jerkily convulsing due to the agony inflicted, as the ghostly claw-like fingers clamped around her eyeballs, and then simply pulled and gouged out.

The sound of her screams, of Grindelwald's satisfied chuckles, of the squishy noise when the ghostly hands withdrew and squashed her eyeballs within their fists, the dripping of rivulets of blood that surged from her empty sockets, all of it became faraway, distant sounds when her mind suddenly seemed to explode in a whirlwind of blinding visions, of flashing images and sounds, of floods of knowledge of past, present and future which abruptly poured forth as if a great dam had been broken.

The pain was insurmountable, yet with her last remnant of conscious will and determination, Sibylla remembered the fake tooth in her mouth and the poison within it. She snapped her jaw shut, and with a soft 'crack', the tooth split and the liquid quickly trickled down her throat.

Gellert jumped forward when, suddenly, purple fumes hissed and emanated from the witch's mouth, blood abruptly pouring from her ears and nostrils, as her face became a lattice of protruding, sickly black veins.

With a roar of rage, having an inkling of what the cunning Seer must have done, he flicked his Elder Wand urgently and repeatedly. His bottomless pensieve flew towards him as he made flows of silvery tendrils pour out from the woman's head, like thick rivers of grey light that came forth like waves as he directed them with his wand.

Frantically, Gellert poured memory after memory into the floating pensieve by his side, but he could already see the wide, gaping holes in the damaged silvery tendrils.

After long minutes of exhausting work, with beads of sweat on his smooth forehead, Gellert took in a deep breath as the last frayed tendril he could salvage dropped inside the pensieve. Settling the pensieve on top of the nearest table, he gazed down at its contents with an utterly enraged expression on his face.

He had told the guards to check every inch of her body precisely so that something like that wouldn't happen. Soon, two of his guards would wish they had never been born.

Yet, as he contemplated the ravaged tendrils of the Seer's memories now floating placidly on his pensieve's surface, he thought he could piece some information together from what was left.

Gellert stilled for a moment, and his hazel gaze snapped to look at the witch. There was nothing left of Sibylla Spyros but a mangled corpse with a black, veiny face, eyeless sockets, and bloodied rags of clothes. Her blue lips, frozen in their expression with the rigor mortis of death, were twisted, yet not in agony but with the satisfaction that came with having taken her ultimate revenge.
If it was revenge on him or on the world at large, Gellert didn't know, but abruptly, peals of
crowing chortles escaped from his lips.

And as he reached her corpse, he gallantly bowed his head to her, admiringly acknowledging the
cunningness of the one witch who had managed to best him.

With a wide, crooked grin of appreciation and parting fondness, he flicked his wand. Her body
instantly vanished into thin air, the chains loudly clanking as they heavily dropped to the stone
floors.

As his hazel gaze returned to the pensieve, Gellert's grin widened. Indeed, he wouldn't have all the
information he had hoped for, but he always enjoyed playing the game when it became harder and
more unpredictable.

Konrad Von Krauss' shiny black boots clicked against the stone floors as he made his way along
the narrow corridor of the highest level of Nurmengard Tower. In his late thirties, with his locks of
ashy blonde hair pulled back on his head in an impeccable style, his hard, icy blue eyes gleaming
with depths of knowledge and self-confidence, and with his tall and broad-shouldered physique, he
cut an impressive figure - the epitome of strong masculinity and vaunted dark pureblood power and
supremacy.

There were not even crinkles around his eyes or along his forehead to indicate the utter exhaustion
the wizard felt, after having spent one more month leading the squads of followers who went
through the Jew possessions that the Nazis had been confiscating and whisking away to the
numerous warehouses they had scattered all around Germany.

Alas, in the endless rows of ornate, antique furniture, of priceless vases, paintings and portraits, of
jewels and gems, of books upon books, and Torahs after Torahs, nothing pertinent had been found.
Oh, there had been some valuables magically hidden away in many objects from wizarding Jewish
families, but not what his Dark Lord was looking for – a clue regarding the location of the Vessel.

Once again, the latest warehouse had proven to be an utter disappointment.

Nevertheless, he had been summoned by the Dark Lord a few minutes ago and Konrad had
instantly apparated to Nurmengard's entrance gateway, his concern for Grindelwald giving him one
more reason to be as swift as possible.

He had heard that the Dark Lord had finally interrogated the Seer, but in the two weeks after that, it
seemed that Grindelwald had spent all his time locked in his office, merely going out to participate
in some meetings in the Reichstag to push matters along with Hitler and the muggle's minions.

For Konrad, this was worrisome to some extent, since the Dark Lord usually liked to be seen in the
many balls and society events thrown with the very money of his followers, affording the lap of
luxury to entice more supporters.

When he finally reached the iron-wrought door of the Dark Lord's study, Konrad cleared his throat,
smoothened his robes to get rid of non-existent wrinkles, and then knocked once.

Without a word from the inside, the heavy door creaked open, and Konrad stepped inside with
brisk, short strides.

He abruptly halted when his icy blue gaze landed on Grindelwald, who was seated behind one of
his many desks. But unlike other occasions, the Dark Lord had dark circles under his eyes and a
rather ruffled and scruffy appearance. Though, the wizard's hazel eyes gleamed with some measure
of satisfaction, and his ever present crooked smile seemed to be one of pleasure at seeing him.

Konrad would still be cautious, nonetheless. No one knew as well as he did how mercurial and unpredictable Grindelwald's mood swings could be. After all, the wizard had practically raised him. He liked to believe that no one knew the man better than he did.

At the sight of his most loyal and trusted of his Haupte Kommandanten, and the only one in his Circle of followers who knew about his true Quest, Gellert widened his smile and gestured for the wizard to take a seat, as he chuckled under his breath, "Every time I see you, you remind me more and more of your father."

"I certainly hope it's in looks only, my Lord," said Konrad, his lips twisting with disdain at the very memory of his progenitor, as he swiftly sat down with an economy of movement.

Gellert chidingly tsked at him, but knew better than to push the matter. It was no secret that Konrad held no love for his departed father. And Konrad, for his part, felt that the only valuable thing Ulrich Von Krauss had ever imparted to him was his vast knowledge of magical history.

Indeed, since his father's schooldays, when Ulrich had been Grindelwald's loyal sidekick and closest friend, his father had been a history fanatic. It had come as no surprise to anyone that, when a seventeen-year-old Gellert had started travelling around the world, the faithful and besotted Ulrich had instantly joined him. For years and years, the pair had journeyed to their heart's content, gathering magical knowledge and coming to form many plans.

Konrad knew well that the Quest for the Vessel had began due to some of his father's findings during the travels, and that soon, it had become the pair's common life goal to see the artifact re-discovered and used for the third time in history.

He didn't hold against his father the man's unrequited and obsessive love and adoration of Grindelwald, despite that it had been subject of ridicule during most of his life and some, even now, dared to throw a jibe at Konrad due to it. He didn't resent his father for having no thoughts or interest but in history and his scholarly pursuits, and to care for no one but for Gellert.

Konrad didn't even despise his father for the childhood he had been given – Ulrich had done his duty and had married a dark pureblood witch, who had bore him a male heir and then was happily content to live her own life in one of the many Von Krauss estates and never see child or husband again.

As a result of that, and per Grindelwald's wishes, Ulrich had been forced to take the little boy Konrad along with them during their endless travels. Konrad had grown up without the formal education of a magical school, and while Ulrich had treated him as a sort of pet which annoyingly distracted him from historical studies and researches, Gellert had treated him as a nephew, and had taken the time and interest to tutor and teach him during the many years when a young Konrad had travelled along with them.

What he did hold against his father was the decimation of the Von Krauss fortune caused by the astronomical expenses incurred during decades of journeys. He didn't blame Gellert for not having spent a knut of the Grindelwald riches in such wanderings around the world. It was his father who had decided to treat his 'friend'. And thus the blame laid on his father's besotted and extravagant foolishness and the man's lack of thought for the future of the Von Krauss line.

The Von Krauss estates, thankfully, hadn't been touched, but that didn't help matters when Konrad's time had come to have a spouse. With not a knut in the Von Krauss vaults, he had had no choice but to marry the wealthiest pureblood that could be found. But it had been his father, as per
Daughter of one of the wealthiest dark pureblood families of Russia, with nothing to entice marital prospects—not in looks or wits—but her fortune, Ludmilla had seemed like the perfect candidate to Ulrich Von Krauss, with little concern about his son's tastes or opinion about her.

Moreover, the wizard had disregarded—other due to blind stupidity or indifference—the many loopholes in the marital contract that was signed with Ludmilla's family. Konrad had later learned that due to that mistake, his wife's fortune would not be appended and become part of the Von Krauss one, as was normal and expected, but that his wife would retain control.

And after a few days of marriage, Konrad had discovered that his wife was nothing but a petty, frivolous—and to his misfortune—occasionally cunning, harpy of a woman. To add insult to injury, they had tried to beget an heir for ages, all conceptions ending in miscarriages, until one day a daughter was born and Ludmilla had quite acidly declared that there would be no further attempts.

A female heiress, of course, was not a proper heir to the Von Krauss line, but Konrad had had no choice but to accept it, since Ludmilla had quickly willed her fortune to her newborn daughter, and told him in no uncertain terms just how knut-less he would be if he ever impregnated one of his mistresses with a bastard child. Then she had swiftly occupied herself with throwing balls in the Von Krauss estates and holding court in wizarding society events, never missing the grandeur and lavishness of the Winter Season in her beloved wizarding Moscow or St. Petersburg, and coming back to Germany only to mingle with the crème de la crème of pureblood circles.

Tied to his wife's purse strings, with no option of poisoning her so that he could marry again, Konrad had grown to despise his daughter as much as his wife, since the girl, in his eyes, though having inherited his looks, seemed nothing but a horrid copy of Ludmilla, personality-wise.

Thus, when his father had been killed, Konrad had considered that justice had been served and he had known joy for one brief moment. And so, when Gellert liked to reminisce about his old friend, Konrad did nothing but press his lips into a thin line, his eyes turning chilly until Grindelwald noticed, which would often result in being shot a crooked smile before the Dark Lord summarily changed subjects.

"Any findings?"

Konrad was yanked away from his embittered reminiscences, and he focused his full attention on the dark wizard before him.

"No, my Lord," he replied shortly, with enough words to convey the fruitlessness of the latest warehouse inspection.

"Gellert, if you will, when it's just the two of us," said the Dark Lord, gracing him with a charming, twisted smile which had a hint of impatience to it. "Surely I don't need to remind you yet again?"

Without replying, Konrad simply nodded, but it wouldn't change the fact that he would always wait for Grindelwald to offer that sort of familiarity between them. Even if the wizard was the only true parental figure he had known in his life, he had experienced more than one occasion when the Dark Lord had seemed vastly irked when addressed as simply 'Gellert' by him.

The wizard before him ever remained truly unpredictable in his moods; as companionable and mischievous as a schoolboy one moment, as charming and alluring as the most consummate of hedonistic dandies in the next, and as chilling and fear-inspiring as the Dark Lord he was, in the other.
Konrad contemplated the perfection of the regal and handsome features of the face before him and the sheer breathtaking potency of the power that Gellert exuded. And not for the first time, he thanked that his tastes didn't lean towards males.

Grindelwald -renowned as a wizard who enjoyed carnal pleasures to the fullest and who didn't restrain himself in such pursuits- had a long string of beautiful male lovers, and the occasional woman, who inevitably all ended mindlessly in love with the wizard. Yet, one after the other, they all went out of Gellert's bedroom door receiving the same farewell: a fond pat on their heads, a salacious parting wink and a crooked smile.

Pulling his gaze away and clearing his throat, Konrad gestured at the nearest map of Europe hanging by the walls, as he said curtly, "Despite of my lack of success so far, I believe that when Austria and Czechoslovakia are taken first, as you have planned, we could have greater chances of finding something in the possessions of the Jews of those countries."

"Yes, yes, certainly. That is a possibility, but we'll wait a while before that," interrupted Grindelwald, his tone disinterested and quite dismissive. "And I will no further waste your talents in such mundane task." His hazel eyes suddenly seemed to gleam as an eager smile broke on his face. "Tell me, how is your dear little daughter doing?"

"Kasimira?" Konrad frowned at him, before he added with unveiled distaste, "I suppose she is doing well. She has begun her first year at Durmstrang."

"Indeed? Wonderful news," said Gellert quite congenially and casually, his tone of voice only managing to put Konrad on his guard and making him quite certain that he wouldn't like the next words that would spill from his Lord's lips. "Have you thought of start making arrangements to have her married into a worthy pureblood line?"

Konrad's frown, now a bit befuddled, only deepened as he replied, "Ludmilla will take care of that-"

"No, my dear friend, you cannot leave such matters to your 'charming' wife," interjected Gellert, his tone sarcastic and poignant. A smile stretched widely on his face as he abruptly stood to his feet and went around his desk to pat Konrad on the shoulder. "Since Kasimira will be the heiress of your estates, it's only fit that you see to her future, as a doting father should do."

"Doting father? Not quite, Gellert, as you well know-"

"And a union with a dark pureblood English family of renown and prestige, is just what the Von Krauss line needs," continued Grindelwald pleasantly as if he hadn't been interrupted at all. "The Patriarch of the family I have in mind is already a supporter but can be persuaded to commit further to the cause if presented with Kasimira as a spouse for his grandson. With the enticement of the estates your daughter will inherit from you and the fortune from Ludmilla, she'll be a treat too appealing to ignore. Thus, I've decided that it's in your best interest to spend some years in England, to see this matter through."

Without knowing what to protest about first, Konrad settled on showing some of his utter abhorrence, as he said with open scorn, "England? Surely not. I'm your right-hand. I'm needed here in Germany, not traipsing around that horrid little country. And Ludmilla would never consent. She can't abide British wizarding society, as boorish and tainted as it is. And for once, I agree with her in that opinion-"

"Ludmilla and your daughter will stay put where they are," interrupted Gellert, all traces of amicable smile gone from his handsome face as he pierced him with a hard gaze. "And I'm not
sending you there to enjoy society, Konrad. I'm sending you on a several missions, as a matter of fact. I've given you a reason for your stay there that will raise no suspicions – to seek a marital contract for your daughter. And so you shall, whilst you conduct more pertinent tasks for me.”

"Which are?" demanded Konrad, fixing his Lord with an icy stare, not ready to relent unless given a worthy reason.

"You do try my patience sometimes, Konrad," said Gellert sharply, before he turned around and gestured at a nearby table. "What do you see there?"

An expression of dawning understanding spread on Konrad's features as his gaze landed on the pensieve predominantly occupying the tabletop, and he said quietly, "The Seer's memories? It went according to plan?"

"Not exactly," said Gellert nonchalantly, as he waved a hand and a scroll of rolled parchment materialized in his grip. "I didn't glean as much information as I desired - but enough." His hazel eyes gleamed darkly and his lips curved upwards, as he added, "I've been… quite surprised by some of it."

Konrad shot him a scrutinizing glance, decided it was best not to pry for the time being, and then eyed the scroll in the wizard's hand. "My missions in England have to do with what you've learned from the Seer's knowledge?"

"Precisely, and there's no one I can trust with it but you," said Gellert, crookedly smiling at him with an affectionate, encouraging expression that Konrad didn't fully trust, since it normally preceded orders he didn't like. "One of your tasks, apart from seeing to your daughter's future marital arrangements and to persuade more British wizards to our side, is to act as a liaison between my spy at Hogwarts and myself. The other, is to forge for yourself an identity in English muggle society, with adequate political and financial clout."

"In muggle society?" echoed Konrad, painfully pushing the words out with an appalled and suffering expression on his face.

"I'm not doing this to torture you," said Gellert sternly, piercing him with an impatient, harsh gaze. "And as distasteful as you find it, you will do as commanded." He dropped the scroll in the wizard's hands as he added curtly, "There you will find the detailed instructions. Your missions will span for several years, and I expect you to report back to me once every three months. You will understand more when you've read the scroll. You're dismissed."

Gripping the scroll tightly in a fist, Konrad shot him a glance, before he snapped his heels together and gave him a sharp nod of the head. In the next instant, he briskly strode out of the room, leaving an amused Dark Lord shaking his head.

Three years later…

In a circular office in Gryffindor Tower of Hogwarts, a wizard sat behind his desk with a contemplative expression on his face. Having nearly eighty years of age, any muggle who would look at him would have pegged him as not being a day over forty.

The wizard had wavy locks of long, auburn hair and a beard of the same hue which reached his waist, sky blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles which twinkled with good humor, and pleasant features in a face which usually wore an amicable and calm expression. Adding joviality to his
appearance, he was dressed in purple robes, the cuffs and hems displaying rows of small, animated suns, with hands that waved and with eyes that winked.

The majority of Hogwarts students who knew Albus Dumbledore as their Transfiguration Professor, the Head of Gryffindor House and the Deputy Headmaster, were of the opinion that he was a benevolent and kind-hearted man, with a patience and fondness for children as that of a fatherly and doting uncle.

The wizarding world in general knew him for the fame and good reputation that the wizard had earned for himself.

Albus was well known and respected in the scholarly circles, where he had gained notoriety with his publications in Potions Journals, with the deep research and experimentation with Alchemy that he conducted with his partner Nicholas Flamel, and with the ground-breaking discovery of the full twelve uses of dragon blood.

He was also known as to have been the youngest wizard to be granted a seat in the Wizengamot, where he was considered by most to be wise beyond his years, his intelligence and prudence admired. Though, his open championship of muggles and muggleborns was not favorably viewed by some.

It was in this regard that Albus sometimes found harsh opposition when he proposed laws and measures for the protection and betterment of muggleborns, especially in recent years, with the rise of a new Dark Lord.

Yet, even if many purebloods considered him to be a thorn in their side and the bane of their traditions and beliefs of old, none could dispute Albus' talents in law-making and in handling political affairs.

In many occasions Albus had offered himself to act in an unofficial capacity for the Ministry of Magic, as an ambassador of sorts, in order to resolve political disputes in other countries which affected the wizarding world. And he was renowned by his long list of successes.

His most prominent accomplishment in this regard had taken place some decades ago, when Albus had acted as the mediator during the negotiations for the formation of the Union of Wands and Staffs of the Americas.

Indeed, it was mostly due to the wizard's intervention that all the leaderless and squabbling wizarding communities scattered about the American continent had been able to reach an agreement to be joined under one magical government; from the shaman tribes of the north, to the wealthy pureblood families of Massachusetts, to the small communities of halfbloods and muggleborns who liked to live amidst muggles, to the powerful magical descendants of the Incas and Aztecs who lived in their hidden ancient cities in Mexico and Central America, to the pygmies in the jungles of the Amazons, to the blooming wizarding towns in Chile and Argentina, and reaching down to the very tip of South America with the isolated communities in Tierra del Fuego.

And yet, for all his success, other than having accepted a seat in the Wizengamot and to be the British representative in the International Confederation of Wizards, Albus Dumbledore always rejected offers to have an official position in the Ministry or any other accolades.

And it was so, that many wondered why the famed wizard was simply content in remain being a teacher at Hogwarts.

Nonetheless, that day in particular, Albus Dumbledore had much on his mind. His spectacled, sky
blue gaze travelled along the many shelves containing his ample personal collection of books and tomes, his eyes focusing on one shelf in particular, which had many silver instruments that whirred and emitted small puffs of smoke. They were of his very own creation; crafty little things made to alert him if certain events were to happen - most particularly, if an old acquaintance of his ever set foot in England.

And while he contemplated the instruments, the flurry of activity surrounding him went on undisturbed.

There was an immense, thick book open on his desk, with a long list of names on its pages – the names of the children who were eleven years old or would be turning that age before the start of the school year that would be commencing in a few months.

The magical ledger, believed to have been created by both Helga Hufflepuff and Rowena Ravenclaw, had the uncanny ability of detecting all magical children in the United Kingdom, and of revealing their names and addresses when the time came for those children to attend Hogwarts.

At present, several magical quills were flying from the pages of the ledger to the stack of parchments at one side, writing the Hogwarts letters for the children and copying down their names. As letters were completed, they folded themselves inside the envelopes that floated nearby, and then another set of quills wrote down the pertinent address. After, the magical dance continued as owl after owl perched themselves by one of the windows, sticking their legs out so that a rolled envelope would be tied to it.

And so went on the progression of flying quills, letters, envelopes and owls, while Albus Dumbledore silently mused about Gellert Grindelwald and the wizard's recent actions.

A knock on his door yanked him away from his thoughts, and an expression of resignation spread on his face as he said, "You may come in, Horace."

A short, plump man, with a balding head and a bushy, brown moustache, entered the room, chuckling jovially. "How did you know it was me?"

As the Potions Professor and Head of Slytherin House settled himself on a cushy armchair without any further invitation, Albus shot him a knowing glance from the top of his half-moon spectacles. "It is such time of the year when I have come to expect to receive a visit from you."

"I certainly don't know what you mean," said Horace Slughorn with an innocent look on his face, before he smiled winningly as he held up a hand to display a large bottle of firewhiskey. "I've just received this from the owner of the Daily Prophet. He was a dear student of mine, if you remember, and he likes to send me gifts from time to time to show me his appreciation for my..."

Horace trailed off as Albus' knowing stare became more pointed. Finally, he huffed as he flicked his wand to conjure two glasses. He began to pour, as he said with an affronted tone of voice, "I just thought that we could share a drink, that's all."

Albus simply smiled at that, and graciously accepted the offered glass of firewhiskey as he waited for the wizard to play his part until he got what he had come there for.

Taking a swig from his glass, and looking mightily content and cozy as he settled himself more comfortably on his chair, Horace then glanced to a side as he said idly, "He's looking a bit peaky, isn't he?"

On a perch near one of the windows, a miserable-looking creature chirped weakly with a
disgruntled tone, before he stuck his head under a wing once more.

"I'm afraid Fawkes is in one of his burning days," said Albus, his gaze softening with sympathy as he observed his companion.

"Someday you'll have to tell me the story of how you managed to bond with a phoenix as a familiar," said Horace with a genial chuckle, though he shot Albus an expectant glance, as he always did when he pried into such matters.

And as always happened, Albus graced him with an enigmatic smile and remained silent.

Abruptly, Horace set his glass on the corner of the desk, a look of surprise on his face. "Oh, look at this! I hadn't noticed - well, if I had known that you were busy with the Hogwarts letters, I wouldn't have interrupted..."

With that outburst, the wizard had fooled no one, and certainly not Albus. It was not only due to the fact that Slughorn clearly lacked any acting skills, but also that with the flurry of activity that had been going on from the length of Albus' desk to the window, it was impossible that the Potions Professor had just then noticed it.

Ever since Armando Dippet had appointed Albus as his Deputy Headmaster and had delegated many of his responsibilities to him - taking care of the letters being one of them - Horace Slughorn had always found an excuse to visit him precisely on such days, every year.

Horace was already standing up and reaching the other side of the desk to look down at the ledger, as he said eagerly, "You wouldn't mind, would you, if I just took a peek...?"

Refraining from letting out a sigh, Albus shot him an indulgent glance, as he granted permission with a gesture of his hand.

Without wasting another breath, though taking care of not disrupting the proceedings, Horace bent down to be able to read the list from the ledger.

Soon, he started voicing his enthusiasm, "Oho! This must be the Minister's grandson, I wonder if he'll be one of mine... ahh, more Blacks - good, good indeed! Prewetts – and they're twins! I would so like to have the set... oh, and-"

Abruptly, Horace stared at the two last lines on the list, blinking with puzzlement. "What's this, Albus? Tom Marvolo Riddle..." He shot Dumbledore a brief glance, before he started ruminating out loud, "Riddle, Riddle... Doesn't ring a bell – it must be a muggle surname. But Marvolo? That's a wizarding name if I ever heard one. And the address, that's in muggle London... and it's an orphanage to boot... and the last boy, with the same address, and yet..."

Slughorn pulled himself up and frowned at Albus. "His name – it just says 'Harry'. What does it mean?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Horace," said Albus, his gaze now fixed on the last two lines in the ledger. Indeed, he had been most intrigued when he had seen it, and nothing short of bewildered too.

"Has this ever happened before? Hogwarts' ledger being unable to provide a child's surname?"

"Never, as far as I know," muttered Albus quietly, a mussing and concerned expression on his face.

Before Horace could continue discussing the matter, a knock sounded on the door, this one polite
and almost hesitant.

"You may enter," called out Albus distractedly.

A small girl took a step inside, dressed in her Gryffindor uniform though it was summer holidays and she certainly wasn't required to do so. She was one of the few who had been granted permission to remain in the school during the holidays and who was often seen spending all her time in the library.

She would soon start her second year at Hogwarts but already many teachers agreed that she would make a splendid prefect. With her hair strictly pulled back into a tight bun, not a hair out of place, and her lips pursing into a flat line when she glanced at Slughorn, she nevertheless gave a small smile and her cheeks flushed faintly when Albus gestured for her to come further inside.

"Miss McGonagall," said Albus warmly, his eyes twinkling at the sight of his best Transfiguration student to date. "What can I do for you?"

"Nothing," she choked out, as if the question had startled her and her mind had gone to dreamy places it shouldn't have.

Instantly after that, she flushed to the tips of her ears, looking mortified. It didn't help matters when Slughorn started chuckling under his breath, evidently amused at her expense.

But in the next second, Minerva pulled herself up to her full height and gazed back at her favorite professor, who was patiently smiling at her, and she said in a strong voice, "Excuse me, sir. That is, I have something for you. The Headmaster asked me to give you this."

She handed over an envelope, and then gave a sharp nod of the head before she turned around and dashed out of the room without another word.

Horace's chuckles turned into belly-laughter after the door was shut, but Albus didn't bother to chide him for it, nor to pay attention to the wizard's amused comments about schoolgirls and crushes.

Albus opened the envelope bearing the Ministry seal and read the contents of the letter, sighing with weariness and a hint of annoyance. Finally, he stood up and flicked his wand at himself, changing his clothes.

Not one to follow the latest fashions but his own colorful tastes, Albus now sported a velvet suit of a startling, bright yellow, pinstriped with violet lines – it was one of his most formal and subdued attires, in the wizard's opinion. And also, the one suit which didn't have animated figures winking, waving or dancing – perfect for an incursion into muggle London.

With that thought in mind, he opened a drawer of his desk where he had kept the letters for the muggleborns. He hadn't planned on visiting the muggleborns' homes for another week or two, but now that the perplexing matter of the boy without a surname was back in his mind, he thought he could kill two birds with one stone.

As requested by the Minister's letter, their meeting would take place in Leisure Alley, just a step away from muggle London. Hence, afterwards, he would pay a visit to St. Jerome's Orphanage.

Pocketing the thick envelopes for Tom Marvolo Riddle and just 'Harry', he shot Slughorn a brief glance, seeing how the Potions Professor was brimming with curiosity.

"I must take my leave, Horace," Albus said quickly, as he grabbed a handful of floo powder from
the pot on the mantelpiece. Without giving the other wizard a chance to start asking questions, he swiftly threw the powder unto the flames of his fireplace. The moment they turned green, he stepped into them and called out, "The Leaky Cauldron!"
Part I: Chapter 6

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AN:

Thanks to all reviewers and sorry I took so long to update. But I must admit that it will probably happen again, I'm not sure. I'm very busy nowadays and don't have much spare time, so my updating will be sporadic – I might update several times in one month and then there might be a period in which I don't update for a couple of months, and such.

Sorry, I know how bothersome that is for readers, but it can't be helped.

Now, you must know beforehand that there is little action in this chapter and no Tom/Harry scene. This is mostly filled with information, so it will be boring and tedious for some of you, but it's very important for the development of the plot.

In the next chapters things will pick up quite a bit, hopefully.

That said, I hope you let me know what you think and enjoy it nonetheless!

Part I: Chapter 6

In his flashy yellow velvet suit, after leaving The Leaky Cauldron to enter Diagon Alley, Albus Dumbledore had traversed the length of the bustling street, pausing here and there to exchange greetings with acquaintances, shoppers and passersby.

When he reached the end of Diagon Alley, where Gringotts stood in all its splendor, he didn't even glance at the corner of the street where the shadowy entrance to Knockturn Alley could be seen. Instead, he stood on the opposite side where there was a small expanse of brickwall between Gringott's building and an owlerly post office.

He gave the brickwall a single tap with his wand and soon an archway materialized in front of him, gleaming bright blue with the age line charm that prevented under-aged wizards and witches from crossing it. As Albus took a step forward, it gleamed green and then the brickwall sealed itself behind him as he entered Leisure Alley.

The cobblestoned, winding street was bustling with activity, being as it was the preferred shopping and dining site, not for families with their children, but for couples wanting to have romantic get-togethers in the cafés, for witches shopping for the latest fashions from wizarding Paris in the three exclusive stores, for Ministry officials who liked to go there during their lunch breaks to partake of international cuisine in its many restaurants, for tourists who could choose between staying in the lavish Hotel Boadicea, favored place for many foreign, visiting dignitaries, or the more relaxed and cheaper Wild Boar's Inn, or, late in the evening, for witches and wizards who wanted to spend a night of cheer and festivity in its many pubs or in Leisure Alley's dancing hall.

Albus soon located the restaurant where he had been 'requested' to partake lunch with the Minister. Dionysius' Abode had become a favorite dinning place for purebloods and high-placed Ministry officials; with elegant Roman columns displaying coiling vines, hanging and heavy with grapes,
with a high, arched ceiling charmed to show a sunny, cloudless sky, with a majestic fountain
decorated with stone nymphs in the middle of the many tables, and with arches along the walls
which resembled windows, charmed to show views of the Mediterranean sea, sprawling villas and
vineyards.

For all its pretentiousness, Albus nevertheless admitted that Dionysius' Abode's chocolate and
lemon dessert was truly exceptional. It was the one positive aspect of being forced to be in such
surroundings.

"Mr. Dumbledore, the Minister is already waiting for you," said the hostess as soon as she caught
sight of Albus, as he stepped further inside the restaurant's lobby. The beautiful young witch,
dressed in form-fitting scarlet robes, charmingly smiled at him as she started to lead the way. "If
you'd be so kind as to follow me…"

Cheerfully trailing after her, Albus waved and nodded in response to the greetings shot at him by
acquaintances as he passed by their tables. A group in particular caught his attention; from those
quarters he received no greeting but rather poignant stares.

Old Maximilian Malfoy, with his long, dark blonde hair and cunning blue eyes, seemed to be
holding court in the best-placed table in the restaurant, the wizard's thin lips curling in distaste as
his chilly gaze followed Albus' progression across the room.

Albus recognized the man's companions: two Ministry officials from the Department of
International Magical Cooperation, who seemed to be preening and basking in the glory of being
seen next to such an eminent figure as the Paternas of Malfoy House; an elderly member of the
Wizengamot, who -when catching sight of Albus- squirmed uneasily in his seat, as if he had been
cought with his hand in the cookie jar; the middle-aged Arcturus and Pollux Black, cousins, and
the Heads of their respective branches of Black House; and last but certainly not least, Aurelia
Bones, the Minister's Undersecretary.

The hostess led him to a table occupied by a wizard of Albus' age – the Minister of Magic,
Charlemagne McLaggen, with his long, thin mustache, its tips curled upwards into spirals, which,
in the wizard's opinion, gave him a sophisticated and majestic look.

Furthermore, the man wore rich robes of the latest fashion and seemed to flinch when blinded by
Albus' flashy yellow attire, his expression then souring as if Albus' choice of wardrobe had been
made with the sole intention of offending him.

Albus took a seat and pleasantly greeted the Minister as the hostess left them after conjuring the
menus. It didn't escape Albus' notice that their table was but an arm-length's away from
Maximilian Malfoy and his cronies. It seemed the Minister had decided to have reinforcements for
their 'casual' meeting – it surprised him not.

Albus had long ago become tired of warning Charlemagne of the dangers of 'befriending'
Maximilian Malfoy and lending an ear to the wizard's advice. It was no secret to Albus that
Maximilian's sphere of influence was far reaching, his web not only threading through the Ministry
—as it seemed a Malfoy tradition of old to bribe their way through the Ministry's ranks. But
Maximilian had taken it two steps further by managing to get himself a seat in the Wizengamot and
elected as the Head of Hogwarts' Board of Governors.

Thus, the old wizard had the three bastions of power of wizarding Britain under his influence.
However, while Maximilian Malfoy surely considered Albus Dumbledore his foremost archrival in
political matters, Albus merely thought of him as one more wizard whose actions had to be
monitored and nothing else – even the Malfoy Paternas, with all his cunningness and power, paled
in comparison to the Dark Lord Gellert Grindelwald, no matter how much Maximilian Malfoy would certainly desire to be considered in the same league.

Nevertheless, Albus Dumbledore was no fool, and he soon covertly swished his wand to envelop both him and the Minister in an invisible magical bubble – their conversation would remain private. He shot a benevolent smile at Charlemagne McLaggen, and while the wizard realized what had been done and shot him a resentful glare, Albus took the opportunity to very briefly, and covertly, share a glance with Aurelia Bones.

Their quick, shared gaze spoke volumes, a silent conversation traded. The witch's minute nod of the head conveying that Mrs. Bones would later apprise Albus of the particulars of Malfoy's conversation with his cronies, in that evening's meeting of the Order of the Phoenix – the secret group Albus had recently founded when it became evident to him that the English Ministry of Magic was ill-prepared, and its leader too weak-willed, to pose an opposition against Gellert.

Aurelia Bones, the Minister's Undersecretary, was -secretly in her case- one of several Ministry officials who followed Albus' lead in political matters. She was his spy – though Albus didn't like to use that word, since dire had to be the times in which they lived when he had no other choice but to have spies in his very government.

Charlemagne McLaggen's mood –which had never been a good one- soured further with each passing second; when Dumbledore magically isolated them from prying ears, when the odious carefree wizard plucked a grape from the vine dangling above their heads and popped it into his mouth, when the man cheerfully hummed as he asked the waiter to only be served 'that scrumptious chocolate and lemon cake', instead of asking for a full meal as any respectable wizard would do. Everything about Albus Dumbledore offended him – it always had.

The man's garish yellow suit insulted Charlemagne's sense of style, the man's benevolent expression and calm airs made him want to strangle him, Albus' mere presence made him grit his teeth – with envy, anger and bitterness.

They had known each other for a very long time. They had attended Hogwarts in the same year; Charlemagne being in Ravenclaw, as most McLaggens before him, and Dumbledore in Gryffindor. Even back then, Charlemagne couldn't stand the sight of him.

Every year, he had come second place after Albus, always bested in grades. Every year he had to watch as the wizard stole the limelight, with teachers praising Albus instead of paying attention to Charlemagne's accomplishments; when Albus was made Head Boy instead of him – a position that should had been his, something he had always coveted- when Albus' NEWT scores were perfect, and when the wizard had been the winner of the Barnabus Finkle Prize for Exceptional Spell-Casting and the British Youth Representative to the Wizengamot – another two things Albus had stolen from him.

Back then, Charlemagne's sole respite from being in Albus' shadow was that he was free of him during summer holidays. But that had also changed. Like several light pureblood families, the McLaggens had a summer residence in Godric Gryffindor's hometown. And one year, all of a sudden, a huge scandal had shaken the wizarding community of Britain; Percival Dumbledore, Albus' father, and a very well respected pureblood wizard since the man had been the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, was sentenced to life-imprisonment in Azkaban for the murder of a couple of muggles. The whole affair had been very hush-hush, the Ministry unwilling to leak information about the matter in their shame of having one of their Head of Departments being convicted of such a serious crime.

Charlemagne, for his part, had been ecstatic at the news, hoping that the infamy of having such a
father would put Albus in his place and take him down several notches. What he hadn't expected was for the Dumbledore family to move right next to his family's summer house in Godric's Hollow.

After that, all he had heard about during those times were his mother's offended remarks and indignation because Kendra Dumbledore had slammed the door shut in her face when his mother had paid a visit to welcome her to the neighborhood; all gossips suddenly were about the Dumbledores, all attention drawn to them and the strange noises that had come from their house, as if they had a wild beast caged within their home.

The following summer had been worse, when Kendra Dumbledore had died from an 'accident', and everyone in the neighborhood pitied Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore, and spoiled them, trying to make up for their loss.

And the last summer, in their seventh year, it became unbearable for Charlemagne. The eminent and famous historian Bathilda Bagshot, the pride of Godric's Hallow, received a visit from her grandnephew, and everyone in the neighborhood doted after the handsome young man, and cooed and speculated when they saw that the boy was always seen in Albus' company. And when the cat was out of the bag and everyone discovered the existence of Ariana Dumbledore when the girl was killed in another 'magical accident' which was blamed on no one at all, Albus was once again the focus of everyone's attention and compassion.

It had galled him, yet Charlemagne considered himself as not being resentful. If Albus Dumbledore had apologized for being the bane of his existence, Charlemagne would have magnanimously forgiven him. But it seemed that Albus wasn't even aware of the damage he had caused to him.

Yet, Charlemagne had been gracious enough to even consider forgiving Albus when he had found out that for all his perfect scores, the wizard had decided to become a mere Transfiguration Professor. That had been a joyful day for Charlemagne, and after Hogwarts he went on to climb the ranks in the Ministry of Magic, his ascendance slow but firm, gaining many important posts before becoming the Minister of Magic.

He had thought, then, that Albus would fade away into insignificance and oblivion in the dusty and lackluster post as a school teacher. But even from such an inconsequential placement, Albus had managed to outshine him.

First, when Albus advocated the preservation of the almost extinct merpeople, managing to convince the Ministry to allow a community of merfolk to take residence in Hogwarts' Lake. Then, when the wizard was awarded with the Gold Medal for Ground-Breaking Contribution to the International Alchemical Conference in Cairo – a prize which hadn't been conferred to anyone for over four centuries. After, Dumbledore was further acclaimed as the key mediator in the formation of the Union of Wands and Staffs of the Americas. Later, Albus broke all records by being elected the youngest Wizengamot member in British history.

Dumbledore even gained further fame when he solved the centaur-problem by reaching an agreement with the beasts, giving them a home in Hogwarts' Forest in exchange of allowing the Ministry to keep them in check by forming a sub-department for the regulation and control of centaur population. That no centaur ever registered, thus breaking the deal, seemed to escape everyone's notice. No one had blamed Albus for it, even when it was clear to many that the wizard seemed quite happy that the halfbreeds weren't submitting to the Ministry's control.

And lately, for some years now, Albus had dealt him the most grievous of insults and offenses, when the wizard started war-mongering from his seat in the Wizengamot, warning about the perils of Gellert Grindelwald's rise to power in Germany, spouting vile alarmist lies regarding impeding
doom for them all if something was not done to halt Grindelwald's ascendancy. Worst of it, half of the Wizengamot believed him, and even before that, many had attempted to convince Albus to become the Minister of Magic – when Charlemagne himself had already acquired the post.

"This is quite tasty," remarked Albus as he loaded his fork with another morsel of cake, at last breaking the silence that had reigned between them after their dishes had been served. "Would you care try a bite-?"

Being yanked away from bitter reminiscences, Charlemagne, who still hadn't touched his dish of duck a la orange, skewered him with a poisonous glare as he said acidly, "We're not here to enjoy the culinary delicacies of this establishment."

"Ah," said Dumbledore, as he set down his fork and leaned back on his chair to regard him with utter calmness. "Why are we here, then, old friend?"

At the appellation, Charlemagne's spiraling moustache twitched with incensed anger. He considered himself to be the consummate politician, a smooth-talker who could persuade even the most hostile of audiences; as cunning as a Slytherin, as prodigal as a Ravenclaw, as loyalty-inspiring as a Hufflepuff, and as noble-bearing and morally upstanding as a Gryffindor. But Albus Dumbledore was the one person in the whole world who instantly riled him up with his mere existence – he was utterly unable to be his restrained, polite and charming public self in the man's presence.

Thus, his dark brown eyes narrowed as he hissed sharply, his tone of voice agitated and enraged, "To discuss two matters. First, I want you to call off Carlotta Pinkstone and her cohorts."

An expression of earnest surprise flashed across Albus' face, his eyebrows shooting upwards. Charlemagne shot him a venomous glance, not believing Albus' innocence in the matter for one second. For the last two weeks, a halfblood witch by the name of Carlotta Pinkstone had begun campaigning for the lifting of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy; her aim being that Muggles be told about the existence of the Wizarding World. Of course, it was preposterous and no one supported her cause.

Nonetheless, the witch and her equally deranged small group of friends had somehow managed to slip into the Ministry of Magic and they had chained themselves to the Fountain of Magical Brethren as a means of protest – refusing to leave until the Minister agreed to her conditions. Articles in the Daily Prophet had found it vastly amusing, ridiculing the Aurors' inability to break the unknown spells that Pinkstone and her friends were using to remain attached to the Fountain. It made Charlemagne look like an incompetent fool, and that he was not.

In his years as a Minister, he had achieved no spectacular accomplishments -nothing flashy and thus not considered by the papers to be news-worthy- but British wizarding society had known years of peace, stability and bountifulness under his mandate. His problems had started with the rise of Gellert Grindelwald and with Albus Dumbledore's alarmist views about the matter.

"You must think very little of me," said Albus at last, his tone of voice grave as he pierced the Minister with his sky blue gaze, "if you believe I'm behind it."

McLaggen met the wizard's stare as he remarked sharply, his tone of voice openly accusing, "I believe you would resort to any lowly measure to ensure I'm ousted from my post."

"I'm not after your job, Charlemagne," interjected Albus, letting out a weary sigh.
"I know you're not," said the Minister sourly, and that very fact burned like acid through his veins, since he knew that Albus could take the post from him if he so desired, but Dumbledore had no interest in it and he felt as if he was being given the leftovers the wizard didn't want. "But you wish you could have a more amenable wizard in my place – someone who could be easily manipulated by you, someone who would do just as you ask."

"I see you're not mincing words today," said Albus with a wry chuckle, as he shook his head as a means of letting the wizard know that he had no such heinous and underhanded intentions.

"I'm taking the direct approach," bit out McLaggen through gritted teeth, "since all other attempts to reach a common ground with you have been thrown back to my face."

Albus shook his head once more, looking pained for a brief moment as he said quietly, "As always, you misjudge me. Nothing would please me more than to reach an agreement with you, Charlemagne."

"How can I believe you have no hand in Pinkerton's protest when just the other week you proposed in the Wizengamot that the Statute of Secrecy be breached?" hissed out the Minister through clenched teeth, his outrage and indignation clear in his incensed expression, his level of voice rising with each word spoken, as he leaned forward against the table's edge to be closer to Albus' face. "You and your followers in the Wizengamot are pushing for your proposed law to be passed and I will not have it! I will not be known as the Minister who doomed the Wizarding World by unraveling our existence to Muggles! It's preposterous, it's sheer madness!"

McLaggen's infuriated, looming visage before his face did nothing to ruffle Albus' calmness. Dumbledore merely stared at him in silence, allowing some time for the wizard to compose himself and restrain his temper.

For a minute, Charlemagne looked mortified that he had lost his cool in such manner, quickly glancing around to see if the other patrons of the restaurant had been witness to his shameful loss of control – the last thing he needed was such an event to reach the ears of the Daily Prophet.

The eyes of many people were indeed on him, some even gawking – Charlemagne was known to be a very even-tempered wizard. However, he remembered the spell Dumbledore had cast at the very beginning and for once he was glad for it. No one could have overheard the reason for his outburst. Nonetheless, he didn't feel even the tiniest bit of gratefulness towards Albus for his spell. It only made him resent the wizard even more; that his reputation had been salvaged by Albus' actions felt like a dagger being cruelly dug between his ribs.

The Minister let out a slow exhalation of breath as he leaned back on his seat, forcing a pleasant smile to stretch on his lips to show observers that all was well.

The moment he saw that McLaggen had regained his composure, Albus eyed him intently as he started to say slowly, "Charlemagne, I'm not proposing to lift the Statute of Secrecy, nor indeed, to breach it per se-"

"I know exactly what you want," interrupted McLaggen crisply. "I've read your proposal – all three hundred pages of it." He shot him a baleful glare as he lifted up a hand, ticking off his fingers as he started enumerating, "A new department to be formed in the Ministry, the 'Muggle Liaison Office'. A means of direct communication with the Muggle Minister which consist of two things. The first, a magical portrait to be hung, irremovable, in the man's office, the portrait's subject being our ears while his second portrait is to hang in my office so the subject can move to it to alert me of any important happenings in Muggle Britain. The second, for the Muggle Minister's fireplace to be connected to the Floo Network, allowing me or any other I appoint, to be able to visit him if dire
circumstances require it. All of it for the purpose of revealing the existence of our world to the Muggle Minister."

"And only him," interjected Albus quickly, pointedly staring at him as if willing to drill his point through McLaggen's skull. "No other muggles would know."

"The Muggle Minister would know and that alone is dangerous enough!" snapped Charlemagne angrily, frustrated by the wizard's blind obstinacy. "Even if he didn't blab to other muggles about it."

"He wouldn't," interrupted Albus yet again. "No one would believe him. He wouldn't take the chance to be thought to be a lunatic. No muggle would."

"Even so," bit out McLaggen sharply, "it's too great a risk and we gain nothing by it."

"Gain nothing?" repeated Albus, his expression incredulous for one instance before his face became grave, his tone of voice turning harshly reproving, "If we don't help the Muggles in their War, they won't survive it."

"Ah, yes, the other point in your law – for us to have the responsibility to protect all Muggles, of any country, when their lives are endangered by a wizard, even if such wizard is not British." Charlemagne shot him a sneer as he continued sharply, "My duty is to protect and ensure the wellbeing of Wizarding Britain, and the safety of British Muggles from harm done to them by a British wizard – not a foreign one. That would be the responsibility of the Ministry of Magic of the wizard's country. Furthermore, the fate of Muggles outside Britain is not my responsibility either."

Albus shook his head sadly as he murmured, "And that is the point in which our opinions differ."

"Indeed it is," bit out Charlemagne poignantly, narrowing his dark brown eyes at him. "Do not believe me to be a dim-witted fool, Dumbledore. I'm well aware of the reason behind this whole charade of yours, with this law you want to pass. You want us to be legally compelled to join the Muggle War, to be legally responsible to protect foreign Muggles who are attacked by foreign wizards – by German wizards." He pierced him with a contemptuous gaze, his lips pulling back from his teeth as he hissed out, "This is about Gellert Grindelwald and your claims that he has become a Dark Lord who wants to take over the entire world."

"I think there is little doubt that he is, indeed, a Dark Lord," said Albus sternly, his features hardening as he skewered him with his bespectacled gaze.

"I have no such evidence," interjected Charlemagne nonchalantly, waving a hand dismissively. "There hasn't been a Dark Lord since the fifteenth century, and as far as I've seen, Grindelwald has done nothing but become Germany's Minister of Magic and."

"A post he gained through coercion and by underhanded means," interrupted Albus curtly, his expression becoming more thunderous by the minute, as if his patience with the wizard before him was reaching its limit. "Surely it's plain for anyone to see – the former German Minister of Magic didn't drop dead of his own accord."

"There is no proof Grindelwald caused the wizard's death, and so far he hasn't done anything illegal either."

Being a wizard who had been a Ravenclaw at Hogwarts, Charlemagne had grown up believing in the precepts of his House – one of the most important ones which had served him well in the past, was that a fact was not a fact until there was solid proof of it. Moreover, upholding the Law and
always acting within its marked boundaries was a matter of integrity and necessity for him, both because he was a Minister of Magic and because he firmly believed in the need for any society to adhere to strict rules in order to be civilized and peaceful.

A sound of frustration issued from Albus' throat, his angered exasperation with McLaggen's pig-headedness clear in his voice as he snapped, "He has taken over Austria, by force."

"Has he?" said Charlemagne pleasantly, his lips curling upwards with satisfaction, as if he had found a legal snag with which to corner Dumbledore and win the argument. "According to what has been reported back to me, the Austrian Ministry of Magic voluntarily submitted themselves to Grindelwald's rule. Who are we to deny their wishes to join their two countries under one mantle? Indeed, if I did anything to threaten such a union, it would be I who would be breaking international magical laws."

Albus mutely shook his head, his bearded jaw clenching, before he attempted once more to make the wizard see reason. "Even before the Austrian Minister of Magic consented to become Grindelwald's puppet figurehead, in fear of his life, the Austrian muggles were already being coerced into annexing their country to the Third Reich."

"Do not think I do not read muggle newspapers and that I'm ill-informed about the happenings in their world," snapped McLaggen incensed, believing that Dumbledore was trying to trick him with faulty information. "The Austrian muggles held a plebiscite – the majority voted in favor of joining the Third Reich, as muggles call it."

Letting out a tired sigh, Albus pinned him with his gaze as he said quietly, "It's clear to me now that you are unaware of the full extent of what happened in Austria."

Charlemagne narrowed his eyes at what he perceived to be an insult to his mental capacities. Nonetheless, he remained quiet and imperiously gestured for the wizard to continue. He would hear what the odious man had to say and then he would refute what would surely be outlandish ravings from a war-mongering loon.

Pushing his abandoned dish of cake to one side, Albus steepled his fingers over the table, boring his gaze into McLaggen as he said gravely, "The Austrian Muggle Chancellor was being pressured by Nazis from within his country and from Germany to agree to the annexation of Austria. The man attempted to keep his country independent, but he didn't succeed. The Austrian Nazi Party launched a silent coup d'état, taking over the country's state institutions. They transferred power to Germany and instantly sent troops to invade Austria in order to enforce the annexation. They didn't call it an invasion, of course, they gave other reasons for it – to keep peace and order in the country, they said. But the reality of the situation was that they left the Muggle Chancellor with few choices. He was coerced into holding a plebiscite, but he still hoped that Austrians would not vote in favor of the annexation, even if they were surrounded by troops."

"I know this already," interjected McLaggen impatiently, "In the plebiscite, ninety-nine percent of the votes were in favor for the annexation. Nothing illegal there, they chose."

Albus' sky blue eyes flashed behind his half-moon spectacles. "Precisely, Charlemagne. Ninety-nine percent. Not just a simple majority, but nearly an absolute one. Doesn't that give you cause for suspicion? Never have muggles reached such unprecedented majority of votes in any sort of election." His expression grew grave as he pierced the wizard with his gaze. "The general muggle populace showed signs of having had their minds tampered with, Charlemagne. I believe their water supplies were plied with a potion to make their minds pliable, open to manipulation - we both know that there are several dark potions that could do such a thing."
The Minister's dark brown eyes grew wide for a moment, before they narrowed, as he said stiffly, "That is a very serious accusation, indeed, if you're suggesting Grindelwald ordered such measure to be taken."

"I'm certain he did," retorted Albus firmly.

McLaggen's eyes narrowed even further as he demanded curtly, "You saw this yourself?" At Dumbledore's shake of the head, he pressed on, "Where is your proof, then, Dumbledore? You can't accuse the German Minister of Magic of such grave crime if you don't have the evidence to back it, if you don't have eye witnesses -"

"I do. I was informed about it by a wizard who saw the signs himself – the glassy eyes of the muggles, the-" 

"Who is your witness?" demanded McLaggen instantly.

"That I cannot tell you," replied Albus sternly, peering at him from the top of his spectacles. "They must remain anonymous or their lives would be in danger."

"Are you implying that the information would be leaked out – that I have spies in my Ministry?" burst out McLaggen indignantly, his jaw clenching as his curled moustache shook with anger.

"Spies? Certainly," said Albus coolly, before his gaze flickered briefly to the table near theirs, where Maximilian Malfoy was still conversing with his cronies. "And many Grindelwald supporters as well. Your choice of… 'friends' is not a wise one."

McLaggen followed the wizard's gaze and his jaw clenched as he caught sight of Malfoy shooting them a covert glance. He turned to sneer at Dumbledore but said nothing about the matter. He was well aware that Dumbledore considered him a fool, but he wasn't one. He knew Malfoy was a dangerous, untrustworthy man to have at his side, but the wizard had his uses.

"Furthermore," started again Albus, "I have been informed of yet other grievous tampering of muggles. Recently, a region in Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland has been occupied by the Nazi army-"

McLaggen interrupted him with a huff. "The muggles there are of German descend. From what I've heard, they wish to be annexed to their home country-"

"As happened with the invasion of Austria," continued Albus as if he hadn't been interrupted at all, his tone growing sterner, "the Nazi troops moved very efficiently, extremely quickly – this is already flummoxing other muggle nations, they believe it indicates that Hitler is a military genius. It instills fear in them. But the reason for it is a much different one."

He pointedly pinned the Minister with his gaze, as he added, "The food provisions for the Nazi armies are being laced with several potions, to give the soldiers strength and endurance beyond normal human capacity. Not to such abnormal levels as to raise suspicions but enough to make them tireless. Furthermore, they are starting to believe their own lies – that they are indeed superior to other muggles, that the reason for their tirelessness if due to their Arian race attributes shining through."

"Again, and your proof of this-?"

"With those two examples, I believe we can see what Grindelwald's modus operandi entails," pressed on Albus, ignoring McLaggen's question. "First, he uses his muggle puppet, the man called Hitler, to give thunderous, agitated speeches to rouse their muggle armies into a frenzy and to give
them a 'valid' excuse for the need to conquer a neighboring country. Then, the muggle armies are sent to invade quickly, in a flash, their very speed and efficiency bringing fear and terror into the hearts of the muggles of the country to be subjugated. After the muggle side of the country is secured, Grindelwald sends in his followers to take over the Ministry of Magic. The Ministry of Magic officials, already seeing that their muggle counterparts have fallen, and now being surrounded by muggle troops and thus vastly outnumbered, have little choice but to submit or be summarily executed."

He paused to pierce McLaggen with his gaze, as he said pointedly and sharply, "But, if they knew that the British Ministry of Magic would come to their aid, they would have hope – they would fight back, Charlemagne. We can save Czechoslovakia yet. We can attempt to halt Grindelwald's progress before he conquers more countries – before it's too late."

Charlemagne leaned backwards on his seat, his expression one of deep, grave ponderings. At last, he glanced up at Albus as he said curtly, "If what you say is true, then bring forth your eyewitnesses. I can call for an emergency meeting of the International Confederation of Wizards. I will give you permission to expose your case, to have your sources of information stand there, in the flesh, giving account of what they have seen – their proof of the illegal use of potions on muggles."

A sharp, hard smile spread on his lips, his expression smug, as if he had reached a solution that could satisfy them both, as he continued, "Only then, can we press charges against the German Minister of Magic. If Grindelwald is unable to show evidence to demonstrate his innocence on the matter, I have no doubt that I would be able to convince other Ministers of Magic to unite in the cause of declaring war on Grindelwald."

"We cannot afford to do as you say - to use legal means," retorted Albus with a shake of his head. "It would take too long. Grindelwald would find ways of postponing it and in the meanwhile he will keep on invading. Moreover, I cannot let my spies reveal their identities. It would instantly reach Grindelwald's ears and they would be killed. I cannot afford to lose them, they are my only source of information."

"Then my hands are tied, Albus!" roared McLaggen, pounding a closed fist on the table. "I'm a Minister of Magic, I have to operate within the Law. And I cannot attack a fellow Minister without evidence of wrongdoing – if I did that, I would be condemned by other Ministries. It would be I who would be breaking international magical laws!"

"That's why I ask you to act unilaterally," interjected Albus firmly. "Aid the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Magic, and once others see that Britain has taken a stance, the other Ministers of Magic will follow your lead."

McLaggen let out a burst of dry, humorless laughter. "How little you know my counterparts! They will not come to the rescue if they see we are vastly outnumbered – and that we will be!" He shot Albus a glare as he added fiercely, "According to reports, Grindelwald's followers reach the thousands, my Aurors number little over a hundred. And I cannot take a leaf out of the muggle's book and force conscription. If I send to battle every wizard and witch of age, they would be ill-prepared –it takes a wizard three years of arduous and constant training to become an Auror. I would be sending them untrained. I would be sending them to their deaths. I will not have that on my conscience!"

Albus skewered him with his eyes and said vehemently, "If we do nothing now, British wizards will die nonetheless when Grindelwald invades England."

"There is no reason to believe Grindelwald will invade our country."
"Don't be a fool, Charlemagne!" thundered Albus with exasperated impatience. "He will not stop at Czechoslovakia. He won't even stop when he has the whole of Continental Europe. England is the one country he will surely not leave alone!"

"Why not?" snapped McLaggen, narrowing his eyes at him. "What makes you so sure of it?"

Albus leaned backwards on his seat, keeping silent for a brief moment before he cleared his throat and said carefully, "There are… things in England he wants."

"Things?" demanded Charlemagne instantly, his eyes narrowing to slits. "What 'things'?"

"That I cannot tell," replied Albus firmly.

"Ah," bit out McLaggen incensed, "another secret you want to keep. Very well, Dumbledore, keep your silence, but know that it comes at a high cost."

He then shook his head, huffing, as he added scornfully, "You refuse to bring to light any evidence you have, you refuse to bring forth your eyewitnesses. You're asking me to act blindly, on your word alone. And you want me to send my Aurors and untrained wizards to the battlefield, without thought of the cost in human lives-"

"I'm well aware that many would die," interjected Albus quietly, letting out a deep, weary sigh. "It pains me as much as it does you. But we have little choice. We have to act now. The longer we wait, the stronger he will get-"

"I cannot do as you ask," interrupted McLaggen, shaking his head repeatedly. "I won't send wizards to their deaths. If what you fear does come to happen and Grindelwald attempts to invade us, I'll negotiate for terms of peace instantly-"

"He will not respect any terms," muttered Albus, "and if you surrender as the Austrian Minister did, he will use you and then kill you when your usefulness expires. You'd be instantly replaced by one of his closeted supporters."

With this, he pointedly shot a glance at Maximilian Malfoy and McLaggen's lips twisted as he understood the meaning of Albus' words.

Nevertheless, McLaggen shook his head once more, as he said stiffly, "You have my answer. I will not change my mind."

Albus closed his eyes, his expression one of defeat and pained regret. In the next instant, he snapped his eyes open and leaned forward, boring his gaze into the Minister's, as he whispered quietly, "Then at least do one thing, and one thing alone. Grant asylum to Jewish wizards."

McLaggen flinched backwards as if he had been struck by a heavy blow. He tried to mask it in the next second by seating straight on his chair, letting out a hollow laugh. "Grant asylum to the very people Grindelwald is rounding up? And with valid, legal cause. I might as well be asking him to invade us."

At present, the Jewish people represented a difficult problem, a delicate issue.

Charlemagne remembered clearly the first time he had read about them when he had been a schoolboy, and how fascinated he had been with them - the Jews, the only group of muggles in the history of the entire world who had embraced their wizarding counterparts.

It had started many millennia ago when the Jewish people were bound by slavery to the Egyptian
Kingdom. And in the midst of times of great misery for them, the first muggleborns had been born in their bosom. But unlike any other muggles who discovered that some of them had strange, inexplicable abilities, the Jews hadn't felt threatened, envious or scared of their muggleborns – they hadn't tortured, isolated or killed them.

No, they had seen their muggleborns as a benediction of their God, that their deity was giving them the means for them to break free from the chains of slavery – they had taken it as a sign that they were God's chosen people, because why else would their God make some of their own kind special just when they were so in need, and give them the wisdom to not fear them but to recognize a godly gift for what it was?

With the aid of their muggleborns, they managed to flee from Egypt and went in look for a territory to call their own. And with the passage of time and rise of new religions, they saw how other muggles viewed their own special people, how their religions spoke of evilness and how muggles instantly thought that their magical people were the very incarnation of such evil.

The Jews, however, remembered, and they closed quarters around their wizards, revering, cherishing and protecting them. They even generated their own version of a pureblood: a pure Jew descendant of only other Jew muggleborns.

With the passage of time, and with their muggle population growing much faster than their magical one, only some select Jewish muggle families remained attached to their magical kind – they made sure they remembered the reason why they were God's chosen people, they verbally passed down the knowledge from father to son, from mother to daughter.

Those families became the protectors of their wizards, living with them, willingly and lovingly serving them. Now, in modern times, only those numerous muggle families knew about their magical kind, since for the others their existence had become a mere legend, a fantasy, until it was no longer remembered at all. The others no longer remembered why, exactly, they were God's chosen people.

As a schoolboy, the story had filled Charlemagne with a hopeful, warm feeling, seeing that at least there was a race of muggles who had always viewed their own wizarding kind favorably.

Even now, they were the only muggles he truly respected, due to it. However, as a Minister of Magic, he understood the risk they represented.

Three years ago, when Gellert Grindelwald had abruptly become the German Minister of Magic, the wizard had sent envoys to all the Ministries in Europe – as any newly elected Minister would do.

Charlemagne remembered his meeting with the diplomat clearly – he remembered how the wizard had explained that Grindelwald was concerned about the possibility that the Statute of Secrecy would be irreparably broken by allowing the select Jewish muggle families to live with their wizards, to keep knowing, thus, that a whole wizarding world existed.

Indeed, when the International Confederation of Wizards had established the Statute of Secrecy in 1692, those Jewish muggle families, the Guardians, had refused to adhere to it; they had refused to allow themselves to be obliviated and parted from the Jewish wizarding families they were attached to. In the end, no one had forced them into complying with the Statute, but they were breaching it nonetheless.

It was so, that the German diplomat had exposed his case very reasonably. As the new German Minister of Magic, Grindelwald had the legal right to fully enforce the Statute of Secrecy in his
own country, and when those Jewish muggle families still refused, he had the legal right to take measures; to round them up - the Guardian families with their attached wizarding families- and relocate them to somewhere isolated where there would be no risk of any of them interacting with other muggles and thus expose the existence of wizarding kind.

It was a harsh measure, but legal, and it only represented isolation for those Jews, nothing grave. So Charlemagne had told the German diplomat that he understood and that indeed he could find no legal wrongdoing in the matter, and thus, wouldn't interfere with a fellow Minister's decision.

"Valid, legal cause?" muttered Albus incredulously, before his expression hardened. "You must be referring to that feeble excuse that is flying around – that Jewish families are breaking the Statute of Secrecy. But he's not capturing them for that reason, he wants something from them-"

"And that is?" snapped McLaggen impatiently, now having grown very tired of his conversation with Dumbledore.

"I'm not certain, yet," admitted Albus quietly. He sighed and carded his fingers down his long, auburn beard, before he glanced up and gazed at the Minister over the top of his half-moon spectacles, his voice turning soft, "But believe me when I say, Charlemagne, that Grindelwald doesn't care about the Statute of Secrecy – he never has. He has always believed that wizarding kind could easily subjugate the muggle world, that it's our duty to do so."

"He has 'always' believed?" McLaggen's brown eyes darkly gleamed, his lips curling upwards underneath his long, thin moustache. "Yes, you would know, wouldn't you?" His expression was now both nasty and accusing. "Some of us, who lived in Godric's Hollow, still remember. Someone of us recognized him. Indeed, when I saw the wizarding picture of Grindelwald accepting the post as the German Minister, I instantly knew who he was. He's older, just like we are, but his distinctive features haven't changed. He was that boy – Bathilda Bagshot's grandnephew, the one you were so close and cozy with."

Albus remained silent, merely meeting his gaze, and McLaggen felt a burst of vindictive pleasure erupt in his chest, as he continued in a poignant tone of voice, "I could bring it to light. I could expose you and easily bring you down." He let out a harsh chuckle, as he added sharply, "Or perhaps I could reopen the investigation into the death of your sister. I wonder what my Aurors would discover? Who killed her, Dumbledore? Was it you, Aberforth, or Grindelwald?" He shot him a nasty smile and then gestured at Albus' long, crooked nose. "Ah, no, Aberforth couldn't have been – he hit you in your sister's funeral, he broke your nose. I was there, I saw. It was you then?"

Still, Albus remained impassive, as unmoving as a stone statue, with an air of unconcern and calmness around him. Evidently, the wizard couldn't be easily riled up or threatened.

McLaggen shot him a scornful glance and then changed tacks, to bring up a matter that had been in his mind for some time.

With an expression of relish on his face, the Minister comfortably leaned back on his chair, eyeing Albus almost mockingly, as he intoned, "The most peculiar thing happened to me three months ago. I was paying a visit to a dear friend in Hogsmeade, and imagine my surprise when I saw that a new pub had been opened – the Hog's Head, it's called. Of course, out of curiosity, I entered the establishment – if it could be called such." His lips curled as he continued pleasantly, "Imagine my further surprise when I saw the bartender and the owner of the pub. Your brother is a bit pudgy around the middle, nowadays, isn't he?"

McLaggen chuckled dryly, shooting a glance at Albus to see his reaction. When none came forth, he smirked and added loftily, "The last time I saw him was in your sister's funeral. I heard that a
French aunt of yours had taken him back to her country. I even heard that he finished school in Beauxbatons and then became their Care of Magical Creatures Professor. Following your footsteps in your profession, it seems, and Abe always did like his dirty, beastly animals, didn't he?" He tutted mockingly, as he added, "I've even heard that for many years you wrote letters to him and attempted to see him – and he always refused. So, it has been what, over six decades since you haven't seen each other? Or have you already attempted to see him at the Hog's Head, hmm?"

He cocked his head to a side, waiting to see if the wizard before him would speak. But Dumbledore seemed content to let him continue cruelly taunting him, perhaps waiting for him to get to the point. Nevertheless, Charlemagne was not fazed by the man's unflappable silence.

"I had to ask him, of course, why he had returned to England, where so many painful memories awaited him," said McLaggen, placidly stroking one curled tip of his moustache. "And you know what Aberforth said?" He dropped his hand from his face, and leveled a hard stare at Dumbledore. "He said he was there to keep an eye on you. I had to ask why, and he didn't mince words in his reply. It seems he had read in the newspapers about Grindewald's actions. And Aberforth spat out to me, 'That man is truly on the move now. Albus was weak once, I won't let him make the same mistake twice.'"

McLaggen paused and shot him a sneer. "I thought he was implying that due to your previous… 'friendship', shall we call it, with Grindelwald, you were at risk of having certain feeling of … fondness for the wizard bloom forth once again. That maybe there was a chance that you would join Grindelwald's side. But Aberforth quickly rid me of that notion – he even laughed! 'No', he said, 'Albus wouldn't join Grindelwald. He can't, even if he truly desired it, he couldn't. He fears him, because he fears himself.'"

The Minister paused, and then demanded acerbically, "What did he mean by that, Dumbledore?"

Albus sat stiffly on his seat, his shoulders tense, his face pale. But then he let out a wry chuckle. "Aberforth did always know me better than I know myself."

"Yes, very endearing. But explain yourself," pressed on McLaggen briskly, but the man before him remained silent and merely relaxed on his chair. Bristling, the Minister bit out, "It has just occurred to me that we have another solution for the Grindelwald matter."

Albus shot him a glance of interest, and Charlemagne continued grudgingly, as if pained by having to admit such thing, "You are hailed to be the most powerful wizard in England. And you are believed to be, possibly, one of the most powerful in the entire wizarding world. Thus, why not fight Grindelwald yourself, Dumbledore? A duel, face-to-face, one-to-one. If you defeat him, I can arrange matters so that you wouldn't be convicted of the crime of murdering another wizard. Indeed, if you killed him then you won't need to protect the identity of your spies and they can come forth and testify about Grindelwald's crimes, and your murder of him would be legally justified. You wouldn't be punished – you have my word on that."

"Believe me," said Albus, his eyes flashing behind his spectacles with a hard glint, "the outcome of
having me face Grindelwald directly might be more dangerous for all of us than anything else."

"I don't see how it could be so," bit out McLaggen, making a move to stand up from the table. "You're a coward, Dumbledore, plain and simple. It's clear to me now that it's just as your brother said - you fear Grindelwald."

"Because I fear myself," interjected Albus curtly, the very intensity of the gaze he leveled at McLaggen making the Minister halt in his motion and sit back down. "Temptation, Charlemagne. I would be tempted, and now I know myself well enough to be aware that it isn't advisable for anyone's sake that I'd be put in such a situation."

"Temptation?" spat out McLaggen, looking both incredulous and repulsed. "What, would you expire in a delirium of lust for the man if you came to face him?"

Albus chuckled wryly, shaking his head with amusement. "I'm not a hormonal teenager anymore, Charlemagne. No, that wasn't my meaning. There's no risk of that."

"Then what? That he might tempt you to his side with promises of power," snapped McLaggen, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Perhaps to share his rule over Germany and Austria with you?"

"Not that either," said Albus impassibly, as he stroked his long beard. "I've long ago learned that I'm the worst suited wizard to have any position of power. I wouldn't make that mistake. No, what he has to offer is... knowledge about some matters, clues about something that tempts me, that I desire, but I know that I shouldn't have – and neither should he."

"And now you speak in riddles!" burst out the Minister, at the very limit of his patience.

Albus didn't shoot him an apologetic glance, he merely stared at him as if conferring that that was as good as it could get. And that he certainly wasn't about to disclose any secrets to him.

"I believe I've said enough," remarked Albus calmly, before he skewered him with an intense gaze. "In the end, then, you will do nothing about the war nor the Jews, Charlemagne?"

"I've already answered that," said McLaggen crisply. "You know where I stand."

"Very well," said Albus gravely, nodding his head once. "Then I'm afraid we have, indeed, reached an impasse. You leave me no choice. I will keep pushing for my law to be passed. It is tantamount that we join the war as soon as possible, if not, all is lost."

McLaggen bristled and jumped to his feet, as he hissed out, "Just put me to the test, Dumbledore. I'm itching to clash swords with you once again. But this time, make no mistake, I'll use all available means at my disposal. I will veto your proposed law in the Wizengamot, as many times as I have to. I will drag your name through the mud by disclosing your former liaison with Grindelwald."

He took threatening steps around the table, and when he reached Albus, he leaned down to hiss in his ear, "And if it comes to the point I have no other option but to surrender and reach a peace agreement with Grindelwald and you do anything to endanger it - if even the vaguest rumor reach my ears that you have done anything to countermand my decision and thus put in peril the lives of British wizards- I'll have you branded as a traitor, judged by the full Criminal Court of the Wizengamot and carted off to Azkaban in the blink of an eye. Perhaps I'll have you thrown into the very cell in which your father died, hmm? Wouldn't that be nice?"

And with those last words he spat out, the Minister of Magic pulled himself up to his full height, slammed several golden galleons on the table and then briskly strode away.
Not at all daunted by McLaggen's threats, Albus sadly shook his head as he watched how the wizard left Dionysius' Abode.

There was much to be done, now that Albus had ascertained that they would find no support in the Minister of Magic. Indeed, his mind was already filled with all that had to be discussed in that evening's meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. So much to do, so much to prepare for and organize, and so much to decide.

With a weary exhalation of breath, Albus flicked his wand once, his eyes growing wide when the sparkling numbers that floated in front of him indicated how late the hour had become.

Suddenly remembering his other chore of the day, the wizard patted his pockets, feeling the bumps of the two letters he had to deliver. He quickly stood up, left his galleons on the table, and dashed as quickly as possible out into Leisure Alley.

Hopefully, the visit to the orphanage would be an easy and quick one. Besides giving the letters and explaining about the existence of the magical world to the boys, it was just a matter of seeing why one of them didn't have a surname, after all.

Yes, it would be quick, and then he could concentrate on vastly more important matters.
Part I: Chapter 7

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AN:

Thanks to all reviewers!

Now, clarifying some points:

I didn't blindly choose to have a McLaggen as the Minister of Magic. Indeed, in canon, Slughorn should have said something to Cormac McLaggen -in the meetings of the Slug Club- about the boy's relative who once was the Minister of Magic, but he didn't. So there must be a reason why Slughorn didn't mention Charlemagne McLaggen and why he didn't fawn over Cormac due to his relation to the man.

Hint: Slughorn ignored Draco Malfoy…. Enough said, lol ^^ We'll see what becomes of Charlemagne McLaggen. But don't be too hard on him, the man means well - what he does is for the sake of British wizarding kind, in his opinion.

Also, for certain matters I'm following the timeline of Harry Potter Lexicon. Thus, Tom Riddle was born on December 31, 1926 and he'll be attending Hogwarts in 1938 (current present year in this chapter). But whether Dumbledore will defeat Grindelwald in 1945 or not, remains to be seen, because Harry's presence will surely change many things.

IMPORTANT: I couldn't fit in another word in the summary, so for those who are asking, this fic will have M/M, I don't think there will be explicit things though, and NO Mpreg either.

Note: I couldn't fit in all the scenes I wanted in this chapter, it would have been too long. I'm sorry, it will come in the next chappie – and it won't be more than a week or two before I write and post it.

Part I: Chapter 7

Alice Jones had finished all her chores for the day. The children were in their respective bedrooms, packing the things they would take along with them the following morning for their excursion to the seaside. And Kathy was in her office, no doubt going through the orphanage's accounts and having a glass of gin to relieve her tiredness.

Meanwhile, Alice was standing at one corner of the empty playroom, right in front of a rackety table holding the wireless – or 'radio', as some people called it– which was Mr. Robert Hutchins' latest donation to the orphanage.

Her ears were focused on the voice of the BBC's newscaster and her eyes darted now and then towards the window, in the hopes of seeing Robert striding towards the orphanage, to pay her and the boys a visit that evening.

Much had happened in the last years, and many things had changed in the orphanage and in her life.
Life at the orphanage, in particular, had changed drastically ever since Kathy had become the Matron. And though Alice was very glad for it - because her friend was an excellent administrator and no longer did the children go around wearing rags or without having milk or meat for whole months - she couldn't say that Mrs. Sharpe's parting had been a happy occasion.

It had all changed nearly three years ago. At first, taking a turn for the worse after the incident of the blow up of the window in Mrs. Sharpe's office. Mr. Jenkins' wounds, caused by the volley of glass shards, had been grave. They had been forced to call for a doctor, who hadn't managed to salvage Mr. Jenkins' right eye nor prevent the man's face disfigurement.

If Mr. Jenkins had been a foul man before, after that, he became unbearable. For two weeks he had lashed out at the children, his temper becoming increasingly violent and markedly focused on Harry and Tom in particular, more than ever.

The man had used any excuse to dole out punishment to the Riddle brothers – for raising their voices too high, for being too loud when playing, for running along the corridors, or for walking too slow or being too silent. Even the feeblest of reasons became an excuse so that the man could can them.

And Harry, who back then hadn't yet suffered such punishment, came to know what it was to be brutally canned on the buttocks and what it was to spend a whole day and night in the small, dark, Punishment Room.

The other children had been terrified; barely speaking, keeping their eyes cast down, their faces pale, barely moving so that they wouldn't make a noise that could catch Mr. Jenkins' attention.

Those two weeks had been sheer torture for Alice as well, since she hadn't been able to do much about it. Both her and Kathy had appealed to Mrs. Sharpe several times, asking her to restrain him in some way, even imploring her to fire Mr. Jenkins before something truly grave happened. The nasty old woman had refused, siding with her old friend.

And then, one day, when Alice had been in the kitchen preparing the children's meals, she had heard an ear-splitting scream of pure fear.

Alice had run as she had never run before, and she had been the first to reach the entrance of the orphanage, to see Mrs. Sharpe taking her last tumble down the stairs, her body crashing on the landing, right in front of the entrance door.

Alice had shrieked then - just when Mrs. Sharpe's scream abruptly ended - when she could see nothing but the old woman's neck twisted in an impossible angle, her knees unnaturally bent, one of her elbows grossly sticking out.

And then, still shrieking, because she had seemed unable to stop the sounds coming out of her mouth, she had glanced up at the staircase's landing on the first floor. And there she had seen him: Tom Riddle, standing like a statue, fixedly staring down at Mrs. Sharpe's body.

In the next instant, when Kathy and the children had arrived at the site, Tom had vanished. But even when Kathy shook her shoulders and frantically started asking her question, Alice's eyes had remained riveted on the empty space Tom had left behind – still in shock.

That day had been pure chaos; the children screaming and crying, Kathy having to take them away so that they wouldn't keep staring at Mrs. Sharpe's body... Alice, after Kathy slapped her out of her daze, had run to the nearest police station. And soon after, two policemen and an ambulance had arrived.
Mrs. Sharpe's body had been taken away, the police officers had asked her questions, and she had recounted the little she had seen but had been unable to mention Tom. But something had been gripping her heart with fear, and that night, for the first time, she had purposely invaded the privacy of the Riddle brothers.

She had had to know. Over the years she had allowed many things to happen, she had protected the boys in many ways, but murder –no matter how much she loved Tom- was something she couldn't turn a blind eye to. As much as it would deeply pain and wound her, she had been prepared to turn him to the police if she discovered that Tom was the cause for Mrs. Sharpe's death.

After the ambulance took away Mrs. Sharpe's body and the children were ordered to go to their rooms and remain there, Alice had followed Tom and Harry at a prudent distance, so that she wouldn't be detected. She had seen in Harry's expression -as the boy took Tom by the arm and pulled him along with a firm grip- that Harry would be questioning his brother as soon as they were alone.

When they had closed the door of their bedroom behind them, Alice had come forth and had pressed her ear against the door.

At first, there had seemed to be a tense silence in the bedroom. Then, a shuffling sound, as if one of the boys had taken a seat on a bed. And at last, she had heard Harry's voice, low and quiet.

Inside the room, a seven-year-old Harry had been standing before his brother, who was placidly lounging on his bed, eyeing him both expectantly and challengingly, Tom's lips upturned into a faint smirk.

"Did you do it?" piped little Harry, biting his lower lip as he pierced his bright green eyes into Tom's dark blue ones.

"Do what?" drawled Tom, a hint of mockery in his tone as he arched an eyebrow.

"You know what," snapped Harry impatiently, huffing as he uneasily carded his fingers through his unruly hair. He glowered at him as he whispered harshly under his breath, "Kill her. Did you do it?"

Tom's arched eyebrow rose even higher, though his smirk seemed to spread on his face, bellying the impassive tone of his voice as he said, "Why would you think I had anything to do with that? You heard the policemen. It was an accident."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him, clearly seeing that he was being taunted. "You left the playroom, you told me you were going to our room to fetch a book, remember? You didn't come back, and some minutes after that-" he shuddered slightly, his eyes losing their focus ",we all heard that… that scream. And then we rushed out and saw Mrs. Sharpe…"

The small boy trailed off, unable to recount the sight of her… her head and limbs bent so awkwardly. Harry shuddered again and swallowed thickly, before he pinned his brother with his gaze, adamantly.

Tom scoffed loudly, waving a hand dismissively. "I cannot believe you can accuse me of…" He shook his head, and then said curtly, "I did see what happened, but I had nothing to do with it. I was coming out of our room when I saw Mrs. Sharpe in the corridor." He shot Harry a sneer, as he continued, "She was hiding her bottles of gin. You know where, in that broom cupboard she uses. And she was drunk. I saw her taking the first steps down the stairs, and then she lost her balance and tumbled down. That's all."
A deep exhalation of breath was let out by Harry, his expression clearly relieved as he rubbed his eyes under his glasses. In the next second, he plopped down on the opposite bed, relaxing and grinning at Tom.

"I suppose, if I had run very fast," said Tom, his expression muscling in a clinical, analytical way, displaying no remorse, "I could have perhaps grabbed her before she fell…"

Little Harry nibbled on his bottom lip but said nothing at that. He simply shot his brother a glance, and shrugged. "It doesn't matter now."

Tom widely smirked at him, and simply said, "True."

Behind the closed door, Alice –as Harry had done before her, seconds ago- had exhaled with relief. Thanking God that, indeed, Tom was blameless. It had pained and disappointed her that the boy hadn't tried his best to save Mrs. Sharpe from her fall to death, but it was hardly a crime.

Thus, with her conscience clear, Alice had stopped eavesdropping on them and retired to her own room.

However, inside the Riddle brothers' bedroom, matters hadn't ended there.

As he heard the sound of footfalls becoming fainter, Tom's eyes flickered away from their closed door and he smirked as he stood up to his feet.

Quickly, he moved forwards until he was towering over Harry; looming over, forcing a startled and wide-eyed Harry to lie back on his bed, supporting himself with his elbows.

"Wh-what is it?" stuttered Harry, perplexed by his brother's weird actions and the strange, kind of sinister glint in Tom's dark blue eyes.

"What if I said now that I haven't told you the full truth?" said Tom, his smirk widening when a baffled expression crossed Harry's face. He leaned down even further, his nose nearly touching Harry's, as he whispered quietly, "I wasn't just leaving our room. I was much further along the corridor. Mrs. Sharpe had her back turned to me. She didn't see me. When she tripped, I was just one step away from her. I only had to stretch out my hand, and I could have grabbed her. But I didn't."

He paused, for a brief moment, before his eyes gleamed, almost feverishly. Licking his lips, he breathed out heavily, "And I enjoyed watching how she fell and hearing her screams. And when she crashed, I stared at her and I knew she had died, and it made me feel happy."

Harry stared at him, with his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide, his heart pumping hard and fast in his chest, his breath hitching.

Tom shot him a glance, before he abruptly pulled away and stood up to his full height. "What do you say now?"

Harry gaped some more, and then blinked - not quite sure of what he was being asked. At last, he quickly sat up on his bed and then frowned, glancing up at his brother yet remaining silent.

A hard expression spread on Tom's handsome face as he crossed his arms over his small chest, his eyes narrowing and pinning Harry, as he demanded, "Well? Are you going to do anything about it?"

Harry's frown deepened as he gazed down at his lap, his fingers fretfully playing with the hem of
his shirt.

Now he did understand what his brother wanted. It wouldn't be the first time that Tom tested him in that way. Always, when Tom had done something Harry felt was wrong, his brother wanted to see his reaction. Tom wanted to see if Harry would turn on him or accept him for what he had done.

Harry had never understood it – the need Tom had to be reassured by him. As if Tom thought that their relationship as brothers was a feeble and easily breakable one – as if Tom feared that it could be so, and also feared that due to it, that Harry could turn away from him if Tom went too far. But Harry never would, and he couldn't understand how Tom didn't know that already, since he implicitly expected the same loyalty from Tom, and knew he had it as well.

"I won't tell on you," said Harry finally, his tone of voice firm, despite the wariness he felt with Tom's confession – that his brother had enjoyed watching as Mrs. Sharpe broke her bones as she went down and hearing her screams of terror…

Harry shook his head at himself. It didn't matter. It filled him with apprehension and he couldn't understand how on earth Tom could enjoy such things, but Tom was his brother.

He had always accepted Tom as he was, with all his weird quirks and all – and his brother had many of those. And Tom accepted him, even if Tom complained much about his loudness, and chattering, and whinings.

Tom's eyes narrowed to slits, his posture unchanged, as he bore his eyes into Harry's even more intensely than before. His lips contorted as he sneered acidly, "She died because I did nothing. I might as well have shoved her, no? It's almost the same, isn't it?"

"Maybe," mumbled Harry, glancing away from him, a hint of uneasiness resurging with Tom's pressing.

"So?" bit out Tom impatiently, clearing expecting Harry to say something more - perhaps to rail at him, or chastise him, or say how awful and monstrous he was.

Little Harry fiercely scowled at him and snapped, miffed, "So nothing! She's dead and I'm going to sleep!"

And with a huff, he yanked his bed sheets to a side and jumped under them - in his day clothes and with shoes and all- instantly rolling over to turn his back towards Tom.

As he firmly slammed his eyes shut, willing himself to fall asleep as quickly as possible, he heard Tom snorting contemptuously. Yet his brother seemed satisfied, since he no longer pressed the issue.

Some minutes of blessed silence led Harry to believe that he would, at last, be left alone. However, he heard his brother speak again, but it was in a quiet, subdued whisper.

"We won't have to worry about Jenkins anymore. That's why I did it."

Harry wouldn't understand what his brother had meant by that until two more days had passed. And Alice herself would remain ignorant of the fact that events after Mrs. Sharpe's death unraveled precisely how Tom had expected and planned.

Indeed, two days after, a man from the government visited the orphanage and then asked questions around the neighborhood. In the end, the man offered to Kathy the post of Matron, which she had accepted with great aplomb, much to Alice's joy.
"How little everyone knows him!" had bitterly grumbled Kathy to Alice about her horrid husband, after the man from the government had disclosed that it was the favorable remarks about her well-respected husband from the people of the neighborhood—as well as Kathy's long years of service in the orphanage—which had led him to choose her as the new Matron.

Mrs. Cole's first measure as Matron of St. Jerome's Orphanage had been to lay off Mr. Jenkins, which was met with everyone's rejoice. One small boy in particular had gazed at his brother with sudden understanding, and with wide, green eyes filled with loving admiration and gratefulness.

With Mr. Jenkins' wage, Kathy had afforded to hire two new caregivers—young neighborhood girls who had instantly fit in, their sweet temper much like Alice's.

And thus, all their lives had taken a turn for the better, even if Alice had heard that Mr. Jenkins was still living in their neighborhood, now working at the docks.

What had caused some problems was that the resentful, odious man had taken to heavy drinking, spending his evenings at the pub, where he told to everyone who would listen that his disfigurement was the Riddle boys' fault.

Indeed, those who had forgotten about Father Patrick's ramblings, now had reason to remember it once again, and this time, including Harry.

To Alice's pained frustration, she had seen how once more Tom was eyed with wariness and dislike, and how even some cast such glances at Harry as well. And she had seen that, even though Tom was utterly unaffected by it, or appeared to be so, it did cause a shadow of hurt to emerge in Harry's normally cheerful green eyes.

On the other hand, a positive influence had entered the boys' lives. Indeed, Mr. Robert Hutchins' association with not only Alice but, through her, with the orphanage as a whole and the Riddle boys in particular, had deepened.

It had started the day in which Kathy's suspicions—regarding all the times in which Alice took Harry along with her to shop for groceries—had reached a peak. That day, Kathy had followed them, and her lips had pursed when she had seen them entering Mr. Hutchins' shop.

Not really surprised, since she had already heard ill-natured rumors about it, Mrs. Cole had swept inside the store. Her eyes had narrowed, seeing Alice cozily chatting with Mr. Hutchins while little Harry was playing with some toys on a shelf.

Kathy had stomped her way to the pair, catching them unawares and then startling them, when she had boomed, "Vile tongues are already wagging, and I will not have it—Alice has a good reputation to maintain! If you wish to continue seeing her, you will do it properly."

"Kathy!" had squawked Alice, utterly mortified.

Alice had known that her friend watched over her like an older, protective sister would, even if there was only two years of difference between their ages. And she also knew that Kathy feared that she would make the same mistake Kathy had, when choosing a husband.

Nevertheless, Alice's face had reddened and she had shot Mr. Hutchins an apologetic glance as she attempted to grab Kathy to pull her away.

But neither of them had paid any attention to her. Mr. Hutchins had looked amused for a brief moment, though he had been wise enough to wipe such expression from his face the moment Kathy scowled at him.
"Properly chaperoned," had continued Kathy in the same stern tone of voice, as she pointedly shot a glance at little Harry, who was by then gawking at the squabbling grown-ups. "Not by a child, but by me."

Instantly, Mr. Hutchins had held up his hands in a gesture of surrender, a small smile tugging his lips as he had said candidly, "I'm willing to abide by your rules, and I'm open to suggestions."

Kathy had seemed startled for a moment, clearly not having expected such easy victory. She had eyed him closely, as if reshaping her previous opinions about the man.

Finally, her shoulders had relaxed as she had said curtly, "Very well. I give you leave to visit Alice at the orphanage during the evenings – after you close your shop, if you will."

Robert Hutchins, or Bob as Harry called him, had immediately agreed, more than gladly, sharing a joyful smile with Alice.

And so it came to happen that the man became a fixture at the orphanage. Not only playing with the children, and sometimes helping Alice with her last chores of the day, as well as repairing whatever needed to be fixed, but also giving little gifts for the enjoyment of the full house– the latest of which would be a brand new radio.

He had even found a solution for a problem Alice had one day found herself with. Indeed, she had been noticing that her fairy tales no longer satisfied the children. The girls still seemed to enjoy them, but the boys had lost interest, even Harry.

She had been a bit flummoxed, and it had been Robert who had chuckled as he said, "They're growing up, Alice. They need something with more adventure and fights in it. I think I have just the thing."

His clear blue eyes had sparkled, and the following day he had arrived at the orphanage with two books in hand: The Iliad and The Odyssey. Alice had gaped. She had heard about them, and indeed, once she had even attempted to read one of them, but had found the archaic poetry impossible to understand.

She had at first thought that perhaps the man had taken leave of his senses. Yet, he hadn't read from the books but used them as reference, as he started telling the stories in his own words, easily understood by any child.

So it was that, in the evenings, while Alice did her story-telling with the girls, Robert took charge of entertaining the boys. Harry soon came to worship Mr. Hutchins, and the boy couldn't stop babbling and asking to be told more about Ulysses and his adventures with cyclops, sirens, the six-headed monster Scylla and the witch-goddess Circe, or about the interfering Greek gods and their quarrels, or about Achilles and his good friend Patroclus, King Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus, Paris and his beloved Helen...

Not much later after that tradition had begun, Robert had come up with another brilliant idea.

In those months he had been expanding his business. His shop had been doing extremely well and he had been able to afford to buy two used Ford Model A station wagons, with which his store could deliver its wares and foodstuff directly to homes and other shops.

One late evening, when Alice, Kathy and Robert had been sharing some cups of gin in Kathy's office, he had musingly proposed, "I have an old friend who lives two hours away - we worked together in a factory up North. Now he lives and works in a charming town by the seaside, and he
absolutely adores children. We could all go together to visit him one of these weekends, and the children could play in the beach. I can drive one wagon, and I can ask one of my lads to drive the other, and between the two wagons, we should all fit together… Some other month, we can go to the countryside. Fresh air will do the children good."

Both Alice and Kathy had readily agreed. Indeed, even Kathy had come to grudgingly warm up to the man.

From then onwards, at least twice a year the children of the orphanage were taken to Southend-on-Sea, where they were always warmly welcomed by Mr. Hutchins’ friend, Old John Bryce.

On sunny days, the old man's son, twenty-one year old Frank Bryce, would take them to the shore. In those occasions, Robert had taken it upon himself to teach the boys how to swim, and even Tom Riddle had participated—with the cheerless determination he applied to master any skill which he deemed could be useful, even if it wasn't a source of joy and pleasure as it was for the other boys.

By sunset, before making the trip back to London, they usually partook of tea and biscuits in Old John's small cottage, all cramped together, with the boys surrounding the old man, sitting crossed-legged as they eagerly prompted him to tell them stories about his days as a soldier, fighting in the Great War.

Alice had been vastly tempted to put a stop to it when the old man gave unadorned details about life in the trenches on the Western Front, about lice, rats and diseases, hunger and despair, about the death of comrades and all other sorts of information which, in her opinion, should not be heard by any child's ears.

Robert had halted her, putting a hand on her shoulder as he whispered, "Let the boys hear about it. Let them see war in its crude and cruel reality. It does no good to molly-coddle them, Alice."

However, by the expressions on the boys' faces, it hadn't seemed to her as if they were taking it seriously. Indeed, they had looked as if they were being told of great, fantastic adventures.

"How many Germans did you kill?" had piped in Harry breathlessly, his eyes bright with hero-worship and fascination as he gazed up at the man.

Alice had pursed her lips, not at all liking the turn in the conversation. The last thing the children needed to hear was about gore and murder, about the disemboweling of soldiers who got themselves trapped in barbed wire, about death by asphyxiation from poisonous gases, about dismemberment caused by land-mines and machine guns.

"Wait," had said Robert to her, stopping her from interfering once again. "Old John is a judicious man, you'll see."

At Harry's question, the old man had then spit out his chewed tobacco, his crinkled, aged eyes sweeping through his audience as he boomed sternly, "There's no honor or fun in war, boys! There's nothing noble about killing a fellow human being. War is nothing but senseless death – there are no victors! War means that fellows like me, and like you, when you grow up, are sent to their deaths, for the greed and power-hunger of politicians!"

The boys had looked properly chastised then, most of them lowering their heads and cringing, though after a brief pause, little Harry had persisted in his chiming voice, "But how many did you kill?"

At that, Alice had shot Robert a scowl, to which he had replied with a shrug of his shoulders as he
chuckled wryly, "Oh well, boys will be boys. I was the same at that age. When they're older, they'll understand."

Gratefully, for Alice, Tom had then decided to ask questions. He had been the only boy who hadn't seemed that much awed or interested in knowing about fighting and battles. Instead, he had wanted to know about the causes for the war, about the political maneuverings behind the scenes. It had been Robert who had answered. Even if the man had been a young boy in those days, it was clear that he had later studied the matter. And Alice had seen then, in Tom's expression, how grudging respect had been born.

As often happened when someone garnered the affection and attention of Harry, Tom had always scowled every time Robert spent time with his brother. But from that day onwards, when both Tom and Robert had discovered that they shared similar intellectual interests, Tom had seemed to come to tolerate the man's presence in both his and his brother's lives.

Indeed, after that day, Robert had started bringing books and newspapers to the orphanage, for Tom, and he had begun spending alone-time with the boy, discussing God knew what. They seemed to have formed a frail, tentative bond of some kind, just as Robert had formed a deep one with Harry.

Nevertheless, although Alice had brimmed with joy as she saw that Robert started to love the Riddle brothers as much as she did, there had been two instances in which she and Robert had had vastly differing opinions of how boys should be raised.

The first had been when Robert had learned about Harry's fascination with motorcars, which had only increased with the years. And when the man had decided to use some weekends to teach Harry how to drive, Alice had argued against it – worried about the boy's safety and considering that he was too young for that.

In the end, she had relented, but she hadn't liked it nonetheless.

They would use one of Robert's station wagons, with Harry sitting on the man's lap as their drove around the neighborhood, the boy shrieking with joy and waving at passers-by, with his short legs dangling on top of Robert's without reaching the pedals, but nevertheless guiding the car with one small hand on the wheel and the other on the stick.

The second occasion had been when, one late evening after story-telling time and when the children had been ordered to go to their rooms for their night of sleep, Harry had approached them.

"Can you teach me how to fight?" he had asked Robert, peering up at him with eager anticipation and with wide, innocent green eyes that had the ability to cajole anyone into doing anything.

However, Alice had seen the quick side-glance that Harry had shot at Dennis Bishop as the older boy left the playroom, and her lips had pursed into a flat line.

For some time, it had seemed to her that Dennis had stopped bullying Harry. Indeed, for some reason, the older boy seemed wary to attempt to do so; he even seemed to fear to be around Harry or Tom. But that peaceful period of time had only lasted for a few years.

Lately, she had caught Dennis tripping Harry, or painfully yanking his hair or insulting him. She always chastised the older boy, most sharply and sternly. And even though it was clear to her that her words didn't have much effect on Dennis, Harry's request could only lead to further trouble.

"Absolutely not," she had snapped, before giving Robert a chance to speak first.
"I will," had interjected Robert, beaming at little Harry and utterly ignoring her angered expression. He had mussed Harry's wild mop of hair, conspiratorially grinning at him. "I can teach you how to box - how to fist-fight. Will that do?"

"Yeah!" had burst out Harry, with an utterly excited expression on his face and a satisfied, mischievous glint in his green eyes that could bode nothing good.

And with that, the small boy had cheerfully gone back to his brother's side so that they could leave the playroom together.

Alice had instantly rounded on Robert, but the man had raised a hand, halting whatever she had to say in order to be allowed to speak first.

"I was also the runt of the litter at his age. I had to learn how to defend myself from bullies. You cannot protect him from it - it would do him more harm than good in the long-run. Let them fight it out and settle their issues between themselves."

Alice had not agreed with him on that matter, but as often happened, Robert –just as Harry– had the uncanny ability to persuade her of just about anything.

Months later, during which Robert had taught Harry his lessons of how to fight like a 'man', Alice had seen the consequences of it.

One evening, when Kathy had been locked up in her office working on the orphanage's accounts, and when Alice and the two young caregivers had been preparing dinner for the children, they had heard loud shouts coming from the playroom.

Robert had been with them, helping them out, and he had jumped to his feet, a vague smile on his face as he said, "Stay put. I'll see to it. I'll make sure that neither of them seriously injures the other."

The man obviously had an inkling of what was going on and had clearly been expecting it. Alice had frowned with dissatisfaction but allowed Robert to take care of it, since she herself had had her hands full with taking care that the chicken casserole they were preparing wouldn't burn in the oven.

Twenty minutes later, when Alice had been about to wipe her hands clean on her apron so that she could go to the playroom and firmly put an end to it –since the encouraging shouts and the yells of the children had only gotten louder- silence had abruptly reigned in the house, and then the sounds of faint, congratulatory cheering.

A few moments after, Robert had stridden back into the kitchen, with one hand on Harry's shoulder, a look of pride on the man's face.

Alice, for her part, had gaped in horror as she caught sight of the small boy – Harry's lovely face covered in bruises, his mop of hair drenched in sweat, his pouty lips split in the middle, bleeding, one of his beautiful eyes swollen to such degree that it was clamped shut with black and yellow around it.

"I won, Alice!" had proudly declared Harry as he ran towards her, visibly limping in one leg. He had then peered up at Robert. "Didn't I, Bob? Dennis looks much worse than I do, right?"

"He sure does," had said Mr. Hutchins, warmly smiling down at the boy as he patted him on the back. "You're a young man now. You fought very bravely."
Harry had positively beamed, and had then turned around to face Alice once more. He had widely smiled at her, a wide gap in his row of teeth. Then he had brought up an open hand, with a small white tooth lying in the middle of his palm, as he asked her, "Um - can you glue it back?"

Alice had nearly fainted.

Robert, in the meanwhile, had chuckled and then tenderly gripped the boy's chin to inspect his mouth, as he said at last, "It's a milk tooth. Don't worry, Harry, the real one will grow at some point."

Little Harry had nodded, seemingly not too concerned if the tooth grew back or not, but he carefully pocketed the one he had lost, as if it were a treasured trophy representing his victory and his passage into adulthood.

Alice had then finally gathered back her wits and had barked out orders for the two caregivers to take Harry to his room and tend to his injuries, and to do the same with Dennis Bishop. When they were gone, she had instantly given Robert a piece of her mind.

Nevertheless, despite that they didn't see eye-to-eye about such matters, Alice had known that he was the man for her.

It had been one day, when Alice's eyes had strayed to watch how Robert play-acted the battle between Prince Hector of Troy and Achilles -making Harry play the part of Achilles, causing the small boy to beam and then shriek with joy as they mock-fought with sticks for swords- that she had known that she had fallen utterly and irredeemably in love with the man.

And somehow, they had started speaking of themselves as a couple. And at some point, they had openly started to discuss the possibility of their marriage and their wishes for the future.

"I can give you a good life," had said Robert to her, tenderly cradling her hands within his large ones, one day in which they had found themselves sitting alone in the kitchen. "And I can provide a good home for those two boys as well."

Alice had gasped, misty-eyed as she stared at him and saw the loving expression on his handsome face. It had become clear to her, then, that he had seen the longing and yearning in her eyes when she had been watching him interact with Tom and Harry – that he already knew what she dreamed about.

"Both of them are extraordinary in their own ways," had continued Robert, then shooting her a warm, knowing smile. "And I love them already as a father would his sons. We can both give them a good home-life. After we marry, we can adopt them, and then we can have other children of our own."

After that, Alice had been in a state of perpetual joy, walking on clouds, humming songs and with such high spirits that nothing seemed able to dampen her mood.

However, it all started to crash down when Austria had been annexed to Germany.

"It's a breach of the Treaties of Versailles and St. Germain!" had boomed Robert irately, in such a fierce state as Alice had never seen him before. "And no one is doing anything about it– they're letting the Nazis do whatever they want! Even Churchill does nothing – I expected more from him!"

He had jerkily carded his fingers through his hair, angrily, as he spat out, "Last year Churchill said that if he had to choose between Communism and Nazism, he would choose Communism, but he
sure isn't acting like it! The League of Nations opposed Japan's invasion of Manchuria, yet Churchill viewed it favorably because, according to him, the Japanese have the menace of Soviet Russia on one side and the 'chaos' of spreading Communism in China, on the other. Now the Japanese have signed a pact with Germany and they have taken over Shanghai and Nanking, killing hundreds of thousand Chinese civilians. And Churchill turns a blind eye, and he's even been praising Mussolini, of all people, until recently. And he's saying that the Spanish Republican government is a Communist front and he's praising Franco for starting a civil war there. And now he's doing nothing about Austria!

Alice had gaped at him, not understanding what Robert was so indignant and angered about, and she had stuttered, "But the Austrians voted in favor-

"Don't be naïve, lass!" had snapped Robert with frustration. "Their votes have no validity – they were already invaded by Nazi troops!"

Alice had decided not to argue about it. Indeed, she no longer shared his opinion about some of his views. For starters, in the last couple of years, she had seen no mention in the newspapers about Jews, homosexuals and other kinds of minorities being persecuted in Germany and being carted off who-knew-where. Not a word was said.

Thus, she had come to believe that Robert and his fellow Communist friends had to be wrong regarding their suspicions. Surely if something like that had been going on in Germany, everyone would know about it by now! After all, the newspapers did write a lot about Stalin and the prison camps of forced labour he had, condemning the man for it and for a whole load of other things.

Robert's beliefs now sounded like ridiculous conspiracy theories to her and she wished she could persuade him to stop attending secret Communist meetings – those people were only filling his head with nonsensical ideas.

Not much later after that, news had come about Germany occupying some region of Czechoslovakia she had never before in her life heard about. That day, when Robert had visited the orphanage, he had asked to talk to her in private. There had been a very grave, strange expression on his face; somehow, he had looked satisfied but also sorrowful.

"I'd marry you right now if I could," he had said to her when they had been alone. "But what kind of selfish man would I be if I married you just to abandon you in the next second to go to war, when I could give you no reassurances that I'd come back a whole man or even alive. I won't have you chained to a cripple you'd have to care after for the rest of your life, and I wouldn't want you to know the grief and sorrow that comes with widowhood. I can't marry you until the war in Europe doesn't end-

"But there's no war!" had cried out Alice, utterly perplexed, hurt and fearful.

Robert had shaken his head, saying softly, "Don't be silly, girl. Now everyone can see that the Germans are not satisfied with only having Austria. Now that they have occupied the Sudetenland, Britain and France will have to take action. They will surely declare war on Germany."

Alice had pleaded and sobbed and done her best to change his mind, with no success. Yet, she didn't care if he had to go to war; she would wait and marry him no matter in what condition he came back.

Moreover, secretly, she hoped he wouldn't have to go to war at all. She hoped that if it came to that, that the British Army wouldn't take him because of the two fingers he had missing in one of his hands - how could he properly hold a gun or whatever other weapon when he had such disability?
But she couldn't be certain that it would work as she hoped.

Thus, at present, she was listening to the radio with fierce intensity, as she had done for the last couple of weeks, glued to the contraption every single minute of spare time she had. She was waiting to hear the news that would define her life.

Their Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, had sent Lord Runciman to Czechoslovakia in order to see if he could obtain a settlement between the Czechoslovak government and the Germans in the Sudetenland. The Lord had returned without accomplishing anything.

And now every newspaper and radio station was speculating that soon, the Prime Minister himself would have to travel to personally negotiate with Hitler.

For Alice, she believed it could mean two things: that Chamberlain wouldn't reach an agreement and thus Britain would declare war and she would lose Robert and have to wait to marry him until he came back; or that the Prime Minister would convince Hitler to withdraw from the Sudetenland, and thus there would be peace in Europe and she could marry, adopt the Riddle boys, and lead a happy life.

"...the Duke of Windsor and his Duchess, the once Wallis Simpson, twice divorcee American who aspired to become our Queen and for whom the Duke abdicated as King Edward VIII, have been seen fraternizing with Nazi..."

Alice bit her lips with sheer exasperation and turned off the wireless – evidently, no news regarding Chamberlain's expected trip would be coming forth that day.

Suddenly, from the corner of her eyes, something of a flashy yellow color caught her attention. A man? She blinked as she peered out the window. It had started to rain heavily, and she couldn't see well, but it had to have been her imagination. There was no one outside.

Abruptly, the doorbell rang loudly and Alice nearly jumped out of her skin. Befuddled, wondering who on earth could be at the orphanage's doorstep at such an impolite, late hour in the evening, she made her way to the entrance and briskly pulled the door open.

Then, her jaw dropped and she simply gawked.

Before her was some kind of one-man macabre spectacle – wavy hair and beard of a coppery red both reaching the man's waist, a suit of blinding canary yellow, pinstriped with violet lines? And the material was velvet, of all things. Her eyes swiveled along the man's frame as she attempted to take him in. He was not carrying an umbrella, yet, that velvet looked dry...

The man cleared his throat and Alice's eyes snapped up to meet his bespectacled gaze, her mouth still hanging open.

"Good evening," said the man pleasantly, his eyes looking kind and with a faint expression of amusement crossing his features, perhaps due to her reaction to him. "I would like to have a word with the Matron – Mrs. Cole, I believe. Is she here?"

Alice was still bewildered and dazed -all that bright yellow...- but not to such degree that the man's eccentric appearance didn't raise some alarm bells in her mind.

Who was to say that the man wasn't some kind of lunatic, perhaps a violent one. And they didn't have a man in the house to protect them, as Mr. Jenkins could have once done - not that she regretted one bit that the odious man was gone. And if Robert wouldn't be visiting her that evening...
Biting her lower lip with apprehension, her hands clenched the wooden door, as she inch-by-inch attempted to close it before the man could realize it.

Abruptly, Alice suddenly felt very calm and warm. And she shook her head, frowning at herself. What had she been thinking? Obviously the man represented no threat.

She peered at him, seeing nothing but benevolent eyes gazing back at her, patiently and kindly.

"Yes, of course," said Alice when she found her voice, opening the door wide open as she gestured at him. "Please do come inside."

As the man entered the hallway, she turned her face to a side to call over her shoulder, "Kather, Mrs. Cole, you have a visitor!"

She closed the door and turned around to stare at him, prompting, "Your name, sir?"

"Mr. Dumbledore."

"A Mr. Dumby-"

"Dumbledore."

"Right," said Alice, blinking once at the weird name, before she yelled once more, "Um - a Mr. Dumberdoor!"

"Show him in!" came Kathy's muffled voice from a distance, sounding as perplexed and curious as Alice herself felt now regarding their unexpected visitor.

"If you'd follow me…." mumbled Alice, trailing off as she started down the corridor.

When they reached the door of Kathy's office, she knocked once and then opened it without waiting for a reply.

The man with the strange name, and an even more bizarre appearance, thanked Alice before he crossed the threshold.

Alice was bursting with curiosity, and she shared a glance with Kathy, but she nonetheless closed the door after the man entered the office and granted them privacy.

Kathy, seated behind her cluttered desk, stared at the man before her, astonished and blinking repeatedly.

"Good evening," said the man, whose name Kathy couldn't remember, as he took a seat on the rackety chair before her desk and then held out his hand. "My name is Albus Dumbledore."

"Er…" Kathy shook her head, as if clearing it of cobwebs and then shook the man's hand briefly, before she frowned and started searching for something on her desk, as she muttered, "Did we have an appointment? I don't recall…"

"I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you very kindly invited me here today."

Kathy blinked at him. "Did I?" But then she sighed and stopped perusing her cluttered, swamped desk. "I apologize, I don't know where I have my head nowadays, I've been very busy-"

"No need to apologize, I understand," said the man cordially, waving a hand dismissively. "I'm
here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle's and... Harry's arrangements for their future."

At that, Kathy snapped her head up to pierce him with her eyes. She frowned deeply. If she had received a letter about them, she would certainly remember.

"I'm a teacher," continued the man – Mr. Bumble-Dumbyby, or whatever the man's name was – as he placidly eyed her, "at a private boarding school in Scotland. I've come to offer them a place there. Their names have been down for our school since birth-"

"Who registered them?" interrupted Kathy, still frowning as she stared at him, puzzled. "Their parents?"

"Yes," replied the man, nodding. "Both their parents did."

"Both?" echoed Kathy feebly, as she felt a wave of apprehension gripping her. Oh, she had known that someday it would come back to bite them in their arses. How would she explain now what Alice and her had done? How to explain that Harry believed himself to be Tom Riddle's fraternal twin?

"Yes, of course." The man was now frowning at her, as well.

Kathy cleared her throat, squirmed uncomfortably on her seat, and then said, "You know then, who their parents were?"

Mr. Bumbles looked troubled now, and he gazed at her over the top of his half-moon glasses. "Don't you?"

Kathy eyed him uneasily, but then her eyes narrowed. The man hadn't answered her – he wasn't giving her names. There was something very strange about the whole matter.

Albus stared at her. The haggard-looking woman before him looked jittery and nervous, as well as wary and suspicious. And she seemed to be very concerned about something in particular.

He wasn't the type of wizard who liked to cast spells on muggles - who by nature had no defense against it. And indeed, he always refrained from doing so when possible. But current circumstances seemed to require it.

Albus covertly drew his wand out from his velvet trouser's pocket, and gave it a flick, as he intensely bore his eyes into hers, deciding to find out the reason for her evident worry.

Instantly, his non-verbal Legilimency spell allowed him to see the memory floating at the forefront of the woman's mind – apparently, it was the very root of her apprehension. And without further ado, he plunged his own awareness into it.

The recollection unraveled before his eyes, the sounds and voices echoing in his ears.

There was Mrs. Cole, looking many years younger, and the woman who had opened the door – Alice Jones, it seemed her name was. They were being yelled at by an old woman… then the cry of a baby… the rushing of their feet… the baby on the doorstep…

Oh, he was intrigued now. A blanket depicting flying snitches. The baby's clothes with 'Harry' embroidered and an image of a moving lion cub on it. With those clothes, there was no doubt – the boy called Harry was no muggleborn. He had to be a halfblood, since pureblood parents wouldn't have abandoned him unless he was a squib. And that, he evidently wasn't, or Hogwarts' ledger
wouldn't have had him in its list.

And then the nursery, with the other baby…. Ah, he understood now. The decision both women had taken. Alice Jones' reasons for it. Hmmm.

Albus pulled out of Mrs. Cole's mind and frowned musingly, pondering about what to do.

Finally, he quickly decided to let matters lay as they were – he could understand and sympathize with Miss Jones' feelings about the matter. And he would see for himself what had come out of it.

Now eager to see the boys, he picked up a piece of blank paper from the woman's desktop and tapped it with his wand's tip, before he handed it over. "Here. I believe this will make everything clear."

When Mrs. Cole's eyes gazed down at the piece of paper, Albus flicked his wand in her direction, as he said in a deep, clear tone of voice, "The Riddles registered their twin sons at my school before the accident which took their lives."

A small memory adjustment – a necessary lie, Albus deemed, since if not the Matron could decide to tell the boys the truth, believing that Albus would. And he rather not have Mrs. Cole believe that his school knew who Harry's parents had been, either. She certainly was a sharp and inquisitive woman, inconveniently so - with the spell he had cast, she would have no reason to suspect anything or dig into it.

Moreover, if he ever had reason to think that, for the boys' sake, they should be aware that they weren't twins or related, then it was something he could easily undo and fix back.

Yet, the mystery of the identity of Harry's parents, and the decision the caregivers had made regarding how to name him, didn't explain why the boy had no surname in Hogwarts' ledger. Albus felt extremely puzzled.

The woman's eyes glazed over, and then she nodded. "Everything seems perfectly in order." Then her eyes focused back, and she blinked, before she set the blank paper on her desk and offered amiably, "May I offer you a glass of gin?"

Dumbledore hesitated. He was eager to see the boys as soon as possible, since he had little time left before he had to prepare matters for the Order's meeting.

However, seeing the longing glance the woman was shooting at her bottle of gin, he nodded and smiled politely. "Thank you. I would enjoy one."

Mrs. Cole poured both of them a generous measure, and Albus took the opportunity to ask with mild interest, "What can you tell me about the boys?"

"About the Riddle twins?"

Kathy abruptly frowned at herself; there was something not right with what she had just said. But in the next second, she shook off the strange feeling, and drained her glass.

She pondered about what to tell him regarding the brothers. Perhaps how they had been born, yet… Her forehead crinkled. She clearly remembered about the weird-looking woman and how she had given birth to Tom, but after that, she didn't remember about Harry coming out.

Kathy wearily sighed. She had to be more tired than she had thought, and clearly getting old, if she couldn't quite remember that last part. She poured herself another glass of gin and chucked it down
in one gulp.

Two pink spots appeared on her cheeks, and she rubbed her forehead pensively.

She could tell him about the many strange things that had happened: about the couple who had wanted to adopt Harry and then had ran out of the orphanage, shrieking with fear; or how Billy Stubb's bunny had died, and she had seen the piece of hair ribbon hanging from the rafters and known that Tom had somehow killed the bunny, and certainly not by 'accidentally stepping on it'; or how she had asphyxiated to the point of fainting and Tom had been standing there, watching, and she knew the boy had been causing it because they had been arguing about something... something she couldn't quite recall; or how Mrs. Sharpe's window had exploded for no apparent reason when Tom was being punished, with Harry in the room; or perhaps how they had found Mrs. Sharpe lying with her neck broken, and Kathy had her own dark suspicions about the matter because Tom hadn't been in the playroom with the rest of them when it had happened; or simply how all the children, except Harry, were scared of Tom and wouldn't go near him.

She could tell him that, and more, but Harry didn't deserve to lose the chance of going to the man's school just because his twin had turned out bad. And Alice would never forgive her if Tom lost the opportunity, anyway.

Her friend had always wanted the best education possible for Tom, in particular. And the man had said his school was a private one, right? It surely had to be much better than the public school in their neighborhood.

Moreover, Mr. Bunderbore had said it was a boarding school, so that meant the boys would only be coming back for their holidays and she could dearly use a respite from having Tom in her orphanage all year round.

So, she finally settled for telling him about the most innocuous of happenings, by comparison.

"Um, well," she began, "some things have happened... nothing serious... some years ago, the children's birthday presents started disappearing, if you know what I mean-"

"One of the boys is a thief?" interjected the man gravely, looking not at all pleased.

"Oh, not Harry, I'm sure!" she blurted out, firmly shaking her head. "And it only happened for a short period of time, then it stopped. And Alice even found her thimble on top of the kitchen's table." Bleary-eyed, she gazed at him and said vehemently, "Harry Riddle is a very good little boy - too energetic, perhaps, but he has a sweet disposition. Tom is... er, a bit odd, but... he's polite."

She felt her cheeks reddening with her lie, more of omission than anything else. And then a sudden hiccup jumped out from her throat. Feeling further uncomfortable under the man's gaze, who was staring at her as if he was about to skewer her with his eyes, she suddenly wanted nothing more but to put an end to the conversation. For some reason, the man now made her feel wary.

Kathy rose to her feet, with surprising steadiness, and prompted quickly, "I suppose you'd like to see them now?"

"Very much," said the man, rising too.

She reached her door and opened it, relieved when she found Alice standing against the opposite wall of the corridor, waiting for them.

"Could you take Mr. Dumberton up to the Riddle twins' room?" Kathy said, wondering why her friend then shot her a quizzical glance, as if she had just said something weird.
"Sure," said Alice, smiling warmly.

Kathy gave her farewells to the man and then locked herself in her office, wanting to finish her work of the day as quickly as possible, since for some reason she felt a sudden headache.

As Albus Dumbledore followed Alice Jones up the stairs, he would use his wand once again that evening, to cast on the woman the same spell he had cast on Mrs. Cole.
Now, there's only one matter I need to clarify; the spell Dumbledore used on Kathy and then Alice, what it did and the consequences of it, for both women.

With the spell, Dumbledore implanted in their minds a fact, what we saw he said out loud with Kathy: "The Riddles registered their twin sons at my school before the accident which took their lives."

He said the Riddles, since it was the one surname he knew had to be correct because it appeared as Tom's surname in Hogwarts' ledger. And before meeting the boys, he had no reason to think that the Riddle name was important. He then believed that Harry was a halfblood of unknown parents, and that Tom could be nothing more than a muggleborn, given his muggle Riddle surname.

But you can see that he employed the Riddles, as if referring to Riddle Sr. and his wife. It's because he doesn't know about Merope Gaunt, and even less suspects that Kathy could know about her (and Kathy doesn't know her name, anyway). But this is obviously Dumbledore's mistake.

In this fic, because he was so curious about Harry's lack of surname in Hogwarts' ledger, he visited the orphanage some time before than he did in canon. And because of that, after meeting the Minister, he already had many things to prepare for the Order meeting.

Thus, he didn't have much time and didn't linger in Kathy's office to ask her a load of question as he did in canon. So, he missed the story of Merope Gaunt. Although, because of Harry, we saw that Kathy wouldn't have told him, anyway, just as she only revealed the thieving thing.

Regardless, you can see that with what he said, Dumbledore was referring to the Riddle couple, both of Tom's parents, thinking Kathy didn't know anything about either of them. So he made up that they had died in an accident, because it was the simplest and most easy thing anyone could believe.

But, unknown to him, Kathy does have the memory of Merope Gaunt giving birth to Tom. So she knows that Tomi's mother didn't die in any accident. Dumbledore was unwittingly saved because for her, the statement of 'the Riddles died in an accident', can only refer to Riddle the father and the man's side of the family, which she knows nothing about. Even this doesn't perfectly fit. Her mind adapted to the facts implanted as best as it could.

That's why the spell didn't erase her memory of Merope Gaunt, but only made her feel certain that - since Harry and Tom being twins is now an incontrovertible factual truth in her mind- she simply doesn't remember Harry's birth after Tom's, because the memory is vague due to the passage of time.

On the other hand, one memory that was affected, and part of it erased, was that of when Tom
asphyxiated her. Because then they had been arguing about not telling Harry the truth, about not being twins. She remembers the asphyxiation, and that they were arguing, but she doesn't remember why.

Lastly, the memory which was completely wiped out from her mind was that of the day in which they discovered Harry on the doorstep and decided to tell him Tom was his twin.

This memory is the only one Dumbledore thought would be affected by the spell. He isn't aware of what happened with the other memories, since he had no reason to even know about their existence.

This is one more case, in this fic, in which we can see that the wizard isn't infallible or omniscient. I don't like my Dumbledores to be perfect, and very much love him as I pictured him in canon, with many failings, much depth of feeling, weighted down with regrets and with the burden of the responsibilities he puts on his shoulders, which not all of them should be his, but he takes them on nonetheless, because he tries to use his power and brilliancy to help the wizarding world. In the end, he's a man with a core of steel, who has to sacrifice much of himself and of others, but who ultimately means good, no matter the many mistakes he makes and no matter if we think he's seriously misguided sometimes.

Now, as for Alice, her memories were affected just the same way as Kathy's, though probably more profoundly because Alice certainly must have thought about the whole 'twins lie' much more frequently than Kathy.

Regardless, you must see that Dumbledore implanted those facts, and let them spread and act in their minds, modifying accordingly, not because he likes to butt his nose into everything and loves to manipulate people.

No, he did it out of necessity, because if he left Kathy believing that Hogwarts knew who Harry's parents had been --as he assured her when he had to tell the lie that both boys' parents had enrolled them in the school-- then he knew that Kathy, as sharp and inquisitive as she is, would have looked into it, more for Harry's sake than anything else.

So Dumbledore, to preserve the secrecy of Hogwarts and even the wizarding world, had no choice. And also, since he sympathized and understood Alice's decision, he decided that the lie about the boys being twins was a good thing, for the boys themselves.

All of this will have further consequences, of course... *winks*

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**Part I: Chapter 8**

Tom sat on his bed, with an open book lying on his lap as he watched how Harry played with Nagini on the boy's own bed.

Both of them had already packed their things for the trip, in the following morning, to Southend-on-Sea. And in about an hour or so, one of the caregivers would start their rounds through the children's bedrooms to turn off the knob of their oil lamps and order them to go to sleep.

Meanwhile, Tom was musing about what he would do the following day. During their last trip to the seaside, he had discovered a cave. Well, both Harry and he had.

It had been a cloudy, chilly day, too cold for swimming, so Mr. Hutchins had been playing with Harry and his stupid friends, making sand castles of all things, while the older boys, with Dennis...
on the lead, had been torturing a stranded starfish with a stick.

Mrs. Cole and Alice had been sitting several feet away from everyone, on the large table cloth they always brought to the beach; Kathy looking stern and grave as she carried a whispered conversation with Alice, while Alice hadn't seemed to be paying her much notice. The stupid woman had been gazing at Hutchins, with that idiotic, love-struck mooncalf expression she always wore when she watched Hutchins playing with the children. He pitied the man, truly.

Out of all the adults, he could say that Hutchins was the only one he respected to some degree. He tolerated him, at least, since Hutchins seemed to be the only one who had half a brain.

The man read a lot and liked the same sort of books that Tom did; non-fiction texts about serious matters, about politics or science, or history and the sort. And Tom somewhat enjoyed his discussions with him.

Nevertheless, he couldn't fully respect him due to the obvious love and affection Hutchins felt for the annoying, silly Alice Jones, and due to the man's beliefs regarding an ideal society where all were equal – such a ridiculously nonsensical and idiotic wish.

Regardless, the point was that that day, Tom had been bored out of his mind. He had miscalculated and he had finished, before expected, the book he had brought to the trip. Suddenly feeling the urge to stretch out his legs, he had stood up and started walking away.

He had smirked when, as he had predicted, Harry had snapped his head up to observe him. Moments later, Harry had run towards him, walking along his side, as he said excitedly, "Are we going treasure hunting?"

Tom hadn't lowered himself to reply to Harry's stupid question and wishful thinking, but he had been satisfied with the proof that, no matter what Harry was doing at the time, he always had half of his attention riveted on Tom.

Indeed, Harry had always rebelled against him in the matter of his right to spend time with his silly little friends. But at least, the boy always dropped them and came to Tom's side if he saw that Tom would be doing something interesting.

Harry may prefer his little friends for playing childish games, but he always chose Tom over them, in the end.

So both of them had meandered along the shoreline, without much hope of finding anything worthwhile. But, when the rest of the people were nothing more than distant black dots to them, Tom had caught sight of something. A few feet away from them, behind a bunch of towering boulders, he had seen a large, wide crack, with waves crashing against it, and with a hissing wind echoing from its depths.

Out of boredom more than curiosity, Tom had started climbing the slippery boulders with some difficulty. Behind him, Harry had seemed very excited, yapping constantly about what he imagined they would find on the other side.

It had been nothing magnificent, just the entrance to a cave. Nonetheless, they had gone inside, the wind howling through the cavernous, dripping rock walls. It had been dark, with only dim daylight spearing through the crack that served as the entrance.

"Look, I'm Frankenstein!" had cried out Harry, making stupid roaring sounds as he moved his arms and hands, forming a grotesque shadow on the cave's walls.
Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' had been, then, the latest story Hutchins had been reading to the boys of the orphanage. Tom hadn't paid much attention to it, just as he hadn't been interested in the tales from The Illiad or The Odyssey, simply because any fiction was a waste of time in his opinion, and those of the fantasy genre were the worst of them all – ridiculous, fanciful and childish.

Though he had been viciously amused when, for weeks after, many of the children had had nightmares, crying and screaming in the middle of the night, waking up the whole orphanage. Due to it, Alice's reprimanding yells at Hutchins, in the following days, had been vastly entertaining.

The only one who hadn't had nightmares, besides Tom of course, had been Harry. Not that it had surprised Tom; his brother did seem to like his monsters, even gross, murdering ones like Frankenstein's. Harry thought It was fascinating.

"Dr. Frankenstein's monster," Tom had corrected absent-mindedly, as he observed the shadows, which, in truth, did look scary and ominous. The whole cave - though they hadn't had time to explore it into its depths - had a spine-chilling and eerie quality to it.

His idea about how to use the cave had been born then, even more so when Harry had suddenly paled and stopped flailing his arms around in that stupid manner.

"What is it?" Tom had snapped, when he saw that Harry had been staring at him, with a look akin to fear.

"Nothin'," his brother had mumbled, looking wary and uncomfortable. "It's just that – for a moment - I thought I saw... I imagined, it was a sort of flash..." He had trailed off and then finally muttered, "The red eyes."

Tom hadn't needed to ask him what he was referring to. Harry's nightmare about a green light and red eyes had become less frequent during the years, but the boy still had them. And it still annoyed Tom, because it was simply stupid. Though he hadn't missed how Harry had been fixedly staring into his eyes right then, as if what the boy had seen was Tom's eyes being red, like those of the nightmare.

And Tom had smirked at that, having one more proof of how scary and eerie the cave could be since it affected his brother to the point that the boy was imagining such imbecilic things. It would be perfect for his plan.

Thus, at present, Tom was pondering how he would carry it out. He would have to ditch Harry and be careful of not garnering Kathy's attention - the nasty old bat had a very sharp eye. But he already knew who his victims would be and what he would say to them to cajole them into following him into the cave - and what he would do to them once they were inside.

Choosing his victims had been easy. It would be the three who annoyed him the most:

Amy Benson because the thirteen-year-old girl – the prettiest and sweetest in the orphanage! according to everyone - was a pest. Always fluttering her eyelashes at all the boys, simpering and smiling coyly.

He despised her, further, because her interest in Harry had only increased with the years. She was always around his brother, hanging from his arm, giggling and flirting obnoxiously. And Harry was a dunce and didn't shove her away in disgust, as he should.

Billy Stubbs because the boy was older now and seemed to have gained a modicum of self-confidence - and even a backbone. Billy needed a reminder of why he feared Tom, and also, after
three years, the boy needed to remember what he couldn’t blab about and what would happen to him if he even tried.

All of Harry's friends had forgotten about the 'fantastic' things Harry had done and displayed, long ago during those months when Tom had ignored his little brother. And Harry, just as Tom had ordered him to, had never attempted to do anything like that again.

Nevertheless, that meant that Billy Stubb's memory about what Tom had demonstratively done to Puffy the Bunny had also lost some of its strength. And Tom was more than willing to remind him about it, with full details.

Lastly, Dennis Bishop, because the boy was a bully and still shot Tom nasty, hateful glances but was too much of a coward to do anything to him. Also because the boy would soon be turning eighteen and thus would be leaving the orphanage, and it would be his parting gift to the boy.

Moreover, because Tom didn't like all the attention Harry gave the bully. Ever since Hutchins had taught Harry how to fight, his brother had been planning and vying to find another opportunity in which to fight Dennis without the caregivers noticing or interfering.

Ever since Harry's first victory against a boy much older than him – and Tom hadn't expected Harry to win when the boy was tiny compared to Dennis, though it seemed that technique, practice, and flash-like reflexes had trumped brute strength in that occasion- his brother had more than once ignored him whilst planning how to beat Dennis to a pulp once more. And Tom didn't like to be ignored.

Tom let out a displeased grunt at that thought, and Harry turned around to glance at him, cocking his head to a side when he saw his brother's expression; one that indicated that Tom was up to something - something he wouldn't like.

Harry was about to open his mouth when he caught sight of the book resting on his brother's lap. It was the one Tom had filched from the latest bookshop in which they had carried out their little act, about two months ago during the orphanage's incursion into commercial London. It was about 'Herpetotogy', or something of the sort – in essence, about snakes.

He huffed and turned back to scratch Nagini's scales, making her hiss contentedly. Tom believed that there was something wrong with their friend, that was why his brother had filched that book.

According to Tom, it wasn't normal that Nagini hadn't grown a single inch -neither in length nor width- during the many years they had known her. But Harry was quite happy about that, since he could easily carry her under his shirt, coiled around his forearm.

But then, when some of her scales had turned black or violet, beginning to form some strange pattern along her thin body, Tom had been further flummoxed because he couldn't find out what kind of snake she was. Her 'species' didn't appear in his book, at least not the pattern which her scales now formed.

Furthermore, once, when Harry had gone to the bathroom to brush his teeth and also wash his feet – because Tom wouldn't let him inside his bed if he didn't, the prissy bastard- he had returned to their bedroom to find Tom with a strange expression on his face.

Nagini had been placidly dozing off on Harry's bed, and according to Tom, he had, for a second, seen how her scales had turned grey, camouflaging with the pillow. Something only chameleons and such could do, his brother had said.
Nevertheless, Harry didn't see why his brother frowned because of that. They had 'special abilities', so why would it be so surprising if Nagini could do strange things too?

However, Tom seemed… 'skeptical' – that was the word, the one he had overheard Alice using when she had been arguing with Kathy, because Tom still refused to go to church and Harry wouldn't go either if his brother didn't. Alice had bemoaned that Tom didn't believe in God and had called him a skeptic, but had said that they shouldn't force them to attend church, regardless.

Harry scratched the soft, small scales under Nagini's jaw –her favorite petting place- and then tugged the hem of his pajama top, scowling with annoyance. The pants didn't reach his ankles and his top hung loosely from one of his shoulders, displaying it, and was also too short, showing a bit of his midriff.

Oh, he was proud that he had had a growth spurt, at last, but it had been way after the rest of the boys, and even girls, had already grown taller. And even though he had gained some inches in height, he remained skinny, and Tom was still nearly a full head taller than him.

'A late bloomer', Alice had called him, thinking it was endearing. Harry had glared at her, not finding it amusing, at all. It galled him.

Even the grandmotherly coos of old matrons had started vexing him – as if he was some kind of pretty-faced doll. And the way they pinched his cheeks with sharp fingernails –calling him 'so handsome', and 'sweet' and 'cute'– truly hurt.

Why didn't they do that to Tom as well? His brother was called 'handsome' too, but no old lady dared to pinch Tom in any way or place.

Harry didn't think it was fair, not at all.

It highly miffed him nowadays, though he forced himself to put up with it, because he was aware that his still 'adorable' looks gave him a free rein, allowing him to do many things, unsuspected and unpunished, he otherwise wouldn't be able to.

Suddenly, a knock sounded on their door, and with his eyes growing wide in alarm, Harry instantly yanked his bed sheet over Nagini, as he hissed urgently, "Don't move – and keep quiet!"

He shot Tom a panicky glance, because no one had ever discovered her thus far, but he knew it wouldn't go over well if they did. And they should still have an hour before they were told to turn off their oil lamp!

Alice didn't like snakes; no one seemed to, though Harry had no idea why. It wasn't as if Nagini was dangerous – she did have a vicious streak and liked to torment and play with her food before eating them, but that was hardly cause for concern. She was a snake, after all.

But no, it wasn't even that. The reason he panicked was because Nagini was a willful creature and he wasn't sure she would obey him. Most times he was glad that she didn't – he didn't want to be called 'master' and be treated as such, as she did with Tom. But now, Tom wouldn't have the time to issue his own orders to her.

Indeed, just as Harry fretfully jumped to his feet, hiding with his body where Nagini laid coiled under the bed sheet, their door opened.

As Alice entered their room, he plastered a wide, innocent smile on his face. Though, in the next second, he frowned a bit when he saw her rubbing her forehead, as if it ached.
Though any concern for her evaporated when he caught sight of the man who walked in, right behind her. His green eyes nearly bulged out, round as platters.

"Tom, Harry, you've got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberdoor -"

"Dumbledore," interrupted the man, warmly smiling, his eyes even seemed to twinkle behind his half-moon glasses as he swept his gaze over them. "Albus Dumbledore." He then turned to Alice as he added very kindly and politely, "I would like to speak with them in private, if it would not be too much of an inconvenience."

"Oh." Alice blinked at the man, and then mumbled, "Yes, of course - certainly."

She looked disappointed, but then shot Harry a smile that looked tense to him, and left the room, closing the door shut behind her.

The man did a strange thing then, he waved his hand at the door – as if he was doing something, but nothing happened. However, he seemed satisfied as he turned around to gaze at them once more.

Harry shot his brother a bewildered glance, seeing that Tom had also stood up, though his brother's shoulders were stiff and tense, and he seemed to be skewering the man with narrowed, dark blue eyes.

"Who are you?" demanded Tom, in that chilly tone of voice he used when he was ordering people around – and which made most cringe as if they had been struck by a blow.

"As I've said, my name is Albus Dumbledore," said the man placidly, not looking at all ruffled by Tom's tone, though by the way he spoke, he seemed to be in a hurry. "I'm a professor at a school in Scotland, called Hogwarts -"

"Professor?" piped in Harry then, shooting his brother a quizzical glance. "That's a teacher, right?"

Tom nodded in response, very briskly and briefly, but didn't peel his eyes away from the man.

His brother didn't say a word, but a fearful suspicion then crept in Harry's mind. The wary way Alice had looked, how tense Tom was now… And he remembered how, so long ago, Tom had warned him that if he kept doing strange things in front of others, someday someone could come from an asylum to take them away.

He hadn't done anything in years -not unless he was in the privacy of their bedroom- but the explosion of Mrs. Sharpe's window three years ago had been his fault. And he had overheard Alice tell Kathy that Jenkins had been going around the neighborhood blaming him and Tom for it.

His heart pumped fast and hard with fear, and Harry quickly reached Tom's side, fisting his small hands, ready to do anything in their defense.

He didn't think he could take down the man before them, but he could land some blows.

If Alice and Kathy were behind this –and it hurt and pained him to even think it, he felt so deeply betrayed- then he would shout and scream, and make them run into the room. And he would put his most pathetic and wounded expression on his face, and he would sob so heart-wrenchingly that he knew he would be able to make them change their minds.

At last, with all the bravery he could muster and ready for battle, he snapped, "You don't look like a teacher." Which was true, since the man seemed to belong to an asylum rather than work in one,
given how he was dressed. Nevertheless, he continued sharply, "Are you a doctor – from the asylum?"

The man –Dumbledore, Harry reminded himself- looked surprised at that. He shook his head and said kindly, "I am not from an asylum. I work at a school called Hogwarts and I've come to offer both of you a place there – in your new school, if you would like to come. If you will sit down calmly, I shall tell you about Hogwarts."

Mr. Dumbledore stared at them expectantly, though Harry noticed how the man's bespectacled gaze lingered on his scar, as if he was curious and perhaps puzzled about it.

His brother must have noticed too, because Tom clamped a hand on his forearm and pulled him further against his chest, making them take several steps backwards.

Tom was evidently leaving room for the man to sit on his bed, but remained standing. And his grip prevented Harry from doing anything else but stand next to him.

It didn't escape Harry's notice how Tom had angled their bodies, with their calves hitting Harry's bed, thus making sure Mr. Dumbledore wouldn't sit on it, where Nagini lay under the sheets.

"Hogwarts," continued Mr. Dumbledore, once he had placidly seated himself on Tom's bed, seemingly not minding that they were too suspicious of him to do the same, "is a school for people with special abilities –"

"Special abilities?" blurted out Harry, his eyes round, suddenly feeling a sense of exhilaration rushing through him. He snapped his head up to gaze at his brother. "Tom! He knows! He's talking about-"

"Shut up!" snapped Tom at him, looking angered as he shot him a brief glare, before he narrowed his eyes at Mr. Dumbledore once more, adding harshly, "We don't know yet what he's talking about."

Mr. Dumbledore remained silent for a second and then peered at them over the brim of his half-moon spectacles. "I'm talking about magic – what you can both do."

"Magic!" Harry cried out, at the same time that his brother did. Though while Harry had nearly jumped in the air with excitement, Tom had sneered the word out, glaring and scowling at the man seated before them.

"You mean it's magic what we can do?" rambled Harry joyously, waving his hands around. "Like in Alice's fairy tales and all-"

"What can you do?" prompted Mr. Dumbledore, gazing at him gently.

"Oh, many things," chirped Harry happily. "We can move things around, and once I disappeared from one spot and appeared in another – though Tom didn't let me try again. And we can also-"

"You're lying," said Tom then, acidly, cutting short Harry's ramblings as he pierced Mr. Dumbledore with eyes narrowed to slits. "My brother believes you because he's stupid. But I know there's no such thing as magic-"

"How do you explain, then, what your brother and you can do?"

Tom's jaw clenched, but he didn't answer and Mr. Dumbledore gazed at him indulgently, before he said firmly, "I assure you, Magic is very much real, as is the Magical World where wizards, like
me and like you, live-

"Wizards… we're wizards… Truly? Really?" breathed out Harry, peering at the man with wide, hopeful eyes.

Mr. Dumbledore warmly smiled at him, nodding his head.

Harry instantly rounded on his brother, digging an elbow into Tom's ribs, feeling revindicated as he laughed, "See, Tom! And all the times you called me an idiot because I thought that perhaps Alice's tales might be right. And when I told you that there had to be other people like us, and when I said that-

"That doesn't mean you were right," bit out Tom, shooting him a dark glare, before he transferred it to Mr. Dumbledore. "And I still don't believe it. Where is this 'Magical World', then? We've never seen it, nor a single thing, sign or clue, that-

"The Magical World is kept hidden from muggles-

"Muggles?" snapped Tom instantly, demanding an explanation and clearly peeved that the man was using terms he didn't know.

"Non-magical people," said Mr. Dumbledore succinctly.

"Muggles…" repeated Tom under his breath, and Harry shot him a glance at that, due to the tone of voice his brother had used; as if 'muggles' represented a lowly thing, as if Tom felt reassured by the fact that there was a tag for such people, since it proved what his brother had always believed, that they were both–and Tom in particular–superior to the people around them.

Nevertheless, Harry was far too giddy to be bothered with that, and he focused all his attention back to the man, as he rambled eagerly, "And what kind of place is this Magical World? Do you have castles and knights? Dragons and princes, and do people fly with wings, and are there houses made of chocolate, and is there-

He was interrupted when Mr. Dumbledore chuckled under his long, auburn beard, looking amused, his eyes twinkling warmly as he gazed at him. "We don't have knights nor princes or princesses. We have no monarchy. But we do have enchanted castles – Hogwarts is a good example of one. We do have dragons, cared for and looked after by wizards, in reservations. And wizards and witches are able to fly, but aided, usually with broomsticks." He stroked his beard, and chuckled again. "We don't have houses made of chocolate or candies, but I think it's an excellent idea. I see that one of your caregivers must be a Grimm brothers fan."

"Oh…" breathed out Harry, with an entranced expression on his face, his wildest dreams already coming true by the mere mention that people could fly –and with broomsticks!– and that dragons really existed.

"You can learn about all of this, and much more, if you choose to attend Hogwarts-

"Of course we do!" piped in Harry instantly, nodding repeatedly and most vehemently, nearly bursting with enthusiasm and elation– he couldn't wait!

When his brother said nothing, he spun around to peer up at him, wondering what was wrong. Tom was still fixedly staring at Mr. Dumbledore, his expression hard and grave.

"You could be making everything up – trying to trick us," said Tom sharply, dislike and suspicion for the man dripping in his every word. "We know what we can do, but we don't know that you're
like us. Do something to prove that what you say is true."

Mr. Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "I will, if you are accepting your place at Hogwarts-

"Prove it first!" commanded Tom with ringing force, like a reverberating whiplash.

Mr. Dumbledore's eyes narrowed minutely, evidently not pleased at the boy's tone of voice, but then his gaze flickered across the room. He seemed to be looking for something, for a particular reason, though Harry couldn't fathom what he was searching for.

There was nothing in the room except their small nightstand with the oil lamp, their two beds against opposing walls, and their old, rackety wardrobe. The man seemed interested in the latter, since his eyes fixed on it, a grave expression growing on his face as if he was about to chide them for something.

The man stood up and pulled a stick of some sort from his pocket, aiming it at the wardrobe, and then, a second later, flames erupted.

Harry cried out in alarm and shock, as he leapt forward to attempt to stop the fire, somehow. "No! All our things!"

However, in the next blink of the eye, the flames vanished, leaving the wardrobe completely undamaged. Harry stared, and blinked, and then gaped as he spun around to glance at Mr. Dumbledore. He frowned slightly when he saw that the man looked puzzled – the man's eyes once more roving over their bedroom, looking for who-knew-what.

Meanwhile, he saw that his brother was standing there, with a fascinated and greedy expression on his face - he looked almost feverish.

"What's that?" demanded Tom, his eyes gleaming as he pointed at Mr. Dumbledore's stick.

"A wand. Wizards and witches use wands to channel their magic, and thus cast controlled spells-"

"Where can we get them?" interrupted Tom instantly, clearly at present not too interested in explanations.

Mr. Dumbledore peered at him, intently, over the top of his half-moon spectacles. There was no warm smile on his face or twinkle in his eyes, as he said, "If you both accept your place at Hogwarts-

"We do!" snapped Tom impatiently, glaring at him as if the man was purposely keeping the information regarding where to get wands as some sort of blackmail material to be used against him.

"Then you will address me as 'sir' or 'professor'," continued Mr. Dumbledore as if Tom hadn't interrupted him at all.

Then, Harry felt it; something shifted. His brother and the man stared at each other, for a fleeting moment, as if they were having a fierce battle of wills. Though it didn't surprise him one bit when Tom's whole countenance changed, abruptly.

"Of course, Professor Dumbledore. I apologize," said Tom very politely, looking properly chastised.

Harry swallowed his snort of amusement, as he saw that Mr. Dumbledore believed that Tom was
being sincere, just like everyone else who had been duped by his brother when he employed such tactics. Though, perhaps not – the man didn't smile again.

Nevertheless, Mr. Dumbledore didn't seem to hold a grudge, as he then said pleasantly, "You can buy your wands and spellbooks at Diagon Alley."

The man plucked out two leather pouches from his pockets, along with two thick envelopes. Mr. Dumbledore handed all of it over to them, as he went on to explain about Hogwarts' fund for those who needed monetary assistance and about how to get to Diagon Alley. When the man mentioned 'Tom' the bartender, he didn't seem to catch his brother's thinning and twist of the lips.

Harry was tempted to say something about it, to taunt his brother about how he thought 'Tom' was a common name. But he remained silent out of loyalty, and also because another reason his brother despised his own name was because he shared it with Mr. Jenkins – and that was no laughing matter.

Furthermore, Mr. Dumbledore seemed to have other things on his mind, and the man's gaze was starting once more to flicker to his scar.

Harry didn't open his envelope or his leather pouch, neither did Tom. It was clear that they were of the same mind – they would do it when they were alone, to be able to freely discuss the whole affair.

"May I ask how that wound on your forehead was inflicted?"

Harry had expected Mr. Dumbledore's question, given the man's lingering gaze. However, what he didn't expect was that the man would stretch out a hand as he spoke, intending to touch his scar. Instantly, Harry recoiled away from the fingers, almost violently.

He never allowed anyone to touch it, except Tom of course, who could soothe it for some reason. Even in his earlier memories, when Alice used to touch his scar before he harshly told her not to, the scar had prickled most unpleasantly, badly reacting to her touch.

And just as Harry had taken a step away from the man's hand, it seemed that his brother had been thinking along those lines as well, since Harry abruptly found himself being pulled back against Tom's chest.

His brother wrapped his arms around Harry from behind, nearly crushing him with a sort of possessive protectiveness, as he hissed out furiously, "Don't touch him!"

Mr. Dumbledore's reaching hand hung in mid-air, and a mesh of expressions crossed the man's face for a brief moment, displaying puzzlement and apprehension, Harry thought; as if there was something bad and wrong about his scar, which the man felt but couldn't quite explain to himself.

It was very strange, and Harry didn't like the man's reaction at all.

At first, he had been suspicious and wary of Mr. Dumbledore, but then, when the man had chuckled and gazed at him warmly as he told him about flying on broomsticks, dragons and how houses made of chocolate was a good idea, Harry had started to truly like him, thinking he had found a kindred spirit.

Now, however, he wanted the man gone. Also because his scar was starting to throb painfully, and he could feel that it was due to Tom; it felt like when Tom had punished Dennis and made the boy hurt.
Harry was convinced that Tom was prepared to do the same to Mr. Dumbledore, and the man seemed to sense something of the sort, because he was staring at Tom with a grave expression on his face, as if appraising him and not liking what he found.

"It's just a scar – I've always had it," muttered Harry, gently rubbing his forehead, still within the protective fold of his brother's arms, as he tried to ease the situation and satisfy the man's curiosity so that he would leave.

Mr. Dumbledore dropped his hand and stopped scrutinizing Tom, and some of the tension seemed to dissipate as a calm and placid expression spread on the man's face. He nodded, looking as if he accepted Harry's reply.

"Very well," he said, "I believe everything is settled, then." He shot them a glance over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "If you are certain you don't require my escort to Diagon Alley, for the day you decide to go-"

"We don't," snapped Tom curtly, from the top of Harry's head. "We know our way around London. We don't need your help – we'll find it."

Mr. Dumbledore said nothing and merely nodded once more, giving them a parting bow of the head as he moved towards the door. Harry exhaled with relief – but he did it too soon.

Just then, their friend decided to remind everyone of her existence, that she was still there, and wanted some attention and would have it.

And Harry blamed Tom for it, because she had adopted some of his brother's worse personality traits, one of them being getting irritated when she was ignored by Harry for too long.

From under the bed sheets, coming out as muffled sounds, Nagini started hissing some annoyed and complaining nonsense, and Harry – with his nerves already frayed and being too tired to think straight- reacted automatically.

"Keep silent!"

Harry froze the moment he realized what he had done – that he had not only said it, but also hissed it.

He didn't think that this ability of theirs was particularly important and even less, special, but Tom had interrupted him when he had been telling Mr. Dumbledore about the things they could do. And he didn't think it had been an accident. It was clear that Tom hadn't wanted to give the man more information about them than necessary, and this certainly wasn't something the man needed to know, either way.

Feeling as if he had let down his brother, he bit his bottom lip and dared to peer up at Tom, expecting to see him glaring down at him. But Tom wasn't looking at him, and his arms - still wrapped around Harry- hadn't tensed nor were they squashing him painfully as punishment for his slip of the tongue.

Harry realized what was going on when he saw that Tom was staring, with narrowed, scrutinizing eyes, at Mr. Dumbledore, who seemed to have spun around the moment he had heard the hissing.

The man was now piercing Harry with his eyes, with such intensity as Harry had never seen before. Mr. Dumbledore's sky blue eyes were roving over Harry's features, inspecting them, as if looking for some kind of clue.
Then, the man gestured at Harry's bed, where all of them could see a lump moving fretfully under the sheets. "May I?"

"Go ahead," said Tom coolly, still without peeling his eyes from Mr. Dumbledore, as he pulled Harry to a side to give the man space.

Mr. Dumbledore grabbed one end of the bed sheet and pulled it away, carefully and even gently, but that didn't change the fact that it revealed their little friend to his eyes.

"Can I speak now?" hissed Nagini, her tone of voice showing her extreme annoyance with them. She then coiled her tail, using it to prop herself up so that her head rose and she could peer at the man staring back at her. "Who's this? The human who's been yapping all this time?"

She blinked slowly, flickering her forked tongue out. "What is he wearing?" She sounded as horrified as Harry had felt when he had seen Mr. Dumbledore's velvet, yellow suit. But her interest in the man didn't last long. She flicked her tail, as if dismissing him as being below her notice, and then reared her head back to skewer Harry with her golden eyes, as she bit out accusingly, "And why were you ignoring me? I was cold!"

The damage was already done, so Harry simply sat on his bed, rolling his eyes at her attitude, and then offered his forearm. Nagini didn't waste a second. She slithered up and squirmed and shifted until she was cozily wrapped around his forearm, leaving only her head popping out from under his sleeve.

"You can speak to snakes?"

Harry glanced up at Mr. Dumbledore at that, thinking it was a pretty stupid question, all things considered.

"So can I," decided Tom to inform him. But when Harry glanced at him, he didn't see the superiority or smugness he would have expected at that proclamation; because of course Tom wouldn't want the man to think that Harry could do something that he couldn't.

But since Tom wasn't acting as Harry thought he would, he knew something was going on; something which Tom had noticed and he hadn't. Indeed, Tom hadn't stopped staring at Mr. Dumbledore. So now Harry observed him as well, and he saw that after Tom's declaration, the man looked even more wary and befuddled than before.

"Both of you?" Mr. Dumbledore said, as if he needed to reiterate on the point because it was too impossible to believe.

Harry's opinion about the man's intelligence was dropping fast. They were twins, so if Harry could speak to snakes it wasn't too surprising that Tom could as well! And yet, the man looked gobsmacked.

"Is it normal for a wizard to be able to speak to snakes?" asked Tom coolly, his manner nonchalant.

"It is… unusual," said Mr. Dumbledore, after a moment's hesitation, his expression quickly having changed to a calm one, "but not unheard of."

Tom's eyes narrowed, and Harry didn't miss either that by the sound of it, and due to the man's pause, there was much that Mr. Dumbledore wasn't telling them about, regarding the matter.

Mr. Dumbledore's eyes once more moved curiously over Harry's face, and then also over Tom's. He seemed to want to linger there with them for some more time, but then he looked hurried once
He shot them parting nods, as he intoned pleasantly, "Good-bye, Tom, Harry. I shall see you at Hogwarts."

And with that, the man left and closed the door behind him.

Harry let out an exhalation of breath, carding his fingers through his hair as he glanced up at his brother. "What do think that was all about?"

Tom wore a pensive expression on his face as he sat beside Harry. "He didn't like it, that we could speak to snakes." Harry nodded, since he had felt the same, though his brother continued, now with a gleam of relish in his dark blue eyes, "He fears it."

Harry shot him a frown. He hadn't noticed anything that would imply that much. Mr. Dumbledore had been uneasy- but fearful? Though he wasn't surprised by his brother's reaction if it was true. Of course Tom would revel in the notion that Mr. Dumbledore -a full-grown wizard who thus had to have more special abilities than they did- was scared of him.

"Why would he fear it?" piped in Harry, his frown deepening.

"Right." Harry rolled his eyes; he should have seen that one coming.

Then he stood up and grabbed Tom's envelope and leather pouch, since he already had his in his hands. He took one step forward, to the very center of the small space between their beds, and then used the tip of his toes to wrangle with the loose floorboard.

The rectangular piece of wood came off and Harry crouched down to look at the secret hiding place where they kept all their 'treasures' – all the things they had filched from stores, throughout the years.

It had been Harry who, long ago, had complained that they couldn't keep all the stuff in their wardrobe. Because every time he had to pull out a shirt, Tom's countless stolen books came tumbling out.

So one day Harry had chosen the floorboard that creaked the loudest when he stepped on it. And for a whole week, he had stomped and jumped on it, until one edge chipped and he was able to yank it off.

The dusty space under it wasn't too deep, but it was large, horizontally. He only had to stick in his arm, up to his elbow, and he could reach all the things they had stuffed in there.

Of all the things they had filched from stores for Harry, not much was left except a motorcar toy and a model of an airplane of the Great War – Harry's most cherished possessions. This was simply because other than that, and some story books, Harry usually made Tom filch food, candy or chocolate for him, while he acted his part.

And thus, the space was mostly occupied by Tom's innumerable books – his brother only wanted that from stores. Even Tom's once cherished cardboard box was still there, though the boy hadn't opened it in ages and Harry knew that his brother didn't value its contents anymore, not since he had made Tom give back Alice's thimble.

As Harry stuck their envelopes and leather pouches inside, he said idly, "We can open them
tomorrow. We don't have time now - soon someone will come to check if we're asleep."

Much of his excitement, caused by Mr. Dumbledore's disclosure about magic and its world, had significantly dimmed after the strange things that the man had done – Dumbledore's reaction to his scar and about the whole speaking-with-snakes ability.

Oh, Harry was still a bit dazed and giddy, but he was wary too.

He turned around as he put the floorboard back in place, just to see Tom nodding at him in agreement.

As he stood up again, a mighty yawn escaped from Harry's mouth, and he didn't give Tom a chance to fight him.

Tom was still seated on Harry's bed, they were both in their pajamas, and Nagini was already dozing off, curled around his forearm. Thus, Harry shoved his brother unto the mattress –making Tom let out a startled grunt- and he quickly plopped himself down by his brother's side, as he found the bed sheet Mr. Dumbledore had thrown to a side, yanking it up to cover them.

"We'll sleep in my bed tonight," he mumbled sleepily, as he snuggled up to Tom's warm body, very much like Nagini always did with him. His brother could be a very cozy, fluffy pillow when he let it happen.

Tom grumbled about something under his breath, but he didn't protest any further at the use Harry was making of him. The taller boy simply stretched out a hand towards the nightstand, to turn off the oil lamp, and then allowed Harry to happily wrap himself around Tom as he pleased.

Nevertheless, Harry could still see his brother's face under the dim moonlight that speared through their thin, frayed curtains. Tom didn't look as if he would be falling asleep anytime soon – he had that expression on his face which told Harry that he had many things on his mind he was musing about.

Indeed, his brother looked conflicted, and Harry had an inkling about why. Sometimes, Harry didn't understand Tom at all, not his motives or reasons. Other times, like then, he could read his brother like an open book.

"I was right and you're not happy about it," remarked Harry, a bit of a taunting tone in his voice, as he tilted his head up –which rested on Tom's chest- to peer at him. He even shot his brother one of those smug smirks Tom so liked to use on him.

Tom merely graced him with an annoyed scowl before he went back to stare at the ceiling.

Undaunted, Harry continued, now trying to soothe his brother's ruffled feathers, "But you know, it's not a bad thing that there are others like us. It doesn't mean we're less special – that's what you don't like, right? That we're no longer unique?"

His brother grunted as a mode of response – Tom clearly wasn't in a mood for much chatter.

"But once, long ago when we discussed the possibility," added Harry softly, "you said that there was one positive thing if there were others like us – that we could learn from them more about our special abilities. Well, you were also right, then. You see?"

Tom scoffed, and for a moment Harry was disappointed, thinking that would be the only thing he would get from him.
However, his brother cleared his throat and then said superiorly, a tone of voice that some times irritated Harry but which now felt comforting simply because it was pure Tom. "Of course I was right. We'll go to this Hogwarts school and see what it has to offer. If I think-"

"If we think," corrected Harry pointedly, shooting him a dark glare.

Tom scoffed once again, this time sounding snide and dismissive. But then he smirked and mussed Harry's hair, as he said placidly, "Of course, little brother. If we think that what they have to teach us is useful and worthwhile, then we'll stay. We'll learn as much as we can and then make our own way in the world."

Annoyed, Harry swatted his brother's fingers away from his hair. His brother always mocked him for having wild, unruly hair, but then Tom always enjoyed messing it up even more.

When he stopped battling against his brother's fingers, he asked in a deceptive, mild tone of voice, "Then our plan of escaping and going to America when we turned fifteen…?"

"Postponed," said Tom curtly, leveling at Harry a hard gaze, as if he was readying himself for a fight.

But his brother had nothing to fear; he had replied exactly what Harry had wanted to hear.

He shot Tom a wide grin, and chirped loftily, "Good. And by the way, tomorrow we won't be going to Southend-on-Sea. We'll stay put, and when everyone's gone, we'll slip away from the orphanage. We'll go to Diagon Alley – I can't wait to see what this 'magical world' is like."

Much to his surprise, Tom did put up a fight regarding that. It made Harry very suspicious. Tom was the one person who didn't find much enjoyment in their trips to the country or seaside, and now he was arguing against missing it.

But in the end, Harry won, just as he knew he would because he had ways in which to make Tom end up doing whatever he wanted. It never failed.

He cajoled and whined and peered up at him with wide, hurt, teary eyes, and all together made such a nuisance of himself that Tom had no choice but to relent, because his brother was well aware that Harry could easily and effortlessly nag him during the whole night and not let him sleep a wink.

It was simply a matter of who, out of the two of them, could be more stubborn and bothersome. And Harry always came on top, in both aspects.

And so, Harry fell asleep, hiding a small, smug smirk against his brother's chest, his thin arms wrapped around him as if Tom was his very own cuddly teddy bear.

Nearly one hour before, Albus Dumbledore had left St. Jerome's Orphanage, his mind swirling with countless, puzzling thoughts.

After seeing Mrs. Cole and before meeting the boys, he had simply thought that Harry had to be a halfblood and Tom a muggleborn.

Even if Horace had been of the opinion that 'Marvolo' had to be a wizarding name, Albus hadn't given it much importance. It wouldn't be the first time muggles came up with a strange name that sounded like the ones used in the wizarding world.
Moreover, the name 'Marvolo' didn't ring any bells. He had never been acquainted or heard of a wizard called such, and it wasn't one of the many names that certain wizarding families liked to bestow on their children, as per tradition of their lines.

However, after seeing the boys, Albus was now certain of a couple of things and was in the dark about many other.

Regarding their personalities, he could only find fault with Tom's, which left much to be desired. Even the boy's possessiveness over Harry had made him inwardly raise an eyebrow. However, there had also been protectiveness, and thus, he couldn't find fault with Alice Jones' decision of making them believe they were twins.

Indeed, he shuddered to think how a boy like Tom would have turned out if he hadn't had someone as a trusted and constant companion -as Harry seemed to be- in a setting such as the orphanage. Hence, for now, he believed that his decision to protect them from the truth, regarding their lack of relation to each other, had been the right one.

On another note, Albus Dumbledore had many extraordinary magical abilities, many of which he kept a secret. One of them was his uncanny sensitivity and perception of the magic around him and within wizards.

From the start, as soon as he had been in the boys' presence, he had felt it. Tom Riddle's magic was dark by nature. If left unchecked and unguided, the boy would naturally feel akin to and inclined to the Dark Arts, and very possibly delve into them.

It was something, of course, that he couldn't let happen, for the boy's own sake. So many had lost and ruined themselves due to the Dark Arts. And the teachers at Hogwarts had the responsibility of saving their pupils from such fate.

Nonetheless, that Tom Riddle had had at least one parent from a dark magical line was now obvious.

Then, there was Harry, whose magic had felt light, but which had a taint of darkness within it. It was that taint which could make the boy lean towards the Dark Arts. The boy was in danger due to it, just like Tom Riddle.

When Albus had seen the boy's scar, he had suspected it was the cause for it.

The scar had instantly caught his attention – it had looked fresh, as if it had just then been inflicted and as if it would never heal properly. It even looked as it could split open and bleed again at any moment. And the feeling it had given him…

It was for a reason that Albus had attempted to touch it without asking for permission first; not because he wanted to be inconsiderate, but because he had needed to test it.

And then, when his fingers had been but an inch away from the scar, he had felt it most potently – a tendril of dark magic, lashing out. It had been strong, intense, as if it had a mind of its own, and as if it had been reacting to Albus' own powerful light magic, deeming him a threat.

Never had he encountered such a thing.

Oh, there were several dark curses that could have left such a scar, and even left it with a lingering buzz of dark magic – but not that powerful. And certainly not with dark magic that seemed alive.

Moreover, the fact alone that the boy had been cursed was already cause for concern. From what
Harry had said, it must have been when the boy had been very young, perhaps even a baby, since the boy couldn't recall how or when he had gotten the scar. And the boy clearly didn't know he had been cursed at all.

Then there was the matter that the boys were parslemouths. One of them alone being such would have startled and puzzled him. The two of them, when he knew they weren't twins... well, it was mystery of such magnitude that Albus felt completely out of his depth.

He wasn't an expert regarding the parslemouth trait, but he had a pretty good notion regarding it, from historical records he had once perused out of sheer curiosity. Nowadays, it was not simply uncommon, it was unique.

The magical ability had originated in some few pureblood lines in India, from which only a couple of descendants remained and none of them with the trait. It was a magical trait that was hard to pass down in a bloodline, usually too weak to manifest itself.

In Europe, the only case of parslemouth ability had been Salazar Slytherin, and his descendants through his bastard son. In that case, for some inexplicable reason which was still undiscovered, the trait had bred true and strong in all descendants.

And yet, by all accounts, the bloodline had died out several centuries ago. Thus was the mystery of how two boys, who were not brothers, could both be parslemouths in such day and age.

It was clear to him that, firstly, the boys could be distantly related to each other. And secondly, that perhaps he would have to look into the only possible origin of their ability – that of the last descendants of Salazar Slytherin; to see, as it was widely disbelieved, if some had survived to present day.

However, even if he added the mystery of Harry's lack of surname in Hogwarts' ledger, to that of the dark magic in the boy's scar and to that of both boys' parslemouth ability, they were still just boys.

They were children who needed to be guided gently, and not unfavorably conditioned and affected by his own wariness. Simply because of what he had discovered about them, as much as it was worrisome, he didn't think ill of them.

It was hardly their fault, and Albus Dumbledore was not a prejudiced wizard, either.

Nevertheless, he was a prudent one.

He would watch them closely during their years at Hogwarts, and be there for them, to guide and help them if solicited and welcomed.

No matter what kind of blood a wizard was born with, in the end, it was a matter of choice whether a wizard turned to the Dark Arts or not. Choice and will could always trump inherited nature.

If he had reason to be concerned about the boys and the choices they made, then he would fully delve into the matter of Harry's scar and the origin of the boys' parslemouth ability.

That decided, with several more things to keep tabs on -just as he kept tabs on many other people, like Maximilian Malfoy, but only acted and interfered if deemed necessary- Albus focused his mind on the Order meeting that would commence in a few minutes.

And with his thoughts thus occupied, as he stood on the muggle street and turned to quickly cast a spell on the orphanage, he didn't notice the eyes that had been observing him.
Part I: Chapter 9

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Author's Note:

Hello everyone, I'm finally back! Thanks for all reviews and your patience, I do appreciate it.

I'll start by answering questions and clearing doubts regarding the fic, and then I'll make some comments regarding this chapter.

1. There's a good point brought up by one reviewer; What happened with the letter for Harry?

Well, just like I was too lazy and didn't think it was necessary to write what Albus did to Alice, regarding the spell he cast on her – the same one he used on Kathy- I didn't bother either to write what Albus must have done to Harry's letter. But since, when Albus followed Alice up the stairs to reach the Riddle's room, we can imagine he cast the spell on her, we can also imagine that he tapped his wand on the pocket containing the letters so that the Riddle surname was added after Harry's name, since by then he had already made the decision of perpetuating the lie about the boys being twins. He couldn't have done this before then because he still hadn't spoken to Kathy and thus made that choice.

2. Another important point made by a different reviewer; Why didn't Dumbledore recognize Harry as a Potter by looking at him?

Well, I think it's pretty simple. Even if we assume that Harry is a carbon copy of James Potter with only Lily's eyes – which I'm not making it so in this fic – I think it would be quite astounding if Dumbledore had thought Harry was a Potter. Firstly because if Dumbledore has seen anyone, he has seen Harry's paternal grandparents, and given the timeline, both of them are young and unmarried. Thus, Dumbledore would have to recognize in Harry features from a young wizard – Harry's granddad- and a young witch –Harry's grandmother- who aren't married or possibly even a couple, and who certainly cannot look, either of them, identical to Harry.

If anything, Harry must have features from the 4 of his grandparents, maternal and paternal, and Dumbledore certainly doesn't know Lily's muggle parents.

For instance, I don't think I look anything alike any of my grandparents. Perhaps I have the nose of one, the chin of the other, the eyebrows of the third and such, but if someone just knew one or two of my grandparents and then looked at me, they certainly wouldn't guess I was their granddaughter without knowing beforehand. So that's the logic that went through my mind when I didn't make Dumbledore recognize Harry.

3. Charlemagne McLaggen threatened Dumbledore about telling the public about Albus' past liaison with Grindelwald because -even though McLaggen thinks there's no proof that Grindelwald is a Dark Lord- it would still be incriminating for Dumbledore because Dumbledore is giving speeches in the Wizengamot saying that Grindelwald is a Dark Lord. So if McLaggen comes out with the story of Albus and Gellert being together when they were young, while Dumbledore is out there saying that Gellert is a Dark Lord, then of course this would stain Dumbledore's reputation and the validity of his claims.
4. On another note, what we see regarding the happenings before WWII we see it through Alice's eyes, and sometimes through Mr. Hutchins and Tom. So of course it's not accurate; it's their opinion and feelings about what's happening. You can't expect Alice to know about what the politicians know or think about the matter, or what other civilians believe, either. There were many who thought that the Austrian annexation had no validity, and we can see this when Robert Hutchins gives Alice his opinion about it. And Alice saw this in the newspapers as well. Nevertheless, she took it at face value, because she is naïve sometimes, but mostly because she wants to believe that everything will go well and that no bad things are happening. And I think there must have been many people like her, back then. From what I've read, no one really believed that another war would start; everyone was still recovering from the consequences of the Great War and the Depression that followed. And after all, the public at large was kept ignorant for a long time. It was only during the Nuremberg trials of 1945 when everything finally came out into the open.

5. Oh, and Tom was born on December 31, 1926, (what Harry believes to be his birthday as well), taken from HP Lexicon. They are starting Hogwarts in 1938 - according to Lexicon timeline- and that's the current present year in the fic. They are turning 11 in New Years. Harry was born on July 31, 1980, following canon, and he was thrown into the past when he was one year and three months old, in October 31, 1981, the night the Potters were killed. So Harry is 3 months older than Tom – wouldn't Harry love to know that he was actually the 'older brother'! Lol.

Note: This chapter is for Elelith, Happy belated Birthday! And thank you for always motivating me to write another chapter for this fic – I hope you enjoy it!

This chapter has no Tom/Harry interaction, it's basically loads of information so I hope you are in a patient mood. But everything is important, and in the next chapter there will be quite a bit more of the same thing, because Gellert and Konrad had been very busy in the last three years and even after reading this chapter we won't know the full extent of it. Thus, the rest will come in the following chapter.

That said, I'm sorry I haven't updated in such a long time. Several months ago I finished my thesis and started working, and let me tell you, I miss my student life! I barely have any spare time and when I do I either sleep or go out with friends, so I haven't had any time to write. But now I'm on my holidays, two weeks of it, so I'm taking the opportunity of writing again for this fic. Hopefully, I'll have the next chapter ready in a week or less.

Enjoy and let me know what you think!

Part I: Chapter 9

The moment Albus Dumbledore disapparated from the muggle street, the blue eyes which had been observing him blinked once more, from a brickwall between a butcher shop and a dilapidated muggle home across the street from St. Jerome's Orphanage. In the next second, the small expanse of wall rippled as a body unmerged from it.

Konrad Von Krauss took a step forward onto the asphalt, his own muscles aching and his skin unpleasantly prickling as he peeled himself out of the bricks. Finally, he stood whole and unharmed, flicking his wand at himself to cast a Disillusioning Charm.

Now invisible to all eyes, he waited a moment as a motorcar rolled past him and then he crossed the street. Standing before the orphanage, he raised a hand and chanted a spell. The magical ward
cast by Dumbledore minutes before, appeared before his eyes, vibrating and thrumming. With another muttered spell and an intricate weaving of his wand's tip, Konrad made a small adjustment to the ward which, per Ministry instruction, had to be cast on the homes of muggleborns so that any use of underage magic would be detected. Of course, with his unperceivable modification to the ward, he ascertained that he would be linked to the ward and not the English Ministry of Magic.

Indeed, it was imperative that when the time came in which the boys would have no choice but to break magical laws in order to ensure their own welfare and survival, it would be he who would be alerted and not the Ministry's Improper Use of Magic Office.

Once he completed this task, Konrad carefully stood before the orphanage's front door and trailed a hand over the wooden frame, making sure that the spell which had given him notice about a wizard crossing the threshold was still working. That the greatly vaunted Albus Dumbledore hadn't detected it, with all the rumours there were regarding the man's uncanny magical sensitivity, seemed quite telling to him. There was no doubt that Dumbledore had been in a hurry, but more importantly, it was clear that the wizard had had no reason to suspect that others might be interested in the Riddle 'brothers'.

Konrad himself didn't know all the particulars of why his Lord considered the boys to be important for his plans. Indeed, in the three years he had been spying on them, he still didn't know much.

Oh, he knew the boys were parslemouths; it was the first thing he had discovered, and quite easily too, given that they kept a pet snake in their bedroom. And yet, when he had reported back that most astonishing information to the Dark Lord, Grindelwald hadn't been surprised at all but rather pleased and satisfied, as if that alone proved something vital to him.

Moreover, Konrad knew the little there was to know about the boys' origins; twice he had abducted the caregiver who seemed to be most attached to them.

It had been on two separate occasions that, when the muggle woman by the name of Alice Jones had gone about grocery shopping, he had taken the opportunity to grab her and apparate her into an empty warehouse. Before giving her the chance to scream and attempt to fight back, he had rendered her useless with a Petrificus Totalus and he had delved into her mind, legilimizing every tidbit of information and duplicating every memory she had regarding the boys, sending the recollections back to Grindelwald in small flasks, as per the wizard's instructions. He had taken extra care of obliterating her after he was done, as well as taking her back to the same spot from which he had taken her.

It was also due to what he had seen in her mind that he had been able to establish an 'indirect link to the boys', as the Dark Lord had commanded him to do.

Indeed, one of his missions in England had been to create a muggle persona for himself with enough social standing and resourcefulness as to be able to influence muggle politics in England as well as to form a connection between his muggle identity and the orphanage.

It had been fairly simple to find a muggle 'Lord', as muggle decaying nobility fancied to call themselves, and to pose as the old man's long lost son.

Lord Arthur Ashcroft had been a recluse for many years, living in his country estate with a few servants, ever since his eighteen-year-old son had been reported as 'missing in action, presumed dead' by the British Army during the last year of the Great War. That the boy had died and his mangled corpse had lain, unrecognizable, in some ditch or trench in the Western Front, there was no doubt.
It was for that reason and due to Lord Ashcroft's precarious health, his wealth and his previous
useful social connections before shying away from society due to his grief, that Konrad had chosen
him.

For a whole month, during his first year in England, he had slipped into the old man's manor and
bedroom, working on the muggle's mind as the man slept, creating new memories which
supplanted the old. And thus, the man's son, Alistair Ashcroft, had been reborn.

According to the story Konrad had spun in the muggle's mind, by the end of the Great War, the
man's eighteen-year-old son had been convalescing in a French army hospital, like so many other
British soldiers. After recovering, 'Alistair Ashcroft', traumatized after his experience in the war,
wishing to start anew, away from anything that would make him remember the brutality of battle,
had written to his father from France, informing him of his decision to travel to America and settle
there. Soon after, he fell in love and married a woman from a wealthy family from Massachusetts,
as would be expected from someone of Alistair Ashcroft's social standing. Twenty years later,
when knowing about his father's ill health, Alistair decided to settle back in England, bringing his
wife along with him, to help his dear father and be with him during the old man's remaining few
years of life.

Of course, Konrad had been careful to support this tale with years-worth of letters he had created
and forged with Alistair's signature, which he had copied from missives the boy had so long ago
sent to his father from boarding school. And having seen the many pictures of a young Alistair that
Lord Ashcroft kept in his room, it had been fairly simple for Konrad to cast a glamour on his face,
looking as Alistair could have possibly looked like, if he had lived to be in his early forties.

The wife had been easily attained as well. One trip to Whitechapel district in London, brimming
with filthy, destitute muggle prostitutes, and Konrad had chosen one of them, paid her a couple of
pounds, cleaned her up and bought her trunk loads of pretty clothes.

It was thus, with a richly clothed and beautifully groomed whore, clinging from his arm whilst
being under his Imperius Curse, that a glamoured Konrad had appeared on the doorstep of Lord
Ashcroft's country estate, three years ago. The invalid, doddering, old muggle had received them
with open arms and teary eyes, nonsensically blabbering with joy.

Without the need of much persuasion, the muggle Lord had given the reins of his estate to
'Alistair', and Konrad had been quick to assign to himself and his 'wife' the entirety of the east wing
of the manor, forbidding servants to enter with the claim that his wife, in her grief after a long
succession of stillbirths and miscarriages, preferred solitude and seclusion since she had become a
fervently religious woman who did little else but pray and read the Bible.

Indeed, Konrad had little use for her. He kept the whore sitting day and night in a dark room, saliva
dribbling from her mouth as she unseeingly stared at a wall, while the house-elf he had brought
from one of his manors in Germany spoon-fed her and bathed her from time to time.

After three years under the constant influence of the Imperius Curse, the muggle woman was little
more than an empty shell, a puppet whose strings he could easily pull to make her dance to his
tune; to make her say the shallow platitudes expected from a woman of her station and to make her
behave in public as a 'lady' should, the few times a year in which he made her make an appearance
by his side in some muggle social gathering or other.

Mostly, he preferred to make his incursions into the circles of muggle high-society alone, always
taking care that his picture would not be taken by any muggle journalist, that Alistair Ashcroft's
name wouldn't be mentioned in the papers, and, with Notice-Me-Not spells and the like, that no
one would pay much attention to him or remember him later.
He only ensured that his inflammatory words regarding the dangers of German rearmament, and the need to put a stop to it before it was too late, were clearly remembered. In those occasions when he posed as Alistair Ashcroft and expressed such vehement and war-mongering opinions, during soirees and social gatherings in which the muggle politicians, the nobility, and the rich mingled, his target audience had been one man in particular: Sir Winston Churchill.

At first, Konrad had not been pleased that the Dark Lord had chosen that muggle in particular. Indeed, in his second report during his first year in England, he had expressed his serious doubts.

"He's an uncouth, ill-mannered, bad-tempered muggle," Konrad had said firmly, trying to make his Lord see some reason, his lips pressing into a thin, hard line, expressing his dissatisfaction and deep dislike. "He's not the kind of man who the people would choose for a Prime Minister, My Lord. The British muggles fancy themselves to be civilized and expect the same in their politicians, and Churchill is not that. But there are several muggles in high posts that would do."

Gellert had shot him that crooked smile of his, the wizard's hawk-like eyes pinning him where he stood, as he interrupted him and said loftily, "And yet, from what you have told me, the current Prime Minister and those close to him prefer peace at all costs. In your own opinion, they'll attempt to negotiate with the Nazis, and we cannot have that." He had slapped a hand on Konrad's shoulder, as he added sharply, "There cannot be peace! Britain must be involved in the war, it's imperative for my plans. You know this."

"Yes, My Lord, but Churchill barely has any clout, at present. He's had a disastrous political career, he's never been loyal to any party, jumping from one to the other for years, and it ended with his own Conservative Party excluding him. He had to flee in shame to his country estate," Konrad had argued in brisk German. "And after several years living in ignominy and largely ignored, he's trying to resurface in the political sphere. But his attempts are unsuccessful, that is my point. Recently, he has even made another political mistake when the muggle King died and his firstborn and successor married an American woman who had divorced twice! And Churchill publicly supported such horrendous impropriety."

"And Churchill lost in his gamble of which of the King's sons to support when the firstborn abdicated and passed the crown to his brother, yes," interrupted Grindelwald, his jaded smile widening as his hazel eyes gleamed. "It is due to that reason and everything you've reported to me regarding the man, that he's the best muggle for the job. He has made many mistakes, he's desperate to clear his name and bring it back from oblivion. He's only loyal to himself, his ambitions and British imperialist interests."

He had held up a hand when Konrad had tried to speak again, and added sharply, "He's loud-mouthed and pugnacious, and he has finally started making speeches warning the public about Germany's rise." His smile curved into a twisted smirk as he continued, now calmly, "As you know, from the start, I've made sure that there were leaks in the Nazi government. I've ensured that British spies were handed certain information. And you've told me that a muggle in the British Foreign Office has passed down some of it to Churchill. Use your muggle identity and your social connections as a Lord's son to acquire a post in the Foreign Office and use that muggle. Make sure that more secret information reaches Churchill's hands. Let him know about the German factories making guns and artillery, building tanks and airplane parts. Let him know that Hitler is creating the Luftwaffe to rival Britain's Royal Air Force. Let him know about the U-boats and warships being built."

He had grabbed Konrad's chin, skewering him with his gaze as he continued in an unyielding, commanding tone of voice, "Follow him to every gathering he attends, fill his mind with ideas, make him believe he can use the conflict in Europe to rise to power. Make him be a rising star
again, and the only voice that cries out for war. And when I make Hitler break every promise and
terms of peace with the current British government, England's muggles will only be able to turn to
Churchill for leadership. And at long last, we will have our Muggle War."

And Konrad had done precisely that, all of it.

At present, after nearly three years of hard work in the muggle world, he could now say that he had
left everything perfectly staged so that, soon, the muggle politician chosen by the Dark Lord would
be elected as the next Prime Minister of England.

Furthermore, he had also created a useful connection between his Alistair Ashcroft persona and St.
Jerome's Orphanage. In truth, he hadn't quite expected the way in which he would achieve it.
Indeed, it had taken him by surprise and he considered it a fortunate coincidence when he had seen
in Alice Jones' mind that the woman had a younger sister who worked as a maid for the
Carringtons.

As Alistair Ashcroft, he had already been acquainted with Lord and Lady Carrington from the
frequent dinner parties the muggle couple liked to throw for their peers, and which he had attended
when Churchill was one of their guests.

In every of their gatherings his skin had crawled with disgust, as always happened when he was
forced to endure muggle company, adding to that his suffering of having to listen to squashed-
faced Lady Carrington as she mindlessly blabbered about her jewels and gowns, and to the porky
and obese Lord Carrington, who had little conversation except hunting, the weather, and his
precious dogs.

Nevertheless, after his second Legilimency of Alice Jones and having discovered with it about the
muggle's sister, he had started paying attention to the maids who served dinner in the Carrington's
home. And then he had seen her, Sarah Jones; a pretty little thing, really, quite to his taste if she
wasn't a despicable muggle. But more importantly, he had noticed how Lord Carrington's gaze
followed the maid as she went around serving the dishes of food.

After that evening's dinner, when the ladies withdrew to the main parlor and the men to the library
to share cigars and brandy, it hadn't taken very long for Lord Carrington to slip away. It had been
evident to Konrad that the muggle lacked subtlety and any form of restraint.

Indeed, when 'Alistair Ashcroft' had followed him into the kitchens, he had found all servants gone
from the place except for a sobbing Sarah Jones pressed against the pantry, who for all her tears,
remained still and silent, allowing her employer's lecherous hands to reach every inch of her skin
under her shirt, certainly only because she couldn't afford to lose her job.

'Alistair' had loudly cleared his throat, pretending he had been looking for a bottle of cognac, and a
flustered and red-faced Lord Carrington had mumbled something or other and fled the scene,
leaving a wretchedly sobbing maid behind. Of course, Konrad had seized the chance and had
tenderly consoled her, forcing himself to touch her in order to gently pat her back, whispering
comforting words to her. And thus, Alistair Ashcroft's 'friendship' with the girl had begun.

During the whole last year he had been a frequent visitor of the Carringtons, several more times
interrupting the Lord's unwanted sexual harassment of Sarah Jones, and every time offering to her a
shoulder in which to cry on. Even when Alistair Jones stopped receiving invitations, he nonetheless
kept visiting, knowing that the Carringtons wouldn't dare to forbid him entrance out of fear that he
would reveal to others what he had seen. There was no doubt in his mind that the Lady of the house
knew exactly what her husband did, and preferred to turn a blind eye to it.
During all his visits, he took the time to find Sarah Jones and have quiet conversations with her, telling her what maids like her wished to hear; praising her beauty, her intelligence, her fortitude, and so on. Soon, when he was certain that the foolish girl had become quite enamored with him, he had candidly disclosed his own tribulations; his wife's inability to bear him a child, his deep yearning for a family of his own, and the sorrow and grief that he felt due to it.

It had taken seed just as he had planned. Two weeks later, in his next visit, a joyful and bubbly Sarah Jones had confided that she had a sister who worked in an orphanage, and she had told him her 'brilliant' solution to his problem; how it would be very charitable and altruistic of him to adopt an orphan. She had written to her sister several times, telling her 'everything' about him, and what an excellent father he would make, how a kind-hearted and gentle man like him, and with his wealth and social station, could give any child a very happy life.

And so, a grateful Alistair Ashcroft had promised to discuss the possibility with his wife, and that someday they might visit St. Jerome's Orphanage - in which they would be welcomed with open arms by her sister, Sarah Jones had assured him.

Konrad had been careful, of course, of not giving her any time frame. After all, his muggle persona's connection with the orphanage might not be used. His Lord had told him that 'Alistair Ashcroft' would only have to adopt the Riddle boys if Grindelwald deemed at some point that it was necessary or useful for the boys to live in Germany, under his thumb and influence.

Thus, he had completed two of his missions in England. The third, contacting the spy in Hogwarts, giving him new instructions and making sure that the spy wouldn't waver in his commitments, had been simple and easy as well. The fourth mission, to gain more supporters to Grindelwald's cause in members of dark pureblood families and even some light ones, hadn't proved to much of a challenge either, since he had been Maximillian Malfoy's guest in many social events and such occasions had provided him ample opportunities to persuade English wizards to their side.

Nevertheless, his fifth and last mission had proven to be more complicated than he had expected, but he had done all he could and now could only wait for a resolution. Indeed, his negotiations with Maximillian Malfoy regarding the future marriage between the wizard's grandson and Konrad's own daughter had been tricky. Malfoy was a ruthless, cunning, and demanding negotiator, and it seemed that the man had previously arranged a marriage with a girl of Black House and the grandson.

Talking to other purebloods, Konrad had been able to glean the reason why Malfoy was so reticent to break that agreement between Malfoy and Black Houses; it seemed the Blacks owed the Malfoys a bride, due to some troubles between the Houses several generations ago.

Nevertheless, just as the Dark Lord had said, Konrad's daughter and what she would inherit from him and her mother, was a prize too tempting to ignore, thus Konrad was confident that Maximillian Malfoy and the wizard's greed would serve his purpose.

Furthermore, Malfoy had been very satisfied with the gifts Konrad had bestowed upon him to sweeten the deal; unique ancient tomes, precious magical artifacts, and even gems and stones to add to the Malfoy collection. And the old man had also expressed his satisfaction regarding Kasimira's looks, the many times Konrad had brought portraits of her, when he commissioned a painter to go to Durmstrang and take her likeness. The Malfoys were known to have very high standards regarding the beauty their brides should posses.

On the other hand, Konrad himself was content with the boy who would become his daughter's husband, fusing the Malfoy and Von Krauss lines and merging their fortunes and estates.
Maximillian Malfoy's grandson, Abraxas, was everything he could hope for in a scion of a dark pureblood House as the Malfoy's. Though, he had discovered, through rumours, about the one fault the boy had. But Konrad was a Traditional Purist, and not a True Purist, as the faction called itself, so what Maximillian Malfoy saw as a grave and humiliating besmirch in the boy's blood and a shame to his line, Konrad saw it as a boon.

However, the boy himself had never seemed particularly thrilled about the negotiations; young Abraxas' indifference towards Kasimira's portraits being obvious and the boy's dislike of having a wife two years his elder, palpable. Regardless, the boy would do what his grandfather commanded, as was his duty, Konrad had no doubt about it.

It was thus that Konrad allowed himself to feel a modicum of contentment and relief, as he finished modifying the ward on the orphanage. At last, he had completed all his missions in that horrid little country, after three unbearable years. As he prepared himself to apparate away, he hoped he would never have to set foot on British soil again.

Minutes later, Konrad's boots clicked on Nurmengard's polished stone floors as he approached his Lord's study, to give his last report regarding how matters stood in England.

Nearly reaching his destiny, he paused momentarily when he saw a uniformed young man standing guard not in front of Grindelwald's door but next to the one across the hall. The Dark Lord was visiting Anacleto Armonios' quarters, was he?

Konrad's lips flattened into a severe line. His opinion regarding the wizard was a low one, indeed – the man was a quack, as far as he was concerned. But before he could inwardly vent his displeasure, he paused to peruse the young man in front of him.

He had heard about Julian Ehrlichmann. The boy's father, after all, had a high position in the hierarchy of Grindelwald's Haupte Kommandanten. And, most importantly, Egon Ehrlichmann and those who followed his lead had always been Konrad's rivals, both of their factions fighting for power within the Dark Lord's ranks. The Ehrlichmanns and the Von Krausses had always been opponents, since time immemorial.

However, what concerned him the most was the boy's appearance. It was just as his allies within the Dark Lord's ranks had told him about. Julian looked like a young version of Albus Dumbledore; guileless, gentle, sky blue eyes, short curls of red hair which lent the boy an endearing look, soft features in a boyish and handsome face, and a noble air to his bearing.

During the three years in which Konrad had been away from Germany, he had taken particular care of visiting his allies whenever he briefly returned back to give his reports to the Dark Lord. And in those visits, his allies had warned him that Egon Ehrlichmann had shoved his son under Grindelwald's nose, clearly aware of the Dark Lord's tastes and preference in lovers and evidently wishing to gain more influence with the Dark Lord through his son.

That the boy had chosen to attend and graduate from Beauxbatons instead of Durmstrang, and that Egon doted on his son to such degree as to allow that, was already a negative mark, in Konrad's opinion. Even if Julian had graduated with top marks and had won the European Dueling Championship in his seventh year, quite an astounding feat.

That after Grindelwald took notice of the boy, the young wizard swiftly climbed through the ranks, becoming the Dark Lord's protégé and pupil, to the point that Julian was now Gellert's personal guard, was twice as worrisome.
Konrad wouldn't have cared if the Dark Lord had taken the boy as a plaything, but having him as both a lover and a trusted, close follower was another matter altogether. Mixing business with pleasure, given the high stakes, was not something Konrad viewed favorably, even less when Grindelwald's infatuation with the boy had already lasted for three years and didn't seem to be waning - that alone was already cause for concern. Gellert was one to get bored with his lovers very quickly.

All the while, as Konrad had been closely scrutinizing the boy with narrowed eyes as his mind flooded with troubled thoughts, Julian Ehrlichmann had bore it with a benevolent and patient expression on his face, not beeping a word.

This didn't escape Konrad's notice. Nevertheless, regardless of the boy's correct and polite manners towards a wizard who was his superior in rank, Konrad was in no particular mood to return the respect.

"Stand aside, boy," was Konrad's curt command.

"The Dark Lord asked not to be disturbed," Julian said softly, earnest regret flashing in his sky blue eyes, seemingly for having to bar entrance to one such as Konrad.

"He'll want to see me," retorted Konrad briskly, skewering the young man with an icy stare.

"As you wish," said the boy pleasantly, bowing low as he took a step away from the door he had been guarding.

Konrad pushed the boy out of his thoughts as he yanked the door open without bothering to knock. As he closed the door behind him, he swiftly took in the scene before him.

Gellert Grindelwald was comfortably sprawled on a winged armchair, nodding his head while a rail-thin, old wizard with a bald head and a scraggly grey beard was importantly giving a discourse, gesturing with his arms as if he was giving a speech before an enraptured audience.

"… so as you see, all my research during these years," was saying Anacleto Armonios, his thick Spanish accent mangling and butchering the German language to such degree that it made Konrad wince, while the wizard was too absorbed in his own words and brilliancy as to notice the new arrival, "has led me to believe that it is quite possible, theoretically..."

"Konrad! Impeccable timing!" welcomed him Gellert, springing to his feet with a bounce on his steps as he grabbed Konrad by the arm and led him further inside the room, looking like a giddy schoolboy who had had the most amazing day in his life.

Konrad was shot a sour look by Anacleto and he repaid it with a disdainful glance. Konrad had made it no secret that he thought him to be the most untrustworthy wizard in existence. Ever since Gellert had recruited the man, giving him fortune, and even quarters and a study in Nurmenrgard itself in which to conduct his research and experiments, Konrad had had his misgivings.

Oh, the old wizard was brilliant, of that there was no doubt. The Spanish wizard had, after all, been the inventor of the time-turner three decades ago. But it was what the wizard had done after that, which didn't set well with Konrad.

Ironically enough, it had all started with Gellert's own great-aunt, the renowned historian Bathilda Bagshot, who back then had been obsessed with finding the ancient, lost island of Atlantis – a much vaunted prize sought after by everyone of her profession.

After years of work and of speculation regarding the reason for the disappearance of the island and
the magical community which had live on it in ancient times – whether it was due to indigenous clans of dragons waging a war between themselves, or the eruption of a volcano, or even some power-hungry wizard who had caused the catastrophe– Bagshot found incontrovertible historical clues regarding the island's location.

According to her discoveries, the island had to be in the depths of the ocean, right in the middle of the Gibraltar Strait, between the two Pillars of Hercules which had stood in ancient times, one in the tip of Gibraltar, the other in the North African peak of Ceuta.

Bagshot firmly believed that the island of Atlantis had been formed from the stretch of land that had once connected both regions. And thus, all the countries that had historical claims on those territories entered the political quarrel to see who would win the rights to explore the discovery.

The contenders had been Britain, since Gibraltar was part of their empire, Morrocco that had once had Ceuta, and even Argelia and Portugal. But Spain had won the argument in the end, being Ceuta currently theirs and Gibraltar having historically belonged to them before it was seized by Britain.

It was so that the task of proving Bagshot's theories had fallen upon Spanish 'Guardadores de Secretos', the Keepers of Secrets – the 'Ohne-Zunge', or tongue-less, as they were called in Germany, or Unspeakables, as they were called in English. And back then, the Head of that Department had been Anacleto Armonios, who had led the expedition into the depths of the Atlantic Ocean.

They had found Atlantis, with its beautiful structures relatively well preserved and a large community of merpeople having made it their home.

What none had expected was that one young Unspeakable, during his exploration of the submerged island, would feel curiosity towards a large array of iridescent clams which spread all along the one side of the island the merfolk didn't go near.

Presumably, the young wizard had the idea that he would perhaps find pearls inside the clams, to thus gift to his girlfriend. But the boy found no simple pearls, but small, golden, shiny orbs, which, at his touch, dissolved and exploded into golden dust.

The records about what the young wizard experienced then, when the dust encompassed him, were never made public. What is known, is that the Spanish Unspeakables reached an agreement with the merfolk, exchanging a continual supply of the clams for trinkets and cheap baubles merpeople fancied.

What they extracted from the clams was rigorously studied and experimented with for many years, and finally termed as the 'Sands of Time'. And it was Anacleto Armonios, and the team he lead, who invented the spelled device that could contain the Sands and control its magical properties.

Thus, the time-turner was created in the Spanish Unspeakable Department. And such invention was made public when Anacleto became greedy, somehow managing to break his Unspeakable Vow of Secrecy, and fleeing from Spain, with all time-turners and the instructions for their construction. He spent a whole year creating more and selling them to the wizarding public at large, making a vast fortune.

Thankfully, Anacleto wasn't able to break the 24-hour constraint of the time-turner, but the damage was already done, with countless wizards and witches using their time-turners to change a day of their lives, wreaking havoc.

When what was happening became evident, the time-turner was banned as illegal, all wizarding
governments seized them from the hands of their citizens, and locked them up in the bowels of their Ministries, only allowing their use under authorized circumstances and after rigorously studying the petitions.

And so, Anacleto Armonios spent the following two decades of his life in hiding, fleeing from Spanish Aurors and having no choice but to spend all his ill-gotten fortune to ensure his own survival.

Until, Gellert Grindelwald snatched him.

Konrad only knew that, just a month after he had been sent to England, the Dark Lord had offered Anacleto terms the man couldn't afford to reject; protection from Aurors, an impenetrable, secret hiding place – Nurmengard Tower– and galleons enough to satisfy his greed.

Thus, Anacleto had been there for nearly three years, and still, Konrad had no idea what the Dark Lord had ordered him to do.

"Start over, Anacleto. I want Konrad to hear this."

Gellert's command yanked Konrad from his musings, and he finally took a seat on a plushy armchair, his lips thinning in distaste at the state of the office.

Anacleto's study was a mess, swamped with columns of books littering the floor, rolls of parchments on every visible table top, whizzing, thrumming artifacts which functionality was impossible to discern, puffing potions in cauldrons, and flasks with coiling glass tubes with multi-colored bubbling liquids. And most conspicuously, a tall hourglass tower occupied one corner, with golden dust nearly filling it entirely.

Anacleto simpered and sycophantically smiled at the Dark Lord, then shot a poisonous look at Konrad, and finally lifted up his wand and gestured with it as if pompously conducting the orchestra of his own voice.

"This is no longer a hypothesis, but a theory, which I have no doubt would be the Law of Time-Travelling if only I was able to prove it. But," he said, as he swished his wand upwards as if conferring more solidity to his own words, "if we altogether assume that there is no twenty-four hour constriction to the magical properties of a time-turner –" Anacleto then shot Gellert a guarded look "- and you must understand, my Lord, that this limitation is one which I see no way of eluding. However," he quickly added as he saw the Dark Lord's impatient expression, "for the sake of argument and to understand my theory, let us assume there is no temporal limitation to the use of a time-turner. Then, I can easily explain how a time-travel of any number of years into the past would work and what the consequences would be."

The former Unspeakable made a dramatic pause and peered at them, as if to lend a sense of excitement to his speech, and then continued in his snotty voice, "Then the start would be our current timeline, which I call the primal line." With his wand, Anacleto drew in the air a long, green line, its beginning and end diffused in the air, no doubt trying to convey that it was infinite. "And let us assume that this is point zero," he said as he poked his wand's tip in the middle of the green line, creating a white circle on it, "when we are right now and assuming it is the instant in which the time-traveler uses the time-turner to go back in time. His time-travelling creates the origin of the alteration of the space-time continuum."

"Listen carefully to all this," whispered Gellert, leaning towards Konrad as he shot him a wide,
crooked smirk.

Konrad faintly nodded, with the little he had heard already having a sick coil in his stomach and a daunting, ominous feeling.

"And thus," continued Anacleto, "with his time travelling into the past, he appears in point 'minus one' – a black circle appeared on the green line, far before the white one of point zero – and due to his mere presence in the past, he creates an alternate time-line, the secondary, as I call it."

Now a red line grew from the green line, starting from the point 'minus one' and shooting outwards in an angle, increasingly becoming more distant from the first line.

"As you see, the longer the time-traveler remains in the past, the greater the differences between the primal and secondary timelines. Meaning," said Anacleto, piercing them with a grave stare, "that the ripple effects of his actions in the past grow exponentially the longer he remains there, making the two lines diverge at increasingly greater distances from each other. Thus, the secondary line would be a parallel universe much different from the original one. But-" he rose an admonishing finger "– this is not stable."

Anacleto paused once again to pierce them with his gaze, and started talking in a lecturing tone, as if explaining convoluted matters to dim-witted children, as he smiled at them, "Let me give you an example which will demonstrate what I mean. What happens when a wizard uses a twenty-four hour time-turner? The secondary line is created, but since it's only twenty-four hours into the past, it's infinitesimal in the grand scheme of infinite time."

He swished his wand and the red line shortened itself until it was barely one inch long. "The directional change, the differences between the two lines, doesn't have time to be too great. And what happens when there is a mutation or aberration in nature? If it's a one-time occurrence, it gets swallowed, it changes things very little."

As the wizard said those words, the green primal line curved slightly to trace the short bit of the red line, and then shot out in the same direction it had originally. "What was changed with the time-travelling becomes what always happened, and there is no alternate universe created – no instability. This is the case of a twenty-four hour time-traveling, and the very reason why no one has been able to breach that temporal limitation."

"Now, in the case of a time-travelling of years, it represents infinite changes –" Anacleto flicked his wand and the red line was a long one once more "– aberrations, which were not meant to occur. And by nature, Time will try to correct itself, thus."

The green line started to become wobbly, curves erupting from it and touching the red line, the red line also becoming distorted as the lines started to become closer together.

"You see, there would be a pull between the timelines, so that they become one and the same, because prolonged instability is not possible. Either they join, or both disappear – that's the danger of prolonged time-travel into the past. There can be no two parallel universes co-existing, it's an impossibility. Either both are destroyed or –"

"Exactly," interjected Konrad loudly, having increasingly paled with each word the old wizard had spoken, now no longer able to contain himself, his face showing an expression of absolute horror. "That's why even a three-year-old child knows that Time must never be tampered with! It's you and your invention which are an aberration-"

"Hush, Konrad," snapped Gellert, leveling at him a harsh glance.
Anacleto, for his part, shot Konrad a smug and superior look, as he intoned, "As I was saying, either both universes are destroyed or a way is found so that only the second universe prevails, taking the place of the original, assuming this second universe is the desired one which has been purposely created with the time-traveling. And I have found the way. This was part of the task appointed to me by the Dark Lord –" he politely bowed low in Grindelwald's direction "- and I have succeeded."

"Continue, Anacleto, I am indeed pleased with you," said Gellert placidly, as he cozily stretched on his seat.

Konrad shot him a sharp glance, but evidently he was the only sane wizard present, and the only one who had any respect for the forces of nature and magic. The whole affair was madness, and he could see no outcome but utter catastrophe.

Meanwhile, Anacleto pointedly ignored him and nodded at the Dark Lord, as he swished his wand. Now the lines formed their original configuration. A white circle in the middle of the long green line, the point zero, and much before it a black circle, the point 'minus one' in the past, and from it, the red line shooting outwards.

"As we see, the parallel universes resemble each other during the first years – there is not much distance between the two lines in the beginning. No matter what the time-traveller does in the past, he changes things but not to such degree as to make the universes completely dissimilar. The differences between the universes becomes much greater throughout the years; the red line growing further apart from the green one."

The lines started twisting and becoming distorted once again, and the old wizard said, "Now, we know this situation is not stable. Thus, to correct this and prevent the disappearance of both timelines altogether, we need to make the infinite aberrations in the time-space continuum, the red line itself, a fixture."

Anacleto shot them a glance, and asked rhetorically, "How do a series of mutations become part of nature itself? When are they accepted and become stable? The answer is simple; when those aberrations are successful. This means, when the red line is 'successful', when it becomes a fixture. And for that, an anchor is needed – an anchor between the green and red lines, their common denominator, that which cannot be changed in essence, no matter how dissimilar the two universes become."

The old wizard widely smiled with supreme smugness. "I found it. It's the time-traveler himself."

He magnanimously swished his wand, making the red line curve until its end connected with the white circle on the green line, with point zero.

"The time-traveler is immutable at the origin and the end of the curve," he said as he touched one circle first and then the other. Then he traced with his finger the curve of the red line. "The curve which represents all the changes he created when he was in the past. The red line has now a beginning in point 'minus one' in the past, its curvature, and then its end in point zero. It's anchored, it's stable, that universe will be the one which prevails, because the time-traveler who created it lived for years in it, and the only point he experiences in the original timeline, in the green line, is point zero – the moment he travelled to the past. Only that point of the green line will remain."

With a flick of his wand, the section of the green line which continued past the point zero disappeared, and then the green section which went from one circle to the other started vanishing.
"The red line becomes all that remains, it takes the place in the space-time continuum of the original timeline, because the time-traveler exists in the red line and now in the point zero - which no longer only pertains to the original timeline, but now is part of the red line."

With the green line gone, all that remained was the curved red line, stretching from one point to the other. "After only this timeline remains, it will curve again from the point zero and shoot out into the future, in the same direction it followed at first."

The wizard flicked his wand, making the red line curve out from point zero and then it continued straight, in the same direction it had been angled away from the vanished green line.

"See? The red line follows the same direction as when I first drew it, before being affected by instability. Indeed, the curves it makes to reach the point zero and then continue away from it, are really infinitesimal curves, which don't affect the direction of the timeline. Meaning, the universe created by the time-traveler, in the past, naturally progresses into the future, with all the consequences and changes brought by the time-traveler's presence and actions in the past. Thus, we are left with a universe vastly different from the original one as more time passes."

Anacleto paused, gravelly staring at them. "Now, this is extremely important." With the tip of his wand he traced the red line's first curve, which went from point minus one to point zero. "This section of the timeline, which is already different from the primal one but connects with it in point zero, will be unstable since it represents all the years the time-traveler is in the past. During this time, both the green and red lines will exist and there won't be such monumental differences between them. The greater differences start when the red line shoots out into the future departing from point zero. Thus, while the time-traveler is in the past, both universes will coexist, and we'll only be out of the danger zone, there will only be stability and balance, and we can assure that only the secondary universe remains, when the red line reaches point zero – when it becomes fixed and the green line thus disappears, that original timeline –the memories and experiences it represents, the births that might not exist in the new timeline- forgotten by everyone as if it had never happened, since truly, it doesn't and now never did."

He took an intake of breath, and then continued sternly, "What does this mean in practice?" He pointed at point zero. "For the red line to pass through here, and thus became stable, it means, as I said before, that the anchor had to be unchanged in essence. The anchor is the time-traveller, hence, he must never change anything in the past which would result in him not being born, or in not making the time-travel in point zero."

Anacleto pierced them with his gaze, as he added grudgingly, as if it cost him great effort to admit it, "He must have the same parents, the same ancestors, and just as importantly, the same soul – this latter is already impossible, since nothing can control souls nor is it understood how the mechanics work when a soul is infused in a life the moment it's conceived. Whether a soul is created at that moment, or whether a rebirth of a soul is what happens, is unknown, and thus, uncontrollable. Also, the time-traveler cannot continue existing after he is born, since if not there would be two of them and that cannot be sustained for long and it might bring as a consequence the destruction of the universes."

The former Unspeakable sighed. "And those are precisely the snags." He gestured widely at the red line floating in mid air. "All of this is possible and correct in theory, but in practice, it simply cannot be done."

Gellert suddenly let out a chortle, and then clapped cheerfully as he rose from his seat. "I congratulate you, Anacleto, you have indeed made a most ground-breaking discovery."

The thin, old wizard stared at him with perplexity, then he squirmed and said hesitantly, "Perhaps I
didn't explain matters clearly, it is not possib-

"I do believe it is," retorted Gellert contently, shooting him a crooked grin. "All of those problems are easily solved. The time-traveler cannot live for long after his baby self is born, and not only that, he must die even before then, because the time-traveler possesses the soul that should be in the baby when it's conceived, since if not, he would be a different person altogether." His twisted grin widened as he added, "Thus, the time-traveler must simply be killed beforehand."

Anacleto blinked at him repeatedly, before he mumbled chopply, "Yes, but there's still the matter of the soul being infused in the conceived life."

"Which can be done with a magical artifact I know of -since it does exactly that, control and manipulate souls- and which I will have in my possession so that it can be used for that very purpose," interrupted Gellert placidly. When he saw Anacleto open his mouth, he brought up a hand, and continued pleasantly, "Regarding the ancestors and parents, why, it's simple. There must be a third party who is aware of the time-travelling and who will watch and influence matters to make sure that the time-traveler's parents and grandparents are precisely who they were. That third party is, of course, me."

The former Unspeakable stared at him uncomprehendingly, and Gellert let out a crow of laughter as he patted the man on the back. "Don't you see, Anacleto? The perfect time-traveler is one who doesn't know he's a time-traveler at all." A crooked smirk stretched on his handsome face. "A baby, Anacleto." He then gestured at the floating red line and its points. "Point zero will be after the time-traveler is killed and over one year later after the baby self is born."

"But then," said Anacleto slowly, a perturbed frown on his wrinkled face, "he will merely be a tool, to change the timeline and then be sacrificed and killed." He shot the Dark Lord a piercing glance. "You understand that if the time-traveler is killed, that is the end of his life. The baby will go through the same, he will not have a different life."

"I understand that perfectly," said Gellert, his hawk-like eyes gleaming with satisfaction. The old Unspeakable shifted uneasily on his feet, and finally muttered with an apprehensive tone of voice, "There's still the matter of the time-turner. I have not been able to break the twenty-four hour limit."

Gellert scoffed and then shook his head disparagingly. Shooting the old wizard a crooked smirk, he flicked his wand and conjured a pile of beach sand on the palm of his hand. In the next instant, he flung it at Anacleto.

The old man wheezed and sputtered, taken aback, while Gellert intoned, "It's as simple as that, my friend."

Looking like a drowned cat, Anacleto started dusting off the sand from his frilly robes, before he stared at the Dark Lord and grumbled, "If you mean to imply that the Sands of Time should be directly applied to the subject who is to time-travel..."

He trailed off and shook his head with dismay and trepidation, flecks of sand flying from his scraggly beard. "No one has dared to touch the Sands directly. Torres, the young Unspeakable who discovered the clams in Atlantis, simply - 'puff!'" He demonstrated gesturing with his hands. "He disappeared, never to be seen or found again. We only had an inkling of what happened because his partner was there, several feet away from him. There is no knowing what the Sands will do to a wizard, and even less a baby. It could affect his magical core, it could-"
"I KNOW it will work," interrupted Gellert sternly, now looking impatient and irritated. "Regardless, it's your task to discover how it will affect the baby, if at all, and take measures to prevent any serious harm to him. And of course, you have to create a spell which will control the properties of the Sands of Time, to make the baby travel precisely fifty-three years into the past." Imparting those new orders and information, he then waved a hand and added magnanimously, "I grant you permission to make use of any of my prisoners in the dungeons as test-subjects."

Then he nonchalantly turned around and commanded briskly, "Come, Konrad. We're done here and we have much to discuss."

A mute and pale-faced Konrad followed the Dark Lord towards the door, but then Gellert paused to glance over his shoulder at Anacleto, who was by then nervously dabbing his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief.

"Oh," said Gellert to the former Unspeakable as an afterthought, "the spell must be wandless and nonverbal. There will be one witness, in particular, who will see what I do and he must never know what magic I used." Seeing the old man's dismayed expression, Gellert's lips quirked upwards. "Don't look so miserable, Anacleto, you have forty-three years to accomplish it, or what remains of your life if you die of old age before then."

And with that, the Dark Lord and his Right-Hand left a shaky old wizard behind.
Part II: Chapter 1

The world has much changed, mused a twenty-six year old Narcissa Malfoy as she stared at herself on the large, full-body gilded mirror in her boudoir.

Ascertaining that her personal house-elf had impeccably groomed her, the dress she wore seeming like a mantle of water wrapping along her slender body and the necklace of marquise-cut, blue topazes matching her icy beauty, she then turned her mind towards the ceremony that would take place in a few moments – the Naming Ceremony for her second son, the three-weeks-old Antares Harrison Malfoy.

Narcissa made a moue of distaste at what would soon be her son's middle name. It had been the subject of many arguments between her and Lucius.

She had the right to decide on the first name, following Black tradition by choosing from names of stars or constellations, but she had expected that tradition would also be followed by giving Antares his father's name as a middle one, as had been done with Draco. Instead, Lucius had informed her that the Dark Lord had already chosen 'Harrison'.

"Harrison," she had repeated, slightly narrowing her eyes at Lucius to convey her deep dissatisfaction, "a muggle surname? Why not Harry, to add insult to injury? It is just as mundane, despicable and muggle-like, but it is at least a first name."

Her voice had been laced with just the precise amount of stinging sarcasm, to let him know she wouldn't relent in her opposition, but what she hadn't expected was for Lucius to shoot her a sharp glance, gauging and piercing.

That had given her pause, wondering why the jibe would rattle him, why he seemed apprehensive and suspicious. Furthermore, Lucius had then swiftly informed her that the Dark Lord had decided to be Antares' godfather and as such, the choosing of a middle name lay with him.

Narcissa had remained silent at that, as Lucius expressed what a great honor was being bestowed upon them, by having the Dark Lord as the godfather of one of their sons. She couldn't dispute that, but the sheer strangeness of it added to her mounting wariness.

It was not only the fact that if the Dark Lord wanted to express his pleased satisfaction with Lucius he should have chosen Draco as the godson, the firstborn, and thus per tradition the one who
should be the recipient of such gesture, but also that Lucius was so clearly distancing himself from his second son by not giving Antares his name.

She had further noticed that Lucius didn't visit the nursery at night, to gaze at his newborn son with pride and affection, as he had covertly done with Draco when he thought no one was watching.

No, Lucius was simply satisfied with Antares' birth, but evidently taking every measure to not become attached. It worried her still, making her wonder at the cause.

At first, she had thought that it could be due to the practical matter that having two sons would mean the division of the Malfoy fortune and estates between the two heirs. The Malfoys were known to have the strict rule of only having one heir precisely to avoid such problem. In the past, it was common to kill the first born females to give way to the birth of a male heir, or to simply kill at birth the spare male child who had been begotten unintentionally.

Lucius always seemed proud that his family had showed such ruthlessness, which had allowed the Malfoys to amass such a great fortune by only having one heir per generation. Meanwhile, Narcissa had always inwardly boasted that the Blacks had no need of that, their original fortune being so great that it had allowed them to have not only two branches of the family since time immemorial but also to have no need to curtail their progeny, the Black fortune seamlessly divided among all without causing squabbles.

But she had soon discovered that Lucius had no intention of dividing the Malfoy fortune; all would go to Draco, and Antares would only be given a generous, lifelong allowance.

It was not enough, in her view; no son of hers would be thought a pauper by comparison. However, Narcissa knew not to fight a lost battle and was already planning what could be done for Antares. Her objective was to gain for him all the Black estates and fortune.

One of her Black cousins, Sirius, had been disowned since the man was a teen, and Regulus had mysteriously disappeared nearly a year ago. That only left who was now the Patriarch of Black House, the only surviving Black of his generation: doddering, old Alphard Black, who had long ago become a recluse in Grimmauld Place.

If only old Alphard was dead, as he was by now in her Old Past, it would be much simpler. Nevertheless, Narcissa knew what to do; when Antares was older, she would start paying visits to her Uncle Alphard, taking Antares along with her, and subtly manipulating matters so that an attachment was formed between old man and boy, so that Alphard would ultimately name Antares his heir.

Alphard Black had always been a sentimental fool, according to what her father had once said regarding his brother, thus Narcissa only needed to be patient.

Narcissa flicked her wand and added a dangling curl of blond hair to her hairdo, and finally satisfied with her appearance, she picked up the trail of her dress and with an elegant, fluid motion, left her lavish, tasteful bedroom.

As she reached the grand stairwell, which led to the ground floor of Malfoy Manor -the sounds of the chattering of guests, the clinking of goblets and the soft, melodic, background music reaching her ears- she met Lucius by the balustrade and placed her hand on the arm he solicitously offered.

Lucius’ eyes swept along her with approval and then they silently descended; not a word spoken between them, since as usual they left their conversations for private moments. Foremost, in public, they presented a joined front.
There was no deep, passionate love between them, but rather companionship, mutual support as they both dexterously danced the political spheres, displaying a match in dispositions, breeding and social skills, and even trust – trust that they would both do what was best for their family, even when they had slightly differing opinions on what that entailed. But such arguments and plots were left for when they were alone.

And thus they were received by their guests, those most attached to the Malfoys either by blood or political and business connections: the Greengrasses, the Goyles and Crabbes, the Parkinsons, Jezebel Zabini and her fifth new husband with their baby son, the Carrows and Averys, the Notts and Puceys, the Flints, and such, and of course, the Lestranges - Bellatrix with her husband Rabastan, and Andromeda, Rodolphus and their baby boy, Lorcan.

As Narcissa swept her gaze along the congregated guests, she inevitably reminisced about the day it had all changed, turning her world upside down. It had been October 31st, 1981; nearly ten months ago.

The Dark Lord Voldemort had left to pay a visit to the Potters, to kill them all for some mysterious reason of his own. The Grey Wizard, as the unknown man was called since he always appeared in public in a hooded grey cloak, which shrouded his face, was nowhere to be seen.

Up until then she had known nothing regarding the man except what she had learned through her husband’s chilly words when he vented his frustrations; how the Grey Wizard had simply appeared one day a few months ago, demanding to see the Dark Lord, how after that first meeting behind closed doors he had been a frequent guest, and how most of the Death Eaters grumbled about it.

Regardless, it had been that very night of All Hallows Eve, a few moments past midnight, when the Death Eaters had felt their Dark Marks burning, alerting them that something had happened to their Lord after going to the Potter’s, the very night Lucius had found that the wards had dropped around the pensieve his father had so long ago left him -along with the grimoire and instructions of precisely when to use the ritual- and when Lucius had plunged into the pensieve and told her nothing of what he had found out. After which, Lucius had swiftly gathered the Crabbes, Goyles, Parkinsons, and the Lestranges and convinced them to undergo the ritual as they waited for the Dark Lord's return.

Then a Death Eater had suddenly burst into Malfoy Manor, relaying the news that the Potter's home was in shambles, nothing left but the corpses of James and Lily Potter, the Dark Lord’s wand lying on ashes – presumably all that was left of him - and with the Potter’s baby gone.

For some reason, it seemed that that had been precisely what Lucius had been waiting for.

The Lestranges, Bellatrix and Barty Crouch Jr. were in a raging frenzy, disbelieving the news of the demise of their Lord and with every intention of going to the Longbottoms, to torture them for information, since it was known that Lord Voldemort had planned on killing them after being done with the Potters.

In a drastic action which had surprised Narcissa, Lucius had ordered them to stay put and then had swiftly locked down the wards on Malfoy Manor, preventing anyone from leaving, clearly having no time to waste in trying to get through the Lestranges and Bellatrix.

Then he had apparated away and had left Narcissa to deal with her enraged sister.

Many long hours had passed, night turning to day as she awaited for Lucius' return, when by evening time, it had happened: she had had the fleeting sensation that the very earth shook, and then memories she had never before experienced had flooded into her mind, making her gasp and
clench her eyes shut at the avalanche, at the surplus of information which warred with other set of memories, fluidly and painlessly, yet leaving her dazed and disoriented.

Some of those recollections were the exact same, others not, yet her two sets of memories seemed to fuse together precisely then. It still perplexed and confused her.

All the while, those Death Eaters and followers who hadn't been chosen by Lucius to undergo the ritual had shrieked and screamed, falling to their knees, their expressions one of agony as if their minds were being torn apart. And then, as two Death Eaters had vanished into thin air, as if they had never existed, there had been silence.

Those Death Eaters for which the change had been painful, had blinked, standing up and puzzling about why they had been on the floor, remembering nothing of what had happened. They didn't have two pasts, only one; the new.

And then Narcissa had seen her sister Andromeda standing there, out of the blue, so changed for the worse, and with a baby boy in her arms which appeared to be several months younger than Draco.

Andromeda had carefully plopped the child into Rodolphus' arms, with all the naturalness in the world and as if it was something she frequently did. Though she hadn't shown an ounce of affection for the man.

Meanwhile, Rodolphus had stared at her and then at Bellatrix and back, looking dazed and blinking quickly. Finally, he had automatically wrapped his arms around the baby boy and simply stood rooted in place, looking as if a rush of tumultuous thoughts were spinning in his mind and he didn't quite know what to make of it all.

All the while Bellatrix had begun shrieking with crowing laughter, with giggles interspersed here and there, as she raised her arms into the air and madly spun around, whilst Rabastan fixedly stared at her with wide eyes and a paling face.

As Narcissa had finally allowed the new set of her memories to encompass her mind, she had begun to faintly understand the scene before her. Though with Bellatrix it was impossible to know what was going through her mind; whether the witch's celebration was due to the fact that she had now a new, younger husband or if it was because the Dark Lord-

Narcissa had frowned at that aborted thought, feeling hazily and increasingly confused. She hadn't had the time to order her thoughts or recollections since Lucius had then abruptly apparated back, uncharacteristically stumbling and looking vastly disoriented.

She had instantly gone to him, taking Lucius by the arm as she steered him to take a seat. All the while, she had taken particular notice of the things he was muttering under his breath, as if to himself.

"...the half-giant oaf and Dumbledore recognized him from the past... it's like Father had said... the two lines converged right then, it was the point of origin... I think it worked, it must have worked..."

Narcissa hadn't been able to understand her husband's mumblings – lines and origins? - and her temper had flared, since she had still felt confused and uneasy regarding the two sets of memories she possessed.

"Lucius, do me the courtesy of explaining matters to me," she had whispered sharply, "or I will
scream."

Lucius had snapped his head up at that, staring at her and gauging the seriousness of her threat, to then quietly hiss through his teeth, "You would not dare."

Narcissa had arched a delicate eyebrow at him, challenging. In the next second, though, she had relented. No, she wouldn't, she hadn't been about to make a scene in public; she had better breeding than that.

Thus, she had simply sat down next to him and turned her face around to gaze at him with a cold look. "Well?"

"All you need to know is –"

"All I need to know?" she had interjected testily, her expression chilling as her tone of voice slightly rose.

Lucius had shot her a look of warning. "Cissy, please."

She had skewered him with her gaze and then quietly cleared her throat. "Pardon me."

Her husband had nodded, accepting her apology, and Narcissa had simply waited, her spine straight, her beautiful face impassive.

Lucius then had seemingly ordered his own thoughts, decided what she should know, and had grabbed her hands, as he whispered adamantly, "Listen, Cissy, our life up until now – that's our old past. The new memories we now have, of a different life, that's our new past – it's the only past that matters. It is, from now on, our true past. Forget the old and embrace the new. Now things are for the better, because they were made to be better. And right now we only have one present and will only have one future. Do you understand?"

"I do not," she had answered coldly, piercing him with her gaze, demanding she would be told the full extent of it.

Lucius had made a noise of vexation, but Narcissa hadn't had the chance to press him for more information, since at that instant three wizards had apparated before the congregated Death Eaters: the Grey Wizard, Abraxas Malfoy, and the Dark Lord.

Seeing the latter two had been like a spine-chilling shock to Narcissa. There, was Abraxas Malfoy, alive, looking to be in his thirties, as if he was Lucius' brother and not his father. And the Dark Lord, so different from the one she had known from her Old Past, no longer with a pasty, pale face with features which lacked definition, no longer with slitted pupils like that of a serpent's, the irises now dark blue which only turned that fearsome shade of crimson when the wizard displayed powerful dark magic or when his temper took a hold of him. His features were now regal and handsome, his hair a silky, wavy black, and his appearance that of a thirty-year-old young man in his prime.

He was Lord Slytherin, her mind supplied, from the new set of memories she now possessed. Marvolo Slytherin.

Narcissa had forced her mind to quiet down, not deigning the moment to be appropriate for inward perusals. Instead, she had smoothly stood up while Lucius had met Abraxas in a tight embrace, both men strongly patting each other on the back, like father and son at long last reunited.
Of course, for the rest of the Death Eaters nothing seemed strange; they only remembered the New Past. Indeed, they had received the three wizards with the usual acclaim and nothing else.

Only the Crabbes, Goyles, and Parkinsons were whispering among themselves, undoubtedly attempting to match the Abraxas Malfoy who had died from dragon pox so long ago, in their Old Past, with the Abraxas Malfoy they saw before them. And indubitably, they were trying to match the Dark Lord from their Old Past, Lord Voldemort, with the one of their New Past, Lord Slytherin.

Narcissa had swept by the tight little group that those families had formed and had heard their speculations; ‘… the Dark Lord is much more powerful now, and he must be immortal, and what had Abraxas Malfoy done to remain so young? – the Dark Lord must have conferred to him immortality and eternal youth, somehow…’

The other family who had undergone the ritual from Abraxas' grimoire was the Lestranges of course, but Narcissa had seen that they had all been too occupied with their own problems to pay much attention to anything else.

Rodolphus had still looked shocked at having found himself with Andromeda for a wife and with a son to boot, while Rabastan had seemed to want to scream and protest for having found himself saddled with Bellatrix for a wife. And Bellatrix…

Narcissa had sighed. Well, Bellatrix hadn't appeared to have had any problems in adjusting to her new situation. She had been by then clinging to the Dark Lord, worshipfully gazing up at him. If Bellatrix had fanatically adored the Dark Lord before, when he was Lord Voldemort, now that he was the handsome Lord Slytherin for all the more reason.

Finally, after making sure that all her guests had been properly attended to, Narcissa had slipped away to the library for a moment of peace in which she could make head and tails of the situation. She had chosen her favorite chaise longue and had rested her eyes as she plunged into her two sets of memories.

The immediate differences between New and Old Past were simple to detect: Andromeda's and Bellatrix's marriages, Regulus disappearing instead of Gringotts' goblins notifying her that he was declared dead as had happened in the Old Past, Alphard Black still living, and most importantly, the Grey Wizard, Abraxas Malfoy and the Dark Lord.

The Grey Wizard's case was peculiar; it had confused her. They were the same in both her New and Old Past. She still had never seen the wizard's face, always hooded, but the man looked to be hunched under his robe, in both Pasts. The only difference was that in the New Past, the Grey Wizard had been by Lord Slytherin's side since the seventies, when Lord Slytherin had made himself the Dark Lord. In the Old Past, however, the Grey Wizard had simply appeared out of the blue, and had just been visiting Lord Voldemort during a few months before the Dark Lord had gone to kill the Potters.

Regarding the Dark Lord himself, from her New Past she remembered when she had been a girl and her mother, Druella Rosier, had gushed and praised the handsome and brilliant Marvolo Slytherin from her schooldays, who had formed the Knights of Walpurgis who would later become the Death Eaters. Druella had also said something about a boy she had detested, Marvolo Slytherin's twin.

Narcissa had frowned at that, since nowhere in her New Past did she find anything relating to that mysterious twin of the Dark Lord, but she soon discarded it as inconsequential. The boy must have died from some illness or some such thing and it didn't affect her anyway.
Furthermore, from her New Past Narcissa remembered her own schooldays during the seventies when the first rumors about a Dark Lord had started to spread among dark pureblood circles. When she had become engaged to Lucius she had even met him in person and had been struck by Lord Slytherin's handsome and cunning, charming manners. Nevertheless, the dark power the wizard exuded had always been frightening as well as awe-inspiring.

Indeed, comparing the Dark Lords from her Old and New Past, besides the differences in appearance, there were also differences in their personalities. She had always thought Lord Voldemort to be dangerously unbalanced, but Lord Slytherin was quite another matter. He was fierce and fear-inspiring, surely, but also suave and highly skilled in smooth, subtle manipulations.

Perhaps that Lord Slytherin wasn't savagely deranged as when he had been Lord Voldemort could explain why the wizard felt much more powerful. Lord Voldemort had been incredibly powerful, of course, but not to such a flabbergasting degree that left everyone breathless when in his presence for long as happened with Lord Slytherin.

Of course, Abraxas was also added to the mix. Lucius' father was the right-hand of Lord Slytherin, Narcissa saw from her set of memories of her New Past.

It hadn't happened like in the Old Past, when Abraxas had sole-handedly raised Lucius since the man's wife, Kasimira von Krauss, had never taken any great interest and had died when Lucius had been a child. Back then, Abraxas had been a Death Eater but hadn't been too deeply involved, rather more occupied with his businesses and with strictly raising his heir, to ultimately die from dragon pox when Lucius had been eighteen years old.

On the other hand, Narcissa saw that in the New Past it had been Kasimira who had raised Lucius. Abraxas had only been popping in and out of Lucius' life. Later it was known that he had been spending all those years with Lord Slytherin, in travels, apparently. Indeed, Abraxas had only returned to England, to stay, in the seventies, when Lord Slytherin had begun to make a name for himself as a Dark Lord. With Abraxas back in England to take the reins of Malfoy business and to take care of his son, Kasimira had then left to lead her own life as she pleased. She was still alive, living in Argentina or some such place, apparently.

Regardless, what mattered to Narcissa was that she and Kasimira didn't seem stand each other, from the few times they had met before the woman had left England, in the New Past.

Other than that, and that she saw that there were some people who didn't exist and some other new ones who did, comparing Old and New Past, there wasn't that great deal of a difference.

Even that day had been very similar in the New Past; Lord Slytherin had gone to kill the Potters at midnight of All Hallows Eve, reason still unknown, though the Grey Wizard had accompanied him—instead of being missing like in the Old Past—along with Abraxas. All the while the Death Eaters had gathered at Malfoy Manor to await, and Lucius had taken the Crabbes, Goyles, Parkinsons and Lestranges—without Andromeda—along with her, and had conducted the ritual.

The same ritual with the same families as in the Old Past, and also with them being none the wiser of why it was needed and what it did, exactly. Though in this instance they all knew that the Dark Lord approved it. In the Old Past, Narcissa didn't think Lord Voldemort had known about it.

On another note, the only thing that stood out was that even though the Wizarding War of the 40s was lost in basically the same way, Gellert Grindelwald had simply disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again, instead of having been defeated by Albus Dumbledore and then imprisoned in Nurmengard.
But again, she had deemed that that hardly affected her, so she had dismissed it. Oh, how foolish she had been.

Having done that little analysis, which had helped her to ease her mind from the conflicting set of memories, Narcissa had then left the library, to find the Death Eaters and other followers celebrating in the ballroom.

The Dark Lord Slytherin had been giving a speech regarding his plans for the future; "… now at last, real changes will come," he had said.

And during the grand celebration that followed, Narcissa had been given a gift.

"We can have a second child, Cissy," Lucius had told her as he pulled her to a side in the midst of the gathering. "The Dark Lord insists upon it, he is granting us a great favor in payment for my service and loyalty."

Narcissa had stared back at him, speechless yet also wary and suspicious. Her husband had never wished for another child and the healers had warned her, after Draco's birth, that attempting a second pregnancy would be extremely dangerous for her health.

However, if the Dark Lord had a way to heal her womb, as was evidently implied, and even if he did it only to have another Malfoy to add to his ranks in the future, she had been willing to pay the price.

It hadn't been out of maternal, loving and sentimental wishes of having another baby. No, it had been more raw and primal than that; it was a desire to have another life which would be flesh of her flesh and blood of her blood, another Black that wouldn't be the Malfoy heir but, rather, completely hers.

And yet, what had followed after she had accepted, she hadn't anticipated. Abraxas had a whole wing of Malfoy Manor for himself, as expected since he had lived there in the New Past, but the Dark Lord, as well, had installed himself in the best guest room after that night of celebration in which Narcissa and Lucius had conceived their second child.

It had been then when her misgivings and apprehensions had begun.

It started the following day after the celebration, when the Dark Lord had cast a spell to ascertain that she had a new life growing in her womb, and when the Dark Lord had given her a present – a hideous golden locket with an incrusted emerald upon which lay a silver serpent in the shape of an 'S', evidently a Slytherin heirloom.

She would have felt honored by the priceless gift, but she grew to be wary of it due to what it made her feel: not the potent dark magic that emanated from it, but the stirring of something within, as if frantically wishing to escape.

During all those months of pregnancy in which she had wore it, she had experienced several nights in which she had been abruptly awoken, dazedly thinking she had heard a desperate wail from within the depths of the locket. Try as she might, she hadn't been able to open it, but still the sensation had remained that there was something there that frenziedly cried for release from its prison.

The Dark Lord had become a fixture in the Manor in the following months of her pregnancy, allowing no healers to attend to her but only Severus Snape and himself.

Furthermore, Lord Slytherin had constantly laid a hand on her bulging and growing belly, without
bothering to ask for permission but rather intent and concentrated in his actions, making Narcissa feel streams of dark magic flowing from the wizard's palm to be infused into the life she carried. She hadn't said a word but she had wondered with concern about the cause for the Dark Lord's wish for such transfer.

The Dark Lord gave nothing for free, and never his own magic, so why? And why such an interest in a second son of the Malfoy House? She still didn't know, and even though it was a further honor to have the Dark Lord as her son's godfather, it didn't bode well regarding what the Dark Lord would demand in the future.

Furthermore, most peculiar of all, Abraxas didn't take any interest in her pregnancy. He even seemed to avoid her during those months, as if something about it was unbearable and painful to him. Quite in contrast with how content and proud he had been when Draco was begotten and born in her New Past, which was the past of the life she led now.

Narcissa pulled away from her musings and regarded the guests present for Antares' Naming Ceremony.

As usually happened when Narcissa laid eyes upon her elder sister, she felt a twinge of regret but which passed swiftly as she suppressed it. Yes, Andromeda had changed much compared to how she had been in her Old Past. There was no happiness in Andromeda's eyes: they were dull, her expression hard, bitter and beaten down.

Nevertheless, Narcissa rather have a sister properly married and occupying her rightful social standing, than an estranged one who had turned her back to heritage and blood, betraying all to follow a selfish whim of love for a mudblood.

Narcissa still remembered that memory of her Old Past, when she had once seen Andromeda meandering in Diagon Alley with a six-year-old girl whose hair continually changed from pink to purple. Their gazes had met then, very briefly, and Narcissa had seen the happiness in Andromeda's eyes, the love and pride she held for her small daughter. It had been fleeting, and Narcissa had coldly and indifferently turned her gaze away from the elder sister she had once loved so deeply and whom she felt had betrayed her when abandoning her family.

Now, as Narcissa saw it, Andromeda's happiness and her daughter had been swapped for a proper marriage and a boy, a Lestrange heir. She had her sister back, in a situation in which they could be close, and it was a fair price. And better yet, Andromeda didn't know what she had lost and thus wouldn't suffer for it.

With Lucius by her, Narcissa at last took her place before the marble plinth in which her son Antares laid wrapped in a black, silk blanket, with Hetty, the nursemaid house-elf, nervously fidgeting as she made sure the baby wouldn't move too much and tumble down. Bellatrix, Abraxas, the Dark Lord and the Grey Wizard were by her side at the forefront of the gathering.

Indeed, the 'Grey Wizard'. Still no one knew who he was yet rumors and speculations ran amok. However, Narcissa knew; she remembered. Yet she had to repress a chilly shudder and drive away the memory of when she had given birth to Antares and seen the man's face.

Nevertheless, she was quite certain Lucius knew the man's identity by now and she had no doubt that the Dark Lord would soon reveal it – it would only add to his political clout and to his following.

She observed the Dark Lord's expression as the wizard stared down at Antares, and the possessive, satisfied and smug look on the man's handsome face - something in it - chilled her to the bone.
Moreover, it still marveled her that all knew about the Dark Lord's blood status as a halfblood, so unlike her Old Past where the wizard had been a mystery and the name Lord Voldemort wasn't uttered even in a whisper since it instilled abject fear.

Now the name Voldemort had never existed and it was known that Marvolo Slytherin was a halfblood, and yet none of the purebloods cared, not when the wizard's power and dark magic thrummed and vibrated around him so potently and enticingly.

Nevertheless, she reminded herself, still many mysteries regarding the Dark Lord remained. Foremost, what the wizard had been doing all those years when he and Abraxas were missing, and what the Dark Lord had done to make them have two sets of memories.

At first, the most obvious answer that had come to her mind was that the powerful wizard had changed the past.

Lord Voldemort had been waging a years-long war up until the moment he went to kill the Potters for whatever reason, and yet the Dark Lord's attempts to have wizarding Britain under his rule had been unsuccessful. Many raids and attacks and political plots had been carried, but admitting it bluntly, the wizard had been failing.

Thus, it could lead to believe that the Dark Lord had taken a desperate and risky measure of changing the past, which had borne Lord Slytherin.

However, Narcissa had covertly researched the matter -careful that Lucius wouldn't discover her pursuit- and everything she had read had made it clear that changing the past wasn't possible and that time-travelling was a very risky business that not even a Dark Lord would be crazed enough to attempt.

Furthermore, if the wizard had somehow time-travelled by mysterious means --since from what she had read, the 24-hour standard time-turner didn't allow the user to truly change anything -- then why hadn't the Dark Lord changed the past so that he had already conquered as much of the wizarding world as possible?

As far as she could see, nothing significant had been changed up until the day when the Potters had been killed.

Up until then, her Old and New Past were very similar in the grand scheme of things: the political regimes were the same in the wizarding world, Britain still had a Ministry of Magic controlled by light wizards, and the Dark Lord, both Lord Voldemort in the Old Past and Lord Slytherin in the New Past, had still been uselessly waging a war – the exact same raids and attacks, eerily enough, only that Lord Slytherin seemed to have always expected the failures, his punishments bland, as if he was just going through the motions.

The true changes had come after the Dark Lord, Lord Slytherin, had returned to Malfoy Manor after killing the Potters, with Abraxas and the Grey Wizard in tow.

It was from then on when Britain's wizarding world had been turned upside down, as if the Dark Lord had had a renewed surge of vitality, power, and brilliancy - or as if he had been long waiting to finally put his true plans into action. It was most peculiar.

Failed and pointless raids were no longer conducted, the man's very strategy had been drastically changed, and a swift coup d'état had been efficiently managed from within the very Ministry of Magic. So quickly, so suddenly, that no one had had time to blink or even do anything against it before it was a fait accompli.
And more perplexing of all, the one wizard whom Narcissa had expected to attempt to fight against it had simply vanished. Indeed, Albus Dumbledore had fled, of all unexpected and uncharacteristical things, from Britain, along with several light wizarding families like the Weasleys, the Bones, and the Longbottoms.

Their names were now infamous, the 'Wanted' as they were listed as, and none knew their whereabouts. Though the Dark Lord didn't seem particularly interested in finding them nor worried about what Albus Dumbledore could be doing and plotting.

Those purebloods, even the light-oriented, which remained had simply embraced the change of political regime in the Ministry of Magic with calmness, clearly waiting to see if it would serve their interests. Indeed, she had even expected that her estranged cousin, Sirius Black, would have trailed after Dumbledore, given that the man's friends, the Potters, were dead and since he was close to the Longbottoms. And yet she had heard that Sirius was out and about, lingering in England.

The rest - the halfbloods and mudbloods - seemed to be either too afraid or simply resigned, knowing they didn't have the power to form a serious opposition, not with Albus Dumbledore gone. Furthermore, they still didn't have any great cause for concern.

The Dark Lord had implemented, through his control over the Ministry, subtle and slow changes, evidently being careful to not raise alarm among the populace. There was still a Ministry of Magic after all, still the illusion of a democracy and not the dictatorship of a Dark Lord.

Indeed, in the face of the public, the one who dictated policy was Lucius himself, the Minister who had been elected by the Wizengamot, indisputably, openly and 'legally'.

Though Narcissa still wondered what price the Dark Lord had demanded from Lucius in exchange for such an exalted position. The fact that Lucius had been informed of his new career the very day the Dark Lord detected she was pregnant with Antares made her suspect, and already was she plotting how to avoid or confront the worst.

All of it had happened during her pregnancy, added to the changes at Hogwarts through the appointment of Severus Snape as Headmaster and the Carrows as professors for the new Dark Arts class, along with several other adjustments.

Narcissa knew well that the most drastic changes would come in the months to follow, subtly and step by step, with wise patience since that seemed to be the Dark Lord's new strategy.

She had an inkling of who could have influenced the wizard's modus operandi. It could have only been the Grey Wizard, given what she knew of him, and she could only wonder for how long the latter had mentored the former and what further plans they had up their sleeves.

That the Dark Lord would soon be plotting to take over the rest of Europe was evident given the wizard's latest speeches to his followers; that it would be done as sagely as the coup in Britain was also clear. That perhaps some country would rebel and would wage a war was also possible. But Narcissa no longer feared the risk it represented to her family, not as she would have if the Dark Lord had been Lord Voldemort instead of Lord Slytherin.

And yet, she still wondered why the Dark Lord had waited so long - why until then.

The discreet clearing of a throat made her abruptly pull away from her thoughts, and Narcissa shot Lucius a glance, understanding dawning on her when she then caught sight of the expectant guests.
Remembering her duty, she smoothly turned her head to a side as she bowed and softly spoke with the just amount of deference and politeness, "May we begin, My Lord?"

With Lord Slytherin's terse agreement, the Naming Ritual commenced. And as since she had no great part in it, she allowed her mind to wander once more, while father, godfather, and the godmother she had chosen –her sister Bellatrix– conducted the proceedings and intoned the name-bestowing enchantment that would ensure Antares a place in the Malfoy and Black family records and tree-lines.

Indeed, as she silently gazed down at her three-weeks-old baby, she was struck, briefly, by the spine-chilling fear she had felt the day she had given birth to Antares.

The experience had been horrible, terrifying and traumatic, and it still shook her to the very bones when she remembered it.

However, all doubts vanished from her mind when, as she observed her son, Antares' eyes, which looked so huge and endearing in his tiny face, abruptly changed to a silvery blue as he gazed up at his father and gurgled, his locks of wavy black with some curls here and there transforming to a tuft of platinum blond hair.

She even saw Lucius' lips quirking upwards at Antares' unwitting imitation of his father's looks, and a strong thought reverberated in her mind as she gazed back at her son: he's mine, there's no doubt about it, no matter what they did to him.

A surge of fierce pride swelled up within her as Antares' coloring changed once again. A Black through and through, a Metamorphagi at that; the greater and most powerful display of his Black ancestry that could be had, and what an honor and merit it was to have a son with such a blood trait present in him.

While Draco looked more like Lucius with every passing day, Antares was clearly all her. The shape of Antares' features didn't change yet, he was by far too young to modify such with his Metamorphagus ability, unwittingly or not, but Narcissa was content with it since it gave her ample opportunity to see how much he resembled her; her refined and delicate features in a tiny, boyish face.

He would be stunning.

Draco was Lucius', the heir to be molded by his father as he pleased, to be strictly taught how to be the future Patriarch of Malfoy House, and Narcissa would simply limit herself to temper Lucius' lessons with subvert, subtle and brief coddling, to give Draco some slight measure of a carefree childhood. But Antares would be different.

Lucius had chosen to not stake a claim on him, implicitly, by inaction, but she had made it clear that she had.

The spare son, the superfluous Malfoy child who would receive no Malfoy vault or estate, would be a Black, all hers, through and through. Hers to pass unto him the Black legacy and all teachings, hers to ensure a way for him to receive all Black vaults and estates, hers to shape and raise without Lucius' interference.

At last the ceremony came to an end, followed by the congratulations of their guests and even by Bellatrix cooing at Antares, raking a sharp nail along one small, round cheek, causing the baby to wail in complaint, though Bellatrix seemed to find it vastly amusing as she let out a crowing giggle and said in a pleased singsong, "Little, bitty, tiny Black - Black, Black, Black."
Narcissa simply allowed her sister to have her fun until she detected that Antares was quickly getting moodier and increasingly fussy.

Shooting a cold look at Bellatrix for what the witch had caused—with Bellatrix answering back with a nasty, smug smirk and another crow of laughter—she sharply ordered Hetty the house-elf to take the baby back to his nursery. And with a swift round of making her excuses to her guests with promises of returning shortly, she soon followed after.

As she crossed the Manor with an elegant fluidity of motion, she caught sight of a figure following at her same pace, but not along the corridors as her, but through walls and doors.

Narcissa didn't falter in her steps, though her jaw clenched momentarily and her hand automatically made a move to reach her wand—she forestalled that action and simply continued, keeping track of the figure from the corner of her eyes.

As soon as she reached Antares' nursery she curtly dismissed Hetty and simply stood by the cradle, gazing down at a wailing Antares who had clearly had too much excitement for one day.

She just waited, without moving, as she stared at her son.

She noticed the exact moment the figure came out of a wall and placidly stood by a corner, inches away from the cradle. Only then did Narcissa raise her head to stare at It.

It looked exactly the same as the two times she had seen It; shimmering, nearly translucent and with a golden light which seemed to sparkle and emanate from It - or him, she didn't quite know.

If It had a solid consistency she would think he was a wizard, a man in his early twenties, tanned, handsome and manly, with curls of dark hair and the eeriest eyes she had ever seen – milky white, sheer, and sometimes even seeming as if clouds, or nebulas or even tiny stars moved through them, like reflections.

The eyes made a shudder run down her spine.

Antares had been born with those eyes and when she had seen her baby for the first time she had nearly screamed in horror, thinking that what they had done to him had caused her son to become blind. Then, in the next second, Antares' eyes had turned into her shade of clear blue and she had let out a deep exhalation of relieved breath.

Nevertheless, it rattled her and she didn't know the reason why Antares had had those eyes, like It's, and why sometimes, briefly, her son's eyes would turn into that hue again.

It seemed to be his default color; that, and a beautiful, vibrant shade of green – which sometimes she had the vague sensation she had seen before.

Regardless, at present, it was the third time she saw It.

The first occasion had been during Antares' birth and she had simply thought at the time that she had been hallucinating, caused by the pain or simply due to the horrendous proceedings.

It hadn't spoken then, just stood there, like a ghostly observer, saying nothing and simply watching. And the three wizards who had been in her room hadn't noticed or detected It in any way. By the time Narcissa had recovered her coherency and coolness, It was gone.

The second time had been the day after, when Narcissa had gone into the nursery to visit her newborn son, halting in her tracks by the threshold, momentarily petrified as she saw It standing by
the cradle and gazing down at Antares with an odd intensity in It's eerie eyes.

Narcissa had been further alarmed when Hetty had gone through It as if it wasn't there at all, clearly the house-elf not seeing It either. Only Narcissa seemed to be capable of seeing It, evidently because It wanted her to.

That day she hadn't thought about it twice and a curse had been on her lips as she whipped out her wand, at the same time that she manipulated the wards of Malfoy Manor with the fingertips of her left hand. But as commanded by the swift movements of her fingers, the wards hadn't wrapped around It and flung It out of the Manor. No, nothing had happened, and Narcissa had been puzzled and scared.

The wards couldn't get a hold of It and It looked like a strange ghost, but she knew It couldn't be that.

Years ago, in her very first day as Lucius Malfoy's newlywed wife, she had swept along the whole Manor, taking control of the house-elves, letting the wards adjust to her as they keyed her in and gave her a control over them which she would share with Lucius, while she inspected every nook and cranny of her new home and planned for the modifications in décor she would make. Then she had been abruptly startled when a pair of Malfoy ancestor ghosts had floated through her.

With one look at them she had deemed them uninteresting and annoying and she had instantly demanded of Lucius that they be banished to some faraway corner of the Manor. It was distasteful to have ghosts rattling and bothering guests and family, and it would not happen in her domain. Lucius had grudgingly yielded to her demands and now the wards would allow no ghosts outside of the Portrait Hall.

Thus, she had known It was no ghost, that day when she had seen It in the nursery. Nevertheless, after failing with the wards, she had begun enchanting a curse as she weaved her wand in the air, but then It had spoken as it raised its hands in a surrendering manner, a soft smile on its face. "I mean no harm, to you or your family," It had said with a thick Spanish accent, its eerie eyes crinkling with amusement. "If I had the slightest intention of it, the wards of this manor would not only prevent it but also immediately expel me out."

With her heart still beating hard with anxiousness and apprehension, Narcissa had nonetheless regained her coolness, her eyes then narrowing slightly as she shot him a piercing, gauging gaze as she considered his statement, her wand still aimed at It.

It took her seconds to deem that It was right; even though the wards couldn't take a hold of It at present, she knew that the moment It made any threatening moves, the wards would act, no matter what It was or if It seemingly didn't have any corporeal solidity.

"Who are you?" she had then demanded in a sharp tone of voice.

"You can call me Santi, if you wish," It had said, a gentle smile growing on its face.

Given that unedifying answer which elucidated nothing to her, her voice had grown hard as she had asked bluntly, her gaze sweeping along his figure, "What are you – a magical creature of some kind?"

A dark eyebrow quirked upwards, It's smile turning into a lopsided grin as he let out a short, rumbling bout of amused laughter. "A creature? No, no." Then It had shot her a glance, and added calmly, "I'm not a wizard either, if you were wondering." It shrugged its shoulders. "I'm simply
"Yes, of course, that clears everything up," Narcissa had interjected tartly and poignantly. "Why are you here? What do you want-"

"Here?" It had interrupted, looking vastly amused as it gazed around the surroundings. "But I'm not here. I'm nowhere." It shot her a grin, adding loftily, "Or I should better say, I'm anywhere, anywhen. As for my purpose…" Its eerie eyes gazed back at Antares in his cradle and continued quietly, "I'm here to see him. I'll be paying him visits frequently."

And before Narcissa could open her mouth to express just what she thought of that, It had vanished with a cheerful wave of its hand.

In the three weeks that had followed she had simply continued thinking of him as It, or The Thing, or 'Santi', as he had said, if she felt generous, which had only happened twice. Indeed, she only felt vexation and impotence regarding the matter, and thus anger and wariness.

And now there he was, before her for the third time, and Narcissa had every intention of obtaining answers.

Evidently, The Thing meant no harm or the wards wouldn't allow him passage, but It could still come and go as it pleased and It was still hovering near her baby son's cradle, staring with an odd expression on his translucent face at a fidgety Antares who was waving his tiny hands in the air, pouting and demandingly gurgling, wanting to be picked up.

Yet, Narcissa didn't move, she wanted to have her hands and arms free, just in case, and she simply stared at 'Santi', waiting. Most of times, people felt compelled to fill tense silences and would inevitably speak of anything and thus reveal information. It was a lesson taught to her long ago by her father.

She remembered him with faint fondness, unlike what she had felt for her mother. Indeed, she had been her father's favorite.

Cygnus Black had never bestowed upon her a touch of affection or an outward and evident show of attachment, but he had nonetheless conveyed it in his characteristical manner, by allowing her to spend time with him in the man's study, in companionable silence as they both read books of their respective interests.

In those few years when she had been a child, he had slowly and quietly imparted his lessons to her; the value of never speaking your mind, being reserved to the utmost, of keeping all thoughts to yourself and thread carefully in all conversations, the worthiness and efficiency of being -above all things- patient, stoic, subtle, and coolly levelheaded, of not giving way to brash impulses and tempestuous displays, as her mother Druella had constantly done, which Bellatrix had inherited and even Andromeda to a lesser degree.

Indeed, the only occasions Narcissa had allowed herself to act impulsively had been the few times she had deemed that a situation required swift and immediate action, after ascertaining that her spontaneous decision of how to react was the best resort. And right then, it was not the case.

As she had expected, Santi didn't take long in gazing up at her with those eerie eyes of his, as he uttered pleasantly, "I have a favor to ask of you. I need you to memorize a lullaby and you will need to sing it to Antares as often as you can during the next months."

Narcissa almost gaped at him in sheer flabbergasted incredulity. Of course, she didn't do anything
so crass and simply stared back at him, conveying exactly how ridiculous and nonsensical she found the request.

But it didn't give her a chance to voice her opinion, as he swiftly sang in a soft, melodic tone, "Once upon a time, there was a good little wolf, mistreated by all the lambs. Once upon a time, there was a bad black unicorn, a little ugly fairy, and a shy dragon. There was also once, an evil prince, a beautiful witch, and an honest pirate. There were all these things, once upon a time, when I dreamed of a world turned upside down."

At first, Narcissa had almost burst into derisive laughter, quite thinking The Thing had taken leave of his senses and that perhaps it was all some ridiculous prank.

Indeed, for all his strange and eerie appearance, he could just be a wizard with a glamour making him translucent and glow in golden light, and perhaps he used some spell to be able to pass through walls and doors, or any such thing.

However, as the lullaby progressed she felt the effect of it; a wave of magic settling around the room, making Antares—who had thus far been wailing softly at the lack of attention—abruptly yawn, instantly falling asleep with a placid expression on his tiny face.

The Black family didn't have such spells, but she had heard about it. The younger the child, the better it worked.

"Which House is it from?" she asked, the first thing that abruptly came to mind, too startled by the bizarre request and the lullaby that had followed.

Santi shot her a lopsided smile. "The Prince's." Then he gazed at her with a most serious and grave expression on his handsome face, and demanded, "Will you remember it or should I sing it again?"

"I am able to remember," she replied sharply, all sense of the strangeness of the situation fading away to give way to vexation and impatience. "If not, I can use a pensieve to revisit the memory of it." She skewered him with her clear blue eyes and demanded curtly, "May I know why I should sing a Prince's lullaby to my son, of all nonsensical things?"

"It's quite simple," retorted Santi in a gentle tone of voice. "A bridge must be formed between now and then. A connection is required. They believed they had it all figured out," he added in an incisive mutter, "and they were right regarding how it worked, in the whole. But you see, they didn't see the details. They didn't realize how the direct application of the substance would affect him - they had no way of knowing."

He gestured a translucent hand towards the cradle. "Now they believe that the spell they used during his birth caused Antares to have a blank soul, wiped clean from his past memories, just as they wanted, but it is not true. A soul yanked out so savagely from its body, by an unnatural and violent death as he experienced, will always remember. The recollections will come back to him suddenly, with unimaginable force, and the way he was killed, the sheer cruelty of it, the pain and suffering, will most likely rip him apart. Not to mention the recollections of the decades his soul spent trapped in the device – the locket. Antares will be too young to understand the influx of those memories - it will most likely happen soon, when he's a baby, you see. What mind of a baby would be able to withstand such without insanity soon following?"

Narcissa speechlessly stared at him, without having made sense out of any of it. She simply felt that the absurdity and nonsense of it had reached a new, insupportable level.

She was already prepared to whip out her wand again and start casting all curses that came to mind.
to drive him away; to call out for the house-elves if required, and even Lucius and the Dark Lord if it came to that.

However, The Thing kept talking, as if he didn't realize or care that he was under any threat from her, "The only way to help him is to ease him into it. They made you start wearing the locket the day after you conceived Antares and modified it so that filaments of his soul would slowly filter into the life you carried, creating the anchor between the timelines in the origin of the change, since he is the catalyst. The full transfer of his soul and the swap was completed when you gave birth to him. They were right to do the transfer of his soul slowly - at least they realized how it should be done so that it wouldn't be as traumatic for his soul, in this instance."

Santi held up a translucent hand the moment Narcissa attempted to get a word out, and he continued in his thick Spanish accent, "At present, it's nearly ten months after the day of origin, the day he was also conceived, and it has been three weeks since his birth, and still, his soul isn't fully anchored in his body – I can feel it. Just as he unwittingly feels that he is in a strange body, where he doesn't naturally belong. And since he, in himself, is the anchor and since the original timeline no longer exists, if his soul isn't anchored, Time will revert back to its original path by inertia. And yet that path no longer exists. We would be plunged into nothingness. So you see, it's not only for his sake but for the sake of all."

He shot her a wide, gentle grin, as he added, "He simply needs something he will instinctually recognize from his past. The simplest thing is the lullaby, which has always soothed him. The very familiarity of it will help him make the transition more smoothly and will finish rooting his soul in his new body. And once it happens, his past memories won't savagely flood into his mind; they will come to him slowly, throughout many years, and thus his sanity will not suffer for it."

Narcissa had, by now, her wand limply dangling from her upheld hand. The moment she realized it, she gripped it tightly and stowed it away. Then she gazed back at him and the first thought that came to her mind was regarding the Prince lullaby.

The only Prince alive at present was Severus Snape, and for a moment she thought it all meant that the dour Potions Master and Hogwarts' Headmaster had been covertly sneaking into Antares' nursery to sing to him the lullaby of the Princes, for how else would it be familiar to her baby?

A frenzied laughter almost escaped her lips, finding it ridiculously funny at the same time that she felt she was sinking into a chasm.

In the next second, she brutally chided herself and made an effort to regain her levelheadedness. She was purposely misunderstanding things, not wanting to really analyze and attempt to make sense of what she had been told. But why should she believe such outlandish things?

"You speak to me about my son's past, implying it was decades ago, that the body he has now is a new one, that he was killed in the past, his soul trapped for years upon years in the locket I later wore, of his horrible death, of 'they' who did it all, and you don't explain whom you are referring to, and of timelines, thus implying a time-travelling which isn't possible," she said quietly, gazing at some point in the wall across from her. Then she snapped her gaze back to him and added sharply, "And yet we are speaking of a newborn baby, a baby I gave birth to merely three weeks ago, and thus, not a being that had any other past but that of these past three weeks."

Santi skewered her with his eerie, milky white eyes, to then deeply frown at her. "Are you being purposely dense or are you really dim-witted and unable to comprehend?"

Instantly, Narcissa's usually cool temper flared at that. She squashed it down in the next second, remembering her father's teachings like a mantra; levelheadedness, calmness, patience, be stoic and
unflappable, take all the time required to analyze your thoughts before deciding what to say.

She trailed her gaze around the vast nursery, basking in the depictions on the walls she had commissioned an artist to paint; it displayed an enchanted forest, with clouds placidly rolling by, as if gently pushed by a soft breeze, trees with rich foliage which sparkled with sunlight, the glow of tiny fairies fluttering from one wall to the other, squirrels meandering along branches, and beautiful unicorns and centaurs trotting through the trees, weaving in and out of sight.

It served its purpose, soothing her, helping her regain her composure and get a grip on herself, allowing her to calmly make a choice.

"I apologize," she said coolly, turning to gaze back at him. "I am indeed able to piece together the bits of information I posses. But first..." She then flicked her wand at one of the rocking chairs at one corner of the room and muttered a spell, transforming it into two plush armchairs which skidded to be placed behind each of them. "Would you be so kind as to take a seat? Make yourself comfortable, if you please."

Santi shot her a surprised look, and then warmly smiled as he flopped down on his chair, clearly believing they had reached a mutual understanding or even an alliance of sorts.

Young Narcissa had to suppress a scoff at The Thing's delusions. She simply wanted to extract from him as much information as possible, and her main objective was to garner just how much It was willing to do for her – or better said, for Antares.

That Santi was interested in her son there was no doubt about, but did he care for her child? Had he formed an attachment, and if so, what was he prepared to do for Antares' wellbeing? If The Thing truly cared, she could easily use that to her and her son's advantage. Could she really be able to acquire for her son someone who could be useful to Antares from so early on in his life?

She would glean that from The Thing afterwards, at present she had another task.

Narcissa elegantly sat down on her chair and folded her pale hands on her lap, briefly glancing at Santi, not escaping her notice that The Thing was able to sit down instead of going through the cushion of the seat.

One of her motives for having offered him a seat -besides instilling a more relaxed ambiance between them that would be conducive to a greater flow of information from him to her- had been precisely that of elucidating if he could, indeed, sit down. She had her answer; The Thing could control his solidity. She filed away that little tidbit of information in case it could be of future use or importance.

Finally, she closed her eyes, not caring what The Thing would think of her by that action, or that she was presenting a vulnerability that could be exploited. Regarding the physical danger to herself, the wards would protect her, indubitably, and that was enough.

She already knew what two experiences were related to what Santi had divulged.

The most recent one was, of course, that of when she had given birth to Antares. But she would leave that for second, not wanting to relive it right then.

The other one pertained to when she had eavesdropped on Abraxas' and Lucius' conversation, finally some of the things she had overheard making sense, and thus allowing her to-

"You know, you must be aware of who 'they' are. They were there when you had Antares and I was observing what they did. It was then when you saw me for the first time, remember? And I know
you didn’t forget what they did, as they believe. That Potions Master who was there covertly swamped the flasks and I heard what he whispered to you. He gave you a potion to remember, not to wipe your memory."

Narcissa’s eyes flung open and she shot The Thing a look, with the precise modicum of irritation to convey that she demanded his immediate silence.

"Alright, alright," said Santi sheepishly, raising his palms, letting out a soft chuckle she would have found charming in another situation and if The Thing was not a Thing. "I'll clamp my mouth shut and let you concentrate and think about whatever you need to muse about."

She didn't bother to reply and closed her eyes once more. Yes, Abraxas' and Lucius' conversation behind closed doors, to which she hadn't been invited to participate, of course, as had happened once a week in the first months after the day of the Change – when she had found herself with two sets of memories.

She had been four months pregnant with Antares, moody, tetchy and quite fed up that Lucius was being so tight-lipped regarding what he discussed with his father – for her own good, her husband had said and still did.

With that, it had become clear to her just how Lucius regarded her. After several years of marriage during which she had proven her unparalleled social skills and the ease and dexterity she had with political maneuverings in order to obtain for the Malfoy name and prestige greater status and clout, her husband still didn't view her as his equal.

Narcissa’s father had warned her about it; had point blank told her what pureblood wizards wanted and expected in a wife.

"A pureblood girl who has the fortune of being as sharp as I believe you are, must never show it openly. Let your husband underestimate you, and just use your wile for when there's a worthy prize you want to obtain. You'll catch him unawares and unprepared, and you will win. Then revert back to your façade and grant him the time to forget that his wife bested him. After he becomes comfortable and reassured in his own superiority and there's another prize to claim, strike again."

Cygnus Black had lifted a finger, piercing her with his grey eyes. "And if someday you wish and feel prepared to assume the responsibility to be a support to your husband, someone he can ask advice from and lean on, then you must ease him into it, slowly, patiently and, above all, with subtlety. In such a way that he will not remember the time when he didn't think you his match, making him believe he purposely chose a clever wife because he was strong and man enough to deal with it. Allow him to think the credit is his. We have large egos, Cissy, and the one thing we cannot bear is a wife who we feel threatened by. Just look at your mother, she's unbearable. Druella has never known how to play me. She has always been pushy, over-opinionated and demanding, and thus, I have never listened to her."

Indeed, after having Draco she had implemented that latter tactic. But that day it had become evident to her that easing Lucius into the notion that she was his intellectual equal, and his superior in astuteness in several aspects, would take longer than she had anticipated.

Nevertheless, Narcissa had taken matters into her own hands, following her impulses since she had deemed that the situation required some brashness from her part. She had had already ordered five house-elves to iron their fingers and ears just to vent some of her frustrations, and spying on Lucius would infinitely be more rewarding than that, she had thought.

When she had seen Abraxas and Lucius enter one of the studies, she had instantly remembered one
of the secret passages that ran behind one of the room's walls. She had slipped inside the passage, conjured a plushy armchair to comfortably sit on, and proceeded to eavesdrop on their muffled conversation.

Abraxas had been talking about a 'portal' which had allowed the wizard the chance to meet with Lucius. Indeed, at the time she had realized what occasion was being spoken of.

It had been in her Old Past, in their seventh year at Hogwarts, when they were already of age and had been engaged for some months. It was known that Abraxas had contracted dragon pox and his days were numbered, Lucius had been fretful and quite unbearable since he wanted to leave Hogwarts and spend as much time as possible in Malfoy Manor with his progenitor. His stern father wouldn't let him miss school, though, and would only allow Lucius back home the very day he laid on his deathbed ready to draw his last breath.

It had indeed surprised her when Lucius had received an owl from his father, asking to meet him in Hogsmeade. Everyone knew that dragon pox at such an age left the infirm too weak to move and even less go anywhere. Yet the letter had clearly conveyed that Abraxas was out and about, waiting to meet his son.

Later, Lucius had returned to Hogwarts with a trunk in tow, not wanting to give any explanations. And just two days after, Abraxas had died.

Narcissa much later discovered that that trunk had contained Abraxas Malfoy's grimoire and the pensieve containing the wizard's memories; a pensieve with wards that would drop many years later on the day Lord Voldemort went to kill the Potters, also the day of the Change, and when she and Lucius had conceived Antares.

The whole affair had puzzled her, and when she had overheard the conversation, she hadn't had an inkling regarding what a 'portal' could be referring to.

Now, matching clues and information, understanding started to dawn on her.

Indeed, if she simply got rid of her former firm notion and accepted that a timeline-altering time-travelling was possible, premise that Santi evidently wanted her to believe, then she knew exactly what a portal could be. It had to be a bridge between two timelines, obviously allowing a wizard to pass through for a certain amount of hours.

It could only mean that the Abraxas who had met Lucius and given him the trunk wasn't the Abraxas dying from dragon pox.

And hadn't the Grey Wizard visited Lord Voldemort several times, during the months before the Dark Lord had gone to kill the Potters? And she knew for a fact that the Grey Wizard couldn't have been freely strutting around.

There had been two of them as well in the same Past, in the Old Past.

That explained how Abraxas had managed to create a 'portal'. Of course that Lucius' father hadn't been the one to discover how to do it. But from Lord Slytherin or the Grey Wizard, yes, she did believe they were powerful and capable enough to manage such an unprecedented accomplishment.

From that, she could infer that there had been two Dark Lords, each in their respective timelines, Lord Voldemort truly dying in the Potter's home and Lord Slytherin killing them as well but without being killed himself. And then the timelines had met – now Lucius' mutterings from that
day, speaking of lines and origin, started to make sense.

That day the timelines had met, the new set of memories of what she would call her New Past had flooded into her mind, and Lord Slytherin had returned after killing the Potters. There had been no two sets of memories being produced after that. No, she had instead continued living the life she had from her New Past. As Santi had said, after the point of origin, the day of the Change, the original timeline didn't continue existing.

Narcissa shook her head, feeling dazed by the entangled loops her thoughts started to form the more she thought of it. Regardless, ultimately, it didn't matter to her.

There was one Dark Lord now, one Grey Wizard and one Abraxas. Furthermore, for the whole world except a very few, there was only one Past. Her Old Past meant nothing, just residue, remnants of a timeline which was no more.

However, if she hadn't had two sets of memories she would have never arrived to such conclusions, the possibility would have never even entered her mind. Just what had been Abraxas' purpose by making Lucius do that ritual on them? And it was risky for the Dark Lord to have allowed such thing; to have people who could remember both pasts. It didn't make sense-

Narcissa snapped her eyes open and pierced The Thing with her gaze. "I was from the original timeline, was I not?"

Santi simply nodded, and Narcissa remembered those two Death Eaters who had disappeared, along with others – those who had existed in the Old Past and no longer did in the New Past, and the reverse, those who now did.

She bore her eyes into The Thing's, and murmured as the realization slowly unfolded in her mind, "All of we who underwent the ritual are from the original timeline and were spared the risk of ceasing to exist the day of the Change – the origin, as you call it. Abraxas ensured his family would survive, and those families allied to the Malfoys."

"Yes," said Santi nonchalantly. "There was always a slight risk. But you were spared, as you say, and you and your counterpart were 'merged', to call it something."

"Which is why I have two sets of memories," whispered Narcissa to herself. "Yet I also remain myself, living the life I had from the New Past."

"Since that day, you are living in the timeline which was created, the only timeline which now exists."

Narcissa nodded in understanding and then demanded curtly, "Who created it? Who time-travelled? The Dark Lord?"

"You already know the answer to that if you bother to think about it," replied Santi tersely. "You are afraid to arrive to the right conclusion, to realize who your son is."

Narcissa instantly became riled up and she hissed out, "Do not dare speak to me in that condescending manner-"

"Enough is enough, Mrs. Malfoy," interrupted her The Thing, looking vexed and impatient. "It's time to face the music. Tell me whom I was referring to by 'they'. Remember what happened that day."

Narcissa nearly sprung up to her feet to demand that The Thing immediately left her home.
Restraining herself from the impulse, she took a sharp intake of breath. "Very well."

The day she had given birth to Antares she had known beforehand that no healers would be allowed; only Hetty, the old house-elf who had been a nursemaid and midwife during many Malfoy generations, and Severus Snape in his quality as a Potions Master to administer the pertinent potions to her, to ease the procedure. She hadn't been at all happy about it, yet what she hadn't expected was for Lord Slytherin and the Grey Wizard to be present as well. But she had swallowed her modesty and protests and had planned to bear it impassively.

Everything had gone smoothly, with Hetty and Severus down there, until with a last push, Antares had started to emerge from her. Then it had all seemed to distort into a hellish nightmare.

The moment half of her baby's body was already out, the Grey Wizard had stepped forward, raising both hands; in one, his wand, on the other, the ring he always wore. But in that occasion, as he enchanted something in a language she didn't recognize, the dull black stone of the ring had shone with something from within; some sort of small design made of thin silver lines, a triangle with some other geometrical figures inside.

Narcissa hadn't been able to take a good look and it hadn't seemed familiar. Moreover, she had been rather preoccupied when some sort of magical link had formed between the wizard's wand and ring. Then, the man's hood had dropped and she had shrieked.

She had seen a horribly disfigured face, as if some sort of wild animal had repeatedly slashed at it with its claws, with a gruesomely empty left eye socket. She had been further terrified when she had recognized the man's right eye.

In all textbooks of modern wizarding history, in both Old and New Past, along with a picture of a handsome blond man, there had always been the description of the wizard's unique eyes. Gellert Grindelwald was always said to have remarkable hawk-like eyes.

It had been then when she had known that Grindelwald hadn't simply disappeared in 1945 of the New Past, presumed by everyone to be dead. She had further understood why, in the New Past, the Dark Lord's mark wasn't that of the skull and snake, like in the Old, but that of a serpent coiling around a hawk.

It had been then when she had comprehended that one Dark Lord had taught the other, mentor and pupil, and that Abraxas and Lord Slytherin hadn't been alone during all those years in which they hadn't been in England.

All of those realizations struck her in the blink of an eye. And in the next second, something had sprouted from the link between Grindelwald's ring and wand, the wizard directing it: enormous claw-like black fingers which had plunged into the locket she had been wearing.

They pulled what had been within, something that wailed and screamed until it was floating a feet above her, encompassed in some kind of magical cage: a ghostly figure, a boy, a teen it seemed to her, yet his form was frayed, as if rats had been savagely gnawing him.

She now knew why. Filaments of soul had been leaking from the locket to the life she carried during those months of her pregnancy, Santi had said. But he had been mistaken in one thing. It hadn't spared the soul trauma.

Those screams and wails she had thought she heard coming from the locket, those nights she awoke, thinking she had imagined it, they weren't just screams for release, there were of pain as well.
Furthermore, that figure, then, had had a wide, uneven hole in his left side, as if something had long ago been ripped from it.

It had screamed and flailed, and Narcissa hadn't been able to understand. The boy had seemed to switch from German to English and back, shouting frantically, desperately or enraged at turns, at Grindelwald and Lord Slytherin. She had heard both of them saying things in return, attempting to soothe him, she presumed, but she wasn't certain.

Between the pain, the confusion, the shock, and horror, Narcissa had been in no condition to grasp everything.

Lord Slytherin had then stepped up, carrying a bejeweled goblet of some kind in his hands, weaving his own wand in the air, and something in the goblet, a small frayed figure, had sprouted out.

It was grey and torn, with no discernable shape, but then it had flown towards the ghostly figure of the boy, still entrapped in the magical cage-like prison. And it had stuck to him, like a leech, at the left side of the boy, where the hole had been.

Narcissa had been in hysterics by then, her own screams demanding an explanation ignored. Her shrieks had worsen when the black, claw-like fingers which emanated from Grindelwald's ring and wand had struck her newborn baby, who by then was in Severus' arms.

They pulled out something so small and so bright; something which was snuffed out in the next moment, inside the black fingers that had formed a tight fist around it. All that was left behind were floating swirls.

She had screamed in horror, terrified and desperate. She had sprung, or attempted to, from her bed, feeling her own magic about to lash out, to protect, to stop what was being done.

"Severus, restrain her!" had commanded the Dark Lord.

In the next instant, she had found herself flat on her bed without able to move or speak, with her magic painfully and forcibly restrained by whatever spell had been cast.

She had observed with eyes that leaked tears of impotence, and rage, and terror, how the ghostly figure of the boy was released and then grabbed by those black hands which pulled him towards the floating swirls. How the swirls gently and softly became attached to him, completing him, making him no longer look frayed and gnawed.

They were back where they belonged, she knew now. And then, the boyish ghostly figure which had never stopped attempting to get free and had never stopped shouting and screaming with heart-wrenching suffering, had been plunged into her baby.

There was nothing but near silence after that, just the soft wail of Antares.

"Give her the potion."

As the Dark Lord and the Grey Wizard started to quietly talk between them, with Hetty now carrying and taking care of Antares, Severus had leaned over her bedside with a flask in hand.

Her vision had been blurry, but indeed, as Santi had said, there had been a switch. So quickly did Severus covertly pluck another flask from his robes, leaning forward over her as he whispered into her ear, "It's important you remember."
And he had feed her that potion and stowed away the other.

Narcissa snapped out of the recollection with her heart still pounding hard in her chest. She took a deep intake of breath to compose herself, and slowly glanced at Santi.

"Whose soul was it? Who was my son in the past?"

The Thing shot her a gauging gaze with those eerie eyes of his, and then intoned calmly, "You do consider him your son, then? Even though you know-"

"That Slytherin and Grindelwald killed the soul Antares was conceived with and swapped it for another?" she interjected coolly, arching a delicate eyebrow at him. "He's still my son. And those bits of soul, those swirls, were from the soul in the locket. They were part of Antares nearly from the start." She slightly shook her head, and added quietly, "He's my son. A Black through and through."

"I'm glad you think so. I wasn't sure if you would," said Santi, shooting her a pleased, warm smile.

"Who was he?" demanded Narcissa curtly, spearing him with her eyes.

"He was the one who was made to time-travel in the day of the origin, a few hours before you conceived Antares." At Narcissa's puzzled expression, The Thing added quietly, "Mrs. Malfoy, you already know, you must simply admit it to yourself. What did both Dark Lords do that day? Lord Voldemort and Lord Slytherin had different reasons for it, but they killed them all the same, and their baby-"

"The Potters," she choked out faintly.

In the next second she had sprung to her feet, her chair tumbling to a side, and she quickly reached the large windows of the nursery, displaying the lovely view of one of Malfoy Manor's most gorgeous gardens with a charming pond in their midst.

Turning her face away, so that her expression wouldn't be seen by The Thing, she fisted her hands into the silky material of her dress, her knuckles turning white with the tightness of her grip. Crushing devastation, horror, and revulsion were engulfing her.

Only one thing came out of her paling lips, "He's the mudblood's spawn."

A noise reached her ears, sounding angered and irritated, and Narcissa swiftly swiveled around to stare at The Thing. It was quite interesting, she thought detachedly, to see an expression of rage in a face that was translucent and glowed in golden sparks.

"You just said he was a Black through and through," said Santi thunderously, skewering her with those eerie, milky white eyes of his. "And what is a pureblood by definition-"

"Do not presume to lecture me-"

"- only blood matters to your kind. The soul has nothing to do with being a pureblood. Two seconds ago you didn't care about the soul-issue," continued The Thing sternly. "His blood hasn't changed. And who conceived him? What is he?"

"He's a Black and a Malfoy, you overbearing creature," Narcissa snapped acidly, her eyes narrowed with anger and irritation of her own. "Yes, I do see your point."

Santi pierced her with his gaze and said curtly, "Tell me now if you want him or not. I don't want to
come back here to see he's been dumped in a muggle orphanage or something of the sort. I rather
take him myself and place him with some other family-"

"Muggle orphanage?" she hissed out, swiftly moving to stand by the cradle. "I would never do
something so despicable." Her eyes narrowed to slits. "And you will not be taking him anywhere at
all."

The Thing paused, narrowing his own eyes, and then demanded, "Is he your son or not?"

Narcissa's temper flared, but she simply replied tersely, "Yes."

Santi gauged her again. "Do you think Antares would be a 'Black through and through', as you say,
if it wasn't for the soul he has now? That he would be a Metamorphagi since birth, already able to
do shifts at one-month of age, or that he would be as powerful as he is now? Do you think the Dark
Lord would have bothered transferring some of his dark magic to him if he wasn't Harry Potter? Or
that he would have enabled you to conceive a second son if it wasn't for that as well?"

"I already said I understood," interjected Narcissa sharply. Her eyes slightly narrowed again, but
now in interest. "Why?"

Santi stared at her. "Why what?"

"Why," said Narcissa tartly, "did the Dark Lord put Harry Potter's soul in Antares, and why give
him his magic? Why does Harry Potter matter to the Dark Lord? And why are you interested in
him as well?"

"I will only answer the latter, since you have no need to know the answers to the first questions,"
replied The Thing loftily. He sighed and then continued, "It took me a while to find him in the past.
You see, he and I are two of a kind - the only ones to have ever existed, as far as I know. You can
think of me as his guardian of sorts-"

"Guardian?" she said, her voice laced with snide, addressing the first of many questions which had
popped in her mind. "You certainly did not protect him from-

The Thing raised a hand to halt her. "I will only take action if I have absolutely no other choice.
And I hope it will never come to that." He shot her a glance and then said nonchalantly, "Speaking
of which, have you kept the glass sphere?"

Narcissa had her wand directly aimed at him in the very next second, as she hissed out, "You work
for Dumbledore."

Indeed, two weeks ago she had found a letter inside one of the drawers of her dressing table,
penned and signed by Albus Dumbledore, and with a plain, small glass sphere inside the envelope – a portkey.

She hadn't failed to notice that she had found it the same day Severus Snape had paid a visit to
leave some potions with her, for her recovery after giving birth.

Severus wasn't being very covert or subtle.

There had always been suspicions and rumors regarding the wizard's true allegiances. That the
wizard had not given her the potion requested by Lord Slytherin to make her forget had also made
her question Severus' loyalties. And now… well, it was no secret that the wizard had been
infatuated with Lily Evans.
Had Severus helped her for Antares' sake? Did he know her son possessed the soul of Harry Potter and thus, due to his feelings for Lily Potter, felt obliged to protect Antares?

She didn't know, but she hadn't been pleased to find a letter from the old coot. Narcissa still didn't know why she hadn't shown it to Lucius.

"I'm no one's partisan. If anything, I'm on his side," said The Thing as he gestured towards the cradle. "I simply wish to suggest that you keep the portkey. You just might need to use it in the future." He speared her with an intense gaze, and added quietly, "Slytherin and Grindelwald aren't through with him. They will want to use Antares again."

Narcissa opened her mouth to speak, a barrage of questions swirling in her mind, but Santi snapped his head around and said urgently, "He's coming." He shot her a glance and added quickly, "Remember, sing the lullaby to Antares every day during the next three months. That should do the trick."

And with that, he simply disappeared, as if he had never been there in the first place.

"You are being greatly missed by your guests, Narcissa," said a smooth voice.

She almost tripped on the trail of her own dress when she jerkily turned around, startled. But she instantly dropped her gaze, masking the motion as a show of deference and awe, just so that she wouldn't meet Lord Slytherin's gaze.

She had much to conceal now and she had no doubt that she would be instantly killed for knowing what she did. It was never prudent to know much of the affairs of a Dark Lord. She would need to master Occlumency as soon as possible.

From the corner of her eyes she saw that Abraxas and the Grey Wizard had accompanied the man, and she turned her gaze towards Abraxas, the safer destination.

"I apologize, My Lord," she intoned quietly. "Antares was quite restless and it took me some time to get him to sleep."

"Such a commendable mother…" murmured the Dark Lord, as he halted before Antares' cradle.

When she saw the wizard leaning forward to trail a finger along Antares' ruddy cheek, she had the abrupt impulse to savagely slap the digit away. Instead, Narcissa stood rooted in her place, with all the impassiveness and elegance in the world.

The Dark Lord clucked his tongue, in disappointment it would seem. Perhaps he had been expecting Antares to wake up. Slight chance of that, not when the baby was surely still under the effects of the lullaby.

"I will expect you to return to the gathering shortly," was all the Dark Lord said as he swept out of the room, taking the two others with him.

Narcissa allowed an exhalation of breath to escape from her lips and then stood uncertainly by the cradle's side. In the next moment she made up her mind and gently picked up a snoozing Antares, taking a seat on a rocking chair at one corner of the room, which offered her the view of the gardens.

Antares' eyes slightly parted open, drowsily, surely due to having been moved around. And Narcissa gazed down at them, taking notice of their color. She knew now like whose eyes they were: the mudblood's, Lily Potter's.
She would have to learn how to love that shade of green again.

And with that thought, she started to softly sing the lullaby.
Part I: Chapter 10

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AN:

Thanks everyone for your reviews! I'm very glad that you enjoyed last chapter, and that it didn't confuse you so much, it was very hard and tricky to write, lol! ^^

To just clear up matters, we are still going to see much of Harry's life in the past as Tom Riddle's twin. That is Part I of the fic.

As you can see Part II refers to his future, to his life as Antares Malfoy. I wanted the first chapter of Part II to come after Ancleto's explanation of time-travelling so that we could see how it happened in practice and so that we understood what happened on the very first chapter of this fic.

We won't be seeing any other explanations regarding time-travelling after this. We have what Ancleto explained, the theory of it, and we have how it was conducted in practice, through Narcissa's experiences and what she figured out.

Regarding the first chapter of this fic, it was October 31, 1981, when the Potters were killed and when baby Harry was made to time-travel, with Dumbledore and Hagrid abruptly recognizing him as Harry Riddle in those few seconds. As Ancleto explained, on the day of origin, the secondary timeline merges with the original timeline, that's why Dumbledore and Hagrid recognized baby Harry as Harry Riddle because of the scar mostly, and then the time-travelling happened and people's minds were altered to only remember their lives in the secondary timeline.

A few hours after that, Antares was conceived and Narcissa started wearing the locket with Harry's soul, leaking bits of it into the life she carried, and thus the 'anchor' Ancleto spoke about was fixed and continued existing. Thus, the secondary timeline remained and the original one –canon– disappeared.

Narcissa figured out one of the things Ancleto spoke about, that the secondary timeline had to be made to be similar to the original timeline in the years and months before the point of origin, so that the intersection could happen.

That is why 'Lord Slytherin' conducted the same raids as Lord Voldemort, as if he was merely going through the motions, and that's why he had to kill Harry's parents. It is also why Abraxas and Grindelwald had been using portals to visit the original timeline. Grindelwald, the 'Grey Wizard', in order to visit Lord Voldemort and ensure the man would kill the Potters and would be killed by baby Harry in return, unwittingly making him a horcrux and so on. Abraxas so that he could visit Lucius and give him his pensieve with his memories of Harry Riddle and much more, with a grimoire with the ritual Lucius had to use on his family and those close to the Malfoys, to ensure that they would all survive the transition/merging on the day of origin, the transition from original timeline to secondary timeline.

Lord Slytherin might have also used a portal to visit the original timeline, though if he did, we won't know what he had been doing in those instances until much later.

We can also infer that Grindelwald used the ritual on himself as well, since he also existed in the
original timeline, imprisoned in Nurmengard. Abraxas had no need of that since in the original timeline he had died long ago from dragon pox. Lord Slytherin must have used the ritual on himself as well, since even though his counterpart in the original timeline, Lord Voldemort, was killed by baby Harry, Voldemort's 'master' soul wasn't killed because Voldemort had horcruxes. Thus Tom had to use the ritual to solve the problem and ensure that he, Lord Slytherin, would be the one who survived the intersection of the timelines that day.

Obviously, Lord Slytherin – Marvolo Slytherin- is what Tom Riddle will become – the Tom Riddle we have been seeing in Part I of the fic.

Narcissa's Old Past was canon, the original timeline, and her New Past is the secondary timeline Harry produced with his mere presence in the past.

Since the transfer of his soul was done successfully and his soul will be further rooted after Santi told Narcissa how to do it, all that remains is the New Past. After the day of origin, Lord Slytherin already started making all the changes in the wizarding world he had been waiting so long to do.

The soul in the locket was that of Harry Riddle, since as we now know he was purposely killed in the past. We don't need to worry about this at present, what happened will be explained much further ahead in the fic, by the time that Part I ends.

Regarding Dumbledore, given the letter he wrote to Narcissa, including a portkey, and given what Snape did during Antares' birth, we can correctly assume that Dumbledore managed to keep his two sets of memories and knows exactly what's going on and what Lord Slytherin's and Grindelwald's plans are, to some extent.

Regarding Snape, Sirius, Regulus, and Remus and Pettigrew if they still exist, as well as those light families that fled with Dumbledore, the Weasleys and Longbottoms foremost, we'll find out about them much, much later in Part II.

I don't know if I will be putting other Part II chapters interspersed here and there as the fic continues with Part I. If I do, it will only be briefly since from now on we will continue with Harry Riddle's life in the past.

So on we go - Cheers!

Part I: Chapter 10

"Harry – Harry! Why are you gaping like a dim-witted idiot? What's the matter with you?"

Eleven-year-old Harry blinked, feeling a bit dazed, still hearing the end of Alice's lullaby ringing in his ears, intoned in a soft, cultured voice he had never heard before, and his eyes still prickling with the afterimage he had seen seconds ago; the face of the most beautiful woman he had ever beheld, with a halo of pretty blonde hair and clear blue eyes, looking like an ethereal angel.

Harry blinked again, wondering if the fumes from the Apothecary they had visited previously to get potion ingredients had made him have a hallucination of some sort.

Finally, he shook his head, clearing it from the strange residues, and stared at his brother. Tom was darkly scowling at him, looking vastly annoyed, with a hideous creature perched on his shoulder.

"What?" Harry croaked out, as he rubbed his forehead. Then he gazed at his surroundings, finally remembering that they were in the Magical Menagerie.
Even after having spent nearly three hours in Diagon Alley, he still felt he was in some bizarre version of fairytale-land.

That day, early in the morning as he had planned with Tom, Harry had faked a terrible stomachache. Moaning and making his eyes go all teary and with a heart-wrenchingly pathetic expression on his face, he had convinced Alice that he had been too indisposed to go to the seaside trip. After Tom had play-acted his part as the concerned brother, promising Alice to take care of him, a worried and hesitant Alice had finally agreed to leave them behind, under the care of Magda – one of the two young girls who had replaced Mr. Jenkins.

It had been unsurprisingly easy to sneak out of the orphanage. The moment Tom had spied that Magda had been entertaining herself in the kitchen, covertly reading a magazine about the lifestyle of the rich and their scandals, Harry had jumped out of his sickbed, already dressed under the covers.

In a few minutes both of them were already taking a double-decker bus into central London. With the leather pouches and the letters Mr. Dumbledore had given them, and after ascertaining that the address of the alley that led to the 'Leaky Cauldron' pub was in the meatpacking district, they had finally arrived at the site after taking a second bus trip.

That had been when things had started to turn strange, or 'magical', as was the case.

There had been butcher shops and warehouses, and workers unloading crates and mobilizing the carcasses of skewered cows and pigs. And yet, none of the people coming and going had seemed to even see the strange sign hanging from one of the shops; that of a figure in black, with a pointy hat, with a ladle in hand, stirring the contents of some huge pot – which was called a 'cauldron', Harry would later learn.

So Tom and Harry had stared at the sign in bemusement, and then Harry had excitedly grabbed his brother by the arm and pulled him inside.

Their first encounter with the 'Magical World' hadn't been at all what they had expected.

Certainly, neither of them had expected that the place would be dusty, nearly outright dirty and gloomy, with half of the people looking dodgy and dangerous, as if they would just as soon kill you as look at you, and the other half looking posh and snobby, in their own bizarre way.

There were women, old and young, wearing the strangest hats with desiccated vultures and the likes, with fur coats which still had the animal's head, with the eyes moving and their tails wagging, or with wide-hipped dresses that looked from another century, or with a motley arrangement of clothes which didn't match in pattern, style or date.

The men were just as bad, with tunic-like dresses which Harry would later learn were called robes - and which he himself was expected to wear, according to the list in his letter- or wearing doublets and tights, with pointy hats, turbans, or felt top hats.

And all of them waving their sticks at the littlest things, making fantastical but also trivial things happen, like moving a chair, lift a cup, light a candle, and the sort.

It wasn't at all what Harry had expected –none of it was like the worlds depicted in Alice's fairytales– but he had loved it, all the more because it was indeed crude and coarse.

However, he had taken one look at his brother and had seen Tom gazing at his surroundings with his lips curled in disgust and contempt. Tom had expected perfection, Harry knew, and the gritty
reality of it must have been a harsh disappointment.

Nevertheless, they had found Tom the bartender, as Mr. Dumbledore had told them, and soon they had been shown the way into Diagon Alley. Both Harry and Tom had stared with excited amazement when the man had tapped the wall with his stick and had made the bricks fold themselves to the sides, opening a passageway into a winding, cobblestoned street.

Diagon Alley had been bustling with activity, and Harry had gawked and gaped at the shops, attempting to not even blink so that he wouldn't miss anything.

The stores stood at impossible odd angles, some looking as if ready to teeter over, displaying their wonderful merchandise with colorful banners, floating and swirling advertisements and animated signs, showing things Harry had never seen before, like telescopes, whizzing silver instruments of unknown function, barrels of strange innards like bat spleens and eels' eyes, piles of spell books, crates of potion bottles, astronomical maps and charts and globes of planets, rolls of parchments, and the like.

He had even seen a shop called Terrortours, advertising that they offered 'action holidays for the wizard with a sense of adventure!', giving discounts for a Transylvanian castle for rent with 'a blood-thirsty vampire for a host!', a trip down the Zombie Trail where you came 'face to face with the living dead!', and a cruise to the Bermuda Triangle, with 'your safe return not guaranteed!'!

Harry's eyes had gone as wide as moons in giddy excitement, and he had quickly opened his leather pouch and counted the golden coins within, hoping that the so-called 'galleons' would amount to enough, to just see if he could perhaps embark on some of those adventures.

He had been crushed when he had seen he didn't have nearly enough, but his spirits had risen again after he had kept meandering along Diagon Alley, absorbing everything with his eyes.

Tom hadn't seemed too impressed by any of it and had soon cut short Harry's fun. Ever the practical one, Tom had analyzed the list of items they had to buy according to their letters and had pulled Harry along with him in a round of shopping for the only things that were basic and necessary.

First, they had gone to a junk shop, buying two second-hand trunks, and Tom had so effectively and thoroughly charmed the shopkeeper that the old woman had given them a fifty-percent discount, had waved her stick at the trunks making them look brand new and had even done something to make them weightless. Then they had gone to Scribbulus Everchanging Inks, where they had bought parchments, quills, and ink bottles.

In Monsieur Ermenegilde Aurélien Jean-Baptiste Célestin's Haute Robes, they had bought one set of first-rate black robes and pants for each of them. Tom had insisted that they had to have at least one set of good-quality clothes.

"No one needs to know we're as poor as church mice. The impression you make with your appearance is everything," Tom had hissed out sharply when Harry had been complaining about the expenditure. Really, spending bunches of gold coins in posh clothes was not Harry's idea of 'buying the basics'.

Thankfully, Tom had agreed to buy the rest of their clothing, such as shirts and other items that wouldn't be seen under their robes, in the second-hand clothes shop.

In Flourish & Blotts they had nearly spent two hours perusing the bizarre books that sighed or screamed when opened, or wiggled and moved around, or even abruptly popped out eyes, sprung
fangs or sprouted tentacles.

Harry had practically needed to drag Tom away from the bookstore in the end. Though moments before, when they had finally simply bought the required textbooks mentioned in their letters, Harry had wanted to make a concession after seeing Tom's resentful and embittered expression when counting the galleons they had left, his brother's dark blue eyes still lingering with want and longing on the rows of shelves.

"Perhaps," had whispered Harry, turning his gaze this way and that to make sure he wasn't being overheard, "we could do our little play-acting. You know, what we do when Alice takes us out to commercial London."

One of Tom's eyebrows had quirked upwards and he had piercingly stared at Harry, gauging the seriousness of his offer. Indeed, as the years passed and they got older, Harry had become more and more reluctant to keep nicking stuff from stores; not because he thought it was wrong since he no longer felt it was that bad, but rather because he thought that the older they got, the higher the chances it would stop working and someone would catch them red-handed.

Tom had seemed to gravely consider the matter, but at last had shaken his head. "It's too risky in this case. We don't know what kind of... magical-" he had said, hesitating in employing that word which still felt foreign and otherworldly to them "- security measures they have." He had then pulled himself to his full height, still a head taller than Harry, to Harry's misfortune, and had whispered with self-satisfaction, "After we know more about this world, we'll start doing it."

Harry had been a bit alarmed at that. He had intended his offer to be a one-time thing. But before he could protest, Tom had dragged him to their next stop.

They had gone to the cauldron shop and then to Slug & Jiggers Apothecary, since apparently they required slimy innards, herbs, powders, fangs, eyeballs, feathers, and claws, for a class simply called 'Potions'.

And finally they were in a very crowded pet store, amidst cages with enormous purple toads, gigantic tortoises with jewel-encrusted shells, poisonous orange snails, rabbits that changed into top hats and back, cats of every size and color, noisy ravens and colorful and exotic birds – Harry had even seen a peacock strutting about– custard-colored furballs, and even sleek, black rats which were apparently highly intelligent and could be taught how to dance a jig and play fetch.

Tom was by now skewering him with narrowed eyes, his scowl having turned into a frown; not a worried one but rather irritated and impatient.

"I said that I'm taking him," snapped Tom shortly, gesturing at the thing on his shoulder. "I'll call him Lord Horkos. What do you think?"

Harry blinked, and then blurted out incredulously, "Lord what?"

"Horkos," repeated Tom with short-tempered annoyance. "He was a powerful wizard in the Middle Ages, apparently. I read that in a book in Flourish and-"

"Right," interrupted Harry as he shook his head. Then he warily peered at the creature. "But what is it?"

"An owl, obviously," gritted out Tom testily.

"That's not an owl," opined Harry with utter conviction, as he pointed a finger at the creature, though careful that his digit wasn't in biting range. Its red eyes were even now piercing him with a
vicious glint in them, as if the thing was about to spring forward to take a chunk of him. "It looks more like a ruddy vulture to me. A very nasty one, at that."

"That's why I'm taking him," remarked Tom smugly, and with that, he spun around and strutted towards the counter.

Harry remained standing in place for a moment and then lurched forwards, trailing after Tom as he complained with a whine, "But then what pet do I buy?"

"You can only get a cat or a toad now, since I already got an owl," stated Tom over his shoulder, without bothering to look back at him. "Just choose a stupid kitten and be done with it."

"I don't want a bloody kitten," snapped Harry, irked beyond measure. Then he huffed and added in a sensible tone of voice, "Besides, snakes and kittens don't get along. Remember when Nagini ate the neighbor's cat? And she'll eat a toad as well."

Tom swirled around to pierce him with his eyes, and interjected sharply, "What does Nagini have to do with it?" In the next second, his eyes narrowed to slits. "You are not taking Nagini to school."

Harry abruptly halted in his tracks and gaped at him. "What-? Of course I'm taking her!"

"It says we can only bring a cat, an owl, or a toad," hissed out Tom, plucking out his letter to wave it in front of Harry's nose. "It doesn't say 'please bring dangerous, mortally lethal snakes into our school filled with little children', does it?"

"Nagini isn't dangerous-" started Harry, feeling quite indignant in her behalf.

"You little idiot," snapped Tom as he stood to tower over Harry. "She's not dangerous to us, but she is to the rest of people-"

"Since when do you care about other people?" gritted out Harry through clenched teeth, as he glared up at his brother. "And since when are you a stickler for rules-"

"I care when it means that I could get expelled," retorted Tom, his tone of voice turning poignant as he looked down at Harry as if he was beholding a brainless slug writhing under the sole of his shoe. "And I'm not getting expelled from magic school before knowing if it's worth my while or not."

With his jaw tightening, Harry stared at him. Then he crossed his arms over his small chest and finally huffed out, "Well, I'm not going to be the one to tell her that we're leaving her behind. She'll bite me if I tell her, you know she will."

Tom let out a scoff of snide and contempt, and then said in a taunting and derisive tone of voice, "Is little, bitty Harry scawed of the tiny, bitty snakey?"

Harry's hot temper flared, but then he simply glared daggers at him and piped in a mocking tone of voice of his own, "If you are sooo brave, you tell her. You're her maaaster after all, aren't you?"

Tom hesitated for a moment; Harry was quick to catch that—Ha! He had always known that he couldn't be the only one who was wary of Nagini's temper.

"Fine. I will," bit out Tom at last, to then swirl around and finally reach the store's counter.

The shopkeeper of the Magical Menagerie, a doddering old man who seemed quite batty and partly deaf, looked mightily happy that Tom was taking the 'vulture' off his hands. The old man even
threw in a few owl-biscuits for free after selling a cage to Tom, and then tried to unsuccessfully persuade him to buy a tonic for foul-tempered owls.

Furthermore, the man looked very cheerful at the galleons Tom handed over in payment for 'Lord Horkos' – the nasty thing was even overpriced, at that. Harry still didn't see the sense in spending so much just to have an intimidating and threatening-looking bird.

And while the old shopkeeper went on to explain how to take care of the owl – apparently not much had to be done since the creature hunted for food himself and only required a very neat cage, it seemed the owl was very supercilious about cleanness, Tom and he would get along famously – his brother took the opportunity to whisper demandingly.

"Are you getting a pet or not?"

"No," grumbled Harry peevishly, as he leaned against the counter and gazed around the shop with disinterest, indeed finding nothing that caught his attention.

With supreme indifference of his own at Harry's dissatisfied pouting and pigheaded stubbornness, Tom went back to continue listening to the deaf old man who yelled rather than spoke.

They finally left the shop, dragging their stuffed but weightless trunks, with Tom looking extremely smug with his purchase and carrying the cage as if the creature within was the most precious thing in the world. Meanwhile, Lord Horkos was simply perched inside, ignoring everything and everyone around, having simply stuck his ugly head under one oversized, black wing.

The creature had already savagely gobbled down all the biscuits, and that seemed to drowsily satisfy him for the moment. Though given the bird's size and thus food-intake requirements, Harry didn't think Lord Horkos would remain peaceful for long.

But that was Tom's problem, Harry thought happily, and he would enjoy seeing how his brother would attempt to explain Lord Horkos to Alice, and especially to Kathy. Oh yes, Mrs. Cole would do some yelling that night.

Vastly cheered up, Harry grinned to himself and then plucked out his letter, mentally ticking off all the things they had already bought, and then mused out loud, "We only need to get our sticks, and we're done."

"They're called wands," corrected Tom sharply, turning around to darkly glare down at him. "Start using the proper terms. I don't want you going around talking like a muggle." His eyes narrowed to dark blue slits, as he added threateningly, "It would reflect badly on me and I will not have it."

"Of course, brother dearest," intoned Harry in deceptively dulcet tones, suppressing a roll of his eyes. Then he took another peek at the letter. "It suggests here that we go to Ollivander's. Do you see it?"

"Let's try that way," said Tom as he jerked his chin to the right, his hands already occupied with trunk and cage.

They soon reached the end of the street, without having met the wandshop –clearly they had gone in the wrong direction- but before Tom could turn around, Harry grabbed him by the arm as he pointed to the building before them.

It had crooked stone columns that made it look as if it was about to collapse. Indeed, all its angles seemed simply wrong and impossible, and it had an enormous set of doors which seemed to be
made of solid gold, with words running along its frame – a warning of some sort. But that hadn't caught his attention, nor the scary-looking creatures that seemed to be guarding the entrance nor the lavish marble floors rimmed with gold that he could see through the parted doorway. What had, was its name; the letters etched in stone above the doors.

"Look, it says it's a bank – Gringotts' Bank," muttered Harry, without peeling his gaze away from it.

Tom shot a glance at the building and then said indifferently, "So?"

Harry snapped his head around to stare up at him. "Banks have a lot of information, right? And we know our dad must be a wizard, so we could-"

Dropping his trunk on the ground, Tom held up a hand and said shortly, "What – ask them if our father has an account with them?" He let out a scathing scoff, looking down at him as if he was a brain-damaged simpleton. "Banks don't give away that sort of information and we don't even know his full name-"

"We know his first name, yours. And his last name, ours. Whether he has a middle name and what it is wouldn't make much difference," interrupted Harry stubbornly, his teeth then clenching together as he glared up at him. "I know you hate him and don't care. But I want to find him, and if they know…"

At Tom's hardening expression, Harry quickly changed tacks. He trailed off and then peered up at him with huge eyes, quickly blinking twice to make them watery and teary, even letting out a sniffle before he said very softly, "Tom… do it for me, please. I just want to try."

Harry saw his brother wavering and he had to bite his tongue to suppress a triumphant grin. He simply remained gazing up at Tom with an utterly heart-wrenching expression on his face.

"Alright," finally snapped Tom briskly, shooting him a vexed scowl as he grabbed the handle of his trunk and maneuvered Lord Horkos' cage to his other hand. "Let's go, then."

Harry smirked to himself and then towed his own trunk, though he nearly halted when the thought struck him that banks didn't allow children inside; at least not London's banks.

Though the next moment he saw a gaggle of teens planting themselves before the two guards, they had something in their hands, it must have been small since Harry couldn't see what it was. But the guards were clearly inspecting whatever it was, and only then allowed the teens to go through.

Nevertheless, arming himself with valor, he finally reached the two scary-looking creatures. They were just as short as he was, but they were very stout and seemed vicious, with nearly bald heads with a few scraggly hairs here and there, long, crooked and pointy noses, small beady eyes, jagged and sharp teeth, and with the longest and most knotted hands he had ever seen, the fingernails several inches long. They were even wearing chest-armors of some sort; the metalwork was quite intricate and beautiful.

"Er, Mr. -?" said Harry hesitantly, addressing the first guard.

However, the creature didn't offer any name. He simply stared down at him over his nose, and demanded sharply, "Key."

"Key?" repeated Harry dumbly, blinking in befuddlement. "Key of what?"

"Of the vault," said the creature in a bored tone of voice. At Harry's expression of
incomprehension, he added briskly, "Of your vault or your family's vault. No key, no entrance."

"Vault?" muttered Harry, to then shoot a look of puzzlement at Tom. But then he shook his head and tried again, addressing the guard, "No, you see, we're here regarding our father's accou-"

"Our father's vault," interjected Tom quickly, swiftly taking a step forward as he covertly dug his elbow into Harry's ribs.

Finally, Harry quickly caught up with the situation and let out a chuckle as he slapped a hand on his forehead. "Yes, our father's vault! Heh, you see, I mean – our father, he's Mr. Riddle, you know, and he said that we didn't need the key to his vault. That if we gave you his name you could perhaps let us in-"

"No key, no entrance," interrupted the guard sharply.

Harry cleared his throat, and bravely made another attempt. He peered at the creature in the same way he had done with Tom moments ago. After all, if it worked on his brother who was the hardest nut to crack, then maybe it would work with the creatures too.

However, in the next moment it became evident that he was failing. The creature looked even more short-tempered than before, his small beady eyes narrowing with alert suspicion.

At last, with impatience, Harry dropped his trunk and took a step forward, his face inches away from the creature's, as he said candidly, "Mr. Guard, please, we only want to go inside to talk to one of the tellers. You see, our father has gone missing and we're very concerned. And perhaps our dad has been here. Perhaps one of the tellers has seen him – or even you! And perhaps the bank has his new address…" He trailed off and peered at him through his eyelashes as he said in a small, sad tone of voice, "I think he has abandoned us, or perhaps he hit his head and doesn't remember us, but maybe he told the bank where he lives, and we only want to write to him. He's called Riddle. We only want to ask-"

"No Riddle has or has ever had a vault in Gringotts," cut in the guard shortly, to then briskly gesture with one of his knotted hands as if to drive him away as if he were a noisome pest.

"Wait - what?" blurted out Harry. "What do you mean? How can you be sure?"

"I'm sure," replied the creature testily, "because we goblins know the name of every wizard and creature that is our client."

'Goblins?', Harry inwardly wondered for a brief second. Then he shook his head and pressed on vehemently, "Then maybe in some other bank-"

"Gringotts is the only wizarding bank in Europe," stated the guard gruffly, skewering him with narrowed eyes, critically trailing his gaze up and down Harry's figure.

Harry was certain the creature wasn't much impressed with him. Both he and Tom had dressed up with their best clothes, but even that wouldn't amount to much. He knew they must look like street urchins, with their cheap cotton shirts that were yellowish rather than white, their grey caps like those of newspaper boys, with their knee-length socks and short pants, and their frayed vests of brown wool, and even their leather shoes were worn; Harry's left shoe had several stitches missing and the sole flapped with every step he took.

"In Europe?" repeated Harry, frowning. "So if he-"

"If your father is living in some other continent," interrupted the guard with irritated vexation, "he
could have a vault in some other bank."

"Or maybe he's dead," interjected Tom coolly as he took a step to stand besides Harry, piercing the creature with his eyes. "Maybe that's why he no longer has a vault here and why you don't remember-"

"If he had been our client in the past, we would still remember his name," snapped the guard dourly, "and if he's dead, the key to his vault would have returned to us and we would have sent it to his next of kin by blood. Apparently, we would have sent it to you, if this Mr. Riddle is truly your father."

"But – I don't understand," muttered Harry under his breath, a deep, alarmed frown on his face. "What does it mean, then-?"

"Thank you for your help," cut in Tom, his tone very polite as he then grabbed Harry by the wrist and pulled him away.

"But Tom, hang on, I-"

"Enough," hissed out Tom under his breath, as he managed to forcefully drag Harry along with him to where they had left their trunks and the cage. He dropped Harry's wrist and spun around to pierce him with his gaze, looking incensed and enraged. "I'm not wasting a single second more in finding out about the man who left our mother to give birth to us and die in an orphanage, and who never looked back-"

"But we already talked about that," interjected Harry stubbornly, "maybe he didn't know she had us, maybe he didn't know she was pregnant."

"Then it means that she fled away from him!" snapped Tom irately. "And he didn't bother looking for her, did he? Or it would have possibly led him to St. Jerome's and no Mr. Riddle has come calling, has there?"

Harry adamantly shook his head. "But it could have been that-"

"There're no 'buts'," bit out Tom, clenching his jaw. "He's dead to me and that's the end of it." He skewered him with narrowed eyes and added in a low hiss, "I won't ever help you with this again. I won't discuss it again either. For all purposes, count me out."

And with that, in the next second, Tom's expression turned into an impassive one as he grabbed the cage and the handle of his trunk. "Now, let's go get our wands – it's the only thing of true value we're getting today, as far as I'm concerned." He shot a side-glance at his snoozing owl, and added with a smirk, "Besides Lord Horkos, of course."

"Of course," repeated Harry mockingly with a roll of his eyes, as he trailed after his brother with trunk in tow.

However, as they kept looking for the wandshop, they remained quiet. It was evident that their little quarrel had left neither of them too happy with the other.

"Perhaps it's that way," piped in Harry, at last breaking the tense silence which had reigned between them, as he gestured towards a sign – it said 'Knockturn Alley', with the depiction of a finger pointing towards the entrance to a very dark and narrow street.

Tom nodded and Harry started to follow him inside, though as he crossed the threshold, he suddenly saw words forming under the sign: 'Darklings, speak Dark Arts and see our true wares.'
"Did you see that?" murmured Harry, wondering what it could mean. But Tom didn't hear him, his brother was already several feet further ahead and Harry quickened his pace to reach him.

Instantly, he realized that going there hadn't been such a good idea. The alley kept narrowing and feeling more oppressive and dangerous with every step they took; he saw dodgy characters whispering among themselves and watching them with a mean glint in their eyes, he even saw a couple of hunched old women with humungous, ugly warts, and small beady eyes that observed them as if plotting what use they could make of their parts, one of them even crooned and crooked her withered finger, beckoning him.

"Um… perhaps we shouldn't be here," whispered Harry uncertainly, as he continued to uneasily glance at their surroundings – he even thought he saw a pair of orange eyes staring at them from the shadows.

However, Tom didn't pay attention to him. The boy appeared to feel quite comfortable and self-assured in the ambiance of the alley, as well as intrigued by the window displays. Though there wasn't much to look at; nearly all the shops lacked signs and seemed to be dirty and dark inside, with few items being shown in their displays.

Harry halted by Tom's side, who had stopped before a gloomy-looking store, albeit one that at least had a sign, which simply read 'Borgin & Burkes'.

Harry peered at the window display, only seeing what appeared to be the head of a mummy, given that it was a skull wrapped in bandages, and a frayed cushion on which laid a sharp dagger with dark red stains along the edges – what he surmised had to be dried blood.

"It doesn't have much," grumbled Tom with dissatisfaction. "None of these stores do."

Harry frowned, and then a thought struck him. "Perhaps that's what the words on the street sign meant."

Tom shot him a questioning glance and Harry started to elucidate, "A message appeared when…" Then he huffed and waved his hand briskly as he added, "Never mind, let me try and see…" He glanced back at the window display, and feeling a bit stupid, he simply mumbled without really knowing what it meant, "Dark Arts."

"Oh!" Harry gasped out in the next second, when the previously unoccupied space in the window display became cluttered with innumerable items. He then quickly glanced at the other nearby shops and saw that the same had happened there.

"What – what is it?" snapped Tom, looking irked and impatient.

"Say what I said," Harry intoned happily, as he started perusing the items with an interested gaze.

Tom shot him an irritated scowl. "What nonsense are you spouting-"

"Just do it," said Harry shortly as he threw at his brother a vexed glance.

"Fine," bit out Tom, looking as if the whole thing was a supreme waste of his time. "Dark Arts."

The next moment, Tom's eyebrows shot upwards as his gaze became riveted on the new items on the window display, and Harry chirped smugly, "See?"

Both then proceeded to gawk at all the weird stuff; many items had tags with short descriptions and their prices – many of which seemed astronomically high to Harry, after a whole day of
shopping which had given him a sense of the value of galleons, knuts, and sickles.

One item in particular soon caught their attention, since it was the only one without a price, and its tag simply said: 'To place a bid, ask for Burke. If ye're not filthy rich, don't bother.'

"That must be the flashiest thing I've ever seen," Harry said with a chuckle, as he stared at the item in question: a heavy-looking and garish golden locket, with a serpentine S in glittering green gems inlaid on the front.

"I like the snaky S figure," remarked Tom loftily, gazing at it with an interested glint in his eyes. "And it looks expensive."

In the next second, Tom started to drag his trunk forward, with Lord Horkos' cage dangling from his other hand, as he said over his shoulder, "Let's take a look inside."

"Watch out!" was the only thing Harry had time to say, as a fat, short man lurched out from the shop, looking harassed and irritated, and collided with Tom, while a gruff and angry voice bellowed from inside the store.

"If ye want mor' galleons, bring me Bloodmoon Tentaculae next time, 'Orace!"

The stranger stumbled backwards as Tom bounced off the man's pudgy belly, Lord Horkos' cage flew up into the air, with the bird shrieking and flapping its enormous black wings in indignant anger. Harry managed to drop the handle of his own trunk swiftly, to grasp the cage with one hand while he used the other to grip Tom's arm to prevent his brother from tumbling heels over head over his trunk.

"Ufff!" let out the stranger after the collision, looking disheveled and caught unawares.

"What the bloody hell!" snapped Tom furiously, as he righted himself up, slapped Harry's helping hand away from him, and then shot a glower at the man. "Watch where you're going, you imbecile!"

The man started to mumble something, and then paused to blink down at them.

Harry stared back in bemusement at the man's protruding belly, the balding head, and the largest and bushiest moustache he had ever seen.

"What are you two boys doing here?" said the man with a frown. Then he became fidgety and nervous as he glanced around. "Where're your parents?"

"We don't have parents," bit out Tom, still angry as he continued to straighten out his clothes, "not that it's any of your damn business…"

Harry cleared his throat, and said, trying to assuage the situation, "We're looking for a wandshop. Ollivander's-"

"Oho!" exclaimed the man as he now gazed at them with interest. "You're about to start your first year at Hogwarts, then!" He let out a belly-laughter, and declared cheerfully, "Well, you're not going to find Ollivander's here." His expression then turned grave and reprimanding for a brief moment, as he added with a tut, "Knockturn Alley is no place for children. Come along now, I'll show you the way."

"We don't need an escort-" started to gripe Tom acerbically, but Harry cut him short with a "Thank you, sir!" and a beaming smile, since the old hags and dangerous-looking, dodgy wizards seemed
to be lurking in the shadows waiting for them, and he thought that the presence of an adult was just the thing they needed.

Tom shot him a fulminating glare, but Harry simply ignored him as he pushed Lord Horkos' cage back to his brother and started to follow the portly, kind man through the twists and coils of the narrow, gloomy street.

The stranger didn't say much as they made their way; the man merely glanced to the sides, as if concerned that someone would jump out from the shadows and point an accusing finger at him, in recognition.

Finally, when they were about to reach the intersection with Diagon Alley, the man took a peek around the corner and declared happily, "The way is clear." Then he turned around and whispered conspiratorially as he winked at them, "Let's not tell anyone where we met, eh?"

At Tom and Harry's nonplussed expressions, the man then simply patted Harry on the shoulder and added congenially, "Ollivander's is the fifth shop to the right. I'll see you at the Sorting!"

"At the what?" said Harry in befuddlement, but the man had already left, surreptitiously slipping into Diagon Alley as if he had never set foot in Knockturn in the first place.

Tom merely let out a snide scoff. "Batty, old lardo."

And with that, he ploughed forward into Diagon Alley, with Harry at his heels.

Indeed, after weaving through the crowd, they found the wandshop precisely where the stranger had said. Before entering the store, Harry mouthed the words etched under the sign, in astonishment at the date: 'Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C'.

The shop was narrow, shabby and dusty, with many shelves behind the counter, with thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. But there was also a strange feeling to the place, something that made Harry's skin tingle pleasantly and the back of his neck prickle.

"Good afternoon," said a soft voice, as an old man appeared behind the counter, with glowing, pale eyes looking at them with interest. "I'm Ollivander. And who might you two be?"

"I'm Tom Riddle," said Tom coolly, inspecting the man with his own gaze and apparently finding him unimpressive. He then jabbed a thumb in Harry's direction. "He's my twin brother, Harry."

"Riddle… Riddle…" muttered the old man under his breath, as if trying to jolt his memory. In the next moment, he seemed to give up in his endeavor and gazed back at them in curiosity. "Twins, you say?"

Tom's eyes slightly narrowed, and he said tersely, "Yes."

"We're here to buy our wands," supplied Harry, quite unnecessarily but in order to help matters along, since the man seemed to be staring at them in some sort of analytical trance.

Mr. Ollivander blinked, seemingly pulled out from whatever musings, and then shot them a mild smile. "Of course you are. Finer wands than mine you will not find. Let's get to work, then."

And with that, the man snapped his fingers and soon, two measure-tapes sprung into existence, fluttering around Tom and Harry, spanning along their arms, hands, legs, and the full extent of their height, to then go around the length of their foreheads, while Ollivander took notes in a small piece of parchment.
In a couple of more minutes, several narrow boxes came flying from the shelves and Ollivander simply told them to "Give them a flick!"

The testing of wands seemed to go on for ages, though they were entertained as Ollivander went to explain the types of cores and woods, and the basics of wand-making, with Tom's mood vastly improving as he listened avidly, while Harry merely enjoyed the experience.

At last, with no winners in sight, Ollivander scratched his head, muttered something under his breath and then disappeared into the depths of shelves. Moments later, he came back with a couple of more boxes, presenting the first wand to Tom.

The moment Tom swished it, a fountain of silver specks exploded from the wand's tip, and Tom started down at it with wide, amazed eyes. In the next second, his expression turned giddy and possessive, while a wide, placid smirk spread on his face.

"Well, there you have it," said Ollivander, gazing at Tom with those creepy, moon-like eyes of his. "Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. With a core of phoenix feather. A very unique core." He paused to skewer Tom with an intense gaze, and then added quietly, "A powerful wand - very powerful."

Tom's head snapped up at that, his smirk widening with supremely smug self-satisfaction.

Ollivander cleared his throat, peeled his gaze away from Tom to then stare at Harry, with a musing expression on his face. Slowly, he presented a wand to Harry as he continued to fixedly gaze at him.

Harry gave it a casual flick, and then gasped as a stream of green and gold sparks shot out from the tip like a firework.

"Yes, how very interesting," whispered Ollivander, his creepy gaze flickering from Harry to Tom and back, briefly pausing on Harry's scarred forehead. "Eleven inches, made of holly. And it so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand's core gave only one other feather – for the wand that has chosen your companion. Both wands just as unique, just as powerful. You two boys have twin wands."

"Twin wands?" Harry shot him a beaming smile. "Well, it makes sense, doesn't it?" He nudged Tom with an elbow as he chuckled. "Twins for twins!"

Ollivander quirked up an eyebrow as he flung a glance at Tom, which was met with a narrowed-eyed, suspicious and then menacing stare from Tom, while the interaction was completely missed by Harry, who was too busy with the sensations coursing through his body as he held his wand; enfolding warmth, and a flow of something within him rolling through his body and into the wand and back, like pleasant, tingling waves going back and forth like tides, as if the wand belonged to him as an extension of himself. He nearly felt drunk with the feeling.

They left the shop after Ollivander had turned strangely quiet as they paid, as Harry bubbled excitedly about their wands.

"I'm going back to Flourish and Blotts," abruptly informed him Tom the moment they stepped back into Diagon Alley. "We still have time and perhaps I can persuade the clerk to give me another discount."

Harry merely rolled his eyes and huffed. "Well, I'm not spending my last couple of galleons in a book. I'll meet you there in half an hour."

Tom shot him an annoyed glance. "What are you going to do, then?"
"I'm gonna explore," piped in Harry, knowing exactly where to go.

In their first round of shopping he had briefly seen two stores which had caught his attention but which Tom hadn't allowed him to go into: Gambol & Japes, that seemingly sold a wide variety of tricks and practical joke items, and Quality Quidditch Supplies, which he was clueless about what they sold but had seen a flock of boys and even girls excitedly talking among themselves as they pressed their noses against the display window of the shop.

In the next second, Harry let go of the handle of his trunk, chirped "Take my trunk with you!" and then quickly fled from the scene before Tom could bellow at him.

Toothily grinning to himself, he first arrived at Quality Quidditch Supplies, and had to precariously stand on his tiptoes in order to attempt to see above the sea of heads of the children planted before the store.

Aggravated at his lack of height and thus lack of success, he was about to plough forward into the crowd with the use of jabbing out his elbows, when someone careened into him, grabbed him by the arms, turning him to a side and pulling him into the crowd of children, to then squat in front of him, holding him in place by gripping his wrists, as it squeaked, "Cover me!"

"What?" blurted out Harry in bewilderment, gazing down to see that it was a boy. But the boy wasn't even looking at him, but rather fixedly gazing at some point across the street.

"Hide me – from them!" the boy said urgently, releasing one of Harry's wrists to point out with a finger.

Nonplussed, Harry followed the direction with his gaze to see a group of people strolling down the street: two women with a bunch of children. The women had supercilious and superior-looking expressions on their faces, and the children, both girls and boys of varying ages, looked remarkably alike, all with black hair and similarly hued eyes. Furthermore, from the little that Harry had seen of wizarding fashion, they all looked to be richly and poshly dressed in dark colors, with only a smattering of silver or bronze here and there.

The group soon started to pass them by, and their conversation reached Harry's ears.

"… where has that unruly boy of yours gone to, Irma?" was saying one of the women, with a harsh and disapproving expression on her face. "Really, you should have a firmer hand with him."

The other woman looked pinched as she replied with a suffering tone of voice, "I have tried everything, Melania. Not even Pollux has managed to instill in him a sense of propriety and good conduct. We have even punished him by suspending his pegasus-riding classes, but it didn't work-"

"Oh, mother," snapped sharply a plain, mean-looking girl, "just kill his crup pup and be done with it. Alphie will learn not to disobey then."

"Your idea might be worthy of consideration, Walburga dear," said the woman with a pensive expression on her face.

"Of course it is," said the girl impatiently, to then add cajolingly, "You promised I could get a new gown from Monsieur Ermenegilde for the Averys' ball of this weekend-"

The girl's mother waved a hand dismissively. "Yes, yes, go and spend what you like. Your cousin Orion will escort you."

At that, a handsome boy, that looked a bit younger, paled significantly, while the girl gazed back at
him with a victorious smirk and an infatuated glint in her eyes.

"You heard, Orion," said the other woman briskly, Melania, the boy's mother seemingly. "Take your sister Lucretia as well." She shot the pretty girl by her side a glance, as she added in a croon, "You could do with another gown yourself, dearest."

"Thank you, mother," piped in the beautiful girl in a sweet and polite tone of voice, and who was then rewarded by a pleased smile from her mother.

"Cygnus," then commanded Irma to the other boy left, who had a grave and serious expression on his face and looked quite disinterested with the proceedings. "You too, go with your sister and cousins. Melania and I will partake of tea in Leisure Alley. Don't bother us for a couple of hours. And if you find your brother, don't let him out of your sight again!"

And with that, the group scattered and their respective conversations faded away.

A loud, relieved exhalation of breath reached Harry's ears and he snapped his head around to see the boy rising to his feet. The boy had curly, black hair, grey eyes, and was just as short as him, Harry saw. Then the boy did a double-take as he looked at Harry, apparently truly seeing him for the first time since manhandling him.

In the next moment, the boy had jumped a step back, his grey eyes wide, as he stuttered, "You're a… a…"

"I'm a what?" Harry frowned at him, then dismissed the boy's stutters and huffed. "A 'thank you' would be nice, you know?"

The boy blinked at him. "Er…" He then trailed Harry's figure with his gaze, as he blurted out, "You don't have warts."

"Warts?" Harry stared back at him in bewilderment. "Why would I have-"

"Your kind has warts, does it not?" said the boy, now peering at him with much interest. "And you're all dirty and poor – well, you are that, by your looks." He gazed at him critically. "But you don't look diseased to me. But perhaps you do have lice and leprosy, eh?"

"What?" choked out Harry, feeling utterly gobsmacked and confused. Then he shook his head and bit out briskly, "I don't have any diseases, thank you very much. And what do you mean by 'my kind'? And you're very rude, you know that?"

The boy snapped his mouth shut, and blinked and stared at him, as if the notion that he had been rude hadn't even entered his mind. Then he shook Harry a sheepish grin, and simply said "Sorry", as if expecting a pat on the shoulder for that generous and altruistic gesture.

"Whatever," snapped Harry shortly, spinning around with every intention of elbowing his way into the shop.

"Wait!"

Harry grunted with irritation and shot a glance over his shoulder, seeing how the boy took a deep breath as if arming himself with courage.

The boy then stuck out his hand, and declared as if giving some kind of formal, uber-important speech, "I'm Alphard Black. Thank you for helping me escape from my family."
Harry blinked at the weird boy, then weighed his options, decided that perhaps the boy wasn't that bad -though he certainly was a bit bonkers- and fully turned to face him, shaking his hand. "I'm Harry Riddle."

The moment they released each others' grip, Alphard stared down at his hand, as if he had expected that it would rot and fall off, and was now discovering that nothing untoward had happened to it.

Alphard then shot him a lopsided grin. "Well, Riddle, I owe you one, and I always pay my debts." He jutted his chin towards the shop, and added, "You were going into the Quidditch store, were you not? I'll be your guide, if you want."

Harry frowned at him. "My guide? What for?"

"You don't know what it is, do you?" said Alphard, shooting him a knowing glance. "I can explain it to you." He beamed a smile at him, and added enthusiastically, "It's only the best wizarding sport ever! I can tell you plenty about it!"

In the bat of an eyelash, he snagged Harry by the arm, apparently no longer scared to touch him, and pulled him along, as he started to enthuse about all the rules and details of Quidditch and all types of racing brooms, snitches and quaffles.
Part I: Chapter 11

The trip back to the orphanage was a tense affair.

Harry had had such a good time with Alphard, perusing all the marvelous items in the Quidditch shop as his new friend kept a running commentary explaining all sorts of things to Harry, that time had flown by before he had realized that he was late for meeting Tom back at the bookstore.

Reluctantly, he had informed Alphard that he had to leave, though he had been surprised when, leaving the store with Alphard by his side, the boy had stopped him before Harry could make a run towards Flourish & Blotts.

"Here, this is for you," had said Alphard, grinning at him as he plucked out a package from one of the large pockets of his dark blue robes.

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Harry had recognized it. In the Quidditch shop, for a moment, the boy had slipped away and Harry had seen him buying something at the counter, to then come back holding a small package wrapped in shinny silver paper with a big, black bow. Harry had assumed, of course, that it was something that Alphard had bought for one of his siblings or cousins.

"For me?" Harry had said, looking at him in wonderment.

"Of course!" had piped in Alphard, his grin widening as he added, "For helping me out, you know, back then - and for showing me a good time."

'A good time?', Harry had thought in amazement. True, it had been fun, but it wasn't as if it merited the gifting of a present. Alphard must be a very lonely boy, the thought had then struck Harry.
Nevertheless, Harry hadn't even considered the possibility of protesting and humbly refusing the present. On the contrary, he had been rather excited of getting something new without having to spend the last galleons left in his leather pouch.

So he had swiftly grasped the package from Alphard's hands, shot him a beaming smile and had chirped happily, "Thanks!"

Alphard had shrugged his shoulders. "Don't mention it. It's only a trifle." Then he had parted from Harry with a wave of his hand as he said, "I'll see you at Hogwarts!"

Harry had waved at him as well, as he had watched as Alphard made his way to Gambol & Japes, the joke shop, feeling despondent that he didn't have time to explore that shop himself and feeling a bit sad from losing the company of his new friend.

Regardless, they would see each other at magic school, since Alphard had already told him that it would be his first year at Hogwarts as well. The boy seemingly knew all about the school, from what his parents, siblings, and cousins had told him, but Alphard had refused to tell Harry anything at all.

"You'll enjoy it more if it's a surprise for you," Alphard had told him, and Harry had simply accepted it and hadn't press for more, since he did indeed love surprises, after all.

Thus, he had finally reached Flourish & Blotts, seeing Tom standing outside, looking extremely angry, impatiently tapping his shoe on the cobble-stoned ground, with Lord Horkos' cage in one hand, their two trunks by his sides, and with the largest and thickest book Harry had ever seen tucked under an armpit – evidently, Tom had managed to charm the clerk so that they would do that trick which made things weightless.

Harry had tilted his head to a side so that he could read the title of the thick tome: 'Hogwarts: A History - New Unabridged Edition!'

"What's that?" had instantly demanded Tom, pointing a finger at the package in Harry's hand.

"I'll explain later," Harry had quickly replied, regretting that he hadn't had a place in which to hide it from his brother. "Let's get back home before Magda realizes that we've been missing for the entire day."

"St. Jerome's is not home," had snapped Tom poignantly, but Harry hadn't bothered to argue as he took hold of his trunk's handle and started to make way towards the Leaky Cauldron.

Tom still despised the orphanage with all his hatred and bitterness, even after Mrs. Sharpe had died and Mr. Jenkins had been sacked. However, Harry still felt that Alice was like a mother to them, still loved and adored her, and still considered Billy Stubbs, Eric Whalley, and Amy Benson to be his closest friends, and thus, for him, St. Jerome's was simply 'home'.

As they finally left the Leaky Cauldron and entered London proper, with Tom still railing at Harry for having been late and for leaving his trunk with him, they managed to get on a bus which would leave them a few blocks away from the orphanage –the bus driver shot them the oddest of looks at their trunks and owl.

Then, Harry finally started to recount his meeting of Alphard Black as he unwrapped his gift, too absorbed to notice how Tom's expression darkened with every word he spoke.

When what Alphard had given him was finally revealed, Harry widely grinned in excitement.
It was a glossy book, called 'The Most Extraordinary Chaser Tactics and Maneuvers of the Century!', and he was quick to open it and start flipping through it; seeing countless moving pictures of flying young wizards doing all sorts of air-acrobatics as they scored quaffles through hoops. According to Alphard, being a Chaser was the best and most fun position in Quidditch.

Suddenly, the book was ripped from his hands, and Harry loudly complained as Tom ruffled through the book as he batted away all of Harry's attempts to get it back.

"Quidditch – a wizards' sport, you say?" sneered Tom acidly. "Looks like utter rubbish to me."

And with that, Tom briskly flung it over Harry's head.

Harry let out a startled and alarmed yell, but thankfully swiftly snatched the sailing book in mid-air before it could fly out of the bus' window.

"What's the matter with you!" Harry bellowed irately as he protectively pressed the book against his chest, wrapping his thin arms around it.

Tom's dark blue eyes narrowed to slits, as he hissed out spitefully, "You're all giddy and happy that you have a new little friend, aren't you? Did you tell him that you're a lowly orphan? I bet he won't like you as much when he finds out."

Harry shot him a mighty glower, but said nothing. He simply utterly ignored him – which he knew was the one thing Tom hated the most- and turned around in his seat, giving him his back in an angle that made it impossible for his brother to snatch the book away from him.

He spent the rest of the bus trip eagerly going through the book, while Tom stewed in his own dark thoughts, looking resentful, bitter, and in a foul-mood.

When they finally reached the orphanage after leaving the bus and dragging their trunks for several blocks, they easily slipped into their bedroom without encountering Magda. Evidently, the girl had never checked on them and was wholly ignorant that they had even left the place.

Nagini, though, wasn't.

"Where have you been?" she demanded in a furious hiss, the instant that Tom and Harry stepped into their bedroom, uncoiling her body from her place on top of Tom's pillow to skewer them with angry, yellow eyes."And why didn't you take me with you? I've been alone, bored, all day!"

"It's none of your business where we've been," snapped Tom shortly, while both he and Harry managed to put their trunks by the foot of their beds, occupying the last free space of their small room.

And as Harry then plopped down on his bed to placidly burrow there to continue perusing his book, Tom meanwhile cleared their nightstand and planted Lord Horkos' cage there, right below the open window.

It took Nagini a second to coil her tail and spring upwards, her gaze fixed on the usurper, as she hissed sharply, "What's that?"

Harry's gaze snapped up from the Quidditch book to glance at the snake and his brother, his lips tilting upwards in amusement at the oncoming quarrel.

"That," said Tom acerbically, throwing her a look of warning, "is Lord Horkos. An owl. I bought him and he's mine. Get used to it."
Nagini let out a vibrant, low hiss, as if steam was bursting from her nostrils. "Throw it out! I won't share, this is my territory -"

"This is MY territory," bit out Tom angrily. "You only live here because we let you, so watch what you say and mind your tone. He stays."

Nagini's yellow eyes narrowed to slits. In the next second, she flung herself into mid-air, landed on the floor, and then quickly slithered up one of the legs of Harry's bed, finally swiftly coiling herself on Harry's lap.

She threw at Tom a resentful glare from her new spot, as if saying 'There, see who's my favorite person now.' And Harry shot his brother a smirk as he started to pet her.

Tom, for his part, looked utterly indifferent as he then proceeded to unlatch the door of Lord Horkos' cage.

"What are you doing?" said Harry with alarm. "I don't think that's a good idea -"

"I have to let him out," bit out Tom with irritation. "He has to hunt, doesn't he? And the cage is too small for him to be stuffed there all day."

Harry adamantly shook his head and opened his mouth, but Tom had by then already opened it.

Nagini instantly tensed on Harry's lap, as Lord Horkos pulled his hulking figure out of the cage, hopping and then perching himself on the edge of the nightstand, his sharp talons leaving gouges on the wood.

The owl's big, ugly head instantly snapped around, his red gaze fixing on Nagini with a hungry and vicious glint in it. In the next instant, the creature let out a high-pitched shriek, spanning out his enormous black wings and hunching, as if about to lurch forward in an airborne attack.

Harry's eyes went wide with alarm and he would have dived out of the way if it weren't for Nagini, who still remained on his lap.

Nevertheless, she was a dangerous and crafty creature herself, and Nagini reacted swiftly to the threat.

Propelling herself with the tip of her tail, she pulled herself up to her full height. She was wiry-thin, but fully elongated she towered over Lord Horkos' intimidating height. And as she swayed and undulated from side to side, as if in some kind of tribal dance preluding a fearsome battle, she let out a series of shrilly, rattling hisses - Harry had never heard something like that coming from her.

The two creatures remained thus, their gazes locked in some sort of deathmatch, Lord Horkos shrieking and flapping his wings, Nagini hissing and undulating.

Harry observed them warily, ready to jump to a side the moment the two engaged in a fight, while Tom merely watched them nonchalantly.

To Harry's astonishment, Lord Horkos abruptly let out a gruff hoot, hopped around, and then flung himself out of the window. Nagini let out a smug hiss after that, and went back to coil herself on Harry's lap.

Harry blinked down at her, and then grinned as he started to scratch the tiny, tender scales under her jaw, as he cooed with pride, "Aren't you the scary one."
"I am," she hissed conceitedly, flicking out her forked tongue to contently caress his finger.

Tom scoffed at that, shooting both of them a snide look, to then merely sit on his bed and become immersed in 'Hogwarts: A History'.

A while later, Lord Horkos returned with a dead rat hanging by the tail from his beak. The creature utterly ignored Nagini as he started to gobble down his prey, and Nagini didn't even raise her head from Harry's lap.

Apparently, both creatures had already settled matters in their own way and had reached an agreement of 'live and let live'.

Half an hour had passed by, during which Tom and Harry brushed their teeth and changed to their pajamas to then continue reading their respective books, when the first sounds of activity reached their ears – the muffled, excited voices of children.

"They're back," whispered Harry. He shot Nagini a glance as he hissed urgently, "You know what to do."

She reared her head back to pierce him with a miffed gaze, and then she flung the tip of her tail in Lord Horkos' direction.

"What about the creature?" she spat in a hiss, as if the owl was the most loathsome thing in existence. "If I have to hide, then it should too-"

"He's just an owl," snapped Tom from his bed. "They'll let us keep him." He shot Nagini a harsh glance as he added crisply, "You're a snake and you'd scare them. If they see you, they'll kill you. You already know that."

"I would like to see them try," hissed Nagini, peeling open her maw to display her row of small albeit long, sharp teeth.

"Come, Nagini," said Harry in soothing, soft tones, as he offered her his arm, "it will only be for a while. I'll let you out afterwards, I promise."

She let out a hissed huff of indignation but nevertheless complied, wrapping herself along Harry's forearm. He opened the drawer of the nightstand and helped her slither into it.

Not a moment too soon, when Harry had dived under his covers and hid his book, with Tom doing the same, the door of their room cracked open.

Alice stepped inside with a worried expression on her face. "Are you feeling better, Harry-"

Her mouth hung agape the next instant, her eyes going wide as her gaze flickered from their trunks to Lord Horkos, who was still perched on their nightstand savagely devouring what was left of his rat.

"What's all this? And what's that!" Alice gasped out, looking as if she was about to shriek and run for the hills at the sight of Lord Horkos.

Tom forestalled her by saying smoothly, "He's an owl, completely harmless."

"Owl?" murmured Alice, blinking, and not looking at all convinced as she gazed at the creature again. Then she shook her head and demanded, in a more forceful tone of voice, "What are you doing with an owl?" She gestured at their trunks next. "And what are these!"
"Mr. Dumbledore gave us money for things we had to buy for our school," replied Tom calmly. "Just uniforms and the sort."

Alice gaped at them. "You went to buy clothes? To London-"

"It was his idea," piped in Harry, pulling a miserable expression on his face as he pointed a finger at Tom. "I told him I felt too ill, but he forced me-"

"You did what?" snapped Alice angrily, instantly rounding on Tom. "You said you'd take care of him, that's the only reason why I agreed to leave you behind!"

Tom had already thrown a furious glare at Harry the moment he heard him, but Harry had merely quirked an eyebrow at him.

Really, what had his brother expected? He wasn't going to tell Alice that he had faked the stomachache. Besides, his version of things neatly covered their tracks and was utterly convincing.

"Oh, I shouldn't have believed you," railed Alice at Tom. "Taking care of your sick brother was too much to expect from you, I see! And dragging the poor boy to stores..." With an expression of deep concern she reached Harry's bedside, as she added frantically, "Look at him – he even looks paler than this morning!"

Harry nodded several times, let out a pitiful moan and slowly rubbed his belly, as he peered at her with wide, pained eyes.

"Oh you poor child," she crooned softly, as she sat on his bed and worriedly pressed the palm of her hand on Harry's forehead. "You haven't developed a fever, at least..." She shot Tom a sharp glance and snapped, "Not thanks to you!"

With a huff, Alice rose to her feet and said quietly to Harry, "I'll bring you a cup of chamomile tea, dear. That will help."

The second she was gone, Tom flung off the covers of his bed and jumped to his feet, as he hissed out irately, "You backstabbing, traitorous little-"

"Relax," said Harry calmly with a roll of his eyes. "It worked, didn't it? I don't see why you must get so riled up-"

Tom's dark blue eyes flashed as he took a threatening step forward to loom over Harry's supine form, as he gritted out through clenched teeth with vicious sarcasm, "You don't see why I should-"

"Oh – oh!" gasped out Harry, letting out a loud groan.

Tom gazed at him in startled bewilderment, but Harry ignored it as he continued, now in a suffering and pained tone of voice, "I'm feeling worse – so much worse! My tummy is killing me – I might even vomit!"

He then shot Tom a pointed glance, as he added loftily, "I'm very, very ill. So you don't want Alice to return and see you standing there shouting at me, do you? I suggest you go back to your bed."

Tom stared at him with incredulity for a split second, and then with murder in his eyes, as if he was about to leap forward and savagely strangle him to death. The boy's dark blue eyes narrowed to slits, as he said very, very quietly, "You'll pay for this."

Harry shot him a toothy grin and then merely shrugged. He could deal with anything his brother
dished out.

Tom threw at him one last fulminating glare promising painful retribution, before he spun around and slipped into his bed, pulling an impassive expression on his face.

As Harry comfortably burrowed himself under the covers, nearly twiddling his thumbs, he slowly mused out loud, "What do you think Mr. Dumbledore told them?"

Tom and he had discussed the possibilities earlier in the day as they made their way to the Leaky Cauldron.

That morning, when they had opened their envelopes, besides the Hogwarts' letters with a list of required items and their classes, they had also discovered cream-hued, glossy parchments with seals on them displaying two intertwined M's.

They had seen that it was from the 'Ministry of Magic'; that had given them quite a lot to talk about.

Tom had fumed and angrily ranted – his brother despised all forms of authority, after all, and held them in contempt. Harry hadn't been thrilled either; it had been the first sign that indicated that the Magical World wasn't the fantasyland he had envisioned.

Furthermore, when they actually read the letters, they had both been very disappointed. Besides a formal greeting welcoming them into the Wizarding World, there had been a long list of rules that under-aged wizards, especially those living in the 'Muggle World', had to follow.

Firstly, they couldn't do magic outside of Hogwarts, not in their homes or anywhere else. Secondly, they couldn't do magic in the presence of muggles. Thirdly, they could tell no muggle about the existence of the Wizarding World; the only exception was immediately family - muggles related to them in the first degree by blood, in which case a Ministry official would have already visited their homes in order to explain matters to them. And finally, the first rule only expired when they became of age – apparently, when they turned seventeen.

If they broke any of those rules, their wands would be snapped, they would be expelled from Hogwarts, and if they were seventeen years old or over, they would also be sent to somewhere called 'Azkaban'. Obviously, it couldn't be a very nice place.

Thus, given that Alice and Kathy were just 'muggles' with no relation to them, they had wondered what Mr. Dumbledore had told them regarding Hogwarts.

The only thing they had surmised was that whatever the wizard had said must have been a very good, convincing lie, because neither of the women had even asked them any questions.

"Eh, Tom, so what do you think he told'em?" pressed on Harry when his brother remained silent.

"I'm not talking to you," spat Tom, as he continued to stare up at the ceiling.

Harry quirked an eyebrow at him. "Are you really going to sulk and brood?"

At that, Tom shot him the nastiest look Harry had ever seen, and Harry uneasily cleared his throat and mumbled quietly, "Er… yeah... do whatever you like…"

Then he quickly rolled to a side, turning his back to Tom, though he could still feel his brother's gaze boring holes into him; it made him feel a bit nervous and uncomfortable. Tom could be very scary when he wanted.
Harry heard rustling sounds and he peeked a glance over his shoulder, seeing Tom getting up from his bed and then moving towards the door.

"Where're you going?" asked Harry in puzzlement.

"I'm going to find out what he said to them," bit out Tom as he yanked the door open. When he caught sight of Harry's beaming grin, he snarled like a wild beast, "I'm not doing it for you, twerp! I want to know myself!"

And with that, he slammed the door shut after him, but Harry kept grinning nonetheless.

Tom fumed as he made his way towards the ground floor, imagining all sorts of ways in which he would take revenge on his 'little brother', his dear 'twin', the imp who had dared to use his wiles against him, persuading him to skip the trip to Southend-on-Sea—and Tom had had great plans for that trip: the cave!—to go to Diagon Alley, and who had then betrayed him in front of Alice.

Why, he had taught the little tyke everything the boy knew!

And then, for a moment, he felt a powerful blaze of pride. Harry had tricked him, and quite cunningly and slyly, at that. Naturally, it was all because of him—since Harry was innately too much of a goody-goody two shoes. Clearly, Harry had grown to be a bit astute due to Tom, because of Tom's lessons and influence.

Those thoughts marginally assuaged his roaring bad-temper. Nevertheless, it didn't mean that he wasn't going to make his 'little brother' pay.

Tom's lips curled upwards in satisfaction, envisioning the enjoyable possibilities. And despite his inward musings, he didn't fail to notice how, as he made his way along the corridors, the children gave him a wide berth. That ultimately lifted up his spirits.

If he had been sentimental, stupid little Harry, most of those children would have been calling out to him, cheerfully blabbering like idiots to tell him all about their seaside trip, all the silly little games they played and the stupid things that Old John Bryce had told them about the Great War, and whatnot.

Instead, Tom was beheld with fear, and was given the instinctual, primal respect that came with that, in his opinion. Thus, he was left blissfully alone and in peace.

At last, he caught sight of the kitchen, where he saw Alice placing a cup of tea on a tray. But Tom dismissed her; it was Mrs. Cole, as the Matron of St. Jerome's, who would know more about it. So he turned to a side and finally reached Kathy's office.

Tom didn't bother to knock. He simply pulled the door open and nonchalantly strolled inside.

Kathy was behind her cluttered desk, looking none the more rested nor refreshed after her trip to the seaside. Her gaze instantly snapped up to sharply glance at him, her expression turning guarded, suspicious, and dour all at the same time.

Well, he despised her too. Tom returned her gaze with a frosty one of his own, as he pulled a chair and smoothly took a seat, not waiting for an invitation.

Kathy's eyes narrowed at that, and then she said briskly, "What can I help you with, Tom?"

"I was wondering," Tom said calmly, "what you knew about the school Harry and I are going to
Kathy blinked at him, as if startled by a trivial question. "Well, I expect you know as much or more than I do. Mr. Bumbleboor went to speak to you, didn't he?"

"He did," replied Tom coolly, "but he didn't give us much information. Just that it was a… private…" he began, gauging her expression with every word he added to see if he was hitting the mark of what she had been told "… boarding… school… somewhere in…"

"In Scotland - yes," cut in Kathy impatiently, nodding her head and waving a hand as if wanting to quickly end a foolish conversation, "that your father selected for you boys, and fully paid, before dying."

Tom's eyebrows nearly shot up to his hairline. But he managed to mask his astonished surprise, and merely placidly gazed back at her, as he intoned softly, "Father… 'our' father – Harry's and mine?"

Kathy stared at him as if wondering if he had taken a hit to the head. "Yes, Tom, who else would it be?"

Tom's eyes marginally widened, but then he cleared his throat and said nonchalantly, "I see. I wonder… if our father enrolled us in the school, you must have asked Mr. Dumbledore for proof. You wouldn't have simply taken his word for it, would you?"

"Of course not," retorted Kathy, looking quite affronted. "I'm the Matron of an orphanage. I wouldn't just let two boys wander off to some mysterious school without having information about it, or documents ascertaining the validity of your enrollment." She shot Tom a most insulted look, as she started to go through the things on top of her desk, as she muttered, "In fact, Mr. Dumberdoor gave me the papers himself – with the information about the school, it's location, and even the contract your father signed before he died in that accident… or was it your grandparents? … I don't quite recall, but it's somewhere here…"

"You say you saw signatures in a contract?" inquired Tom smoothly. "Do you recall the names?"

"Yes, it was…" Kathy trailed off, abruptly deeply frowning and then rubbing her forehead. "Well, I don't quite remember right now… it was something like… like…" She huffed, apparently annoyed at her own faulty memory, and then rummaged through the papers at the right side of her desk. "I remember leaving the contract here… I must have misplaced it…"

Indeed, she only found a blank piece of paper in the place where she would have sworn she had left the document.

Meanwhile, Tom was observing her with the intensity of a hawk, a mesmerizing possibility churning in his mind nearly since the start of their conversation.

To further test his suspicions, Tom leaned forward and absorbed her with his gaze, as he murmured quietly, "I trust that our agreement still stands?"

"Agreement?" Kathy stopped perusing her desk in order to stare back at him with a perplexed frown. "What agreement?"

"The agreement we reached some years ago," said Tom carefully, piercing her with his dark blue gaze, taking notice of any possible twitch in her expression, "one night when I overheard you and Alice arguing about me and my… twin, in the kitchen. And I confronted you, because I was angry about…."
He trailed off, skewering her with his gaze as he waited for her to complete his sentence.

"Um, yes," said Kathy, blinking twice at him. "I think I remember. We argued about…" Her forehead scrunched. "Er, it was about…"

"I was very rude and angry then," supplied Tom slowly, intently staring at her.

"Yes," interjected Kathy flatly, shooting him a wry glance. "I remember that."

Tom shook his head, a contrite expression on his face as he said candidly, "I shouldn't have overreacted in such manner. If you and Alice wanted to convince Harry to go to church, I shouldn't have been so angry about it. I should have let you do it, instead of making you promise to leave him alone -"

"Oh, yes, you might be right! I think I recall now…"

"Of course you do," Tom said warmly, widely smiling at her.

He fluidly rose to his feet, but before he left, he said one more thing, wanting to know just how deep it went.

"I've never thanked you," he whispered quietly, gazing at her with a softness in his eyes, "for helping our mother. Alice told me the story." A gentle, deeply grateful expression unfolded across his face. "You helped my mother bring me to this world. It was a difficult childbirth, from what you told Alice. And then, you…"

"I helped her give birth to Harry too, yes," stuttered Kathy, looking utterly taken aback by Tom's sweet tone, expression, and gratefulness. A pleased, pink hue blossomed on her cheeks, as she added humbly, "Well, I only did what any charitable person would have done."

"You did, indeed," said Tom softly, shooting her a gorgeous, charming smile, "and you have my undying gratitude for it."

Kathy blinked at him, looking a bit dazed.

Tom shot her one last smile –because truly, he felt as if he was walking on clouds– before he calmly strode towards the door.

"Um, Tom! I seemed to have misplaced the papers regarding the school, would you mind telling me-"

"It's called St. Thomas' Boarding School for Boys," said Tom over his shoulder as he opened the door, saying the first name similar to his own despised one which popped into his mind, as he then continued to let the lies smoothly roll out from his tongue, "it's in a town near Edinburgh. On September the first we're expected to catch a train to Edinburgh from King's Cross Station. We'll only return for Christmas and summer holidays."

"Excellent!" Kathy beamed at him as she scribbled down the information. "Thank you, Tom. I'll have Alice accompany you two boys to the station on that date."

Tom merely nodded before strolling out of the office.

"What did you find out?" Harry immediately asked the moment Tom stepped inside their room.

Evidently, Alice had already come and gone, since there was an empty cup of tea sitting on the
nightstand. And Harry wasn't expecting anyone else but him, since Nagini was out in full view, now sharing a pillow with Harry, snoozing placidly. Even Lord Horkos had returned to his cage and was sleeping with his head stuck under a wing.

"Dumbledore told them that it's a private boarding school for boys near Edinburgh, called St. Thomas,'" replied Tom coolly, as he toed off his shoes and slipped inside his bed, then stretching out a hand to slightly turn the knob of the oil lamp, dimming the light.

Harry propped himself up against the wall, to have a full view of him, though careful to not disturb Nagini at his side, and he said disbelievingly, "That's all?"

Tom shot him a brief glance, and said coolly, "He also told them that our father had put our names down for the school before he died in an accident."

"What?" gasped out Harry, lurching forward on his bed to stare at him. "Dumbledore knows who our father is-"

"Of course not, you nitwit," snapped Tom with aggravation, glowering at him. "How can he, when we don't know ourselves? He lied."

Harry's forehead scrunched as he mumbled, "So our dad isn't dead like he said?"

"Don't know. Don't care," said Tom impassively, shrugging his shoulders with supreme indifference.

Harry huffed at that but made no comments. Then he frowned pensively and finally blurted out incredulously, "So Dumbledore simply said that, and Alice and Kathy believed him? They didn't ask him any questions, or asked for more information about our father or the school?"

"Apparently, no."

Harry blinked at him in puzzlement, and then huffed out in disappointment, "Well, I expected something more. I thought Mr. Dumbledore must've done some trick or spun some great, complex lie to cover it all up…"

Tom's lips tilted upwards.

He could scarcely believe it. Dumbledore had done something to Mrs. Cole, something incredible, amazing, and wondrous. It was evident. Somehow, the man had altered the woman's memories. And he must have done the same to Alice as well, now that he thought about it.

Oh, he knew that it could only mean that Dumbledore was aware that Tom and Harry weren't twins. Mrs. Cole must have told the man before he changed or wiped her memories.

Of course, it made Tom extremely suspicious regarding the man's intentions. Why had the man perpetuated the lie?

No doubt the wizard would use that information against them in the future, when it served the man's interests. That could be the only explanation possible of why Dumbledore did what he did. Thus, Tom would definitely keep an eye on him at school.

Yet, maybe Dumbledore didn't know that Tom was aware of the truth about them not being twins. It depended on whether Kathy had told him or not, and Tom had no way of ascertaining that since the woman was nearly senile!
She didn't even remember what they had been arguing about, that night in the kitchen when he had suffocated her until she passed out. She didn't seem to remember much, and clearly firmly believed that Tom and Harry were twins.

At least, she remembered Tom's mother still, but apparently had firmly convinced herself that Harry had popped out right after him. Funny, since that had been exactly the version of things that Tom had told Harry.

Regardless, the point was that Dumbledore had modified the minds of two women.

It had never even crossed Tom's mind that such thing was possible! And if something so extraordinary and amazingly useful could be done with magic, then he could envision any sort of all other things that could also be done!

Tom had never felt so exhilarated in his life.

His head was filled with imaginings of all the things he could learn to do, and the immense scope of infinite possibilities that that represented for him and his future. Obtaining everything he wanted for him and Harry could be so simple!

Furthermore, apparently there was utter impunity and no repercussions. Dumbledore had erased the memories of two muggle women as if it was a trifle, or something he did everyday, after all.

Of course, according to the Ministry of Magic's letter, Tom couldn't do magic outside school until he turned seventeen. But it mattered little; he could be patient, or perhaps he could find ways around that.

Tom's smile bloomed.

Harry caught sight of something from the corner of his eyes, and he snapped his head around to gaze at his brother.

"You're…" Harry had to take a double glance to be certain, and then he stared at him, flabbergasted. "Are you smiling?"

Harry peered at him with wide eyes. He didn't remember his brother smiling ever before in his life, not once.

It was extremely disturbing. It couldn't bode anything good, Harry was certain.

"What's the matter with you?" mumbled Harry, taken aback, never peeling his gaze away from his brother. And then Tom's smile widened even further, and Harry sputtered out warily, "It's creepy."

Tom let out a soft chuckle.

"That's even creepier!" gasped out Harry in alarm, pointing a finger at him. "Stop it!"

Tom loudly snorted and then shot him a glance. "What – I can't be cheerful for once?"

"No," retorted Harry vehemently, as if it had been the dumbest question he had ever heard. "You aren't a jolly chap, in case you hadn't noticed."

Tom scoffed, but still continued to smile up at the ceiling, with his arms indolently crossed under his head.

"It's bloody spooky, it is," groused out Harry, sleepily rolling to his side so that he wouldn't have to
The three weeks before September the first arrived, passed by in a flash, but not without their share of incidents.

Firstly, things had gotten very amusing and enjoyable for Harry the day that Tom plucked up a bit of courage and finally informed Nagini that they would be gone for nearly a whole year and she wasn't coming along.

Their snake hadn't taken the news well, even less when she realized that Lord Horkos, the usurper of her humans and territory, would be accompanying them.

After a hissed shouting match between Tom and her, Nagini had turned vicious.

Not a day passed by when she didn't spring at Tom the moment the boy entered the bedroom, with her jaws open, ready to chomp down on whatever part of his body she could reach.

It was a pity that Tom had a large dose of self-preservation instincts, because he always managed to dodge her no matter where she popped out from.

It would have made Harry's day to see his brother with his arms and hands covered with bite marks. Nevertheless, he sniggered and chortled and encouraged Nagini in every attack. Tom murderously glared at him, but it was worth it.

Tom became unhealthily paranoid for his own sake, and was always warily glancing at shadows and corners, in case Nagini sprung forth. The boy couldn't even sleep a wink at nights, because she had learned how to reach their bedroom from the outside by slithering up the pipes –Harry had been the one to sweetly suggest to her that solution– and their window had to remain open for Lord Horkos and his hunting trips.

Thus, Harry was vastly entertained by them during those weeks.

Secondly, as Harry knew would happen, the neighborhood became aware of the presence of a large, horrendous bird terrorizing their inhabitants with the mere sight of him.

Wild rumors ran amok, and every neighbor had their own opinion of what the creature could be: some sort of vicious eagle; inexplicably, a vulture; an airborne carnivore aberration that had escaped from the London Zoo; and whatnot.

Until, one late evening, just as Harry and Tom were about to slip into their beds, they heard shouts coming from the street.

"There it is – THERE! It has my Miss Mittens!" was shrieking a woman at the top of her lungs, sounding hysterical.

Tom and Harry had instantly reached their window, to see Lord Horkos up in the air with a huge, fat animal dangling by its broken neck from his beak.

The shrieking woman was Mrs. Smith, the butcher's wife, and her husband was already with rifle in hand, shooting bullets up into the sky. The man's aim was terrible, but it didn't mean that he faltered in his attempts, the loud banging noises soon waking up the whole neighborhood.

And they all knew who Miss Mittens was, of course. Mrs. Smith's adored fat, old cat, that spent her days drowsing at the butcher's doorstep among pots of gardenias, like a beached whale.
"I told you he'd be nothing but trouble," chirped Harry merrily, as he peered out the window.

Tom fulminated him with a dark glare, and then paled when he saw Lord Horkos flying towards them with his prized prey.

As much as Tom wildly flailed his arms, apparently trying to convey to his pet to turn around and go somewhere else, the owl obviously didn't get the message.

Looking very smug, the beast flew in through their window, perched himself on their nightstand, and then proceeded to open up the dead cat by the use of his large, sharp beak, soon beginning to devour Miss Mittens' innards.

"And here I thought that owls only ate insects and mice," remarked Harry in a mutter, his stomach sickly squirming at the gory sight.

"It went into the orphanage!" was soon heard coming from the street.

At that, Harry shot Tom an impish grin and wriggled his eyebrows. He wanted to see how his brother would get out of this one.

Harry half expected their neighbors would come with torches and pitchforks in hand to pummel at their door.

Tom, the little sneak, was quick to shove Harry out of their room, ordering him to find out what was happening.

Harry merely complied because he was feeling generous, and because he wasn't the guilty party this time and thus could enjoy the proceedings without having to worry about his own skin.

He reached the staircase of their floor and peered above the rail to watch what was going on at the entrance of the orphanage.

Their neighbors hadn't come calling for bloody murder, except the butcher who still held his riffle, but they had pounded on the orphanage's door as they bellowed.

It was Kathy who had greeted them in her usual brisk, no-nonsense manner, and now a cacophony of angered or indignant shouts could be heard as she answered them.

"Ye're tellin' me that creature's an owl? That's no owl!"

"It took my Miss Mittens!"

"What d'you mean it's the pet of one of your orphans? Since when are owls pets!"

"One of the Riddle boys? It's always 'em – those troublemakers!"

Harry merely watched them in silence, undetected. He had known that his days of being the adored little orphan of the neighborhood had ended when Mr. Jenkins had been fired and the spiteful, vicious man had spent all his nights in the pub bellowing that his disfigurement and loss of an eye had been Tom and Harry's fault.

And Tom, of course, besides that added stain on his ignominious reputation, had always had Father Patrick – the neighborhood's respected priest- publicly railing against him.

"We demand they come forth with the beast – let us get a shot at it and be done with it."
Then, Harry barely heard Kathy's calm voice saying something about boarding school.

"They're leaving?" said someone with a much-relieved tone of voice. "And they're taking the creature with 'em?"

Whatever she replied to that, it seemed to soothe their ruffled feathers, though some still grumbled as they left.

Thus, Harry returned to his bedroom utterly disappointed that his brother hadn't gotten in trouble, and merely said to Tom, "You have Kathy to thank, for saving your hide."

Tom didn't reply to that except to shoot him a sneer, and then glanced at his owl with irritation; his delusions of what a perfect pet it would be, as a tool of intimidation without bringing negative consequences, crushed.

The third incident - well, it hadn't been an incident per se, but rather his brother being the mean, spiteful git that he could sometimes be.

One afternoon, Harry returned to their bedroom to see Tom standing there, looking quite smug and pleased with himself, with a nasty glint of relishing anticipation in his eyes.

Instantly, Harry became on guard, ready for anything that his brother could suddenly dish out at him. But Tom didn't move an inch; he merely smirked at him and then pointedly glanced at Harry's bed.

Cautiously, Harry took a step forward to peer at it. There was only a handful of ashes on top of his covers.

"What's that?" he said, puzzled.

"Notice anything missing?" intoned Tom pleasantly.

Harry frowned and threw his gaze around. Then he did a double take at his closed trunk; that morning he had left his Quidditch book on top of it.

"What did you do!" gasped out Harry, his eyes wide with horrified disbelief.

Tom shot him a wide, poignant smile. "Why, I simply stuck your precious little book in the playroom's fireplace, watched it burn to cinders while I chortled, and then brought back its ashes for you to admire."

Harry didn't quite know what took possession of him. But he saw red - he felt such a surge of blinding rage as he had never before.

One second he was standing there, staring at his brother with aghast incredulity, then in the next, he had leaped at him like a feral, demented beast, letting out a shrilly, high-pitched shriek of a battle-cry that he would later refuse to admit that it had come out of him.

His reaction took Tom by surprise, no doubt. But it didn't stop Harry from pummeling him as viciously hard as he could. Tom replied in kind, and they were soon grappling with each other, landing blows and kicks as they rolled in the little space that was between their beds, hitting their heads and limbs against furniture and whatnot, like a pair of wild street cats.

Tom was a head taller than Harry, but while Tom had sneered at learning how to fight from Mr. Hutchins, Harry had not, and he knew quite a few tricks and had had practice.
Not to mention that Harry had always completely ignored Bob's rules about what was unsportsmanlike. He had good teeth and a strong bite, so Harry also used it in this occasion, chomping down on one of Tom's arms without letting go, like a determined bulldog, while he flung his small fists at Tom's ribcage.

Obviously, their furious screams and yells soon caused a crowd of children to gather at their door. And in a few seconds, they overheard the caregivers arriving at the site, shouting at them to stop.

However, they were all women and Harry wasn't ashamed to admit that he thus completely ignored them. If Bob Hutchins had been there and had told him to stop, he would have. But really, what did girls know about the need to fight to stand up for oneself?

Moreover, Tom wouldn't have obeyed anyone for any reason. Thus neither of them stopped and they completely ignored their spectators.

Until, something icily chilly splashed down on them, and Tom and Harry jumped away from each other, sputtering out water from their mouths and haggardly gasping for breath.

Drenched like pathetic kittens in the rain, they both stared at Kathy Cole, who was glaring at them with thunder in her eyes, a dripping, empty pot hanging from her hands.

"This," she snapped furiously, "is unacceptable. I expected better from you both!"

She said 'both', but she was staring at Harry in particular, because truly, it was well known that the woman had given up on Tom a long time ago. And Harry then felt a bit chagrined at the reprimand, because even though he didn't love her like he did Alice, he was still fond of Mrs. Cole.

Alice then ran into the room, with a roll of bandages in one hand and a bottle of iodine in the other, ready to gently nurse them back to health.

However, Kathy instantly forestalled her, barring her with an outstretched arm, as she snapped, "Let them feel the pain of their own stupidity." Then she skewered them with her gaze and added briskly, "You're to remain locked in your room for the day. And I don't want to hear a peep coming from here. One sound of fighting and you'll be grounded for a week."

And with that, she herded the rest of the children away and then banged their door shut.

Harry and Tom dragged themselves up and took opposites side of the room, each flopping down to sit at the edge of their beds.

Still with water dripping from his hair and clothes, feeling every crook and cranny of his body aching, Harry shot his brother a resentful, baleful glare, as he bit out, "You crossed the line."

"I don't know why you're throwing a hissy fit," acidly sneered Tom at him. "You don't even like books-"

"I liked that one, and you knew it!" spat Harry furiously. "You had no right!"

Tom shot him a vindictive smirk at that, as he intoned sweetly, "See what happens for turning against me?"

"This is because I told Alice it was your idea to go shopping when I was 'ill'?!" gritted out Harry, angry beyond measure. "Then you should have done something else to get back at me. I would have never burned one of your books. And that one was a present!"
"It was a present," mimicked Tom in a high-pitched, childish voice, throwing him a snide sneer.

Harry's green eyes narrowed to slits. In the next second, he shot him a nasty, smug smirk. "Ah. I see. So that's the matter. You're jealous because I made a new friend. You're always jealous of me because I have people who like me and you don't!"

"I'm not jealous of you, you twit! And I don't want or need friends!" snarled Tom looking indignant, flinging out a leg to kick Harry in the shin.

Harry's eyes narrowed again in anger, and he returned the kick as hard as he could, as he intoned mockingly, "You kick like a little girl. You punch like one too, come to that!"

Tom's nostrils flared and he viciously kicked Harry again.

In no time, they had engaged in a kicking battle, both of them gripping the sides of their beds for support, snarling and panting heavily, until Tom roared, "Enough!"

Harry immediately stopped, but only because he was wheezing by then, his legs pulsing painfully, no doubt black and blue, and he could no longer move without groaning.

When he recovered his breath, Harry merely shot his brother a scathing glance and slowly moved to get some textbooks from his trunk.

They couldn't leave the room according to Kathy and he wasn't going to speak to Tom, so he had no choice but to entertain himself with his Hogwarts books.

The idea didn't much appeal to him, but in the end he curled himself up in his bed, inwardly whimpering due to the aches, and then discovered that the 'Charms' textbook was actually interesting; it had loads of animated pictures of wand movements and the spells did pretty awesome things.

He soon became immersed in it, while Tom read his stupid 'Hogwarts: A History', because his brother, know-it-all book-muncher that he was, had already flipped through all of his textbooks.

The following day, Harry had already forgiven him, because he still couldn't hold a grudge for long and being angry at his brother was simply exhausting and left him feeling miserable.

Nevertheless, Harry had managed to wring from his brother the promise that Tom would replace the book. He had mercilessly nagged him and even set Nagini on him twice until Tom caved in.

Harry didn't care how Tom did it: whether he had to steal galleons to buy the book, borrow them, nick the book itself, or thoroughly charm the shopkeeper so that he could have it for free. Harry just wanted that book back, and he had even been magnanimous and had given Tom the time frame of one year.

And thus, they had made their peace, as they always did in the end, no matter what.

Finally, just two days before they had to leave for Hogwarts, the last incident happened, which inevitably left Harry's innocent sensibilities a bit traumatized.

They had been peacefully sleeping in their beds when they were woken up by a girly scream.

Harry would have blissfully ignored it and gone back to sleep if it wasn't because the scream got louder and then he recognized the voice that started to frantically shout.
"Amy is bleeding to death! Help – HELP!"

It was Mary, one of Amy Benson’s friends and the one who shared her bedroom.

Worriedly, Harry dragged himself out of his bed and reached the corridor. Tom trailed after him at a sedate pace, surely to see what the dunderheads of the orphanage were up to and to sneer and mock them.

Many other boys had already left their bedrooms as well; Harry saw his friends Eric Whalley and Billy Stubbs among them.

Going together, they quickly went down the stairs and reached the girls' floor, seeing a group of girls crowding the threshold of Amy’s room.

Harry and his friends managed to elbow their way inside and then stood rooted in place, staring at Amy who was hysterically sobbing on her bed. There were red stains on the sheets and on her nightgown.

"What's the matter with her?" muttered Billy Stubbs, looking alarmed. "Is that blood?"

Harry could only stare without replying. It did look serious.

When he was about to take the steps to reach Amy and see where she was injured, to try to help her, Kathy appeared, barking out for everyone to make way.

By her looks, she had been having another late night in her office going through the orphanage's accounts. Alice and Robert were with her, but evidently those two had simply been spending time talking to each other in the kitchen, as they had taken to do during the year.

"Oh, stop your crying, lass," said Kathy impatiently, looking thoroughly vexed. "We told you about this two months ago when you turned thirteen. You knew it would happen at some point."

That didn't seem to help matters because Amy let out a wail of despair.

Finally, it was Alice who started patting her on the back comfortingly, as she said gently, "It only means you’ve become a woman, Amy. It's not a bad thing."

Evidently Amy didn't think so because, if possible, she burst into even greater tears, her sobs turning more wretched and panicky.

"She's a woman now?" piped in Eric Whalley bewildered. "How's that?"

"But she's bleeding!" said Billy adamantly. "Is she hurt or what?"

Kathy snapped her head around at that, to stare at them before she commanded sharply, "All of you boys, out! You have no business here." She shot Alice a glance, and added briskly, "Alice take charge of them, I'll take care of Amy."

Alice was quick to round them up and herd them away, but Harry refused to leave until he knew if his friend was alright, so he asked, "What's happening to her?"

"Perhaps you should explain it to them," said Robert Hutchins then. "They're old enough to know about that and about-

"Yes, yes, fine," cut in Alice, looking weary and none too thrilled with the suggestion.
She took them to the playroom, though Harry noticed that the boys younger than him and those older by four or more years were left behind.

Furthermore, Tom had tried to slip away but Alice had instantly caught sight of his attempt and had said sharply, "You too, Tom."

"Please," Tom had scoffed out with a snide look on his face. "I already know about."

"I don't care what you know or don't know," had interjected Alice impatiently. "You're coming along."

Tom had fumed in his indignation, apparently because it was an utter waste of his time or because he was being bundled with half-brained children. Nonetheless, he followed them in the end.

Alice then stood before them, with Robert by her side, who nodded at her as if giving her encouragement. She seemed to need it, because Alice looked fidgety and flustered.

Whatever she was going to explain had to be very important, Harry decided.

"Well, let's see," began Alice, "there are bees and flowers…"

Tom let out a loud snort, and she fulminated him with a glance, but then went on.

"What's she talking about?" whispered Harry to his friends in utter bafflement as Alice carried on with her explanation about bees carrying pollen seeds and planting them in flowers and whatnot.

"Gardening, by the sound of it," replied Eric Whalley, shrugging his shoulders.

"… and then, the married couple gets a visit by a stork, who carries their baby and leaves it at their doorstep…"

"Bees, flowers, and now storks?" whispered Billy Stubbs looking thoroughly confused.

"… and so, that's how babies are made," concluded Alice, shooting them a smile.

Harry frowned, highly puzzled. "But what do plants and bees-"

"And the stork!" whispered Billy to him, nudging him with an elbow.

Harry nodded, and continued loudly, "- and storks, have to do with Amy being hurt? And I didn't understand the baby-making part either."

Alice blanched, looking uneasy, and then she cleared her throat. "Well, you see, when a girl's body matures, when she's a certain age, she starts bleeding because it means she can have babies. But it's not a subject for polite conversation," she added, shooting them a warning glance. "So I don't want you boys talking or bothering the girls about it."

"But girls bleed from where?" piped in Eric Whalley, frowning. "Because I didn't see that Amy had an injury. And why would girls bleed if they can have babies?"

Harry nodded in agreement, extremely befuddled. "Yes, because you said that it was the bees and flowers that made babies and the stork that carries it to the parents. And I don't see how plants can have babies-"

Robert Hutchins loudly cleared his throat, looking amused for a brief moment, to then gently say to Alice, "Perhaps it would be best if I explained matters to them?"
"Oh yes, you're quite right!" exhaled out Alice, looking mightily relieved. "Of course it's better if a man explains it to boys."

And with that, she practically fled from the room, leaving Harry blinking after her, perplexed.

"Let's start from the beginning," said Robert calmly, "our male anatomy and how it works. We have penises..."

"He's talking about our willies!" sniggered Eric Whalley under his breath.

"... and you're at an age in which your body is maturing. Some of you might already be doing it. There's no shame in that. You won't turn blind or get warts on your hands. It's a completely natural..."

Harry gazed at him with wide eyes, while some of the older boys were either twittering and snickering, or looking uncomfortable, with red blotches on their faces.

"... I won't speak about the female anatomy. It's only proper that we preserve their modesty," went on to say Robert. "Only know that when you fall in love with a woman and after you marry her, your body will know what to do. You'll have sexual intercourse with your wife, or what's simply called 'sex', and your seed – as Alice tried to explain with the metaphor of bees and flowers- will be planted in your wife's womb, and your child will grow there until it's ready to be born."

Well, that had certainly cleared up many things for him, Harry thought. Though he wasn't quite sure if he had wanted to know that much. It did sound awfully troublesome to him.

"Why can't you tell us how sex's done?" groused out Eric Whalley with dissatisfaction.

"You're all a bunch of dimwits!" abruptly snapped Tom, apparently finally having reached his limit of how much nonsense he could withstand. "We've all already seen what sex is! It's what the mongrels do in the streets – one dog mounting the other, sticking it inside and rutting. That's what people do too, you simpletons!"

Harry stared at him with wide eyes, struck by the monumental revelation, with his mouth hanging agape.

Most of the other boys were wearing similar expressions on their faces as well.

"Tom!" said Robert sharply, his tone of voice censuring and reprimanding. "Enough of that."

"What – it's true!" bit out Tom with impatient annoyance. "And what you said is a load of codswallop. Men don't have to marry stupid women to have sex – they both want it for the pleasure it apparently gives. And you don't have to marry for that. I bet that half the children here are bastards, so that proves it!"

Harry blinked, but his mind was still reeling with Tom's first explanation. He gazed at him and said slowly as the astounding idea unfolded in his mind, "So a man mounts a woman like the dogs do, and that's sex?"

"Yes," said Tom coolly, just at the same time that Robert quickly said with alarm, "No!"

Harry stared at them warily, his gaze flickering from one to the other.

"People are not animals, Harry," then said Robert gently, shooting Tom a vexed glance. "We are civilized. We fall in love, we marry, and we form a family. And sex should be an act of love-"
Tom let out a disdainful snort, shooting Robert a scathing glance to then turn to Harry. "You can marry or not. You can do whatever you want, Harry. Don't let him convince you otherwise."

And with that, he spun around and strolled out of the room.

After that, Mr. Hutchins reiterated his view of things, but most of the boys were whispering among themselves regarding the things Tom had said and didn't pay him much attention. So the man apparently gave up and let them return to their rooms for a good night of sleep.

Two days later, Harry was parting from his friends at the orphanage.

After the day in which Lord Horkos had murdered and gobbled down Miss Mittens, the news that the Riddle brothers were going to a boarding school in Scotland had spread like wildfire throughout the neighborhood. Which inevitably led to Harry's friends finding out before he came around to telling them himself.

Harry's friends' reactions had been varied.

Eric Whalley had sulked for three days, envious that Harry was going to some private school while the rest of them were stuck in the neighborhood's public one.

Though then it seemed to pass and he wished Harry the best, imparting to him some sound advice: "Just bully them if those snotty, rich boys stick up their noses in the air at you!"

Harry had nodded at him, though he didn't know why everyone seemed to be under the impression that 'St. Thomas' School' was a place for posh people.

Billy Stubbs had been sincerely happy and excited for his friend, and had hugged him, making Harry promise that he would write.

And Amy Benson had taken the news hard, clinging to Harry, asking him not to leave and even sobbing twice on his shoulder.

That had made Harry feel very uncomfortable; he didn't like to see girls cry, and it always made him feel as if it was entirely his fault, somehow. And he was terrible at trying to comfort them, to boot.

She wasn't there at the entrance of the orphanage to wish him farewell like Billy and Eric. Apparently, according to her friend Mary, she was in her bedroom crying.

The moment he heard that, Harry quickly waved at Eric and Billy, grabbed his trunk, and left the place as fast as possible, just in case Amy abruptly decided to make an appearance.

At last, Tom and Harry loaded their trunks and Lord Horkos' cage at the back of Robert Hutchins' delivery wagon.

Alice was accompanying them to the station and Robert had kindly offered to drive them there. Harry, of course, tried to grasp the opportunity.

He peered up at Bob and chimed, "Can I drive?"

The man seemed to give it some consideration, but Alice instantly forestalled it by snapping, "Absolutely not! He shouldn't have taught you how to drive in the first place – you're just a child!"

Harry pouted as endearingly as he could manage, but it didn't seem to work on Alice in this
occasion.

However, apparently it did with Mr. Hutchins. The man patted him on the head, shot him a wink and whispered, "I'll let you drive when you come back for the holidays - how's that?"

Harry beamed at him, and so he obediently sat at the back of the wagon with Tom, while Robert took the wheel and Alice sat with him at the front.

And thus, they made their way to King's Cross Station.
Tom and Harry were making their way through King's Cross station, towing their weightless trunks, with Lord Horkos' cage dangling from one of Tom's hands and with Mr. Hutchins and Alice whispering to each other behind them.

Tom pulled out once more, from his pocket, the train ticket that they had found inside their letters. And he scowled at the glowing golden letters that simply read: 'Hogwarts Express. Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. 11 o'clock.'

He had thought nothing of it the first time he had seen it, since he had never been in a train station before. But now, as they passed by platform two and started to cross platform three, it was evident to him that the platforms' numeral system didn't include fractions.

Mr. Dumbledore hadn't said anything about this. Evidently, it had slipped the man's mind, and Tom was now glaring down at his ticket. All the while, his stupid little brother didn't seem to have realized their predicament, yet. Harry was merely glancing back at Alice and Robert, a concerned expression on his face.

"D'you know what they're arguing about?" worriedly whispered Harry to him, as they started crossing platform four.
Tom glanced at him, deadpanned, but nevertheless replied in a flat, indifferent tone of voice, "Mr. Hutchins wants to enlist in the Army and Alice is trying to convince him not to." His lips curled in disdain. "She wants to get married and he wants to wait."

Harry gawked at him. "How do you know that?"

"Because I listen and I observe," said Tom shortly.

"Because you eavesdrop and you spy, you mean," quipped Harry, and then a beaming smile of pure joy spread on his face. "So they're getting married!"

Tom shot him a scathing sneer. "No, you twerp. Hutchins is going to the Army and he'll get killed in the war, no doubt. And if we're lucky, Alice will be so distraught that she'll end up killing herself."

"What-?" Harry gasped out in bewilderment, to then darkly glower at him. "Alice isn't going to off herself! And Bob isn't going to die – what are you talking about – war? There isn't any war!"

Tom glanced at him with utter contempt. "If you read the newspapers, you'd know-"

"I might not read the newspapers," snapped Harry hotly. "But I hear things, don't I? All the grown ups are talking about it, and Alice is always tuning the radio to the newscast." He shot him a hard look, as he added with utter conviction, "And no one thinks there's going to be a war."

"No one thinks so because they're all half-brained imbeciles like yourself," bit out Tom snidely. "The Germans already got the Rhineland and Austria, and have now occupied the Sudetenland - the rest of Czechoslovakia will be next, obviously," he added nonchalantly. "There will be war soon. Only idiots still think that there could be peace."

And with that, he quickened his pace, leaving Harry a little bit behind as he started to glance at the signs of the platforms once again.

The moment Harry caught up to him, Tom felt too vexed and irritated to further try to convince his brother of something he knew was inevitable. Instead, he decided to close the subject with something that had been troubling him for some time.

"They want to adopt us after they get married," hissed out Tom accusingly as if it was the most heinous of crimes, the moment that Harry was about to open his mouth.

Harry snapped his mouth shut, his eyes grew as wide as moons, and then he breathed out, "They do?"

He was utterly surprised at first and then felt a surge of exhilarated happiness, as he started to envision what his and Tom's lives would be like – finally having a home of their own, with Alice and Bob as their parents, happily loving each other and them...

Harry shot the two quarreling adults behind him a look of pure love and gratefulness.

He couldn't overhear their whispered conversation, but Alice's tones now sounded imploring and frantic, while Mr. Hutchins wore a gentle and patient expression on his face, though there was a look of fierce determination in his eyes – the man didn't look as if he would be yielding to Alice's pleads any time soon.

"Don't look so gleeful," snapped Tom, shooting him an angered glare. "I wouldn't agree to it and I wouldn't let you either. We don't need parents," he spat, with a foul-mood expression on his face.
Then he let out a nonchalant scoff. "Besides, it won't come to happen. Hutchins will die-"

"Don't say that!" bit out Harry furiously, snapping his head around to glower at him, though he couldn't help feeling a constriction of fear and worry in his chest, something lodging in his throat.

Tom merely snorted, and then abruptly halted under a platform sign with the number eight on it.

He spun around to face the two adults, who were startled out of their conversation when Tom intoned, "The train bound for Edinburgh is over there. Harry and I can manage from here. Thank you for accompanying us!"

Alice blinked at him, and then gazed over Tom's head, slightly frowning. "Where is it? I don't see it-"

"Over there," cut in Tom, vaguely gesturing with his hand at some point in the distance.

When Alice's frown deepened and when she opened her mouth again, Tom suddenly dropped the handle of his trunk, pushed his owl cage into Harry's arms, and then swiftly hugged Alice around the middle.

"I'll miss you!" exclaimed Tom in a warm, loving tone of voice, as Alice gaped down at him.

She looked startled and incredulous for a moment, but then she flushed with pleasure and tightly returned the embrace, as she murmured softly, her eyes looking a bit teary, "You'll be much missed too, Tom."

Harry merely gawked at his brother's unexpected actions. Tom did the same with Mr. Hutchins, who patted Tom on the head with fond affection.

"But we'll come along," began Alice, as she once more perused with her gaze the row of platforms, "and help you load your trunks into the train-"

"Alice, they don't want us there," interrupted Robert, glancing at them with a knowing look. "They are big boys now, and they don't want others to see them with two adults as if they were little children who needed guidance."

Tom stared at him for a moment, and then quickly nodded his head, shooting him a grateful look.

"Oh," let out Alice, looking a bit hurt and disappointed.

Robert merely smiled at them in understanding, and Tom then covertly shot Harry such an impatient and irritated glance that Harry sprung to his feet, still clueless about what was going on but nevertheless realizing what his brother wanted him to do. Thus, he hugged Alice and Robert as well, exchanging their farewells.

"Write to me everyday, if you can. I want to know all about it. And if you don't like it there, say the word and I'll come and fetch you!" said Alice, looking at them with worry and concern, before Robert gently took a hold of her and started to lead her away.

"What-?" began Harry the moment they were alone, but Tom didn't give him the chance to say more.

The taller boy grasped Lord Horkos' cage from the floor where Harry had left it and then grabbed his trunk's handle, as he snapped, "Hurry up, we don't have much time left."
Nonplussed, Harry followed him with trunk in tow. Though Tom halted a moment later, standing between two platforms, staring up at their signs.

Frowning, Harry dropped his trunk and at last plucked out his train ticket from his pocket. He blinked when he took notice, for the first time, of the Hogwarts Express' platform number.

"Er..." he mumbled, as he peered up at the sign that showed the number nine. He took two steps to the right and stared up at the sign of the other platform: '10', it displayed.

"Where is it?" he blurted out, scandalized.

"That's the question, isn't it?" quipped Tom coolly, with a frown on his face.

Harry shot him a bewildered glance. His gaze then snapped to a side, catching sight of the enormous clock perched high up near the ceiling, at the other side of the station. It was about to strike eleven o'clock.

"We only have five minutes left!" gasped out Harry in alarm.

"I know – shut up! Let me think," snapped Tom crossly, then he started muttering under his breath, "It has to be something logical... nine and three-quarters..."

"The platform must be hidden from muggles," blabbered Harry anxiously, in an urgent tone of voice. "Like Diagon Alley. It must be concealed by magic-"

"Yes, that much is obvious," bit out Tom with vexed annoyance.

Seeing that his brother was just standing there, frowning and apparently trying to solve the riddle that was the location of their platform, Harry started to glance at the people coming and going from the two platforms, in an attempt to catch someone who was weirdly dressed – someone who looked like a wizard or witch. But he saw none.

"How many arches are there between the platforms?" abruptly demanded Tom, skewering him with a glance.

"What-?"

"Go – run! Count them!" commanded Tom briskly.

Harry blinked at him, but then quickly left his trunk behind and dashed through the crowd, nevertheless feeling quite miffed at Tom's tone of voice, which the boy frequently used with him, as if Harry was his pet puppy, who had to be good and obey or else.

Regardless, given the urgency of their situation, Harry did as he was told, and a few moments later he came back, panting for breath as he gasped out, "There're eight!"

Tom solemnly nodded. "Then it must be the sixth – six is three-quarters of eight."

Harry stared at him, finally realizing what Tom had figured out, if his brother was indeed right. And he didn't waste a single second in following Tom as the boy made his way towards the end of platform nine.

Counting them in their minds, they both finally halted before the sixth arch, which stood between the two platforms like a brick-wall column supporting the station's roof.

"So you think that's the entrance to the platform?" muttered Harry, inspecting it a bit warily. "How
do we cross it, d'you suppose?"

Tom frowned, took a step forward and slowly pushed his hand against the bricks. Nothing happened, and Tom scowled.

Harry then decided to try for himself, though unlike his brother, he did it in a reckless manner because, really, they didn't have the time to do things cautiously and primly, like Tom had just done.

Thus, he threw a punch at the bricks, suppressing the instinct of closing his eyes against the oncoming pain. However, in the next moment, he blinked when his fist went through, and he stared at his wrist, which stuck out from the arch, while he felt the unseen part of his hand tingling.

With a gasp, Harry quickly withdrew his hand, gazing at it to make sure it was whole and unharmed. It was, thankfully.

"I see," muttered Tom. "So that's how it is." Then he shot a glance at him and said sharply, "You go first. It has to be quick, apparently - make a run for it."

Harry threw him a withering glare. "Right, I go first, because if something bad happens it will be my hide and not yours."

He then let out a huff but nevertheless complied, because spending time bickering with his prat of a brother would surely make them miss the train. And they had no idea how to get to Hogwarts if they did – they didn't even know where the school was, exactly.

Harry took several steps backwards, grasped his trunk, and then pelted forwards, tightly clenching his eyes shut as he made a straight run towards the arch.

The next second, he felt his body tingling and prickling unpleasantly, and then he smashed against something – someone, he realized, the moment he opened his eyes and found himself at the beginning of a platform.

There were lots of wizards and witches waving at a shiny scarlet train and at the children that were leaning out from windows, waving back – on a train that was puffing out smoke and already moving and leaving, he saw with alarm.

Harry then snapped his gaze up at the man he had careened into, and said urgently, "My brother is coming through – please move to a side!"

However, the man didn't comply. He was a wizard by the looks of him, tall, imposing, and broad-shouldered, with a cravat around his neck with a pearl pin, dressed in velvety black robes lined with soft, grey fur at the lapels, with a familiar-looking, blood red flower pinned in the middle of his chest. He had long, golden blonde hair peppered with grey tied at the back of his neck, and held a cane in his right hand, which had the silver head of a snake with a small crest displaying an ornate 'M'.

The wizard was staring down at him with a repulsed and enraged expression on his face, the man's blue eyes narrowing with contempt and hatred as he gazed at Harry's clothes.

"Mudblood," the man spat viciously, to then abruptly swing his cane forcefully at Harry's head.

Utterly taken aback by the startling and unprovoked attack, Harry ducked and managed to dodge the blow, as he yelled frantically, "What are you doing!"
The wizard snarled like a vicious beast, flinging his cane at Harry once more – and Harry just knew that if it struck him, he would be laying on the ground with a cracked skull.

Just then, Tom appeared with Lord Horkos and trunk in tow, unharmed, since thankfully, the deranged wizard had moved as he continued to attack Harry.

As Harry avoided another strike, he yelled frenziedly at his brother who was standing there with his mouth slightly parted open, blinking at the scene, "He's howling mad! I did nothing to him, I swear!"

"Filthy mudbloods!" hissed out the demented wizard, his cane up in the air ready for another volley, though this time it seemed that he would make Tom his target as well.

"What's going on there!" someone bellowed, and Harry saw that they had started to attract much attention, since a group of parents, wizards and witches, were making their way towards them.

Apparently, Tom and Harry had the same idea right then, because they grasped the opportunity and simply started running, fleeing from the loony.

Panting for breath, they made a mad dash – Harry could only see a few carriages still accessible from the platform, since most of the train was already outside, its speed increasing with every passing second.

Harry moved his short, skinny legs as fast as he could, though Tom was ahead of him, since the boy's taller height and thus longer limbs gave him an advantage.

Finally, Tom threw his trunk and owl's cage into the entrance of the last carriage. A second later, he had helpfully taken Harry's trunk and done the same, to then leap into the carriage himself, grasping a side-handle as he outstretched an arm.

"Grab my hand!" shouted Tom above the loud noise of the train's steam engine and speeding, rumbling wheels, a look akin to panic on his face as he gazed at his brother who was still madly running, trying to catch up.

With a last spur of energy, Harry jumped from the very end of the platform, for a second airborne and thus a bit worried as he flailed his limbs in mid-air, before Tom's hand shot out and grasped him by the wrist, yanking him into safety.

Harry smacked into his brother with the force of the pull, and they both tumbled down to the carriage's floor, gasping for breath.

"That was wicked!" wheezed out Harry, sprawled on top of Tom, a wide, exhilarated grin on his face.

"If you think that, then I should've let you smash into the train-tracks!" groused out Tom acerbically, shooting him a glare. "Get off, you idiot, your puny elbows are digging into my ribcage!"

Harry jumped to his feet and grasped his eyeglasses, which were precariously dangling from his left ear. He had nearly lost them.

He stuck them into place, pushing them up his nose, and then shot his brother a beaming smile. "You saved me."

Tom merely grunted at that, as he picked himself up from the floor and started to straighten out his
clothes. He shot his brother a glance, as he frowned and murmured, "What do you think the nutter meant – by calling us 'mudbloods'?"

"I haven't the foggiest." Harry shrugged his shoulders. "It wasn't anything nice, though."

Tom frowned once more, but then simply commanded, "Let's find a compartment."

Taking hold of their trunks, and Lord Horkos' cage too in Tom's case, they started down the corridor of the carriage, seeing that all the children had already comfortably settled themselves. They didn't find a single compartment with spare space for them, and thus crossed to the next wagon.

Mid-way through it, Harry halted when he caught sight of Alphard Black and his cousin Orion, with a couple of other boys and plenty of extra room. Alphard paled when he saw Harry through the compartment's window, and even quickly shook his head at him, looking aghast.

Harry frowned, wondering what was wrong with his friend, and simply opened the door and stepped inside as he exclaimed enthusiastically, "Hullo - I hoped I would find you!"

To his perplexity, Alphard cringed and quickly glanced away from him, saying nothing.

"Who are these, Black?" said a smooth, low voice.

Harry snapped his head to a side and then halted in astonishment when he saw the boy who had spoken.

He didn't think he had ever seen someone like him before. The boy seemed to be as tall as Tom, with chin-length platinum hair and the strangest yet most beautiful eyes he had ever seen; they weren't light grey or pale blue – no, they were purely silver.

The boy was extremely good-looking, but not prettily beautiful in a feminine way like girls could be, but with the kind of unique handsomeness in a boy that made people look twice and then stare, gobsmacked.

Harry even caught sight of a signet ring on one of the boy's fingers, with a crest that looked exactly like the one on the deranged wizard's cane. He felt a bit of trepidation at that: perhaps they were related, and the wizard had been bonkers, so perhaps the boy was too.

Nevertheless, Harry couldn't stop staring. He felt weirdly dazed as he kept gazing at the boy without being able to peel his eyes away.

"He's no one, Abraxas," then said Alphard quickly, still without looking at Harry, his face pale.

Harry huffed angrily at that, shooting his friend a scowl – though evidently the boy wasn't his friend anymore, because Alphard was fixedly staring out the window as if he wanted nothing more than to disappear.

"I'm Harry Riddle," said Harry firmly, sticking out a hand as he jerked his chin towards Tom, who was standing behind his shoulder. "And he's my twin, Tom."

The boy – Abraxas, apparently– narrowed his eyes at them, his gaze trailing over their worn clothes. "Riddle… Riddle…" His silvery eyes then narrowed to slits, as if he had suddenly figured something out, and he hissed under his breath, "You're mudbloods."

"What's that supposed to mean?" snapped Harry, pulling his hand back and feeling irked beyond
measure. That was twice that they were called that, as if it was the most grievous and horrid of insults and some ghastly, shameful fault of theirs.

"If you don't even know," said Abraxas in a low, sharp voice, his face pinched with disgust and anger, "then it further proves you're mudbloods." Then he leveled at them a glare of utter scorn and revulsion, and bit out forcefully, "Get out! Your kind isn't welcomed here."

"You're under the impression that you can order us around?" came a cool voice behind Harry. "Or force us to do as you wish?"

Harry glanced over his shoulder to see Tom skewering Abraxas with a narrowed-eyed gaze, his face with a chilling and hard expression on it.

"Oh, I can force you, alright," said Abraxas poignantly as he pulled out a wand from his robes' pocket.

"You can't use magic outside Hogwarts," pointed out Tom scathingly, shooting him a mocking, snide look.

"True," retorted Abraxas tersely, "but I don't need it." The next moment he shot a glance to the boy seated next to him, and snapped commandingly, "Avery!"

A hulking boy rose to his feet, his small, beady eyes glinting with a hungry, mean look of anticipation in them, as he fisted his meaty hands and menacingly cracked his knuckles.

"Touch us," hissed out Tom in a very low, quiet tone of voice, that made his words sound all the more scary and intimidating, "and I'll make you rue the day you were born."

His brother made no attempt to whip out his wand and cast whatever spells he had learned from Hogwarts' textbooks, if any were useful in such situation. Evidently, he didn't want to do anything that could possibly lead to his expulsion from magic school.

Moreover, Harry knew that Tom wouldn't resort to a physical attack with his fists, because his brother scorned such things. And honestly, his brother truly didn't know how to fight.

However, Harry was well aware that his brother didn't need his wand or fists to hurt people. The day in which Tom had made Dennis Bishop scream and writhe on the ground was still fresh in his mind. Furthermore, he had no idea if what Tom could do was magic that could be somehow detected. Tom was evidently betting that it wouldn't, and thus wouldn't lead to any negative consequences for him.

Nevertheless, Harry didn't want to find out.

"Drop it – it isn't worth it," he whispered as he grabbed Tom by his forearm. "Let's just leave."

Tom didn't pay him attention, he still had his blue-eyed gaze fixed on the Avery boy, gauging and challengingly. He almost looked feverishly giddy, as if he would relish the chance to do to the boy what he had done to Dennis – expression that alarmed Harry even further.

"Tom!" snapped Harry then, giving him a small shove towards the door. "We're leaving!"

He didn't give his brother the opportunity to refuse or protest, he kept shoving him until they were out of the compartment with their trunks in tow and with Lord Horkos shrieking at the rough handling of his cage.
Though, Harry did shoot Abraxas and his friends a scowl over his shoulder.

A boy on the corridor nearly crashed into them the moment they stepped outside, just as the compartment's door was slammed shut at their backs and the shade of its window was yanked down.

The ginger-haired boy glanced at them and then at the compartment's door, his lips twisting as he said wryly, "Malfoy and his cronies kicked you out?"

Harry blinked up at him. The boy was a few inches taller than him, though he was lanky instead of stout, with bright red hair and weird eyes; one was hazelnut brown, the other sky blue.

"Yeah," mumbled Harry, "we were looking somewhere to settle -"

"Oh!" The boy's expression brightened, and he shot them a warm, friendly smile. "My sister and I have a compartment all to ourselves. You're welcome to come, if you want."

"Sure!" piped in Harry, beaming a wide grin at him. "Thanks!"

"No problem," said the boy shrugging his shoulders, as he started down the corridor. "I'm Felix Prewett, by the way. And you are?"

Harry made their introductions, since Tom was merely following them in silence. No doubt, his brother was still angry and resentful after the 'disrespectful' way in which he had been treated by Abraxas and the others, surely brooding and planning what he would do in retaliation.

So Harry merely left his brother to his dark plots and merry thoughts of carnage and revenge.

"You're twins?" exclaimed Felix at the news. "My sister and I are too! We'll all be good friends, then, I'm sure." He shot Harry a wink. "We twins have to stick together, eh?"

Harry grinned at him, already liking the boy very much, since even though Felix was wearing robes that looked posh and expensive to his eyes, the boy was clearly the kind of friendly, unpretentious, and carefree sort.

When they stepped inside the compartment, Harry saw a girl with a book in her hands. The moment she raised her head and glanced at them, Harry's eyes widened slightly and he felt a bit flustered.

She was Felix's twin, no doubt, but her features were more delicate, and her mismatched eyes made her look even more beautifully exotic and compelling. Not to mention that she also had ginger hair; long, cascading down in pretty ringlets, which made Harry want to touch them to see if they were as soft as they looked.

Abruptly, he felt Tom's gaze boring holes into him, and Harry quickly suppressed the urge, wary that his brother would openly mock him.

He had discovered he had a strange fascination for girls with red-hair, and Tom knew this well.

A year ago, a seventeen-year-old girl had stayed at the orphanage for a few weeks. The only parent she had had, her mother, had died and her relatives couldn't immediately pick her up. So the girl had stayed at St. Jerome's before her uncle from Manchester, or some such place, came to get her.

Harry didn't remember her name and not even her face. But he remembered how he had dazedly
gazed at her, surreptitiously following her around the orphanage, simply wanting to see more of her – of her hair, more precisely. It had been long and prettily curly, too.

Back then, Tom had instantly noticed Harry's strange fascination, of course, and he hadn't stopped mocking and taunting him with anger and disdain, because according to him, Harry had trailed after the girl like a pathetic, love-sick puppy.

So now, Harry quickly rippled his gaze away from this girl before Tom could say anything, and he busied himself with stuffing their trunks under the seats.

"Felicity," said Felix as he helped out Harry, "these are Harry and Tom Riddle – they're twins!"

The pretty girl shot them an interested look at that, warmly smiling at them.

Doing the utmost to not see her, Harry finally flopped down on a seat, while Tom did the same after placing Lord Horkos in the privileged spot by the window. The beastly owl was apparently satisfied with the honor conferred to him, because he soon stopped angrily hooting and shrieking and settled down to gaze at the passing scenery.

However, once seated across from the Prewett twins, it was impossible not to meet the girl's gaze.

"Your eyes are pretty," suddenly blurted out Harry, in the next second blanching when he realized what had come out of his mouth, feeling utterly mortified.

Tom let out a snort of contempt, the girl's cheeks went pink, and Felix let out a peal of laughter, to then wriggle his eyebrows at Harry, as he intoned with vast amusement, "Think my sister is pretty, do you? She has loads of boys trailing after her, so you'll have competition!" Then he shot a smirk at his twin. "You've snared another one!"

"Oh, hush you!" Felicity snapped, slapping her brother upside the head. Then she turned to stare at Harry, leaning forward a bit as she peered at him. "You have pretty eyes too. They're green, are they not?" She flushed, as she added in a soft murmur, "They're lovely."

Harry felt his cheeks heating up and the tips of his ears turning red, he stammered something or other, and then decided to simply shut his mouth and sit still. He even saw Tom glowering at him and then glancing at the girl with masked dislike.

"Break it off, you love birds," piped in Felix, toothily grinning at them. "You'll have plenty of time to continue this budding romance at Hogwarts, so there's no rush."

His sister threw him a vexed look, but the boy forestalled any reprimand by shooting her a pointed glance, as he said in a low tone of voice, "I found them coming out from Abraxas Malfoy's compartment, you know."

"What did Abraxas do?" asked Felicity instantly, a frown on her face.

Before Felix could reply, Harry noticed the use of the boy's first name, and already having recovered from his chagrin, he said cautiously, "He's a friend of yours?"

Felicity huffed, snapping her book shut on her lap. "We were childhood friends - good friends, at that. With him, Neron Lestrange, the Blacks, and their sort."

"What changed?" inquired Tom softly, and Harry shot him a glance and saw the greedy glint in his eyes.
Then he understood his brother's sweet tone of voice. Of course Tom wanted to know as much as possible regarding his new 'rival'; the boy had the firm conviction that information was vital in order to swiftly and successfully take down an enemy.

"They changed, we changed," murmured Felicity. "Our families did, that is." She then shared a glance with her twin, trading some kind of silent conversation.

Felix adamantly shook his head, but a look of determination crossed Felicity's pretty features, and she said firmly to her twin, "They should know. It affects them, doesn't it?" Then she glanced at Tom and Harry and asked quietly, "You're muggleborns, aren't you? Given your clothes, you seem to be…"

She trailed off, looking a bit uncomfortable and then waiting for their reply.

"Muggleborns?" Tom stared at her intently. "What does that mean? Does it have something to do with the term 'mudblood'?"

Felicity went rigid, anger flickering in her mismatched eyes. "Abraxas called you that?"

Intrigued, Harry nodded in reply.

"He shouldn't have," she said hotly, then letting out a sigh. "Well, I'm not even surprised. Mudblood means muggleborn, yes, but the word is meant as an insult, and no one polite would say it."

"But what does it mean?" bit out Tom sharply, his look impatient.

Felicity shot him a startled glance, due to his tone of voice, no doubt.

Though Tom was quick to mend his error, and he beamed a gorgeous, charming smile at the girl, as he intoned softly, "Please, if you'd be so kind to tell me…"

The girl gazed at him, looking a bit entranced, her cheeks prettily flushing. And Harry scowled at his brother. He saw Tom's lips curling upwards, smugly, at Harry's reaction.

At that, Harry smoothed his expression – he wasn't going to give Tom the satisfaction.

He knew well that Tom was merely charming the girl to pump out as much information as possible from her. Tom had always considered girls, and women in general, to be stupid, vapid, and bothersome creatures not worth his notice.

Furthermore, it wasn't as if Harry was interested in Felicity – not in that way, he decided. After his experiences with Amy Benson, girls seemed utterly incomprehensible to him, and too much trouble. It even made him shudder.

He had never felt attracted to one either, not like Eric Whelley and other boys, who were always attempting to peek down girls' shirts. Perhaps he was too young still, to feel those urges, he wondered.

Regardless, he simply thought that Felicity was pretty, and he liked her hair and eyes, and merely wanted to be her and Felix's friend, if possible.

"Muggleborn are those who have two muggle parents," said Felicity calmly. "It's the opposite of pureblood. Felix and I are that - our parents are magical, purebloods themselves, and there has never been a muggle in our bloodline."
"I see," muttered Tom quietly, to then gaze at her as he gently prodded further. "Abraxas Malfoy and his friends are also purebloods?"

"Yes," she replied, her jaw clenching. "But they're dark purebloods…"

And Tom went on, gently and subtly pressing her for more, and Harry's brain soon became stuffed with too much convoluted information, with concepts that were too new to immediately make sense to him, as Felicity and her brother traded turns to answer all of Tom's questions.

"… purebloods are all related to one another, however distantly," said Felicity at some point. "It's inevitable because blood purity is very important to us – it's a matter of ensuring that wizarding kind doesn't become extinct, you know? So none of us would marry a muggle. And many purebloods even take it further and would never marry a muggleborn or even a halfblood."

"Our great grandaunt was a Malfoy, for instance," supplied Felix, when Tom wanted to know the difference between dark and light purebloods. "So even though we Prewetts have always had light magic coursing through our veins, we also have a bit of dark magic in us."

Felicity nodded, as she added, "And the type of magical blood we carry defines the kind of spells we can cast, and what we feel more akin to. For instance, charms, hexes, and jinxes can be cast by everyone, because they're pretty basic and don't require any special kind of magic. But powerful light spells, like the Patronus Charm, for example, usually can only be cast by light wizards, or those who have some measure of light magic from their ancestors. And the same happens with dark curses – dark wizards master them more easily and quickly, because they were invented by someone of their kind and for their specific use. Most light wizards wouldn't attempt to learn dark curses or wouldn't even manage to, if they wanted."

"And muggleborns?" interjected Tom, looking vastly interested and as if it all made much sense to him.

"Their case is peculiar," replied Felix musingly. "They have no problem doing normal light and dark spells, but it's said that they have difficulty in mastering those that are more complex and require more magical power." He shrugged his shoulder, and then shot Tom a sympathetic look. "Sorry mate, but muggleborns, like yourself, are never very powerful."

Tom looked utterly impassive at that, and when Harry opened his mouth to rectify the misconception that they were indeed muggleborns –since he wasn't too sure about that- he then kept quiet when his brother shot him a sharp, warning glance. It befuddled Harry, but he let it slide.

"I understand," said Tom, shooting the Prewett boy a warm look. "Then, basically, the difference between light and dark spells depends on whether the spell was made to be cast by a light or dark wizard, given the case?"

"Yes, in essence," replied Felicity, before he briefly hummed pensively. "Though regarding a spell as light or dark became more messy when the Ministry of Magic was created, several centuries ago. You see, throughout time, when the Ministry had a light wizard as the Minister, they labeled many spells, potions, and curses as 'dark' not because a wizard required to have plenty of dark magic in him to be able to cast the spell or produce the potion, but because the potion or spell was used to harm people…"

"And in the political quarrel between light and dark wizards," piped in Felicity, effortlessly continuing his twin's explanation as if they shared one same mind, "the light-oriented Ministry decided to label those spells and potions as 'dark', giving the word a negative connotation and thus scoring one against their political opposition…"
Felix nodded his head. "Due to that, nowadays there are many spells labeled as 'dark', and even banned by the Ministry, because they've claimed that they require the user to have 'evil' intentions. For some horrid dark curses it's true, granted, but not for the majority of them."

"The same happens with some charms and many spells regarded as 'light' and harmless," interjected Felicity matter-of-factly. "There are many of those, if one is creative, that could be used to hurt people or even kill them. But because they aren't commonly employed for that, but rather to heal or do useful and practical things like making something float, for example, then they were never banned."

"I don't get it," finally cut in Harry, feeling his head throbbing. "You say you're light purebloods, but you seem in favor of these dark spells, potions, and spells you speak of."

"Well, I would never delve into the Dark Arts myself!" sputtered Felicity, looking appalled. "If you're not a dark wizard and don't know what you're doing, they can be seriously harmful to you. Many curses were only made to be used by dark wizards and they can lash back at you if you're not." Then she shrugged, as she added calmly, "But if they aren't used to hurt people, I have nothing against them. They're part of the Wizarding World's legacy - magical knowledge that our ancestors have gifted us with. Thus, the Dark Arts should be preserved and respected, even by those who don't use them, like us."

Felix nodded in agreement. "Our family is liberal minded in respect to muggles and muggleborns. We don't despise muggles though we wouldn't marry one, and we don't think that muggleborns shouldn't be allowed into our world or be forbidden from learning at our schools. However, we take seriously the upholding of our traditions and knowledge. We think blood purity is important and that the Wizarding World should be kept hidden from muggles."

"Is that why you stopped being friends with Abraxas Malfoy?" interjected Tom, his gaze piercing and extremely interested. "Because his family isn't 'liberal' and he despises muggleborns?"

"Sort of," replied Felix tersely, looking unwilling to say more.

"That's not the full extent of it," said Felicity softly, garnering a sharp glance from her twin, which made her snap her head around and say crossly, "They have a right to know! They're muggleborns and it affects them directly, as I said before!"

"Father told us not to speak about it, Lissie," bit out Felix pointedly.

"We can trust them, I'm sure," she said in clipped tones. And with that, she turned around to gaze at Harry and Tom. "It began when Dumbledore-"

"Dumbledore?" Harry blinked at her. "Professor Dumbledore?"

"Oh, you know him?" Felicity beamed at him. "Isn't he wonderful!"

"Er – yes, I suppose," muttered Harry without much conviction, a bit taken aback as well, by the girl's gushing tone of voice. "He was the one who came to our orph-"

"To our house," interrupted Tom smoothly. "He gave us our Hogwarts letters and explained to us and our muggle parents a bit about the Wizarding World."

Harry threw him a glance at that, his eyebrows shooting upwards, now seriously wondering why his brother insisted in making the Prewetts believe that they were muggleborns, when they didn't have solid evidence one way or the other.
It couldn't be just as simple as Tom not wanting anyone to know they were orphans, not when it came at the cost of everyone believing they came from two muggles. Especially given how much Tom looked down at muggles now, ever since his perpetual conviction of being superior to everyone around him had been validated when he had learned the word 'muggle' and what it meant from Dumbledore.

Thus, it had to be due to some manipulative reason and dastardly plot of Tom's, Harry concluded.

"He's the Transfiguration teacher at Hogwarts, you know?" carried on Felicity in admiring tones. "And the Head of Gryffindor House and the Deputy Headmaster, but also so much more! He's a respected member of the Wizengamot and has done loads of wonderful things – like helping merfolk and the centaurs, and what he did for the Union of the Americas!"

She leaned towards them, and added in an excited whisper, "Many say he's one of the most powerful light wizards alive – and that he has all sorts of secret magical abilities! Most wizards wanted Dumbledore to become the Minister of Magic instead of Charlemagne McLaggen, you know? But Dumbledore gently refused – I'm sure it was because he's too much of a-"

"Gulping gargoyles, Lissie!" groused out Felix, looking thoroughly vexed. "No need to sing a sonnet about how marvelous, divine, and sublime you think he is! Our poor new friends don't need to know how much you adore the man. If you're going to tell them, then get on with it!"

"Fine," said Felicity shortly, looking disgruntled for a brief moment, before she glanced at Harry and Tom again. "The point is that Dumbledore started warning people about what was happening in Wizarding Europe - in the continent, that is. He warned people about Gellert Grindelwald."

At Harry and Tom's nonplussed expressions, she added quickly, "He's a dark wizard - he's the German Minister of Magic now." She let out an angered scoff. "That's what the man calls himself in public! But Father believes Dumbledore and so do I, and Dumbledore said that he's really a Dark Lord!"

"A what?" muttered Harry, befuddled.

"A Dark Lord is, usually, a wizard that self-proclaims himself as the leader of dark purebloods," replied Felix nonchalantly. "There have been several throughout history. They're always very powerful and are followed because of that, and because they usually uphold the most extreme of pureblood ideals – like getting rid of muggles and muggleborns. Most of them ended up doing terrible things."

He shot his sister a pointed glance, as he added, "Though there hasn't been one in ages and there's no proof that Grindelwald is one himself."

"So what do you think happened to Auntie Nettie, then?" snapped Felicity heatedly, glowering at her twin. "She just vanished from existence on her own accord, did she?"

Felix blanched at that, looking suddenly pale, and remained silent.

His sister scowled before she turned to face Harry and Tom again, her voice going very soft and quiet as she murmured, "Our Aunt Nettie was married to an Austrian wizard – he was an Auror, and they both lived in that country. The day that the news reached the English Ministry that the Austrians had 'agreed' to merge with the German Ministry of Magic, under Grindelwald's sole leadership, our Father knew something was not right. Father is the Head of the International Magical Cooperation Department in our Ministry, so he had inside information that implied that what had happened hadn't been at all peaceful, while the Daily Prophet and our own Minister were
saying that no fighting had occurred in the Austrian Ministry and that no coercive force had been used by the German wizards."

She paused, taking a deep, steadyng breath, before she continued, "So Father went to look for Aunt Nettie, in her home in Austria. He didn't find her or her husband, and when he went to the Austrian Ministry of Magic, he was told that Uncle had resigned from his job and that they didn't know where he was nor could be expected to know, since Uncle was no longer under their employment. Father never found either of them, and he discovered that many other Aurors and some other officials in the Austrian Ministry had also disappeared the day the Austrian wizards 'voluntarily' annexed themselves to the German Ministry of Magic."

Her jaw clenched as she gritted out through her teeth, "They were killed by Grindelwald – he killed those who opposed him and his followers when they took over the Austrian Ministry of Magic! Only the cowards remained unscathed. Dumbledore believes this and so does Father."

"Do you know if that happened the same day, or around the time, when the Nazis occupied Austria?" inquired Tom coolly, though there was something glinting in his eyes - Harry saw, and immediately discerned what it was.

His brother was giddy, exhilarated, and thrilled for some mysterious reason - it couldn't possibly be due to what Felicity had told them, Harry hoped, since it was quite awful.

"Nazis?" Felicity mumbled, looking confused. "Oh, those muggles!" She shook her head. "I don't know. We don't follow muggle news."

"It did happen the same day," interjected Felix, shooting Tom a curious glance, before he turned to his sister. "Father said so. And Dumbledore told Father that he believed Grindelwald was the mastermind behind it all, using German muggle troops to occupy the country at the same time that he sent his followers to raid the Austrian Ministry of Magic. We overheard them discussing it – remember?"

"Oh, you're absolutely right!" breathed out Felicity, her brown and blue eyes growing wide.

"Mastermind?" whispered Tom, his own eyes slightly widening as he fixedly stared at them with an odd expression on his face. The next moment, his eyes sparkled with triumph, as if their words validated some deep suspicions he had held for a long time.

Though he was quick to mask it the moment he saw Harry staring at him, frowning.

Tom cleared his throat, and intoned quietly, "And he's just one wizard, doing all these things? Is he very powerful, this Gellert Grindelwald? I suppose he knows all sorts of Dark Arts, as you call them, does he?"

"Um, yes," replied Felicity, blinking at him.

"I see," murmured Tom, the feverish, gleeful glint in his eyes not escaping Harry's notice.

Harry shook his head, deciding to ignore his brother's weird behavior, for the time being, and then glanced at the twins, a bit confused. "So you stopped being friends with Abraxas Malfoy and other dark pureblood children because of that? It couldn't have been their fault-"

"Of course it wasn't," said Felicity firmly, "but it was the last straw that broke the hippogriff's back."

At Harry's look of utter incomprehension, she elucidated further, "Our family had always been
close with the Malfoys, the Blacks, and such, since the day when our ancestor married a Malfoy witch, centuries ago…"

"Those sorts of marriage matches," piped in Felix, "are to form alliances between families."

"Exactly," carried on Felicity, "so all was well between our families. But a couple of years back, when Dumbledore started saying that Grindelwald was dangerous, Father believed him and they became close friends. That started to cause problems between Father, Maximilian Malfoy and Pollux and Arcturus Black, because those wizards have always despised Dumbledore, and they didn't like that Father was getting all cozy with him…"

"And Father," added Felix coolly, "started suspecting that they knew about Grindelwald being a Dark Lord and that they were secretly supporting his cause by giving the wizard loads of galleons. Malfoy and the Blacks fiercely denied the accusation and they quarreled with our father…"

"And after that," continued Felicity, as she nodded at her twin, "he forbade us from going to their manors and playing with their children. And then Austria happened, and Aunt Nettie and Uncle disappeared, and Father began to openly support Dumbledore in the Wizengamot…"

"And Malfoy and the Blacks started calling Father a bloodtraitor for that," grumbled Felix angrily, "which further heated the quarrel between them."

"So now they hate Father," supplied Felicity shortly, "and he hates them back."

"Er…" said Harry, as the twins stared at him, apparently waiting for a reaction of some sort. "Um - it's understandable, I reckon."

They beamed at him, with such identical grins and expressions that Harry blinked.

"I'm still not convinced," said Felix then, as if wanting to explain himself to Harry, "that Grindelwald is a Dark Lord, but nevertheless I-"

"You're not 'convinced'," quipped Felicity, but her tone wasn't angry or chiding this time, but rather playfully taunting, "because you hope it isn't true – because the possibility scares you."

Felix shot her a shameless, toothy grin. "True. But my point is that I still support what Father did." He fiercely scowled. "Being accused of being a bloodtraitor is the worst insult for a pureblood. Father took it very hard. And it's unforgivable. The whole issue started a feud between us, Prewetts, and the Malfoys in particular, because Pollux and Arcturus Black follow old Maximilian Malfoy's lead…"

"And feuds between wizarding families," piped in Felicity, "are a very serious matter – they can last for centuries and many generations. So Old Malfoy also has the fault for starting something so grave."

Harry nodded, though he couldn't quite fully understand what it meant for them. Then, he shot a glance at his brother, who had been strangely quiet all that time.

He saw, though, that Tom appeared to be immersed in his own thoughts. And most disturbing of all, the boy was unseeingly staring at some point in the air, his lips curled into a smirk, as if whatever was swirling in his mind was giving him much satisfaction.

Harry eyed him suspiciously, but he was yanked away from his efforts, the very next second, when a voice suddenly called out from the corridor.
"Anything from the trolley, dears?"

The Prewett twins jumped to their feet at the same time, wide grins on their faces, as Harry glanced at them in bewilderment.

Felicity took notice of his expression, and she said quickly, "She sells all sorts of candies - they're magical! Don't you like sweets?"

"I do!" affirmed Harry immediately, his eyes wide with anticipation as he started to search for his leather pouch – for candies, he was very willing to spend the couple of galleons left in his leather pouch, there was no thinking twice about it.

"Don't bother," said Felix, waving a hand dismissively, "it will be our treat!" He shot his sister a toothy grin, as he added, "Won't it, dearest twin of mine?"

"Oh, yes, brother darling!" chirped Felicity, as she repeatedly nodded her head. "We'll buy bunches of all sorts and make him try them all." She beamed at Harry. "It will be your introduction to the magical world of wizarding candies! But you'll have to try them all without complaint, that's the deal!"

As soon as she said that, both Prewett twins shot him identical manic grins that made Harry shudder with wariness.

And thus, all conversation about Dark Lords, wars, deaths, and whatnot, were soon forgotten in lieu of the Prewett twins grinning and chortling and letting out peals of guffaws, every time Harry tried a different sweet.

The Pepper Imps made Harry belch out short puffs of fire, as steam gushed from his ears. When he chewed on Drooble's Best Blowing Gum, the compartment became filled with bluebell-colored bubbles that kept popping out of his mouth. The Fizzing Whizbess popped and crackled in his mouth, and made him levitate and placidly float a feet from his seat – they soon became his utmost favorite!

When he bit down on the exploding bon-bons, Harry opened his jaw wide so that the twins could see the tiny fireworks that were bursting in his mouth, making him all tingly and giddy. And when he munched down on a cockroach cluster, believing it was just made of chocolate, he had to splutter out the insect that he had suddenly felt moving inside his mouth, leaving him thoroughly disgusted and horrified.

Tom had taken the safest route and politely declined what the twins so cajolingly offered to him. Harry didn't think his brother did so merely because he disdained all sweets in general.

Finally, Harry managed to extricate himself from trying more bizarre sweets for the twins' entertainment, and chose the candy that looked the most innocent of all.

Indeed, he happily munched down two chocolate frogs, managing every time to swiftly grasp the frog in mid-air as it leaped and tried to make its bid for escape.

And even though, after having perused most of his Hogwarts books, he had become accustomed to seeing moving wizarding pictures and such, he was still thoroughly surprised by the chocolate frog cards, and then thrilled as he read them.

He soon shoved them into Tom's hands, as he said smugly, feeling utterly vindicated, "Not all of Alice's tales were rubbish! See? See?"
The first card had a moving picture of Malodora Grymm. A witch of the Middle Ages, who used a
beautification potion to conceal her true ugly form, married a king, and used a charmed mirror to
reinforce her self-image. Then became jealous of the most beautiful girl in the land and fed her a
poisoned apple.

The second was of Leticia Somnolens. This spiteful hag of medieval times was jealous of the king's
daughter, and caused her to prick her finger on a spindle tainted with a Draught of the Living
Death. A young wizard, who had smeared his lips with Wiggenweld potion, kissed the princess and
brought her back from her eternal sleep.

After Tom read them, though, the boy looked utterly unimpressed, and merely snidely scoffed as
he flung them back at Harry.

Well, Harry knew that he couldn't have expected much else – Tom was too much of an arrogant git
to admit that Harry had been right.

Nevertheless, Harry carefully pocketed the cards, treasuring them, because what they said were
proof that the Magical World was indeed a land of fantasy, only that the 'fantasy' aspects were
produced by potions, spells, charms and such. And Harry liked that even more, because it meant
that if he learned how to do them, then he could fit in in that wondrous world were the
unimaginable was possible, and thus feel he belonged.

Afterwards, their conversation inevitably turned to Hogwarts, but Harry didn't refuse to hear the
Prewett twins telling them about the bits they knew.

It was impossible to not want to listen to the ginger-haired twins' cheerful conversation and good-
natured bickering, so he found out about the Four Houses, the system of points, the Quidditch Cup,
the hierarchy of Prefects and Head Boys and Girls, and the annual point competition for the House
Cup.

"We still don't know," said Felicity, as she bit down on a sugar flobberworm by the middle, tearing
half of it and starting to munch it down, "how the Sorting into the Houses happens."

"Our parents wouldn't tell us," Felix nodded, popping a cauldron pasty into his awaiting mouth.

"But we managed to glean that it's done by a magical artifact of some sort." Felicity's mismatched
eyes grew big, as she gestured with the bit of the sugar flobberworm that was left, flailing its tail in
mid-air. "Imagine that! I could be anything. And who knows what the thing does to us!"

"Hogwarts: a History' doesn't say anything about the Sorting, either," groused out Tom, looking
utterly annoyed that for once he wouldn't have information beforehand, and thus would be caught
unawares and unprepared.

"Our cousin, Ignatius Prewett," said Felicity then, as she finally popped into her mouth the rest of
the sugar flobberworm, "finished Hogwarts last year, and he was a Ravenclaw. And Mother says
that I have a Raven's mind too." She scrunched up her small button-nose. "But I rather not end up
there. They're too boring and stuffy, from what I've heard."

"Very true!" piped in Felix, nodding adamantly, to then shoot his twin a toothy grin. "But we have
another cousin, Muriel, and she's a Gryffindor in seventh year. So our prospects are good."

"Oh, yes! It's the Gryffindors who have all the fun, apparently."

"So that's where we want to end up," they then chorused together, beaming a smile at each other.
"And you?" said Felicity, shooting Harry an interested glance. "In which House would you like to be?"

"Um - they all sound good to me, from what you've said about them," said Harry, then shrugging his shoulders. "I don't mind which is it, as long as it's the same as Tom's."

At that, Tom shot him an utterly pleased, satisfied smirk. Though Harry didn't see how his brother hadn't already known how he felt about it. Really, now that they weren't in the orphanage, he considered that 'home' was his brother. And he could think of anything worse than spending the next seven years separated from his twin, in different Houses. If there was something he could do about it, he would make sure they stayed together.

"I completely understand you," said Felix, nodding in sympathy and agreement. "I couldn't bear it if I wasn't with Lissie."

"Nor I without Felix," breathed out Felicity, her expression aghast as if simply considering the possibility was too horrid to be borne.

"And you, Tom?" piped in Felix, shooting the boy a scrutinizing glance.

"Slytherin House, of course," said Tom coolly, arching an eyebrow, his conviction as solid and hard as rocks. "It's the only worthy one, from what I've read."

At that, Harry snapped his head around to shoot him a miffed, indignant glare.

"The House of the cunning and ambitious," quipped Felix, quizzically gazing at Tom, to then grin toothily. "Yep, I can easily see you there."

"Um... I don't know about that," interjected Felicity hesitantly, eyeing Tom closely. "I've never heard of a muggleborn being sorted into Slytherin. If you are, it won't be easy for you. The purebloods will make your life a nightmare, no doubt."

Tom imperiously waved a hand dismissively, his expression one of absolute arrogance and self-confidence, as he intoned nonchalantly, "I can manage, I'm sure."

"And what?" snapped Harry, scowling at him. "I'll have to 'manage' too? You want me to end up there with you? It doesn't sound all that nice, given what Felicity has just said-"

"It's you who wants to end up there," interjected Tom impassively, arching an eyebrow at him. "Where I go, you go - that's what you said, basically."

"Oh, I see," bit out Harry hotly. "But I wasn't expecting that you'd decide which House you wanted and then expected me to follow like an obedient pet. I expected you to say that you also wanted to be wherever I was..."

The Prewett twins gazed at them in fascination, their mismatched eyes snapping from one to the other. Evidently, they enjoyed Tom and Harry's bickering as much as Harry had felt amused by theirs.

However, the Riddles' kind of 'bickering' was much different from the Prewetts'; certainly, it was tempestuous most of times and could turn dangerous and even vicious, given the boys' clashing personalities – Harry's stubbornness and short-temper and Tom's arrogance and high-handedness, in particular.

"It doesn't matter," finally interrupted Felicity in mollifying tones, "which House you'd like to
choose. It's the magical artifact that will choose for you, that much we know. There's no point arguing about it."

Harry snapped his mouth shut at that, and merely huffed, shooting his brother one last scowl, just to let Tom know that -even though what the girl said was apparently true- he still resented him for being such a selfish prat.

Gratefully, any further arguments were forestalled when they heard a Prefect going down the corridor, announcing that they would soon be reaching Hogwarts' station.

The three boys immediately pulled their school robes from their trunks and then took turns in the carriage's toilet stall, to change their clothes, while they left the use of their compartment to Felicity.

In no time at all, they were all towing their trunks and cages out of the train.
Children of all ages were pushing their way through the small station's platform, while Harry shivered in the cold night air.

He wrapped his robe tighter around his body, for once grateful that Tom had insisted on buying one set of school robes from Monsieur Ermenegilde's.

His expensive robe was plain black and fitted him well, and surely made him look posh – as Tom had intended- but the important aspect was that it was made of a very warm material, and so velvety and soft to the touch that Harry wouldn't mind bunching up the robe to use it like a pillow, to contently rub his face against it like a pleased, purring cat.

"Leave your trunks and cages over here!" suddenly called out a squeaky voice.

Harry glanced at the wizard who had suddenly appeared in their midst, with a lamp dangling from his hand. The man was very plump and short, barely a few inches taller than Harry, wearing brown woolen clothes, and with such a bushy beard that only his eyes could be seen.

"The house-elves will take your luggage up to your dorm rooms after the Sorting," added the wizard in his high-pitched voice. "Hurry up now!"

"Elves?" Harry blinked, his eyes then widening with amazed astonishment. "Did he really say elves?"

However, Tom didn't hear him. His brother was already several feet ahead of him, dropping his
trunk at one side of the platform, next to the large pile of luggage that had already been left there by the older students.

Harry quickly advanced forward to do the same, and just when Tom had carefully placed Lord Horkos' cage on top of his trunk, looking reluctant to leave his pet behind, the short wizard spoke again.

"First years, gather around – gather around!"

They soon complied, and Harry saw that there had to be about forty children or so, in all.

"I'm Figwig Ogg, the Keeper of the Keys and Grounds of Hogwarts," announced the plump wizard congenially. The man's smile was hidden by his overlarge, bushy beard, but there was no mistaking the kindness and welcoming warmth in his eyes. "Now follow me for your first trip across the Black Lake – no dawdling behind, if you please!"

They all trailed after the man, whispering and murmuring with excitement, while Harry saw that the older children had taken another path that veered to the right. Even from a distance, he could see that those students were taking open carriages that were being pulled by very weird-looking, skinny horses - they even had leathery wings, it seemed.

Just when Harry was going to quicken his pace to catch up with the Prewett twins, who were up ahead, Tom grasped his forearm, pulling him back towards him.

"We're not going with them," whispered Tom sharply.

"What –" Harry snapped his head around to stare at him, incredulously. "You don't like Felix and Felicity?"

"Do you even need to ask?" scoffed out Tom, to then shoot him a sneer at his stupidity, apparently.

"Someday, you'll have to get friends," groused Harry, following his brother along the path, far from the ginger-haired twins.

Though, he was determined that he wouldn't let Tom pull him away from the Prewetts once classes started – that would distract his brother and make it easier for him to slip away.

"You can't still keep me all to yourself, you know?" continued Harry, highly miffed. "It's not healthy! And you need some other friend besides me."

"You aren't a friend, but my twin," snapped Tom sharply, narrowing his eyes at him. "So I have every right to 'keep you all to myself', as you put it." His eyes further narrowed to slits, as he hissed out poignantly, "And I don't even do that. I don't know how you dare accuse me of it, as if I needed you--"

"But it's true," quipped Harry, impishly grinning at him. "You do need me - you like me, you could've never wished for a better brother than me, and you know it. And you're scared that someday I'll like someone more than you, and that I'll have a new best friend and ditch you."

Tom fiercely glowered at him, looking murderous. But then, the steep, narrow path they had been following suddenly opened onto the edge of a great lake, with a fleet of little boats sitting in the water by the shore.

"No more than four to a boat!" loudly warned Mr. Ogg.
Harry grasped the opportunity -before his brother could retaliate with some nasty retort- and he dashed away, cheerfully calling out over his shoulder, "First one to make it to a boat is owed a galleon!"

He quickly climbed into the first boat he saw, which was already occupied by a boy and a small girl, sitting apart from each other.

Glancing back, though, he saw that Tom hadn't bothered to take up his challenge. His brother was leisurely making his way towards him, coolly sauntering as if he had all the time in the world.

The second Tom finally climbed in, being the last child to finally settle, Figwig Ogg, standing in another boat all by himself, squeaked merrily, "Forward we go!"

And the fleet of little boats moved off all at once, gliding across the lake, which looked as smooth and unperturbed as glass.

"You owe me a galleon," was the only thing Harry whispered smugly to Tom, before he snapped his eyes forward, to gaze at what could be seen in the distance, across the lake.

There was a high mountain on the other side, and perched atop it, a vast castle with many turrets and towers, its windows shinning in the starry sky. Harry's eyes widened as he stared at it, mesmerized. It even seemed to him that the castle glowed with streaks of many colors, as if it had an enormous sparkling mantle draped over it.

"What was that?" cried out a shrilly voice. "I saw something there!"

Harry's head snapped around to glance at their companion. Tom and he had taken the front of the boat, and at the back were a boy and girl, seated at opposite sides.

The boy had a rich cloak on top of his robes, lined with heavy fur, and had a contemptuous expression on his face, his nose stuck up in the air.

But it had been the girl who had spoken; plain looking, with lank hair, pimples and thick eyeglasses. She was squatting away from the edge of the boat, pointing a shaky finger at the water.

"There! Something's there!" she abruptly screamed hysterically, flinging herself to a side.

Their boat lurched and dangerous rocked to the right, water spilling over the edge and splashing them.

"You stupid girl, stop moving!" snapped the boy at her side, roughly shoving her off him.

"There's something lurking in the water!" she shrieked frenziedly, as she let out a high-pitched sob. "I want off this boat! Make it turn back! Make it turn back NOW!"

"Shut up, you idiot!" hissed out Tom furiously. "There's nothing in the water – stop screaming and sit still!"

Just then, a huge tentacle broke out from the surface of the water, for a brief moment, and the girl jumped in the air, letting out a strident, terrified wail that made Harry wince, his eardrums nearly popping.

"It's just the Giant Squid, you lamebrain!" bit out the boy next to her, scowling. "It's harmless."

"I want to get off this boat! I want to go home – I want to go home now – this is horrid!" the girl
continued to wail, shriek, and bemoan, looking out of her wits as she frenziedly grasped the edges of the boat, letting out loud, weeping sobs.

"Then get off the boat!" snapped Tom angrily. "Do us a favor and fling yourself over the edge before you make us capsize!"

At that, something ugly seemed to possess the girl, because her sobs abruptly halted and she snapped her head around to glare at Tom, her expression thunderous as she bellowed, "Right! Let's shove silly, weeping, sobbing Myrtle off the boat, because she's nothing but a pest!"

Harry blinked at the barmy girl, thoroughly perplexed by her sudden mood-swing. She was mad as a hatter, this one!

Tom looked ready to leap at her and throttle her. Though, instead, his brother gave him a small shove, as he commanded briskly, "Harry, deal with her. Calm her down before she overturns the boat."

Harry nearly toppled over his seat at Tom's push, but he managed to grip the edge of the boat, steadying himself, before he shot his brother an incredulous look, aghast. "What? Why me?"

"Because you're good with people," hissed out Tom in an angry whisper, "with stupid idiots like her. So do it!"

"I don't know how to deal with crying girls!" whispered back Harry sharply. "And she's a loony!"

"A loony!" cried out the girl, evidently having overheard him, shooting him a look of pure fury. "Bonkers, am I? A nutter, batty, off my rocker, raving mad, am I!"

Harry stared at her, his mouth hanging open. The other boy had pushed himself as far away from the girl as possible, a sneer of disdain on his face. While Tom sat there, boring holes into Harry, pressing him to take action.

Finally, Harry huffed. Cowards, those two. So he crawled to the back, taking the seat the other boy had left, and then warily met the gaze of the deranged girl.

"Look," he said as gently as he could, shooting her his best friendly smile, "just calm down, alright? Let's just-"

"Let's just what?" she snapped, glowering at him through her thick spectacles, before she spat accusingly, "You're going to shove me off the boat, aren't you? That's why you've come to sit with me – to make me think you want to be my friend, but you'll just push me over!"

"No one's going to do anything to you," he gritted out with irritation. He took a deep, steadying breath, and added soothingly, "Let's just calm down." He shot her a wide smile. "I'm Harry Riddle. What's your name?"

"I already said it!" bit out the girl. "Or are you deaf as well as dumb?"

Harry's jaw clenched, but he strived for patience, and then said kindly, "Myrtle, right? But what's your full name?"

The girl eyed him suspiciously, and then said sharply, "Why? Want to mock me?" She pointed a finger at the other boy and Tom, as she added shrilly, "Will you make jokes about me with your friends, and call me names, and make fun of me!"
"Of course not," said Harry very gravely.

"Fine," said the girl briskly, to then peer at him closely through her thick glasses. "I'm Myrtle Mimbletonon."

Harry's lips twitched, but he managed to keep his expression smooth.

In the next second, before he could say anything more, the girl's brief moment of relaxation vanished, as she started again to snap her head to one side and the other, her eyes wide and terrified as she scrutinized the surface of the lake.

Seeing this, Harry intoned soothingly, as he gestured at the other boy who had been quick to take a seat besides Tom, "That chap said that it was only a giant squid, and that there was nothing to fear."

Myrtle spun around on her seat, to whisper sharply, "It wasn't a tentacle what I saw at first." Then she let out in a low, strident wail, "It was some kind of hideous creature – a monster! Staring at me from under the water!"

Just as if her words had summoned it, right by their side of the boat, a head popped out of the water, with very long, knotted hair, its features wrinkled and ugly, a thin-lipped mouth revealing very sharp, jagged teeth.

"The monster has come for me again!" wailed Myrtle, jumping on Harry and making their boat dangerously swing from side to side, as she desperately clung to him. "Save me!"

"It's a mer-maid!" shouted the boy by Tom's side.

Abruptly, just as Harry kept staring at the creature, blinking, he saw its features changing, and he was suddenly gazing at the face of a mesmerizingly beautiful woman, with long, silky, pink hair and striking purple eyes, her full lips curving into a tantalizing smile.

"Don't look at it, you fool! What are you, a muggleborn, that you don't know what it does?"

Someone grabbed Harry by the arm, pulling him away and shaking him violently, but he couldn't stop gazing dazedly at the woman, her head moving closer and closer to his side of the boat, her beautiful purple eyes fixed on him.

"It's a female merfolk," continued yelling the other boy, "she becomes beautiful to entice you and then drag you into the depths, into their lair, to eat you! Stop staring at it, you dolt!"

"Harry!" bellowed Tom into his ear, angry and anxiously.

Harry blinked, and then peered up at his brother, who had his arms around him, panting hard, and was now also scowling down at him.

Then he glanced around, perplexed, yet soon realizing that at some point they had all moved to the opposite side of the boat, and Tom had apparently dragged him with them. That edge of their boat was dangerously close to the water now. And it didn't help matters that Myrtle was sobbing, wailing, and moaning in distress and fear.

"The Giant Squid will surely appear soon," rushed out the other boy. "That's what it does – keeps the merfolk under control, so that they don't prey on the students."

Except Myrtle, they all kept a tense and wary silence, not for a moment looking over the other side
of the boat where the mer-maid no doubt lurked.

A moment later, as prophesized by the boy, a large tentacle shot out from the water and then splashed down. A horrible screech reverberated all round them, so earsplitting that they all cringed and slapped their hands over their ears.

There was blissful silence after that, and they all let out deep sighs of relief, taking back their seats, except Myrtle who clung to Harry like an eel, as she moaned and let out wailing sobs.

Finally, their boat reached the cliff on which the castle stood and it carried them through a curtain of ivy that hid a wide opening on the cliff's face. They sailed along a dark tunnel, which seemed to be taking them right underneath the castle, until they reached a kind of underground harbor.

The moment their boat struck shore, they all quickly clambered out onto rocks and pebbles; the boy whose name they still didn't know bolting away without sparing them a backward glance.

"Harry –wait!" called out Myrtle, quickly taking a hold of him. She sharply stared up at him through her thick glasses. "You'll be my friend now, right?"

"Sure," said Harry beaming a smile at her. Though not if he could help it. He had had enough of her to last him a lifetime.

He gently extricated his arm from her clutches, as he said calmly, "I'll see you tomorrow. Now I must go with my brother."

And with that, he scampered off, dashing and catching up with Tom, as all the children followed Mr. Figwig Ogg through a passageway in the rocks. They soon came out onto smooth, damp grass, right in the shadow of the castle. Then they took a flight of stone steps and crowded around the huge oak front doors.

There, the Groundskeeper left them in the hands of a very scary looking man who gruffly introduced himself as the Caretaker of Hogwarts, Apollyon Pringle. He was a swarthy and scruffy looking man, rail-thin, his skin leathery, with a red patch covering his left eye, a wooden leg that clanked with every step he took, and a crow perched on his shoulder.

The man introduced his beloved pet as 'Rascal the Corvus' -while the creature gazed at them with its small, beady orange eyes, with a distinct malevolent gleam in them- and warned them with much relish that Rascal always found any students who violated the rules, misbehaved, or broke curfew, and would savagely peck them until they bled and even gouge out their eyes if they weren't careful.

Then Mr. Pringle led them into the castle, and Harry's attention was soon snatched.

From the moment he stepped inside, his eyes had widened, the streaks of colors that he had seen the castle glowing with from a distance, now fully revealed before him.

They were everywhere, like a marvelous lattice, spanning like swirls or thin cords or veins along the floors, across the ceilings, and throughout the walls; braids of silver and emerald, yellow and black, blue and bronze, or crimson and gold. They glowed, they shone, and they thrummed.

And his skin felt prickly, like had happened in Diagon Alley, particularly in Ollivander's store. But while the feeling had been heavy and oppressive in the wandshop – as if the place had been too small and stuffy to contain it- the feeling in Hogwarts was soft, warm, and airy, as if the magic freely floated and flowed throughout the vast spaces, and much more vibrantly and powerfully.
However, it didn't escape his notice that one seemed to see it, not even Tom.

The children didn't gape, mesmerized, at the flagged stone floors and walls. They whispered about the gigantic hog statue they had come across at the entrance, or the magnificent moving marble staircases they could now see above them, or the magical portraits and landscapes hanging high up above their heads in rows upon rows, becoming smaller in the far distance. But none of them murmured about the streaks of colors everywhere.

So when the Caretaker halted before the grand, parted double doors of what he called the Great Hall, and commanded them to wait in silence until the Sorting Ceremony commenced, Harry tugged on Tom's robes and dragged him till they were at the very end of the crowd of first years, several feet behind them.

"Stop pulling me!" snapped Tom angrily. "What's the matter with you?"

Harry dropped his hand from his brother's sleeve, frowned at him, and pointed a finger at the wall they had before them, as he demanded, "Don't you see it?"

Tom glanced around, and then shot him an annoyed scowl. "See what?"

"You really don't see the colors? The streaks – on the wall?" murmured Harry, eyeing him with agitation.

"What are you yammering on about?" bit out Tom briskly. "There are no colors, just plain stone." He let out a disdainful snort. "You've gone round the bend!"

Harry mutely shook his head and then intently gazed at the wall again. Right before his eyes, it was vibrating and pulsing with the braids of colors – he wasn't imagining things!

He took a step forward, and then pressed the palm of his hand against the stones. His fingers and hand were instantly suffused with tingling warmth, the lattice of colors spanning across the wall suddenly expanding and contracting under his touch, as if it were breathing.

"It's alive," he breathed out, his green eyes wide as moons and riveted.

Tom shot him a glance, and then mimicked mockingly in a high-pitch, "It's alive!" Then he scoffed snidely. "What – you're Dr. Frankenstein now?"

"What?" said Harry bewildered. Then he fiercely scowled at him. "No, you idiot! I see bloody colors! I think its magic, and I can feel it more intensely when I touch the wall, too."

"You've lost your marbles-"

Irked beyond measure, Harry brusquely grabbed Tom's hand and forcefully pushed it against the wall, glancing up at him as he snapped, "You don't feel anything either?"

But then, an odd expression crossed Tom's face; the boy blinked, and then frowned.

Harry dropped his hand from Tom's, and fixedly gazed at him, scrutinizing. "Well – do you feel something or not?"

Tom didn't say anything, but in a second he had yanked his hand away, taking a step back and then scowling up around him, as if expecting something to be lurking above, ready to jump on him. He looked suspicious, wary, and angry.
"You did feel something," whispered Harry sharply, skewering him with his gaze. "What was it?"

Looking disconcerted for a moment, Tom glanced at him, then his jaw clenched and he gritted out, "I think the bloody thing is sentient. Something brushed my mind, like a ruddy caress." He shuddered, and then sneered, "It was warm and embracing, as if it was joyfully welcoming me. It had no business doing that to me!"

Harry gaped at him, and said astonished, "The castle spoke to you?"

Tom rounded on him like a puffed up, bristling cat, spitting, "No, it didn't speak to me, you halfwit! It's a bloody building! Since when do-"

"Dumbledore said Hogwarts was a good example of an enchanted castle," ground out Harry. "Remember?"

"He didn't say it was alive and sentient, though," hissed out Tom angrily, glowering at him. "Did he?"

Harry stared at him with big eyes. "So you do think it's alive?"

"I don't know," bit out Tom churlishly, then glancing up uneasily as if expecting that the castle would suddenly strike him down with a lighting bolt, "but I don't like it - not one bit."

Harry scowled at him, miffed. "I don't see why not. It 'touched your mind', as you put it, and welcomed you." He paused and then complained with a disappointed whine, "How come it didn't do that to me?"

"And how come you see colors," groused out Tom disgruntled, "it's magic, apparently, and I don't?"

Harry stared at him. "Er – well, you have a good point there."

"Of course I do," said Tom, looking furious. "And I rather see things than have my mind attacked – I can assure you of that!"

"It didn't attack you," pointed out Harry sensibly, rolling his eyes. "It welcomed you, you said."

Tom briskly waved a hand with vexed irritation. "Same difference."

Harry shot a glance at the crowd of children a few feet away from them, and murmured quietly, "But no one seems to be aware of it, though."

"Best keep it to ourselves, then," said Tom firmly, a deep frown on his face.

Then, Tom quickly grabbed Harry by the hand, pulling him towards the group of awaiting children and apparently deciding they had had enough weirdness and excitement for one day.

Through the sea of bodies of the children, Harry managed to take a peek inside the Hall, and he gazed in fascination. The impossibly high ceiling was transparent, showing a velvety black sky dotted with countless stars. The hall itself was lit by thousands of candles that floated in mid-air, above four long tables where the rest of the students were sitting. At the top of the hall was another long table facing the students, where a row of adult wizards and witches sat – they had to be the teachers. And right in front of it was a four-legged stool, with a pointed wizard's hat on top – very patched, frayed, and dirty looking.
Just then, the hat suddenly twitched, a rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth, and it began to sing. Harry gawked.

When the song ended, having basically revealed the attributes of each House that he had already learned from the Prewett twins, everyone in the Great Hall loudly applauded. And then, at last, one of the teachers –Dumbledore, he saw- stood next to the stool, with a roll of parchment in hand, and called out the first name.

It was Thaddeus Avery, the hulking, bully of a boy that Abraxas Malfoy had ordered to throw Harry and Tom out of the compartment. The hat was placed on the boy's head for a split second, before it bellowed, "Slytherin!"

A girl was called next, and then Alphard Black. This time, the hat twitched and shifted on top of the boy's hair for a few moments, but at last also sorted the boy in Slytherin, which garnered a round of constrained applause from the table with the students with green and silver ties.

Alphard's handsome cousin, Orion Black, followed afterwards, and it just took the hat two or three seconds to yell "Slytherin!" again.

And so the Sorting continued, with Harry only paying attention to those he knew from sight or brief acquaintance.

A tall, broad-shouldered boy with curly dark hair and brown eyes was called at some point, and Harry recognized him as one of those who had been with Abraxas Malfoy.

He was Neron Lestrange, apparently, and Harry remembered that Felicity had mentioned him in particular, as one of twins' former childhood friends. Unsurprisingly, the boy was also sorted into Slytherin, soon followed by Abraxas Malfoy.

"McLaggen, Tiberius!" was called out next, and a frisson of excitement ran throughout the Hall, many looking excited, envious, awed, or resentful.

"...he's the Minister's grandson!" someone said breathlessly.

Harry blinked when he saw that it was the boy who had been in their boat. The boy strutted down the Hall like an arrogant peacock, with his nose stuck up in the air - a pompous prig that one, no doubt, Harry decided.

"Ravenclaw!" the hat yelled as soon as it touched McLaggen's head.

The Ravenclaws, who thus far hadn't hooted and clapped as boisterously as the Gryffindors or as warmly welcoming as the Hufflepuffs, erupted into a long round of applause and cheers, looking extremely proud and smug of their new member.

The girl Myrtle Mimbletinon was next, and to Harry's astonishment, she was sorted into Ravenclaw as well. But none of her housemates seemed to even notice her, since they were still patting McLaggen on the back as the boy took a seat among them.

Soon, it was Felicity Prewett's turn, and then Felix's. With Felicity, the Hat took several seconds; with her brother, it announced it immediately. They were both sorted into Gryffindor and their rowdy housemates welcomed them very cheerfully and excitedly.

Harry saw that there was one girl in particular who had stood up and clapped the loudest; she was older, plump, with auburn hair and brown eyes, with a golden badge pinned on her robes displaying the letter 'H'. She was the Head Girl, then, and had to be Muriel, the cousin in seventh
year that the twins had mentioned.

Some time afterwards, he suddenly heard, "Riddle, Harry!"

Shooting a glance at Tom, who nodded at him reassuringly, Harry then made his way through the few unsorted first years left, entered the Great Hall, and walked down the aisle that separated the four tables by the middle. Fortunately, no one seemed to be paying him much attention.

He plopped down on the stool and Albus Dumbledore carefully placed that hat on top of his head. The next second, the hat shifted and Harry waited, not sure of what was supposed to happen.

Suddenly, a small voice said in his ear, "Hmm, what have we here? Let's see... Ah, a kind heart and deep loyalty towards those you care for – Hufflepuff could be the place for you, especially with your yearning for a complete family and your desire to belong."

Harry gripped the edges of the stool, a bit startled by the voice, but remained quiet.

"Oh, quite a good mind you have, sharp and perspicacious when you bother to take an interest or apply some effort. Always brimming with curiosity too, and that is ever the catalyst for thought. Then perhaps Ravenclaw, but... Aha!" The voice chuckled wryly. "No, not Ravenclaw for you, it would stifle you! You have an adventurer's soul! And clearly an utter disregard for rules. Plenty of courage, as well... Yes, you would do well in Gryffindor, and... My, my, what an accomplished thief you are-"

The hat wasn't going to tell on him, was it?, thought Harry with some anxiousness.

"No, no, don't fret, I cannot disclose to others what I learn in your minds. But I must say, you can be quite the innocent-looking manipulator. Quite an actor you are – cunningness indeed! A skill only best honed in Slytherin...Well, what a dilemma, you are a hard one to sort. I haven't had such a challenge in a long time!" It chuckled merrily. "I'll have to take a deeper plunge!"

Harry felt the hat gripping his head tighter, shifting and squirming.

"Oh – ah! What's this?" The hat moved again, with agitation it seemed to Harry and he started to get worried.

"Well, I've never encountered one like you before. Quite an unparalleled situation it is. You don't belong here."

Harry began to panic, before the hat's gruff voice snapped in his ear, "No, no, I didn't mean it that way. You are indeed a wizard, don't get your undergarments in a twist. But your life has been tampered with, and twice in that very same night, no less!"

An avalanche of nonplussed, bewildered thoughts swirled in Harry's mind, but the hat didn't seem to take notice of them this time. Instead, it started squirming uncomfortably, as if someone was tickling him.

"Hold your hippogriffs! Yes, yes, I know it's a grave matter. No – but – you want to come out, then? Oh well, have it your way," the hat snapped with irritation, and then it went completely still.

'Oh you poor, poor child,' said a soft, sorrowful voice in Harry's head. 'What a grave misdeed has been done to you-

'Get a grip on yourself, Helga,' said a sharp, female voice briskly. 'It does no good to get agitated.
We all know this is a complicated situation.'

Helga? thought Harry bewildered. He had heard that name before. In the Hogwarts Express, Felicity had mentioned the Founders. Were they really-

'Of course we're not the Founders themselves,' spoke the sharp female voice again. 'We are the bits that the Founders used to create the Sorting Hat – we are their judgments. Now keep still and let us speak, there's much we have to discuss.'

'We cannot sort him, Rowena,' interjected a low, deep male voice. 'It's not his time yet. Hence, we posses no right to do so.'

'Oh, but we can't just turn him away!' anxiously retorted Helga's voice – er, judgment, or whatever it was; Harry still felt a bit dazed, confused, and astonished by the whole affair.

'That is not what Salazar meant,' said Rowena sharply. 'The crux of the matter is that the presence of this boy here, in this time and place, is no accident or consequence of a natural event. That much is clear.'

'I'm with Helga in this,' interrupted a strong, vehement voice. 'The boy should stay. Hogwarts will always be a sanctuary for those who need it!'

A snide scoff was let out, before an incisive male voice snapped, 'It is not a matter of giving sanctuary, Godric, but of whether we should sort him or not.'

'Precisely,' interjected Rowena, her tone matter-of-factly. 'As Salazar says, there's no question about the boy staying or not. My Ledger detected him. Thus, despite that his being here should not have happened, he nonetheless has the right to attend Hogwarts. And Hogwarts evidently wishes to protect him. However, we cannot sort him.'

'He must choose himself,' said Salazar firmly.

'Oh well, if that's all, then it's a simple matter,' said Helga's voice with much relief. Then her tone softened as she added warmly, 'My dear child, in my House you will have loyal friends – you will need those. They will warm your heart and they will be your most treasured gift. You will have this in Hufflepuff, my child. And my House will teach you to forgive those who have acted wrongly towards you, bringing you peace, happiness, and tranquility.'

'He does not need peace and he should never forgive!' interrupted the adamant, boisterous voice. 'He needs to become strong and brave, to be able to battle the foes who have committed this nefarious crime against him. My House will prepare you for that, boy. Choose Gryffindor!'

'Nonsense. He needs a sharp, brilliant mind to garner the knowledge he requires to comprehend his situation and thus act accordingly. You need to be in Ravenclaw, boy, it will shape your mind well.'

'He does not require happiness, or courage, or knowledge,' interjected snidely the deep male voice. 'He needs astuteness and cunningness in order to unravel the puzzle that is his existence and hence best his opponents using their own wiles against them – fighting fire with fire!'

It paused and then added gravely, 'It's clear to me that you are the tool of titans, boy, and you'll need to become one yourself if you wish to survive! Only my House can prepare you for that. The male voice changed into a whispery murmur, 'And you are one of mine, boy. You have my tongue, my blood. There is no other place for you but Slytherin.'

'Choose, my child,' prompted Helga's voice gently.
Agitated and with confused, warring thoughts clashing in his mind, Harry helplessly glanced around him. He saw that many students were staring at him with irritation or impatience. No doubt, to them it had to look as if the Hat was taking too long to sort him.

'Choose!' pressed on Godric's voice adamantly.

At that, Harry glanced at the Prewett twins seated at the Gryffindor table. They were looking at him with expressions of eager anticipation and expectation. Felicity was warmly smiling at him and Felix was giving him a thumbs-up.

'Don't be swayed by such sentiments. Friends is not what you need,' silkily whispered Salazar's voice. 'And you want to be with your... twin, do you not? I've seen him in your mind. He'll be in my House. Do you really want to be separated from him? Look at him!'

Harry's gaze snapped to Tom, who was one of the few first years left standing by the Great Hall's threshold. His brother was frowning, looking slightly worried.

'If you want to be with him, choose Slytherin - SAY IT NOW, boy, or you'll lose him!'

"SLYTHERIN!" Harry bellowed frenziedly. But in the next instant he realized that it hadn't come out of his open mouth. Instead, it seemed to have travelled from his vocal cords, up his head and through the hat, since it had been the Sorting Hat that had yelled the word in its gruff voice.

Harry immediately jumped to his feet and ripped the hat off his head, letting out a haggard pant of breath.

Albus Dumbledore was intently gazing at him over the rim of his half-moon spectacles, his stare piercing, but Harry didn't pay him any attention.

He simply shoved the hat into the wizard's hands and fled as far away from the hat as possible. He ran towards his House's table.
Thank you all for giving me your opinions about what should be the pace for this part of the story!

It helped me loads, and I finally decided to cover all the years, doing no time-skips. However, I won’t describe every little thing of each school year. I’ll only expand on scenes that are important for the plot or character development, and just describe the rest. It’s difficult to calculate, but I think that each school year will be covered in 5 chapters or so - except for the last years when most of the action will be happening; those will need more chappies.

I hope this will be for the best and that you’ll like it.

Answering some doubts:

The Hat said, “your life has been tampered with, and twice in that very same night, no less!”’. It said ‘twice’ because it was referring to when Voldemort went to the Potters to kill Harry and accidentally made him a horcrux. And when, in Privet Drive, the ‘Grey Wizard’ –Grindelwald– took Harry from Hagrid and Dumbledore, and made him time-travel. Both happened the same night, if you’ll remember.

Salazar’s ‘judgment’ said Harry had his blood because, according to canon, Voldemort and Harry were distantly related. My version of how this is, for this fic, we’ll see it when the Riddle twins begin to unravel the mystery of their origins. But it’s just that, though - Harry has a bit of Slytherin blood, but that alone doesn’t affect him much. We know he’s a parslemouth because he’s a horcrux, and we know that only Tom is Slytherin’s direct descendant and heir.

I’ve always liked to imagine Hogwarts as a sentient being –either on purpose, done by the Founders, or due to such an accumulation of magic throughout the ages- so I’m making it happen in this fic.

Hogwarts ‘touched’ Tom’s mind and joyously welcomed him because it could sense that Tom is Slytherin’s heir.
The reason why Harry’s so sensitive to all the magic around him, going as far as seeing the magic in Hogwarts, is due to what he has become. We’ll know more about this as the fic progresses.

Also, I won’t be strictly following the family tree lines that are all over the web. They are not cannon, after all – because I only consider canon the books, not whatever else JKR published in other HP related books –I’ve never read those- or what she might have mentioned in interviews – I haven’t read those either. So from such family tree lines, I’m taking names and some dates, but don’t expect the characters to have the exact age shown in the tree-lines, because they won’t. I’m twisting these ‘facts’, if they could be considered as such, to make things more interesting, in my view.

Ah, and there won’t be any MPREG in this fic, no matter if the subject is mentioned in one of the chapters.

That said, I hope you enjoy this chappie! It’s a very looong one.

Part I: Chapter 14

As Harry approached the Slytherin table, he realized that his clothes had been suddenly modified: his plain black tie was now displaying strips of silver and forest green, his black robes had a crest at the right side of his chest, with the emblem of Slytherin House. He wondered vaguely if the same had happened to the clothes in his trunk.

Nevertheless, he was aware of what had happened in his surroundings after the Hat had announced his sorting. Some few Slytherins had started applauding, however, almost instantly, murmurs and sharp whispers had spread throughout the table, and those who had been clapping immediately stopped, staring at Harry with utterly revolted looks or horrified gazes.

He knew exactly what they must have been informed about and their reason for those expressions.

When he reached the end of the table where the first years were seated – that which was closest to the professors– he caught sight of the few spaces left, between Thaddeus Avery and two girls: Priscilla Pucey and Capricia Carrow, if he remembered their names correctly from when they had been called out to be sorted.

Abraxas Malfoy was on the other side, flanked by Neron Lestrange and Orion Black, with Alphard seated next to his cousin.

Not that much further up ahead at the table, he recognized the other Blacks he had seen in Diagon Alley: amidst the second year students, Walburga –Alphard’s sister, nasty and plain-looking- and her cousin Lucretia, the pretty one; and among the third years, Cygnus Black, Alphard’s brother.

The two girls were whispering sharply among themselves, shooting Harry glowers and glares. Cygnus, for his part, merely seemed to be listening to his housemates’ angry murmurs. He appeared to be the quiet, observant sort.
When Harry finally attempted to take a seat, both Priscilla Pucey and Capricia Carrow quickly moved along the bench to instantly occupy that space, as one of them hissed out, “Go away, you mudblood scum!”

That seemed to open the floodgates of the dam that had so far been constraining all their voices.

“A mudblood in Slytherin! Impossible, are you sure he is—”

“… Riddle is not a pureblood family name! So of course he’s a filthy mudblood, and Abraxas said…”

“He has to be resorted! We must demand it from Professor Slughorn…”

Suddenly, all their mean and vicious voices were drowned when Dumbledore called out, “Riddle, Tom!”

At that, Harry brusquely shoved Capricia Carrow to a side and plopped himself down at the very end of the bench, leaving a space between him and the girl – hopefully, for Tom.

He didn’t even pay attention to the girl’s infuriated shriek of protest about having been touched by his ‘filthy paws’, and merely snapped his gaze up to piercingly stare at his brother.

He was still thoroughly confused, alarmed, and even angry due to what had happened with the Sorting Hat. He had no idea what the Founders’ voices had meant when they had spoken about a nefarious crime committed against him, the need to battle his foes, of unraveling the puzzle of his existence, or that he was the tool of titans and whatnot.

At first, he had had the bewildered thought that perhaps he had been dropped on the floor as a baby, or that one of the orphanage’s caregivers might have done some other thing of the sort, by accident. But of course, that was no ‘nefarious crime’, and the Hat had said that two bad things had happened to him on the same night.

Then, he had thought that perhaps it referred to the punishments inflicted on him by Mrs. Sharpe and Mr. Jenkins. However, they were hardly ‘titans’, and Mrs. Sharpe had died and Mr. Jenkins had been sacked, so why would he need to battle those foes?

In the end, he had decided to simply lay it rest at the back of his mind. Perhaps, at some point, he might come across something that might shed light on what the Founders’ voices had said, and then he would worry about it. Because at present, he was more concerned about Tom’s sorting.

If the Hat didn’t put his brother in Slytherin, Harry would throttle it and rip it to pieces.

Yes, he had thought that what Salazar Slytherin’s voice had said made much sense; besting his enemies by being as cunning as them and all that rot. It was just the thing that Tom might have said.

Regardless, in the end, he hadn’t chosen Slytherin because he thought it offered him the most sensible and clever ‘solution’ to his ‘grave situation’ – whatever it was – but simply because of his brother. So if Tom ended in some other House, Harry was not going to be happy.

Thus, he was staring intently as Dumbledore placed the Sorting Hat on top of Tom’s head. Harry started to fret and worry when the Hat didn’t announce the House right away. But then, when he understood that it must be speaking to Tom, Harry felt a frisson of hope.

Perhaps the Founders wanted to speak to his brother too, and it would make sense, because if
something bad had happened to Harry that he couldn’t remember, then it must have also happened to Tom, since they were twins and had always been together, after all. And maybe Tom could make sense of what the Founders had said.

However, it didn’t seem to be the case, because in the next second the Hat bellowed, “Slytherin!”

Harry let out a sigh of relief nonetheless and he beamed a smile at his brother. Though the odd look on Tom’s face didn’t escape his notice. It was clear that the Hat must have said something to him.

“Another one!” someone at the Slytherin table exclaimed with anger, and all the mutterings and glowers started again.

Harry utterly ignored them and shot Tom a puzzled glance when his brother merely sat by his side and gazed up at the Slytherin banners that were floating high above their heads. His brother’s expression was a musing and calculating one, and there was a strange gleam in his dark blue eyes.

Harry frowned at him. “Tom, what did the Hat say-”

“Rosier, Druella!”

The Slytherin table broke into excited murmurs at that, and even Harry’s attention was caught when he saw the girl that gracefully sat on the stool. She looked strangely familiar to him.

In the next moment, Harry’s eyes widened when he realized what it was. She had the same lustrous blonde hair and clear blue eyes, and many of the same delicate and breath-taking features as those of the face of the young woman he had seen, like a misty mirage, in the Magical Menagerie in Diagon Alley, when Alice’s lullaby had been inexplicably ringing in his ears.

Extremely puzzled by it, he watched as she was sorted into Slytherin. When the girl reached their table, she didn’t sit with them. Instead, with nose sticking up in the air, Druella Rosier took a place beside Walburga and Lucretia Black, the two second-year girls instantly welcoming her warmly in their midst. Evidently, they were close friends.

Though, Druella Rosier seemed more interested, at first, in shooting coy glances at Cygnus Black. It seemed the girl had seated herself on that spot precisely for that purpose. The third-year boy, for his part, gave her a disdainful look, his lips twisting with irritation, before he turned his back on her and proceeded to quietly chat with his friends.

When Walburga and Lucretia Black started whispering to her, gesturing in Harry and Tom’s direction, shooting them glowers, all the beauty that Druella Rosier possessed was marred, her face scrunching up as she shot them an ugly sneer.

If Tom realized what was happening at the Slytherin table, or even overheard all the mean whispers and murmurs, he didn’t show any proof of it. His brother was still occupied in some sort of deep introspection or grave pondering, coolly indifferent to everything else.

Soon, the last child was sorted, and the wizard who had been seated in a golden chair in the middle of the High Table, walked around it to stand before them. A marble plinth, displaying Hogwarts’ emblem—an H with a badger, a raven, a snake and a small lion wrapped around it—appeared in front of him, and the wizard rose up his arms, gathering all their attention.

He was thin and not too tall, with a wrinkled face showing his advanced age, with grey hair matched by a neatly cropped beard, and he was dressed in rich, plum-hued robes. The wizard had a solemn and wizened air about him. He had to be the Headmaster, Armando Dippet, that the
“Welcome,” the wizard said gravely, “welcome to another year at Hogwarts.”

The rest of the Houses cheered, hooted, and clapped loudly while the Slytherins merely applauded quietly for a brief moment.

“Let’s raise our goblets in a salute!”

At that, many pitchers with all sorts of colored drinks suddenly appeared at the tables, and Harry nearly yelped in surprise, to then see that his own golden goblet was abruptly filled with an orange-hued liquid. Nonetheless, he imitated the other students and raised his goblet in a silent cheer, to then take a careful sip from it.

The drink was very tasty and sweet – pumpkin juice, he would later find out- and he smacked his lips in appreciation. That earned him many disgusted scowls and sneers from his housemates, but he utterly ignored them and took another long gulp, the warm drink settling pleasantly in his belly.

The Headmaster then went on to explain the many rules of Hogwarts, particularly pointing out the curfew hours, that only second-years and onwards were allowed to play Quidditch – which garnered many grumbles and complains from the first-year Gryffindors – that signed permission slips were required for the weekend outings to Hogsmeade, that students who fancied to take a swim in the Black Lake had to notify a teacher first, so that the Giant Squid could be alerted and thus be prepared to protect them from the dangerous creatures that inhabited the lake, and finally, that the Forbidden Forest was precisely that, forbidden.

Some of the Slytherins sneered at that, contemptuously whispering and hissing out about ‘filthy halfbreeds’ and ‘centaurs’, which made Harry’s eyes widen.

And then the Headmaster introduced the wizards and witches seated at the High Table. Three of the professors, in particular, earned the most boisterous round of applauses.

Indeed, Albus Dumbledore, as the Head of Gryffindor House, the Transfiguration teacher and the Deputy Headmaster, was most loudly cheered by all the Houses, except the Slytherins who didn’t even bother to clap, but rather remained stony-faced and silent.

The second most lauded one was the Charms teacher and Head of Ravenclaw House, Professor Tilly Toke, who stood up from his seat and gave a swooping, courteous bow at all the students. He was a very handsome man, seemingly in his early thirties, with long, golden hair and bright hazel eyes; his robes form fitting but also an unpretentious midnight blue.

Most girls dazedly gazed at him, blushing or sighing with longing and infatuation, just as many first-years of all Houses broke into excited, loud whispers which reverberated across the vast expanse of the Great Hall.

“…my mum told me about him! He saved all those Muggles on that beach, a couple of years ago…”

“…he defeated the rogue dragon! I saw the article in the Daily Prophet…”

“…the Ministry gave him an Order of Merlin, First Class!”

“…is he wearing it, do you see it?”

The wizard evidently overheard all the thrilled, awed murmurs, though Harry saw that the man
didn’t preen under the attention, as he had half-expected. Professor Toke merely gave them a half-smile and then sat back on his chair, allowing the Headmaster to introduce the next teacher.

The third professor who earned much voiced admiration was the Flying Instructor and Quidditch Referee, Miss Jocunda Sykes. She was a young witch in her twenties, with long, white hair, which she wore in a simple ponytail. Quite tall and slim, she appeared to have vast amounts of strength and energy.

“…is she really the one who broke all records by crossing the Atlantic by broomstick, three years ago?”

“Oh, yes! She was the first witch or wizard in history to accomplish it!”

“…she flew with the Oakshaft 79 racing broom, no less!”

“I’ve heard that she’s a wickedly good Quidditch player as well…”

Nonetheless, the other teachers were greeted warmly, even if not as enthusiastically. The Hufflepuffs did cheer Professor Perpetua Fancourt very loudly, who apparently was their Head of House and the Astronomy teacher. She looked to be in her forties, with a small, bony body, and a mane of short, purple curls.

Harry even heard one of the Slytherins mentioning that the witch had invented something called the ‘Lunascope’, several years ago.

“It’s just as Grandfather told me,” Harry overheard Abraxas Malfoy say gravely to his friends. “Dippet has taken care of employing outstanding witches and wizards these last few years. It was about time, in my opinion.”

“Is it because of the European Dueling Championship?” inquired Capricia Carrow with interest, leaning forward to be able to participate in the discussion between the boys across the table from her.

“I expect it to be so,” replied Abraxas shortly, waving a hand. “The next one is planned to take place in a few years, and Hogwarts’ Governors are quite tired that the Championship is always won by former students of Durmstrang-”
“And Beauxbatons!” cut in Orion Black, looking must put upon. “The last Championship, of three years ago, was won by a boy in his seventh year!”

Abraxas nodded at them. “Yes, Julian Erlichmann. He was not yet eighteen, back then.”

“I didn’t believe it was true!” breathed out Priscilla Pucey, her eyes wide. “I thought that the Daily Prophet’s articles about how young he was, and still a mere schoolboy, were an exaggeration.”

“And last, but certainly not least,” announced the Headmaster, his voice drowning the Slytherins’ conversation, “our very own Potions Master, Head of Slytherin House, and Potions teacher, Professor Horace Slughorn!”

Harry gaped at the pudgy, short, and nearly bald man that stood up and winningly smiled at them all. It was the same wizard that Tom and he had stumbled upon in Knockturn Alley – the man’s enormous, brown mustache was unmistakable. And he was their Head of House, no less!

As the Slytherin table broke into very loud applauses for the first time -though they didn’t cheer or hoot, apparently that was considered bad manners and very uncouth by his housemates- Harry snapped his head around to glance at his brother.

He sniggered under his breath when he saw that Tom was staring at Horace Slughorn with wide eyes and a pale face. No doubt, his brother was now regretting the shouted insults that he had flung at the man.

Though, in the next moment, as Professor Slughorn sat back down on his place at the High Table, Harry saw how Tom regained his composure. And then Harry detected a most calculating glint in his brother’s dark blue eyes, just before Tom’s expression morphed into one filled with respect and awe as he gazed at Slughorn.

Not wanting to miss the interaction, Harry glanced at the professor, seeing how Slughorn blinked at Tom, and then sat up straight on his seat and slowly picked up his goblet in a move that surely felt regal and elegant to the man.

Harry caught the way in which his brother’s lips slightly tilted upwards in a covert, satisfied smirk. Furthermore, apparently to wrap the matter with a nice bow and further make his way into the good graces of their Head of House, Tom lifted up his own goblet in a silent, reverent toast towards
the wizard, and then brought it to his lips.

Slughorn immediately repaid the gesture by doing likewise, looking like a puffed out, preening, fat pigeon.

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. Tom’s tactics never failed; his brother was too much of an expert on how to stroke the conceit and vanity of others to have them eating out of the palm of his hand. Either by doing such or by displaying carefully calculated humble or charming manners, his brother always succeeded with too much ease.

Harry shook his head. It was disgusting, really. And pathetically sad too, that Tom’s targets never realized how thoroughly they were being played.

“Enjoy the Welcoming Feast!” boomed the Headmaster at last, before rejoining his staff at the High Table.

Harry’s mouth fell open the next second when, suddenly, the golden plates in front of him were piled with food, which appeared to have come out of nowhere.

He had never seen so much food in his life, and most dishes with things he didn’t recognize, given the limited diet he had endured in the orphanage. There were all sorts of vegetables, boiled or fried, and many types of cooked or roasted meats in steaks or chops, with thick gravies on the side that he had never seen before but looked thick and delicious, and meat pies or puddings with cheese and carrots and the sort, and many other things that he couldn’t describe.

He inhaled the varied, mouth-watering smells coming from the countless dishes, and sighed with sheer pleasure as he lifted a hand, ready to grab as much food as possible and try a bit of everything.

He halted and nearly jumped in the air, startled, when a flock of ghosts abruptly flooded into the Great Hall, emerging from the walls and even the floor.

Many of the first-years of the other Houses gasped in surprise, though soon the ghosts mingled with the students, and Harry managed to remember the names of some of the ghosts that the Prewett twins had mentioned.

There was The Fat Friar, now amicably chatting with the Hufflepuffs, and the Gryffindor ghost was pulling his head to a side, with Felix Prewett jumping to his feet to peer at the nearly severed neck, the boy looking thoroughly thrilled at the sight.
Suddenly, Harry felt as if an icy wind swept around him, and he jerked to a side when he caught sight of the ghost that was floating right beside him, at the end of the table.

It had to be Slytherin House’s ghost, he realized, but he couldn’t quite remember his name. He was all grey and nearly transparent, like all the others, but he bore a grim expression on his broad, rough-featured face and was dressed in very ancient-looking clothes – from Medieval times, it seemed.

Moreover, there was a gaping, jagged wound in his chest, as if someone had plunged a dagger in his heart, with dark grey stains splattered bellow it – bloodstains, Harry realized with a shudder. However, what was even scarier was that the ghost also had dark grey stains on his face, shoulders, and arms, which couldn’t have come from the ghost’s own wound.

The ghost’s eyes trailed along the Ravenclaw table, his gaze intent and piercing, as if looking for someone. The next second, he let out a grunt, and turned his attention back to the Slytherins.

The silent ghost’s eyes, now dull and dispassionate, swept along the Slytherin table with disinterest. He started to turn around with the intention of leaving, it seemed, but then he did a double take on Harry. The ghost halted and stared.

Harry stared back, and blinked, raking his brain to remember what the ghost was called. “Er…” He shook his head, giving up, and finally asked amicably, “What’s your name?”

The ghost didn’t answer. Instead, he was now frowning at him, his grey gaze flickering from Harry’s face to his neck and then hands – apparently to every inch of his body that wasn’t covered by his school robes.

Harry looked down too, wondering if he had spilled juice on himself, since the ghost was indeed staring as if he had something on his skin.

Finding nothing, Harry glanced back at the ghost, puzzled. If the ghost had been frowning before, now the expression was fiercer and deeper. And almost as if in slow motion, Harry saw the ghost extending out a grey hand, with a finger posed to swipe through Harry’s arm, a flash of perplexity and curiosity in the ghost’s eyes.

The next second, Harry stiffened at the strange sensation; the feeling of an icy finger touching his
skin. It hadn’t passed through his arm at all. But hadn’t the Prewett twins said that ghosts had no solidity – that they went through people just like they went through walls and doors?

The ghost let out a muted gasp, instantly withdrawing his hand and recoiling away from Harry, staring at him with a horrified expression on his face.

Then he spun around and flung himself at the wall, instantly disappearing from sight, leaving a bewildered Harry in his wake.

“Look - off he goes to search for the Grey Lady!” one of the older Slytherins guffawed, shaking his head. “Always chasing after her-”

“It’s her I rather pity,” a third-year girl interjected in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. “When the Bloody Baron manages to find her, she always flees away from him. And have you seen her expression? She always looks utterly terrified and fearful. I’ve always wondered why…”

Harry snapped his head around, his heart pounding in his chest, still feeling thoroughly confused. Though he saw that none seemed to have noticed his interaction with the ghost. Apparently, only a few had taken notice of the ghost leaving the Great Hall.

All the Slytherins were already eating and chattering amongst themselves, and even Tom hadn’t been paying attention to him. His brother still hadn’t served himself with dinner, but was rather listening in to their housemates’ conversations, closely observing them with an expression on his face that Harry knew well – Tom was plotting.

Harry felt a frisson of relief and glanced away – the moment he did, his green gaze got locked with a silver one. He froze like a rabbit caught in a motorcar’s headlights. Abraxas Malfoy was staring at him with wide eyes, a shocked expression on his unearthly handsome face.

The boy had seen – the realization struck Harry like a lightening bolt. What had happened with the ghost couldn’t be anything normal, not when Malfoy was nearly gaping at him.

And Harry couldn’t stop staring back at him either, just like what had happened in the Hogwarts Express. Even when Malfoy’s expression slowly changed - the boy tilting his head to a side, his silver eyes becoming heavy lidded, glittering with interest as he now gazed at him as if Harry had suddenly become a fascinating, complex puzzle that Abraxas was determined to solve – Harry still couldn’t peel his eyes away.

Though, he did shift fretfully on his seat, feeling a mite flustered and discomfited under Malfoy’s intense gaze. It wasn’t comfortable to have the boy’s full attention, he decided. And there was such a strange pull to boy.

Finally, he managed to pull himself together and he shot Malfoy an irritated scowl, clearly
conveying that he didn’t appreciate being stared at. To his surprise, Abraxas didn’t react as expected. The boy arched an eyebrow and one corner of his lips tilted upwards, as if in amusement.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. Malfoy’s lips curved upwards even further. Finally, Harry grunted and glanced away.

He didn’t do much better when his eyes landed on the High Table. There, was Albus Dumbledore, piercingly staring at him from above the rim of his half-moon spectacles, with his hand in mid-air, carrying his goblet, as if he had been about to take a sip before something halted his motion. And given the man’s puzzled and pensive expression, Harry just knew that Abraxas Malfoy hadn’t been the only one who had seen his interaction with the ghost.

The next moment, when the wizard seemed to realize that Harry had caught sight of him, Dumbledore calmly settled back his goblet on his table and he smoothened his face, giving Harry a gentle smile. The man did seem sincere in his attempt to grace him with a soothing and calming expression, but Harry had had enough.

After Dumbledore’s visit to the orphanage, when the wizard had reacted so strangely to his scar and to the discovery that they could speak to snakes, no amount of smiles was going to make Harry feel comfortable with the man. And he really was in no mood to accept friendly gestures, not when it seemed that there was another weird thing about him.

Harry was mightily glad that, from the start, he had been ignoring the colorful lattice that spread throughout the entirety of the Great Hall. Only Tom knew that he could apparently see the castle’s magic, and he especially wanted to keep it that way after the ‘touch-thing’ with the Bloody Baron.

So, he glared at Albus Dumbledore, and then he snapped his head around to glare at Abraxas Malfoy too, who was still intently observing him, and he finally concentrated all of his attention on the numerous dishes before him.

He chose the roasted chicken legs and extended a hand to grab a piece, just when a fork had been about to stab another leg.

The boy yielding the fork instantly withdrew it, to then slam it on the table. Indeed, Neron Lestrange sprung to his feet, his face contorted with rage as he bellowed at Harry, “You dare touch our food with your bare, filthy, mudblood hands! Touching the same platter we must all share!”
Tom stiffened by his side, and Harry gaped at the boy, his hand hanging a few inches away from the chicken leg.

Cutlery clattered on the table all along it, every Slytherins’ attention drawn to them at Lestrange’s loud, reverberating shout.

“Really, this is unbearable!” then cried out Capricia Carrow, from her seat besides Tom, as she vehemently addressed all her housemates. “Are we expected to tolerate their presence in our midst, in our very own table, sharing our food!”

“She’s right!” interjected Orion Black, his handsome face twisting with revulsion. “Who knows what kind of disgusting muggle diseases they carry – they’ll contaminate our food, they’ll pass on to us their filthy illnesses!”

Many Slytherins grumbled in agreement, or nodded, or loudly voiced similar opinions, until Walburga Black jumped to her feet, with a thunderous expression on her plain-looking face as she shrieked angrily, “They must be Resorted! The Hat evidently made a mistake. We’ll not have mudblood scum among us!”

Two older Slytherins suddenly appeared before them. A tall boy with curly blonde hair and a slightly crooked nose, with a golden badge pinned on his robes that denoted him as the Head Boy. And a girl, with the type of curvy body, with tiny waist and generous bosom, that would have had Eric Whelley drooling after her. She also had a badge on her robes, but a silver one – she was a Prefect. But it wasn’t those things that caught Harry’s attention, but her face.

She had the same light grey eyes as Alphard, though much larger and thus prettier and more noticeable. Her hair was a glossy, wavy black, reaching her waist. And her features were simply stunning, even surpassing Lucretia and Orion Black in beauty and handsomeness.

She was another Black, no doubt, and it surprised Harry since he hadn’t expected that there was even more of them at the school. He certainly hadn’t seen her in Diagon Alley. He was quite sure he would have remembered a girl as striking as her.

“What’s all this ruckus about?” demanded the girl sharply, scowling at the younger Slytherins.

“They’re mudbloods,” snarled Thaddeus Avery, pointing a finger at Tom and Harry. “That’s the problem – or didn’t you hear? They even tried to get in our compartment in the Hogwarts Express!”
The burly, stout boy shot Abraxas Malfoy a glance, as if asking for his support and participation.

However, anything of the kind was forestalled when the Prefect girl swiftly turned to pin Tom and Harry with her gaze, as she demanded briskly, “Are you mudbloods, really?”

Harry opened his mouth to explain what he and Tom suspected and believed – that they were halfbloods- but his brother replied before he could, saying nonchalantly, “We are.”

Digging his teeth on his lower lip, Harry snapped his head around to glower angrily at him. His brother was making everything worse! He still didn’t understand why Tom wanted everyone to believe they were muggleborns – Tom had done the same with the Prewett twins.

“SEE!” boomed Thaddeus Avery. “I told you!”

The Prefect girl spun around and narrowed her light grey eyes at the boy, as she whispered sharply, “Yes, but that’s no excuse to make a scene in the middle of the Welcoming Feast! Everyone’s watching us now!”

She gestured with a hand at the other tables, and she was indeed right. Many students of the other Houses were standing up, trying to take a peek at what was happening at the Slytherin table. Even the professors looked worried or concerned, murmuring among themselves, shooting them glances. Slughorn looked flustered and hesitant, though apparently he had decided to let his Prefect and the Head Boy take charge of the situation and resolve the matter.

“Now stop making a spectacle of yourselves and eat your dinner quietly, with the proper pureblood manners you were raised with,” continued the Black girl in a harsh tone of voice. “Now’s not the time to discuss such things-”

“I’m not going to sit here with them, Dorea,” interjected gruffly an enormous, muscled, third-year boy, seated across from Cygnus Black, his voice laced with a slight foreign accent. “I refuse to share a table with mudbloods-” he gestured at all the younger Slytherins around him “- and I’m not the only one. Take them away and then we’ll all proceed with our dinner-”

“My, my, Dolohov,” snidely sneered Dorea Black at him, “your skull is even thicker than I thought. Did you hear me asking for your opinion? No, you didn’t, did you? Perhaps the two years you’ve been at Hogwarts haven’t been enough to make you fully understand who makes all the
decisions around here.”

She leaned forward, and lowered her voice to a poignant whisper, apparently not wanting the other students and the teachers to overhear her, “As the oldest Black, a Prefect, your Quidditch Captain, and the undefeated dueler in our House’s matches, I’m one of The Two who leads Slytherin House, and we don’t take to disobedience kindly. Do we, Algernon?”

The Head Boy nodded coolly, shooting a stern and irritated scowl at all the younger Slytherins. “Quite right, Dorea.”

“I don’t care if you and Wilkes are The Two,” spat Walburga Black incensed, still standing up as she darkly glared at them. “In such a grave matter as this one, you have no right to make us yield!”

“I have every right, Burgy-”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Why, dear niece,” drawled Dorea Black mockingly, her light grey eyes glinting, “do you prefer ‘Wally’ as a nickname, then, like a common muggle’s?”

“You hag!” screeched Walburga, looking deranged in her fury as she swiftly brought a hand to one of her robes’ pockets.

Dorea instantly grabbed the younger girl’s arm in a painful grip, as she hissed out, “Think twice before wielding your wand against me, you stupid girl. And watch how you speak to me, I’m still your Aunt-”

“That you’re Father’s baby sister doesn’t mean I have to obey you,” snarled Walburga as she ripped her arm from the older girl’s grasp. Her voice turned low, cruel, and nasty, as she added venomously, “Your mere conception was an unfortunate accident. Grandmamá didn’t want to have you. She should have drowned you at birth-”

“Stop it, sister,” interjected Cygnus Black suddenly, his voice quiet, yet his gaze strict as he leveled at her a hard look.

Walburga instantly rounded on him. “Why should I? She struts around Hogwarts as if she’s so much better than the rest of us, ordering us around, when she should be licking the sole of our shoes, in gratefulness for taking her in! She’s living in our house, spending our money and eating from our table, by our good graces, because she’s such a blood-traitorous slag that grandpapá, her own father, kicked her out!”

She snapped her head around to glare at Dorea, her face contorting with fury, as she spat hatefully, “I stopped listening to you, Aunt, the day you became a loose hag with no standards, cavorting with that muggle-lover-”

“Insult him in my presence once more and I’ll make you regret it,” hissed out Dorea Black, taking a menacing step forward. “Your father sees no flaw in the boy I want to be engaged with, so neither should you. And even if you do, you should shut your mouth and respect your betters!” She gave her a thoroughly disgusted look. “You’re acting no better than a muggle fishwife – venting Black family matters in public, for all to hear!”

The moment Walburga opened her mouth again, bristling with fury, Cygnus grabbed her by the arm and yanked her down on the bench, as he whispered angrily, “Aunt ‘Rea is right. Shut up once
“Indeed she has,” remarked Dorea Black in a low tone of voice, her beautiful light grey eyes glinting with vindictive relish. “Your father will hear about this, of course. I’ll be owling him post-haste. I dare say Pollux won’t be pleased with you at all, Burgy.”

The Head Boy, the tall, blonde, curly-haired Algernon Wilkes, loudly cleared his throat, forestalling any retort from Walburga’s part, as he said pointedly, “I believe we’ve deviated from the matter-at-hand.” He gestured vaguely in Tom and Harry’s direction. “This issue will be resolved in the privacy of our common room, where you can take your protests up to our Head of House.”

“Precisely,” interjected Dorea Black, leveling at all the younger Slytherins a harsh, reprimanding look. “As you all know, before the rest of the school, we present a joined front, no matter our inner disputes. So until we’re back in the dungeons, you’ll finish your dinner without uttering another word. Is that clear?”

The younger Slytherins grumbled, nodded, or simply stayed quiet in implicit obedience.

And ‘The Two’ – Harry still didn’t know what that meant, exactly, and much less what the heated argument between the two Black girls had been all about, though he had enjoyed seeing the nasty one, Walburga, being taken down a peg or two- turned heel and returned back to their seats, at the other end of the table.

Finally, he clenched his jaw, jutting his chin out, and quickly grabbed two chicken legs, to then glance around him. No one said a word to him, even though plenty shot him sneers and glowers. The hostility towards Tom and him was palpable, and it felt extremely uncomfortable and strange to Harry. He was used to quickly making friends wherever he went. Even the early years of being bullied by Dennis Bishop, and then when the neighborhood’s good opinion of him had changed in the last few years, hadn’t prepared him for this, since it had been so mild in comparison to the sheer hatred that his housemates seemed to have for him. He hadn’t expected, at all, that he would be welcomed like this in magic school. He had been so thoroughly certain that he would instantly have loads of friends.

His brother didn’t seem to be affected by any of it. Though Tom had experience in being a pariah. But even that had been different in the orphanage, because the children there had been fearful of him and had given him a wide berth. Here, instead, Tom was despised and considered to be bellow them. Harry was certain that that couldn’t have gone over well with Tom, even if his brother didn’t show it.

He shook his head, dispelling such grim thoughts from his mind, and then relaxed a bit; at long last, taking pleasure in his meal.

Unfortunately, his brother spoiled it by serving him a bunch of peas, small pieces of lettuce, and
carrots, giving Harry a stern, pointed look. Tom did always make him eat all his greens at the orphanage. Apparently, the boy wasn’t planning to relent now that they were in different surroundings.

Harry huffed, miffed. Then he stuck one of the carrots into his mouth and started to munch it as noisily as he could, shooting Tom a side-glance to see just how much it irritated his brother. He would eat his vegetables, but he wasn’t going to do it happily. His discontent was going to be expressed.

To his disappointment, Tom merely scoffed snidely at him and then proceeded to utterly ignore his antics, turning to partake from his own dinner.

Harry became full quite quickly, not accustomed to such rich foods and with his stomach only used to small intakes of food at a time. He despaired even further, his eyes bright with longing, when the desserts appeared after everyone was done with the main course, knowing that even if he wanted to, he wouldn’t be able to swallow a single bite.

There were towers made of ice-cream balls of all colors and flavors, marvelous chocolate and strawberry cakes, lemon puddings, apple pies, custard tarts, raspberry cake, cherries covered in hot chocolate, treacle tarts, meringue confections, cupcakes of all sorts, frosted bits of fruits with swirls of cream on top, and many other dishes that he had never seen or heard about before. And he vouched that, next time, he would skip the meal all together and just wait for the desserts, to have plenty of place in his belly to try as many of them as possible.

At last, Dorea Black came by their end of the table once more, shortly instructing them to follow her. By then, most of the older students had already left, and many of the teachers. Only the first-years of the four Houses had remained in their full numbers.

Algernon Wilkes waited for them by the grand doors of the Great Hall, giving each of them a scroll of parchment with the timetable of their classes.

The Head Girl, Muriel Prewett, was doing the same with the Gryffindors, while the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs had their oldest Prefects performing such duties.

Harry unrolled his parchment and grinned with excitement when he saw that they shared every class with one of the other Houses, that they had no lessons during weekends, and that they had several hours of spare time every day. It really didn’t look that bad.

As they followed Algernon Wilkes and Dorea Black into the Entrance Hall, they passed by the first-year Gryffindors. Felix Prewett waved a hand at him, mouthing ‘We’ll see you tomorrow!’ while Felicity looked at the Slytherins with consternation, to then shoot him a worried glance, as she whispered, “Good luck.”

Harry grinned and waved back at them, feeling a frisson of relief. He hadn’t thought that the twins would drop him just because he had ended up in Slytherin, but it was nice to feel reassured, nonetheless.

Algernon Wilkes and Muriel Prewett shared a dark glance -Head Boy and Head Girl throwing each other looks of mutual hatred and contempt- and then off they went, all of the Houses taking different directions.

The last Harry saw of the twins was when the Gryffindors took one of the moving marble
staircases, while he followed the Slytherins to the very end of the Entrance Hall.

There, amongst shadows, was an archway, leading to a downward-spiraling, stone staircase. Torches niched in the walls lit up a few paces before them, as they proceeded forward and entered the dungeons.

Harry noticed that the further they went, the colors of Ravenclaw, Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff disappeared from the cords of magic pulsing everywhere along the floors, walls and ceilings, leaving only the silver and green braids.

He surmised that it could only mean that Salazar Slytherin had been the only one to cast the enchantments and spells that formed the lattice, in his section of the castle. Perhaps it happened similarly in the areas in which the dorms of the other Houses were located – wherever that was.

They followed Algernon Wilkes and Dorea Black through a succession of labyrinthine, deserted passages, walking deeper and deeper under the school, their surroundings becoming increasingly more chilly and damp.

Harry shivered and wrapped his robes tighter around his body, as he caught sight of some tapestries and landscapes hanging sparsely along the walls, depicting all sorts of sceneries: of a tumultuous sea with a large ship striving for survival amidst a roaring storm; a grim, bare, rocky mountain with lightning striking its peak; a large, full moon hanging above a derelict, abandoned castle; a burnt, scorched field with a leathery, winged serpent breathing out plumes of fire; and such. They all had a sort of stark, harsh beauty to them.

They finally paused by a stretch of bare, damp, stone wall. Several feet away at either side, there were landscapes: one of a solitary cottage at the edge of a steep, plunging cliff, with spiked waves clashing against the rocks; the other of a dark, deserted beach under a black sky with one lonely, bright star.

Harry took careful notice of the paintings, branding them in his mind. Though he didn’t think he really needed to remember them to find the place again – the wall before him was pulsing with such a dense and knotted lattice of silver and green cords, that it was utterly unmistakable. But it was wise to be precautious, in case his ‘magic-sight’ ever failed him.

“Gloria a la pureza,” murmured Dorea Black.

At that, a stone door concealed in the wall noiselessly slid open.

“Is that Latin?” asked Thaddeus Avery in his gruff voice.
Algernon Wilkes shot him a contemptuous look as they all marched inside. “No, you fool, it’s Spanish. Any pureblood worth his salt knows Latin and thus we didn’t want a clever Ravenclaw to stand here and spout all the Latin phrases he knew and hit the mark. Hence, Dorea and I decided that we would not only change the motto every week, but we would also change the language in which it should be spoken.”

A good idea, Harry thought. But it was even cleverer that Salazar Slytherin had chosen a bare expanse of wall as the entrance to his House. If he didn’t see the magic of the castle, he would have been certain that the entrance had to be behind one of the tapestries or landscapes. He wouldn’t have suspected a simple wall.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls, sparsely decorated here and there by tapestries displaying the Slytherin emblem. In between several of them, there were large, oval windows, through which the very bottom of the lake could be seen.

The windows had to be enchanted since the views they displayed weren’t lightless and unfathomable, as anyone might have expected given the depth of the murky waters. Instead, entangled algae could be seen clearly, gently swaying back and forth, schools of silvery fishes swam by, and Harry even caught sight of one of those wrinkled and grey skinned merfolk creatures.

Furthermore, there were no other decorations, no portraits or landscapes, except thick, forest green carpets that covered the floors and round, yellowish lamps that hanged on chains from the ceiling.

Thankfully, dispelling the chilly dampness of the room, there were five fireplaces in total, each on opposites sides of the common room, with fires crackling under elaborately carved mantelpieces. Each hearth was surrounded by a set of couches, settees, sofas, low tables, and high-backed chairs, all made of dark wood and upholstered by some kind of black, leathery material.

All in all, the common room was rather cozy in a sort of elegant way. It wasn’t stuffy, cluttered, or overly decorated, which Harry appreciated given that he was used to living in spartan quarters. Nevertheless, it was certainly much more lavish than anything he had ever seen.

All the older Slytherins who had left the Great Hall before them, were standing in the middle of the common room, with Professor Horace Slughorn in their midst, looking frazzled and harassed.

Harry didn’t pick up everything that the students were angrily ranting about at their Head of House, but given their expressions, he got the gist of it.

Not two seconds after they had entered the common room, one of the older Slytherins caught sight of them and spat, pointing a finger at Harry and Tom, “Ha! There they are! These are the two mudbloods we were telling you about, Professor Slughorn!”
“They must have cheated – must’ve tricked the Hat, somehow!”

“They ought to be expelled for that, sir!”

“Or at least get them resorted and out of our House!”

The incensed clamoring started again, leaving a flustered, mumbling Horace Slughorn, who didn’t seem to be able to take control of the situation.

“Let our Head of House speak!” snapped Dorea Black with irritation, as she made her way through the crowd of students, the Head Boy, Algernon Wilkes, following after her.

Slughorn released a haggard exhalation of breath. “Thank you, Miss Black.” Then the pot-bellied wizard pulled himself up to his full height, holding up his hands, and said congenially, “Now, now, children, let us not be carried away by our impassionate beliefs or our tempers-”

“There have never been mudbloods in the entire history of Slytherin House. Salazar must be rolling in his grave, Professor!”

“Precisely. It’s not to be borne, sir! How can we be expected to tolerate the presence of two mudbloods in our midst, I ask!”

“Muggleborns, Mr. Dolohov, Miss Pucey,” chided Slughorn gently. Then he took several steps to stand between Tom and Harry, clamping his hands on their shoulders, as he turned around to face the other students. “We cannot hold against them their unfortunate origins.” He graced the congregated students with a forced smile. “Let’s take this as an opportunity to show the other Houses how magnanimous Slytherin House can be towards those from a… ah, slightly different background-”

“But, sir-”

“No,” interrupted Slughorn, holding up a hand. “As I have already explained, there are no grounds for expulsion and they cannot be re-sorted – such thing would go against Hogwarts’ rules-”
“Then have the rules changed!”

Slughorn frowned at them, all trace of amicability vanishing from his voice as he scolded, “Headmaster Dippet cannot change the rules set forth by the very Founders, nor would he, for a matter such a this-”

“The Headmaster can’t,” interjected Walburga Black sharply, glaring at the wizard. “But the Governors could. My father is on the Board-”

“Give it a rest, sister! Professor Slughorn already said that nothing can be done,” piped in Alphard Black with exasperation, as he shot Harry a covert, apologetic glance. “Let’s just try to get along with them-”

Harry saw the boy’s glance, but didn’t respond to it. He was having a hard time, as it was, not to hunch his shoulders defensively against the onslaught of contemptuous repugnance thrown his way.

“Shut up, Alphie – who asked you!” snarled Walburga, to then address the other students. “Let us all write to our parents, demanding that the mudbloods be resorted.” She spun around and rounded on Abraxas Malfoy. “Especially you, Malfoy. Your grandfather is the Head of the Board of Governors.” She narrowed her eyes at the boy, and demanded forcefully, “You’ll write to him, won’t you?”

Abraxas arched an eyebrow at her, and said impassively, “I will.”

Walburga’s eyes narrowed even further, apparently not satisfied with the boy’s terse reply, as she spat, “And you’ll make him convince the other Governors to have the mudbloods resorted, or better yet, expelled?”

“I cannot ‘make’ my grandfather do anything,” drawled Abraxas in a bored tone of voice. “He’ll act as he sees fit.” He then shot her a frosty smirk. “However, if I were you, I wouldn’t count on the Governors doing anything about this matter.”

Walburga bristled, before her face contorted as she sneered contemptuously. “I don’t know why I turned to you. You’re glad that there’re mudbloods among us, aren’t you? To have two who are even lower than yourself.” She nastily smirked at him, as she spat snidely, “We all know what you are, after all.”
Abraxas stiffened at that, his silver eyes turning chilly with icy fury, as many students gasped in outrage, showing their defense of the boy, while a few sniggered as they shot Malfoy spiteful, resentful or demeaning looks, and others simply gazed from girl to boy, with hungry looks of anticipation at the oncoming confrontation.

“I dare you to come out with it openly,” hissed out Abraxas very quietly, as he took a step towards the girl. “Why, we could solve our differences in a dueling match-”

“I would best you in the bat of an eyelash,” jeered Walburga, her dark grey eyes gleaming meanly.

Abraxas let out a short, hard laugh. “You’re not the only one who’s being tutored in the Dark Ar-”

Slughorn loudly cleared his throat, looking agitated. “Children, children – please!”

“This is ridiculous – we were talking about what to do with the mudbloods!” someone yelled with angered impatience. “I don’t want to stay up all night because of this. Let’s agree once and for all what to do about them!”

That brought on another round of voiced opinions, and abruptly, Dorea Black appeared before Harry and Tom.

She looked irked beyond measure, but didn’t even glance at them as she commanded sharply, “Come along, I’ll take you to your dormitory. It’s best if you’re out of sight.”

Harry didn’t think about it twice and instantly followed her, glad to go as far away as possible from the hateful mob. Tom trailed after them in silence, and Harry shot him a glance over his shoulder, not quite discerning what his brother might be thinking about the whole affair.

At the very back and right side of the common room, they passed through an archway and went down a spiral staircase, landing on the first subfloor. It was circular, with three doors, each with a silver plaque displaying fine, elegant inscriptions. The one on the door that Dorea Black opened read: ‘First-year Boys’.

Before entering the room, Harry noticed that the staircase continued downwards, evidently to other
deeper levels housing the dormitories of the fourth-year boys and onwards.

Their dorm-room was circular as well, illuminated by torches perched along the walls, with seven canopied, four-poster beds. Harry had never seen beds like those: they had heavy, velvety curtains at all sides, of a dark green lined with silver thread; the posters were carved with figures of serpents wrapped along it.

At the left side of each bed, there was an oval floor-carpet, a nightstand, a desk, and an ornate wardrobe displaying Slytherin House’s crest. And above each desk, there were round windows, much smaller than those in the common room but still evidently enchanted since they gave different views of the bottom of the lake.

In the very middle of the room, there was a stone plinth with a basin-like top filled with wood pieces, a fire merrily crackling. It didn’t even have a chimney; the smoke rose a few inches from the flames and then vanished into thin air. There was a waist-high rail surrounding it, so that no one would fall into the fire by accident, Harry surmised.

There was only one other door besides the entrance’s one, which had to lead to the bathroom. It divided the circular room in two uneven halves: one with four beds and their corresponding furniture, the other side with three.

Seven trunks had been left at one side of the entrance door. Evidently, they were supposed to choose which beds to take.

“Where’s my owl?” demanded Tom suddenly. Harry turned around to see his brother gesturing at Lord Horkos’ empty cage, which sat on top of his trunk.

Dorea Black shot Tom a glance and replied tartly, “The house-elves took it to the owlerly, obviously. That is where owls are kept.”

She then spun around to leave the room without sparing them a second glance.

“Where’s the owlerly?” asked Tom sharply before the girl disappeared.

“Near Figwig Ogg’s cottage, in the school grounds,” was Dorea Black’s terse, irritated reply before she left, closing the door shut behind her.
As soon as she was gone, both of them dragged their trunks to the right side of the circular room, the one that had the three beds. Tom instantly chose the bed further away from the entrance door, leaving Harry to take the middle one.

Tom didn’t waste a single second and he began unpacking all his things, putting his books, parchments, inkbottles, and quills inside his desk, to then proceed to hang all his clothes in his wardrobe. Meanwhile, Harry merely plopped down on his bed, deciding he would leave his unpacking for the following morning, too tired to even attempt it at present.

As he observed his brother, he muttered, “Do you think we’ll get expelled? Or be forced to be sorted again?”

“Of course not, don’t be ridiculous,” said Tom dismissively, as he continued with his task.

Harry sighed, and then flopped down on his bed, crossing his arms under his head, staring up at the canopy, as he grumbled, “They hate us. What are we going to do?”

“Do?” scoffed out Tom, briefly glancing at him. “We didn’t come here to make friends but to learn as much as we can about magic.” He shot him a sneer. “I couldn’t care less if they don’t like me.”

“But I do care,” murmured Harry sullenly. “I didn’t imagine it would be like this. I do want to have some friends.”

Tom halted and turned around to give him a disgusted look. “Stop moping about it. You’re never going to have friends in Slytherin House, you might as well accept it and get over it.” He then closed the doors of his wardrobe, with his pajamas and toothbrush in hand, and commanded briskly, “Come, let’s get ready for bed. I want to show you something before the others get here.”

Intrigued, Harry obeyed. He plucked out his old, worn pajamas from his trunk, along with his toothbrush, and followed his brother into the bathroom. There, he halted, gaping at his surroundings.

“They have indoor plumbing for everything!” breathed out Harry, marveled.
He had heard that wealthy folk had that, but at the orphanage they certainly didn’t. When Mrs. Sharpe had died and Kathy Cole became the Matron, she had managed to save money for many months and had finally paid to have plumbing installed in the orphanage, but only for the kitchen and the toilets. They still had to carry water in buckets, from the kitchen up to the bathroom in the boys’ floor, so that they could pour some of it in the washbasin, for their daily ablutions of brushing their teeth, cleaning their faces and hands.

Moreover, they bathed in the kitchen, where they brought in a tub made of aluminum, just big enough for a child to sit in with his knees drawn to his chest. They heated water in the kitchen stove and then poured it inside the tub, using a bar of soap and a flannel to scrub the dirt off their bodies and hair. That was once a week, ever since Mrs. Cole became the Matron, of course. Before that, under Mrs. Sharpe’s rule, the caregivers only bathed them twice a month, if they were lucky. Tom had always angrily complained about it. His brother was very fastidious about personal hygiene.

Tom was going to be in paradise here, Harry thought, as he caught sight of the right side of the room, where there were seven tubs made of stone, sprouting from the floor; the largest tubs he had ever seen. He could fit, fully stretch out his legs, and still have plenty of spare room! And each of them had a series of different faucets - he wondered at that. They were seemingly made of bronze, copper, silver, gold, or other likewise colored metals. But it was clear that there was no rationing of water here, and Harry rather liked the idea of being able to bathe everyday if he wanted.

Eagerly, he sprang towards the sinks, where Tom was standing, looking puzzled. Above the sinks there was an enormous rectangular mirror, and at one side, between the sinks and the tubs, a whole expanse of wall had seven rails, one on top of the other, with many fluffy, dark green towels of different sizes with the Slytherin crest embroidered near the hems.

However, it wasn’t that which had Tom perplexed, or Harry, when he realized what the problem was. Under the large mirror, along the back of the sinks, there was an array of decanter-like, crystal bottles. The tall ones had a purple liquid inside; the shorter, a blue one.

“Where’s the toothpowder?” said Harry bemused. “And the soap bar?”

He glanced at the tubs, but there wasn’t any bars of soap there either, instead, also flasks of varied-colored liquids.
Harry blinked, gazing back at the sinks. They had brought their toothbrushes along with them, since when Kathy became the Matron she had bought one toothbrush for every child. The handles were made of cattle bone and the bristles of wild boar or horse hair.

They were quite a luxury for them. With Mrs. Sharpe, they had to use their fingers.

However, they hadn’t thought of bringing toothpowder too. They had imagined that the school would have it. How else were they supposed to clean their teeth, if not? But there, on the sinks, he didn’t see any glasses either, just very small crystal cups. Nonetheless, toothpowder had to be mixed with water in a glass so that they could stick their toothbrushes in.

“I don’t think wizards use toothbrushes or soap bars,” muttered Tom, as he picked up one of the purple decanters. He plucked out the stopper and, instantly, bubbles popped out of the bottle. Tom gave them a sniff. “Smells like some sort of herb. This must be soap.”

“Soap in liquid form?” said Harry, his eyebrows shooting upwards.

“It’s a potion of some kind, I believe. But yes, soap, in essence.”

“Then, if the purple liquid is soap, the blue one…” Harry trailed off and grasped one of the shorter bottles – these ones didn’t have any stoppers. He opened his mouth and tilted the bottle. When nothing came down, he shook it, but only two drops slowly landed on his tongue. Nevertheless, nothing else happened.

“Try it with water,” said Tom as he turned the knob of one of the faucets, quickly filling one of the tiny crystal cups and offering it to Harry.

Harry nodded and poured the small measure of water inside his mouth. Then he gasped, his eyes round, when a sort of whirlwind exploded inside his mouth. In the next second, the sensation vanished along with the water, yet his teeth, his tongue, his very breath, felt utterly refreshed and cleaner than he had ever experienced before.

He opened his mouth and stared at himself in the mirror – why, his teeth even seemed to be sparkly white!

Harry chuckled as he passed the bottle and cup to Tom. “This is tooth liquid soap, then, to call it something. Try it!”
After that, they quickly cleaned themselves up and changed into their pajamas, returning to the bedroom. Harry folded the school clothes he had been wearing and left them in his trunk, while Tom hanged his inside his wardrobe.

The other boys still hadn’t arrived. The heated debate in the common room was certainly taking them a long while – what to do with the mudbloods, indeed!

Harry grunted angrily as he plopped himself down on Tom’s bed. “What did you want to show me?”

Tom lifted the top of his desk and extracted a thick, large book from it, before he took a seat by Harry’s side.

When Harry caught sight of the title, he groaned loudly, “Hogwarts a History?” He shot his brother a pitiful glance and whined, “Tooom, really...”

“Stop complaining, this is important,” snapped Tom sharply, as he started to ruffle through the pages. Then, he settled the book between them, as he pointed at a page. “Here – see this.”

Harry sighed and then took a peek. He cocked his head to a side when he saw a picture of a scowling, ugly wizard dressed in dark green robes, with a long grey beard, spiky eyebrows, and a bald head.

What caught his attention was the red flower pinned in the middle of the wizard’s chest. It was exactly the same as the one Maximillian Malfoy had been wearing in the platform of the Hogwarts Express. And once again, the flower looked very familiar to him. Something niggled at the back of his mind, but he couldn’t quite put a finger on it.

He dismissed the notion as he read the title at the very top of the page, seeing the name of the wizard.

“So Salazar Slytherin looked like a constipated monkey chewing on a wasp, so what?” intoned Harry flatly. Then he frowned and glanced at the picture again. “Why isn’t it moving?”
“Because it’s not a picture of his portrait,” bit out Tom, looking extremely annoyed. “All the original portraits of the Founders were lost or accidentally destroyed throughout the ages. This is a picture of a likeness painted by some unknown wizard who lived in the Founders’ time.” He shot Harry an irritated look. “It wasn’t the picture what I wanted you to see, but this.”

Tom pointed at a passage, as he continued speaking, his tone of voice now excited, “Here says that Salazar Slytherin was the first known Parselmouth in Europe. And it explains what that means – he spoke Parseltongue. He could speak to snakes, Harry. That’s what we are, Parselmouths!”

“Oh.” Harry blinked. Well, that certainly explained what Slytherin’s voice had been yapping about in the Hat. But he still didn’t see why his brother was so giddy.

He shrugged. “So we know what our ability is called.” He rolled his eyes. “Honestly, Tom, I thought you had found something interesting-”

“You’re a half-brained imbecile!” hissed out Tom, looking beside himself with aggravation. “The Sorting Hat spoke to me, Harry. It said that the only place for me was the House of my forefather! Don’t you understand what it means?” A feverish gleam glinted in his eyes, as he continued exultantly, gesturing wildly at the book, “It says here that his line died off centuries ago – evidently they don’t know – they can’t imagine – I’m Slytherin’s descendant – his lost Heir!”

Harry frowned at him and when Tom caught sight of his look, the expression on his handsome face swiftly changed.

Tom let out a little cough, and then said smoothly, waving a hand in an encompassing manner, “And you’re his Heir too, of course. Obviously, since you’re my twin.”

“Yes, I know that,” snapped Harry crossly. “The blasted hat spoke to me too, Tom. And it said loads of things. That I had Slytherin’s tongue – now I know what it meant – and that I have Slytherin’s blood, and they also said-”

“What – what do you mean?” Tom stared at him oddly. He cleared his throat, piercing him with his eyes, a slight expression of disbelief on his face. “It said you had Slytherin’s blood?”

Harry shot him an impatient scowl. “Duh - yes! It’s practically the same as what the Hat told you, isn’t it? That Slytherin is our forefather – our ancestor, that we have his blood, that we’re his descendants…” He rolled his eyes with exasperation. “Really, Tom, what’s the matter with you?”
Tom stared at him some more, and then cleared his throat again, to intone placidly, “Well, yes, that’s exactly what I’m trying to explain to you.” He then shot him an irritated look. “You don’t seem to understand just how important this is.”

He gestured briskly at the book. “If you had read it, you’d know that we’re the descendants of a very powerful wizard. Indeed, he was considered the most powerful of his time – the first Dark Lord, because even if he didn’t lead dark pureblood wizards in a revolt or a war, he was the first to warn people about the evils of reproducing with mugglebloods, how it weakened the magical bloodlines, and the dangers of letting them study at Hogwarts, since they went back to their muggle families and disclosed the secrets of the Magical World—”

“He did those things… and you admire him for it?” interrupted Harry incredulously, his eyebrows shooting upwards.

Tom glowered at him, and bit out shortly, “There’s no doubt he was a great wizard and I’m sure he was right in many things. Not only that, but he was, allegedly, a genius. A Potions Master who created all sorts of groundbreaking potions, especially for fertility. But my point is, that he surpassed all in power.” An exhilarated expression spread on his face. “We’ve inherited his Parseltongue trait, so it can only mean that we are very powerful too.”

He leaned forward, intently pinning Harry with his gaze, as he rushed out in a whisper, “And the book mentioned that magical children have bouts of ‘accidental magic’ – uncontrolled displays, that means. But do you remember the things we did in the orphanage? That wasn’t accidental magic, Harry! We were controlling our magic, even if we didn’t know. You made Puffy the Bunny dance, and the toys you wanted moved to your hand, and you heal quickly, and could manipulate the length of your hair. And I can move things around, I hanged the rabbit from the rafters, and I could make anyone hurt just by wanting it! And you disappeared from the backyard and appeared in our room when Dennis Bishop was hurling stones at you – that’s called Apparation, Harry, and wizards learn how to do it when they’re seventeen!”

“Oh!” breathed out Harry, his eyes wide as he took in such revelations. But then he frowned, pensively. “So that’s why you’re so excited about us being Slytherin’s descendants?” He cocked his head to a side. “Just because it means that we’re powerful?”

Tom sprang back to his former position, and leveled at him a disappointed and angered glance, as he sneered, “Just? Does it seem a small matter to you that we have the capacity to become the greatest and most powerful of wizards—”

Harry snorted, and his brother shot him such a venomous look that Harry quickly held up a hand,
as he piped in, “Yes, it would be nice if we grew up to be powerful wizards—”

“Nice!” exclaimed Tom indignantly, a furious look beginning to grow on his face.

Harry continued without pausing, merely rolling his eyes, “But I’m more interested in what we can do now.” He fiercely glowered at his brother, and bit out angrily, “Why are you making everyone believe that we’re muggleborns and with two muggle parents who are alive, to boot!”

“Ah,” said Tom nonchalantly, giving him a superior look. “I have a good reason for it—”

“I bet you do. I know you’ve been plotting something. But I don’t care what you’re up to,” snapped Harry hotly, pointing a finger at the door of their room. “Our housemates hate us and I don’t want to put up with that! Now that we know we’re Slytherin’s descendants, let’s tell them!” He leaned forward, as he added eagerly, “You’ve heard the things they’ve been saying about how horrid it is to have mudbloods in their great, esteemed House. Obviously, they worship Salazar Slytherin. So if we told them—”

“No,” snapped Tom decisively, narrowing his eyes at him. “I don’t want anyone knowing about it. It’s bad enough that Dumbledore—” he acidly sneered the name “—knows we’re Parselmouths. So for now, we’ll keep it a secret—”

“But I don’t understand!” bellowed Harry, nearly yanking his hair in frustration. “I would have thought that you, in particular, would want everyone to know how ‘special’ we are—”

“Oh, but I do,” Tom intoned pleasantly, a wide, devious smirk spreading on his face. “But I have it all planned out, it involves several stages, and now is not the time to reveal our ancestry and our Parseltongue ability. Not yet, that will be the very last stage.”

“Stages?” Harry stared at him, his mouth hanging open. Then he glowered at him and said heatedly, “Well, you better start explaining this plan of yours!”

Tom shot him a superior look, as he said coolly, “Never you mind what my plan is, leave it all to me—”

“Tom,” hissed out Harry warningly. “Spills the beans or I’ll—”
“Fine, you little pest,” spat Tom with vexed irritation. “I’m not in the mood to put up with your hissy fits, so I’ll tell you a part of my plan.” He shot him a hard glance. “It’s the most important of all, so you’ll have to be satisfied with knowing only that.”

“Alright,” muttered Harry, suspiciously narrowing his eyes at him.

Tom picked up ‘Hogwarts, a History – New Unabridged Edition!’, and flipped a page, to then point a finger at a title. “What does it say here?”

Harry leaned forward, and read out loud, “The Legend of the Chamber of Secrets.” He shot his brother a puzzled, curious glance.

Tom answered it by looking very self-satisfied, as he said amiably, “Apparently, Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin got into a fight, because Slytherin insisted that mudbloods shouldn’t be accepted in Hogwarts and Gryffindor, in particular, opposed this. After their fight, Slytherin left the school, never to be seen again. However, it’s believed that, before leaving, Slytherin had built a chamber somewhere in the castle, that only he could enter. And that there’s a monster in it, that only he and his descendants could control, since it’s said that the monster’s duty, if released, is to kill all the mudbloods in the school.”

His dark blue eyes gleamed with excitement, as he added gleefully, “Clearly, the Chamber can only be found by a Parselmouth because, obviously, it can only be accessed by speaking Parseltongue. Proof of this is that any have tried to find the Chamber and have failed. And the monster must be a snake of some kind, since only Slytherin and his descendants, Parselmouths, can control it, according to the Legend.”

And with that, Tom stared at Harry, looking supremely smug and pleased with himself.

Harry blinked back at him, before he said slowly, “And you’re happy about this because…?” The next moment, he shut his eyes close, and groaned dismally. “Tom, don’t tell me you actually want to find this Chamber place!”

“Of course I do,” intoned Tom arrogantly.

“Whatever the hell for?” exhaled Harry dismayed, as he opened his eyes and gazed at his brother. He anxiously carded his fingers through his hair. “It has a bloody monster, you said so yourself!”
Tom arched an eyebrow at him. “I thought you would be interested in this.” He then added with a jeer, “Given that you always like to go around, having little adventures-”

“Not if there’s a ruddy monster involved!” snapped Harry, crossing his arms over his small chest. “I value my life, thank you very much!”

Tom scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. “The monster wouldn’t be dangerous for us. We’re Parselmouths and thus can control it-”

“If the Legend is right,” pointed out Harry acerbically, “and there’s no way of knowing if it is until it’s too late and we’re there, face to face with who-knows what kind of creature! And it would go about killing muggleborns, to boot!”

“Well, we can tell it not to kill mudbloods,” granted Tom graciously with a magnanimous air, “if it’s so important to you.”

Harry shot him a hard look. “I’m going to chose to believe that you were not seriously considering letting the thing lose in the castle, having a muggleborn killing spree.” He huffed, and squared his shoulders. “So given that, what’s the point of finding the Chamber?”

Tom shot him a vexed glower, as he gritted out impatiently, “Don’t you see that by finding the Chamber of Secrets we would be proving that not only we’re Parselmouths but also Slytherin’s Heirs? It’s the only way of proving it to others-”

“You want to take our housemates to the Chamber,” asked Harry astonished, “when we find it?”

“Only one of them,” replied Tom nonchalantly. “I’ve been observing the Slytherins and paying attention to their conversations. And given what that Prefect girl said, it’s obvious there’s a hierarchy in the House, led by ‘The Two’.” He sneered at the ridiculous title. “Added to that, what the Prewett twins told us – basically that the Malfoys are the most influential dark pureblood family- and having seen how most students took Abraxas Malfoy’s side when that screeching Black girl accused him of being a ‘thing’ – whatever she meant by it – it’s clear that Malfoy will become one of the leaders.”

Tom waved a hand dismissively, as he added, “For as long as I allow him to, obviously.” He shot Harry a superior look. “Evidently, when I deem that the time is right, it will be I who will take the
reins of the House,” he said as if it was already a fait accompli. “It’s my birthright, after all, being Slytherin’s Heir.” Then he glanced at him, and offered in an indulgent, generous tone of voice, “Yours too, if you’re interested.”

“Not really.” Harry rolled his eyes. “I’ll leave it all to you.” Then he shook his head, and muttered as he shot him a dubious glance, “So you want us to only take Abraxas Malfoy with us, when we find the Chamber of Secrets?”

“Exactly,” said Tom pleasantly. “He’ll be our witness and no one will doubt his word when he spreads the word around the House that we are indeed Slytherin’s Heirs.” He pierced Harry with his eyes, as he added matter-of-factly, “Don’t you see that if we told them right now that we’re Parselmouths, and even talked to a snake in front of them, they would have no reason to believe us? They wouldn’t understand the language, to them it would sound like gibberish hisses, and they’d think we were merely imitating the sounds. But finding and opening the Chamber, proves it.”

“Ah.” Harry’s eyes widened in understanding. “You’re right. I didn’t think about that.”

Tom nodded at him. “Furthermore, it’s also important that by then, we’ve shown that we’re outstanding. We must have earned their grudging respect. I’ll have no problem with that, since I’m brilliant.” He waved a hand as if it was a foregone conclusion. “You—” he skewered Harry with a hard gaze “- I won’t let you be mediocre. You’ll have excellent marks even if I have to tutor you myself, like I did with Alice’s lessons—”

“Yes, yes,” mumbled Harry grimly, rolling his eyes, “because it would reflect badly on you if I didn’t do well, and all that rot – I’ve heard it all before.”

Tom shot him a satisfied glance, and then leaned forward to be inches away from Harry, as he smirked at him, intoning softly, “Don’t look so dejected, little brother. You’re going to get something else out of this. I’ll be using every spare time I have researching about the Slytherin line and the Chamber of Secrets in the library. Meanwhile, I want you to explore the whole castle, looking for the entrance—”

“That will take me ages!” burst out Harry, appalled.

“Perhaps a few years,” agreed Tom coolly. “Hogwarts has seven floors, not counting the dungeons and its levels, and there must be hundreds of rooms in total. Only a small section of the castle is used nowadays, according to Hogwarts a History.” He shot Harry a pointed glance. “But if you take a couple of hours every week, to go about the castle, then in three or four years you ought to find the entrance. And I might come across some clues in books that might help you narrow the
Harry mutinously glowered at him, as he groused, “Why do I have to be the one who does all the field work-”

“Would you rather spend those hours cooped up in the library doing research?” jeered Tom, shooting him a pointed, knowing look. “We’ll each do what we do best.”

Harry jutted out his chin, not all satisfied with the arrangement. He would be doing all the hard work, as far as he was concerned. Yes, he enjoyed exploring new places, and Hogwarts was certainly very interesting, given all that magic thrumming about, but he would be working on it for several years, and Tom evidently wouldn’t be researching for that long.

Seeing Harry’s expression, Tom leaned forward and whispered ever so cajolingly and softly, “If you help me find the Chamber of Secrets, I’ll help you find our father.”

Harry gave him an affronted look. “You must think I’m a complete idiot-”

“Of course I do,” hummed Tom, a little taunting smirk on his lips.

Harry snorted, and then continued hotly, “That’s no deal! You have a reason now to be interested in finding our dad. You’re not going to help me look for him to do me a favor, you’ll do it for yourself.” He crossed his arms over his small chest, as he huffed out, “I’ll only agree to all this if it’s clear that you’ll owe me a huge favor. Take it or leave it.”

Tom darkly glowered at him, and finally gritted out grudgingly, “Very well. But I reserve the right to refuse if I don’t like what you ask of me in return.”

“I can live with that,” said Harry, cheekily grinning at him as he flopped down on Tom’s pillow, very satisfied with himself.

Tom scowled, clearly not appreciating that Harry had gotten the upper hand, but Harry ignored him as he mused out loud, “You know, about this whole thing of being Slytherin’s descendants…” Seeing Tom’s irked, dark look, he added quickly, “No, of course I believe it. The Hat said it to you and to me too. And there’s also the Parseltongue thing. It’s just that…” He shook his head, trying to clear up his ideas, and finally glanced at Tom, as he said quietly, “Well, remember what the
goblin guarding Gringotts said? I’m thinking that perhaps our mom was the witch, and Slytherin’s descendant, and not dad-”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” sneered Tom at him, shooting him an utterly disdainful look.

“Wait – hear me out!” said Harry adamantly, sitting upwards, crossing his legs. He took a deep breath, and expanded, “The goblin said that no Riddle ever had a vault in Gringotts. And we know that dad is British, given his name-”

“There are countless reasons that could explain why he doesn’t have a vault-”

“Yes, but wouldn’t the simplest explanation be the right one?” insisted Harry stubbornly. “That dad is a muggle, and that our mother was the witch, and since we don’t know her first or last name, we can’t ask the goblins. But that her family does have a vault, and they’re alive, and that’s why the goblins didn’t send us the key?”

Tom shot him a disgusted look, as if he were beholding a brain-damaged simpleton. “Our mother couldn’t have been the magical one.”

“I don’t see why not,” persisted Harry vehemently.

Tom angrily rounded on him as he spat, “A witch wouldn’t have been in our neighborhood, giving birth in an orphanage, of all places, like a whore! Haven’t you seen how the Prewett twins are, and our own housemates? They know nothing of the Muggle World, they have never set foot, nor would want to, in a Muggle town or city. So if our mother was a witch, what was she doing in our neighborhood? Tell me that!”

“There could be many reasons,” insisted Harry pigheadedly. “Perhaps she was curious. Maybe she decided to visit Muggle London-”

“And she ended up in our pathetic, run down, dirty neighborhood,” sneered Tom mockingly, “because it’s such a tourist attraction, is it?”

“Well, no,” gritted out Harry. “But we don’t know what her situation was.” He shook his head, and muttered irritably, “I don’t see why you refuse to even consider the possibility-”
“Because she DIED!” bellowed Tom at him, so suddenly and violently that Harry was left blinking at him, gobsmacked.

At last, Harry gazed at him warily, and then said softly, “Everyone dies, Tom.”

Tom narrowed his eyes at him in sheer anger and contempt, as he hissed out, “Not magical people - wizards and witches have twice the lifespan that muggles have! And haven’t you been flipping through our textbooks, haven’t you seen all the things that magic can do? I have! And with potions alone you can heal yourself, and make your body stronger, and who knows what else! A witch wouldn’t die like our mother did! She wasn’t even ill – she just simply died, like the pathetic, wretched, filthy muggle that she was!”

He leaned forward, his face inches away from Harry’s, as he whispered furiously, an utterly revolted, hateful expression on his face, “And the worst of it is that I’m Slytherin’s Heir but I’m also poisoned with her blood - her same weakness runs through my veins, her tainted, weak, common blood. Well, I’m not going to end up like her, I’ll tell you that much! If there’s some way of ridding myself of her taint, I’ll do it. If not, I’ll invent one myself! I’m never going to die like she did!”

Harry stared at him, gaping. Then, suddenly struck by the realization, he breathed out, “You’re scared - scared of death.”

Tom instantly stiffened, his expression turning thunderous. But Harry could only feel a flash of pity, sadness, and compassion. In the bat of an eyelash, he flung himself at his brother, wrapping his thin arms around him, as he murmured soothingly, “It’s all right, Tom. You’ll never die like mum did.” He warred with his emotions for a second, feeling guilty and a bit sick, but then he added nonetheless, for his brother’s sake, “It’s true, she was weak and pathetic, but you’re nothing like that.”

Tom struggled against him for a moment, but Harry just tightened his hold, like a stubborn octopus, and didn’t let go. In the end, Tom sagged, but it was so abruptly that it caught Harry unprepared. With surprised grunts, they both fell backwards on Tom’s bed due to their compounded weights.

Harry chuckled as he disentangled himself from his brother, and then lied on his tummy by his side, propping himself up with his elbows as he peered at him, murmuring quietly, “I don’t think you should be afraid of dying-”
“Only a simpleton wouldn’t be scared of death,” bit out Tom, turning his head towards him, narrowing his eyes to slits. “There’s nothing after death, Harry.” He then added with a contemptuous sneer, “Or are you telling me that you believed the rubbish that Father Patrick preached from the pulpit – about God and Heaven and Hell?”

“Not really.” Harry muttered. Then he paused and added pensively, “But I do think that there must be something afterwards—”

“There’s nothing, you idiot!” snarled Tom with angered exasperation. “You simply cease to exist – so who would want that?” He shook his head, and then said through clenched teeth, “And I bet that wizards have all sorts of ways of making themselves live longer. Why would they have double the lifespan of muggles, if not? That’s something else I’m determined to research. I’ll find a way to live as long as possible.” His dark eyes suddenly gleamed, as if he had been struck by a marvelous possibility. “Why, maybe with magic and being very powerful, one could even become immortal—”

Harry snorted, shaking his head in amusement. “If there were immortal wizards strutting about, I’m sure the Prewett twins would have mentioned it.”

“What of magical creatures, then?” interjected Tom sharply, glowering at him. “The Prewetts said that dragons were ancient - that they lived for hundreds of years, some even reaching a millennia. If they can last so long, then a powerful wizard could surely find the way too.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Well, I don’t see the point myself.” He shot his brother a warm smile. “I’ll be happy if we both grow old together and die peacefully, surrounded by our families. That’s the best way to go.”

“Only you would think that,” sneered Tom snidely. “Dying like an ordinary, sappy muggle.” He shook his head with disdain. “Well, that’s not for me.” He shot Harry a hard look, as he added harshly, “And I won’t let you end up like that either. No, after Hogwarts, we’ll travel all around the Magical World,” he added with a thoroughly determined tone of voice, “and we’ll learn all sorts of magic, and we’ll find ways of making us stronger, invincible, and immortal.”

“Alright, Tom, if you say so,” murmured Harry drowsily as he crossed his arms and rested his head on them, knowing of course, that it wouldn’t come to happen, quite convinced that it was impossible.

“What are you doing?” demanded Tom briskly.
Harry opened one eye and peered at him, as he groused, “I was falling asleep, you idiot. Thanks very much.”

“You’re not sleeping in my bed!” hissed out Tom angrily.

At that, both of Harry’s eyes flung open, and he stared at his brother, taken aback. “What do you mean? We’ve always slept on the same bed.”

“Well, we’re not doing that here,” snapped Tom shortly, glaring at him. “Do you want the other boys to see us sharing a bed, come morning? I’m not giving them reason to mock us!”

“I don’t care two straws about what they think!” said Harry hotly, as he pulled himself up, glowering down at his brother.

“I do, about this,” bit out Tom incensed. “And we’re not little boys anymore, Harry. We’ll be turning eleven this December. It had to stop at some point!”

“But what if I get the nightmare?” spluttered Harry, his green eyes wide. “It always makes my scar hurt and only you can soothe it.”

“You’ll have to learn to deal with it on your own,” said Tom harshly, shoving him away.

Harry clutched the bed sheets to keep his balance, as he gasped out, “Tom, you can’t be serious!”

“I am – get out!” hissed out Tom, this time pushing him so forcefully that Harry nearly hit the floor on his bum.

He managed to steady himself on his legs, though, and he stared incredulously as his brother yanked the curtains of his bed shut, leaving Harry out, standing there.

“FINE. SEE IF I CARE, YOU ASS!” bellowed Harry at the top of his lungs the next second, feeling deeply hurt, despondent, and dejected.
He sullenly dragged himself to his bed like a kicked puppy, and burrowed under the covers, sniffling.

Not a minute after, he heard the other first-year boys entering the room and moving about. At some point, he even heard them whispering among themselves, as if plotting something. But he didn’t have the spirits to even care.

He tossed and turned and rolled around in his bed, finding it impossible to get comfortable and fall asleep, so used he was to always having his brother’s warm body by his side.

The hours seemed to stretch by eternally, and at some point, after he had firmly shut his eyes close in another attempt to force himself to drowse, he saw the face of the beautiful, mysterious woman; the image unraveling like a mist in the darkness behind his closed eyelids.

He didn’t wonder if it was a hallucination or some strange conjure of his imagination, this time. He simply sleepily basked in the beauty of the golden-haired woman, and sighed as her soft, cultured voice echoed in his ears, singing Alice’s lullaby.

There seemed to be a sorrowful or worried tinge in her voice, but it was still so soft, soothing and cradling, that Harry murmured placidly, feeling a deep pang of yearning at the same time that his whole body relaxed. He even had the sensation that he was wrapped in her arms, being gently and lovingly rocked against her chest.

Harry fell into a deep, peaceful slumber, with her soft voice in his ears and the image of her beautiful, ethereal face like a soothing caress in his mind.
Part I: Chapter 15

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AN:

Thank you very much to all of those who reviewed – hugs and kisses to you! ;)

Elelith pointed out something I think it’s interesting because I had to muse about the subject when writing the last chapter–thanks for that, Elelith!- and other reviewers also commented on it. Here goes her remark: “But are you sure you didn't overplay the Mudblood sentiment a little. I mean, the whole anti-muggleborn thing is not at its peak, and even in canon Harry Potter, the Slytherins veiled their disgust...”

Answering back… Well, I rather thought that the anti-muggleborn sentiment back then must have been even stronger than in canon years, because in the 1940s the dark purebloods must have been very emboldened, since they had a Dark Lord in Europe, Grindelwald, who was succeeding, already having two countries in his grasp so far (Germany and Austria) – Voldemort never managed a small fraction of that. And unlike canon - when the Slytherins had to watch what they said because many of their relatives or parents had been put on trials or gone to Azkaban for supporting Voldemort in his First Rise- these Slytherins of the 1940s haven’t known such defeat yet, and thus are arrogant, over confident, and more outspoken. But still, the Slytherins wouldn’t openly go calling mudbloods to other muggleborns at school. They openly did so to Harry and Tom because they are from their same house, so it would remain in-house, so to speak. And of course that with Slughorn, as their Head of House, they would see no reason to not openly say what they believed. And also, at the Slytherin table, the younger Slytherins yelled and forgot themselves, firstly because they’re still children and thus don’t have the restrain and coolness of the older Slytherins, and secondly because they must have been extremely shocked – there had never been muggleborns in Slytherin House before- and also because none of them had ever been confronted with a muggleborn before in their lives. So given all this, I thought their reactions should be a little bit explosive.

Answering a doubt, the 'mysterious woman' Harry sees is Narcissa Malfoy. If you'll remember, in Chapter 1 of Part II, 'Santi' told her to sing to her baby the lullaby, to create a connection and anchor Harry's soul in his new baby body. That Harry Riddle from time to time sees her face and hears her voice singing Alice's lullaby is just an side effect of that, because he is tied to the timelines and the past and future, since he's the 'anchor' and the time-traveler.

This is also why Druella Rosier, who will be Narcissa's mother, looked so familiar to Harry,
because he had already experienced seeing Narcissa's face when he was in Diagon Alley.

On another note, I’m aware that students at Hogwarts don’t have Care of Magical Creatures in their first year, but they do in these times of the fic. In my fic, it was so, and it changed due to reasons we might see later.

I hope these explanations helped!

Enjoy and Review, please!

Part I: Chapter 15

The following morning, Harry was awoken by a loud, horrified gasp and by a blistering, piercing pain flaring in the scar on his forehead.

Feeling much rested after his night of sleep, Harry sat up straight and then pulled the curtains open of his bed. He instantly jumped to his feet when he caught sight of Tom, standing in his threadbare pajamas in front of his wardrobe and desk.

The doors of his brother’s wardrobe were parted and Harry saw that all the clothes inside were destroyed, as if some wild animal had ripped them to pieces. The top of Tom’s desk was wide open as well, showing all of his brother’s destroyed quills, books, and parchments, as if claws had slashed them. The inkbottles were broken too, blue and black ink dripping from everywhere.

Given the staggering pain on his forehead, Harry knew that Tom had to be in a murderous fury, but his brother was merely standing there, his stance rigid but his expression blank.

Then, Harry realized that there was a terribly pungent bad smell in the room, and he finally moved around his bed and caught sight of the other boys in the room.

Alphard Black was standing near the entrance door; it seemed the boy had taken the only other bed on Harry’s and Tom’s side of the room. The boy’s mouth was hanging open - clearly he had been the one who had gasped.

At the other side of the fire in the center of the room, stood the other four boys, dressed in tunic-like night clothes which appeared to be made of some soft, silky and thick material.

Abraxas Malfoy was silent, with a cool expression on his face, but Orion Black was tittering with nasty laughter, the hulking, meaty boy, Thaddeus Avery was shooting Harry and Tom a malevolent sneer, and Neron Lestrange was gazing at them with a cruel glint in his eyes and an expression of anticipation on his rough face.

“Look what he’s wearing!” jeered Neron Lestrange, his brown eyes travelling along Harry’s frame, his expression contemptuous. “Like his twin!” He shot Harry a disgusted look. “What – are you mudbloods dirty poor, to boot?”

Harry didn’t answer since he was watching how Alphard Black slipped out of the room, unnoticed
by the rest of the boys. He bristled with anger at that – it seemed the boy was fleeing! It had to mean that Alphard had participated in the nasty prank of destroying all of Tom’s things.

Thaddeus Avery and Orion Black guffawed at Lestrange’s jibe. And then Avery gestured at Tom’s desk and wardrobe, as he sneered mockingly, “Do you like our little present?” The hulking boy then pointedly darted his eyes to Harry’s trunk.

It was then that Harry realized that he hadn’t been spared. He quickly approached his trunk, and he gasped in horror at the sight, realizing what was the source of the stench in the room.

His trunk was filled to the brim with muddy water, brown things floating on the surface. A message, in glittering green letters, floated in the air above: ‘Dung for Mudblood Scum.’

And all his things were there! Unlike Tom, he hadn’t unpacked the previous night.

Harry suddenly felt such a surge of fury that he swirled around and made a lunge for the boys, his small hands ready, clenched into fists.

“Don’t!” hissed out Tom, instantly grabbing Harry by the arm and pulling him back. “That’s just what they want – do nothing!”

Harry shot him an incredulous glance and whispered back, angrily and nearly spluttering, “But they’ve wrecked all our stuff! How are we supposed to buy everything again? We don’t have any galleons left except the three I have!”

“He was going to physically assault us!” cried out Orion Black in disbelief.

Neron Lestrange let out a scathing guffaw. “Because that’s what filthy muggles do – they use their fists! They don’t know how else to fight!”

Harry swung around at that, ready to jump at them again to show them just what Mr. Hutchins had taught him. He had managed to beat Dennis Bishop, thus against these boys he could land some painful blows and crack some noses before he was overwhelmed by their numbers.

However, Tom’s tight grip on him prevented him from even attempting it. And just when he was about to wrench himself free from his brother’s grasp in order to attack the boys, Dorea Black came sprinting into their room.

Alphard Black was right behind her, slipping into the room, panting as if he had ran for miles, but also quietly, clearly not wanting any of the others to notice him. He shot Harry a covert wink as he slinked towards his bed, looking very proud of himself.

Nevertheless, Harry utterly ignored him, which made Alphard look crestfallen for a moment.

Dorea took the scene before her with one sweep of her light grey eyes, and then instantly rounded on Abraxas Malfoy, as she said angrily, “Didn’t you listen to what I said to all of you last night!”

Abraxas arched an eyebrow at her, as he said impassively, “I had nothing to do with this.”

Dorea suspiciously narrowed her eyes at the boy, clearly believing that Abraxas must have been the mastermind behind the cruel prank. Harry would have thought so too, since from what he had seen, Malfoy was clearly the leader of his group of friends.

“We did it, Aunt!” pronounced the handsome Orion Black, looking mutinous as he gestured at himself, Thaddeus Avery, and Neron Lestrange.
In a flash, Dorea turned around to pierce the boy with a furious scowl, then glowering at the other boys, as she spat, “I’ve had it with you little snouts! Go and change in the bathroom and leave, before I hex you!” She gestured briskly at Harry’s trunk and Tom’s wardrobe and desk. “I’ll deal with this.”

“We’re are not going anywhere,” snarled Neron Lestrange, squaring his shoulders and glaring at the fifth-year girl, “if you’re going to help the mudbloods and undo what we’ve done!”

Dorea bristled like an angry, ruffled cat. Indeed, her long, glossy black hair even seemed to start sticking in all directions, as she shook her head in fury. Then she paused, a wicked gleam in her light grey eyes.

“You’re not going anywhere, you say?” she intoned placidly, then she graced the boys with a dangerous smirk. “We’ll see about that.”

In the bat of an eyelash, she whipped out her wand and swooped it in mid-air, in a slashing motion, as she snapped, “Divesto!”

The four boys’ tunic-like sleepwear suddenly split in the middle and dropped to their feet, leaving them standing there, completely naked.

“Aunt ‘Rea!” cried out Orion Black shocked and aghast, his handsome face flushing in mortification as he quickly covered his groin with his hands.

The hulking Thaddeus Avery stood there, his mouth opening and closing, dumbly, before he clutched a pillow to cover his private parts, looking too stunned to do anything else.

Abraxas Malfoy hadn’t been spared either, and he had been the first to react, quickly getting a bed sheet and wrapping himself with it, his cheeks going pink.

Neron Lestrange had covered his bits with his hands, his face a splotchy, violent red, as he spluttered incoherently.

Alphard Black, the only one of the other boys who hadn’t been affected, meanwhile, was covering his mouth with a hand, choking as he tried to repress his guffaws.

Then, Lestrange seemed to find his voice, and he thundered furiously, “How dare you do that! Uncovering our private parts!”

“You have nothing I haven’t seen before,” scoffed out Dorea Black. “And believe me, I have no interest in seeing your pathetic, little bitty pricks,” she added, demonstrating by mockingly wiggling her pinky finger at them.

Neron Lestrange gaped, and then roared, “You have no shame, you scarlet witch!”

Dorea Black irreverently snorted, and then waved a hand at them, dismissively. “Scamper off now,
you little snouts, before I do something else to you.”

“Let’s go,” said then Abraxas Malfoy, in a cool, commanding tone of voice. “I don’t want to miss breakfast.”

And with that, he grabbed his school bag and his clothes, entering the bathroom without sparing Dorea a second glance. His friends swiftly followed, though the moment they closed the door of the bathroom shut behind them, Harry could hear Neron Lestrange’s and Thaddeus Avery’s furious voices.

Alphard Black had also grabbed his things, but he had remained behind. He approached Harry now, looking hesitant for a brief moment. Then he squared his shoulders as he stood before him.

He gazed at him with entreating expression on his face, as he said vehemently, “I had no part in what they did. As soon as I saw, I went to fetch Dorea.” The boy bit his lower lip, as he added quietly, “And I did try to warn you not to enter our compartment in the Hogwarts Express. You have to understand that I cannot openly-”

“Alphie,” interrupted Dorea, her voice sharp as she narrowed her eyes at her nephew. “Go with the others. You can speak to him later.”

Alphard looked uncertain for a second, but then he nodded. He shot Harry a wink and then dashed to the bathroom. Harry frowned, wondering just what the boy wanted from him.

As soon as they were alone, Dorea shot Harry a scowl, but she said nothing about the matter as she approached Tom’s wardrobe. She merely grumbled under her breath as she wielded her wand, “Right, let’s fix this, then.”

It took her but a few moments and an uttered spell, to mend all of Tom’s clothes, and as she moved towards the desk, Tom said solemnly, “We appreciate your help-”

“I’m not doing this for you,” snapped Dorea irritably, without even glancing at them as she started waving her wand, fixing Tom’s books, quills, parchments and inkbottles. “I’m not happy about having muggleborns in my House. Your presence here is causing much disruption. And if I hadn’t come, Slughorn would have heard of it.” She scoffed snidely. “Spineless, useless Head of House that he is, Slughorn, nonetheless, would have had no other option but to dock points from Slytherin for what your roommates did.” She did glance at them, then, glowering darkly. “And that, I cannot
Then she went silent again, and moved to Harry’s trunk. First, she siphoned the water, then vanished the dung, cleared the message, and finally proceeded to clean and dry all of Harry’s things. It took her quite a while, and Harry shifted on his feet, not sure what to make of her.

He glanced at Tom, seeing that his brother was scrutinizing her, with a calculating look in his eyes.

At some point, while Dorea was busy with Harry’s stuff, the other boys came out of the bathroom, dressed in their school robes and with their school bags hanging from their shoulders.

Abraxas coolly waltzed out of the room without looking at them, with Orion Black trailing after him. Only Avery and Lestrange shot Dorea dirty, angry looks. And Alphard, the last, gave Harry a cheerful wave of the hand, before trotting out.

Harry scoffed and turned away, watching the girl and trying to learn, from observation, the many spells she was using, in case something like that happened again. Tom was doing the same.

Finally, Dorea finished with her task. Though she halted, a second later, moving a hand to touch her hair, as if finally realizing that there was something not quite right about it.

With a look of irritation, she then brandished her wand and spun it around her hair, which looked a mite messy.

Harry blinked, when, in the next moment, her hair was neatly groomed again; not a hair sticking out of place, all long, glossy, black waves now.

Dorea Black spun around to gaze at them, her eyes narrowing as she said briskly, “I am going to keep my Slytherins in check in the House. Mind you, outside of the dormitories and the common room, you’re on your own. The Slytherins will hex and jinx you, but you better not retaliate and lose us points—”

“If we’re going to be attacked,” burst out Harry with indignant anger, crossing his arms over his small chest, “then of course we’ll defend ourselves and attack back—“
The fifth-year girl instantly rounded on him, and she hissed out warningly, “No, you won’t, or I’ll make your lives miserable.” Dorea shot them a hard look. “You’ll have to put up with it. You won’t go complaining to any prefects, professors, or the Headmaster. I’m sure you can find other ways in which to prove to your housemates that bullying you is not the way to go.”

“I’m sure we can,” agreed Tom placidly, his lips tilted in a slight smirk.

At that, Dorea shot him a long, suspicious and scrutinizing glance. Then she nodded, apparently looking satisfied with whatever she had found.

Harry gave his brother a bewildered look, at Tom’s easy compliance, but remained quiet.

“Very well,” said Dorea, then letting out a deep exhalation of breath. “Now I’m going to teach you a couple of spells, to lock your trunks, your armoires, and the top of your desks.” She leveled at them a dark look, as she muttered crossly, “And a charm to shut your curtains close, so that no one but you can open them. I overheard Walburga and a couple of second-years planning to slip into your room tonight, to hex you whilst you slept.”

Harry stared at her, utterly surprised at her offer, and the girl instantly bit out, “Well, what are you waiting for! Get out your wands – I’m not about to be late for my first class, as well!”

The three of them only missed their breakfast, but she did teach them, briskly and impatiently, though quite effectively.

However, in the following weeks, it became quite a burden and an impossible task for Harry to try to keep their promise to Dorea Black.

They became the most hellish weeks of his life thus far. As the girl had warned them, they were attacked right, left and center. Not a day went by that Harry didn’t get tripped or painfully elbowed, not to mention that he was frequently ambushed.

Normally, it happened around the corner of some corridor, as he returned from lunch or dinner from the Great Hall. A group of older Slytherins would always find him, often led by the nasty Walburga Black.
They had caught him unprepared many times, so quickly casting on him a series of hexes and jinxes, with his aggressors then quickly fleeing, that Harry could only drag himself up to the Hospital Wing. That was the one place in the castle that he came to know very well.

Miss Nightingale Wellbeloved, Hogwarts’ mediwitch, always clucked her tongue when she saw him, eying him with compassion. During his first time in the Infirmary, the young witch had taken a shine to him, revealing that she was a halfblood.

The mediwitch’s mother, a muggle, had apparently named her after the famous English muggle nurse, Florence Nightingale, who had done such a pioneering work in nursing during the Crimean War, tending to wounded soldiers.

The mediwitch was so proud of that, that she preferred to be addressed by her first name, as simply Miss Nightingale.

Once, when Harry had been laying on a bed, with feathers continually bursting from his mouth and with tentacles for hair, Miss Nightingale had tutted, “It’s only ten days since the start of term and you’ve been here six times already.”

She had shot him a considering look, and offered gently, “I don’t usually report incidents to the Headmaster unless the wounds are grave, but I will, in your case, if you want me to do so.”

Harry had sullenly shaken his head. He knew that that would only make matters worse, not to mention that Dorea Black would be furious if the Headmaster found out about what was happening which would obviously lead to points being taken from Slytherin House. And Tom wouldn’t like it either.

So from then onwards, the mediwitch simply reversed the hexes and jinxes cast on him and healed him, if needed, and then send him away, shaking her head with a look of pity in her eyes.

Regardless, before that, the second time he had landed in the Infirmary, the Prewett twins had found out about it and had paid him a visit, bringing him bunches of Chocolate Frogs and a book – ‘A 101 Most Nasty Hexes and their Counter- Spells’.

Felicity had been livid with fury when she had seen Harry’s state; his face covered with painful boils, and his hands with enormous, hideous warts.
As she gave him the book, she had proclaimed vehemently, “We’ll teach you as many jinxes and hexes as we know, and their counters.”

“We’re also telling our cousin Muriel, and the rest of the Gryffindors, to keep a watch out for you,” piped in Felix, looking determined to help his friend.

The Prewett twins had indeed taught him many spells. During every bit of their spare, free time that they didn’t use to do their homework, they slipped out of the castle to the school grounds, where they practiced their hexes, jinxes and counters.

However, it didn’t make much difference. As soon as Harry demonstrated that he had learned how to cast back hexes, the Slytherins had taken to attack him from behind and from afar, to then quickly vanish before anyone could see them.

Moreover, having the Gryffindors protect him had only made matters much, much worse.

The first day when the Gryffindors had done so, Harry had been surrounded and greatly outnumbered, plastered against a wall as he shouted hex after hex. The ringleaders had been Walburga Black, Thaddeus Avery, and Neron Lestrange.

A second-year Gryffindor girl had suddenly come upon them, halting in her tracks. With her hair pulled back in a strict bun, and her lips pursing together in a flat line when she caught sight of the scene, she had swiftly turned around and ran towards a flock of older housemates who were coming around the corner. The girl was Minerva McGonagall, Harry would later find out.

The girl returned seconds later, with Muriel Prewett at her heels. The Head Girl’s eyes had glistened with triumph and much pleasure, as she snapped, “Fifty points deducted from each one of you for attacking a fellow housemate!”

Then Muriel’s lips had twisted in an even greater, gleeful smile, as she turned her gaze to Harry. “And twenty points from Slytherin House for hexing a girl!”

Harry had gaped at her, thoroughly angered at the injustice. He had managed to cast on Walburga Black the Bat Bogey Hex – Felicity’s favorite. Indeed, Walburga had been shrieking then, frantically batting her hands at her nose, which had enlarged and grotesquely turned into a snout with black, leathery wings sprouting from it, attacking her face.
“Oh, I’ll protect you whenever I can. I know you’re friends of my cousins,” Muriel Prewett had whispered to him, as she took him to the Infirmary, “but I’ll grasp the opportunity of taking as many points from Slytherin as possible.”

Clearly, the twins’ cousin was no altruistic soul. From then onwards, Muriel Prewett was on the prowl, like a hawk swooping upon the Slytherins every time she caught them bullying Harry, taking points from them all, and never sparing Harry either.

The Head Boy, Algernon Wilkes, and Dorea Black had been furious at all the points Muriel was docking daily from Slytherin House. Indeed, it had initiated a war between the Head Girl and the Head Boy, both deducting points from the other’s House for every little thing, with Harry in the middle, being used like their pawn.

Wilkes and Dorea even confronted Walburga openly in their common room, resulting in a fearsome and hateful shouting match between aunt and niece.

Walburga didn’t relent, but when Dorea Black threateningly promised to Neron Lestrange and Thaddeus Avery that she would use the Divesto Spell on them, in the middle of the Great Hall, to have them standing there naked to be jeered at by the rest of the school, the two boys had stopped attacking Harry. But that only made them turn more vicious when insulting him.

In the midst of it all, Abraxas Malfoy constantly observed him, like he had done after Harry’s interaction with the Bloody Baron during the Welcoming Feast. Malfoy didn’t insult him, didn’t call him a ‘mudblood’. In fact, the boy didn’t speak to him at all.

Abraxas had often been present when the Slytherins attacked Harry, but he never participated, nor did he prevent it. Abraxas simply watched him, only reacting, by looking amused, his lips tilting upwards or his eyebrow arching, when Harry darkly scowled at him with annoyance.

Alphard Black, on the other hand, made many attempts to redeem himself. Indeed, it had happened thrice, when Harry had been ambushed in the dungeons, that Dorea Black or Algernon Wilkes suddenly appeared, putting a stop to it, with Alphard behind them.

Evidently, the boy was fetching one of them when he heard of or caught sight of Harry being attacked. But he was always careful to slip away before any of the other Slytherins noticed what he had done.

Moreover, several times, Alphard had looked for Harry, when he happened to be alone and unobserved.
“I’m doing what I can,” said Alphard, his tone of voice insistent and sometimes even soft and pleading. “I want to be your friend. We had a good time in Quidditch Supplies in Diagon Alley, didn’t we? But you must understand, I cannot be your friend openly. My father would surely do something drastic if he found out I was friends with a muggleborn. But we can be friends in secret!”

The boy always said something along those lines, suggesting they met in empty classrooms, to play Exploding Snaps, to share the sweets and candies Alphard received from his mother, or to work on their essays together.

However, Harry always rejected him. It wasn’t enough, in his opinion. He wanted a friend who would stand up for him, and not one who was ashamed of being seen in public with him. He always said so to the boy, hotly and angrily. And then Harry always turned heel and left Alphard behind, a forlorn, downcast look on the boy’s face.

The boy kept trying though, and many times Harry was tempted to cave in, because he had never felt so alone and dejected in his life.

The Prewett twins were good friends, his only ones, but they had Gryffindor friends of their own and preferred to spend most of their time in their common room.

Harry had been invited several times, and there, he had even been introduced to a first-year boy that the twins had befriended during their first days in Hogwarts.

Algie Longbottom was a self-confident and sometimes arrogant, tall boy, but he had welcomed Harry in their midst with a warm smile, and was quite amicable. They also shared a common interest, since both Harry and Algie had proven to be quite good, even the best, in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

“I know all sorts of counter-curses and shield spells,” one day Algie had disclosed quite proudly, as he was playing chess with Felix Prewett in the Gryffindor common room, Harry and Felicity watching them as they all chatted together, “beyond second year level, even, because my sister, Augusta, is a very good dueler and she has been teaching me. You might have seen her around. She’s a prefect, sixth-year.”

The boy had paused to sweep his blue gaze around the common room, and then had pointed a finger at a rather severe looking girl. “Oh, there she is!” Then he had leaned towards Harry, as he
whispered with much smug pride, “I’m trying to learn as much as I can because I want to be an
Auror, you know?”

That led to a very enlightening discussion, for Harry, of what Aurors were and did, and about the
several departments in the Ministry of Magic which also monitored the happenings in the
wizarding community, like the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, Improper Use
of Magic Office, the Obliviator Unit, the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, and even about the
Department of Mysteries – which had all of them speculating and, well, mystified, regarding what
Unspeakables actually did in that secretive, lower level of the Ministry.

Harry came to just tolerate Algie Longbottom, because sometimes the boy was too conceited, and
he certainly didn’t like him as much as he did the twins. However, his stays in the Gryffindor
common room were not always fully pleasant. Sometimes, he felt some tension in the room, and
saw that older Gryffindors from time to time shot him dark, suspicious looks.

Once, he even overheard one of them muttering, “He might be a muggleborn with his housemates
against him, but he’s still a Slytherin, isn’t he? The Hat sorted him there, so it’s proof that he’s just
a slimy snake like all the rest. Clearly not to be fully trusted…”

The twins hadn’t noticed, but it was evident to Harry that not all of the Gryffindors welcomed him
there, as the Prewetts had assured him.

Not to mention that Harry didn’t like their common room much. It was stuffy, overly decorated
with garish red and gold everywhere, too hot, and the Gryffindors were a too loud, rambunctious
and boisterous lot.

Moreover, one day, an older housemate openly confronted him in the middle of the Slytherin
common room.

Of course, after the way the Head Girl went about docking points from them, they had realized
that Harry had the Gryffindors’ so-called ‘protection’ – though Harry certainly didn’t consider it as
such, given that Muriel gleefully took advantage of it- and they had certainly seen that he spent
much of his time with the Prewett twins. But apparently, it all became too much when they heard
that he had been going to the Gryffindor common room.

“We, Slytherins, don’t mix with Gryffindors!” had spat at him the older boy, looking enraged and
thoroughly disgusted and contemptuous. “So we don’t want to see you cavorting with any of them,
you hear! You’re tainting our House’s name by doing so, mudblood!”
By then, Harry had known, of course, that Slytherins hated Gryffindors, and that it was a mutually shared sentiment. And they didn’t consider Hufflepuffs to be worthy. Apparently, they only tolerated and somewhat respected Ravenclaws. But that wasn’t the point.

“Oh, so now I’m considered a member of this House, am I?” had burst out Harry, bristling, having had enough. “But none of you will befriend me because I’m a ‘mudblood’, so I’ll have friends from whichever House I damn well please. And if you don’t like it,” he had then jumped to his feet, bellowing at the top of his lungs, “THEN YOU CAN STUFF IT WHERE THE SUN DOESN’T SHINE!”

And with that, he had ran out of the common room, with tears of sheer fury, yet also of misery, in his eyes.

Harry knew he would have been able to bear his isolation, his loneliness, and the plain hatred his housemates felt for him, if he just had Tom by his side. But he didn’t.

One day, the Prewett twins had toothily grinned at him, proposing that he simply sat at the Gryffindor table during lunch and dinner. Harry had almost done so. It had never happened before, had informed him Felix with a mischievous gleam in his blue and brown eyes, but there wasn’t any rule against it.

Oh, after the Welcoming Feast, when the younger Slytherins had made ‘an spectacle of themselves’, as Dorea Black had put it, they had all been careful of never behaving like that again. Indeed, the Slytherins only insulted him and called him a ‘mudblood’, when no students of other Houses were around, and most importantly, when no teacher was in hearing range.

However, every time Harry took food from the dishes they all shared, many Slytherins shot him glowers, and quietly, yet angrily, grumbled. It made the meals very tense and uncomfortable for Harry.

Thus, one evening, he had made a move to stand at the beginning of dinner, since the Prewetts twins had been grinning and gesturing at him to come over.

But Tom had instantly grabbed his arm, yanking him back on the bench, as he hissed out angrily, “Don’t even think it.”
Harry had gritted his teeth, as his brother had continued acerbically, “You’ll make matters worse with our housemates if you do it.”

“I’m fed up!” Harry had whispered angrily, glaring daggers at him. “You tell me not to attack them back when they hex me, you tell me not to go to any professors, not to complain, to keep silent and put up with it. But I cannot go on like this, Tom!”

“I’m already carrying out the first stage of my plan,” snapped Tom sharply. “So just be patient!”

Harry had clenched his hands into fists, trembling with anger. Nevertheless, he had swallowed any further protests when Tom had shot him a very dark, ominous look. So he had ended up eating as fast as he could and leaving the Great Hall early, to morosely sulk by himself.

Though, he certainly didn’t know what ‘stage’ Tom was referring to, since the boy had been doing nothing but spending all his time in the library, studying or researching. Outside of class, Harry never saw hide or hair of him except at night when they went to bed.

Indeed, Tom did nothing but that and earning loads of points for Slytherin House every day in class, which was much needed given the Head Girl’s deducting-points-spree.

He saw even less of Tom after one night, when his brother had shown him a glittering, golden ‘ticket’, which was, apparently, a pass to the Restricted Section of the library.

Very smugly, Tom had disclosed to him how he had managed to cajole Professor Slughorn into giving him a pass. They had had to write a seven-inch essay about Dittany and it’s magical properties. And Tom had found a very brief mention, in a book, about how the ingredient was also used in Dark Potions.

His brother had used that as an excuse after a Potions lesson, when Tom had stayed behind –Harry remembered that well since his brother had waved him away, and Harry had left, puzzled.

It seemed that Tom had approached Slughorn, ever so politely, humbly, and with such a look solely of innocent interest and curiosity, that the teacher had given him a pass without a second thought. Because of course that someone as brilliant as Tom would feel curiosity about how Dittany was used in more complex potions, even if they were considered Dark. Slughorn had congenially chuckled as he said that, according to his brother - no doubt feeling that Tom was a kindred spirit.
His brother had indeed quickly become Slughorn’s favorite student. Not a Potions lesson went by in which their Head of House didn’t gush and praise Tom, calling him a natural talent in potions-making, the wizard’s eyes gleaming greedily as if he was beholding a great asset.

“With this,” Tom had said to Harry, looking extremely pleased with himself as he waved the golden pass, “I’m sure I’ll finally find information about the Chamber of Secrets and Slytherin and his descendants.”

Indeed, during the first week of school, Tom had been very irritated because the library didn’t have any books concerning those subjects.

After that, he saw even less of Tom. His brother certainly hadn’t been around all the times Harry had been attacked. And when he saw the results of it, or when Harry told him, his brother just sharply ordered him to bear it and, “don’t whine like the crybaby you are!”

It made Harry bristle, his mood souring. Though he didn’t think Tom could imagine what it was like. The Slytherins certainly didn’t attack Tom like they did Harry. Oh, they had tried, Tom had told him that.

The Slytherins soon figured out that Tom spent all his free time cooped up in the library and they had decided to wait for him at the entrance and ambush him there. But Tom had seen them by the threshold, and the moment the librarian announced it was closing time, making all students leave, Tom had immediately engaged the man in a long-winded discussion about Gobstones, which seemed to be Mr. Ciceron Plume’s favorite game. They chatted for so long that the Slytherins had given up, returning to their dorms, sulking and grumbling bitterly.

On another occasion, Tom had waited for a group of first-year Ravenclaws to leave the library and he had immediately slipped into their midst, leaving the library together and thus inherently protected by them, chatting up one of the girls and using his charming ways to full power.

Tom had done this with much ease, since the boy had already ‘befriended’ some first-year Ravenclaws before then. It had happened after their third Transfiguration lesson, which the Slytherins shared with the Ravenclaws.

A bunch of them had waited for Tom at the door, after class, and had then pounced on him, looking angry and irritated at all the points Dumbledore had given Tom during the lesson, and demanding to know why he hadn’t been sorted into their House. The pompous Tiberius McLaggen - the boy who had been in their boat and who was also the Minister of Magic’s grandson- had led the group.
Feigning surprise and somehow managing to even blush with humbleness, Tom had softly expressed that, alas, before arriving at Hogwarts, he had known nothing about the Houses. Indeed, Tom had assured them, if he had known, he would have certainly asked the Sorting Hat to be sorted in their House, to be amongst such clearly excellent and brilliant students as they were.

And then he had further charmed them all, and bestowed upon them gorgeous, warm smiles. By the end of it, only McLaggen looked irked and miffed, but only because his housemates now had another student who they fawned over, as they did with him.

Even Olive Hornby, the prettiest first-year Ravenclaw, who had before then always orbited around McLaggen, shooting him enamored, adoring, coy glances, had started to do the same to Tom.

Harry, for his part, just wished Tom would treat her badly at some point, because from what he had seen of her, she was a cruel girl. Olive had taken an instant dislike to her housemate, Myrtle Mimbletonin, and taunted her mercilessly, especially very loudly whenever McLaggen was around. The boy seemed to enjoy this, because McLaggen was often seen sneering at Myrtle, looking down his nose at her with disgust and a superior look on his face – just as he had done when they had taken the boat trip across the Black Lake.

Though, Olive Hornby didn’t mock Myrtle because she was a muggleborn -as Harry had found out that she was- but due to Myrtle’s weird, deranged personality and due to her less than attractive looks. Olive had even invented a little singsong. Harry hadn’t heard it fully, but it involved Myrtle’s pimples, ‘ugly mutt’, and thick eyeglasses, along with her bouts of wails, moans, and sobs.

In a few days, the whole school was calling the girl ‘Moaning Myrtle’. And several times, in the Great Hall, Myrtle had loudly yelled at her housemates, spitting mad with fury, her unbalanced mood then swinging abruptly, making her burst into tears, ending up running out of the Hall, wailing and sobbing. From what he heard, the girl had started to spend much of her time in a girls’ bathroom.

Harry had felt stabs of pity for her, and even guilt because Myrtle had at first shot him expectant, sharp and demanding glances, as if to remind him that he had promised to be her friend. Then, she began to look at him accusingly, with much anger.

However, he had never approached her, and had turned tail and scampered off the few times Myrtle had been lurking, ready to jump on him and confront him.
Yes, he felt compassion, but he wasn’t about to make his situation worse by befriending such a girl, especially when he already knew that Myrtle got on his nerves and that he wouldn’t be able to put up with her for long. And crying girls just made him feel so utterly helpless, awkward, and uncomfortable.

Regardless, that aside, the point was that every time the Slytherins tried to ambush Tom, the boy always found a sneaky way of dodging them.

It only made Harry resent the unfairness of it all, because he could hardly use the same tactics since he liked to be out and about instead of cooped up somewhere. He was an easy target given this. Furthermore, it didn’t seem to him that the Slytherins were trying as hard to make Tom’s life miserable. Harry suspected it was due to the many points Tom earned for them everyday.

In the end, Harry only found respite from all of this during his classes. Three of them soon became his favorites: Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Care of Magical Creatures.

He liked those not only because they were the subjects which fascinated him the most and thus he studied willingly, but also because he seemed to have a natural inclination for them, discovering that he could cast the spells they were taught which much ease, most times being successful in his very first attempt.

Silvanus Kettleburn was their Care of Magical Creatures professor. He was a spindly, thin man, with his left hand missing, without an ear, and Harry suspected with a wooden leg as well, given how the wizard limped and awkwardly moved around. Apparently, his missing body parts had been caused due to the many years the man had dealt with dangerous creatures.

Nevertheless, he was a patient, gentle man who had already taught them about several amazing magical creatures and showed them a few, as well. And Harry had been thrilled to discover that many of the creatures ‘of myth and legend’, of Alice’s fairy tales, were actually real. Granted, sometimes they were called differently in the Wizarding World, and in their tales, Muggles seemed to have made many mistakes regarding their attributes and appearance. But still, they were not fantasy!

Harry’s favorite lesson so far had been when Professor Kettleburn had taken them to a clearing in the Forbidden Forest, where a couple of unicorns had been pasturing, all white and astoundingly beautiful and ethereal, as if they were merely a dream that could vanish at any moment.

“There are many false beliefs regarding unicorns,” the teacher had told them very quietly, as if not wanting to startle the gentle creatures, “such as that they can only bear the touch of virgin maidens.
That is not so. They only tolerate the touch of those who are pure of heart.”

The Slytherins shared that class with the Hufflepuffs, and as if proving their professor’s explanation, one unicorn had then approached a Hufflepuff girl and boy, who had cooed and oohed and aahed, as they gazed, wide-eyed, at the beautiful, delicate creature.

Harry had been startled when, suddenly, a soft, warm muzzle had nuzzled his neck. He heard Lestrange and Avery guffawing and jeering at him, saying something mocking, but Harry hadn’t paid them any attention. He had been too dazed and entranced by the sight of the white unicorn, which was so innocently and with such implicit trust bumping its nose against his cheek.

And then he had caught sight of the creature’s long, thin horn, and Harry had stared at it, taken aback, because it wasn’t white to his eyes—as their professor had said- but rather, it glowed magnificently with a golden light. It was magic.

That had been the first time in which Harry realized that, apparently, Hogwarts’ magic wasn’t the only magic he could see. And clearly, he didn’t see the castle’s magic because Hogwarts allowed it, as a means of welcoming him as one of Slytherin’s Heirs, as Tom had told him. His brother thought that that could be the only explanation for Harry’s strange ability that Tom didn’t share.

With an amazed, silly smile on his face, Harry had then hesitantly caressed the incredibly soft hairs between the unicorn’s nostrils. But his interaction had been brief, because a moment later the unicorns neighed and they had all trotted away into the depths of the forest. They were certainly skittish creatures that didn’t like to be in others’ company, whether they were ‘pure of heart’ – whatever that meant– or not.

Harry then saw that Tom, on the other hand, had been bored, utterly indifferent and unimpressed with the creatures.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was taught by Medea Merrythought. She was very old, with a heavily wrinkled, marred face, with grey hair she always wore in a long, thin braid, and blue, crinkled eyes. Yet, she seemed to have great bouts of energy, and though she was brisk and stern, she proved to be an excellent teacher.

Harry had overheard that she had been a renowned Curse Breaker and Treasure Hunter when she had been young and had worked for Gringotts. That could explain why half of her face was marred and distorted, looking melted as if it had been burned by something a long time ago. If she had anymore scars on her body, it couldn’t be seen, since she always dressed in long-sleeved robes that were buttoned up from toes to chin, and made her look like a black crow.
They shared that class with the Gryffindors, and Harry and Algie Longbottom soon distinguished themselves when they were all taught basic defensive spells such as minor shields.

Professor Merrythought never praised them like Slughorn did with Tom, but she never failed to give them points and look silently proud of them.

Tom and Abraxas Malfoy many times matched Harry and Longbottom in being the firsts to successfully cast the spells. However, whilst the teacher gave points to Tom as well -and more often than not due to Tom’s participation in class by correctly answering all the questions regarding theory that she posed- curiously enough, she didn’t do the same with Abraxas.

Indeed, for some mysterious reason, the old witch ignored the boy all together, as if he didn’t exist. In the beginning, Abraxas raised his hand the many times he knew the answers to her questions, but Merrythought never called on him, instead turning to Tom.

After that, Abraxas sat stiffly in class and never participated again, but Harry had seen the frosty, cold look in the boy’s silver eyes whilst piercing the old woman with a narrowed-eyed gaze.

The much lauded, handsome and blonde Tilly Toke, bearer of an Order of Merlin, First Class, taught them Charms, which they shared with the Hufflepuffs. These, in particular, gazed at their famous Head of House with utter awe-struck adoration and worship. Moreover, all the girls in the class, even the Slytherin Priscilla Pucey, always sighed softly, besotted and blushing, at his sight.

Harry hadn’t known quite what to expect of him, but he certainly hadn’t been prepared for what the man proved to be. Tilly Toke was utterly and fabulously unorthodox, and he instantly became his favorite teacher.

The very first day, the Professor stood in front of the class, smiled at them, and skipped any introductions, and asked, “What would have any of you done if you had been suddenly confronted by a rogue dragon, like I was?”

The students blinked and stared, and then Neron Lestrange raised a hand.

Mr. Toke rolled his eyes. “There’s no need to raise your hands and wait to be called on in my classroom.” He grinned at them, and added cheerfully, “Just say what’s on your minds, let your thoughts spring forth, unhindered by old fashioned behavioral rules such as hand raising! Let’s hear
it then, Mr. Lestrange!”

Lestrange looked discomfited and utterly appalled for a moment, clearly not liking the professor’s way of conducting his class, but then finally replied sharply, “I would have cast a Conjunctivitis Curse on the dragon.”

“Ah, ridding it of one of its stronger senses – sight.” Mr. Toke shook his head. “But it’s a dangerous, brutal curse, and not one viewed upon favorably. Not to mention, that by casting it, it would have angered the dragon, making it more wild and violent. And let’s remember that I was sunbathing in that beach in Ilfracombe, surrounded my defenseless muggles that had to be protected. What other suggestions do you the rest of you have?”

“A Slashing Curse,” said Abraxas Malfoy coolly. “To split the membrane of one of the dragon’s wings, and make it fall down.”

“But then the dragon’s body would have flattened,” interjected Tilly Toke, distressed, “and squashed to death many muggles, Mr. Malfoy!”

Abraxas didn’t look particularly bothered by that, but he didn’t retort.

“You could employ a lethal curse, sir,” supplied Tom then, his tone very polite and quiet.

The handsome, blonde teacher frowned at him. “Such as?"

“I don’t know, sir,” intoned Tom smoothly. “I have not looked into Curses, and I certainly don’t want to know about such ghastly, terrible ones that could kill.” He shuddered, looking horrified at the mere thought, before adding in a sensible tone of voice, “But there was to be some curse that can mortally wound a dragon, professor.”

“Indeed there are,” muttered Tilly Toke. “But they’re hard to cast and it would take a very powerful wizard to kill a dragon with one of those curses.” He gazed at his students, as he added gently, “And let’s not forget that a dragon is a living, sentient, magical creature. Indeed, the most ancient and magnificent of all, and as such, it shouldn’t be killed, even if it was to protect others.”

The Hufflepuffs instantly nodded, in complete agreement and understanding, and then one of them, a small boy, raised his voice timidly, “A Confounding Charm, maybe?”
Tilly Toke warmly smiled at him. “Such a spell wouldn’t work on a dragon, but you’re on the right track, Mr. Bones. The answer is, indeed, Charms!” He shook his head, as he added in dismay, “A wizard in my shoes, would have relied on Curses, because we’re used to do so in threatening, dangerous situations. But it always results in people getting hurt, and it tends to worsen the situation, making it a matter of violence.”

His hazel eyes shone, as he continued eagerly, “With Charms, however, being creative, you can resolve any problem and any situation peacefully, without causing harm to others, not even your enemy. That is the marvel of Charms! With them, you can become excellent duelers without the need to resort to Defense Against the Dark Arts spells and curses, and you’ll take everyone by surprise because wizards only tend to use Charms for their daily, trivial toils.” He shook his head disparagingly, rolling his eyes. “More often than not because we’re too lazy to even lift a finger, stand up, and do things with our hands. Instead, we use our wands for every little thing.”

Then the professor paused and graced them with a beaming smile, as he inquired, “Can any of you tell me how I only used Charms to deal with the dragon and save those muggles?”

“My mum told me,” breathed out a Hufflepuff girl, gazing at him reverently, “that you used illusion and glamour charms, sir!”

“Quite right,” said Professor Toke cheerfully. “Ten points to Hufflepuff!”

The Hufflepuffs beamed, and those close to the girl clapped her on the back, cheering her. Harry’s eyebrows shot upwards – quite a supportive bunch, they were. And apparently, they weren’t that used to earning House points, if they reacted so excitably.

“That’s unfair,” hissed out Capricia Carrow quietly, yet her anger was clear in her voice. “We have him loads of suggestions for Curses, and he didn’t give us one single point!”

“He’s their Head of House,” muttered Neron Lestrange darkly. “He’s obviously completely biased, that explains it.”

Harry rolled his eyes, biting his bottom lip to suppress what he wanted to snap at them. Evidently, the teacher’s explanation, about why Curses shouldn’t be used against the dragon, had flown over their heads.
“Now I’ll explain, step by step, all the Charms I used,” said Mr. Toke brightly, as he brought up a hand and started ticking off his fingers. “Firstly, the moment the dragon swooped down on the muggles in the beach, I illusioned myself, with a series of glamours, to look like a dragonet. No easy thing, I grant you, and even less to do it so quickly, but by the end of your Hogwarts years I fully expect you to be able to cast such complex illusions and glamours on yourselves, on others, and on all sorts of objects.”

He beamed a warm smile at them, as he continued, “With that I caught the dragon’s attention. But I needed to fly, didn’t I, to make it believe I was indeed a youngling of its species. Furthermore, I had to lead it away from the muggles, staying several feet of the dragon itself so that it wouldn’t be able to smell me from afar and thus realize that I was just a wizard. Yet, I had no broomstick with me! So what did I do?”

Mr. Tilly Toke paused to see if any of them had any clue. When none replied, he went on cheerfully, “Well, very simple – I cast a Levitating Charm on myself!”

Druella Rosier snorted in scathing disbelief, and the professor shot her an even wider smile, as he intoned pleasantly, “Oh, not many can use that Charm on themselves, or others – that’s another thing I’ll be teaching you, and you’ll be mastering by the end of this term, I promise! But the trick is all in the wrist, you see?”

He demonstrated by flexing his wrist as he aimed his wand at himself. It did look like an uncomfortable, awkward position, given the angle the wrist had to bend in order for his wand to be pointing at himself.

“So, I floated up into the air,” continued Mr. Toke eagerly, as if rehashing a great, fabulous adventure, “and then I cast a Hover Charm on myself, and directed my movements with the tip of my wand, making myself fly through the air, far away from the beach and muggles. It was indeed tiring to keep the Charm on myself for so long, I could feel the strain in my magical core. However, casting and maintaining such charm, even the most complex and powerful ones, depends mainly in a wizard’s will and determination, as much as his magical power!”

“Finally, I landed in the middle of a forest, with the flying dragon at my heels. But the rouge creature wasn’t violent or angered. It believed it was following a baby dragon, after all. So it wanted to take me by the scruff of my neck and carry me away with it. Dragons are very protective of their younglings, even those which aren’t theirs.”

“So the moment my feet touched ground, I instantly used a Summoning Charm on the first stone I saw, and then, I turned it into a portkey, with another charm!”
The moment Orion Black opened his mouth, Mr. Tilly Toke rose up a hand, as he chuckled. “Yes, I know that most wizards don’t bother to learn the Portus Charm, as it is quite tricky and difficult. And they’re commonly used for vacationing travels, so most just go to the Ministry’s Department of Magical Transportation and buy themselves a portkey there, to wherever they want to go – that’s one of the Ministry’s greater sources of income!”

He chuckled wryly, and then continued, “Since the Ministry workers there have hundreds of pensieves with recollections of all sorts of destinations, which they keep updated, and thus, they need only to plunge their heads into the pensieve with the memory of the place the paying wizard wants to travel to, and the Ministry worker, with that image in mind, can then successfully create a portkey.”

“Nevertheless, I’ve always believed that the Portus Charm is extremely useful to get out of sticky situations, and I fully intend to teach you the spell on your fourth year, so that you have three full years afterwards in which to master the charm.” He shot them a mischievous grin. “After all, it’s not illegal for a wizard of age to create his own portkeys, as much as the Ministry has attempted to ban it in the past – they do like the mounts of galleons that creating and selling portkeys earn them!”

Tilly Toke let out a dry laugh at that, and then continued buoyantly, “I had the good fortune of having a friend who worked in a Dragon Reserve in Ukraine, who I visited often. So that’s where I spelled the stone portkey to go. Though, if I hadn’t had that friend, I would’ve simply needed to think about an isolated place that I had been to before, to portkey the dragon there, so I wasn’t that much worried.”

He shot them a wide smile, as he added, “Still glamoured and with portkey in hand, I used the Levitation and Hover Charms again on myself, and floated quickly towards the dragon.” The handsome teacher chuckled in amusement, as he revealed, “My aim wasn’t that good, because I hadn’t intended to stick the portkey up the poor dragon’s nostril, but that’s where it ended, with half of my arm stuck inside its nose, my hand still clutching the stone portkey. It activated a second later and off we went in a whirlwind of colors!”

Mr. Toke’s hazel eyes sparkled with joy, as he went on, “We landed in my friend’s reserve, and my, were the Dragon Keepers there shocked at the sight! The rogue dragon hadn’t escaped from there, but from a reserve in Romania, I later learned! But they were quick to act and with spells only they know, they put the dragon to sleep, and after a night of partying and drinking with my friend, I made a portkey to England and returned safe and sound!”

The moment he ended his tale, the Hufflepuffs broke into loud cheers and applauses, while Harry blinked, a bit dazed. He hadn’t quite understood the ‘portkey’ and ‘pensieve’ parts - what were they, exactly?- but given all that the man had said, he could form a vague idea of what they must do. And really, he was rather excited about being taught all the charms the teacher had mentioned!
Mr. Toke waved off his House’s applause, smiling humbly, as he said gently, “Truly, there’s no need, but I thank you. Nevertheless, the lesson of my story is that with a bit of creativity, a series of charms, and with no curses at all, I saved those muggles, I peacefully dealt with the dragon without harming it, and I had a very entertaining tale with which to amuse my friends!”

He chuckled as he swept them with his hazel gaze, before he added vehemently, “So you see, employing the imagination, Charms are very versatile, and they are not only spells to be used in your daily life just for trivial, simple things. Indeed, if you want to slip away from an enemy, you can turn yourself invisible with the Disillusionment Charm, if you’re suddenly confronted with a Dementor, you drive it away with the Patronus Charm, if you want to swim underwater for a long period of time, you can use the Bubble-Head Charm, if you need to douse a dangerous fire, you cast an Aguamenti Charm, or you can make the fire harmless by using a Flame-Freezing Charm, if you want to conceal an important secret within a person, the Fidelius Charm is the best spell for it, if you want to possess superior senses, you cast a Supersensory Charm on yourself, if you want to protect the perimeter of a place, or a treasured object, and be alerted of unwanted intruders, you cast a Caterwauling Charm, with a Protego Charm you can form a magical shield against hexes and curses, and on, and on it goes!”

Seeing many of their nonplussed and baffled expressions -Harry being one of them, not having understood most of the terms the teacher had employed- Tilly Toke chuckled as he said kindly, “Fear not, you’ll understand and learn all those charms and many more, during the next seven years.”

He clapped his hands together, and then announced, “Now, we’ll start with the first one – the ever useful Levitating Charm! With my story, you’ve seen one extraordinary situation in which in can be used, if you find yourself in the need of flying when you have no broomstick. I want you to imagine now, another situation in which you could use this charm to even save someone’s life!”

The blonde Professor flicked his wand and a chair came skittering across the room, halting by the wizard’s left side. Then the man’s hazel gaze trailed over them, before he called out, “Miss Carrow, if you’ll please come to the front for a little demonstration?”

The girl obliged, though she certainly didn’t look happy about it. But she took the hand that Mr. Toke so gallantly offered, and with that aid, she climbed unto the chair, standing on the seat.

With another flick of Tilly Toke’s wand and a muttered word, the chair suddenly grew many inches taller and Capricia Carrow paled. She shifted fretfully on her feet, clearly anxious about what the Professor was planning on doing, just like the rest of them were wondering.
“Now,” the blonde wizard said, turning around to address them, “imagine that you’re climbing down a staircase along with a friend, and suddenly, he trips and starts tumbling down! And you see that he’s about to crash on the landing and break his neck – thus!”

Mr. Tilly Toke swirled around and shoved Capricia Carrow. With a shriek of horror and shock, she fell over the very high chair, whilst the Hufflepuffs gasped and Druella Rosier and Priscilla Pucey jumped to their feet, crying out and shouting.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” chirped Mr. Tilly Toke merrily with a swish and flick of his wand, just in the precise moment in which Capricia Carrow was about to smash, face forward, into the hard stone floors. “And thus you save your friend!”

With another flick of his wand, Capricia landed on her feet, her face colorless, having been scared out of her wits. In the next moment, her face contorted with sheer fury, as she bellowed at the man at the top of her lungs, “MY FATHER WILL HEAR ABOUT THIS, YOU DERANGED DINGBAT!”

Mr. Tilly Toke’s body bent backwards from the waist, his long blonde hair swept back as well, as if a strong gust of wind had hit him from the front. He blinked at the girl utterly taken aback, then the wizard seemed to find the threat incredibly funny, and he chortled loudly, as he waved her off. “Ten points to Slytherin! You can return back to your seat, Miss Carrow – well done!”

Capricia did, nearly running, flopping herself between Druella Rosier and Priscilla Pucey, the girls instantly whispering amongst themselves, shooting the professor very dirty, angry looks.

“So that’s the charm we’ll be practicing today, and by the end of term I fully expect you to be able to levitate each other,” said Mr. Toke cheerfully. “Usually, all Charms Professors teach this spell by making you practice on quills. But I find that so dreadfully boring! We might as well have some fun, don’t you think?”

With the flick of his wand and some muttered spells, a series of items came rushing out a cabinet to then land on their tables, as the Professor explained, “Those paddle-like things with strings are called racquets, and the feathered projectile is the shuttlecock, or simply just ‘the shuttle’. They are used in a very amusing muggle sport called Badminton. As you see, each one of you has a racquet and a shuttle. You’ll start practicing the charm by making your shuttles float.”

He shot them a beaming, wide smile, as he added joyfully, “And the first of you who by the end of the lesson can play a badminton match with me, by only using the Levitating Charm for the shuttle and the racquet, gets fifty points!”
Harry’s eyes widened, with fascination for the man, his shocking but terribly thrilling teaching methods, and also just because he had enjoyed Capricia Carrow’s terrified shrieks so much. He had known then, instantly, that Charms would not only be one of his most favorite classes, but also the most fun and amusing.

Perhaps because he enjoyed the lesson so much, or because he really wanted to try his hand at a game of Badminton, magically style, that he eagerly brandished his wand, flicked and swished it just like Tilly Toke had done, and pronounced the strange words just as he had heard them. He didn’t even bothered opening his Charms textbook like the others were doing. He was brimming with too much excitement to do so.

So self-confident, determined and cheerfully he was, that it didn’t surprise when his shuttle instantly flew up into air, gently floating.

“Very well done, Mr. Riddle!” cried out Tilly Toke happily as soon as he saw what Harry had done. “Ten points to Slytherin!” The blonde, handsome, and clearly a bit eccentric wizard, gazed at him eagerly. “Oh, do try the racquet now!”

It was indeed Harry who earned the fifty points, as he ended up being the very first one who also managed to successfully float and control his racquet and shuttle. Tom achieved it fifteen minutes after him, the only other student who successfully accomplished it, but by then Harry was excitedly playing a match of Badminton with Tilly Toke, both laughing and giggling like little children as they had the fun of their lives.

“You’re a natural in Charms!” Professor Toke exclaimed as the lesson drew to an end and the students started packing their things into their schools bags. The wizard’s hazel eyes were bright with joy and pride as he gazed at Harry. “It must be in your blood, Mr. Riddle!”

Harry ignored some of the Slytherins’ scathing scoffs because they didn’t know anything, clearly thinking that nothing was in his blood since they believed he was a muggleborn, and wondered at the teacher’s words.

Was his father good at Charms, or had his mother been, perhaps? Secretly, he still held the notion that their mum could have been the magical one. Regardless, whichever the case was, he was suffused with a very warm, tingling feeling, and he left the classroom with his cheeks flushed with pleasure.
All of Professor Toke’s lessons proved to be as shocking, thrilling, creative, utterly unorthodox, and fun, as the first, and Harry soon became the wizard’s favorite pupil, just as Tilly Toke became Harry’s favorite teacher, by far.

In those three of Harry’s favorite classes, Tom didn’t manage to beat him, he came in a close second place after Harry, though he earned plenty of points by always answering questions posed by the teachers, and he did it in such a way, that all professors were fond of and thought highly of him.

Tom didn’t agitatedly raise his hand in the air and frantically waved it around, nor nearly jumped up to be seen and demanding to be acknowledged, like many Ravenclaws did. And he didn’t answer questions verbatim, word for word, as if he had memorized full passages from textbooks and was merely spilling it all out. No, he thought about his answers, and explained his reply in his own words, with his own insights, and it became clear to all that he was the most brilliant student.

In their other classes, Tom was at the very top. Abraxas Malfoy and Felicity Prewett were very good at potions, but couldn’t match Tom’s perfection. And Harry soon saw that he was pants at it.

“You lack the subtleness, patience, and precision required in potions-making,” Tom had hissed out at him one day, with much irritation and annoyance.

Harry couldn’t argue against it, because just then he had dropped seven bat eyes instead of five, and hadn’t stirred his potion once counter-clockwise, and it had bubbled dangerously, turning to an ugly, muddy color, and in the next second it burst out in flames. Only a scorched, brown, odiferous thing was left, which reminded Harry of the dung that had floated inside his trunk, that first morning, when they had been so nastily pranked.

Gratefully, after Slughorn had taken a shine to Tom, and unashamedly showed his favoritism, the professor usually paired them together, because Tom had made it no secret that that was what he wanted.

If not, the days in which Horace Slughorn fancied to mix Slytherins and Gryffindors together in pairs -for some unfathomable reason, given that it never ended well, though the teacher persisted, undaunted- Harry always ended up with Felicity Prewett, who was very good in Potions, and he much enjoyed his time with her.

It became clear to Harry that the walrus-like wizard knew of his friendship with the Prewett twins, surely having seen them around together. And it seemed that Slughorn so wanted to be in Tom’s good graces, that he extended his good will to Harry as well, those circumstances.
One day, the short, pot-bellied wizard had looked at Harry as if seeing him in a brand, new light, which Harry ascribed to his suspicions – that Horace Slughorn had learned from Tilly Toke and Medea Merrythought that Harry was at the top in their classes. Maybe even Sylvanus Kettleburn had disclosed the same, though Harry didn’t think Slughorn would care much about how well he was doing in Care of Magical Creatures. But, certainly, Slughorn started to treat him much better, all of a sudden.

Astronomy with the curly and purple haired Perpetua Fancourt, he enjoyed, because they climbed up to the very top of the Astronomy Tower at night, wrapped in thick, warm blankets, to placidly star-gaze through their telescopes, learning names of stars and constellations, the orbits and movements of planets, how to make astral calculations, and how to use those, learning that many magical rituals and brewing of potions were affected by the position of planets and could only be carried out in certain days with certain planetary alignments.

Nevertheless, Harry wasn’t outstandingly good at it, but it didn’t bother him.

Herbology, on the other hand, was simply horrible. Their teacher was Herbert Beery, a very eccentric, short, plump wizard, who kept a magical gramophone in the Greenhouses. If the man had put music to be played, Harry might have understood it, since perhaps such tunes helped the plants grow. However, the weird wizard always put recordings of wizarding plays, to full volume. So whilst Harry struggled with screeching, butt-ugly plants that refused to be repotted, and with the Venomous Fanged Fly Trap that nearly took a chunk off his ear, or the Tentacula Viciosa which always tried to strangle him, he even had to suffer the languid woes of the light witch Desdemona who had fallen in love with the Moorish, dark sorcerer Othello, who was violent and crazed with jealously, and Desdemona would wail and melodramatically shriek and make choking noises as she was smothered to death by her husband, and Othello would cry out in tragic anguish, and moaned, and let out ear-splitting screams as he discovered his beloved’s innocence and that Iago was the villain behind it all. By the time the class ended, and the dark sorcerer Othello gave his last woeful, wretched, histrionic lamentations as he plunged a sword in his chest, overly loud squishy noises sounding, apparently imitating the splatter of blood, Harry was the first to run away as far as possible from the Greenhouse and the gramophone within.

If Harry’s eardrums weren’t suffering Othello and Desdemona, then it was the sung play of Medea and Jason, and the like; all of them apparently true stories.

He wouldn’t have minded if the hero Jason had a bigger part, as the actor sang joyfully about his adventures with the Argonauts in the quest to find the Golden Fleece. But that part, of the only actor who could actually act and sing well, was very brief, and Harry never found out the supposedly marvelous things Jason saw and did. Instead, he had to bear with the hero’s wife, the
dark witch Medea, daughter of Circe, revengeful and crazed, ranting furiously like a madwoman at the top of her lungs, in what was supposedly some tragic, angsty song but sounded more like a banshee’s screeches, crying out as she killed their children when Jason abandoned her for the daughter of the King of Corinth. And then she went on to kill other people, to boot, cackling madly and spouting ridiculous sonnets, marrying others and having more children, and Harry only wished that someone had actually killed her at some point and spared him the torment. But apparently no one did, and the play concluded without actually saying what happened to the madwoman.

All other of Herbert Beery’s records were very much the same, and the worse of it all was that the wizard sang alone with the records, in a high-pitched, utterly out of tune voice.

If their Herbology teacher liked that sort of thing, he might as well hire Moaning Myrtle and have her there, standing in the Greenhouse, sobbing, wailing and screeching, and it would have much the same effect.

To Harry’s horror, he had overheard one of the students saying that the wizard had been trying to cajole Headmaster Dippet into allowing him to stage a play at Hogwarts. To Harry’s ever lasting relief, he heard next that Herbert Beery had been unsuccessful so far - Harry might’ve smacked a smooch on Dippet’s wrinkly, spotty forehead for that.

History of Magic was just as bad, but for another reason altogether. Harry had been very excited before their first lesson, with very high expectations after having skimmed through his textbook written by a historian, Bathilda Bagshot, who was apparently much lauded and renowned. Indeed, everything he had read so far, had utterly enthralled and fascinated him, and he couldn’t wait to have a teacher explaining all of it all.

His hopes were cruelly dashed, however, when Cuthbert Binns entered the classroom. He was a small wizard, ancient and shriveled, as wrinkled as a prune. He didn’t introduce himself nor glanced at them. No, he merely stood at the front, staring at some point in the wall, and then began.

The wizard droned on, in a deadpanned monotone. Such it was, that their heads began to bob and then hung down limply, their eyelids drooping, and soon soft snores could be heard around the classroom.

The teacher never noticed, or didn’t care at all. And Harry was, much like the others, the unwilling victim of the man’s tedious, dull tone.
Tom pinched him, hard, scowling at him, as he hissed out, “Don’t fall asleep, you dunce! At least use the time to study from your textbook!”

Harry jerked up his head, groggily, and he did try to do like Tom and teach himself from the book during class-time, but it was asking too much of him. Not even the Ravenclaws managed to stay awake, and that was saying something. The only one who seemed to have the power to repel the evil influence of Binn’s lulling monotone was Tom, the rest of them inevitably snoozed and drowsed as if under some enchantment.

During each and every lesson, the exact same thing happened, and not a word droned on by Binns actually registered in any of their minds.

In the end, they all ended up studying the subject in their own free time. There was no other solution.

And finally, Transfiguration wasn’t either one of Harry’s best subjects, but he fully blamed Dumbledore for that. Oh, the Head of Gryffindor House and the Deputy Headmaster was an excellent teacher, there was no denying. Dumbledore was patient with them all, and gentle, and thoroughly explained everything very clearly and always demonstrated as many times as needed. The wizard was even fair with all the Houses- unlike some of the teachers- never showing any favoritism. But that wasn’t the problem.

“What are you doing?” bit out Tom sharply at him, one lesson when they had to transfigure a pincushion into a porcupine.

Harry blinked at his morphed pincushion. It looked like some ghastly aberration of nature, with three toothpicks sticking out –he didn’t know how that had happened- tiny furred paws, a tadpole’s tail, and with no eyes or face.

He groaned, and then whispered tartly, “I can’t concentrate with Dumbledore always glancing at us, as if expecting that we’ll suddenly grow horns or something!”

They both shot the professor a glance at that, to see that, indeed, Dumbledore was gazing at them from above the top of his half-moon spectacles. The man placidly smiled at them.

“You see!” whispered Harry crossly, shooting Tom a scowl. “He’s always looking, always observing and watching, and when he catches me looking back, he bloody smiles like nothing’s the
matter. It gets on my nerves. You know that I don’t feel comfortable around him!”

“I don’t either,” hissed out Tom, aggrieved and impatient, “and I’m sure I revile him more than you do, but I just ignore him and get on with my spellcasting. So should you. It’s no excuse that the old geezer peers too much at you and makes you jittery!”

Harry glowered at him at the lack of sympathy, and but lesson, after lesson, it was of no use. He couldn’t focus due to the many times he felt Dumbledore’s heavy gaze on him, and Tom made matters worse by always hissing and angrily whispering at him, to such a point, that in the end it was only Tom who always successfully cast his spells in his very first attempt, earning many points – because his brother, of course, had perfect concentration, deliberation, envision, precision, which resulted in perfect transfiguration and whatnot.

Nevertheless, his brother always helped him though, since Tom had warningly promised that he would tutor him in all the classes that Harry didn’t do well in.

In the end, Harry only needed did this for the subjects of Potions and Transfiguration, because they were the only ones he had trouble with, since he had no talent in the first and didn’t learn anything in class in the second. And Tom didn’t seem to care about Astronomy or Herbology, so he didn’t offer Harry help with those, even though Tom was the most outstanding student in them, of course - quite effortlessly, even when the boy had much disinterest and indifference for the subjects.

However, having Tom ‘tutoring’ him only entailed that his brother would whisper to him and thus teach him during class-time, and then leave him books to read and even homework, because outside of class, Tom didn’t have time to spend on him, always being in the library as he was.

So it hadn’t changed things between them, nor had it dispelled Harry’s dejected loneliness. Furthermore, matters with his housemates remained just as bad for a long time.

It was only by the end of the month that several things changed for him. Indeed, it happened the day they finally had their first Flying Lesson.

All the things that happened as a consequence of it would make him feel all sort of different things: joy and pleasure was caused by the decision of a girl; shock, amazement, worry, and puzzlement due to an incident which happened because of a new friendship with a boy; and finally, dread and fear for his and his brother’s future, brought upon by what Tom revealed after Harry disclosed a new secret of his own.
That day would be one of the most impactful in Harry’s life.
That fateful day in which he discovered so many things, and which brought many consequences, began rather early for Harry.

Indeed, the previous day, he had willingly gone to the library, taking out several Charms books for his own interest, but also to find a spell that could be used to wake him up at the desired hour.

He had cast the charm at night, and at six in the morning, as he had wished, he had been awoken
by the soft chirps and trills of a conjured small robin perched on his bed’s headboard; the pretty bird’s chest and face covered in orange plumage, its round tummy white and its back brown.

Quietly, he had bathed quickly and donned his Slytherin uniform and black school robes, to then sleepily make his way up to the common room. Tom had been nagging him incessantly for the last couple of days, demanding to know when Harry would start looking for the entrance of the Chamber of Secrets.

Thus, Harry began his search that morning, two hours before the rest of the House woke up for breakfast.

Groggily, and now and then rubbing his eyes to stay awake, Harry started hissing at every crook and cranny of the common room, paying special attention to the many figures of snakes that were all over the place: decorating the dark wood of armchairs and settees; carved in marble in the fireplaces’ mantelpieces; made of silver, wrapping around the torch brackets; embroidered in the tapestries displaying the Slytherin emblem; and the like.

Indeed, he hissed, “Entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, reveal yourself,” or “Part open before my eyes,” and lastly, just an impatient, snapped, “Open!” when he had become rather tired at his lack of success.

But nothing moved, the figures of snakes didn’t twitch and even less hiss back, and Harry was rather startled when suddenly someone jeered loudly, “Listen to the mudblood! He’s trying to imitate how snakes hiss!”

Harry spun around from the last fireplace he had been nattering at in Parseltongue, blanching when he realized that time had flown by and that he had quite an audience.

Girls and boys were coming out from the archways that led to their respective dormitories, many clearly having overheard his attempts, since they now started to surround him, mocking him, nastily guffawing, sniggering and jeering.

“How pathetic can he be! Snakes don’t even hiss like that!”

“Someone must have told the mudblood about the Legend of the Chamber of Secrets and he wants to gain some prestige by finding it!”
“Another gullible first-year that has been put up to it!” one of the older Slytherins groaned.

“Every year it’s the same – how stupid are you?” snapped a seventh-year girl, glowering at him with disdain as she puffed up with irritation. “Do you little children think you’re going to discover it when, throughout the ages, all others have failed? Even purebloods of the most distinguished old families have been unsuccessful…”

“The monster in the Chamber eats your kind, you half-brained mudblood!”

“… it certainly wouldn’t open for someone like you – it can only be opened by the heir of the great Salazar Slytherin, and his line died off centuries ago, you fool!”

Harry swallowed thickly at the onslaught of mocking vitriol shot his way, and then noticed two silent boys amongst the crowd. Alphard Black looked dismayed and was gazing at him with wide eyes, a glint of pity in them, whilst Abraxas Malfoy was frowning, piercing him with narrowed, silvery eyes.

Abruptly, Harry’s scar flared most painfully, and he saw Tom making his way through their housemates, a murderous look on his handsome face.

His brother grabbed him by the arm, the clutch tight and painful, and then yanked him out of the common room, leaving all the others far behind, as he hissed out furiously, “What were you thinking, you idiot!”

“I didn’t realize that it was breakfast time already,” grumbled Harry as he was pulled along the narrow, labyrinthine corridors. He shot Tom a glower, attempting to free his arm from his brother’s grip, to no avail, and then bit out peevishly, “I woke up at six in the morning to do just what you wanted, to start looking for the entrance-”

“You shouldn’t be looking for it in the common room, you imbecile!” spat Tom, giving him a most disgusted and contemptuous look. “Salazar Slytherin was a cunning wizard, so he wouldn’t have built the entrance in any part of the dungeons – it would have been a too obvious place!”

“You might’ve told me that before!” groused Harry, highly miffed, as they took the flight of stairs up to the ground floor of the school.
Tom shot him a very scathing look. “I thought your pea-sized brain would have realized that much!” He shook his head disparagingly, and then snapped harshly, “Don’t put on a show like that again. Thankfully, no one suspects that you were really speaking Parseltongue – be very glad of that, because if they had realized the truth, I wouldn’t have been at all forgiving.” He shot him a most baleful, dark look at this, and then commanded sternly, “Start looking for it on the seventh floor and then make your way down. And don’t bother with the dungeons again. Understood?”

“Yes,” snapped Harry stiffly, as he was finally released when they entered the Great Hall.

Soon, the other Slytherins arrived and took their places along the table and Harry had to silently put up with his housemates’ taunts and jibes, but not for long, since as usually happened during breakfast, a flock of owls flew into the Hall.

Harry’s mood brightened when a tawny barn owl, with a collar around its neck bearing the Ministry of Magic’s emblem, dropped two letters: one on his plate, the other on Tom’s.

The owl nicked a piece of bacon from Harry and then took off, while Harry was rather happily tearing the envelope open, to see Alice’s letter and those enclosed with it, from Mr. Hutchins, Amy Benson, Eric Whalley, and Billy Stubbs.

A week before, when he had realized that he hadn’t been receiving any letters from the orphanage, and when he had finally remembered what Tom had told him – that Dumbledore had said to Kathy and Alice that their boarding school, ‘St. Thomas’, was in Edinburgh, Scotland, but clearly hadn’t given them any address- Harry had finally asked his Head of House how he could send and receive letters from people in Muggle London.

Professor Slughorn had explained the system to him: he had to put his letter in an envelope with the muggle address written on it, and that had to be stuck inside another envelope, this one addressed to the Department of Magical Transportation of the Ministry of Magic. Apparently, in that Department there was a unit of Ministry workers who would then send his letter, in its first envelope, through a Muggle Post Office.

It worked similarly when Alice sent letters to him, since the Ministry workers covertly placed in the Muggle Post Network had magical ways of detecting all letters address to wizards – especially those bound to the false muggle address for Hogwarts that Slughorn had given Harry, and that he had passed on to Alice- and they would intercept them and then send them by owl to their recipients.

It was so, that this was the second time Harry received letters from his loved ones, and he most
avidly read what they all had to say.

Amy Benson asked if he missed her, and then ranted about how she had rowed with her friend Mathilda because she was certain the girl had stolen two hair ribbons from her.

Harry shook his head as he read that, mystified since Amy apparently thought he would understand, sympathize and also denounce Mathilda as a horrible ribbon-stealing fiend. Really, all girls, except Felicity Prewett, were unfathomable, incomprehensible, strange creatures, in his opinion.

Eric Whalley complained about the local public school they attended, telling him how ghastly it was and how horrid the teachers were, to then ask him if in Harry’s posh boarding school they were also canned on their hands or buttocks when they misbehaved, as often happened to Eric in the neighborhood’s school.

Harry had to wonder at that, because so far he hadn’t seen that happening at Hogwarts, and he was mightily glad about it. His memories of Mr. Jenkins’ brutal canings had become something of the distant past for him, better to be forgotten.

Billy Stubbs bubbled excitedly throughout the entirety of his letter, telling him that he had had a wonderful birthday and that Alice had given him a stray kitten she had found in the streets. Harry had smiled as he read that, because Billy had mourned Puffy the Bunny for very long but had also yearned for another cuddly pet.

Harry saved Alice’s and Mr. Hutchins’ letters for later, since they were longer and he enjoyed reading them when he was alone, as if they were a special treats, since he felt comforted by the evident fondness and love they held for him.

Nevertheless, when Tom opened his letter, it didn’t escape Harry’s notice that both Alice and Robert Hutchins had sent the boy numerous newspapers clippings. Harry knew well that the only reason Tom wrote to them was to keep them happy, so that they would continue sending him news about the Muggle World.

Tom still despised Alice, considering her to be a sappy, sentimental, foolish woman, and he had only grudgingly tolerated and respected Mr. Hutchins in the past, because the man was intelligent and had educated himself, and particularly because he had always given Tom plenty of books. But now, his brother had nothing but disdain for them, since they were just ‘mere, lowly muggles’.
Suddenly, as had happened every morning for the past week, another owl swooped down before Tom, this one with a small golden plaque that hung on the plumage of its chest, with the inscription ‘The Daily Prophet Owl Delivery!’ , and carrying the rolled wizarding newspaper in its claws.

In exchange for allowing Harry to use Lord Horkos to send his letters to the Ministry, Tom had demanded to be given the three galleons Harry had been saving and hoarding like a tenacious goblin.

Harry had yielded in the end, grumbling and scowling, especially because he realized he had gotten the worst end of the bargain, since Lord Horkos was as vicious and nasty as ever, and always savagely bit Harry’s fingers when he went to the owlery with tasty bits of food, presenting them as offerings to get the vulture-like bird to condescend to carry his mail.

With Harry’s galleons, Tom had paid for a one-year subscription to The Daily Prophet, and had been very smug and content every since.

Just as many other students of all Houses received their copies of the newspaper as well, mutterings broke throughout the Great Hall.

Curious, Harry peeked over Tom’s shoulder to see what had everyone so agitated.

There, in the front page of The Daily Prophet, was a moving picture of a wizard with a long, thin mustache with its tips curled upwards into spirals, magnanimously gesturing with a hand at the crowd of reporters that surrounded him. The caption underneath said: ‘The Minister of Magic, Charlemagne McLaggen’.

Harry’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. So that was the grandfather of the first-year Ravenclaw, Tiberius McLaggen. The wizard certainly looked as pompous and self-aggrandized as the boy.

However, it had to be the long article itself that had everyone so jittery. In big, bold, black letters, the title announced: ‘Dumbledore’s Greater Integration Law Vetoed in the Wizengamot by the Minister!’.

“The Minister is losing support,” said Priscilla Pucey worriedly as she gazed at her own copy of the newspaper, “if he had no other choice but to use his vetoing powers to hold back the law.”
“How dare Dumbledore try to pass that atrocious, muggle-loving law!” hissed out Capricia Carrow furiously. “It’s what, the sixth time in these last couple of years that he’s tried to push it forth?”

“Yes, but this is the first time that Dumbledore’s faction in the Wizengamot has gained a majority of votes,” interjected Abraxas Malfoy coolly, a thoughtful expression on his handsome face.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” piped in Alphard Black, his voice a bit hesitant as he fiddled with his bit of French toast. “It’s not as if he wants to get rid of the Statute of Secrecy-”

“But his law will breach it, cousin!” snapped Orion, scowling at the boy. “If it gets passed, a Muggle Liaison Office will be created in the Ministry of Magic, and they’ll contact the Muggle Minister and tell him about our world-”

“Exactly!” snarled Neron Lestrange, his brown eyes flaring in indignant and appalled fury. “According to the law, they’ll connect the Muggle’s fireplace to the Floo Network and they’ll hang a magical portrait in the filthy Muggle’s office!”

At that, Harry’s eyes grew as round as moons, and he gaped. Dumbledore wanted to do what?

Then he brought a hand to his mouth, repressing his sniggers. He could clearly imagine the very proper Neville Chamberlain in his office in Downing Street, one day suddenly finding a portrait speaking to him and a wizard in flashy yellow robes bursting out from his hearth. Poor Chamberlain would have an apoplexy and keel over!

“We all know why Dumbledore wants that,” said Druella Rosier poignantly, from her place nearby, having once more seated herself with Lucretia and Walburga Black on one side—the second-year girls rather occupied in discussing the article among themselves in angered whispers—and with Cygnus Black on the other. “It’s because he wants to help the Muggles with what’s happening in Europe.” She shot them a superior look. “You know, given everything that the Dark Lord has been doing-”

“Hush!” whispered sharply Cygnus Black, glaring at the little girl. “You know better than to say that title in public. The other students don’t know about that, Druella! Most wizards still don’t want to believe Dumbledore’s claims-”

“Oh, but Cygnus…” breathed out the beautiful, blonde girl in a mellifluous tone of voice, coyly fluttering her eyelashes at him, which only resulted in the boy’s lips twisting with immense dislike.
Their conversation, however, was drowned as the first-year Slytherins continued voicing their horrified and angered opinions.

“And the Law would be changing Hogwarts’ curriculum too, adding insult to injury!” bit out Capricia Carrow, looking enraged. “He wants to create a Muggle Studies course, no less!”

“But they also have a Wizarding Studies class,” snapped Priscilla Pucey, glowering at the boy. “And that’s compulsory for all mudbloods and halfbloods. At least they teach them about our culture and prevent them from staining it with their filthy prejudices and false beliefs! And you don’t see Dumbledore’s Law forcing a Wizarding Studies course at Hogwarts, do you?”

“Not only that,” grumbled Thaddeus Avery darkly, his voice more gruff than usual, “he wants to get rid of Care of Magical Creatures-”

“Oh, yes! He wants to leave it as a third year elective!” burst out Capricia Carrow, “because apparently the current curriculum is too much for first-year mudbloods - we wouldn’t want to overwhelm them, would we?” she spat fiercely, her tone nastily mocking. “It’s too much of a shock for them to learn from the start that there are also magical creatures – their sensibilities have to be protected, of course! And we, purebloods, should just end up suffering from a deficient education all the while! The gall of the man – I don’t know how he dares propose such a thing!”

“Quite right,” agreed Orion Black, nodding at the girl. “The Hogwarts Express was enough, in my view…”

That opened a whole other thread in the conversation, which left Harry rather surprised.

Apparently, the Hogwarts Express was a new development. Eight years ago, purebloods students travelled to the school by whatever means their families had: in magnificent carriages pulled by pegasi, in the case of students like most of the Slytherins, who came from old families that had such things; others travelled in magical carpets, before they were banned; or their families brought them, by Floo or Apparation, to Hogsmeade; and meanwhile, muggleborns, and those halfbloods who lived in the Muggle World, were taken by Ministry officials to the gates of the school, by portkey.
From what the Slytherins said, Dumbledore had one day convinced Headmaster Dippet that a muggle-based means of transportation should be used - a train, so that all children arrived in the same manner, causing no distinction between them from the start, and also providing several hours of travel for all the students to mingle and get to know each other.

The wizard had proposed a train also because it was a new muggle invention, and Dumbledore apparently wanted wizards and witches to see that muggle things could be useful and shouldn’t be disdained, providing an opportunity for greater wizarding understanding and tolerance for muggle creations.

Harry noticed that, in the midst of it all, his brother had also been intently listening to the Slytherins’ conversation, as he did, but Tom also began reading again the article in The Daily Prophet, to then read the muggle newspaper clippings that Alice and Hutchins had sent him, with a musing and calculating glint in his eyes, as if he was figuring out plenty of other things.

Soon, they all had to leave for their first class of the day, though Harry made a mental note to ask Tom, before they went to sleep, just what he had discovered.

Double Potions with the Gryffindors proved to be a rather enlightening experience for Harry, for two reasons.

Firstly, because he managed, for the first time, to successfully brew the potion they had to work on. He had his brother’s help, certainly, but slowly Harry began to understand some of the theoretical aspects and principles -about how all the different types of ingredients reacted when mixed together- that Tom had been drilling into his skull.

He would never be brilliant at Potions like Tom was, or very good like Abraxas Malfoy and Felicity Prewett, but his brewing skills apparently could be honed to be moderately acceptable – and that seemed to be enough for Tom, and it certainly was for Harry.

And secondly, they had both made a rather startling discovery after the lesson was over.

Tom had gestured at him to remain behind, while he dallied with his scales and other supplies, as the rest of the students left the classroom. Intrigued, Harry had followed his brother’s lead.

The moment they were alone, Tom approached Horace Slughorn, who was by then organizing parchments of essays on his desk.
“Professor, we’ve been wondering,” said Tom in a very polite and respectful tone of voice, as he inclined his head just so, in angle from which he could peer at the wizard through his wavy, black bangs, making him look handsomely endearing, “about the day we met you in Knockturn Alley…”

Slughorn at first looked surprised to find them still in his classroom, then he became flustered, as he cleared his throat and muttered uneasily, “Ah… yes… I hope you did as I asked and didn’t mention that to anyone…” He gave them a forced, congenial smile, as he prodded a bit forcefully, “You haven’t, my dear boys, have you?”

“Certainly not, sir,” replied Tom solemnly, looking appalled at the very idea of not obeying his Head of House. Then his face adopted a humble expression, just displaying innocent curiosity, as he intoned softly, “But my twin and I saw a locket in the shop’s window, and it puzzled and intrigued us a mite, because-”

Harry shot his brother a glance, his eyes widening a bit in understanding, as he realized why Tom might be interested in it. It dawned on him as he remembered what the locket had looked like… could it possibly be…

“A locket? The locket in Borgin and Burkes’?” interrupted Slughorn nearly stuttering, blinking and then staring at them, looking taken aback. The wizard abruptly stood up and moved around his desk, his belly jingling all the way, before he planted himself before them, piercing them with his eyes. “You mean to tell me, that you saw that?”

It was Harry and Tom’s turn now, to stare back at him, puzzled and confused.

“Um, yes,” finally replied Harry, frowning at the wizard. “Why wouldn’t we?” His eyes widened in the next second, as he remembered how it had happened, and he then waved off a hand dismissively. “Ah, we said ‘Dark Arts’, and then we saw all the stuff the stores had-”

“Oh!” exclaimed Slughorn, gazing at them as if he had never seen them before, a gleam of delighted surprise in his eyes. “Then you cannot possibly be muggleborns, my dear lads!”

Harry blinked, perplexed at how the wizard could have jumped to that conclusion, while Tom cocked his head to a side, as he said softly, “Perhaps you could explain what you mean, Professor, if you’d be so kind…”
Slughorn’s eyes sparkled as he leaned forward and breathed out, “Tell me why you said those words.”

Frowning, Harry said slowly, “Well, I saw a message appearing in Knockturn Alley’s street sign. It said something like ‘Darklings, speak Dark Arts’. And when we saw that all the shops were nearly empty-”

“You said the keywords,” interrupted Slughorn, clapping his hands together in a gesture of satisfaction, as if he had made some great discovery that pleased him to no end, “and all the wares were revealed before your eyes, correct?”

Harry nodded, but when Slughorn saw that they still looked confused, he chortled happily as he expounded, “That message can only be seen by dark wizards, and if the keywords are spoken in Knockturn Alley, they will only work if they are spoken by dark wizards, you see!” He let out a chuckle. “The message and keyword changes every week…”

He trailed off, his bright countenance sobering into a more serious one, as he cleared his throat and tried to put tactfully, “Knockturn Alley’s stores have… unsavory items, let us say… and Aurors, from time to time, raid the Alley in search for such wares. That is why the shops have wards to Disillusion some of their merchandise, which would cause trouble for them with the Aurors, if found.”

“Then, when we said ‘Dark Arts’,,” said Tom quietly, piercing him with his eyes, “that was what brought down the wards for us?”

“Precisely!” Slughorn clapped his hands together once again, looking to be in a very jolly good mood, as he added, “Since it worked for you, it’s evident that you have Dark Magic in your magical cores, my dear boys! One of your parents must have been a dark wizard or witch – you’re not muggleborns!”

Then he shook his head, frowning thoughtfully, as he muttered to himself under his breath, “I wonder if Albus suspects… I could wager a bottle of Ogden’s Finest that he might, as sensitive and perceptive as he is about Dark Magic…”

“I see,” said Tom smoothly, though not very surprised by Slughorn’s revelation. Harry wasn’t either. After all, it wasn’t startling to discover that they had Dark Magic coursing through their veins, since they were Parselmouths and Slytherin’s descendants.
“I think it would be best if we didn’t tell anyone about this, sir,” added Tom softly, humbly hanging his head down.

Slughorn looked surprised at this, before he shot them a knowing glance, as he murmured gently, “But, my dear boys, if your housemates knew about this, they would treat you much better.”

“They might, sir, but then everyone would know how we met, and what you were doing in Borgin and Burkes,” interjected Tom, looking nothing but concerned for his Head of House’s good reputation. “And we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

Slughorn squirmed and uncomfortably cleared his throat, and then bobbed his head up and down, as he boomed, “You’re quite right, my dear boy!” He then shot them a congenial, conspiratorial wink. “Best if we keep all of it a secret, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” intoned Tom warmly, bestowing upon him a gorgeous, charming smile, before he added in a casual tone of voice, “But about the locket we saw.”

“Oh, that old thing!” exclaimed Slughorn, shaking his head disparagingly. “Caractacus Burke has had it for over twelve years, I think – claims that it’s a Slytherin heirloom, he does! Yet he refuses to say how he came to have it! He won’t outright sell it either – you have to bid for it. There are only three wizards and witches who still remain in the running, since in the last bid, the price for it reached the astronomical amount of sixty thousand galleons! Hepzibah Smith herself is still bidding for it, you know?”

The Professor puffed up self-importantly at this, as he added, “She’s an old acquaintance of mine, of course – a dear friend. You might have heard about her – a very wealthy old lady, with the most magnificent collection of magical antiques. She’s Helga Hufflepuff’s descendant, as well!”

“But is the locket a Slytherin heirloom?” pressed on Tom, a bright, hungry and greedy gleam in his eyes, which seemed to pass unnoticed by Slughorn, but not by Harry, knowing his brother as well as he did.

Slughorn paused, thoughtfully playing with one tip of his bushy moustache, before he replied jauntily, “The locket cannot be opened, and Burke claims that this fact alone proves that it is indeed a Slytherin heirloom. According to him, only a Parselmouth would be able to open it. But since Parselmouths don’t longer exist nowadays, there’s no way of knowing, is there?”
Tom’s dark blue eyes flashed, before he ducked his head as he mumbled softly, “Thank you, sir, for clearing such matters to us. We’ll leave you now, since we don’t want to be late for our next class.”

Slughorn looked very content, as if he had done his good deed for the day, and then merely waved as Tom and Harry picked up their schoolbags and dashed out of the classroom.

The instant they were in the corridors, Harry breathed out excitedly, “Do you really think the locket is a Slytherin heirloom?”

“Yes,” said Tom firmly, as they both ran towards the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. “Remember that it had a silver snake in the shape of an ‘S’ – exactly like the one of Slytherin House’s crest. There’s no doubt about it.” He shot Harry a side-glance, as he added quietly, “And it would explain why the Riddles don’t have a vault in Gringotts.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You think it’s because our father’s family is poor-”

“And they resorted to selling their heirlooms - exactly!” affirmed Tom, sounding extremely self-satisfied with his discovery. “Slughorn said Burke got the locket twelve years ago – exactly before we were born!” His eyes suddenly gleamed, as he added fiercely, “But I won’t let the locket end up in some old witch’s grubby hands. It’s ours by birthright! We’ll steal it, little brother!”

Harry hesitated at that, blanching, as he mumbled, “Um, I dunno about that… I don’t want to get caught and carted off to Azkaban.” He shuddered. “The Prewetts twins told me about the wizarding prison and those ‘Dementor’ creatures that guard it-”

“Of course we won’t get caught,” snapped Tom irritably, scowling at him. “We’ll nick the locket when we’re older and know all sorts of spells.” He skewered him with narrowed, demanding eyes, as he bit out, “You’ll help me steal it, won’t you?”

“Well… if we’ll only do it when we’re older and after we come up with a good plan… then…” Harry shot him a toothy grin. “Then, of course I will, brother!”

Tom graced him with a wide, pleased smirk, just before they opened the door of their next class.

Defense Against the Dark Arts, shared also with the Gryffindors, would be their last lesson of the
day. Since after lunch, they would finally have their first Flying Lesson. The first-years of all Houses were rather eager and excited about it, and some nervous.

In Defense, for the past month, they had learned several minor shielding charms and other basic defensive spells, but the previous week, Professor Medea Merrythought had informed them they would start learning about dark creatures and the ways of battling them. Dueling spells and counter-courses would be resumed in their third year, since by then they would be old enough to learn such things.

Thus, for the last couple of lessons, they had learned about Trolls, the mischievous and nastily wicked Cornish Pixies, and about Grindylows – Harry finally discovering what those creatures were who made faces at him through his bathroom’s window, sticking out their forked, blue tongues at him when he bathed.

The second Tom and he had taken a seat in the classroom, Harry blinked when he caught sight of Medea Merrythought. Then he frowned, aggravated with himself. The old witch was dressed in dark robes buttoned from chin to toes, as always, but this time, she had a blood red flower pinned in the middle of her chest.

That flower, again! Harry started to feel quite frustrated about it. He had already seen it in the picture of Salazar Slytherin’s likeness in Tom’s ‘Hogwarts, a History’. But the first time had been at the Hogwarts Express’ platform, on Maximillian Malfoy’s chest.

Thus, he knew that the flower looked strangely familiar to him because he must have seen it in the Muggle World, since before encountering Abraxas’ grandfather, he had known no other place.

However, the sensation tingled and niggled in the back of his mind, and he still couldn’t put a finger on it. It was very irritating.

“No need to take out your books,” abruptly said Medea Merrythought sternly, the moment they were all seated. “You won’t find today’s lesson in it.”

A Gryffindor girl raised a hand, before she said confusedly, “But last time, Professor, you said we would be learning about Kappas today.”

“I’ve changed my mind,” snapped Merrythought crisply, her eyes darkly gleaming in the next second, as she added in a low tone of voice, “I’ll be teaching you about Veelas in this lesson.”
“Veelas?” burst out Algie Longbottom, looking thoroughly astonished. “But Veelas aren’t dark creatures, Professor.”

“That’s a matter of opinion, Mr. Longbottom!” bit out Merrythought fiercely as she swiftly rounded on him, her long braid of grey hair swishing through the air. Her burned and marred face contorted, as she spat acidly, “Indeed, they might not be classified as such, but Veelas are one of the most dangerous creatures in existence. Their allure is no better than the Imperius Curse – enthraling decent wizards and making them do all sorts of things against their will! Wizards even commit terrible crimes, to impress the Veela who has ensnared them – horrid things that they would never do if they were sound of mind!”

Half the class was gaping at her, never having seen the old witch conduct herself in such a way and clearly taken aback by her view on Veelas, while the other half were stiff.

Indeed, to Harry’s further bewilderment, he saw that Abraxas Malfoy’s spine and shoulders were rigid, his silvery eyes silently flashing with fury; the boy’s friends, seated around him, were tense. He even noticed that Felicity Prewett looked enraged as she glowered at their teacher, when she wasn’t shooting Abraxas soft, compassionate looks.

Then Medea Merrythought’s thin lips twisted, her gaze swiveling to Abraxas Malfoy, as she added in a very low, vibrating tone of voice, “Oh, believe me, children, Veelas are the darkest of creatures! And today I’ll teach you exactly how they should be treated.” She cleared her throat. “How we could defend ourselves against their powers, that is.”

It became the most uncomfortable lesson Harry had thus far experienced, and by the end of it, their professor had gained no friends among her students.

They all left rather quickly, their ears ringing with the old witch’s loud, ominous warnings about all sorts of malevolent things Veelas had done to wizards throughout the ages.

Harry quickly intercepted the Prewett twins as soon as they were in the corridor. “What was that all about?”

Felix and Felicity shared a glance, nodded to each other, and then turned to him.

Felicity huffed out angrily, “We’ll tell you, but first let’s go to the Great Hall.”
Harry mutely nodded, too curious and intrigued to do much else, and followed them as they quickly made their way.

Finally, they halted before the threshold of the Great Hall, as many students flowed in to have their lunch.

“Wait for us here,” piped in Felix, his mismatched brown and blue eyes sparkling as he glanced at the school grounds through the parted doors of Hogwarts’ entrance. “It’s not raining today, at last - so we might as well make a picnic of it!”

And with that, the twins quickly slipped into the Great Hall, leaving a surprised Harry behind.

A few minutes later, Felix returned with a large pitcher of pumpkin juice under one of his arms and three goblets in his hands, whilst Felicity carried a large platter with all sorts of food heaped on it. Both beamed at him when they caught Harry’s joyful expression.

Just when they were about to slip outside, a hand landed on Harry’s shoulder. He spun around, fretfully biting his lower lip when he saw that it was Tom who had halted him. But in the next instant, he shot him a mutinous glare and squared his shoulders.

After they had met the Prewett twins in the Hogwarts Express, Tom had never condescended to be with them again. The twins had been offended and angry at first, but then they seemed to decide to simply ignore Tom altogether.

Tom, on the other hand, had quite plainly expressed to Harry just what he thought about his friendship with the Prewetts, especially after it had caused so much trouble with their housemates, when Head Girl and Head Boy had began the war of docking points from each other’s Houses, left, right, and center, with Harry in the very middle of it.

A few days ago, one night, Harry and his brother had even ended up in a shouting match, because Harry still stubbornly refused to relinquish the only two friends he had in the whole school, while Tom furiously claimed that he was making everything worse by still cavorting with them.

Well, his brother had always despised all of his friends, but unlike in St. Jerome’s Orphanage, where Tom had always wanted to have Harry’s full attention and company at all hours, things were different at Hogwarts.
Tom had thus far ignored him, spending all his time in the library, obsessed in his research and all the things he was studying. And Harry understood it, a bit, because of course Tom would be thoroughly enticed by the sheer, staggering source of magical knowledge that Hogwarts’ library offered.

Nonetheless, that didn’t mean that he was happy about it, or that he would let his brother drive him away from his friends. In this instance, Tom had no right to do so, since he didn’t offer his company in return.

So Harry glowered at him, at present, while Tom’s eyes narrowed as he pierced the ginger-haired twins with his gaze. Felix glared back, while Felicity flushed under Tom’s skewering, unpleasant gaze, but then she lifted her chin up, challengingly.

Tom let out a disdainful scoff, and apparently decided he wouldn’t make a scene in public.

Instead, he briskly yanked his Slytherin scarf from his neck, and then wrapped it around Harry, up to his cheeks, only leaving Harry’s surprised, wide green eyes peeking from above it.

“It’s cold outside,” was the only thing Tom said curtly, before he shot the twins one last glare and then coolly sauntered into the Great Hall.

Harry blinked, then grinned behind the scarf, suddenly feeling all warm and tingly due to his brother’s unexpected gesture. Abruptly in a very good mood, he then marched off to the school grounds with a skip in his steps, the Prewett twins trailing after him.

They settled themselves before a couple of trees at one side of the Black Lake, its shore a few feet away. They even had the Giant Squid as an audience, its huge single eye peering at them from the lake’s surface, as he moved around his countless tentacles in a languid manner.

It took Felix five attempts before he managed to transfigure a stone into a tablecloth —and it was quite threadbare and patchy, at that, but it served its purpose. Harry spread it above the grass and then helped the twins to settle pitcher, goblets, and platter of food, before they sat down, crossing their legs as they dropped their schoolbags to one side.

Harry popped a small, roasted potato into his awaiting mouth, and munched it down happily, before he began slowly, “So… what Professor Merrythought said today about Veelas and the way
she glanced at Abraxas Malfoy… you seemed to know what that was all about…”

Felicity halted in mid-sip from her goblet of pumpkin juice, and then heavily sighed. “Did you notice the flower she was wearing?”

Harry’s eyes brightened instantly, as he rushed out, “Yes! And I had seen it before, on Maximillian Malfoy and in a picture of Salazar Slytherin!” He then cocked his head to a side, extremely puzzled. “But I didn’t imagine you’d say anything about the flower. What does it have to do with what happened today in class?”

“Everything,” said Felix firmly, looking a bit angered. “That flower is the Egeriana Rose.”

“Its full, proper name,” interjected Felicity, “is Verus-Cruor Egerianus. And its magical properties were discovered by Salazar Slytherin himself.”

Felix nodded, as he continued, “It was with it, that Slytherin created the very first Fertility Potions. And it’s believed that he wore the flower as a sort of medal.” He rolled his eyes. “A medal representing his own brilliancy and ground-breaking discoveries in Potions.”

“But his descendants adopted it as symbol of their beliefs,” piped in Felicity, as she nibbled on a piece of toasted bread. “Especially one of them, who founded the TrueBlood Alliance, and made the Egeriana Rose its emblem. The group still exists nowadays.”

Harry frowned at her. “A group? So Maxillian Malfoy and Professor Merrythought are members of this group, since they wear the rose?” He shot them a confused look. “But Professor Merrythought has never looked down on Tom or I for being muggleborns-”

“Oh, but the TrueBlood Alliance is not about blood purity. Well, at least not regarding muggle blood,” clarified Felicity briskly.

Felix nodded in agreement at her words. “Yes, because beside the whole issue of Dark or Light Magic and the political-orientation that this brings, purebloods are also divided in the matter of how they regard having creature blood in wizarding bloodlines.”

“Exactly,” piped in Felicity. “Indeed, the Merrythoughts are a light pureblood wizarding family that have never held prejudices against muggles or muggleborns – these are humans, after all. But
They object to wizards and witches procreating with magical creatures, and thus having wizarding lines with creature blood in them.”

“Well, they didn’t before,” pointed out Felix, a musing frown on his face as he shot his twin a glance. “Do you remember what it was that happened? Father told us but I can’t remember the details—”

“Oh, yes! It was a huge scandal, remember?” said Felicity eagerly. “Marlowe Merrythought—”

“Ah, yes – what was he? Professor Merrythought’s cousin?”

“No, her young brother!” said Felicity urgently. “The youngest one in the family and their heir! That’s why the Merrythoughts took it so badly.”

Harry’s gaze was snapping from one to the other, until he pressed, “But what happened?”

“Marlowe Merrythought fell in love with a full-blooded female Veela, that’s what happened,” replied Felicity, shaking her head despairingly. “She was living in England because she had married a British wizard…” She trailed off, frowning. “I don’t remember his name, though.”

Felix rolled his eyes at his twin. “Never mind that. He was just someone from a minor wizarding family, I think. The point is that Marlowe Merrythought was besotted with the Veela. Rumors say that he even stalked her for months! And, of course, she wanted nothing to do with him, since she had already chosen a mate and married him.”

“But one day,” carried on Felicity, taking over her twin’s explanation, “the couple were strolling down Diagon Alley and Marlowe Merrythought suddenly appeared, shooting spells and curses at the Veela’s husband, like a madman!”

Felix leaned towards Harry, his mismatched eyes huge as he whispered, “It’s said he even used the Unforgivables!”

Harry blinked, wondering what that was supposed to mean.
“Not all three,” interjected Felicity. “He tried to cast the Killing Curse.”

“Oh,” said Harry, now understanding, since given the name it was clear what the curse did. Then he frowned, as he muttered, “So he killed the Veela’s husband?”

Felicity snorted, as she picked up a carrot from the platter. “No, of course. The Veela went berserk – they’re very protective of their mates, you see- and she blasted him to smithereens, right then and there.”

“There was nothing left of Marlowe Merrythought put a pile of ashes,” breathed out Felix, his eyes wide.

“His family was furious,” piped in Felicity, taking a bite from her carrot. “They tried to have the Veela convicted for murder and carted off to Azkaban.”

“They failed, though,” pointed out Felix, as he served himself pumpkin juice.

“Yes, because she was within her rights to protect her mate under life-threatening situations,” explained Felicity at Harry’s bemused expression. “There are plenty of wizarding laws that protect Veelas, you see. They are one of the few kinds of magical beings that have managed that. They have their own Council, and it’s them that have always successfully lobbied with wizarding governments to have that sort of laws that protect their kind.”

“But Veelas don’t usually go to other countries,” remarked Felix as he took a sip from his goblet. “They stick to France, mostly. There, they have towns and communities of their own, and the French are very used to them. That’s why full-blooded Veelas don’t often live in other countries, because if not things like what happened with Marlowe Merrythought occur.”

“True, especially in England because we’re not used to having Veelas among us.”

Harry cocked his head to a side. “So Professor Merrythought hates Veelas so much because of what happened to her brother?”

“Exactly,” said Felicity. “After that, the whole family became members of the TrueBlood Alliance.”
“There are those who call themselves ‘True Purists,’” went on to explain Felix, after taking another swig from his goblet, “evidently they form the TrueBlood Alliance. And then there are those who are Traditional Purists, like us, who see nothing wrong in having creature blood in our lines - after all, it’s still purely magical blood.”

“You two have creature blood?” asked Harry, his eyebrows shooting upwards in surprise.

Felix Prewett grinned toothily. “We have an ancestor who was a siren!”

“And this is a common thing, is it?” inquired Harry, more intrigued and astounded as the conversation progressed.

“Well, not common, but there are several wizarding families with creature blood,” piped in Felicity nonchalantly, waving her half-eaten carrot in the air. “Like the Weasleys.” She frowned, as she added slowly, “They’ve always been very weird, but they have a Leprechaun somewhere along their bloodline, so that might explain it.”

Felix guffawed loudly, his body shaking and the force of his laugh making him lean backwards. “Oh, yes! Last year there was a Weasley at Hogwarts - in our House! And he pranked everyone in sight, our cousin Muriel told us. Even his own housemates! Muriel didn’t know what to do with him. Thankfully, he was in his seventh year, and Muriel said that she had never felt so relieved as in the day when she saw him gone.”

“Well, yes,” interjected Felicity, waving a hand dismissively. “But that case is a very odd one. In the old times, pureblood wizards and witches bonded and had children with magical beings or creatures because they wanted to gain some of their traits for the bloodline – useful things that would make their descendants more powerful in some aspect.”

“Like mating with a vampire, for example,” pointed out Felix, popping a tiny potato into his mouth, and munching it down before he continued, “because even though vampires don’t tolerate sunlight very well and are nocturnal creatures and have the whole bloodlust issue, they have a very long life span and excellent sight and heal abnormally fast, and they passed on some of those positive traits to their offspring with wizards or witches.”

“It’s believed that the Princes intentionally had a vampire ancestor because of this,” said Felicity giggling. Then she shook her head, as she took the last bite from her carrot. “But most wizarding families keep such things a secret, not because it shames them, but because it’s a sort of secret
weapon. So they don’t want their rivals to know about it.”

Harry, a bit dazed by the whole revelation, nodded in understanding. Then he frowned musingly, as he said slowly, “So given what happened in class today, Abraxas is a Veela? So that’s what Walburga Black meant when she insulted him, implying he was a thing.”

“She did that, did she?” snapped Felicity, looking ferocious, her ringlets of fiery, red hair springing about. She pursed her lips and then added hotly, “I don’t know how she dares! Many purebloods now know that she has Troll blood in her, and she goes casting aspersions on Abraxas?”

Harry gaped at her, his mouth hanging open, his hand carrying his goblet of pumpkin juice halting midway in the air. Then he managed to gasp out, utterly gobsmacked, “Troll blood!”

“Her mother is Irma Black, a Crabbe by birth,” piped in Felix, his mismatched eyes sparkling with mirth. “The Crabbes had never revealed that they had Troll blood in them. And, well, they have never been the sharpest daggers in the drawer, to begin with. But one of them clearly thought that mating with a Troll was a brilliant idea.”

Felicity snorted loudly at that, as her twin continued explaining, “Trolls are as dumb as doorknobs and incredibly ugly – no good traits there- but they’re also very strong, physically, and their thick skins makes them naturally immune to several spells. So that might be what the Crabbe ancestor could have been thinking about.”

“Yes, but the point is that no one knew,” interjected Felicity, a wide, toothy smile of relish then spreading on her beautiful face. “Pollux Black would have never married Irma Crabbe if he had known about that – that’s for sure! The Blacks have always been extreme purists in all senses – despising both muggle and creature blood. Irma is beautiful, and she got that from her mother, who was a Greengrass, so Pollux never suspected anything.”

“But it all come out into the open,” breathed out Felix eagerly, leaning closer towards Harry in his excitement, “one day when Irma Crabbe was eight months pregnant with Walburga. Apparently, as a baby, Walburga kicked her mother so hard that Irma started fearing that her daughter might have inherited Troll characteristics. And it’s clear that she decided to cut her loses and inform her husband about it, before a Troll-like baby came popping out and Pollux found out about it in the nastiest way.”

“So Irma just came out with it, one day when our father was sitting in Pollux’s study, waiting to discuss some business with him,” continued Felicity, chuckling under her breath as she grabbed a slice of cheese. “That’s how we know about it. Well, Father came out of the room when he
overheard the couple shouting at each other. According to him, Pollux was beyond enraged, but also so shocked that one could have knocked him over with a feather!"

“Things were never right between husband and wife after that,” piped in Felix, looking as if he savored the misfortune of those who later called his father a ‘bloodtraitor’ and became his enemies. “But Pollux didn’t abandon her, because he couldn’t, given the strict magical bond with which they had married.”

“And Cygnus was already a little boy by then, and he’s handsome,” murmured Felicity absentmindedly as she made a cheese and ham sandwich for herself. “And Walburga is nothing to look at but isn’t hideous as a Troll. And then Alphard was born, normal and as good-looking as his older brother and his father, and that seemed to soothe Pollux Black’s ruffled feathers.”

Felix shot Harry a wicked glance, as he grabbed a piece of bread and waved it around, intoning cheerfully, “But you must’ve already experienced how Walburga Black screeches, making your eardrums nearly burst, eh?”

“Oh, yes!” exclaimed Felicity, tittering with laughter whilst she took a small bite from her sandwich. “Given that, we’ve always wondered if she might have some Banshee blood too! Perhaps the Crabbes didn’t limit themselves just to Trolls!”

Harry choked, ending up snorting into his goblet, the pumpkin juice nearly coming out the wrong way. He wiped his nose clean the next second, and snickered under his breath. “I could believe that.”

They all chuckled companionably, Felix and Harry grabbing roasted chicken legs, munching on them happily, while Felicity concentrated on her sandwich.

In between bites, Harry finally returned to one of his earlier questions, cocking his head to a side, as he murmured, “So Abraxas is a Veela?”

“Do you really need to ask?” Felix toothily grinned, waggling his eyebrows at him. “We’ve seen how you sometimes stare at him, looking all dazed and starry-eyed, as if he was some sort of dream.”

Harry felt his cheeks and the tips of his ears burning, and muttered grumpily, “That’s not my fault! You heard what Professor Merrythought said about the Veela allure and stuff!”
Felix mercilessly sniggered at him, looking vastly amused, whilst Felicity merely rolled her mismatched, beautiful eyes, as she said with some exasperation, “Harry is right.” She shot him a gentle smile. “You can’t help it. No one can, really. Abraxas is a half-Veela, because of his mother. With part-Veelas it’s always impossible to know how many traits they’ll get. Sometimes they get all, their faces turning bird-like, their fingers becoming claws, and with wings sprouting from their backs, when angered, and capable of shooting out balls of fire too. But sometimes they don’t get any traits at all.”

“Abraxas at least has the whole allure thing down pat,” chortled Felix, shooting Harry a pointed look, lopsidedly grinning.

“No, he doesn’t. Not really,” retorted Felicity, frowning with consternation. “It will only become stronger as he grows up, and he’ll have a hard time of learning how to control it, especially because he won’t have an adult Veela to teach him.”

“Why not?” asked Harry surprised, as he took another bite from his chicken leg. “You said he’s a half-Veela because of his mother-”

“His mother is dead,” interrupted Felicity softly, taking the last bite from her sandwich and then daintily dabbing the corner of her lips with a napkin.

“Then his mother’s family,” pressed on Harry, frowning. “Or his grandfather could help him –” He clamped his mouth shut, his frown deepening. “Hang on. If Abraxas is a half-Veela, then why does Maximilllian Malfoy go around with the Egeriana Rose pinned on his robes?”

“Because the old wizard is an extreme purist in all senses, like the Blacks,” bit out Felicity crossly, after taking a brief sip from her goblet. “And he’s as nasty as they get. He’s even the leader of the TrueBlood Alliance nowadays. So, on one hand, he made Abraxas his heir, but on the other, he dealt him a backhanded insult, by openly being a True Purist, despising Abraxas for being a ‘halfbreed’.”

“Their relationship have never been an easy one,” remarked Felix gravely, as he finished with his chicken leg and left the bone at one side of the large platter. “Back when our families were close, I clearly remember one day when we were in Malfoy Manor, playing in the gardens with Abraxas.” He let out a snicker. “Chasing and tormenting those albino peacocks they have, in fact.”

“Oh, yes, I remember too!” Felicity then bit her bottom lip, as she took a slice of apple. “A flock of
beautiful white owls suddenly swooped down, carrying a very large package. It was from Abraxas’ Veela grandparents.”

“But Old Maximillian came running out of the manor,” continued Felix somberly, “looking beside himself with fury. He destroyed the gift right there and then, without letting Abraxas even take a peek at the letter tucked under the ribbon. And then the nasty old curmudgeon dismissed us all.”

“We all ran into the manor for the nearest fireplace to floo out of there, scared out of our wits,” muttered Felicity grimly, as she nibbled on her slice of apple, “but we still heard Abraxas furiously yelling at his grandfather. He was six. I think that was the only time I’ve ever witnessed Abraxas losing his composure.” She sadly shook her head. “Maximillian never let him have any contact with his maternal grandparents, and I think Abraxas has always resented and hated him for it, in return.”

Harry blinked at her. “But he’s alright with being a half-Veela, then?”

Felix snorted in amusement as he started peeling an orange. “Abraxas isn’t the kind of person who would ever hate himself for being who he is. He has embraced it, clearly. And he’s quietly proud of it, I think. That’s why he has such a difficult relationship with his grandfather.”

“It all started with Cassius Malfoy, really,” said Felicity with a heavy sigh. “Abraxas’ somewhat tragic past is all his father’s fault.”

“True,” piped in Felix, popping a piece of orange into his mouth.

“Cassius Malfoy was very wild, from what Father told us,” carried on Felicity, cleaning her fingers with a napkin after she was done eating her desert which had only consisted of two bits of apple, while Harry was still busy with his chicken leg. “Caring about nothing but getting drunk with his friends, gambling, chasing after pretty witches, and travelling all around the world, from party to party, carelessly wasting all his galleons.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot upwards in surprise, and seeing this, Felicity nodded, as she continued quietly, “He was young, of course, but it was no excuse. Maximillian Malfoy tried every ruthless measure and punishment to sort him out, but nothing worked. And the Malfoys have always been very strict with their rule of only having one heir per generation, so Old Maximillian was stuck with Cassius.”
“But it got worse,” supplied Felix, taking another piece of his orange fruit. “One day, young Cassius ended up in a ball in Paris, and there, he caught sight of a full-blooded Veela.”

“She was astoundingly beautiful, of course,” interjected Felicity, then waving off a hand as she settled herself comfortably against a tree trunk, “but also infamous. Her own Veela parents had disowned her, because she was very frivolous, cared for no one but herself and cared for nothing but having a lavish life. She latched herself to every rich wizard she could find, her goal being to catch a very wealthy husband from a distinguished, pureblood family.”

Felix snorted, shaking his head as he tossed the remnants of his orange unto the platter. “Young Cassius Malfoy didn’t stand a stance. He was completely mesmerized by her, according to all rumors, and he married her right there in France, two days later.”

“The Veela was very cunning, too,” continued Felicity, her expression souring, as she primly rearranged the hem of her skirt to cover her displayed knees, “because she got married to Cassius by using one of the strictest magical rituals, which formed an unbreakable marital bond, of course.”

“You can imagine Old Maximillian’s reaction when he found out about it,” interjected Felix, shuddering, as he swiped his fingers clean with a corner of the tablecloth. “But the Veela wasn’t cunning enough, as it came to happen.”

Felicity nodded. “She got pregnant, clearly unintentionally. The couple then struck a bargain with Old Maximillian. Since they didn’t want to be bothered with raising their son, they left baby Abraxas in Maximillian’s care, while he agreed to give them access to the main Malfoy vault and thus most of his hoarded fortune.”

“They didn’t imagine how ruthless Maximillian could be,” piped in Felix, as he took a sip from his goblet. “He had a new heir he could mold from the start, this time without making the mistakes he had in raising Cassius. This time, being thoroughly and mercilessly strict with Abraxas from the beginning. So Cassius was no longer of any worth to him.”

“So while the couple continued to travel around the world, having a good time,” continued Felicity, shaking her head disparagingly, “the Veela buying herself loads of jewelry and pretty, expensive clothes, and Cassius doting on her and giving her every little thing she wanted, Maximillian brooded and plotted.”

“And one day, when Abraxas was two years old,” carried on Felix, his expression turning queasy, his face a bit greenish, “Cassius and the Veela were in Greece, and wanted to travel by portkey to Venice. They did, but the portkey was faulty. Their body parts were scattered all over the place in
“chunks, some in Venice, some in Athens.”

Felicity shuddered. “At first, it was called the most gruesome portkey accident in history. But then, authorities found the Greek Ministry worker who had created the portkey and sold it to them. He was put on trial, and yet he couldn’t remember that he had made it. But there were Ministry records that proved it. The poor man was found guilty and carted off to prison for life.”

“But it was Maximillian who was behind it, you see,” interjected Felix, looking very grim. “Father was friends with him back then, so he knew the truth. Maximillian had bribed the Greek Ministry worker so that he would make a faulty portkey, but as soon as Cassius and his Veela wife were killed, he thoroughly obliviated the Greek wizard. So even though some suspected, there was never any proof that could be brought up against Maximillian. He had been very careful in covering all his tracks.”

Harry stared at them with a pale face, as he mumbled, “Does Abraxas know about it?”

“We think he must suspect,” replied Felicity, heavily sighing, a sorrowful expression spreading on her beautiful face the next second. “Maximillian never made it a secret that he had despised Abraxas’ mother. And he would often say all sorts of horrid things about her, openly, to Abraxas, when we were little children. Clearly, because he didn’t want him to have any positive feelings about his mother. Yet, we never saw Abraxas confronting his grandfather about any of it, except that day, when his Veela grandparents tried to contact him. But that was about the grandparents Abraxas wanted to get to know, not about his father or mother.”

Harry frowned, and then scowled. He refused to feel any pity or compassion for the boy. He shot the twins a glance, and grumbled darkly, “He’s still a git.”

Felix quirked an eyebrow at him, then shot him a toothy grin. “Very true, my friend.”

Harry left his half-eaten chicken leg on the platter, feeling quite full, and then helped the twins to gather everything up, to then leave it in the Great Hall.

However, through it all, he still couldn’t stop wondering about the red flower. If it was just the ‘Egeriana Rose’, as the twins had explained, then why had it looked so oddly familiar when he had first seen it pinned on Maximillian Malfoy’s robes, at the Hogwarts Express’s platform?
“Harry, are you there?”

Hearing his brother’s voice and the sound of shoes scuffing against the stone floors, Harry stiffened. He was seated on his bed, the curtains pulled shut around him, a pained expression on his face.

“All first-years are already gathering at the school’s entrance for our Flying Lesson – what are you doing? You’re going to be late-”

The next second, Tom yanked the bed curtains open and Harry shot him a baleful glare when his brother froze, his dark blue gaze zeroing in on Harry’s forearm.

Harry had been peeling the bandages from his arm, with a bottle containing a thick, purple salve propped between his knees, his teeth digging into his bottom lip.

The scar on Harry’s forehead blazed painfully for a second, as Tom hissed out under his breath as he took in the burns and boils spread along Harry’s forearm, “What happened to you?”

Harry shot him a scathing look, as he bit out peevishly, “You ask? What always happens, Tom! I was hexed, again. I was coming from the Great Hall, to leave my schoolbag here before going back to the entrance of the school-”

“Who did it?” said Tom very quietly, swiftly grabbing Harry’s wrist.

“Ouch – be careful!” snapped Harry, trying to yank his injured limb from his brother’s tight clutch.

“Who?” demanded Tom forcefully, without letting go.

Harry stilled and eyed him carefully, frowning when he saw that his brother’s dark blue eyes were flashing with anger.

He nearly scoffed. This might be the first time that his brother saw, first hand, the injuries caused
when he was attacked and hexed, but he had certainly informed Tom about it all the other times it had happened.

Indeed, just three days ago, at night, when he had told Tom how he had been attacked that day to press his brother to reveal to him what he was doing about the matter –since Tom only told him to be patient and that he would soon understand his ‘plan’ and ‘the first stage’ that he was supposedly already carrying on- Tom had shot him a contemptuous look, telling him that he whined too much since clearly the Slytherins couldn’t really harm him.

To prove his point, Tom had showed him a passage in ‘Hogwarts, a History’, where it explained some of the wards in the school, like those which prevented Apparition and the use of portkeys. It also said that there was a ward that notified the Headmaster when the Dark Arts were used, and thus, Tom had told him crisply, the Slytherins couldn’t use Dark Curses on him, so Harry had no cause for concern and he should just stop complaining about being attacked with silly hexes which really couldn’t be that bad.

It had only made Harry furious, and he had swirled around and stomped into the bathroom, slamming the door shut on Tom’s face when his brother had attempted to follow him as he kept berating Harry.

The only good that had come from it was that the mention about ‘wards’ had piqued Harry’s curiosity. It had prompted him to go to the library, for the first time not to look for books about Charms. Instead, he had learned a bit about wards and had begun to understand that the magic he saw all around the school could only be, actually, ‘wards’.

He had even discovered that wards were created with the use of Ancient Runes, and the following day he had spent a while closely inspecting the lattice of magic along the walls, seeing that, indeed, those little lines that he had just thought were scratches or something of the sort, were actually strange symbols – Runes, apparently.

Furthermore, he had overheard that there was an elective course of Ancient Runes that students could take beginning on their third year, so Harry had been quite content with that prospect, which would allow him to further understand all the magic he saw in the castle.

“Who attacked you, Harry?” pressed Tom, his voice now very low as his gaze remained fixed on the charred, crisped skin on Harry’s forearm, huge, painful boils scattered here and there.

“Walburga Black,” replied Harry flatly, irritated with his brother beyond measure, “and two others that I didn’t have time to see who they were.” He shot him a glower, as he added shortly, “They
hexed me from behind, as always, and then quickly fled.”

Walburga had only turned more vicious since the day in which Harry had managed to cast on her the Bat Bogey Hex, which made her have no other choice but to go to the Infirmary, since the ‘bat’ had ferociously scratched the girl’s face, leaving welts on it, and since the girl hadn’t known how to cancel the hex or heal herself.

Ever since, Walburga had turned even nastier, as if she now had a personal vendetta against him. It hadn’t helped that Dorea Black and Algernon Wilkes had furiously confronted Walburga in the middle of the common room, regarding all the points Muriel Prewett had docked from them.

Walburga apparently felt that Dorea and Wilkes had humiliated her in front of her friends, and she surely blamed Harry for that as well.

“I see,” murmured Tom as he started to take over what Harry had been doing, now carefully peeling off the bandages himself. The boy’s dark blue eyes darted to the bottle between Harry’s legs and then to the two fresh rolls of bandages on top of the bed covers. “You went to the Infirmary, I gather.” He skewered Harry with a piercing gaze. “The mediwitch said you were good to go?”

Harry shifted on his seat, but then raised his chin and said smoothly, “Yes. I only have to apply the salve now, and bandage my forearm again. And then later at night, that’s all.”

Tom eyed him suspiciously but said nothing, which Harry was very glad for, since Miss Nightingale had actually told him that he shouldn’t be using his arm at all and that he should certainly not go to his Flying Lesson.

Nevertheless, he had managed to convince her that he would do as she said but couldn’t stay in the Hospital Wing as she had wanted, since he had books to read for class.

Thus, very reluctantly, Miss Nightingale had bandaged his arm, given him the salve and two rolls of bandages and then had let him go, after she had made him promise that he would go to his dormitory and lie on his bed for the rest of the day.

When Tom started to dab the thick, purple salve on Harry’s forearm, Harry hissed in pain a bit, but then merely stared at his brother in silence.
Harry frowned the next second, closely observing Tom as the boy tended to him gently and carefully.

First, Tom had given him his scarf, which Harry still wore, wrapped warmly around his neck, and now this. Tom was positively doting on him, tenderly, and outright behaving like a concerned, loving brother.

It couldn’t bode anything good. Harry’s green eyes narrowed, as he eyed his brother very suspiciously.

His brother was only nice to him -as ‘nice’ as someone like Tom could be- when he was up to something. Indeed, most often than not, it was when Tom had been doing something behind Harry’s back – something Harry wouldn’t like at all.

Harry kept watching him warily, while Tom finished applying the salve and then solicitously wrapped Harry’s forearm with fresh bandages.

When he was done, Tom shot him a glance, and said in a quiet, musing tone of voice, “Perhaps, given this-” he gestured at Harry’s swathed arm “-it’s time for me to implement the second stage of my plan.” A dark, ominous smirk tilted his lips, as he added softly, “And in Walburga Black’s case, I might even launch the third stage as well. Yes, I think the time is right for such measures.”

Tom’s smirk became even wider, as if thoughts of gore and bloodshed were happily floating in his mind, before he glanced at Harry again and said curtly, “Now let’s get going.”

They had to make a run for it, and they caught up with the other first-years being led by the famous Jocunda Sykes, marching down the sloping lawns towards the Quidditch pitch.
Part I: Chapter 17

Harry had seen the enormous Quidditch pitch before, a week ago when Dorea Black, the Captain of the Slytherin Team and one of its Chasers, had held the tryouts. He had seen the proceedings from a distance, of course, knowing that he wouldn’t be welcomed on the stands among his housemates.

He had seen how Dorea had ranted, railed, and shouted with anger and vexation during the entirety of the tryouts, looking thoroughly frustrated with those few she had ended up choosing to fill the empty positions in her team, even though their abilities clearly weren’t up to her standards.
quite scathingly informed Harry that he considered the wizarding sport to be an utterly idiotic waste of time, with wizards flopping and flying around, stupidly chasing after balls – for what purpose? Nothing but entertainment for the half-brained masses, Tom had said with much condescension and disdain.

The young Flying Instructor, Jocunda Sykes, with her long ponytail of white hair, led them all towards the very center of the Quidditch field, where there were several long lines of ancient looking brooms lying on the grass, with broken or loose twigs in their tails, sticking out in odd angles.

“Choose a broom and stand before it,” Sykes commanded without beating around the bush.

All the first-years scattered around, though it was very noticeable that they all stuck to their own housemates. Harry found himself aligned in the midst of the Slytherins, with Tom at one side and Alphard Black at the other, while the Prewett twins and Algie Longbottom were right in front of him.

“Stick out your right hand over your broom,” called Miss Sykes at the front, “and say ‘Up!’”

“UP!” everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped at once, so abruptly and instantly that it almost slammed him on the face. Thankfully, his reflexes were very quick, and with some surprise, he swiftly caught his broom’s handle. A wide, joyous grin spread on his face the next second.

But he was only one of the few who had been successful in his first try. Felicity managed it in her second attempt, while Felix was glowering at his broom, which just rolled and flopped around the lawn.

Algie Longbottom wasn’t having much success, and he was now bellowing ‘UP!’ at the top of his lungs. Neron Lestrange was yelling too, but it sounded more like a snarl, as his broom wavered back and forth in the air, out of reach, as if afraid of the boy and not quite certain it wanted to be caught by him. Thaddeus Avery was grunting at his, which refused to move.

Myrtle Mimbletinon was by far the worst; her shrill voice quavering as she tremulously called her broom, looking afraid of it, as if expecting it would jump and bite her.
Only Alphard Black, Abraxas Malfoy, and Tom had succeeded in their first try, like Harry. Alphard Black looked happy about it but not surprised, while Malfoy and Tom seemed merely satisfied but clearly also indifferent after their success.

Half an hour later, after Sykes had helped everyone with how to call their brooms –spending most of her time with Myrtle, who didn’t look at all happy with her broom in her hand- she then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows, correcting their grips and postures.

“Not like that, Mr. McLaggen!” snapped the slim, young witch at the Ravenclaw, when Tiberius kept ignoring her instructions.

The Slytherins, in particular, sniggered and guffawed at this, Harry among them since he didn’t like the boy, as the Minister’s grandson turned red and puffed out in indignation at being told he had been doing it wrong for years. Olive Hornby shot them all very dirty looks, offended in her crush’s behalf.

“Now, when I blow my whistle, kick off from the ground, hard,” said Miss Sykes, a golden whistle in hand, tied around her neck with a thin cord. “Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and just stay there, hovering.”

They all did so, with different degrees of nervousness or confidence, the moment the whistle sounded.

Harry felt himself soaring, for a moment feeling such a startling sensation of sheer joy and unrestrained freedom that he was extremely tempted to just let go and allow himself and the broom to fly wildly without any restrictions. Shockingly enough, he felt as if one with the ancient broom, though it quivered and vibrated as if taxed, and he just wanted to see what they could do.

However, he caught sight of Tom’s dark look of warning, and with a gusty sigh, Harry restrained himself, merely hovering three feet above the ground, as Sykes had instructed.

His brother was doing well too, but just like Abraxas Malfoy, only remained floating in midair without looking particularly thrilled, or eager to do more.

Tom had the same hard and joyless expression he had wore when Mr. Hutchins had taught them
how to swim during the trips to visit Old John Bryce at Southend-on-Sea.

An expression that indicated that learning such provided no fun to Tom but, rather, that he made himself learn it and be good at it because it was an ability that could prove to be useful. And of course, if others knew how to do it, Tom wouldn’t lag behind.

Alphard Black, on the other hand, and Felicity Prewett, had faces that shone with excitement and happiness, as they flew around in small circles. Neron Lestrange, too, after taking command of his old broom, seemed to be quite a good, experienced flyer as well.

Jocunda Sykes was peering up at all of them, her eyes shrewd, as if taking particular notice of those who were talented.

“I don’t want to learn how to fly!” abruptly wailed Myrtle very loudly, letting out a terrified moan while she merely hovered a few inches off the ground.

“Very well, then dismount off your broom,” barked Jocunda Sykes impatiently, “and just stand to a side and keep quiet, girl!”

Myrtle instantly did so, dropping her broom as if it was hot coals and hastily running as far away as possible from the rest of the hovering students, as if fearing that one of them would plummet down and crash on her.

“What is she doing here?” suddenly said Priscilla Pucey, sounding surprised yet also excited and pleased, hovering a few inches away from Harry as she addressed her question to the rest of the Slytherins.

Harry turned his head around, following the direction of the girl’s gaze, and caught sight of Dorea Black striding towards Jocunda Sykes, with Dolohov trailing after her – that enormous, muscled third-year boy that Dorea had angrily berated at the Welcoming Feast.

“Oh, ‘Rea always likes to watch the first-years’ Flying Lessons,” piped in Alphard Black, grinning widely and waving his free, left hand at his aunt.

“True,” interjected the handsome Orion Black, rising slightly and quite unsteadily in order to participate in the conversation. “She does it every year. Wants to see who among the first-year
Slytherins show some natural talent in flying. For the Quidditch Team, you know."

“But first-years aren’t allowed to play Quidditch,” snapped Capricia Carrow crossly, who unlike her friend Priscilla Pucey, hadn’t grown to respect and worship Dorea Black. Capricia, most of times, looked bitterly envious of her.

“She’s looking for future players, of course,” pointed out Alphard, rolling his eyes at the girl. “Didn’t you see how awful the new players were at the tryouts?”

“What is the Slytherin Captain doing here!” one of the Gryffindors suddenly groused angrily, apparently finally catching sight of her, which caused all the other students to take notice and start muttering and whispering sharply amongst themselves.

“Miss Black, what a pleasant surprise!” exclaimed Jocunda Sykes the moment the fifth-year girl reached her.

That warm welcome only made the Gryffindors whisper all the more furiously, about Sykes—who was also the Quidditch Referee- being biased in favor of Dorea Black and thus the Slytherin Team, about blatantly having favorites, the unfairness of it all and whatnot.

If the Flying Instructor heard them, she gave no sign of it. Sykes looked quite unconcerned as she smiled at Dorea Black. They did seem to be friends of sorts, as much as a teacher and a student could be such. And perhaps it wasn’t all that strange, since Jocunda Sykes was relatively young - in her early twenties, from what he had heard.

The Slytherins were those closest to where Sykes, Dorea Black, and Dolohov were now standing, and thus they could overhear their conversation.

Jocunda was eyeing Dorea knowingly, as she murmured, “Want to see which of your housemates show some promise, do you?”

“It would help me,” grumbled Dorea Black, a frustrated look on her face. “You should have seen my team’s tryouts…” She let out a heavy sigh, before she smiled beautifully at the older witch, as she said cajolingly, “I’ll treat you to a bottle of Ogden’s on the first trip to Hogsmeade.”

Sykes snorted and then arched a white eyebrow at her. “You already owe me twenty galleons for
losing to Gryffindor last year.”

“And yet a Quidditch arbiter shouldn’t bet on the games she referees, should she?” intoned Dorea pleasantly, slightly smirking, though it looked playfully taunting instead of scolding or threatening.

Jocunda Sykes scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. Then her brown eyes narrowed as she glanced at her students, still hovering on their brooms several feet off the ground.

“Alright, I’ll lend you a hand,” she then said to Dorea. “You’ll owe me two bottles of Ogden’s Finest, mind you.”

Dorea agreed to the deal with a satisfied look on her face, just before Jocunda Sykes turned around and loudly announced, “We’ll be having a short race among those of you who have shown to be experienced flyers. I’ll call on the names of those chosen to participate. The rest of you will come down – you just have to lean forward slightly on your brooms, for that. Fifty points will be awarded to the winner!”

Excited and eager murmurs broke among the students, as Jocunda’s gaze slowly swept through all of them, as she began calling, “Miss Prewett, Mr. Black – not you, boy.” Orion did look mightily relieved at that, as she added, “Alphard Black, I meant. Mr. Riddle - Mr. Harry Riddle, that is.” The witch let out a gusty sigh, clearly a bit exasperated at having several students with same surnames. “Mr. Lestrange, Miss Carrow, Miss Abbot, Mr. Wright, and Mr. Longbottom.”

She then gestured at the air above her. “Come and form a line here. The rest of you, come down and dismount from your brooms.”

They all did so, though Harry took a moment, since Tom came to hover at his side and whispered sharply, “Is your arm hurting?”

“No,” lied Harry smoothly, since it was throbbing painfully, already exerted too much, yet, obviously, he wasn’t going to tell his brother that.

Tom didn’t look as if he entirely believed him, but in the next second he smirked at him. “Then go for it. Win.”
Harry shot him a surprised look, not having expected that.

Was it for the points? No, it was for more than that, he realized when he saw the calculating expression on Tom’s face as his brother’s gaze darted from Dorea Black to Alphard and Orion – precisely who had explained the girl’s motives for being there.

Harry then understood Tom’s reasons, though he himself wasn’t quite sure if he agreed with them.

The next moment he shook his head, and beamed a smile at Tom, before he shot forward towards the starting line all the others had formed.

He would be doing it for his own reasons and nothing else. He wanted to fly as free as a bird, he wanted to experience that sensation again which he had felt for a very brief moment when he had pushed off the ground. The rest didn’t matter much to him, at present.

“Mr. McLaggen!” suddenly snapped the Flying Instructor briskly. “I didn’t call your name, did I?”

Harry blinked, seeing that, indeed, the boy had aligned himself with them – the only one of those who hadn’t been called who was still up in the air.

“Well, you obviously made a mistake,” proclaimed Tiberius McLaggen pompously, puffing out his chest. “I’ve been flying for ages! All my family members are excellent flyers-”

“I’m not letting you fly, much less participate in a race, until you heed my advice and learn how to grip your broom correctly and how to properly sit on it!” barked Jocunda Sykes irritably. “Now come down right this instant, before I serve you with detention with Apollyon Pringle and that nasty bird of his!”

The threat of being subjected to the sadistic Caretaker of the castle and to the vicious pecks of Rascal the Corvus, did seem to do the trick, since McLaggen quickly landed on the ground the very next second, even if he looked very resentful. Olive Hornby, though, was quick to solicitously comfort him, and that seemed to soothe the boy’s wounded, overlarge ego.

“Now, it will only be one lap around the Quidditch field. At the blow of my whistle!”
It sounded three seconds later and they all shot forward, zooming above the heads of all the other students, and an exhilarated cry burst from Harry.

He soared with joy as he sped forward, his eyes watering behind his glasses, his messy hair flattening back on his head, his robes flapping violently, his fingers freezing in the cold, his injured left arm painfully throbbing with the strain, yet he didn’t think he had ever felt such happiness in his life.

He didn’t even feel irritated with his broom, which tried now and then to willfully veer to the right, or which sometimes vibrated dangerously, as if about to sputter off and stop working, or which jolted with an abrupt burst of speed to then dwindled back as if its energy was suddenly ebbing away.

All the others had just the very same ancient model and they were having problems of their own. He could particularly hear Neron Lestrange hissing and snarling at his.

But as they flew by the three towering, golden hoops at one end of the pitch, it was already clear who amongst them were the better flyers.

Capricia Carrow was lagging far behind, along with the Hufflepuff girl, Astrid Abbot, and the Ravenclaw, Wenceslas Wright.

The Gryffindors, Felicity Prewett and Algie Longbottom, were clearly very good, but they were a few feet behind. The race was now headed by Alphard Black, Neron Lestrange, and Harry.

Indeed, from the corner of his eyes, Harry even saw Alphard’s surprised expression as the boy looked at him. Though in the next moment, Alphard was grinning, apparently quite proud and pleased with Harry’s unsuspected ability. On the other hand, Lestrange looked furious as he shot Harry very dark glares.

Just as they were halfway around the lap, about to reach the three hoops at the other end of the field, someone suddenly rammed into him, like a rampaging bull.

Harry let out a shocked cry of pain since they had smashed right into his injured left arm, and his broom dangerously veered to the right with the force of the impact, bucking wildly and nearly unseating him.
He careened sharply, spinning out of control, and he gasped when he saw he was about to crash against the stands.

“Lestrange, you bastard!” he distantly heard Algie Longbottom roaring with fury, while Felicity Prewett cried out “Harry!” with alarm and dismay.

Harry sharply pulled the handle of his broom upwards with all his might, gritting his teeth with the effort and employing every drop of strength, will, and determination, his knuckles turning white with the force of his grip.

He avoided colliding against the stands by a mere inch, turning upside down to dodge them, and then shot forwards with a burst of speed as he managed to turn himself up again. He appeared right behind Algie and Felicity but soon zipped past them.

“Go Harry!” shouted Felicity, letting out a happy laugh as he dashed by her.

Harry pelted forwards, starting to reach Neron Lestrange and Alphard Black, and his green eyes narrowed angrily. If Lestrange wasn’t going to compete fairly, he saw no reason to stick to the implicit rules either.

He kept his right hand firmly clutching his broom’s handle, and used his injured left arm, now blazing with piercing pain after the hit, to grasp his wand from his robes’ pocket.

He certainly wouldn’t attack Lestrange physically, as the boy had done, it would be too obvious. No, it had to be something subtle and that no one would notice or could accuse him of.

Harry grinned as the idea struck him. Well, he wasn’t at the top of his year in Charms for nothing. And he remembered that very neat, useful spell he had been studying from one of the Charms books that he had taken from the library. It was perfect.

Surreptitiously, he aimed his wand at Neron Lestrange from the folds of his robes, and then whispered, “Confundus!”

In the next instant, the nasty Slytherin blinked, looking dumbly dazed, and then started precariously zigzagging like a disoriented bee.
In a few moments, even Felicity and Algie had passed him by, leaving Lestrange behind.

Suddenly, as he quickly stuffed his wand back into his pocket, he heard a bout of shortles and Harry snapped his head around, to see Alphard Black widely grinning at him over a shoulder. They were the only two who headed the race now, though Black was still a couple of feet ahead of him.

The boy winked, as he said loudly enough to be only heard by Harry, “I won’t tell!” Then he added with a cheerful yet also challenging tone of voice, “It’s between you and I, now. Let’s see what you’ve got!”

The boy burst forth and Harry swiftly followed, clenching his jaw as he wrapped both his hands tighter around the handle, his knees clamping firmly on his broomstick whilst he completely leaned forward, his body flattening along the broom. His new posture, performed out of sheer instincts, helped much, since the broom apparently took it as some sort of command, and it shot forward like a bullet.

Harry let out a cry of thrilled joy as he gained distance, soon coming to be head to head with Alphard Black, who was wildly grinning.

They both saw that they were reaching the finishing line. At some point, Jocunda Sykes had evidently cast a spell, since there was a glowing, long red tape floating in midair, high above the heads of all the others who had been watching the race and were now loudly shouting, hooting, and cheering.

Both boys put all their efforts in it, panting and rushing forth at breakneck speed. In the next blink of the eye, Harry felt something pressing against his chest, and he stared down, seeing the tape plastered across his torso, its long ends flapping in the air behind him at his sides.

Harry beamed triumphantly as the cries of the students reached his ears.

“That was fantastic!”

“Amazing – best race I’ve ever watched!”
“He won by a full head!”

“Did you see how quickly he gained back first position after Lestrange knocked him to a side!”

“Never saw someone flying like that!”

“Fifty points to Slytherin!” boomed Jocunda Sykes, looking ecstatic, as Harry flew down to the ground and dismounted off his broom. “Very well done, indeed, Mr. Riddle!”

Harry grinned, his high spirits not even dampened by his housemates’ reactions. The Slytherins weren’t cheering him, they all looked rather sour. Well, except Tom, of course, who looked satisfied, and annoyingly enough, Malfoy, who was merely observing him.

Alphard Black, for his part, didn’t look angry for having lost, but he had a rather odd, pinched expression on his face, as if he was constipated and had to dash to the toilets. Harry realized, in the next second, that the boy had such a weird expression on his face because Alphard was actually doing his best to suppress a grin.

Harry frowned at him, shook his head, and then glanced away. Really, the boy was impossible. Alphard and his wishes for a ‘secret friendship’, and all his attempts at endearing himself to Harry, still angered and frustrated him to no end.

Several long moments later, the other participants of the race started to land. Neron Lestrange still looked a bit affected, given that he was uncharacteristically silent, with a dumb expression on his face instead of being in a towering rage, as he usually was. Capricia Carrow, though, looked fit to be spitting with fury at Harry having won.

“Well, that’s all for now,” said Miss Sykes, clapping her hands together. “The lesson is over! Leave your brooms on the ground, I’ll take care of them. Off you go!”

It was then, as they all started to leave and Sykes gestured at him to remain behind, that he overheard a bit of the Slytherins’ conversation as they made their way towards one of the exits of the Quidditch pitch.

Thaddeus Avery was snarling angrily, “Surely your aunt wouldn’t dare-”
“Of course she won’t,” retorted Orion Black indignantly. “He’s still nothing but a mudblood…”

Their voices dimmed with the distance, and Harry spun around, his green eyes wide and alarmed. Indeed, he finally caught sight of Dorea Black again, standing with Dolohov next to the Flying Instructor.

The Slytherin girl was piercing him with glimmering grey eyes, her lips curved upwards in a most ominous way. It made Harry shudder.

Sykes beckoned him again, now impatiently.

Very warily and reluctantly, Harry approached the three of them, dragging his feet.

“Right, I’ll leave you to it, then,” said Jocunda Sykes brightly, as she flicked her wand and all the brooms rose into the air. She jauntily took off without another word, a line of floating brooms trailing after her.

Harry glanced around him, fretfully. They were all alone now. Tom hadn’t even remained behind, the bastard. Clearly he had done that intentionally, clearly his brother knew what would happen and wanted it.

He sighed and turned back to stare at Dorea Black. She smirked at him, her expression much like that of self-satisfied, gloating cat that had unexpectedly cornered a surprisingly juicy mouse.

Suddenly, she whipped out her wand, quickly flicking it as she muttered something under her breath. A leather ball materialized the next second, and abruptly, she hurled it at him.

Without a thought, automatically, Harry instantly caught it with one hand.

“Toss it back!” snapped Dorea briskly.

Blinking, Harry did so, right into the girl’s hands. Dorea widely smirked, her grey eyes sparkling
“Very fast reflexes and a good aim as well!” she declared triumphantly. She cocked her head to a side as she inspected him, her gaze travelling along his figure. “You’d make a good Seeker too, actually.” She then shook her head. “But it’s a Chaser I need.”

Harry crossed his arms over his small chest, shooting her a rebellious look. “Do you?”

Dorea’s grey eyes narrowed, and then she seemed to decide to be candidly honest with him, as she stated flatly, “Look, I need a Chaser for next year. I’m a Chaser myself, you see, but I’ll need to replace the other two. Danila Donahue, one of my Chasers, is in seventh year, so I’m planning to substitute her with my nephew Alphard when she leaves Hogwarts – he’s quite good, as you have already seen.”

She threaded a hand through her long, wavy hair, as she then added with much frustrated irritation, “My other Chaser, Morticia Montague, was excellent – that is, until she took a nasty fall, last year during the first match against Gryffindor.” She rolled her eyes with exasperation. “She broke her spine and now she’s too afraid-”

“She broke her spine?” choked out Harry, his green eyes wide, horrorstruck.

Dorea blinked at him and then loudly scoffed. “Miss Nightingale fixed her in a jiffy, Riddle! There was nothing to fear.” She snorted with disgust. “But after that, Morticia has never flown quite as well as before – prefers to keep herself safe now, rather than do risky maneuvers for the sake of the Team, selfish bint!”

She shook her head angrily. “During this year’s tryouts, though, she was still better than the other candidates, so I had no choice but to keep her. But I will get rid of her next year!” She pinned Harry with a skewering, hard gaze. “I want to replace her with you, actually. You are the kind of Chaser that I want for the Team – small, lithe, fast, and a reckless, fearless flyer, from what I saw during the race. And you clearly have no problem with feeling pain, taking brutal hits, or playing rough, given that you recovered quite easily when Lestrange smashed into you.”

Dorea paused and then an expression of glorious satisfaction spread on her beautiful face, as she disclosed with a smug tone of voice, “So I’m going to train you, Riddle, during this whole year – your arms and legs are too thin, but I’ll make you exercise and develop lean muscles on them, don’t worry about that. And by this time next year, you’ll be superb! The Slytherins will have no other choice but to grudgingly accept you into the Team, even if they hate you for being a muggleborn! We’ll be keeping your training a secret until then, of course, so we’ll be meeting
every Sunday at six in the morning–"

“I’m not doing it,” bit out Harry, shooting her a mutinous look.

Dorea blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

Harry crossed his arms over his small chest once more, his expression surly. “Why should I play for those who despise me?”

The girl’s grey eyes narrowed to slits, as she spat incensed, “You’re a natural on the broom, Riddle! You belong in the air, you silly boy, and I’m not letting your abilities go to waste! Not when I know that with Alphard and you in my team I’ll finally be able to thoroughly beat the Gryffindor Captain. He’s stolen the Quidditch Cup from me these last few years, and finally I can make him rue the day he dared challenge me!”

Dorea’s eyes gleamed most exultantly as she said this, her lips widely curving into some sort of half-dreamy, half-vindictive smile.

Then she took a step towards Harry, her voice lowering, as she pointed out tartly, “And I saw your face when you flew – you looked wildly happy, you little snot, or do you deny it?”

“I don’t,” said Harry grumpily, then he shook his head, “but still–”

“Still nothing!” snapped Dorea impatiently. Her light grey eyes glinted suddenly, as if remembering a good point, and she said very softly, “And you might want to consider, that if you become the excellent Quidditch player I fully believe you are capable of being, our housemates will come to have some respect for you.”

The moment Harry opened his mouth to retort, the girl swiftly raised up a hand, as she added crisply, “Oh, it won’t happen overnight, and they’ll still hate you for being a muggleborn, but Slytherins appreciate outstanding talent, Riddle – and you clearly have that, on a broom. And you if help Slytherin House win the Quidditch Cup, and show that you are a very valuable asset to the Team–” she widely smirked at him “–then they’ll stop harassing, attacking, and bullying you, Riddle, because they wouldn’t want to harm one of their Chasers. Indeed, they wouldn’t sabotage their own team’s chances of winning matches. Do you see what I’m saying?”
“Yes,” conceded Harry peevishly, that was no revelation to him.

Indeed, it was the first thing that had crossed his mind when he had seen that Tom had left him behind, alone, to deal with Dorea Black. What the girl had just said, he knew, was what his brother had instantly realized and considered. Obviously, that was why Tom had wanted him to participate in the race, after he had heard Orion and Alphard’s remarks about Dorea’s motives for observing their Flying Lesson.

Dorea’s light grey eyes narrowed to slits, clearly not satisfied with the tone of voice in which he had replied.

“Given all the reasons I’ve given you,” she demanded, looking angrily vexed and incredulous, “you still refuse?”

Harry took in a heavy, weary gust of breath, as he carded his fingers through his locks of messy black hair. He eyed her intently, and said shortly, “Fine, I’ll agree to be trained by you.” He pinned her with narrowed green eyes, as he added firmly, “But if, and the moment, I stop enjoy it and having fun, the deal’s off.” He shot her a dour look. “I couldn’t care less about helping my housemates win the blasted Quidditch Cup. They’ve made me miserable. I’m agreeing to this for myself.”

“Fair enough,” said Dorea gravely, giving him a considering look. Then she smirked, in a very self-satisfied manner, and gestured at him and Dolohov. “Come, let’s leave the pitch. I’ll show you where I’ll be training you on Sundays. It’s a vast stretch of lawn at the other side of the Black Lake, a spot that can’t be seen from the castle – perfect to keep our practices a secret. The hour will help in that too, of course, since we’ll be there at the crack of dawn.”

Harry groaned at that, which was echoed precisely at the same time by the enormous, muscled third-year boy who had remained silent the whole while, like a mute protector standing and towering behind Dorea.

“Oh, yes, I forgot,” Dorea said when Harry and the other boy glanced at each other when they had groaned at the same time. “Harry Riddle, formally meet Antonin Dolohov – Slytherin’s Keeper.”

The huge older boy now shot him a very nasty, malevolent glare, full of contempt and jealous bitterness too, it seemed, but the expression vanished the next second when Dorea slapped Dolohov up the head, as she snapped, “I’ll have none of that between my players! You know how I value teamwork, and that requires respect, Antonin, both ways!”
Dolohov merely grunted, whether it was from reluctant understanding and acceptance or a complain and tacit rejection of her words, it was impossible to know.

Clearly unperturbed by this, Dorea Black carried on blithely, “And you know I’m giving you extra training because you’ve become a lazy lummox, Antonin. Furthermore, since you’re the Keeper and need to practice your goalie skills against more than one Chaser, having Riddle training with us is very convenient. And he, of course, needs to practice with a Keeper and another Chaser too, so it works perfectly all around.”

The moment they were out of the Quidditch pitch and started making their way towards the castle, Dorea pointed a finger towards the distance. “See the bridge that goes to Hogsmeade?”

Harry gazed in that direction. Indeed, very far away, there was a very tall and narrow wooden bridge, perched very high across one end of the Black Lake.

“Over that side of the shore, there’s a large clearing – that’s where we’ll be training.” Dorea shot him a glance, as she added curtly, “And you’ll have to get a broom of your own, Riddle. I’m not having you practicing with the school brooms – they’re useless. And you’ll need an excellent broom for when you’re part of the Team, so I suggest you owl-order one from Quality Quidditch Supplies-”

“I can’t,” muttered Harry grimly, his face paling.

Dorea halted in her tracks and fully turned around to face him. They were mere feet away from the immense oak doors of Hogwarts’ entrance.

She skewered him with her gaze and then glanced at Dolohov, as she said shortly, “Leave us, Antonin. I want a word in private with him.”

Dolohov didn’t look at all pleased with this, he was frowning and scowling, but Dorea gave him such a dark, vexed look, that the enormous boy soon obeyed, only shooting Harry one last glower.

The moment they were alone, Dorea turned back to Harry, as she said slowly, “Lestrange has been saying that you and your twin don’t seem to have much money – that at night, you don strange, threadbare sleepwear. Your muggle parents are poor then?”
Harry snorted at that, but then clenched his jaw and remained silent.

“Look, Riddle,” snapped the fifth-year girl impatiently. “I need to know-”

“No, I don’t have money enough to buy a broom,” bit out Harry dourly, then he crossed his arms over his small chest, and added shortly, “And I can’t have a broom, either, can I? My Hogwarts’ letter said that first-years aren’t allowed-”

“Why do you think I’m going to be training you on Sundays at six in the morning, at the most remote corner of Hogwarts’ grounds?” said Dorea irritably. “So that no one sees you using a broom, Riddle!” She waved a hand dismissively. “Granted, I also want to keep your training a secret because I don’t want to put up with our housemates’ furious complains of why I’m training a muggleborn. But the point is that you need a good broom…”

She trailed off, musingly taping a finger on her chin. “Alphie got the new Comet 180 for his birthday, and it’s a marvel. It’s back at home…” Her grey eyes brightened. “Right, I’ll tell him to write to Pollux and ask to have his broom sent to him – shrunken, of course, so that no one realizes what it is…”

“I’m not asking Black to lend me his broom,” gritted out Harry incensed. “I would owe him for that, and he might use it as an excuse to-”

He broke off and clamped his mouth shut, glancing away.

Dorea’s light grey eyes narrowed, and she suddenly took a step towards him, as she hissed out, “He’ll use it as an excuse to make you be his friend – is that what you were going to say?”

Harry’s head snapped around, to stare at her in surprise.

The girl scoffed. “What – you thought I didn’t know what my nephew has been up to?” Dorea then pinned him with her gaze. “Besides my brother Pollux, Alphard is my only other relative that I actually like, and I’m in his confidence. He told me all about how he met you in Diagon Alley, and how he’s been trying to be your friend.”
“Friends in secret!” snapped Harry hotly, glowering at her.

“You foolish little boy!” bit out Dorea, her eyes flashing angrily. “Pollux would disown his son in a second if he heard that Alphard was cavorting with a ‘mudblood’! Is that what you want – for Alphard to be left without his inheritance, without a name, without a family!”

Startled, Harry blanched, his mouth hanging open, before he stammered, “No – but –”

“It’s all the same with your kind,” snapped Dorea with irritation. “You muggleborns don’t have the slightest clue, and you go around demanding to be treated as equals without even stopping to consider how things are for us! Alphard is risking a lot by just trying to be your ‘secret friend’, and it’s still not enough, in your opinion!”

Harry frowned, and remained silent.

“For some unfathomable reason,” carried on Dorea in a sharp tone of voice, advances on him, “my nephew likes you and is interested in you. And I want to see him happy for once in his life.” She flicked her hair to one side, with frustration, as she added, “He’s always been the odd one out, and doesn’t really have friends of his own. His cousin Orion has always been Abraxas Malfoy’s closest friend, along with Lestrange, and doesn’t pay much attention to Alphie, and my nephew’s other cousins and siblings are older and have their own little cliques of friends.”

Harry’s expression slowly softened as he considered all her words.

Dorea paused, to then pierce him with her light grey eyes. “Alphard is simply different than all of them – better, in my opinion.” Her eyes narrowed. “But he’s still a Black, and when a Black does you the great honor of extending a hand in friendship, no matter the conditions attached to it, you should have the good sense of accepting and bask in the great compliment that is being bestowed upon you and in the fruits that such a friendship will bear.”

Harry scowled for a moment, her proclamation making him feel a bit insulted and indignant at first, but then gazed back at her, pensively, as he mulled about the whole matter.

“So you will give him a chance,” demanded Dorea, drilling her gaze into him, “won’t you?”

“Maybe…” muttered Harry slowly, hesitantly. Then he let out a weary sigh. “Fine, yes.”
“Good,” said Dorea shortly. “So that’s settled. And I’ll tell Alphie about the broom and he’ll be more than happy to lend it to you.”

And with that, she marched off into the castle.

When Harry reached the dungeons and slipped into the common room, he caught sight of Dorea and Alphard seated together in one shadowy corner. They were whispering among themselves, and then Alphard noticed him and shot him a beaming grin.

Harry stared for a moment, seeing the boy’s joyous expression making him feel rather guilty for having rejected him all that time. Then he felt extremely awkward, not knowing quite how to respond, and merely gave him some sort of forced, uncomfortable smile – which he knew had to look pained and weird.

Then he just glanced away and hurried off to the dormitories. As he had expected, he found Tom waiting for him.

No sooner had Harry crossed the threshold, that his brother demanded, “Did Dorea Black-”

“Yes,” breathed out Harry, plopping himself down on his bed.

He winced and gently clutched his throbbing left arm. While he took the salve and a new roll of bandages from his nightstand, he told Tom what had happened. He left out the part regarding Alphard, though, knowing his brother wouldn’t be particularly thrilled about that.

“Perfect,” said Tom smirking, the moment Harry ended the narration. He looked extremely pleased with the situation. “It’s just what I wanted.”

His brother was so content, in fact, that he gently tended to Harry’s injured forearm again, helping him peel off the bandages.

Harry paled and cringed when he saw the state of his arm. The charred skin was no longer just red, but rather bubbly with an ugly puce color. The first application of the salve had cured the boils, since they had vanished, but it was clear that the strain of having used his arm when flying –and
being hit by Lestrange- had also worsened the burned parts.

At the sight, Tom clicked his tongue in a chiding manner, but evidently his good mood wasn’t dampened.

He applied the salve on Harry’s arm again, very tenderly, as he intoned placidly, “I still think Quidditch is nothing but a waste of time, but you becoming part of the team, and thus gaining some respect, as Dorea Black said to you, will work quite well with my plan. Even if it will only happen next year.”

He shot Harry a very smug smirk, as if he had been the mastermind behind it all, and Dorea and Harry had just been the puppets that had danced when he had pulled the strings.

Harry rolled his eyes and scoffed. “Yes, Tom, I did it all for you and your great, magnificent ‘plan’.” Then he glowered, and grumbled darkly, “Whatever it is. If you just told me-”

“No yet,” tutted Tom, undaunted by Harry’s miffed glare. He finished bandaging Harry’s forearm, and then moved to his desk, grabbing his schoolbag.

Harry frowned at him. “Where are you going? I thought that perhaps we could work on our essays for-”

“No a chance,” said Tom coolly, as he began stuffing his schoolbag with quills, inkbottles, and parchments. “I’m off to the library.” He glanced at Harry, seeing his annoyed look, and added loftily, “I’m very busy, little brother. I’m working on many things, as you know-”

“I don’t know,” snapped Harry crossly, scowling at him.

“You know the important parts,” pointed out Tom nonchalantly, arching an eyebrow at him. “You know what I’m researching, don’t you? That’s good enough. When I discover something important, I’ll let you know.”

And with that, he left the room, leaving Harry behind, alone and sulking.
Harry stood up and kicked his trunk in anger, then he winced and dearly regretted it when his big toe throbbed. But really, he wasn’t at all happy with his brother. He dearly missed him.

They had always spent all their time together, except those three months long ago when Tom had been furious with him and hadn’t spared him a word. But this was different, because Harry hadn’t done anything wrong and his brother was ditching him -for books!

Harry brooded sullenly, and then he became angered with himself and the self-pity party he was throwing, and sprung to his feet again.

Fine, then, he would go and spend some time with the Prewetts, and then he will tell Tom all about it, bubbling with cheerfulness, and he’ll watch how his brother glowered and got all nasty with jealously, and Harry will vindictively snigger in his mind all the while.

That decided, now in a bright good mood, Harry picked up his school things and dashed out of the room, soon making his way to Gryffindor Tower.

Something was up with the red and gold House, Harry saw as soon as he climbed through the portrait hole behind the Fat Lady, after giving her that week’s password – the twins did always keep him up to date with that.

He caught sight of the twins, who were playing Exploding Snaps with Algie Longbottom, and made a beeline for them.

“Oh, good, you came!” said Felicity happily as Harry took a seat among them. She shot him a speculative glance. “I thought you wouldn’t. You said you would do your Potions homework with your brother, this evening.”

“He was busy,” said Harry a bit grumpily. Then he brightened. “I brought my History of Magic book, though. Binns gave you the same homework as us, didn’t he? I thought we could work on that together, even if we don’t share the same class.”


Algie Longbottom snorted, just as a card spontaneously exploded and nearly scorched his fingers.
Felix whooped in victory at that.

Felicity rolled her eyes at them, and then turned to Harry, smiling widely. “Good idea, Harry. We should get started with the essay as soon as possible. It’s due in three days.”

Harry nodded as they both started getting out their books, parchments, and quills.

He and Felicity worked together on their essays, and after nearly two torturous, long hours, they finished.

It was then when Harry paid attention again to the rest of the Gryffindors, many of who were still congregated together in the middle of the common room, speaking quickly and looking very animated.

“So, what’s going on?” he finally asked as he sharpened his quill’s tip with Felicity’s penknife, pointedly looking at the older Gryffindors so that she realized what he meant.

“Oh, All Hallow’s Eve is in two weeks, you know,” said Felicity excitedly. She pointed at a girl amongst the crowd. “Amanda Morninglory is a halfblood. Her mother is an American muggle, and Amanda has been telling us all about how they celebrate Hallow’s Eve over there.”

“Apparently, the American muggles,” piped in Felix with a thrilled expression on his face, who had left the Exploding Snaps to play a game of chess with Longbottom, “get dressed up in wacky costumes or scary ones, and paint their faces and whatnot, and go around doing something called ‘Trick or Treat’, asking for candies…”

“And we all thought it was a great, fun idea!” continued Felicity, grinning widely. “So now they’re planning the costume party! The older Gryffindors will get butterbeer, sweets, and candies from Hogsmeade, since the first outing is exactly on the weekend before Hallow’s Eve.”

“We’re inviting the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs too,” pointed out Algie Longbottom, then pausing to give instructions to a white knight to move across the chessboard. His expression then turned pleased and proud, as he added, “We have already told them and plenty agreed to come!”

“Oh!” Harry gazed at the three of them with wide, exhilarated eyes, as he said very excitedly, “And can I come too, then? I’ve never been to a costume party!”
Algie Longbottom looked a bit hesitant at that, and remained silent, which made Harry frown at him, just as Felix piped in, “Sure you can – you’re our friend!”

“But he’s also a Slytherin,” said Algie quietly, shooting Harry an apologetic glance.

Felicity scoffed. “Don’t be silly, Algie. The other Gryffindors won’t mind.”

“You should ask them, first,” retorted Algie firmly, “before raising Harry’s hopes.”

Felicity frowned at the boy, before she said curtly, “Fine, I will then.” And without any further ado, she sprung to her feet and called out, “Oi, you lot! Can Harry attend the party?”

The bunch of older Gryffindors abruptly fell silent, turning around to look at the girl, some frowning, others blinking, and several scowling.

“Harry who?” one of them said.

“Harry Riddle,” replied Felicity with some exasperation, as she gestured at Harry.

All their gazes turned to him, and Harry forced himself to calmly stare back at them, though he would have rather preferred that Felicity wouldn’t have gone about it in such a way.

It didn’t escape his notice how the expressions of many of the Gryffindor’s faces changed when they saw his green and silver tie and scarf.

“He’s a Slytherin!” someone burst out, scandalized.

Many voices then rose together at the same time.

“He’s that muggleborn twin!”
“Ah, yes, the one Muriel has been protecting!”

Harry nearly let out a loud, disdainful scoff at that, but wisely kept silent.

“But we can’t have a Slytherin at the party!”

“He’s been in our common room plenty of times, I’ve told Muriel that she shouldn’t allow it-”

“The Prewetts have been giving him our passwords, I’ve heard…”

“If he comes, then the other Slytherins might try and do the same and they’ll ruin everything!”

“No, they won’t!” snapped Felicity, scowling at them. “Most Slytherins are dark purebloods, so they’ll be celebrating Samhain that night. And I know for a fact that Headmaster Dippet has always allowed them to leave the castle and spend that night with their families, so Harry will be all alone!”

Harry shot her a puzzled look, and he saw that he wasn’t the only one. There were many Gryffindors who clearly didn’t know about this ‘Samhain’ celebration of the dark purebloods, since they were gazing confusedly at Felicity. Only a very few were nodding.

“It doesn’t change the fact that he’s a Slytherin!” bit out a sixth-year boy, one that Harry recognized as being one of those who always grumbled and shot him dark looks when he was in their common room. “And many of us don’t appreciate that you’ve been giving him the password for the Fat Lady!”

“Very true!” interjected someone else, very gruffly. “Muggleborn or not, he’s still a Slytherin, and one of these days he’ll tell his housemates our password so that they treat him better, and the slimy snakes will creep into our common room and dorms at night, and who knows what they’ll do to us!”

“They’ll use the Dark Arts!” someone gasped in alarm, as if the thought had just struck them. “When we’re asleep!”
“... hex us, they will, while we’re in our beds, defenseless, slimy snakes that they are, and they’ll do all sort of nasty, dark things, and destroy our common room, at the very least!”

“Harry would never give them our password!” roared Felix Prewett, jumping to his feet and standing by Felicity’s side, who had began yelling back at the other Gryffindors.

It all took a plunge for the worse, after that, with only the twins defending him while most of the other Gryffindors seemed to get even more wind under their sails, voicing all sorts of ridiculous things about what Harry was secretly plotting with his housemates, or that he was a spy and they had suspected all along, or that the Slytherins would kill them all with evil Dark Magic, if given half a chance, and whatnot.

In the midst of the chaos, more Gryffindors abruptly entered the common room, sweaty and dirty, their distinctive apparel indicating that they were the Quidditch players of the Gryffindor Team, who apparently had had a taxing, night training session.

Most of them instantly wanted to know what all the commotion was about and soon got mixed into the shouts and yells, as well.

At that, Harry finally stuffed his things into this schoolbag, very sullenly, and then quietly slipped out.

He had known, of course, after his experience with Muriel Prewett, that the Gryffindors were not the knights in shining armor they so liked to proclaim they were. He had known that, at some point, their ‘good will’ would ran out and something like this would happen.

Though, he hadn’t expected it would be so soon, or just precisely when he was feeling so downcast and lonely, missing his brother’s company so much.

Harry was panting, as he ran along the labyrinthine corridors of the dungeons, having just evaded Rascal the Corvus by mere seconds.

When he had been making his way to the lower levels of the castle, he had heard the ominous flapping of wings, along with the ‘click, clack’, clanking sound of Apollyon Pringle’s wooden leg
hitting the stone floors.

A quick Tempus Charm had made him realize it was way past curfew time, and alarmed, he had dashed through the corridors.

So far, he had been fortunate enough as to have never encountered the Caretaker and his nasty pet during their rounds. But he had seen, a couple of times, Neron Lestrange and Thaddeus Avery with faces and hands covered in bleeding, small wounds caused by Rascal’s beak, and he certainly didn’t want to suffer the same.

Nearly out of breath, Harry was swiftly reaching the entrance to Slytherin House, when he caught sight of something very strange.

Just a few feet away, right in front the blank expanse of wall that led to the Slytherin common room, there was some sort of blurry, glowing thing – it looked like a figure, crouching, glowing with a sort of watery mantle of golden and white magic. And it was speaking!

“No, that didn’t work - what were the bloody words then?” the figure was grousing under its breath, in a suffering tone of voice. “Really, a password in Croatian, how am I expected to remember that! She just likes to make things difficult for me-”

Harry skidded to a halt, and the thing swiftly turned around towards him and went very still and silent.

Alarmed, wondering what kind of amorphous, dangerous creature could have slipped inside the castle, Harry instantly whipped out his wand, straightly aiming it, and snapped, “I heard you speaking, you thing! Go away before I scream and get everyone out here-”

“You thing?” the figure echoed, letting out a very amused laughter.

Harry yelped in horror and jumped a step back, when a bodiless hand suddenly appeared, floating in mid-air.

Then he blinked, and gaped, when the hand grasped the mantle of golden and white magic and pulled it to a side. A tall boy suddenly appeared, as if having emerged from underneath it.
Harry stared, mouth hanging open, as the boy stuck the mantle of magic into a large pocket of his robes, only leaving a corner sticking out, which had a strange geometrical symbol that glowed in silver light.

He lost sight of it as the older boy shifted and stood there, gazing at him. Harry observed him in return.

The boy was tall, broad shouldered, and very good looking, with windswept dark hair and hazel eyes. But what caught his attention the most, was what the boy was wearing: a crimson and golden Quidditch uniform with mud splattered all over it, with leather pads on shoulders, elbows, and knees. The golden badge displaying a large ‘C’, pinned on the right side of the chest, was unmistakable too.

The boy was the Captain of the Gryffindor Team! Harry instantly became very suspicious and on guard.

It couldn’t mean anything good if the Gryffindor Captain was trying to break into the Slytherin common room! And he remembered clearly what Dorea Black had said about wanting to beat this Captain – evidently, she quite hated her rival.

“You look familiar,” said the tall boy, cocking his head to a side. His hazel eyes brightened the next second in dawning realization. “Ah, yes! You’re one of the twins - the muggleborn Slytherins, right? I’ve heard about you.”

“Er…”

“I’m Potter,” the older boy said, widely grinning as he stuck out a hand, “Charlus Potter.”

Warily, Harry stared, but then shook the proffered hand, as he muttered, “Harry Riddle.”

“Ah, yes, that’s the name!” Potter beamed a charming smile. “Now, can you help me get inside?” He gestured at the blank wall.

Harry’s green eyes narrowed, still holding his wand, though he had lowered it. “I don’t think I
Potter chuckled as he slapped a hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I’m not going to do anything to you little snakes!” A wide, joyful, and dashing smile spread on his face, lightening it up, as he winked at him. “Oh, no, I’ve got much more pleasurable business in hand. I’ve got a date with the most beauteous, magnificent, delightful, bewitching girl in the school – a goddess! – the keeper of my heart, she is! You wouldn’t want me to be late for that, would you?”

Harry’s mouth hanged open, and he eyed him incredulously. “You’ve got a date – with a Slytherin girl?”

“Oh yes,” Potter breathed out exultantly, his hazel eyes sparkling. “And I cannot wait to kiss her senseless as she deserves, naughty minx that she is! Giving me a password in Croatian, of all things!”

“Um…” Harry began hesitantly. “So you do know the password?”

Potter rolled his eyes. “I know what it means, but can’t remember how it’s said in Croatian, of course! Really, I don’t know how you put up with it – having passwords in all sorts of impossible, strange languages.”

Harry frowned, not quite knowing if to believe him or not. But then he stowed his wand away and compromised. “All right. If you correctly tell me what it means, then I’ll believe you and let you in.”

“Easy enough,” said Potter, grinning, to then scoff and roll his eyes. “It means ‘pride of the blood’.”

Harry rubbed his brow. “Well, that’s right. Come on, then.” He gestured at him with a hand as he stood before the wall, and said very slowly, carefully enunciating the Croatian words, “Ponos u krvi.”

It opened for them and Harry let out a relieved exhalation of breath.

It was no easy thing to learn the passwords by heart, but they all practiced saying them correctly during hours, if that’s what it took. No one wanted to end up like Thaddeus Avery, who had
already spent five different nights sleeping in the corridors because he couldn’t remember how the passwords were said in their foreign languages.

“Thank Merlin you got it right!” exhaled Potter behind him.

Harry, for his part, was grateful that the common room was empty. It was quite late and everyone was clearly already in their beds.

“Um, so...” trailed off Harry uncertainly, turning around to face the older boy. “I’ll be going to sleep now. It was nice to meet you-”

“Oh, wait!” Potter rushed to him, and then stood there, scratching the back of his head. “Could you do me another favor? I don’t want to get deeper into the lair and into ‘forbidden territory’, if you know what I mean - in case someone else bumps into me.” He imploringly gazed down at Harry. “So could you go and tell my girl that I’m waiting for her here?”

“Alright,” said Harry, releasing a heavy sigh. “Who is she?”

Potter grinned rakishly and winked at him. “She’ll be the only one waiting awake in the fifth-year girls’ dorm.”

Harry nodded, left his schoolbag on a settee, and marched off towards the archway at the left end corner of the common room. He had just set a foot on the very first step of the spiral staircase that led downwards, when a yell of alarm rang loudly.

“DON’T!”

Just for a split second, in the time that it took Harry to snap his head around, startled, he saw Alphard Black at the threshold of the archway that led to the boys’ dormitories. It had been him who had shouted, urgently, but it was too late.

The staircase under Harry’s feet had swiftly morphed into a slide, and he instantly lost his balance and fell, landing on his back and shooting off, like a speeding bullet. He frantically flailed his arms and legs, trying to get a hold on something, but it was to no avail.
Harry spun and spun, going down the spiraling slide. He saw a blurry flash of three doors on the first subfloor, as he flew by, then another three doors in the next level, and he shouted in alarm when he didn’t stop and continued sliding down at an alarming speed, and finally he was on the last level, which had only one door – that of the seventh-year girls’ bedroom.

It was the last subfloor and the stairs-turned-slide ended there, but nothing sprouted up to halt his progress. Instead, he shot off from the very end of the slide, and was careening forth, not towards the door, though, that would have somewhat relieved him. He was flying towards the stone wall!

When he was about to brutally smash into the wall, he instinctually crossed his arms over his face. But just as he was about to crash into the hard stones, a gaping dark hole appeared, opening wide, like a gigantic mouth.

Harry got sucked into it, his body somersaulting, leaving him hanging upside down as he got yanked upwards in the darkness, as if he was shooting up inside some sort of huge tube or pipe.

And, suddenly, he was spat out, like a regurgitated thing, and he landed on his rump, sprawling on stone floors.

Pained, dizzy, wheezing, and utterly disoriented, he heard voices as if they were coming from a faraway distance.

“How was I supposed to imagine that Salazar Slytherin had cared about protecting the virtue of girls!”

“Of course he cared, Charlus! Given his beliefs and ideals, Slytherin had even more reason than the other Founders to enchant the girls’ stairs so that boys couldn’t get in their dormitories!”

The sound of shoes scuffing on floors, and then grey eyes were peering at him, a helping hand offered.

“Are you alright?” inquired Alphard Black worriedly.

Harry could only dizzily blink at him, and groan. Everything ached. The only thing that consoled him was the fact that he had, thankfully, not landed on his injured arm. But still, that was little solace indeed.
All of it was very unfair, inwardly bemoaned Harry. He was having a very rough day. He simply shouldn’t have gotten out of his bed that morning, he decided.

Everything was still very blurry, he then slowly realized. He numbly started patting his face with a hand, and finally found his eyeglasses precariously hanging from his left ear.

“What – where – ” he wheezed, as he stuck his glasses back into their place.

Apparently, Alphard understood him, because the boy pointed at a fireplace. “You’re back in the common room and you came shooting out of there.”

The boy then carefully helped him up, and Harry let out a sound, a whimper mixed with a pained groan. His bum and back were killing him.

“Oh, allow me,” said Potter, flicking his wand at Harry and muttering something.

The effect was instantaneous, all aches disappeared and his back seemed to get back to normal.

“I’m sorry about that,” said Potter sheepishly. “I didn’t know what the stairs would do.”

Harry grumbled something unintelligible, and finally slowly stood up straight. He shot the older boy a very miffed glower, then.

Potter gave him a sort of apologetic grin, if such a thing was possible, and patted Harry on the back – at least it was gently.

Then the tall, older boy turned to Alphard. “So, can you get her for me, then? You said you had a way, since going down the stairs is clearly a No-No.”

“Yes, I do,” said Alphard, still holding Harry with a hand. Then he gave Potter a considering look, his grey eyes flickering towards the piece of sheer, silvery cloth that stuck out of the older boy’s bulging pocket. “If you keep the promise you gave me this summer, that is.”
Potter rolled his eyes. “Yeah, you can have my Invisibility Cloak when I leave Hogwarts. But it’s only a lending, mind you. I want it back the moment you finish your seventh year, because-”

“It’s a Potter heirloom,” piped in Alphard quickly. “Yes, I know, Charlus.” He widely grinned. “You got yourself a deal, then.”

Harry, all the while, had watched them in bemusement. Though at least he knew what was what he had seen; that golden and white mantle of magic. ‘Invisibility Cloak’ – not much explanation was needed to understand what it was and did.

Nevertheless, the discovery left him feeling quite astonished. He hadn’t imagined that such things existed. Though he could certainly understand why Alphard would want it – oh, the possibilities - all the things that could be done with something like that!

Then, Alphard started to lead him towards one of the couches, and Harry simply allowed it, still feeling a bit winded.

As soon as Harry had sat down, Alphard turned around, flicked his wand and said something under his breath. A small blue bird shot from the boy’s wand tip and then fluttered away quickly, flying through the archway of the girls’ dormitories.

“She’ll be up soon,” said Alphard to Potter, as he sat down across from Harry, and then addressed him. “Are you feeling better?”

Harry nodded. “Yup, thanks.”

As they all waited for Potter’s mysterious girlfriend to make an appearance, Harry shot Alphard a puzzled glance. After what had happened, he no longer felt all that awkward around the boy, and he was a bit curious, so he asked quietly, “What were you doing up here?”

Alphard lopsidedly grinned at him. “Waiting for you, actually. All the others were in their beds - your twin too. And it was getting late.”

“Oh.” Harry blinked, not quite knowing what to say to that. Then he began hesitantly, “Um… I saw
you and Dorea talking before… did she tell you-”

“She told me all about her conversation with you,” said Alphard quietly, then he added nervous and vacillating, “She said you had agreed to be my… er… my friend?” He cast Harry a hopeful look. “Did you really?”

“Um, yeah,” mumbled Harry, nodding, then he gave him a small, tentative smile.

Alphard grinned widely in return, his grey eyes shining.

Their first stumbling foray into their new friendship was interrupted when a beautiful girl stepped into the common room, wearing a strappy, silvery nightgown with a silky white shawl draped over her slim shoulders.

“Dorea?” choked out Harry, having to blink twice just to be certain. He gaped.

The girl didn’t pay much attention to either of them, her light grey eyes were fixed on Potter, who was wearing a silly, irredeemably besotted smile on his handsome face.

“You didn’t even have the decency of changing after your Quidditch practice?” she said crisply, her light grey eyes narrowing as her gaze trailed up and down the tall boy. “You’re mad if you think I’m going anywhere near you – you’re filthy!”

“Oh, but my darling,” enthused Potter in a playful, suggestive tone, “dirty and filthy is just the way you like me!”

Dorea snorted irreverently, then she waved a hand impatiently, as she said with exasperation, “Well, you’ll have to do, just like that. What’s the plan, then?”

Potter widely smiled as he bounded up to her, throwing an arm around her shoulders. He ducked down and breathed into her ear, “You’ll love it. I’m taking you to the Astronomy Tower tonight, and-”

“The Astronomy Tower, really?” she intoned flatly, giving him a very unimpressed look. “Just
where everyone else goes?” She splayed a hand and gazed at her fingernails. “I might just have to find myself another beau. A more creative and resourceful one…”

She trailed off, leaving that hanging in the air.

“Don’t count me off yet, my luv,” murmured Potter, shooting her a wicked, rakish grin. “Just you wait and see what I’ve prepared. It will sweep you off your feet, it will – literally.”

Dorea shot him an interested look at that, and then briefly inclined her head, as some sort of gesture implying permission.

Potter beamed, and quickly took out his Invisibility Cloak and draped it over them both.

Just as Harry saw the bulgy mantle of golden and white magic about to slip out of the common room, Dorea Black’s head stuck out from the invisible folds, looking as if it was beheaded, dangling in mid-air, and the girl snapped, “Go to sleep, you two!”

And with that, the couple left, and Harry was still gaping.

In the next second, he whipped his head around to stare at Alphard, as he said astounded and incredulous, “They are together? But the things Dorea said to me about the ‘Gryffindor Captain’ – I thought she hated him!”

Alphard sniggered under his breath. “Oh, on the Quidditch field they’re both fierce rivals – they love it that way.”

Harry blinked, and then frowned, as he said slowly, “So all the nasty things your sister said to Dorea at the Welcoming Feast – all that was about Charlus Potter?”

“Yes,” said Alphard, not looking amused anymore.

Harry certainly had loads of questions about that, but he was feeling quite tired after the long day, so he said hesitantly, “Um, we should call it night and go to bed…” just as Alphard said excitedly, “Let’s go to the kitchens for a midnight snack, the house-elves make a delicious-”
“Elves?” Harry breathed out, staring at him, astonished and excited. “The Elves are in the kitchens?”

Alphard blinked. “Of course! Where else would they be?” Then he broadly grinned at him. “I can show you where the kitchens are and how to get in – Charlus told me about it! And I’ve already been a couple of times. The house-elves make a wonderful cup of hot chocolate with a side of scones. And I can tell you all about Dorea and Charlus. What do you say?”

“Sure!” piped Harry eagerly, all his tiredness vanishing at the thought of finally seeing the Elves!
Part I: Chapter 18

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AN:

Answering a couple of reviewers:

In canon, Alphard Black was the uncle who died and left Sirius his fortune, when Sirius was a teenager and had already run away from his family. That’s why Alphard Black’s name was one of those that Walburga Black had burned off from the family-tree tapestry in Grimmauld Place.

However, as we saw in the chapter about Narcissa, Alphard’s future is different from canon’s already – this caused by Harry’s time-travel and presence in the past. For one, Alphard is still alive. A recluse, Narcissa said.

Harry Riddle and Alphard Black are going to be very much part of each other’s lives, and they’ll ‘meet’ again, so to speak, in the future.

Narcissa doesn’t know anything about ‘Harry Riddle’ or that her son Antares with Harry Potter’s soul was that twin of the Dark Lord she had briefly heard about from her mother Druella Rosier. But Narcissa does plan to get Antares mixed with old, hermit Alphard Black, because she wants the Black estates and fortune for Antares. But that is a whole other story – part II, that is. *grins*

Why didn’t Charlus Potter ask Harry why he could see him?

Because Harry said he had heard him speaking, not seen him, when Charlus Potter was under the Cloak and had stilled and stopped talking when detecting Harry’s presence. Harry didn’t say “I see you” because for him it was obvious that Charlus was there, being seen, since Harry still didn’t know at that point that the magic he was seeing was actually an Invisibility Cloak. And he didn’t ask Alphard about it because he isn’t telling anyone about his magic-seeing ability, only Tom knows. Harry isn’t telling anyone because he doesn’t understand why he can do it and because he doesn’t want to stand out in that way and be a “freak”, so to speak, since he already knows that everyone else doesn’t see the magic in the school.

Why doesn’t Harry simply follow the green magic lines around the school to find the entrance to
the Chamber of Secrets?

If you remember, he saw the Slytherin dense lattice of magic only on the bit of wall that was the entrance to their common room, but there was nothing before he came upon it that blatantly indicated where it was – there wasn’t a trail of green lines showing the way because all the common/general areas of the school present the color of magic of all 4 Founders.

In the case of the entrance to the Chamber, since it's the sinks in the middle of the girls' bathroom, only the sink would have Slytherin's colors of magic, so Harry won't see it unless he gets in the girls’ bathroom, and what reason would he have to do so? We’ll see that much further ahead. So Harry’s search for the Chamber will drag on quite a bit. After all, in canon, Tom only found it in his last year of school. Harry won’t take that long, but it won’t be immediate either.

Part I: Chapter 18

Ever since Figwig Ogg, the school’s Groundskeeper, had mentioned ‘house-elves’ when he told them to leave their trunks at the platform of Hogsmead’s train station, Harry had been thrilled by the revelation that there were Elves somewhere in Hogwarts.

Though he had never imagined they would be in the kitchens. He wondered about that as he and Alphard cautiously made their way through the dungeon corridors, straining their hearing in order to detect if there was a flapping of wings that would indicate that Rascal the Corvus was still on the prowl.

In one of his fairytale books -that he and Tom had nicked from a bookstore in London, during the times in which it was Harry’s turn to choose what to get for himself- he had read several Celtic folklore myths and legends about Elves; that they were willowy, unearthly beautiful beings that dwelt in the woods of Ireland.

Perhaps, Harry mused, there were also Elves who liked enchanted castles, and….um, food…. so that’s why they were in the kitchens? Thinking about it that way, it didn’t make much sense, but he was still very thrilled with the idea of finally seeing the magnificent beings!

So he eagerly followed Alphard as they made their way to the school’s ground floor, as the boy told him, in a whispered voice, about how Dorea and Charlus Potter had ended up together.

“Charlus has always been after her since they were in third year,” said Alphard quietly, “though Dorea wouldn’t give the time of day! It was only when they both became Captains of their House’s Quidditch Team that Dorea started to take notice of him.” He sniggered under his breath. “They’re
both the best Chasers in the school, but Charlus has always beaten her, and I think it was that which riled up Dorea and made her become interested in him! She only respects someone who can compete with her and best her, you see?”

He chuckled, and Harry shot him a puzzled glance, as he said confusedly, “But why did your sister Walburga say those nasty things to Dorea at the Welcoming Feast? What’s wrong with Potter?”

“Nothing’s wrong with Charlus,” said Alphard rolling his eyes. “The Potters are one of the oldest and most distinguished wizarding families in Britain! They’re light purebloods, granted, but that isn’t that bad, since they have loads of prestige and are very wealthy. Walburga is just furious about the whole matter because…” He trailed off and then heavily sighed. “Well, because we, the Blacks, owe the Malfoys a bride.”

Harry shot him perplexed sidelong glance. “You owe them a bride?”

“Yes,” said Alphard lowering his voice, his grey eyes shinning with mirth as they climbed up the staircase that led out of the dungeons. “Centuries ago, my ancestor, Isla Black, was betrothed to a Malfoy.” He shot Harry a wicked grin. “But she eloped with a muggle instead! It was a huge scandal and the Malfoys were furious, and ever since, we’ve owed them a bride. We’re magically and honor bound to it.”

“Your ancestor married a muggle?” breathed out Harry incredulously. After everything the Prewett twins had been telling him about the Blacks, it seemed impossible!

“She did,” said Alphard, his tone then dripped with relish as he glanced at Harry with much amusement. “It’s due to the ‘Black Sheep’ Curse – that’s what I call it, anyway!” He chuckled under his breath at his own pun. “In every generation of my family, there has been a member who was a ‘black sheep’ – who did something that got them disowned and cast away from the family!” He brought up a hand, and started ticking off his fingers, “There was Isla Black, that I’ve already told you about. Then Phineas who supported muggle rights, and then Uncle Marcus who was a squib – just to name some.”

He broke off and added in a whispered, cheerful tone of voice, “I’ve always said that it’s because of a Bloodline Curse that must have been cast on the family – those things were used in the old days, you know? – but Walburga becomes demented every time I say that.” He adopted a shrill, screechy, high-pitched tone of voice as he mimicked, “The Most Noble and Ancient House of Black is Not Cursed!”

Alphard sniggered under his breath. “I think it gets her so riled up because she dearly fears that one
day, when she has children, one of them might end up being a Black Sheep too!” His grey eyes
sparkled, as he chortled gleefully. “Wouldn’t that be fantastic!”

Harry shot him an amused glance as they stepped into the Entrance Hall of the school.

When they turned and began walking towards the very end of the ground floor, Alphard waved a
hand, as he continued, “The point is that Dorea was supposed to marry Maximillian Malfoy—”

“What?” Harry gaped. “I’ve seen him – he’s… old!”

“That doesn’t matter, he’s a widower so he can marry again,” said Alphard dismissively, to then
roll his eyes. “Ever since the old wizard clapped eyes on her, he’s demanded to have Dorea as his
bride, and thus have the debt fulfilled.” He shot Harry a pointed look. “And you've seen Dorea –
she’s the most beautiful of all unmarried Black girls, and the Malfoys have always had very high
standards about the beauty their brides had to have. So Maximillian wanted Dorea, and my
grandfather Cygnus – who’s Dorea’s father- happily agreed, since Cygnus and Maximillian are old
friends."

He paused and shook his head. “Last year, during Dorea’s Fifteen Birthday Ball, Grandfather took
to her to his study, where Old Maximillian awaited, and they sprung it on her. Grandfather and
Malfoy had already signed the magical betrothing contract, and all that was needed, to clinch the
deal, was Dorea’s signature.”

Alphard chuckled under his breath. “And you can just imagine how it went - Dorea was furious.
She was already seeing Charlus Potter in secret, at school—” he shot Harry a very proud look “- only
I knew about that, because she has always trusted me. And she had already decided that she wanted
Potter.”

He paused, and then added with much relish, “From what she told me, the confrontation was very
nasty. Dorea refused to be ‘the sacrificial lamb on the altar of family duty’ and she wouldn’t even
consider marrying that ‘lecherous, nasty old curmudgeon!’” Alphard chortled, his eyes shining
with tears of mirth. “That’s what Dorea has always called Old Maxy, you know – has never liked
him.”

Then he sobered up, his expression turning grim, as he added, “She wouldn’t yield and Grandpa
Cygnus was furious. He kicked her out of the house and disowned her—”
“And she went to live with you?” interrupted Harry, remembering the things Walburga had said at the Welcoming Feast.

Alphard nodded, and sniggered under his breath. “Grandfather got a nasty shock when my father took her in. Grandfather Cygnus is really old and a bit senile, and he passed on the title of Head of Black House to my father some years ago. And although my father has always heeded Grandfather Cygnus’ advice in all matters, Grandpa should have known that Father would help Dorea.”

The boy beamed a smile. “She’s my father’s baby sister and he has a soft spot for her, you know. And I’ve always thought he thinks of her as his older daughter, and his favorite one. That’s one of the reasons why Walburga is so jealous and hates her so much.” He grinned widely. “Another reason is that Father is also going to give Dorea one of the Black vaults as her dowry, for when she marries Potter.”

“So they’re getting married?” Harry said, blinking.

“Oh yes,” said Alphard, grinning. “This summer, Dorea finally told Father about Charlus Potter, and she was allowed to spend a week with his family.” His grin widened. “The Potters loved her, of course - Dorea can be very charming when it suits her purpose.” He sniggered and then waved a hand. “And then Charlus stayed with us for two weeks, so that Father could assess him. And Father finally gave them his blessing.”

As they turned a corner, the boy added matter-of-factly, “Now our families are negotiating the finer details of the betrothing contract, so that’s why Dorea and Charlus are still scurrying around in secret. But once it’s signed, they’ll be able to be a couple openly, without breaching any rules of propriety.”

Alphard then paused to shoot Harry a very toothy grin, as he added exultantly, “But the best part is that, to soothe Old Maximillian’s furious temper at being denied Dorea, Father offered Walburga as a bride, and Old Maxy refused!” He chortled loudly. “And then Father proposed that Walburga became Abraxas’ fiancée, to settle the debt, but Old Maxy rejected that as well!” He beamed and chortled. “And ‘Burga was spitting with fury and humiliation at being turned down – twice! She should have known, though. She’s not pretty, so doesn’t meet with Old Maxy’s standards, and Abraxas is about to be betrothed to some nasty German girl, from what I’ve heard-”

“He is? But he’s twelve!” gasped out Harry, staring at him aghast, mouth hanging open.

Alphard blinked, nonplussed. “So? Many of us get engaged when we’re in our cradles, or at least during our school years. By the time we leave Hogwarts, we’re betrothed, at the very least.” He
cocked his head to a side, frowning. “Isn’t it the same for Muggles?”

“No!” said Harry vehemently, shaking his head, feeling very glad that it wasn’t.

“Strange,” muttered Alphard, looking disconcerted.

Harry gaped at him, a bit horrorstruck. “So you’re also... er –what do you call it– betrothed?”

Alphard snorted loudly. “No. Cygnus is the oldest, thus my father’s heir. And I’m just the spare.”
He shrugged, though he looked a bit gloomy. “So no one cares who I marry as long as it is to a
pureblood.” A smile that seemed a bit forced spread on his face then, as he added, “But that’s
alright – it’s the only perk of being the spare son, in my opinion.”

Then he halted in his tracks, and announced excitedly, “Aha – here we are!”

Harry blinked, nonplussed, as they stood before a large painting of a bowl of fruits, hanging on a
wall at the very end of the Entrance Hall of the school.

“You have to tickle the pear,” said Alphard cheerfully.

“Tickle?” Harry cast him a disbelieving look, to see if his leg was being pulled.

Alphard grinned. “Yup, go ahead.”

“Alright,” muttered Harry dubiously, as he stretched out a finger to touch it.

It happened the very instant he touched the canvas. In the blink of an eye, his finger went through
and the rest of his body with it, as if he had tumbled into it or been sucked in.

Harry cried in alarm just as he heard Alphard’s identical shout behind him. Harry’s eyes grew as
wide as moons, and frantic, as he found himself standing in a small room, only a table in the very
middle where the bowl of fruits laid on top, the walls and floors made of stone.
But they weren’t, he realized the next second, the discovery making him feel gobsmacked. Everything was made of oil paint.

The details were incredible, as to trick the eye to believe everything was real. But it wasn’t. He took a hesitant step forward, his heart thumping in his chest, and saw how his footmark was left on the oil paint that formed the floor, only to vanish in the next second.

“What did you do?!” came the frenzied, horrified shout, and Harry snapped around to see Alphard peering at him, looking wildly scared.

The boy was staring at him with wide eyes, from across something that looked like a frameless window that just floated in midair where one of the walls should be. It was a ‘window’ that displayed to the outside the painting within.

“I didn’t do anything!” cried out Harry as he rushed forward. He frantically pressed the palms of his hands on the window, pushing. When nothing happened, he started pounding against it. “I can’t get out! How do I get out!?”

“I don’t know!” said Alphard, looking beside himself. “Living beings can’t get into magical paintings, only ghosts and the subjects of other paintings can, from what I’ve heard-”

“Obviously that’s not true because I’m a ‘living being’ and I’m stuck here!” snapped Harry, his temper rising with every panicky beat of his heart.

“The painting’s magic must be faulty! Perhaps due to the passage of time it wore off or something…though I’ve never heard of that happening before…” muttered Alphard under his breath. Suddenly, he halted and the boy’s grey eyes grew impossible wider, as he gasped, “How are you breathing?”

“What?” Harry stopped pounding against the ‘window’ to stare at him, then he gaped. It hadn’t even crossed his mind, though it certainly did then. Shakily, he drew in a deep intake of breath and cautiously let it out slowly.

The next moment, he sighed with relief. He was breathing as normally as he had been seconds before. The air even felt normal, albeit it had a lingering oily taste to it.
Alphard, who observed his experiment very closely, said tremulously, “Apparently you can breathe, but I don’t think you should be doing it for very long. What if the air there is some kind of toxic poisonous fume made of paint or magic or who knows what! You have to get out!”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do!” yelled Harry, demonstratively pounding a fist on the window to the outside.

It was like being stuck in an unbreakable fish bowl, and his chest constricted with abject fear when he realized that he could be there forever, watching how life carried on on the outside and how the years passed, and he would only be a boy peering out from within a painting, growing old and dying, only his skeleton to be left for future Hogwarts generations to point their fingers at and tell the story of the once-upon-a-time first-year of many centuries ago who fell into a painting.

A shudder ran down his spine and he gazed at Alphard with huge eyes, as he chocked out, “What do I do?”

“Oh – try tickling the pear!” said Alphard excitedly, as if the brightest of ideas had just burst in his mind.

“The bloody pear?!” said Harry in a strangled voice. “That’s what got me into this fix to begin with!”

“But maybe now it will take you to the kitchens – magically transport you there or something of the sort,” piped Alphard, his voice turning fainter as he spoke to end up in an uncertain note.

Harry, however, became hopeful, and he quickly reached the painted table and followed the suggestion. But nothing whatsoever happened except that after ‘tickling the pear’ it lost some of its paint and ended up in Harry’s fingertip, just to fly back from his skin to the pear to become part of it again.

Dismayed, he began to turn around again to face Alphard, just when he caught sight of something on the back wall.

“There’s a painted door here!”
“Of course!” said Alphard, slapping a hand on his forehead. “All of Hogwarts’ paintings are connected to each other. It must lead to another one. Try it and see if you can get out from that one, I’ll wait for you here!”

Harry didn’t waste a single second and urgently pelted forwards and yanked the door open. He had to make haste, especially if Alphard could be right and he might be breathing poisonous ‘air’.

The transition to another painting was like having jumped into a spiraling free-fall. He felt dizzy and disoriented for a brief second, his stomach sickly churning, and then he stumbled onto his feet, squinting when he found himself standing in what looked to be half of a small amphitheater, only that there was a long table in the middle holding a corpse that looked to have been hacked off and there were a bunch of men in green robes, with bottles in their hands, hiccupping, leaning on each other and sharing bawdy jokes, everything made of tiny dots and strokes of paint.

“… and the hag said to the troll, want to see my nimbulus tentacula?”

The portrayed healers broke into drunken peals of laughter before one of them caught sight of Harry gaping at them.

“Ah, we have a visitor!” the painting exclaimed cheerfully, red splotches appearing on his cheek as if just then added by a stroke of a paintbrush. “Come to learn from us the mysteries of the human anatomy?”

“You must be a new portrait. We haven’t seen you around before, have we, chaps?”

Another healer squinted at him, hiccupping, “You would make an interesting subject for dissection. You look very realistic. Who was your artist?”

“My artist?” echoed Harry dumbly, before he raised his hands which still looked to be made very much of flesh and blood, and snapped, “And not a painting! I’m real, and I need help-”

The healers roared with laughter, guffawed and sniggered, starting to lean onto each other once again, as they traded impressions.

“Poor lad!”
“He’s clearly a new portrait-”

“Still hasn’t realized what he is, it seems!”

“Could be he’s a post-mortem portrait. Have to pity those, they always have a hard time accepting that they’re only a painting and that the real them has died…”

“I’m not a –” Harry started to explain frantically, but then he desisted and simply ignored the drunks and made his way forward.

The side where the rest of the amphitheater should have been was wholly occupied by the same window-type thing as in the painting of the bowl of fruits, only that this one was much larger, giving the outside world the full view of the painting inside.

Through it, he could see the grand, moving staircases that hung high up in Hogwarts’ Entrance Hall, only that they were now at the level of his eyes. But it made little difference, as much as he pounded and pushed, the window didn’t give way.

He considered yelling for help and screaming himself hoarse, but it would be pointless. It was late at night and there was no one roaming the staircases.

Harry spun around, and with frenzied eyes he searched the room. Finally, he saw it and rushed towards a shadowy painted door.

The plunge was again dizzying and he found himself squinting against sunlight, only to realize that the effect was caused by the bright colors that had been used to paint the sky all around him.

Glancing around, Harry saw he was like a giant amidst small, rolling green hills. He could see a castle and a tiny town painted in the distance, and his feet were surrounded by a long stretch of forest, the trees no taller than his pinky finger.

“Who goes there? Intruder upon my lands, name yourself, you scurvy knave! Or Sir Cadogan the Brave shall skewer you from hairy navel to jaundiced eye!” a tiny figure shouted, coming galloping on horse, with battered armor and tiny lance, rushing along a small hilltop.
“You overgrown villain, I shall pierce your heart if you do not lay your arms before my feet and declare me the champion of all-”

The tiny knight fell head over heals, horse caught in the middle of the tumble, as his lance got stuck on the ground, whilst Harry paid him no mind and made his third attempt to break out of a painting.

As unsuccessful in his efforts as ever, feeling increasingly more desperate, he went through countless of other paintings: snoozing ballerinas, a group of roaring drunk monks that told Harry exactly where the healers had gotten their firewhiskey from, an Amazonian jungle that had him running from enormous insects, the Gryffindors’ Fat Lady snoring loudly in her sleep, a ship at sea where the sailors had every intention to push him off the plank, and an African plain where the very first thing he encountered was a rhinoceros charging forth from behind a scraggly bush, where Harry ran for a floating door with no intention of sticking around to see if an enormous beast made of paint could actually kill him or not.

Harry heaved a deep breath and carefully tiptoed around the latest of the paintings he found himself in. It was just a portrait in this case, and he felt deeply relieved after his experience with the rhino.

It was dark, with only a fire crackling on the hearth, casting dots of orange and yellow splats of paint on the subject of the portrait. It was a richly robed wizard snoozing in an ornate armchair, with black hair streaked with grey on head and beard.

The room depicted was filled with shelves with books and appeared to be an elegant study. A tapestry hanging from a wall caught his attention, since it bore the Black coat of arms, which he recognized from the signet rings that Alphard’s brother Cygnus and his cousin Orion wore.

As he silently made his way towards the window of that painting, the soft snores of the portrayed wizard abruptly halted and a deep, low voice grumbled gruffly, “Paracelsus, is that you again attempting to steal my smoking pipe?”

Harry spun around to see one grey eye cracked open, staring at him. Soon both eyes flew wide open as the wizard stood up straight on his throne-like chair, the portrait’s gaze roving up and down over him.

“You are not Paracelsus,” stated the painting sharply.
“Er-”

“You are not a portrait at all,” hissed out the wizard as he quickly rose to his feet, skewering him with narrowed grey eyes. “You are a student. From my own House, at that,” he added, gesturing at Harry’s Slytherin uniform. His eyes narrowed to slits, as he spat furiously, “How did you get in?”

“It was an accident,” said Harry quickly, feeling a modicum of relief at having found someone who didn’t look like a complete incompetent or a dimwitted drunk. “If you could help me get out-”

“An accident, indeed!” roared the painting. “I don’t know what kind of spell you used – some new one that shouldn’t have been invented, illegal no doubt!”

Harry’s eyes grew large in alarm and he interjected swiftly, “No! I tell you, I didn’t mean to-”

“You wanted to break into the Headmaster’s office, didn’t you? And you thought that the best way to do so was through a portrait, did you not?” snarled the wizard accusingly, pulling himself up to his full height. “Well, you little miscreant, you shouldn’t have chosen my portrait to break in through!”

“The Headmaster’s office?” Harry blinked and then frowned, before he glanced at the ‘window’ and through it to see a shadowy large oval room, with many rows of other portraits hanging from the opposite wall.

“Playing the innocent act won’t work with me, no matter if you sound as dumb as you look!” roared the painting. “Don’t you know who you’re dealing with? I had the misfortune of being the Headmaster myself and I know all the little tricks you play when you’re up to no good – hormonal adolescents who like to go around pranking the staff and with no space in your air-filled head but for thoughts of food, having fun and chasing after girls and boys. Waste of a good education, you all are! When we try to discipline you, you can only whine and plead that you’re misunderstood!”

“Er… right,” muttered Harry bewildered, taking a step back. “Um… I’ll just go then, and do my whining somewhere else-”

“Oh no, you won’t!” snapped the portrait. “You’ll stay put and face the consequences of your misconduct. I’m waking Armando Dippet. Let him deal with you!”
He whipped out a wand from his robes and aimed it at Harry the instant he attempted to inch away from the wizard.

Harry eyed the wand and then met the grey eyes again, as he said slowly, “You realize that it’s made of paint, don’t you? Just like you are?” The portrait nastily glowered at him, and before such response, Harry squared his shoulders and scoffed. “Can you actually do magic at all?”

“You’re in my portrait, I can do anything I wish here,” snapped the wizard sharply.

Harry shot him a considering look, trying to discern whether to believe him or not. Finally, he smiled broadly. “Sure you can. But if it’s all the same to you, I’ll scamper off and get out of your hair-”

“You’re not moving an inch!” snarled the painting, threateningly jerking forward the tip of his wand. “You’ll wait here while I go fetch the Headmaster!”

“Of course I will,” said Harry sarcastically, letting out a loud snort. “You just go do that. I’m taking off.”

“You won’t!”

Utterly ignoring the wizard’s roar, Harry trotted towards the only visible door, since it was of no use to try with the ‘window’. Even if he could miraculously get out through it, landing in the Headmaster’s office would only get him in even more trouble.

“Even if you leave, I’m informing the Headmaster! You’ll be facing expulsion for this, mark my words-”

“Right,” unconcernedly said Harry over his shoulder as he yanked the door open, “and when he comes to Slytherin House to find out who got into your portrait, I’ll just play dumb. If he actually believes you, which he won’t, because from what I hear, the living can’t get into paintings. Dippet will just think too much pipe-smoking has addled your brains – not that you really have any, being a portrait and all.”
And with that and a last impish grin, he waltzed through the door.

He was momentarily stumped when he faced a long corridor of endless doors instead of falling into another painting. Clearly, this portrait had many other connections than any of the others. He started rushing along, uncertain of which door to pick.

“You little miscreant! I won’t let you escape unscathed. You will face your due punishment for your rule-breaking!” he distantly heard from behind him, only to shoot a glance over his shoulder to see that the painted wizard had followed him into the corridor and was now chasing after him.

Harry grew alarmed at that – and he had thought that this one was a sane one! He broke into a run, putting as much distance between them as possible.

“Come back here, you runt!”

All the doors flashed by like an endless black blur as Harry continued rushing forth. For a second he caught sight of something silver and he instantly skidded to a halt before the only door that wasn’t black.

Quickly glancing behind him, he saw that the wizard was still far away, and thus that he wouldn’t know which door he had taken. Urgently, Harry opened the silver door and jumped into darkness.

He landed in a painting of a dark room, very much like the study he had left behind, only that there was no portrayed wizard there or any crackling fire. The scarce light that suffused the painting seemed to actually come from the outside world, through the ‘window’.

Hopeful that perhaps he was in a painting hanging in a common room or dormitory, preferably of Hufflepuff House, so that he could cajole some insomniac student to help him out, he excitedly rushed to the window. That was, until he heard the voices on the outside.

“…come, come, Maximillian, why not tell us once and for all what made you halt your attempts to get the mudbloods expelled?”

“I certainly do not know what you are talking about, Pollux. As I said, Hogwarts’ Board of Governors is filled with despicable muggle-lovers. I was outnumbered and strategically decided not to push the matter. You know as much, you were there yourself.”
Someone snorted softly and a tenor voice said, “You pretend to make us believe that was the only reason? When we have been receiving letters from our children, asking for our help, apprising us of the deplorable and shameful situation of having two mudbloods being sorted in Slytherin House-”

“Quite right, Rosier! With our children being forced to interact with them, against their will, they are being irrevocably tainted. Why, those mudbloods’ presence amidst our children represent a threat to the values and education we have imparted on them, as my daughter Walburga so wisely pointed out in her letter to me. It only takes one of our children to start sympathizing with the mudbloods, to begin believing that they aren’t that different, and it could start a chain reaction-”

“Ah, but Maximillian didn’t have a daughter dutifully informing him of the situation and the gravity of the consequences. He was not as fortunate as the rest of us were, Pollux. If you’ll remember, it was us who knew before him. And us who informed him of the facts.”

A high-pitched laugh resounded and a voice interjected with pointed maliciousness, “Indeed, your grandson did not write to you about the subject, Maximillian. Why would Abraxas keep such news from you? It seems the control you have over your heir is slipping.”

“My heir has worthier matters to be interested in than that of two mudbloods,” drawled Malfoy’s voice in a chilly tone.

“Be that as it may,” interjected someone sternly, “I still believe there’s something you’re keeping from us. Those two mudbloods – what’s their name, does anyone remember?”

“Riddle,” someone answered with much scorn and disgust.

“Precisely, the Riddles. I was there with you when you received a missive from the Dark Lord, Maximillian. And that very day, you halted all your attempts of manipulating the Board of Governors to vote your way on the issue of having the mudbloods expelled.”

“What are you implying, Pollux?”

“Is it not clear? What I’m saying, Rowan, is that the two events seem to be linked.”
“You must be jesting,” said Malfoy’s deep voice, dripping with ridicule. “Why would the Dark Lord ask me to ensure that the mudbloods remain at Hogwarts?”

“Why indeed! That’s what I ask myself and what I demand to know.”

Harry’s breath had long since been stuck in his throat from the moment he realized the wizards had been talking about him and Tom, but now, it was horror and disbelief that had his heart pounding frantically in his chest.

With a sense of ominous foreboding, and just wanting to know who exactly he was dealing with, he inched closer to the ‘window’ of the painting he was in, and he very carefully took a peek from one of its edges.

The group of wizards was right underneath his painting, their seats surrounding the fireplace that seemed to be under him. Maximillian Malfoy he recognized immediately. Pollux Black, though he had never seen him before, he did as well, resembling Cygnus and Alphard so much. There was another wizard who looked very much alike, who could only be Arcturus Black, Orion and Lucretia’s father. A blonde wizard who looked to be in his sixties, could only be the ‘Rosier’ who had been addressed before; Druella’s father, or an uncle, perhaps. There were three others he didn’t recognize at all.

“I grow weary of talking about the mudbloods,” said then Arcturus Black. “What I want to know is when the Dark Lord will be conquering Czechoslovakia. That’s more important and relevant for our plans. Surely the Dark Lord has confided in you, Maximilian.” He arched an eyebrow. “Or perhaps your control in that regard is slipping as well?”

“Control!” A burly wizard let out a shriek of a guffaw. “No one controls the Dark Lord!”

“As unnecessary as that input was, Dolohov,” said Pollux Black scathingly, “I quite agree with the sentiment. When it comes to the Dark Lord, it is dangerous to imply any sort of control over him.” He shot his brother a censuring glance. “Let us not forget that or we incur in the danger of overstepping our bounds with him. And I, for one, prefer to show him all due respect and be spared from his wrath.”

Rosier pierced the wizard with narrowed blue eyes. “But we are still planning on taking all possible advantage, are we not?”
“Advantage of him, certainly not. It’s too risky. He’s too powerful and unpredictable,” interjected Maximilliam Malfoy, his voice curt and frosty. “Advantage of what he’s willing to give us in return for our sustained support, yes.”

“Sounds good enough,” conceded Rosier gruffly.

“All this is very well,” cut in Arcturus Black, to then piercingly gaze at Malfoy, “but I still want to know when he’s taking over Czechoslovakia.”

“Next March,” replied Maximillian Malfoy curtly.

Harry’s eyes grew wide at that, stunned and aghast, a horrified gasp escaping unwittingly from his lips, though it was drowned by the shout that rang at the same time.

“There you are, you little urchin!”

Startled, Harry reeled backwards at the same time that the painted wizard who had been chasing him before erupted into the painting and leapt towards him, just as he saw Pollux Black springing to his feet, his expression furious and alarmed, as he yelled, “What’s the meaning of this, Phineas? Did I just see someone in your portrait-”

All the other wizards quickly and noisily rose to their feet at that, their voices meshing together as they rose loudly.

“A portrait was spying on us?”

“He’s not a portrait, he’s a Hogwarts’ student!” panted out the painted wizard as he made a grasp for Harry.

Harry ducked, swerved to a side swiftly, and then made a mad dash towards the only door he saw at the very end of the portrayed study, his heart in his throat, his pulse beating erratically, and his feet skidding and slipping on the floor made of oil paint.

“How’s that possible-”
“How much did he hear!”

“Get him, Phineas! He must be silenced!” roared Pollux, who by then, like all the others, had his face nearly pressed on the canvas of the painting, wand drawn out.

“I’m trying!” snarled Phineas, fast on Harry’s tracks.

Harry yanked the door open and slammed it shut behind him, knowing it would do little good. He didn’t halt but inwardly groaned when he found himself in another corridor filled with doors. But this time he didn’t wait until he found a door that looked different from all the rest. No, this time he was scared out of his wits and could barely even think straight.

‘He must be silenced’ didn’t leave much room for interpretation. He wasn’t fleeing from being expelled by the Headmaster or from getting detention, this time he knew he was running for his life.

Midway along the corridor, he choose a random door, prayed to whatever Gods he didn’t believe it, and vaulted forwards.

“You’re not getting away this time, boy!” was the last thing he heard from some distance behind him.

The free-falling sensation engulfed him once more and he abruptly landed in a painting of a library, with tables filled with telescopes and other astronomy gadgets, rolls of parchments here and there and with a lone chair missing its occupant. He didn’t even pause and rushed to the painting’s window.

Just as he reached it, he saw the room outside, only lit by moonlight spearing through curtains, with rows of shelves filled with books and strange silvery artifacts that puffed and swirled. But what caught his attention was the large, weird looking bird sleeping on a perch. It was strange but breathtakingly beautiful, with fiery red and golden plumes.

It was a pet! So it could only be a teacher’s familiar!

Frenziedly hammering his fists against the ‘window’, Harry yelled with all his might, “Wake up! Bird, wake up!”
A head popped out from folded wings, and yellow eyes blinked at him.

“Get your owner! I need help, please! Get the teacher that owns you! Or anyone - HURRY!”

The bird trilled softly at him, eerily sounding inquiring, as it cocked its head to a side and just peered at him with curiosity.

Harry nearly sobbed with impotence as he screamed desperately, “Don’t sing to me! Help me! He’s coming!”

Just when he thought that the bird wasn’t as intelligent as any bloody common barn owl in the Wizarding World was, it took up flight into the air. To his astonishment, though, the damnable bird didn’t fly out of the room in search of help. Instead, it flew right towards him.

Startled, Harry jumped backwards just as the bird crossed the ‘window’ and flew into the painting with natural ease. He gaped at finding that he wasn’t the only ‘living being’ that apparently had no trouble getting stuck in paintings.

The bird, flapping its magnificent gold and red wings, steadied in front of him, trilling and shaking its tail at him.

“I don’t understand you,” said Harry urgently. “What do you want me to do?”

The bird trilled again, and flew lower until it was at the level of Harry’s right hand, pointedly shaking its tail again, brushing its feathers against his hand.

“You want me to take hold of your tail?” guessed Harry, bewildered.

But he didn’t stop to consider why or if he had understood correctly. He just grabbed the bird’s tail feathers, feeling quite stupid doing so, and knowing that that wasn’t going to help him at all.

In any moment, Phineas was going to find him in this painting and he didn’t have the foggiest idea
what would happen to him then. He would at least scream at the top of his lungs until he woke the whole castle up, even if it was while he was being dragged from the scruff of his neck by a portrait. Or he would whip out his wand and take his chances, hoping that magic actually worked inside a painting and that a portrait’s subject made of paint could be killed with the limited spells he knew.

“What-” he shrieked in surprise as he was suddenly lifted into the air. He held on for dear life on the feathers with both hands, and gaped at the back of the bird that was so effortlessly carrying his weight as it flew forth in a flash.

And he didn’t stop gaping, flabbergasted, as one of the doors lining the wall of the painted library just sprung open by itself, as if commanded to do so by the bird, as inexplicable as that was.

As they transitioned to another painting, he didn’t even feel the free-fall sensation of all the times before. Instead, it felt as if he was still embarked on a smooth flight.

His feet suddenly landed on a cushioned floor, and he automatically let go of the bird’s tail as he quickly glanced around.

Harry was dismayed by what he saw. No wonder the floor of the ‘painting’ had felt padded. Everything was made of cords and threads, not paint!

The fat wizard with red cheeks that was blabbering happily as he conducted a bizarre dance by waving his hands, the three humongous trolls wearing ridiculously pink tutus, who were clumsily attempting to follow the wizard’s instructions, even as they held clubs in their meaty hands, all of them were made of cords of colorful cloth and threads that stitched everything in place, making them look like big, walking and speaking —grunting, in the trolls’ case— dolls.

“Paintings are connected to tapestries as well?” Harry moaned loudly as he peeled his gaze away from the crazy spectacle and glanced up at the bird. “Why did you bring me here?”

The bird softly trilled at him, the sound of it beautiful and soothing, but it was abruptly interrupted as the wizard made of cloth cried out cheerfully, “Oh, we have visitors! Titi, Tete and Toto, get in position! Let’s show them how beautifully you can dance a ballet!”

“Are you sure you meant to bring me here?” urgently whispered Harry to the bird, who had landed on his shoulder. He winced as he watched the trolls clumsily stumbling on their big feet, making a whole mess of things.
“No, no! Titi, that’s not a pirouette! It’s done like this!” shouted the wizard, to then demonstrate by spinning around like a loon, flapping his arms up and down.

The bird trilled insistently, and Harry shot him a glance, to see that it had lifted up a talon and was pointing with a sharp claw. He followed the direction and saw a watery-like, translucent veil spanning throughout a whole side. Realization dawned on him. It had to be a tapestry’s version of the ‘windows’ that paintings had!

“That’s the way out!” he gasped in understanding. He snapped his head around and breathed out with profound gratefulness from the very depths of his relieved heart, “Thank you!”

The bird chirped and flung up into the air, and Harry rushed towards his exit. Just when he was a few feet away from it, he saw what was on the outside world: a very dusty long corridor of the school, that looked as if it hadn’t been used in many years, but strangest of all, there was a female figure just across the corridor from him, floating inches from the floor, its tones greyish, as it swished up and down before an expanse of wall heavily latticed with bronze and dark blue cords of magic.

The figure had her back turned to him, but her voice was clearly audible. “I need redemption… I need redemption… I need redemption…” she repeated three times again and again, the distraught desperation painfully evident in her voice.

Harry stared, frowning, and took a hesitant step forward.

“No, Toto, we don’t hit the guests!”

The warning had come too late. Before he could even spin around, something hit him on the head and Harry found himself falling through and out of the tapestry, painfully landing on the hard stone floors of the corridor.

He groaned as he rubbed the back of his head, glowering at the troll of the tapestry that was stupidly grinning at him as he flailed around his big club. At least the club had only been made of cloth, and at least now he had his answer: things from paintings and tapestries could indeed hurt him. Not that he planned to ever again touch a magical painting or tapestry for as long as he lived.

The bird seemed determined to stick by his side, because it swiftly flew out of the tapestry and
landed once more on his shoulder, trilling softly.

“What are you doing here? Who are you?” said a sharp, angered voice.

Harry blinked at the ghost floating and towering over him. Now that he could see her face, it was clear that she was incredibly beautiful, with a willowy figure and long dark hair that reached her waist. What her eye color could have been in life was impossible to say, except that they had been light, because the grey of her eyes as a ghost was pale. The only thing that marred her beauty was a gaping wound and the copious dark grey spots that stained the bodice of her very old fashioned dress.

“I asked you who-”

Harry glanced away from the chest wound and kept trailing his gaze up until his eyes met hers, and the ghost suddenly clamped her mouth shut.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled as he picked himself up from the floor. “I didn’t mean to interrupt whatever you were doing-”

“Eyes of jade, House of Snake,” she breathed out as if repeating a long ago memorized litany, her eyes fixed on him, flickering from his eyes to his Slytherin uniform, then to his hands, “skin of gold, hard of touch, you will know him by these traits.”

Harry stared at her, nonplussed. “Um…sure. I have to rush now!”

Then he swiftly turned heel, ready to dash away to pounce upon the very first teacher who crossed his path so that someone could help him out of the mess he had gotten himself into.

“No –wait! You have to show me your hands, your arms!” she cried out, in a flash floating right across his path, as she started at him as if he was the ghostly apparition and not the other way around.

“Look, lady,” snapped Harry irritably, “I’m in loads of trouble and I haven’t got the time for-”
“SHOW ME YOUR ARMS!” she bellowed at him, the very force of it flattening his unruly hair backwards.

Utterly taken aback, Harry repeatedly blinked at her. In the next instant, he automatically obeyed because she looked dangerously scary at that very moment.

“See,” he said pointedly, rolling up his sleeves and displaying his skin to her. “I’m a wee bit tanned because I like to be outdoors. But I don’t have ‘skin of gold’-”

“He didn’t mean skin of gold,” she breathed out slowly, her eyes impossibly wide, fixed on his arms. “He meant that you would have specks of gold on your skin, like he has.”

Harry didn’t even bother asking whom this ‘he’ was. It would most likely be a figment of her imagination, by the look of things.

“I don’t have ‘specks’! Don’t you see?” he bit out impatiently. “I’m evenly tanned and I don’t have any freckles!”

She shook her head, her mane of hair swishing with the motion. “He wasn’t talking about freckles, but about specks of gold, and you have them.”

Harry blinked, stared down at his own skin, and then stared back at her, highly miffed and exasperated. “I really don’t have any sort of specks of any bloody color-”

“I see them,” she whispered, inching closer as she stretched out a tremulous hand. “Hard of touch… the last trait… I must know…”

And in the bat of an eyelash, her fingers had clamped around his wrist. Harry shivered at the chilly coldness of her skin.

“I didn’t go through,” she murmured, her gaze pinned where they were joined. She heaved a shuddery breath, and closed her eyes as she exhaled shakily, “I’m touching you. I can feel your skin against mine, your warmth. You’re solid to me. I can feel you.”
Harry cleared his throat and said as gently as possible, trying to rein in his temper, “Yes, it seems to be a freakish thing I have with ghosts, now if you don’t mind I must go—”

She snapped her eyes open, skewering him with her gaze. “You don’t understand.” The grip she had on his wrist jerkily tightened to a painful degree, making Harry wince. “You’re it. You’re who was promised to me. My savior, my salvation—”

“I never said he, in himself, was your salvation, Helena,” said a voice dryly.

She violently jerked as if doused in chilly water and madly spun around, her voice a mix of fury, incredulity and hysteria, as she cried out, “You!”

Harry peered around her and then gawked at the sight. There was a man shimmering and nearly translucent, with golden light and specks sparkling on his skin, in his early twenties, much tanner than he was, and very handsome, with curls of dark hair and the strangest eyes; milky white and sheer, looking as if nebulas or even tiny stars swirled in them, like mirages.

The man looked straight at him, a gorgeous wide smile on his face, as he said softly, “I’ve finally found you.”

“Found me?” said Harry baffled, pointing a finger at himself.

“Yes, you,” said the man, grinning. “It took me longer than I expected. There were so many possible lines in which you could have landed and I didn’t want to find you until you were round this age. Too soon or too late, and it wouldn’t have been good.”

Harry frowned at him. “What are you talking about? Who are you?” He cocked his head to a side, as he added hesitantly, “Er – are you a ghost too?”

“He’s not a ghost!” the real ghost shrieked, her voice angered and accusing.

The man utterly ignored her, his weird eyes remaining pinned on Harry, as he beamed a grin at him. “I’m no ghost, no creature, I’m just me. I am—”

“‘Santi’ he’s going to say!” cut in the ghost, letting out a humorless, incisive bout of short laughter. “Because it makes him sound so boyishly charming, doesn’t it?”

“Enough, Helena,” interjected the young man, frowning at her.

“Oh, you don’t want him to know what your real agenda is?” she bit out scathingly. “What you
have planned for him? Why don’t you tell him and see how he likes it!”

All amiability vanished from Santi’s face, as he said sharply, “You don’t know what you’re talking about-”

“I know enough!” snapped the ghost, to then point a finger at Harry. “You just said it – you finally found him. It’s all about him. What about me!” Her voice broke, a half choked sob issued from her lips, her tone wretched, “Have patience, you told me, time and again. He’ll soon be here, you’ll soon have help. But it’s been a thousand years!”

She wailed, the sound distraught and terrible, before her expression contorted into one of fury as she flew at Santi, her fingers poised as if they were claws and she intended to rip him to pieces, as she screamed, “All your promises were dust in the wind!”

The young man instantly gripped her wrists before he could be assaulted, and the ghost seemed to melt in his embrace, her hands gripping and trailing all over him, her voice shaky as she whispered brokenly, “Touch… it’s been so long… why did you abandon me? Why did you leave me alone for a thousand years?”

“It was your own fault, Helena,” said the young man softly, gazing down at her with a mix of pity and anger, though he still held her gently. “What possessed you to become a ghost? You knew it wouldn’t solve anything. A thousand years would have gone by in a flash if you would have allowed your soul to be reborn-”

“Reborn!” she shrieked, suddenly furious again as she tore herself away from him. “And go through another cycle of rebirths, again and again under the Curse, with the pain, the men, the violence, the horror, the deaths! I couldn’t go through it all again! You said my savior would come soon – I thought you spoke of years, or decades, not centuries, so I chose to be a ghost instead. But it’s been a thousand years without touch, without being able to feel or taste, and you weren’t here!”

Santi shook his head, and repeated sternly, “You shouldn’t have become a ghost. If you had allowed the natural process to take place, I would have found you, wherever and whomever you were, this year, this very day, and I would have brought you to Hogwarts, to him.” He gestured at Harry, who was confusedly watching them. “But as always, you chose the easy way out – or what you thought it would be.”

The ghost glared at him at that, and spat hatefully, filled with indignant fury, “Easy way out? How dare you, when you above all know of my Curse and all what I’ve suffered-“
“And you deserved every last bit of it,” snapped the young man sharply, his strange eyes hardening. “You reaped what you sowed, Helena, and it wasn’t undeserved—”

The ghost let out a yell of anger, “Everything I did, I did for the man I loved! I thought you were the only one who understood me—”

“Exactly, for the man you loved, and bugger everyone and everything else,” interrupted Santi curtly. “Selfish to the end, and I see you haven’t changed—”

“I didn’t deserve—”

“What she suffered because of you, that was undeserved,” snapped the man impatiently and angrily. “What happened to me, that was undeserved. The Curse she cast on you, that you fully earned.”

The ghost hissed under her breath, and Santi added sharply, gesturing at the wall, “And instead of doing what is right, you again chose to try an easy way out. Really, Helena, did you truly think the Room of Requirements could give you your salvation?”

“I had to try something – anything! All these centuries—”

“Room of Requirements?” interjected Harry in curiosity, staring at the expanse of wall that the ‘Santi’ person had gestured at, still seeing the lattice of vibrant magic. “What is it supposed to be, all that bronze and blue magic stuff?”

“You see it?” said Santi, smiling at him, though he didn’t look very surprised, but rather satisfied.

“Of course he does!” snapped the ghost acidly. “He’s just like you!”

“Not yet,” whispered Santi softly, his expression content.

“But he will, if you have any say in it,” bit out the ghost, “which you fully do.” She swiveled
“Enough!” snapped Santi angrily, glowering at her. “You’re doing nothing but scaring the boy. This is not the way-”

“Better said, you don’t want to scare him off with the plans you have for him!” retaliated the ghost sharply. “You want him to think that you’re his friend, his protector-”

“I am your protector,” said Santi vehemently, disregarding the ghost to intently lock his strange gaze with Harry’s. “The only true one you will always have.”

Harry stared at him, befuddled, while the ghost scoffed. One look at her, and Harry saw that her quicksilver mood was about to change again – certainly, given her swift mood swings, she wasn’t quite right in the head, and he dearly didn’t want to be again in the line of fire.

Furthermore, he remembered the reason for his previous haste, and interjected quickly, “You two obviously have loads to talk about and I’m in the way, so I’ll just-”

“In the way?” snapped the ghost, her tone shrill. “You’re not in the way, child, you are the way!” She turned towards Santi, and said desperately, clutching his arms, “What does he have to do? Show him! Make him do it now!”

“It doesn’t work that way,” said Santi calmly. “I said he was the key to your salvation, not your savior, if you care to remember. There’s much he needs to know-”

“Then tell him!”

“-from me, but from you, foremost,” carried on the man as if he hadn’t been interrupted, leveling at her a censuring glance. “It will take time-”

“Time!”
“Yes, time, Helena,” said Santi curtly. “You waited for millennia, you can afford to wait for a couple of years more. He’s too young and he doesn’t have what he requires, yet.”

He shot her such a chiding glance that the ghost went silent, and then he added with a sardonic curl of his lips, “Furthermore, it certainly won’t be done in his presence. He has witnessed too much already.”

At first, Harry thought Santi was staring at him, then he realized he was gazing at the bird on his shoulder. He had almost forgotten about it.

“Fawkes, is it, what you’re going by nowadays?” said Santi, chortling as if vastly amused.

The bird squawked and flew off Harry’s shoulder, and then the man did something – Harry could only imagine it was that ‘wandless magic’ stuff he had heard about, though seeing it now both amazed him and scared him – and the bird went careening towards Santi.

Alarmed, Harry cried out, “Don’t hurt him!”

“Hurt him?” echoed Santi smiling, as he held a wildly flapping Fawkes by his talons, and then started petting him with the other hand, which only made the bird look all the more indignant and disgruntled. “Do you know what he is?”

“Er – no,” replied Harry hesitantly, watching how the bird tried to free himself and uncertain whether to do something about it or not. “But he helped me.”

Santi chortled. “Did he now?” He raised his nearly translucent eyebrows. “Fawkes, here, is a phoenix.”

“Oh,” breathed out Harry, his eyes wide as he stared at the magnificent bird.

“Not only that,” carried on Santi blithely, “but he’s Albus Dumbledore’s phoenix.”

Harry froze and paled at that, and Santi chuckled at his reaction, as he said cheerfully, “Precisely. Though perhaps I should say that Dumbledore is his and not the other way around. You see, it’s
phoenixes that choose the wizard they want to bond with. You won’t find this in any textbooks.”
He grinned at him in amusement. “Wizards don’t like to think of themselves as being anyone’s pet, but that’s indeed the case with phoenixes and their wizards. And Fawkes here is very fond of his pet.” He shot the bird a wide, mocking grin. “Aren’t you?”

Fawkes squawked even louder than before, flapping his wings violently, but abruptly stilled when Santi added loftily, “And he wants nothing more than to fly back to Dumbledore to tell him everything he has learned tonight.”

“Tell him?” repeated Harry perplexed, blinking at the bird. He knew next to nothing about phoenixes but he hadn’t imagined they could actually speak.

“Yes, in his own way, he can communicate with his bonded wizard, transmitting thoughts through his singing,” said Santi calmly, before he shot Fawkes a smirking, smug grin, “but he won’t. Because there’s something he doesn’t want anyone to know, something I will disclose to you if he blabs to Dumbledore anything about what happened to you today.”

Fawkes let out a shrill trill and then hunched his wings and went still, looking thoroughly annoyed but also defeated. Santi, for his part, beamed a satisfied smile at the bird.

“Leave,” said the ghost suddenly, her voice sharp as she pierced Fawkes with narrowed eyes.

The bird flapped his wings once and let out a sad, mournful trill, which only seemed to anger the ghost further, since she snapped, “You’ve never helped me either, so leave! I don’t want you here, ever!”

Fawkes shook his head sorrowfully, but then let out a soft trill and burst into a ball of flames, vanishing in the next second. Harry gaped.

“That’s his favorite exit strategy when he’s feeling frustrated,” said Santi with an amused chortle. “But don’t worry, he won’t be telling Dumbledore anything.”

Harry snapped his gaze up to stare at the man, and then carded his fingers through his hair, shakily. “That’s not what I’m really worried about… Though it’s better if Dumbledore doesn’t know…”

He trailed off uncertainly, and then pointed a finger at the tapestry, not knowing where to begin or
if to even say anything about it to this stranger, who he didn’t really know who or what he was.

“Ah, you’re troubled,” said Santi before Harry could open his mouth. He smiled at him gently. “Don’t be. I’ve already taken care of it.”

Harry stared at him, frowning. “Taken care of what?”

“Of the bunch of dark wizards who were after your trail, of course,” said Santi nonchalantly. “How was it that Pollux Black put it? Ah, yes, you have to be ‘silenced’.”

He grinned at Harry and chuckled.

Harry blinked, gawked, and then stammered out, “How do you know about that? It happened before I met you and I didn’t see you anywhere before that-”

The ghost scoffed and Harry glanced at her, nonplussed.

“I, myself, the one you see now, didn’t do it,” said Santi calmly. “But I came back a few minutes earlier and took care of it. The portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black doesn’t remember you.” He widely grinned at Harry. “In fact, the only thing he remembers is Fawkes taking someone away from Paracelsus’ portrait in Dumbledore office. Because he caught just a glimpse of that before Fawkes took you to Barnabas the Barmy.”

He gestured at the tapestry, where the loony wizard depicted was still trying to teach the three beastly trolls how to do ballet.

“I thought it was better if they believed that Dumbledore had something to do with it, that’s why I let Phineas remember Fawkes,” continued Santi coolly. Then he paused, his strange, swirling milky eyes loosing their focus for a second, before he widely smirked. “In fact, right now, the wizards are interrogating Phineas and they are coming to the conclusion that you were a portrait of Hogwarts, sent by Dumbledore to spy on their secret meeting in Grimmauld Place number twelve. So see, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Grimmauld Place?” repeated Harry numbly, feeling very much out of his depth and not
understanding a single thing.

“That’s where you were,” replied Santi patiently. “In the Black’s townhouse in the middle of muggle London.”

Harry shook his head repeatedly, trying to puzzle out his confused thoughts. “I don’t understand. How did you-”

“How did I know what had happened? How did I wipe Phineas’ portrait’s memories? How did I do it all before I met you, and also undetected and unseen by them?”

“Yes,” said Harry, frowning deeply. “And how did you get in the portrait to do it, because I’ve been told that no ‘living being’…” His frown deepened even further. “How did I get stuck inside paintings, too! If you know, you have to tell me-”

“Because you’re not a living being,” snapped the ghost, looking very impatient.

“What?” Harry glowered at her, feeling deeply insulted. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She rolled her eyes, and then gestured indolently at Santi. “It means that you’re like him.”

“What?” repeated Harry, biting the words out. “And what’s that supposed to mean, then?” He huffed and gestured at the spot from which Fawkes had disappeared. “Besides, the bird is a living being, isn’t he? And he had no trouble getting into the painting-”

“Ah, but you asked for his help, didn’t you?” interjected Santi. “A phoenix can come to the aid of those he considers worthy and good of heart, beings of Light Magic that they are, and no magical barriers can oppose them in such circumstances – like the barriers that prevent living beings from entering paintings and tapestries.”

“Alright…” said Harry a bit uncertainly, then crossing his arms over his chest to pierce the strange man with his gaze, his jaw in a stubborn set. “That doesn’t explain all the rest-”

Santi waved his hand dismissively. “All the other ‘hows’ are simply explained by saying that I can
do all that because I’m me.”

Harry’s green eyes narrowed to slits. “And what are you, then, exactly?”

Santi smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “Simply that, me. I’m one of a kind.”

“Two of a kind, now,” piped in the ghost, her eyes travelling to Harry.

“There!” snapped Harry grumpily, pointing a finger at her. “What does she mean by that?”

Santi scowled at the ghost, and Harry darkly glowered at them both, as he gestured wildly with his hands and bit out, “Look here, I’m a living being, alright? And I’m not like him. I’m not glowy, golden, and all sparkly!” He stomped a foot on the floor with sheer exasperation. “I don’t have weird eyes and I’m not transparent and stuff!”

“He can be as solid as he pleases-” began the ghost with a mock, cheerful tone.

“Oh, Helena, please,” groaned Santi.

“I’m growing weary of all this,” she snapped, scowling. “Just tell the boy everything and-”

“If you want to do that,” interjected Santi curtly, shooting her a hard glance, “then it’s you who should start telling him all about you.”

She stilled and her eyes narrowed to slits. “Certainly not!”

“He cannot help you unless he understands,” persisted Santi sternly, “and he cannot understand unless he has all the information-”

“I cannot tell him everything!” said the ghost, her voice wavering and becoming faint, even her face seemed to pale with desperation. “For that I would have to relive it all!”
Santi shrugged his shoulders carelessly. “It’s the only way.”

“No,” she said tremulously, her eyes huge and haunted.

Santi ignored her and turned to Harry, as he asked casually, “Do you know who she is?”

Harry glanced at her dubiously. “I think I do. I’ve heard about Ravenclaw House’s ghost who doesn’t like to be seen and is always fleeing away from students. I guess she’s it, then – the Grey Lady.”

A brittle sound, half choked laugh, half bitter scoff, issued from the ghost’s lips. “Is that what I’m called nowadays? Wizarding kind certainly has a short memory.”

“It’s a start,” said Santi, smiling and nodding at him, to then pointedly glance at the ghost. “The rest is for her to tell you.”

The Grey Lady glowered at him. “I refuse-”

Abruptly, a loud wail echoed through the corridor, mournful, longing and wretched, accompanied by the sound of clanking chains.

“Helenaaaa,” the deep, gravelly voice was calling out.

The Grey Lady spun around, a look of abject horror on her face, her mouth opening in a silent, terrified scream.

In the bat of an eyelash, she swiveled around and flew away, sinking into one of the ways. Seconds later, another ghost flashed by to disappear into the same wall.

Harry blinked, and then pointed. “That was the Bloody Baron, I think. What-”

“That was the consequence of the Curse that ails the Grey Lady,” put in Santi loftily.
Harry stared at him, and frowned. “You mentioned a curse before-”

Santi forestalled him with a raised hand. “That’s for you to glean from her.”

Abruptly, he came to stand before him, or better said, kind of floated to where he was, and gripped him by the shoulders.

Harry shivered, though not from unpleasantness. Even through the layers of fabric, he could feel Santi’s touch, soft and so very warm. It also felt very strangely familiar, as if it was just right.

Some of it must have shown on his face, because Santi smiled at him, ever so gently and pleased, before he adopted a grave expression. “It is of the utmost importance that you get her to speak to you, to tell you all about her life. She will be very reluctant, but you must succeed. That’s your task.”

“Task?” Harry shook his head. “I don’t understand. I don’t see why I –”

“You want to help her, don’t you?” demanded Santi, piercing him with his weird milky eyes.

Harry shot him a look of utter disbelief. “Er – no? Why should I?” He harrumphed grumpily. “I have my own problems and things to do, let me tell you. And she wasn’t exactly nice to me, was she?” He tapped the side of his head with a finger. “Bonkers, she is, in case you didn’t notice.”

The corner of Santi’s lips hitched upwards. “True, but she hasn’t had an easy existence, and you’re the only one who can help her.” Seeing Harry’s unimpressed expression, he smiled widely in amusement, before adding more seriously, “Furthermore, by helping her, you will be helping yourself, through all the things you’ll discover from what she has to say.”

“Right,” said Harry dubiously.

“Trust me,” said Santi vehemently, “even if I’m only a stranger to you, for now. I truly only have your best interest at heart. Will you do as I ask? You have nothing to lose.”
Harry shot him another uncertain glance but then finally nodded. “Alright. When I find the time, I’ll look for her and I’ll try to make her speak to me…”

“Good,” breathed out Santi, warmly smiling at him. His face turned grave and he added adamantly, “Another thing, don’t tell your… brother anything about me or her.”

“Tom?” Harry blinked at him, then darkly glared, crossing his arms over his small chest. “Why not?”

Santi sighed, and said sternly, “Because the Grey Lady possesses, let us say, information that would be dangerous in certain hands – in your brother’s hands, that is.” He skewered Harry with his milky gaze, and added pointedly, “He likes to use people, doesn’t he?”

At that, Harry scowled at him. It was true, for sure, but he didn’t like others bad-mouthing his brother, only he had the right to do that! Besides, what did this ‘Santi’ person, or whatever he was, know about anything? He certainly couldn’t know Tom, or him for that matter - not all that much.

“What he would do with that information would be disastrous, to others,” said Santi insistently when he saw Harry’s unyielding expression, “but mostly, to himself.”

“Oh,” said Harry, frowning worriedly, even though he didn’t even partly understand what the man was talking about. “To know about the Grey Lady would hurt him, then?”

Santi nodded. “Yes, exactly.”

“Alright, then, I suppose…” Harry trailed off, and then brightened. “But there’s no reason for me not to tell him about you.”

Santi looked briefly alarmed and then made a moue of dissatisfaction, before he said sharply, “You can’t tell him about me. Ever.” He lifted a hand when Harry was about to interrupt him. “I was serious when I said that I’m your only protector. That’s why Tom can’t know—“

“I don’t need protection from my own brother!” snapped Harry feeling quite indignant.
“You will,” interjected Santi curtly.

Harry fiercely glowered at him, his hands balling into fists. “Tom would never hurt me!”

“He wouldn’t willfully hurt you, no, I don’t believe he would,” said Santi slowly, cocking his head to a side as if pondering how best to phrase his words. “But he will hurt you when misguided and thinking that he’s doing what is best for you – and it will not be.”

Harry frowned, feeling deeply perturbed, uncertain, and confused.

At that, Santi gently smiled at him and ruffled Harry’s already unruly hair. “You’re still so very young. But we have many years.” He chuckled. “Indeed, we have Time.”

At the strange inflection on the word, Harry shot him a bemused glance, and the man chortled, as if amused at his own pun, as he added, “I might as well tell you now, since the Grey Lady will certainly mention it. She will tell you that I can bend Time at my pleasure, which is basically true. But I also impose limits on myself, that’s why I must go now.”

Harry gawked at him, then snorted loudly, now believing that the Grey Lady wasn’t the only one who was a loony.

Santi clearly knew what was crossing his mind because the golden, sparkly man patted his head, smiling indulgently. “You want proof? Very well. I know all about your Sorting. I know that the Founders’ judgments spoke to you. I know what they said.” He widely grinned at him. “You will be the tool of titans, that’s one of the things Salazar Slytherin said, if you’ll remember.”

Harry gaped at him, his mouth hanging open, his green eyes wide. “How-?”

“You told me,” said Santi with a shrug of his shoulders.

“I didn’t!” choked out Harry, affronted.

Santi chortled. “Ah, but you did, in the future. And you haven’t told Tom about it, and you never will. It was only I whom you trusted.” His cheerfulness vanished from his handsome face when he
added gravely, “On that note, given your little ‘adventure’ through the paintings today, do you care to hazard a guess who one of those titans is?”

Harry paled dramatically, his heart stuttering and dropping to his stomach, as he remembered what he had overheard, and he said in a thin, scared whisper, “Grindelwald.”

“Got that right,” said Santi shortly, piercing him intensely with his gaze. “And you’ll have to do something about it, won’t you?”

“Do what?!” exclaimed Harry, panicky and highly troubled.

“Simply prepare yourself as best as you can,” replied Santi calmly. When Harry opened his mouth to tell him just what he thought about that ‘brilliant’ and vague suggestion, the strange young man held up a hand, “I must go. But we’ll talk soon. Indeed, we’ll have much time to talk all you want and to get to know each other.”

“Know each other?” Harry’s eyebrows shot upwards, not knowing what to feel about that.

“Yes.” Santi shot him a gorgeous, charming smile. “And you might want to hurry too.”

Harry stared at him, befuddled.

“I believe you have a good little friend awaiting you,” pointed out Santi gently, “beside himself with worry.”

Harry slapped a hand on his forehead, his eyes wide in realization, as he breathed out dismayed, “Alphard!”

“Quite.” Santi grinned at him. “I’ll see you soon!”

And with that and a cheery wave of his hand, the young man simply vanished into thin air.

Harry blinked, shook his head and then simply spun around and made a mad dash.
Indeed, he found Alphard Black still waiting for him in front of the painting of the bowl of fruits, looking as if he was in hysterics.

When he saw Harry coming towards him, running, the boy actually flung himself at Harry, hugging him tightly, as he let out a frantic sob. “I thought you had died! I thought you were dead, in some painting – you know, because of the air!” He choked, and then half hiccupped and half sobbed. “I was about to go wake up the Headmaster. I didn’t know what to do!”

“I’m all right. Really,” said Harry hurriedly, feeling very guilty, as he patted his new friend on the back.

Alphard pulled away from him, his teary grey eyes roving all over Harry to ascertain he wasn’t lying. Finally, he rubbed his eyes and nose with the cuff of his shirt, and stared open-mouthed at him. “What happened? How did you-”

“I seems I can breathe inside paintings without problem,” said Harry, shrugging his shoulders. “It just took me a long time to find a… er, a painting that would let me get out from it.”

Alphard’s grey eyes went wide, as he stuttered, “But how – why-?”

“I reckon it was just what you said,” cut in Harry quickly, as he gestured at the painting of the bowl of fruits. “Its magic must have gone all wonky.” He let out a forced laugh as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Best if we don’t test it again, don’t you think?”

“Oh!” Alphard breathed out, shooting the painting a terrified glance. “Yes, I sure don’t want to tickle the pear now!” Then his expression turned downcast and mournful. “But I so wanted to show you the house-elves!”

“And you will,” said Harry swiftly, beaming a smile, “some other night.”

“I suppose it would be best if we just went to sleep,” said Alphard slowly, still looking very much disappointed, “it’s pretty late.”

Harry nodded vehemently, and they began they return back to Slytherin House.
“I suppose we should tell a teacher,” whispered Alphard at some point, looking troubled. “You know, about the faulty magic of the painting, so that they can repair it.”

Alarmed, Harry had to quickly mask his expression, and he said casually, “Oh, I dunno about that. We would have to tell them everything then, and we were way past curfew. I don’t want to get a detention!”

“Oh, right,” said Alphard, biting his lip.

“And besides,” Harry quickly added, “Apollyon Pringle must have a way to know when paintings’ magic go bad, right? Being the Caretaker of the castle and stuff.”

“I suppose,” said Alphard, not sounding very certain.

“I really don’t want to get detention,” insisted Harry now with a whine, shooting him a woeful little glance.

At that, Alphard understandingly smiled at him, patting him on the back. “Don’t worry. We won’t tell anyone, then. It will be our secret. Kind of an adventure, really!”

“Yeah,” breathed out Harry, who truly didn’t want to have adventures of that kind ever again.

Though as they made their way to the dungeons, Harry was highly tempted, several times, to ask Alphard many questions. About his father, what he knew of the man’s involvement with the Dark Lord, about the so-called Grimmauld Place and Phineas Nigellus’ portraits, and about the Dark Lord Grindelwald himself. But he never dared, knowing there was no way he could do it subtly enough as to not make Alphard suspect that something else had happened during Harry’s ‘adventure’ through the paintings of Hogwarts’ castle.

By the time they reached their dormitory, panting with exhaustion, they had only had to escape from the prowling Rascal the Corvus for several minutes, but they had managed to lose him quickly through the labyrinthine corridors of the dungeons.

Choking on their pants of breath, they tiptoed around their dormitory very quietly and swiftly got
ready for bed, with Alphard shooting Harry a last conspiratorial grin before going to sleep.

For his part, Harry would hardly sleep a wink, his mind too troubled with everything that had happened.

In the following weeks, his sleep would be fleeting as well, since he would constantly and fretfully worry and ponder about what to tell, how much, and to whom.

Since what would most heavily weigh and prey on his thoughts was the fact that, apparently, Czechoslovakia would be attacked in March.

The knowledge of such terrible thing would settle like an immeasurable burden on his soul. After all, Santi hadn’t said anything about not speaking a word about that part.
Part I: Chapter 19

The following weeks passed by like a blur for Harry.

He couldn’t sleep well, he barely paid any attention in class – even in his favorite one, Mr. Tilly Toke’s Charm class, where they were up to the point of casting Hovering Charms on each other, resulting in having students flying all around the room, some laughing and some even shrieking in horror, like Capricia Carrow, who still hadn’t forgiven their teacher for pushing her off a high chair– and he had even lost his appetite and his sweet tooth.

His friends had noticed, though the Prewett twins and Algie Longbottom seemed to think he was depressed because he couldn’t attend the Gryffindors’ Halloween costume party.

When excitedly discussing the planning of the event, they would suddenly remember his presence in their midst and they would clamp their mouths shut, Algie Longbottom looking awkward and uncomfortable, the twins looking sad and guilty.

Harry had even heard that Felicity and Felix were very angry with their housemates and were still arguing and fighting with them, for his sake. In any other occasion, he would have told them to let it rest, that attending a party was the least of his concerns. But he couldn’t even make an effort to care about any of it.
His new secret friend, Alphard Black, had also detected something was troubling him. It had happened on the day in which Harry finally woke up from bed with a solution in mind.

Feeling vastly energized and cheerful, he had almost skipped all the way towards the Great Hall for breakfast, with every intention of using the free hour before his first class to write a letter to the Prime Minister himself. Indeed, who better to tell about the attack on Czechoslovakia but Neville Chamberlain!

His brilliant idea, though, was cruelly crushed when Tom and he received letters from Alice. One of the newspaper clippings that Alice had sent his brother had instantly caught his attention.

‘Prime Minister returns victorious from Germany!’ the article said in big bold letters. ‘Munich Agreement signed!’

The first picture accompanying the cheerful article showed the Prime Minister at an aerodrome, triumphantly waving the resolution signed the day earlier with Germany. Another displayed a still beaming Neville Chamberlain on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, celebrating and waving at the crowds, with King George VI and Queen Elizabeth by his side.

Harry felt a powerful burst of hope and happiness as he looked at the pictures and read the article over his brother’s shoulder. Clearly, there was no need to tell anyone at all about the attack!

Given everything the Prewett twins had told him about Gellert Grindelwald, Hitler was the wizard’s puppet, and if Hitler had made peace with England and had sworn not to attack any other country, then it must have been because the Dark Lord had ordered him not to! Maximillian Malfoy just didn’t know that yet, that was why the wizard had believed that Czechoslovakia would be conquered in March.

At that point, feeling as if nothing could go wrong in the world, Harry had popped a piece of French toast into his mouth, munching it joyfully. That was, until his brother spoke.

“Idiots,” Tom scoffed scornfully under his breath, as he unceremoniously stuffed the article back into the envelope of Alice’s letter, “ ‘Piece for Our Time’, don’t make me laugh.”

“What-?” came out the strangled, taken aback words from Harry’s mouth. He urgently swallowed his piece of toast, and pinned his brother with his stare. “What d’ya mean?”
Tom arched an eyebrow at him, as he said nonchalantly, “What I mean is that they’re all fools for believing that a signed piece of paper has any value at all-”

“But it said it was a *Peace* agreement!” interrupted Harry, choking out his words as he pointed at the envelope containing the newspaper article.

“Exactly,” said Tom sharply, “it’s a contract, in essence. And contracts are made to be broken, aren’t they?” He snorted disdainfully and then focused his attention back to his breakfast, as he added dismissively, “That ‘peace agreement’ is as worthless as the ink it was penned with.”

Harry gaped at him in disbelief. “But it said-”

“Really, brother,” snapped Tom impatiently, shooting him an annoyed scowl, “haven’t you been paying attention to Muggle News? Do you really think someone like Hitler, who goes around calling himself a Führer, of all things, and by that he might as well crown himself an Emperor and it would mean the same-” he scoffed scathingly “-would just decide to play nice? He’s been doing a pretty good job in taking countries that aren’t his. Why would he stop?” He carelessly waved off a hand. “He’s fooled Chamberlain to gain some time, that’s all.”

Harry’s face scrunched up with a deep, highly troubled frown, as he muttered, “So you really think there’ll be war-”

“I’ve been telling you so for ages,” bit out Tom, looking irked beyond measure. “Yes, there’ll be war. Yes, Hitler won’t stop. Anyone with half a brain would realize that much.”

Harry dashed out of the Great Hall before his brother could even ask him what bee he had on his bonnet.

Given that writing to Neville Chamberlain was no longer an option, since the man clearly believed in the validity of the agreement he had signed, Harry considered simply writing to Alice. But soon, he realized several things.

Even if she believed him, she would want to know how he came upon such information, and he couldn’t tell her anything about it, because revealing to her the existence of the Magical World and Hogwarts could end up very badly.
He knew about the Statute of Secrecy thing, and he dreaded the possibility that the Ministry of Magic would somehow know and end up sending one of those ‘Obliviator’ chaps that the Prewett twins and Algie Longbottom had once mentioned, when telling him about the Ministry and all its departments. And the last thing Harry wanted was for anyone to mess with Alice’s brain; that was unforgivable, in his view.

The only other alternative he could come up with, was to write to that Winston Churchill fellow he had so often heard about, when Alice and Robert Hutchins discussed politics. He remembered that Bob had said that the man was an ‘old dog’ in politics, and was the only one who publicly decried Hitler and Germany as a threat.

There was one grave obstacle, though. One thing was to write to Neville Chamberlain, who all knew he lived in Downing Street. Winston Churchill, on the other hand, Harry didn’t have the foggiest idea where he could be found.

Thus, after the end of a class shared with the Gryffindors, he pounced on Felicity Prewett.

“Owls can really, really find anyone in the whole world?” he asked quickly. “With just knowing their name? Even if they’re a muggle?”

Felicity blinked at him, before replying matter-of-factly, “Yes, of course. In the Wizarding World, owls are bred by trained wizards, and they cast all sorts of spells on them when they’re just eggs, to give them several magical abilities, like that of being able to find anyone by just knowing their name.”

The girl tilted her head to a side, gazing at him with her beautiful, mismatched hazel and blue eyes, which glinted with curiosity. “Who do you want to write to-”

Harry was gone before she could even complete her sentence.

It was thus, that by evening time, he had used every spare moment in writing a letter to the politician. He had gone through many drafts, and though still dissatisfied with the end result, he had felt a modicum of relief as he stuck the letter into a pocket of his school robes.

He was in such a good mood, that when Alphard Black waylaid him, he allowed himself to be cajoled into going to the kitchens.
It was their twelfth time down there. Indeed, three days after Harry’s ‘incident’ with the painting of the bowl of fruits, Alphard had insisted on showing him the elves.

At first, the boy had been a bit hesitant in tickling the pear –Harry certainly didn’t offer himself up as a volunteer- but it had worked without a hitch. The painting had flung itself to a side, revealing a passageway.

“You were right,” had piped in Alphard, looking mightily content. “Apollyon Pringle must’ve repaired its magic!”

The ‘Elves’, at first, were a crushing disappointed for Harry. They were not the willowy, ethereal and beautiful beings mentioned in his Celtic folklore book. Instead, they were short, green things, with huge bulging eyes, gigantic flapping ears and large, pointy noses.

However, he soon became very fond of the little creatures. Though they weren’t all that ‘little’: just about his very same height, which still made him grumble. But they were very kind and cheerful, and tripped over their own feet in their rush to cook or bake anything Harry or Alphard asked for, allowing them to indulge their sweet tooth, which they both shared in common.

Thus, the kitchens had become their secret little meeting place, since it appeared that no student ever went there. It was in the kitchens -with the house-elves always orbiting around them, solicitously asking what they desired and making for them delicious pastries and scones, along with scrumptious cups of hot chocolate- where the two boys spent all their time together, when they wanted to talk, when they played Exploding Snaps, or even when they had to do their homework.

That day, though, it seemed that Alphard had decided to voice his concerns.

“What’s been going on with you?” the boy asked, as he settled down his cup of hot cocoa.

“Huh?” said Harry distractedly.

“That!” said Alphard, pointing a finger at him. “You have been going around, with that dazed, worried look on your face.” The boy leaned forward over the table, peering at him, as he said softly, “Does it have something to do with your parents?”
“My parents?” Harry blinked at him.

“Yes,” said Alphard quietly, looking concerned. “I saw you and your brother receiving letters again, today at breakfast. And you started arguing with him, or something, and you looked very worried.” He gazed at him with commiserating, big grey eyes. “Did you get bad news from home? Is one of your parents ill?”

“Ill?” Harry started to shake his head, before he changed tacks and quickly nodded.

Indeed, he might as well say that Alice was ill, because there was no doubt in his mind that she would soon be so.

Tom always said he was a complete dunderhead in anything politics-related, but he comprehended enough to realize that if Maximillian Malfoy was right, and Czechoslovakia was going to be attacked in March, it would amount to the same thing as the Germans declaring war on England, given the so-called ‘Munich Agreement’ they had signed and would be breaking.

And Harry knew exactly what would happen then.

Now, Old John Bryce’s tales about his time as a soldier, fighting in the Great War, didn’t sound as thrilling, adventurous and wonderful as before, because now it would be Robert Hutchins in the trenches, fighting against the spike-headed Germans.

Tom had warned him about it, in King’s Cross Station. Bob wanted to enroll in the army if there was ever a war, and Alice would be crushed. It only made the whole matter ever more urgent and worrisome for him.

“Oh, yeah, it’s my… mum. She’s ill and a bit frail,” he finally said in a shaky whisper, “so we’re worried.”

Alphard shot him a look filled with understanding and sympathy and left it at that, for which Harry cherished him immensely.

It was then when he realized what a good friend the other boy had been, because Alphard must have detected his lack of concentration in class, must have been concerned, but in all that time, the boy had never pressed him to know why, and had simply helped him with homework after class.
Not only that, but following Dorea’s plan, Alphard had written to his father, asking for his racing broom whilst expressing his wish to keep practicing his flying abilities without the teachers finding out.

Weeks before, a huge, intimidating owl had landed in front of Alphard, with a box no larger than a wand’s. Later that day, the boy had proudly presented Harry with a shrunken Comet 180.

Alphard had even woken up at the wee hours of Sunday morning, to accompany Harry on his first Quidditch training session. As they had made their way to the remote spot at the other end of the Black Lake, the boy had excitedly explained to Harry all the details and features of the broom, adding some very useful suggestions of how it was best mounted and directed.

Every Sunday thereafter, Alphard would be there, watching and cheering him on, even when the weather turned bad and it started raining and hailing.

Furthermore, even though Dorea Black was a very tough trainer, Quidditch had soon become Harry’s favorite activity of the week.

Having Antonin Dolohov there, being the team’s Keeper in need of more practice, would sometimes remind Harry that the older boy’s father had been one of those in the secret meeting in Grimmauld Place, and it would make Maximillian Malfoy’s spine-chilling words, ‘Next March’, reverberate like roaring thunder in his head.

But as soon as he was on the Comet 180, all those thoughts would simply melt away from his mind and he would feel as carefree as never before in his life. Flying was truly the best thing that had ever been invented, and it bestowed on him the only few hours a week of true peace.

Not only did he immensely enjoy it, but he had realized that he was actually quite superb at it. At least, Dorea Black couldn’t stop gushing about his ‘fabulous’ skills and moves, although Harry had done much to earn her praise, since no matter what outlandish and crazy stunts and acrobatics she came up with and made him try, he was always up to it and ended up performing them without a fault.

Once, the older Slytherin girl had even hugged him tightly in mid-air, as she cried out, ecstatic, “I’ve been waiting all my life for a Chaser like you, Riddle!” A wicked, highly satisfied glint had shone in her grey eyes. “Charlus and his pathetic bunch of Gryffs won’t stand a stance next year!”
Moreover, Harry could already see the benefits of the arduous training on his body. His arms and legs were no longer the thin things of before, but they had gained some lithe muscles. And he could only wish that he would keep getting stronger, and grow to be very tall too, so that for once, it would be him bossing Tom and not the other way around, as usual.

Though, it hadn’t been all sonnets and roses. Dorea had come to utterly despise his big, rounded eyeglasses.

It had started on the second Sunday, when Dorea had passed him the Quaffle, so unexpectedly and so forcefully, that the ball had slammed on his face, breaking his glasses. She had had a quick fix for that, and had taught him the charm.

On the following practice session, in the middle of a very complicated maneuver, they had come tumbling down to the ground. The Slytherin Quidditch Captain, still in a patient good mood, had taught him a sticking charm.

The previous Sunday, though, it had down-poured, and her mood had been short and acerbic. So when Harry -hardly being able to see a thing through his stained glasses- missed a shot, leaving Antonin Dolohov to easily deflect it, nastily guffawing at him, Dorea had put her foot down. Flying up to him, she had snapped, scowling fiercely as she gestured at his eyeglasses, “I could teach you a spell for that, but what would be the point? Even if you cast the three charms on your glasses before a match, they could wear off in the middle of a game – matches can last for many hours, Riddle, and you aren’t allowed the use of a wand when playing Quidditch. Those horrid eyeglasses of yours have to go!”

Angrily, she had made him fly down to the ground. She had been so furious, that it seemed to have affected even her hair, since suddenly –when it had been glossy, perfectly coiffured, and beautifully wavy all during practice, withstanding even the heavy rain- it became a frightful tangled mass of hairs sticking in all directions.

“What are you gawking at, Riddle?” Dorea had snapped at him. Only to touch her hair the next instant, and grumble under her breath, highly irritated, “Oh, the grooming charm must have worn off.” With an annoyed flick of her wand, she solved the problem, though she still glared at him, biting out, “Yes, that’s my natural hair. Not that you’re one to speak, your hair is just as atrocious!”

Automatically, one of Harry’s hands went to his hair, trying to flatten it out, not that he had ever
cared much about it. Only Alice had complained, the many times she had attempted to comb it into submission. Well, and when they had been younger, Tom would frequently mock him for it, calling him ‘scarecrow-head’. Still did sometimes, at that.

“Look here, Riddle,” Dorea said firmly, skewering him with her grey eyes, “you’ll have to take a potion to correct your sight.”

Harry frowned at her, and said a bit dubiously, “A potion?”

“Yes,” she said shortly, shooting him an irked glare. “You have several options.” She started ticking off her fingers. “There’s one that you can find in any apothecary and is quite cheap. It corrects your eyesight for a month, so you would have to buy it and take it in a monthly basis, because we’ll always be having practice and I don’t want to see those glasses of yours ever again.” She halted, before adding nonchalantly, “The only drawback to that potion is that it gives you terrible headaches at random.”

She cocked her head to a side. “Now that I think about it, that potion isn’t an option for you. I don’t want you to cost us a match due to some trifle little thing as your head hurting too much.” She shook her head. “No, you’ll just have to use the Dark potion. It permanently corrects your eyesight, only that in thirty-five percent of the cases it can leave the drinker completely blind, with no magical way to reverse it.”

Harry gaped at her in disbelief. “You’re mad! I’m not trying that!”

Alphard, who by then had approached them and had been listening in with curiosity, piped in, “Oh, that’s the one you used, wasn’t it, ‘Rea?”

“Quite right, little nephew,” said Dorea, beaming at him, before her grey eyes narrowed and she pierced Harry with scowl. “I was as blind as a bat, just like you, but when I was ten I already knew that I was serious about Quidditch, and I took a chance and the potion paid off.” Her eyes narrowed to mere slits, as she demanded sharply, “The question is, are you serious about playing Quidditch? If not, tell me now because then I’m just wasting my time with you.”

“I am serious about Quidditch!” said Harry vehemently, before his voice turned hesitant, “but if the potion could turn me blind…” He trailed off, shaking his head, before he frowned. “You said something about it being ‘dark’?”
Dorea shrugged her shoulders unconcernedly. “It is. You’ll only find it in Knockturn Alley’s apothecary, and it’s a bit expensive. It’s a banned potion, considered Dark, because it uses an illegal ingredient – the eyes of some magical creature nearly extinct that no one really cares about.” She rolled her eyes, showing what she thought about that.

Harry stared at her, before his expression turned even more troubled. “Exactly how expensive is it?”

“Nowadays, about a thousand galleons or so,” she replied offhandedly.

“I don’t have that kind of money!” said Harry gobsmacked, gawking at her. That was ten times the amount Dumbledore had given Tom and him, and they had bought all the possessions they owned at present with that!

He shook his head sadly. “I don’t have a single galleon, in fact.” He paused, his green eyes suddenly brightening, as he said excitedly, “Oh, I know! I could ask Professor Slughorn to brew it for me-”

“Slughorn!” shrieked Dorea, bursting into loud guffaws, tears of mirth in her eyes. “He’d charge you even more than the apothecary in Knockturn Alley! Slughorn would sell his own mother if it earned him a small fortune!” She shook her head, as she said between peals of laughter, “He’s a creature of comforts, you see, with expensive tastes – such that can’t be maintained with his teacher’s salary. Why, just take a turn around the Greenhouses at night and you’ll see Slughorn covertly slipping in, nicking buds of Professor Beery’s Venomous Tentacula to sell in Knockturn Alley. He nicks everything that isn’t bolted to the floor, actually!”

She nearly choked on her chuckles, as she added, “He even used to scavenger the Forbidden Forest for plants that are expensive potions ingredients, until the Centaurs trampled all over him and he spent a week in the Hospital Wing! He doesn’t dare put a toe near the forest ever since.”

With a last chortle, Dorea wiped her tears of mirth from her eyes, and glanced at Harry again. “No, you’d do better just buying the ingredients and asking your twin to brew the potion for you.”

“Ask Tom?” Harry blinked at her.

“Yes, I’ve heard he’s brilliant at Potions, and the potion is not that complicated, just very tedious and time-consuming to brew.”

Harry had had several objections to that, first but certainly not least of all was that he couldn’t even afford to pay for ingredients. But Alphard had very generously offered to give him his allowance of a month, to pay for them.

Not one to accept charity, Harry had very stubbornly refused, but his friend had worn him out in the end, with a very candid sentiment expressed in his words, “I’m not giving you free money, I’m investing in you as a Quidditch player, Harry! I’m planning on being a Chaser too, next year, and I want my fellow teammate to be just as good or better than me - that will make me enjoy the sport even more. And when you become a famous Quidditch player, I will proudly say I was your first
sponsor. Really, just accept the stupid galleons!”

Harry yielded in the end, and a few hours afterwards, Dorea tracked him down and handed him ‘Obscure Brews to Correct the Senses’, with a page dog-eared on the chapter detailing the instructions for the potion.

A day later, she was already demanding to know if she had talked to Tom.

Harry smoothly lied and nodded, since approaching his brother about it wasn’t high up in his list of priorities. Moreover, he also dreaded to imagine what Tom would demand in return for brewing a potion that would take him a long time and thus pull him away from his precious, stupid little books.

Though, the day when Tom confronted him about his lack of concentration in class, Harry actually remembered that he was owed a favor in exchange for looking for the Chamber of Secrets.

He had known, that at some point, his brother would ask what was the matter with him. Tom was the one person who knew him best in the whole world, so of course the boy had noticed that something wasn’t quite right with him.

And Harry had mightily dreaded it, because he knew that if Tom pressed him, he could very well be unable to keep it all in, and he would just blurt out the whole thing – Santi and Grey Lady included.

Indeed, back then, Maximillian Malfoy’s words were still haunting him, day and night. He had felt frantic with impotence and worry. He hadn’t known what an eleven-year-old boy like himself could possibly do about such a grave and urgent matter. And given the chance, he feared he would break down and plea and ask his brother for help.

However, he wasn’t given the chance, because Tom was still so self-absorbed in his research - about the Chamber, but foremost, Salazar Slytherin’s line, wanting to discover how they could be the wizard’s descendants- that his brother’s mode of approach didn’t even tempt Harry the slightest bit to be in any way forthcoming with him.

“I don’t care why you’ve been moping around and I don’t have time right now to tutor you, but you best stop getting low marks on your essays, or else,” Tom had hissed out at him angrily, plopping a couple of thick textbooks of all sorts of subjects on Harry’s desk. “Read, study, and stop embarrassing me.”

His brother had only halted to shoot him a demanding glance. “How is your search for the Chamber going?”

Harry had almost told him where he could go to sod off, but he hadn’t, because he had actually spent considerable time and effort on that quest.

Indeed, after meeting Santi, he had decided he could kill two birds with one stone, carrying on both of his tasks at the same time: finding the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets and finding the Grey Lady again, to glean from her the ‘story of her life’.
Thus, every evening after class, he had spent a couple of hours meandering around the castle.

He had caught glimpses of the Grey Lady three times, but one look at him and she was gone. It became patently clear to him that Santi had vastly understated her ‘reluctance’ – the Grey Lady didn’t seem in any way disposed to open up her bosom to him and even less, share life experiences.

His search for the Chamber of Secret had been just as unsuccessful. The moving staircases of the castle kept making him go around in circles. Once, he actually saw the lattice of magic on the walls vibrating, as if Hogwarts was good-naturedly laughing and playing with him, tricking him and moving her stairs around to make him land always on the same spot, or sometimes in remote corners of the castle.

Harry hadn’t found it all that funny and had almost yelled at the castle.

Nevertheless, it had allowed him to discover a few interesting things.

He had miraculously found again the corridor where he had met Santi and the Grey Lady, taking note that it was on the seventh floor, the unused and abandoned part of Hogwarts.

He had stood in front of the wall covered with bronze and dark blue cords of magic, though he certainly hadn’t seen any door that would lead to the ‘Room of Requirements’, whatever that was.

Moreover, when Barnabas the Barmy had cheerfully greeted him and recognized him, Harry had quickly turned heel and dashed away, not wanting to stick around for awkward questions of how, if he was a student, had he managed to get in the tapestry.

By accident, in one of those days when the castle was clearly feeling quite mischievous and had kept shifting around her stairs whilst he stood on them, he had come upon a still-life painting near the kitchens, the whole thing shimmering with yellow and black magic, which instantly told him that he was beholding the entrance to Hufflepuff House’s common room.

And finally, on a third-floor corridor, he had stumbled upon a statue of a humpbacked witch, the hump itself glowing in red and golden light.

He had touched, and then pushed and shoved, and it had given way, the statue shifting to a side, revealing a narrow passage. With a quick Lumos Charm on his wand, Harry had instantly seen that
it also shimmered red and gold all along its ground and walls.

Very curious about the secret passageway that Godric Gryffindor himself had clearly built many centuries ago, he had made a mental note of going back there when he had more time to explore.

To his brother, though, he simply retold his frustration with the moving staircases and the many times he had ended up inspecting the same abandoned classroom, only to realize it too late.

“Then draw a map, you lamebrain, and tick off the classrooms you go examining,” said Tom snidely, shaking his head as if not believing he could have such a dolt for a brother.

Harry stared at him at that, silently admitting to himself that it was actually a good idea. Not that he told his brother that. He just shot him a peeved glower and left him biting his dust as he waltzed out of the room with his chin raised high in an affronted gesture.

Nevertheless, he was planning on asking Professor Tilly Toke for help on that, because if he was going to make a map, he would do it with magic.

He didn’t want to go around the school looking like a fool, with roll of parchment and quill in hand. No, he would use Charms and make for himself a wickedly brilliant map and then he would rub it in on Tom’s face and never let him use it.

But that would be later, because at present, he had a letter in his pocket, addressed to a certain someone, with which he would finally solve the Czechoslovakia issue.

Thus, after finishing their cups of hot chocolate, he parted ways with Alphard in front of the painting of the bowl of fruits, since they couldn’t be seen together.

And with self-confident, assured steps, Harry made his way towards the owlerly. Inevitably, though, with every step he took, he thought about his letter, and his certainty started to slowly dwindle.

At first, he thought about how he wished he had his brother’s penmanship; Tom’s elegant, fluid and clear script, instead of his, which looked like chicken scratches. Then he wished he could write all grown-up like, like Tom, who always used big words that sounded very important and impressive. His letter, on the other hand, sounded as if it had been written by the little boy that he
Frowning, Harry started to realize that Winston Churchill could very well take one look at his letter, snort, chuckle - or whatever the man did when unimpressed, or when believing he was being pranked- and toss it to the garbage bin. After all, he could offer no proof to his claims. And Churchill would know it had been written by a little boy and would most surely give it no credence at all.

Furthermore, sending it by owl might be a very bad idea. He had heard that the old muggle liked to hunt – what if the chap blew off Lord Horkos’ head? He would never hear the end of it from Tom.

Just when he came to the decision that he should just turn around and find some other solution for the problem, he heard two hushed voices coming from around the corner.

“… Grindelwald… not heard… Julian Erlichmann… no news?… I fear the worst….”

Suddenly, he almost smashed into Albus Dumbledore as the wizard appeared in his corridor.

For a moment, Harry caught sight of something in the professor’s hand. It looked like a small glass sphere, with a curly, blonde head inside, of a woman.

He blinked and stared, puzzled and intrigued, but the sphere vanished into the wizard’s violet robes in the next instant.

“Mr. Riddle, what an unexpected surprise,” greeted him cheerfully the Transfiguration Professor, the man’s sky blue eyes twinkling. “Running a bit late, aren’t you? Curfew started some minutes ago, my dear boy.”

“Oh,” said Harry, fidgeting awkwardly, wondering if he was about to get detention.

“It will be forgiven this time,” said Dumbledore with a congenial chuckle. Abruptly, he peered at him over his half-moon spectacles, a slight expression of worry flashing across his face. “You look troubled, my boy. And you have been distracted as of late, in my class. Is there anything the matter?”
For a moment, Harry could do nothing but stare, then his mouth parted open in a silent ‘O’, and he almost slapped a hand on his forehead.

He had been so stupid - the answer to his problem was right there in front of his very nose! Granted, he still didn’t like Dumbledore much, and Tom often hissed out with much irritation that the professor was always watching him closely, but it was Dumbledore!

He had lost count of the many times that Felicity Prewett had sung the man’s praises, and it had been her who had told him all about how Dumbledore, from the start, had been warning the rest of wizarding England that the ‘German Minister of Magic’ was really a Dark Lord.

Why, the twins’ father, Faustus Prewett, was supporting Dumbledore’s faction in the Wizengamot, as they kept trying to have that Law passed. The very same law that, many weeks ago, had the Slytherins grumbling angrily. But just the other day, Felicity had mentioned something about the law really being all about forcing Charlemagne McLaggen to aid the muggles in case of war, of actually preventing the Minister of Magic from making some pact with Grindelwald.

Furthermore, Dumbledore was one of the most powerful wizards in the world! At least according to the Prewetts. So given all that, who better than Dumbledore to take care about the whole Czechoslovakia thing!

Harry was so excited that he barely knew where to start.

He jerkily gestured at his pocket, where his letter to Churchill rested in, and then he pointed in the general direction of the owlerly, and finally blurted out frantically, “Yes! I overheard – that is, I didn’t mean to, but it just happened – and I wrote a letter, I was about to fetch Lord Horkos to send it, but there’s no need, you’re here-”

“How Lord Horkos?” said Dumbledore, his auburn eyebrows shooting upwards as an expression of alarm briefly flickered through his features.

Harry blinked at him, a bit startled at the man’s reaction. “Er- yeah, he’s my brother’s owl-”

“I see,” muttered Dumbledore quietly, his face once more calm, though his eyes seemed to sharpen as he pinned Harry with his spectacled gaze. “Your brother named him, I take it.”
It didn’t sound like a question but more like a self-assertion of the wizard’s own thoughts. Nonetheless, puzzled, Harry nodded hesitantly.

Dumbledore’s expression turned grave, as he eyed Harry from the rim of his half-moon spectacles and prompted gently, “Is there anything you wish to tell me? About your brother?”

“What-?” Harry’s mouth hanged open. Frowning, he snapped with exasperation, “What does Tom have to do with anything!”

“That is for you to tell me, my dear boy,” interjected Dumbledore softly, his concern now clear on his face.

“Tell you what?” echoed Harry dumbly, feeling utterly baffled. He shook his head and bit out with irritation, “About Tom? Nothing’s the matter with him! The trouble is Chec-”

“If you’re worried about anything he might be doing,” said Dumbledore quietly, as he intensely peered at him over his glasses, “it would be best if you confided in me. And together, we would find a way to help him.”

“Help him?” Perplexed, Harry nearly gaped at the wizard. Yet suddenly, he felt such a burst of sheer anger and crushing disappointment, that he bellowed at the top of his lungs, “My brother is just fine! LEAVE HIM ALONE!”

And with that and a disgusted glower, Harry spun around and ran away from the wizard.

He didn’t know what he had been thinking! It was just as Tom had said, Dumbledore was still as suspicious of them as the day they had met him in the orphanage. And for a brief moment – clearly of utter insanity – he had actually thought he could trust the wizard, that Dumbledore would be the solution to all his problems!

Why, if Tom ever found out what he had been about to do, he would be cruelly mocked to death.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t any of that which had him almost beating his head with his fists, but rather the fact that Dumbledore had been his last resort. Now, he truly didn’t know what to do.
It was such the depression in which he sunk in the following weeks, that All Hallow’s Eve came by and passed, and Harry barely noticed it.

The splendid feast in the Great Hall, with countless decorations and carved pumpkins floating all around, lightening the place, with the mouth-watering dishes, desserts, and candies, the celebratory cheerfulness that reigned in the castle in those days, with the Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws attending the costume party to which he wasn’t welcomed, the fact that the Slytherins disappeared from school – just as predicted by Felicity – and with Alphard, later, with much guilt but nevertheless firm in his convictions, refusing to tell him what that ‘Samhain’ celebration had entailed, all of it happened and Harry couldn’t have cared less.

He didn’t even have the energy to tell Alphard just what he thought about his dark pureblood traditions and the need to keep them a secret from him, an outsider, allegedly a non-dark wizard.

Harry simply spent all those days in sheer misery, moping and meandering around the castle like a wretched ghost.

It wasn’t until they entered November –with the weather turning very cold, the mountains around the school becoming icy gray and the lake like chilled steel, with every morning displaying grounds covered in frost and snow- that Harry received a wake up call from Alphard.

They were in the kitchens, with cups of hot tea in their hands as they worked on their essays for Potions, about the tedious subject of ‘101 magical proprieties of newt’s eyes’. Or better said, Alphard was working on his essay and Harry was merely copying it onto his own piece of parchment, feeling as uninterested and lackluster as he usually did in those days.

Suddenly, Alphard cleared his throat as he settled down his quill on the table, and said softly, “I know that you have a lot on your mind, with your mother being ill...”

“How?” Harry gazed at him with dull eyes. “Oh, yeah. She’s actually worse,” he then added in a mutter, because really, those words quite accurately reflected his state of mind.

Everything was worse, now that he still didn’t know what to do about the attack on Czechoslovakia. Part of him dearly wished he had never heard a word about it, so that he didn’t feel that pressing responsibility, and the utter impotence that came with it when realizing that there didn’t seem to be much that he could do.
“I’m sorry,” said Alphard, looking very sad and concerned for his sake. However, his voice became firmer as he added, “I haven’t said anything to you because I didn’t want to burden you, but…” He cleared his throat again, looking uncomfortable. “Well, I think you should know, because in the end, it wasn’t a bad thing.”

Harry shot him a glance as he scribbled something on his parchment. “Know what?”

“You really don’t know – nothing at all?” whispered Alphard, leaning forward to intently gaze at him. “Your brother hasn’t told you anything?”

That did catch his attention, and he fully turned around to face his friend, as he frowned. “About what?”

Alphard released a heavy exhalation of breath. “Where to start!” He carded his fingers through his short, wavy hair, and then shot him a quizzical glance. “Haven’t you seen the House points lately?”

Harry scrunched his face up, trying to remember the giant hourglasses set in niches along one wall in a corner of the Entrance Hall, with rubies for Gryffindor, sapphires for Ravenclaw, emeralds for Slytherin, and yellow topazes for Hufflepuff House.

“Um, yeah, I think we don’t have that many emeralds anymore,” said Harry slowly. “Ravenclaw is beating us-”

“Exactly,” cut in Alphard quickly, “and at first, we were winning by a lot, mostly due to all the points your brother got in class, because he answered all the questions.”

“So?” Harry stared at him, still not understanding what had his friend in such an agitated state.

“So,” said Alphard patiently, “your brother stopped participating in class, about two months ago. You didn’t notice?”

“Er- not really.” Harry then snorted loudly. “He probably decided to stop being such a teacher’s pet-”
“That wasn’t the reason,” said Alphard in a singsong, his tone smug. His grey eyes grew big then, as he added in a rush, “Oh, and didn’t you see your brother hanging around a lot of students of other Houses? And how our housemates have stopped bullying you? And the glances that my sister has been shooting at Tom? And-”

“Hold your horses!” exclaimed Harry dismayed, feeling as if he was being battered with questions. Then he deeply frowned as he spun them in his mind and slowly began to remember and take notice of the little things that had happened during the past months.

He had seen Tom consorting with Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, and even some Gryffindors, in different places and on different days, but he hadn’t given it much importance. He had ascribed that as Tom being Tom, probably cajoling something out of them.

His housemates had indeed stopped harassing or attacking him, but they had probably just gotten tired of it or just feared that some teacher would finally realize what they had been doing. Although he wasn’t able to say if the present situation was an improvement, because his housemates had gone to the other opposite extreme: they still shot him glowers and glares, which looked angrier than before, but they wouldn’t even say a single word to him.

Furthermore, the only other thing he had detected was that Walburga Black had begun casting Tom very weird glances. She actually looked constipated most of times.

Besides that, the only weird thing was, that one day, a Flourish and Blotts owl came swooping into the Great Hall and left a package to Tom. His brother had opened it and flung a shiny, brand new book at him, smirking with self-satisfaction, as he said, “Take the stupid thing. I owe you nothing now.”

Harry had seen that it was ‘The Most Extraordinary Chaser Tactics and Maneuvers of the Century!’, the gift Alphard had given him the day they first met in Diagon Alley, and which Tom had later burned at the orphanage, in a bout of jealousy or something of the sort.

If he hadn’t had Maximillian Malfoy’s words weighting heavily on his mind, he would had felt very happy. But he had only frowned, as he asked, “How did you get the galleons to buy it?”

“That’s none of your business,” Tom had replied tartly, before going back to his lunch.

Thus, none the wiser about what Alphard could be hinting at, he shook his head, and muttered, “I
really don’t know what you’re talking about.” He rose up a hand the moment the other boy opened
his mouth, and groused out, “And no, Tom hasn’t said a single word to me about any of it. He isn’t
speaking to me anymore. He’s mad at me because I’m not doing well in class. But he refuses to
help me!” He darkly scowled. “He doesn’t give two figs about what’s going on with me. That’s my
dear brother for you.”

Alphard stared at him with wide eyes, as he breathed out, “You’re so wrong.” He shook his head,
as he added candidly, “Look, I don’t really like your twin that much, but I have to admit, you have
a good brother there.”

Harry snorted scathingly. “Yeah? How’s that?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to explain to you!” said Alphard with a bit of exasperation.

“Then you might try doing a better job at it,” Harry muttered peevishly under his breath.

Alphard shot him a miffed glance, before he sat up straight on his chair. “Alright, then listen to me.
As I said, two months ago, your brother stopped answering questions in class. At first, no one paid
it much mind, but then, we all started seeing him around students of other Houses—”

“You already said that,” interjected Harry grumpily.

“And,” carried on Alphard, utterly ignoring his remark, “we started seeing that without Tom’s
participation in class, our House points were going down, but the points of the other Houses
abruptly started rising!” He leaned forward, as he breathed out, “He was seen, exchanging rolls of
parchments for pouches of galleons. Your brother was doing the homework of loads of other
students of different Houses, even some who were second or third-years, and he was charging for
it!”

Harry’s eyebrows shot upwards, as he said uncertainly, “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure! Many Slytherins saw him do it,” said Alphard, shaking his head as he
sniggered under his breath. “He wasn’t being subtle about it! And he did it for weeks!” He
chuckled, as he added, “You know how seriously they take it, and how important it is for our
housemates to win the House Cup. They were all furious with your brother, because all those
points the other Houses were earning were because of the essays Tom had sold to them!”
Harry blinked, and then inaudibly mumbled under his breath, “Well, that explains how he bought my book.”

“And you can just imagine what happened,” continued Alphard, his grey eyes growing big. “They all confronted him one day and—”

“Wait – what?” interrupted Harry quickly, frowning and piercing him with his gaze. “Where was I?”

Alphard scratched his forehead pensively, before his expression brightened. “Ah, it was that Sunday! Remember that I had a nasty cold and couldn’t go watch your Quidditch practice? It was then. An hour after you left with Dorea and Dolohov, Algernon Wilkes woke up the whole House and took us to the common room.” His expression turned upset for a moment, as he added, “They all ganged up against your brother, furious and yelling. It wasn’t pretty.”

Harry shot him a fretful, worried look. “Did they hurt him?”

“Oh no,” said Alphard with a chuckle. “You should have seen him! They were all shouting at him, and he stood there, looking at us all as if we were mud under his shoes. And when they stopped yelling, he just smirked at us, and said that he wasn’t going to stop selling essays. And that he wouldn’t earn points for a House that didn’t welcome him and you.” He waved off a hand. “Or something like that.”

The boy widely grinned, as he added excitedly in an admiring tone, “And then he turned all serious and scary, and said something like ‘No one touches my brother’ – and he was staring straight at Walburga!” Alphard chortled happily. “I swear on Salazar’s snakes, my sister actually went pale! It was fantastic!”

“Oh,” breathed out Harry, gazing at him with green eyes wide as moons, a very warm, fuzzy feeling suddenly surrounding him. He couldn’t help the beaming smile that spread on his face. “Tom really said that?”

“Yup,” said Alphard, vehemently nodding his head. “But wait – it doesn’t end there! Many were still angry, Walburga most of all, but then something happened.” He leaned forwards as he whispered quietly, “Your brother ambushed her when she was coming out from a girls’ bathroom, alone. And he cursed her, Harry! I saw her myself – it was very nasty.” He sniggered under his breath. “Burga refused to go to the Hospital Wing and in the end only Dorea could fix her up. And haven’t you seen the glances ‘Burga shoots Tom?’ He shuddered dramatically. “I think she fancies your brother now!”
“Those constipated looks - that’s her fancying Tom?” Harry said incredulously, not knowing whether to guffaw or be concerned for his brother.

“Well, she has a thing for him, I think,” said Alphard, to then shoot him an apologetic glance. “But she cannot seriously fancy him, you know, he’s still just a muggleborn.”

Harry shrugged his shoulders, really don’t caring two straws about Walburga’s amorous affairs or the limitations she imposed on herself.

“Still,” grumbled Alphard, looking highly miffed, “that doesn’t stop the first and second-year Slytherin girls from making eyes at him, gossiping and giggling – you know, that stuff girls do. Some have even started to go around trailing after him!”

His friend looked very upset and vexed about the matter, but Harry could only frown as he remembered something. “Hang on. You said Tom cursed her, as in-”

“As in he used a dark spell!” piped in Alphard, nodding. “That’s something that had many wondering-”

“It can’t be,” interrupted Harry shortly, starting to feel a bit perturbed. “My brother doesn’t know any Dark Arts.”

Alphard frowned at him. “Well, it couldn’t have been a truly harmful dark curse, because Hogwarts has a ward that detects such spells, alerting the Headmaster. But it must have been a curse borderline Dark Arts.” He turned very grave, as he added, “Because I saw my sister and she was a bloody mess, Harry. She’s being very tight-lipped about the whole matter, and even if she knows what curse he used, she isn’t telling.” He shook his head disparagingly. “Dorea herself couldn’t figure it out, though she managed to heal ‘Burga in the end.”

Given all the stuff the Prewett twins had told him about the ‘dangers of delving into the Dark Arts’, Harry became increasingly worried with every word his friend spoke, and could only stare at him.

“Many have wondered, you know,” said Alphard, his tone mystified, “about where your brother might have learned such curse from-”
“Oh!” breathed out Harry, as realization struck him. “He has a pass for the Restricted Section of the library. Slughorn gave it to him-”

“Everyone has a pass from Sluggy,” interjected Alphard with a scoff and a roll of his eyes. “He gives it to any Slytherin who asks, because he knows that if my father or Abraxas’ grandfather hear that he isn’t, they would use their posts as Governors of the school to fire him – under some other made-up reason, of course.” He waved a hand dismissively. “All our parents are counting on us to continue our studies of the Dark Arts in the Restricted Section, since Hogwarts doesn’t teach the subject.”

“Right,” muttered Harry, shaking his head. “But my point is that clearly, Tom learned the curse from there-”

“He couldn’t have,” said Alphard decisively.

Harry frowned at him, perplexed. “What d’you mean? Of course he could! Tom told me himself, long ago, that the Section if filled with Dark Arts books for anyone with a pass to look at-”

“Oh, of course, you don’t know!” breathed out Alphard, his eyes wide. He quickly leaned forward, as he whispered urgently, “It was filled with Dark Arts books, but it’s not anymore. Way before your brother cursed ‘Burga, the older Slytherins saw that the vast majority of Dark Arts books were missing. Algernon Wilkes managed to glean from Ciceron Plume that Dumbledore had raided the Restricted Section, taking the books with him.” He grew excited, continuing as if unraveling a complex conspiracy, “And then Dorea went to visit Headmaster Dippet under some pretext of needing something for her prefect duties, and in the minutes he was gone, she spoke to Phineas-”

Alphard halted, and then quickly rushed out, “We have an ancestor who was a Headmaster and his portrait is hanging there in Dippet’s office.” He waved off a hand dismissively, “The point is that she asked him, and Phineas said that the books were under lock and key in the Headmaster’s office.”

“Hang on,” interjected Harry, rising up a hand as an ominous, foreboding feeling started churning in his stomach. “You say Dumbledore started that? The he was the one to take the books?”

“Yes,” replied Alphard instantly. “Apparently, it was his idea.”
Harry sat up straight on his chair, and skewered the boy with his gaze, as he demanded sharply, “When did this happen?”

Frowning, Alphard said slowly, “I think it was about a month ago-”

“I need the exact date!” snapped Harry hastily.

Alphard blinked at him, looking taken a back, before he turned pensive. “It happened… the Monday… two weeks before Samhain…” He then nodded to himself. “Yes, that was the day.”

Harry choked on a gasp as the realization dawned on him. It had been precisely the day after he had his encounter with Dumbledore. It was too much of a coincidence, especially given the weird things the wizard had asked him about!

In the bat of an eyelash, Harry jumped to his feet and stuffed all his things into his school bag. By the time Alphard had gathered his wits, Harry was almost through the door.

“Wait - what about our Potions homework!”

“We’ll finish it tomorrow!” Harry threw over his shoulder, and he left the kitchens in a mad dash, leaving Alphard to blink and gape after him.
Part I: Chapter 20

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AN:

Some reviewers have commented that they don’t like how Harry is being portrayed, that he’s childish, immature, naïve, and even stupid – though on this, I disagree. He isn’t dumb, he’s merely acting his age. He’s still 11.

I’m trying to be realistic here. He isn’t like cannon Harry, whose family didn’t love him and had to grow up fast.

This Harry has plenty of people who love him, care for him and who have protected him, like Alice, Robert Hutchins, his friends at the orphanage and Tom. And nothing ‘bad’ has happened to him yet, that he knows of. So of course he’s naïve, innocent, childish and dependent. But that’s what character development is all about.

Just as we saw, in some past scenes, how he behaves like a Slytherin due to Tom’s influence on him, and in some others, he’s the good-hearted boy due to his innate personality and Alice’s influence, we’ll see that as he grows up, events in his life will shape him, making him stronger, more independent and self-confident. But it won’t happen overnight. So for now we’ll have to put up with a realistically eleven-year-old Harry, who has led a relatively ‘easy life’ thus far.

On another note, some have commented about Dumbledore’s characterization. I always keep something in mind when writing this younger version of him: in canon, when he was 60 years or so older, he made many mistakes even when he was already wise, patient, cautious and very experienced. For all the more reason, when he’s younger, he will make even more obvious mistakes, in his desire to help others and mean well.

What happened in the last chapter was that, after hearing about the Lord Horkos thing, Dumbledore was certain he knew what it was all about, and so he tried to make Harry confide in him about what Tom must have been doing, thinking Harry was being difficult and obtuse on purpose.

He was so sure, that he didn’t pay attention to what Harry was trying to tell him. I think it’s a common mistake that some very intelligent people do, thinking they already know all and thus
they don’t actually listen to others. But after this chapter, it will be very clear why Dumbledore jumped to conclusions.

That said, the pace of this story will be picking up gradually as world events start affecting the boys’ lives. The older they get, the faster things will move and the more action we’ll see, so don’t get frustrated, lol ^^.

I hope you enjoy this chapter and tell me what you think!

Part I: Chapter 20

Panting, Harry finally reached the library, seeing that his brother was precisely where he had expected. Though he skidded to a halt when he saw that Tom was sitting in his usual table at one corner, albeit, surrounded by a flock of girls.

“Oh, you’re so smart, Tom! You should’ve been in our House,” was saying Olive Hornby, sounding both mournful and adoring.

She was the first-year Ravenclaw girl who was seated closest to his brother, scribbling something on a long piece of parchment, now and then shooting Tom coy, fluttering glances.

Tom, for his part, looked like a magnanimous king surrounded by a worshipful court. Charming his audience with gorgeous smiles as he spoke in a low, soft voice, the girls were giggling and blushing, as they hanged to his every word. Apparently, he was helping them with their Potions homework.

At the sight, Harry felt a sudden surge of irritation, and he stomped his way over, scowling darkly.

“I need to speak to you,” he said shortly, as he stood at one end of the table.

Some girls shot him annoyed glares, whilst his brother waved a hand dismissively, without sparing him a glance. “I’m busy right now. Come back later.”
Harry’s mood darkened considerably, and he barked, “You’re coming with me now!”

And without giving his brother a chance to reply, he leaned over the table and briskly started picking up his brother’s books, quills and parchments, stuffing them in Tom’s school bag.

Tom remained seated, shooting him a quizzical glance, while the girls squawked like a flock of affronted, angered geese.

“You can’t take him away! He was helping us—”

“He knows so much! Better teacher than Professor Slughorn—”

“Oh, you truly are, Tom,” breathed out sycophantically one of Olive Hornby’s little friends, one of those who were always cruelly taunting and mocking poor Moaning Myrtle.

Which only made Harry even angrier, because he hated how her housemates treated her, and it made him feel pity, but also guilt since he still fled in opposite directions whenever he caught sight of Myrtle in the corridors, when she tried to approach him and make him remember his promise of being friends.

“You can’t take him away from us, Riddle!” snapped Olive Hornby, standing up as she glowered at him.

Harry shot her a disgusted look, as he bit out, “Oh, yeah? Watch me!” And with that, he hefted Tom’s schoolbag on his back, grabbed his brother’s wrist, and yanked him away.

As they crossed the library’s door, Tom, who had thus far allowed himself to be pulled away, broke free and demanded in an annoyed tone of voice, “What is it? What do you want?”

“Not here,” whispered Harry, glancing around as they entered a corridor. “Let’s go to our dorm. There won’t be anyone there at this hour.”

He hastened his steps, and though Tom remained silent and effortlessly matched his pace, he could still feel his brother’s irked gaze boring into one side of his skull.
As they made their way to the dungeons, they came across many meandering groups of students, and here and there, Tom was greeted and charmingly greeted in return Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws.

His brother had been busy. It only made him remember everything Alphard had told him about, and Harry quickened his steps.

The moment they arrived at their bedroom, Harry dropped Tom’s bag on his brother’s desk, and spun around.

Tom had elegantly seated himself on his bed, and arched an eyebrow at him as he prompted impatiently, “Well?”

“Where did you get Lord Horkos’ name from?” demanded Harry sternly without beating around the bush.

Tom stared at him, then frowned. “What’s all this about?”

“Just answer the question,” said Harry sharply.

“You already know the answer,” replied Tom with annoyance. “It was from a book in Flourish and Blotts.”

Now it was Harry who frowned at him. “What book, exactly?”

Tom heaved a deep breath as if a bothersome bug was pestering him. “When I was exploring the Section of Magical Theory, I saw a book there, opened and lying on the floor.” He shot Harry a strange glance, for a moment looking hesitant, before he continued in dismissive tone of voice, “It was opened on the chapter about a wizard called Lord Horkos.”

Harry waited, and waited, but his brother said nothing more and merely gazed back at him with a bored expression on his face.
“And?” prompted Harry, gritting his teeth with exasperation.

“And nothing,” snapped Tom, glowering at him. “Why are you asking me this-”

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” bit out Harry angrily, stomping a foot on the floor. “This is important, Tom! Just tell me and then I’ll explain!”

Tom heavily frowned at him, before he grumbled dourly, “Fine. The book was called ‘Obscure and Forgotten Dark Lords and their Inventions’. The chapter I began reading was about an Ukrainian Dark Lord of the Middle Ages, called Lord Horkos the ‘Unvanquishable’, the ‘Indestructible’, the ‘Undefeated’. It told about how he had been killed eight times and always came back from the dead-”

“Hang on,” said Harry, rising up a hand before he stared at his brother with utter disbelief. “You named your owl after a Dark Lord? Have you lost your marbles!”

Tom sprung to his feet and glowered at him as if he had been dealt the worst of insults, as he hissed out, “I wasn’t being stupid! I didn’t know what a ‘Dark Lord’ was back then. I thought it simply meant he had been a powerful wizard-”

“Alright, alright,” said Harry quickly, “don’t get your knickers in a twist!” He shook his head, before he pressed on, “So what else did the book say about this Lord Horkos fellow?”

Tom skewered him with narrowed eyes. “No. Now it’s you who’s going to start talking. Why are you asking me all of this?”

Harry gritted his teeth with frustration. He brusquely gestured from one to the other, as he snapped, “Look, the only way this is going to work is if you tell me all you know first, and then I’ll tell you all I know. Got it?”

Tom poignantly glared at him, before his features rearranged themselves into a nonchalant expression, as he said loftily, “Very well, I’ll answer your stupid questions.” He waved a hand dismissively, his tone turning casual, “The author of the book carried on, explaining that historians believed the Dark Lord Horkos had created a vessel of some kind, which granted him immortality-”
“That’s where you got the idea from!” breathed out Harry, his eyes widening with understanding.

He remembered the times when Tom had insisted that immortality had to be possible for wizards, given that their lifespans doubled those of muggles, given how many magical creatures, like dragons, lived for millennia, and how like, with magic, everything was possible.

Now he understood that all those reasons had been a load of crap, and that Tom had known exactly what he was speaking about.

“Yes,” admitted Tom very reluctantly, scowling with irritation.

Recalling how Dumbledore had reacted to the ‘Lord Horkos’ name, it all started to make sense to Harry, and with an ominous feeling in the pit of his stomach, he pierced his brother with his eyes, and asked sharply, “So what was this ‘vessel’ thing?”

“A magical artifact of some sort,” said Tom impatiently. He sat back down on his bed, as he continued briskly, “The author went on and on, describing how he had spent ten years in Ukraine, tracing back Lord Horkos’ steps, wanting to discover what he had created. And apparently, if the author is to be believed, he found a book in a muggle junk shop, in some remote Ukrainian town – a grimoire written by Lord Horkos himself, the author claimed, which detailed the spells used to create this vessel artifact that granted immortality.” He heaved a deep breath, before he added airily, “The author named the artifact after the Dark Lord, playing with the Latin term for ‘cross’, since he argued that the vessel had been both the wizard’s salvation and doom. ‘Horcrux’, he called it, the Cross of Lord Horkos.”

Harry plopped himself down on Tom’s bed, crossing his legs as he gazed at his brother, muttering under his breath, “It must have been something very bad and nasty—”

“Bad?” Tom snapped his head to pin him with an angered gaze. “How could it be bad when it gave the wizard immortality!”

“He died in the end, didn’t he?” quipped Harry pointedly.

Glowering, Tom bit out churlishly, “Because he must have messed it up.”

Harry rolled his eyes, but then he frowned pensively, trying to understand why Dumbledore had
reacted so strongly to the name. Really, it seemed quite silly to him – some Dark Lord who had created a long forgotten artifact that allegedly granted some kind of immortality that in the end didn’t work!

Cocking his head to a side, he gazed inquisitively at his brother. “So how do you make this Horcrux thingy? How does it work?”

Tom shot him an irritated look, as he groused out darkly, “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean ‘you don’t know’?” Harry frowned at him. “You read the book.”

Tom glared at him with all the power of his frustration, as he bit out sharply, “I was reading the book! I had just started on the part of the chapter that began explaining that the artifact was made with ‘Soul Magic’ dark spells, when it disappeared!” He shook his head angrily. “I felt someone behind me, and I turned around. But there wasn’t anyone there. The moment I looked back to my hands, the book was gone.”

“Gone?” Harry blinked at him. “How?”

“Magically, of course,” snapped Tom, shooting him a snide look before his expression turned dour. “I thought it might have re-shelved itself into some other Section, or something of the sort. So I asked the shop attendant.” He grumbled darkly under his breath as he added, “The wizard got all uppity with me, affronted, saying that Flourish and Blotts didn’t deal with ‘those kinds of books’, and he practically shoved me out the store – I barely had time to pay for our textbooks and Hogwarts a History!”

“Oh,” said Harry, sniggering under his breath, “too bad for you, I guess.”

Tom glared daggers at him, but Harry merely grinned placidly as he leaned back on the pillows, calmly stretching out his limbs, as it all made sense to him, the pieces finally falling into place.

“So you looked for the book in Hogwarts’ library, about a month ago,” he concluded contently, letting out a yawn, “and you didn’t find it.”

“What are you talking about?” Tom skewered him with his dark blue gaze. “I started looking for the book from the moment Slughorn gave me a pass to the Restricted Section. Ciceron Plume told
me they had it, but when he checked the shelves, the spot where it should have been in was empty.” He shook his head angrily. “He even went through his registries and no student or teacher had checked the book out—”

“Wait – what?” Harry sprung up straight, and frowned, baffled. “But Slughorn gave you the pass ages ago! It couldn’t have been gone then, that was too soon.” His frown deepened, as he muttered under his breath, “Dumbledore didn’t know yet.”

“Dumbledore?” bit out Tom, his eyes narrowing to slits. “He didn’t know what?” He instantly brought his face up to Harry’s, as he hissed out accusingly, “What did you do?”

“Er… well…” Harry chuckled nervously, scratching the back of his head as he pulled the most innocent expression over his face.

It didn’t seem to work because Tom’s eyes just got angrier and narrower, and he swiftly changed tacks and pointed a finger at his brother. “It was your own fault! I didn’t know you had named your owl after some loony Dark Lord!”

“You told him my owl’s name?” hissed out Tom furiously.

“He could have found out on his own!” snapped Harry defensively. “You should have changed his name—”

“You can’t change an owl’s name once it’s given,” bit out Tom angrily. “They only respond to the first name given by their first owner.”

Harry stared, and then shrugged his shoulders. “Well, that ain’t my fault either, is it?”

Dauntingly, he could almost see the wheels churning in his brother’s head, Tom’s expression turning darker and darker with each passing second, until his brother bit out, “So you’re the one to blame for Dumbledore ransacking the Restricted Section and taking half the books! He did it to keep me from finding out what a Horcrux is!”

“Um – yeah,” said Harry, letting out a forced, blasé laugh. “I think that was the reason.”
Tom fulminated him with a murderous glare. “I can’t believe it, my own brother…” He shook his head furiously. “I didn’t have the time to go through all the books. One of them might have had some information about Horcrux-”

“But he didn’t take them all, right?” said Harry quickly, trying to mend things.

“Oh, he left those about Magical Theory, and Dark Potions,” said Tom, skewering him with a glower. “and about the genealogy of dark wizarding lines – be grateful for that, because if you had also cost me my research about Slytherin’s line, I wouldn’t forgive you.” His face darkened, as he added, “But the most interesting books about dark magical artifacts and Dark Curses are gone.”

Harry frowned then, something simply not making sense. “Alright, so he took those books the day after he found out what your owl was called. But you said the book you had seen in Flourish and Blotts had been in Hogwarts’ Restricted Section but wasn’t there anymore when you checked. And that was ages ago, so it couldn’t have been Dumbledore.”

“Yes,” Tom grudgingly conceded.

Becoming increasingly intrigued with each passing second, Harry cocked his head to a side. “So who took it?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Tom, scowling.

“And why did you find that book in Flourish and Blotts when the shopkeeper told you they didn’t have it?” continued Harry, his frown deepening.

“I don’t know,” repeated Tom, his voice turning lower and angrier.

“And why did it disappear from your hands when you were distracted?” pressed on Harry, utterly mystified by this point. “Who took it from you?”

“I don’t know!” snapped Tom viciously.

Harry blinked at his brother, and then quipped nonchalantly, neatly summarizing things up, “Well,
I had nothing to do with all that, so you can’t be angry with me.”

He beamed a smile. His brother glowered.

“Oh, but I am angry with you,” hissed out Tom, pushing his hands on the bed to pull his face in front of Harry’s. “What were you doing consorting with Dumbledore? Why did you tell him Lord Horkos’ name?”

“I didn’t mean to,” groused out Harry. “I came across him when I was on my way to the Owlerly to send a letter to Winston Churchill-”

“I beg your pardon?” swiftly interrupted Tom, staring at him, before his tone turned snide, “Why would you be writing to Churchill?”

“Erm, well…” Harry stammered, and then trailed off. In the next second, he cast a long, considering look at his brother, and then made up his mind.

After a bit of cajoling, his brother had been forthcoming with him in the end, and given that he was stumped in the matter of what to do with the information he possessed, he decided he might as well try getting Tom’s help.

So doing some fast thinking, he quickly decided what innocent little lies he would be telling, and began retelling his odyssey through Hogwarts’ paintings, completely leaving Alphard, Fawkes, Santi and the Grey Lady out of the narration but putting special, frenzied emphasis on what he had overheard when he had been in Phineas Nigellus’ portrait of Grimmauld Place.

“… and then I was in a tapestry, a troll clubbed me on the head, and I fell through this transparent, veil-like thing that tapestries have instead of the windows of paintings, and I finally landed on a corridor of the school,” concluded Harry faintly, running out of breath.

Staring back at his brother, though, he found a reaction he wasn’t expecting.

“You can get into paintings?” bit out Tom, looking incensed beyond measure. “How! Living beings can’t-”
“Living beings can’t get into paintings,” parroted Harry in a tired monotone. “Yeah, I know.”

At his brother’s piercing stare, he then shrugged.

Suddenly, Harry’s scar began to throb painfully, and he rubbed it, scowling but also perplexed at the reason for his brother’s apparent anger.

Tom seemed to be highly irked, his expression had darkened and his eyes had narrowed.

A ray of understanding shone in Harry’s mind, and he gaped at him incredulously. “You’re envious?”

“I’m not!” snapped Tom instantly, shooting him a venomous look. “I just don’t think it’s fair that you can get into paintings when I can’t. I’ve touched one, and nothing happened!” He glowered darkly, as he muttered, “So now you can get into paintings as well as see magic. And I can’t do either-”

“Didn’t you hear a word I said!” Harry shook his head with disbelief, as he wildly gestured with his hands. “I was chased by humongous jungle insects, drunken healers wanted to cut me open and chop me up, sailors nearly shoved me off a plank into a sea made of paint, a huge rhino came charging at me, and a troll nearly smashed my head open! It wasn’t fun!”

“But it’s an ability of some sort, and it’s useful,” groused out Tom acidly. “And I can’t do it.”

Harry shook his head with exasperation. “But you have Hogwarts nudging your mind and welcoming you when you touch her walls – I rather have something like that, instead of her always shifting her stairs on me!” He shot his brother a quizzical glance. “I bet you could communicate with her if you wanted to. Have you tried it?”

Tom glared, as he said bitingly, “No, and I don’t intend to. I don’t like having alien, sentient beings barging into my head, let me tell you.”

Giving up, Harry threw his hands up into the air. Though he halted in mid motion, snapped his gaze to Tom’s, and breathed out slowly, “Hang on. Why are we even discussing this?” His green eyes narrowed. “Why haven’t you said a word about what I overheard?”
Tom coolly arched an eyebrow at him. “About Czechoslovakia apparently being attacked in March?” He shot him a scathing look, and scoffed, “Hardly surprising. How many times do I have to tell you that war is coming-”

“Not that,” snapped Harry, his green eyes now mere slits, highly suspicious. “You didn’t bat an eyelash. I told you that it seems that Maximillian Malfoy didn’t do his best to get us expelled because he received a letter from Grindelwald. I told you that, for some reason, the current Dark Lord has an interest in keeping us in Hogwarts, and you didn’t look remotely surprised!” He pointed an accusing finger at his brother, as he said crossly, “What aren’t you telling me!”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about,” began Tom in a lofty tone of voice. “Of course that it puzzled me in the extreme and made me wonder-”

“Bollocks!” immediately judged and declared Harry. He pierced him with his stare, and stated, “I know you’re lying, because you have that expression on your face you always pull when you’re keeping something from me.”

“What expression?” said Tom coolly, his face blank.

“That one!” chirped Harry instantly, feeling quite smug.

Tom shot him the nastiest of looks, before he harrumphed under his breath. “Very well, you little midget.” He slowly got up to his feet and started making his way over to his trunk, though he spun around for a moment, and bit out sharply, “Let’s just get one thing straight. I’m showing you because I want to, not because you’re pestering me.”

“Of course you are,” quipped Harry sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

Tom gave him a dark look but nonetheless proceeded to cast all sort of unlocking spells on his trunk. Intrigued, Harry left the bed and bounded up to him.

The moment the trunk was opened, what instantly caught his attention were the numerous pouches of all colors, some velvet, others of silk or just plain leather. As Tom started to search his trunk, the pouches tingled with the sound of coins.
With wide eyes, Harry breathed out, “You made all that by doing others’ homework? How many galleons have you got already?”

Tom paused and shot him a sidelong glance, as he smirked. “Oh, so you finally noticed and figured out what I’ve been doing?”

“Of course,” said Harry quickly, not about to tell him that, actually, he had been too absorbed with his own troubles to notice anything at all, and that it had been his ‘secret friend’ Alphard who had apprised him of events.

“We’ll not be paupers for long,” said Tom smugly, as he gestured at the pouches. “This is just the beginning.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot upwards. “You’re going to start charging more?”

“Yes,” said Tom, chuckling sharply under his breath, “but I wasn’t referring just to money. What I meant is that, gradually, I won’t only ask for galleons but also favors. Our housemates have many things I want.”

“Our housemates?” Harry frowned at him, bemused. “I thought you were selling essays to students of other Houses.”

Tom waved a hand dismissively. “That was only to make a point and show the Slytherins just what an asset I could be. Now that they’ve realized that they gain more by having me working with them instead than against, they’re starting to approach me.” He shot him a brief, self-satisfied look. “Thaddeus Avery and Neron Lestrange have already paid me to do some of their homework. They’re just the beginning. Soon, more Slytherins will ask, and then I’ll be able to stop selling essays to other Houses.” He smirked smugly. “After all, I have every intention to make Slytherin win the House Cup every year I’m at Hogwarts, and our housemates will know that they will owe it to me.”

Harry shook his head and muttered under his breath, “I don’t see why you should care. They’ll still hate us for not being purebloods.”

“I don’t want them to like me,” hissed out Tom impatiently, “but to respect me and be in awe of me, however grudgingly, and they’re already starting to do so.” He smirked widely at him. “And besides, my whole intention is to make a thorough use of them and take all possible advantage.
Selling them essays is just a way to do that. Just you wait and see all the things I’ll get from them.”

“Like what?” prompted Harry curiously, tilting his head to a side.

“Favors, books that can only be found in their manor’s libraries, rare and expensive potion ingredients,” began rattling off Tom as he continued to peruse his trunk, “invitations to balls and parties where I’ll be able to start forging connections… that sort of things.”

“Oh, that sounds good,” said Harry, grinning, before he took a step to be closer to his brother, as he added quietly, “By the way, thank you.”

“Hmm?” said Tom distractedly without sparing him a glance. “What for?”

Harry warmly smiled at him, as he said softly, “For telling them that they couldn’t touch me.”

Instantly, Tom snapped his head up, scowling. “Who told you that? You weren’t there.”

Harry shrugged his shoulders, though he couldn’t stop beaming. “Oh, I just overheard some Slytherins talking about it.”

Glaring, Tom bit out shortly, “Well, don’t think too much of it. I did it for my own reasons, not for your sake.”

Obviously, Harry didn’t believe one word, but he hadn’t expected any other retort, so he kept grinning. Which only made Tom twitch, glower, and then go back to his trunk.

“Here they are,” suddenly said Tom exultantly, as he pulled out two books and handed them over with much care, as if they were his most revered and treasured possessions.

Harry stared down at them, and then shot his brother a highly peeved glare. “‘How to Care for your Pet Owl’ and ‘101 Grooming Charms and Hairstyles’, really, Tom? What’s this rubbish?”

Tom gave him a wide, gleeful smirk. “Haven’t you ever heard that you shouldn’t judge a book by
the trunk and slapped it into Harry’s hands. “On the second week of school, I found those two books and that letter stuck under my pillow.” He gestured magnanimously. “Go ahead, read it. You wanted answers, didn’t you?”

Intrigued, Harry settled the books on Tom’s bed and opened the folded piece of parchment. As he began reading, his whole body froze and his breath got stuck in his throat.

My esteemed Tom Marvolo Riddle,

Allow me to express my deep admiration for your magical abilities. It is not every day that a young boy with your qualities enters the Wizarding World. You have grasped my interest and I am fervent, devoted advocate of helping promising and outstanding young wizards like yourself reach their full potential.

Accept my two gifts as a show of my respect for you and my desire to see you grow into the powerful wizard I believe you can be.

With Hogwarts’ curriculum being what it is, ever bestowing a deficient education, you will find the two books to be vastly enlightening, and much to your taste and interest, I shall hope.

Please do share this with your brother, who has, like you, earned my patronage. I wish you would both accept it and that you will come to think of me as a friend. And perhaps, in time, I will have the honor of calling myself your mentor.

“It’s not signed,” mumbled Harry numbly, his fingers jerkily sinking into the parchment. He shot his brother a wild look and said in a strangled voice, “Tell me it’s not from whom I’m thinking.”

“Look at the postscript,” said Tom gleefully.

Harry did, and frowning, he briefly saw that it described in much detail two charms and their counters. Before he had the chance to read it fully, his brother was already casting one of the spells on the two books.

It instantly changed the books’ covers into ones that were all black, looking a bit battered from use and the passage of time, the titles having morphed into silver words of some foreign language.
“And this spell,” said Tom, looking giddy as he flicked his wand, “translates a whole book into English.”

The moment it was cast, Harry leaned forward to stare at the titles: ‘Comprehensive Study of the Dark Arts: Grade One’. The other book had the exact same title, only that it read ‘Grade Two’.

“Open them!” prompted Tom excitedly, as he sat down on his bed and gazed at Harry, looking as if he was waiting for his reaction with much expectation.

Just knowing that he wouldn’t like what he would find, Harry bit his lower lip as he flung open the covers of both books. And there, in the same elegant scrawl of the letter, he saw the words: ‘Property of Gellert Grindelwald,’ and just below it, ‘Durmstrang Institute, 1870.’ The second book had the same, only the year was different.

“He gave us his very own schoolbooks,” said Tom exultantly, as if Harry needed any clarification on the matter.

At that very precise moment, Harry felt such a powerful surge of sheer fury mingled with horror and fear, that he could only skewer his brother with his gaze and bellow irately, “You’ve had this for all these months, and you didn’t tell me! What were you thinking, keeping this to yourself? Don’t you realize what it means-”

“I didn’t tell you before,” yelled Tom back, rising to his feet, “because I knew how you would react!” He shot him his most disgusted and snide look. “I knew that the Prewett twins had been filling your head with stupid ideas about how dangerous the Dark Arts are, and about how evil Grindelwald is. And then you got all weird and worried about the oncoming war-”

“I was worried because of what I overheard Malfoy and Pollux Black and all the rest talking about!” snapped Harry furiously.

Tom pointed a finger at him, as he hissed out, “See? This is exactly my point. I knew you wouldn’t have an open mind. So I was waiting for the right time to tell you, when you wouldn’t react so hysterically.”

Harry’s hands clenched into fists, shaking with the temptation of docking his brother with a punch. He somehow managed to rein in his temper, and bit out, “I’m not hysteric. I’m worried, you great
“Worried about what?” scoffed out Tom scathingly.

Harry shot him an incredulous look, and then mimicked mockingly, “Worried about what?” He glowered at him. “What do you think, you ass! We have a Dark Lord who’s interested in us for some reason and—”

“Hush!” snapped Tom, instantly raising a hand, and looking very alert.

Harry heard it too then, the sound of footfalls coming down the stairs, soon to reach their bedroom.

“Grab the books and follow me,” said Tom urgently, “and bring the letter too.”

Swallowing the volley of words he wanted to shout at his brother, Harry immediately complied, knowing they had to go to some other place to continue what he was certain would be a very heated argument.

They were out of the bedroom in a second, and just when they caught sight of the hem of someone’s school robe coming from around the bend of the spiral staircase, Tom quickly took the stairs. But he was going down instead of upwards.

Frowning, nonplussed, Harry followed him, as he whispered, “Where are you going?”

Tom briefly shot him a snide look over his shoulder, without halting his steps or slowing his pace. “You didn’t finish reading the end of the letter, did you? There’s another postscript there. Read it.”

Frowning, Harry stuck the two books under an elbow and opened the letter again, as he followed his brother further down the spiral stairs.

In a whisper, he read it out loud to himself, “For a place to do a bit of exercise, I recommend you visit the floor of the seventh-year boys’ dormitories, behind where the stairs end. Others would need to tap the second brick to the right with the tip of their wands and utter the password, but not
you, my boy. Make use of that unique tongue of yours and simply say ‘Open’.”

Just then, Tom was doing so, hissing, “Open.”

The bricks of that small expanse of wall vibrated and then furled themselves to the sides, leaving a huge gap open.

Standing, aghast, Harry paled and burst out in alarm, “He knows we’re Parselmouths! How can he know!”

Tom waved a hand dismissively before he vanished into the darkness. Harry instantly followed him, persisting, “Tom! How can he-“

All breath left him when he found himself in a very vast chamber, surrounded by several tiers of stone seats, like those of an amphitheater. The majority of the chamber was occupied by a large circular area of stone floors, its perimeter lined with dummies and mannequins, a few feet from each other.

From a distance, Harry could see that they were made of different things: some of different types of metals, others of wood, but many were made of a skin-colored pulp mass thing that had all the appearance of being magically-constructed flesh – at least, Harry hoped it was a magical-construction.

However, what caught his attention the most, and had him looking in awe and wonder, was the heavy lattice of magic that spanned throughout the whole place, the cords thin and delicate, of a vibrant, shining silver, only a very few dark green ones here and there which only seemed to be keeping all the others in place.

“What is this place?” he breathed out. “It’s beautiful…”

“Beautiful?” Tom approached him, frowning. In the next moment, he looked as if he had swallowed a sour lemon. “Ah. You’re seeing its magic, aren’t you?”

Harry just nodded, his eyes fixed on one of the walls, seeing all the tiny little symbols running up and down the trails of magic. Experimentally, he poked one with a finger, and saw it jiggling and squirming away.
He chuckled happily, and rushed out breathlessly, “It’s wonderful, Tom - it’s filled with all these Ancient Runes. I can’t wait to be in third year! We have electives then and Ancient Runes is one of them. I’m sure gonna take it! And then I’ll finally be able to understand all the stuff I see around the castle!”

He shot his brother a glance and saw Tom with a musing expression on his face.

“It’s just how I thought, then”, said Tom, now looking exceedingly satisfied. “What you must be seeing are wards that isolate this chamber from the wards of the school that alert the Headmaster when Dark Arts are being used.” He suddenly smirked at him, as he gestured at the whole chamber with an encompassing, grandiose motion. “Because this, little brother, is a dueling arena.”

“Oh.” Curious, Harry made way to one of the fleshy dummies and experimentally pinched it. It was squishier than real flesh but a rather good imitation of it.

“Those actually bleed,” remarked Tom gleefully.

Harry shot him a inquisitive glance at that, and his brother was quick to inform him further with a smug tone of voice, “I’ve started to practice dark spells from Grindelwald’s books in this place. Our housemates just come here on the weekends to keep up with their Dark Arts practice, so I’ve been coming during the weeks, at night.”

Tom strode to the very center of the dueling ring, raising his arms in an enveloping gesture. “Here, too, is where Slytherin House have their dueling tournaments.”

“Tournaments?” Harry stared at him, intrigued.

Tom nodded. “Remember what your Quidditch Captain said in the Welcoming Feast?”

“Oh…” Harry nodded slowly, as he understood what Tom was hinting at. “Yes, Dorea said she was one of The Two, because of her name and stuff, but also because she was the undefeated dueler of the House.” He glanced around. “So this is where-”

“This is where, once a year, they hold a dueling competition,” cut in Tom excitedly. “And the two best duelers get to become the leaders of Slytherin House. Algernon Wilkes and Dorea Black have been that for the last two years.” He shot him a wide smirk. “Not for long, though. In a couple of
years it will be me winning all the duels and becoming the leader.” He raised his chin up, his dark blue eyes sparkling, as he declared curtly, “As is my birthright, given that I’m Salazar Slytherin’s descendant.” He paused and then added quickly, “And yours too, if you wanted.”

Harry just rolled his eyes. He had no interest in being the ‘leader’ of a bunch of purebloods who looked down their stuck-up noses at him.

“You do that, Tom,” he said dismissively, before his voice turned stern as he pinned his brother with his gaze, “How come Grindelwald knows we’re Parselmouths? No one knows-”

“Dumbledore does,” interjected Tom indolently.

“Dumbledore wouldn’t have told a Dark Lord he’s trying to bring down, would he?” snapped Harry impatiently.

Tom skewered him with narrowed eyes. “Bring down? Curious choice of words there. Why would you say that?”

Harry stilled for a moment, before he said casually, “Oh, you know, all that stuff about the law Dumbledore is trying to pass in the Wizengamot-”

“That’s not to bring down the Dark Lord but to prevent Charlemagne McLaggen from signing a pact with him,” hissed out Tom, his eyes now mere slits, bright with suspicion. “What do you know, Harry?”

Harry made his green eyes go really wide, and he blinked, once, twice, pulling the dumbest look he could manage. “About what, brother?” He then shook his head mournfully. “I know so very little. I wish I was as smart as you are, brother-”

“Spare me the theatrics!” bit out Tom incensed. “I’ve been more than honest with you – I showed you the books, the letter, and I brought you to this place. Now it’s your turn to payback that trust-”

“You showed me the books, letters and this place because Grindelwald told you to do so!” snapped Harry crossly. “And you should’ve done it instantly, not months later!”
Tom waved a hand dismissively, as he said airily, “That’s beside the point.” He then skewered him with his gaze. “You found out about something, didn’t you, that day when you ‘came across’ Dumbledore?”

Harry grumbled under his breath. It was frightening how perspicacious his brother could be.

“Fine,” he groused out. He heaved a deep breath, and then rushed out, “So, I was making my way to the Owlerly, because I had written to Winston Churchill about the attack on Czechoslovakia in March, and then-”

“What!” hissed out Tom, looking highly alarmed. “That’s what the letter was about?” In the next instant he grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him so hard that Harry’s teeth rattled, as he snarled furiously, “Are you insane! You could have gotten expelled!”

“Geroff!” cried out Harry, trying to break free. But his brother only released him when the two books Harry had been carrying nearly fell to the floor.

Tom yanked them away from him and then demanded sharply, “Give me the letter!”

Frowning, Harry plucked it out from his pocket and handed it over.

“What are you doing?” he asked, bemused, when Tom aimed his wand at it.

“Getting rid of evidence that could tie us to the Dark Lord. I was only keeping it for you to see,” bit out Tom, before he cast, “Incendio!”

Harry watched how the letter turned to ashes, before he scowled at his brother and said sternly, “Then you should destroy the books too.”

“Not a chance,” said Tom in clipped tones. “You and I are going to learn every spell and curse in those books, and all those that will surely come afterwards-”

“No, we’re not!” snapped Harry furiously. “I’m not going to learn stuff that a Dark Lords wants me to know!”
Tom looked frustrated and angered beyond measure. “We’ll discuss that later.” He pinned him with a narrow-eyed stare, as he demanded, “You didn’t send Churchill the letter in the end, did you?”

“No,” mumbled Harry sadly. “But now I think we should—”

“We can’t!” hissed out Tom. “Don’t you know what’s going on?” He shot him a snide look. “If you read the Daily Prophet you would know that the Minister of Magic has key muggle figures under watch! If you had sent that letter to Churchill, the Ministry wizard keeping an eye on him would have seen it – they would have known who wrote it and they would have come here and expelled you from Hogwarts! You were breaking the Statute of Secrecy by writing that letter, Harry!”

Harry went pale and he stammered, “A-are you sure? The Daily Prophet actually said that Charlemagne McLaggen has spies on Churchill?”

“Well, no, but you have to know how to read in between the lines,” bit out Tom impatiently. “Churchill is notorious because he’s one of the few saying that Hitler has to be stopped before it’s too late. And McLaggen is so opposed to helping English muggles in case of war, that he’s taking every possible measure to prevent that Dumbledore and those who support him in the Wizengamot make contact with muggle politicians.”

“But we have to do something!” cried out Harry.

“No, we don’t,” said Tom firmly, before he narrowed his eyes. “And don’t change the subject. You were telling me about how you stumbled across Dumbledore.”

Harry shot him a frustrated look. “Fine,” he grumbled peevishly, “but we’re not done yet about what he have to do about the attack.” That warning uttered, he then proceeded quickly, “Dumbledore was coming from another corridor, and then I saw that he had this glass sphere thing in his hands. I think I saw the head of a woman inside, and he was talking to her. It sounded serious and important—”

“He was talking to someone about important things, openly, in the middle of the castle?” interjected Tom disdainfully. “How stupid can he be?”

“It was late at night, after curfew, and no one was around,” snapped Harry impatiently.
“You heard him, didn’t you?” pointed out Tom scathingly.

Harry scowled at him. “Fine, then! He’s a complete idiot. Satisfied?”

“Vastly,” said Tom smoothly, smirking at him. “So what were they saying?”

Harry hesitated for a moment, before he heavily sighed. “It was about Grindelwald. It sounded like Dumbledore was worried because they hadn’t received any news from Julian Erlichmann.”

Tom’s dark blue eyes went wide, and he breathed out, “Julian Erlichmann – are you certain?”

Harry nodded, and Tom’s eyes acquired a disquieting gleeful glint. He shot Harry a glance. “You do know who he is, right?”

“Of course I do.” Harry rolled his eyes. “Our housemates talk plenty about him. How he’s the youngest European Duelling Champion. And Grindelwald’s pupil and favorite.”

“And his lover,” said Tom, still looking giddy.

“Lover?” Harry blinked at him. “What d’ya mean?”

“That Grindewald beds him!”

“What?” Harry’s whole face scrunched up, nonplussed. “But ‘Julian’ is a boy’s name, isn’t it? So he’s a boy?”

Tom stared at him, then scoffed. “You’re such a simpleton. Don’t you remember that day, when we were seven, and we saw policemen in our street, carting off the butcher’s son’s body?”

“Yes,” said Harry in a soft, sad voice, a shudder running down his spine at the remembrance of the seventeen-year-old’s mangled body, all his broken bones and horrible gashes and bruises. “You
told me some sailors had beaten Terry to death, and that his body was found in one of the alleys near the docks and that I should never, never go into that part of our neighborhood.”

“I did?” Tom stared at him, looking surprised of the lie he had told to protect his brother. He shook his head and added nonchalantly, “Well, it wasn’t true. No sailors beat him up. His father had discovered him in bed with a man, in their own house. So he beat him up and left him by the garbage bins.” He shrugged his shoulders. “The whole neighborhood knew, of course, and the policemen must have know as well, but no one seemed to care much about it. The police just said that some foreign sailor long gone must have done the deed and left it at that.”

“What?” Harry choked out, horrified and incredulous. “Terry’s dad killed him? I don’t believe it-”

“That’s not the issue!” bit out Tom impatiently. “Do you remember the things Alice said in those weeks?”

Harry frowned. “She kept ranting about her favorite playwright – that Oscar Wilde chap.”

“Exactly,” said Tom, smirking. “And what had happened to him?”

Harry blinked at him, utterly befuddled of how that had to do with anything. “He spent some time in prison and after went to France and died.”

Tom shot him an exasperated look. “What was he sentenced for?”

“Something very bad,” said Harry musingly, trying to recall the funny word. “Sada- no, soda-”

“Sodomite, you dimwit!” snapped Tom. “It means that he liked to bed men – young men in his case.”

Harry gaped at him, thoroughly baffled. He glanced at his brother a second time, just to make sure his leg wasn’t being pulled. But no, it didn’t seem so. He was utterly confused, he couldn’t make head or tails of it, because he was quite certain that only girls and boys could do the ‘sex’ thing and it was because boys had willies and girls didn’t.
He was sure of that. He clearly remembered the day when Alice had yelled about ‘dangerous, rampant teenage hormones!’, when she had been shouting at Eric Whalley because she had caught him in the act of paying a couple of pennies to one of the girls in the orphanage, to see what girls had ‘down there’.

Of course, poor Eric had seen nothing but a flash of yellowish undergarments when the girl had quickly lifted up her skirt for a very brief moment, and then the boy had found himself with Alice suddenly towering over him as she dealt him a furious slap on the head, bellowing at him.

But after that, Eric had ran up to Billy Stubbs and him, panting and looking awe-struck, as he informed them that girls didn’t have anything down there, that they were ‘flat’.

Harry shook his head and gazed back at his brother, perplexed. “But all boys have willies! So how-”

“I already told you what sex is,” said Tom sharply. “Do you think that all the mongrels we see rutting and mounting each other on the streets are always a male and a female? No, many times it’s two males going at it. It’s instincts, they mount everything in sight.” He let out a disdainful scoff. “Well, human beings aren’t much different, are they? Clearly, it’s not something liked or allowed in the Muggle World, but apparently, it isn’t that much of a big deal for wizards.” He waved off a hand dismissively before he added in a disgusted tone of voice, “Which is hardly surprising given that wizards even rut with magical creatures.”

Harry gazed at him, blinking. “I still don’t get it. How can two boys do the ‘sex’ thing then?”

Tom shot him a highly irritated look, but suddenly he frowned, looking as if some possibility was highly bothering him. Then he snapped sharply, “Never you mind. You won’t ever need to know about that.”

Harry stared at him, disconcerted, but he wasn’t given a chance to ask anything further, because his brother quickly said, “The point is that Julian Erlichmann is Grindelwald’s lover.” Tom shot him a glance. “You do realize what Dumbledore’s words meant, right?”

“Duh,” said Harry, rolling his eyes. “Julian Erlichmann is spying on Grindelwald under Dumbledore’s orders.”

“Exactly!” said Tom exultantly, his eyes glinting brightly. “I would have never imagined it – the
Dark Lord’s favorite, his little lover and darling, a traitorous spy!” he crowed gleefully. “It’s simply too good! Just wait ‘till I write him a letter telling him that!”

Taken aback, Harry stared at him, feeling something constricting his chest – panic, awful guilt and alarm – and he then barked furiously, “You plan to do what? You’re not, Tom!”

His brother shot him a scathing look. “Of course I am.” He smirked triumphantly. “And I bet that after that, I could ask him for anything and he would give it to me, as a reward.”

“You’re not telling him anything,” growled Harry, taking a step towards his brother, his small hands clenching into fists. “Erlichmann would be killed, Tom. I’m sure.”

“So?” Tom shrugged unconcernedly, before he caught sight of Harry’s expression and glared at him as he hissed out, “What do you care about some stranger?”

“I care exactly because he’s ‘some stranger’,“ snapped Harry bristling. “I told you about what Dumbledore had been speaking about because you had been honest with me so I was honest with you – but I was trusting you with that, Tom! And if Erlichmann get’s killed because I flapped my gums at you, then his death would be my fault – and I’m not having that!”

“It wouldn’t be your fault, you little twit,” bit out Tom impatiently. “He would be getting what he deserves for being a traitor and spy. It would be his own fault.”

Harry shook his head repeatedly. “Put it any way you want, it will change nothing. You’re not telling, and that’s that. It’s right that Dumbledore has a spy. It evens the field and makes it fair, in my view.”

“Meaning what?” Tom pinned him with narrowed eyes.

Harry scoffed loudly. “Come off it. Don’t play dumb.” He yanked the two books from his brother’s hands and waved them in front of Tom’s nose. “How did these get under your pillows, eh? You know as well as I do that someone in this castle received them, and the letter, from Grindelwald, and they were the ones who put it under your pillows.” He frowned musingly. “Maybe it was an older Slytherin.”

“Someone like Grindelwald,” interjected Tom coolly, “wouldn’t trust an underaged wizard.”
Harry shot him a glance. “Then a teacher.” His eyes widened the next instant, and he breathed out, “Slughorn! As our Head of House he’s the only teacher that could get in our dorms—”

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be Slughorn,” pointed out Tom matter-of-factly. “Any teacher could have asked a house-elf to do it and not say a word.”

“You’re right,” muttered Harry, frowning. That fact just perturbed him even more. He liked all his teachers, well, except Galatea Merrythought given the way she had treated Abraxas Malfoy just because the boy was a half-Veela.

He shook his head and waved his hand dismissively, “Whoever it is, he or she is Grindelwald’s spy at Hogwarts - clearly to spy on Dumbledore.” He shot his brother a dark scowl. “And maybe even to keep an eye on us and report to Grindelwald – who knows? But my point is that they both have spies on each other, so let’s just leave it at that.”

Tom skewered him with narrowed eyes and remained silent, and Harry could just tell he was up to something.

At last, Tom widely smirked at him, as he intoned smoothly, “‘Leaving it at that’ with ‘even fields’ – all words out of your mouth, if you’ll remember- also means that you can’t tell anyone about the attack on Czechoslovakia.”

Harry gawked at him. “That’s a completely different thing!” He shook his head and declared adamantly, “I am going to tell someone. Maybe not Churchill or any other muggle because I don’t wanna get expelled, but I could tell…”

He trailed off, frowning musingly. Now that he knew why Dumbledore had behaved that way when hearing Lord Horkos’ name, he could understand the wizard. After all, Dumbledore had been right to be suspicious about his brother – Tom had been trying to find out more about that Horcrux thingy. And Dumbledore had wanted to help, to prevent his brother from knowing more.

When Tom had told him about it, it had seemed very silly to Harry. But given Dumbledore’s reaction – going to such lengths as taking half the Dark Arts books from the Restricted Section – it was clearly something very bad. And he quite agreed with Dumbledore, then. He didn’t want his brother knowing anything some nasty artifact created by a Dark Lord of the Middle Ages, of all things.
So Dumbledore was forgiven for not letting him speak, and the wizard was right up back on top of his short list of people he could go to.

Harry nodded to himself and glanced back at his brother. “I’ll tell Dumbledore.”

Tom scoffed scathingly at that, to then arch an eyebrow. “What makes you think he doesn’t already know? Julian Erlichmann is his spy, after all.”

“Yeah, but hearing it from two different people makes a difference, doesn’t it?” snapped Harry impatiently. “Besides, Dumbledore was saying he hadn’t received any news from Erlichmann. So he might not know.” He shook his head and added firmly, “And if Dumbledore doesn’t do anything about it, then I’ll write to Charlemagne McLaggen himself – to every wizard and witch in the Ministry of Magic if I need to!”

Tom glowered at him, before he halted and smirked superiorly. “And how do you intend to prove your claims, little brother?” He shot him a snide look. “Do you really think anyone would believe an eleven-year-old boy?”

Harry scowled at him, before a determined and mulish expression spread on his face. “Then I’ll tell them the whole truth – about how I can get into paintings and how I overheard Malfoy, the Blacks, and the others having their little secret meeting, plotting.”

Tom hissed under his breath, looking furious beyond measure. However, his expression then turned pensive, and Harry could just see the plotting going on in his brother’s head.

Smirking vindictively, Tom took two short steps to tower over him, and bore his gaze down into Harry’s, as he said silkily, “If you tell anyone about the attack on Czecoslovakia, I’ll tell Grindelwald about Julian Erlichmann. That is ‘evening the fields’ in my book.” His voice then lowered into a soft, slow whisper, “So think very carefully, little brother, what will it be? Julian Erlichmann’s life or that of the Czechs that might get killed when Grindelwald and his puppet Hitler attack the country with joined forces? Hmm?”

Harry stared at him with wide, incredulous eyes, his mouth hanging open, before he choked out, “You must be joking! I can’t decide on something like that!”

“Oh, but you will,” intoned Tom loftily. “Because I’m giving you no other choice.” His eyes then
narrowed to slits. “If I want to inform Grindelwald about Erlichmann, I will, and you can do
the whole Owlerly?” He scoffed snidely. “You wouldn’t have the gumption. And if you took any
drastic measure, I would still find a way of communicating with Grindelwald. That I promise. So make your choice, brother.”

Harry gritted his teeth, so furious that he was shaking, and he spat, “I’m not going to choose!”

Tom arched an eyebrow at him. “Tell I’ll just write to Grindelwald.”

Harry hatefully glared at his brother, before he bit out, “Why do you want him to succeed!”

“Why do you want him to fail?” hissed out Tom angrily.

“Because he’s a bad person!” snapped Harry, jerkily carding his fingers through his hair.

Tom scoffed snidely. “That’s the Prewett twins talking.”

“No, it’s not,” gritted out Harry. “I can form my own opinions, thank you very much. He’s
conquering countries, killing people and dragging muggles into it! Bob Hutchins might end up
fighting and dying, because of him! And Alice will be crushed-”

“That’s what you care about?” interjected Tom scathingly. “Hutchins and stupid Alice?”

“And everyone who’s gonna die, Tom!” shouted Harry at him, beyond exasperation and frustration
and any measure of patience or understanding.

“You’re pathetic,” said Tom acidly. “You should be caring about yourself – about us!” He yanked
the two books from Harry and violently tapped a finger on them. “I know what the Dark Arts can
do and light wizards don’t stand a chance! So I know Grindelwald will win and thus, we must be
on his side-”

“You can’t predict the future, Tom,” bit out Harry crossly. “He could lose – and besides, we don’t
have to be on anyone’s side-”
“You’re a fool!” hissed out Tom. “We’re already involved.” He shook the two books pointedly. “We’ve caught the Dark Lord’s attention.” He instantly brought up a hand. “And no, I don’t know how he found out about us or how he knows we’re Parselmouths. The point is he does, and he wants to teach us the Dark Arts, to mentor us—”

“Exactly,” snapped Harry shortly, “he’s after something.”

Tom coolly arched an eyebrow at him. “How so?”

“You know perfectly well,” said Harry, aggravated. “You’re the one who always says that nobody does something in exchange for nothing – so what does Grindelwald want from us?”

Tom shot him a long, considering look, until he said calmly, “Yes, he wants something from us, that’s clear. I don’t know what it could be, but I’m going to milk it for everything it’s worth. He wants to teach us – let him! And we’ll learn and be prepared.”

Harry shook his head, but before he was given a chance to speak, Tom said quietly, “Let me tell you something very important.”

Snapping his head up, Harry intently gazed at him, and his brother continued in a hushed tone of voice, “For many years, I’ve known there was something very suspicious about World Events. How Fascism rose in Spain and Italy, and Nazism in Germany – all almost at the same time. Back then, I came to the conclusion that a group of politicians must’ve been orchestrating things from behind the scenes. I didn’t know about the Wizarding World yet.”

Tom paused, before he carried on, “But when we met your little friends—” he shot him a scathing look “—the Prewett twins, at the Hogwarts Express, and they started blabbering about Grindelwald and how he was really a ‘Dark Lord’ and what being a Dark Lord meant, then it all clicked. I knew that I had been right, only that instead of a ‘group of people’, it was a wizard, a Dark Lord, moving around the chess pieces.”

His brother’s voice lowered to a mere murmur, “Of course, I was in awe of him, and that just grew as I learned more about him, as I continued to inform myself, crossing the information I gathered from Alice’s newspaper clippings with that reported on the Daily Prophet. And I realized just what a genius and brilliant strategist Grindelwald is.”

He pierced Harry with his dark blue eyes, as he added firmly, “So if he wants to ‘mentor’ us and
teach us the Dark Arts, then we’ll do it, because we’ve caught his attention and whether we want it or not, because of that, we’ll be involved in the war and whatever happens. And the only thing we can do, is be prepared.”

Silent, Harry frowned, before he shot him a disturbed glance. “So what? You want us to be his followers?”

“It would be the wise choice,” said Tom coolly. “Just until we know what he’s after, just until we had the time to learn as much as we can from him.” He superiorly smirked at him. “But not forever, little brother, because I’m not meant to follow but to lead.”


“That,” said Tom airily, waving off a hand dismissively, “is a subject to be discussed some other time.” He shot him a smug smirk. “In a few years, perhaps, when I will already have some plans underway.”

Letting that go, too tired to attempt to glean more about that from him, Harry let out a deep sigh.

Remaining silent, he deeply mused about all of it, and after long moments, he said slowly, “I agree with you that, maybe, it isn’t a bad idea to be ‘prepared’, as you put it-

“By that,” remarked Tom pointedly, piercing him with his eyes, “I was talking about learning the Dark Arts.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Harry, heaving a deep breath. He shot him a glance, and grumbled reluctantly, “I will learn them if you think it’s necessary-”

“It is,” interjected Tom swiftly.

Harry nodded, and then said stubbornly, “But it doesn’t mean, even if we have to be his followers because Grindelwald doesn’t leave us with any other choice, that I want him to win.” He glowered at his brother. “I don’t. So I’ll make sure that the right people know about Czechoslovakia.”
“Can’t you let that be?” groused Tom with exasperation. He fulminated him with a glance, and added acidly, “What do you think will happen if you do that? I’ll tell you what. Grindelwald will find out, and he’ll have you killed. He’ll see it as a betrayal because he clearly already considers us his pupils. And I don’t think he’s the forgiving kind, do you?”

Fretfully, Harry bit his lower lip, and he said dubiously, “Maybe he won’t find out?”

Tom merely scoffed, before he arched an eyebrow and said coolly, “Perhaps I should rephrase the deal I offered you before. What will you do – tell people about the attack of March, knowing you will become Grindelwald’s target and knowing that if you blab, I’ll tell him about Julian Erlichman –” he narrowed his eyes to slits, as he hissed out “- or will you keep your trap shut?”

Harry stared at him incredulously. “Not that again!”

“Yes, that again,” bit out Tom sharply. “Your life and Erlichmann’s, or that of the Czechs that might die? Choose now and let’s be done with it. I’m very serious about this.”

Harry shook his head disparagingly, but glancing at his brother, he knew Tom wasn’t kidding. His brother would tattle-tale on Julian Erlichmann if given the chance. It seemed harsh and cruel to make him chose something like that, but really, in the end, Harry knew what his only answer could be.

Julian was a complete stranger to him, yet, having heard so often about the young man and knowing he was a spy, doing his best to bring down Grindelwald, Harry felt admiration and sympathy for him – and a sort of strange connection, as puzzling as that feeling was.

Furthermore, he knew Dumbledore might already know about the attack – he dearly hoped that.

“Julian’s life,” he finally breathed out. Before he clenched his teeth and gritted out, “You win. I won’t say anything about Czechoslovakia.”

“I win nothing,” pointed out Tom curtly. “I made you choose for your own sake, because I know you’re stupid enough to try to save those Czechs when it’s really not your responsibility to do anything of the sort!” He shot him a vexed glare, before he added sternly, “And now, to clinch the deal, I’ll get an Unbreakable Vow from you.”
Not liking the sound of that, Harry frowned at him. “A what?”

Tom took his time to explain the spell to him in great length and detail, and the moment he was done, Harry cried out incredulously, “You’ve gone bonkers! I’m not doing that – if I break my promise, I’ll die!”

“Precisely,” said Tom with much smug satisfaction. “That way, I know you won’t be tempted to flap your gums.” He arched an eyebrow at him. “You either do the Vow or there’s no deal and I’ll tell about Erlichmann.”

Harry glared at him with all the power of his frustration, until he spat at last, “Fine.”

Tom just nodded. “I will vow to never reveal to anyone, in any shape or form, written, verbal or magical, about Julian Erlichmann’s role as a spy. And you’ll vow the same, regarding the attack on Czechoslovakia.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” grumbled Harry darkly. “Let’s just get on with it.”

They did, and when it was done, Harry moodily sulked, flexing his hand, still feeling the string of magic that had tightly wrapped itself around it, to then sink in into his flesh, tugging something in his insides.

“Now you can stop pathetically worrying so much,” said Tom acerbically. “You’ve been a little hero and saved a man’s life. That should suffice you.”

Harry shot him a peeved glower, and his brother -as was usual when he managed to rile up Harry- widely smirked at him.

Looking vastly content, Tom patted him on the shoulder as he started directing Harry towards the exit of the dueling chamber. “And don’t forget, you agreed to learn the Dark Arts. We’ll meet here, every weekday at nine in the evening.” He gave him a wide, pleasant smirk. “I think I’ll enjoy casting dark spells on you, little brother.”

Harry shot him an alarmed look at that, and was quick to say, “We’ll only practice on the dummies!”
His brother just chuckled, which always sounded very disturbing in Harry’s opinion.

That night, Harry rolled and rolled in his bed, and got tangled several times in the sheets, his mind buzzing with thoughts that wouldn’t leave him alone.

He wondered about who had put the book about Lord Horkos on the floor of Flourish and Blotts, for his brother to see, and who had then taken it, clearly using some spell. He wondered who had taken the copy of that very same book from the Restricted Section of Hogwarts’ library. And he mused and speculated about who could be Grindelwald’s spy in the castle.

But coming up with no clues, he shelved all those issues in one corner of his mind, for later perusal.

And then, he couldn’t stop thinking and wondering about the young man whose life he had saved, as Tom had put it.

What kind of person was Julian Erlichmann that he could be the lover of another man? But more importantly, how could anyone be the lover of a Dark Lord? The very thought made him shudder, even when he was still clueless regarding what it entailed. Did Julian actually love Grindelwald the slightest bit, or just fully hated him? Or was it a mix of both?

Julian, Julian, Julian – Harry wouldn’t stop obsessively thinking about him for many years, and many times he would deeply wish for an opportunity to meet him.
Part I: Chapter 21

November became a very busy month for Harry, full of events.

For starters, he had approached Mr. Tilly Toke about how he wanted to make a map of Hogwarts. Initially, Harry had been a bit worried that his Charms Professor would angrily refuse or get suspicious, demanding to know why he wanted a map of the school.

However, he had been pleasantly surprised when Tilly Toke, with his usual exuberance and boyish excitement, had declared, “What a wonderful idea!” The man had winked at him knowingly. “You’ll be putting it to good use for mischievous deeds, no doubt!”

The professor had chortled wistfully. “Oh, to be young again, full of adventurous spirit and a prank-full disposition! Of course I’ll help you, Mr. Riddle – I’ll teach you all the Charms you might need and we’ll add a couple more for sheer fun!” He had patted Harry on the shoulder. “Why, we can make it an extra-credit project for my class and I’ll give you full points for it. But you’ll have to do all the work yourself.”

Harry had readily agreed, and had been going to Professor Tilly Toke’s office during the weeks, right after dinner and before he had to meet Tom in the Dueling Chamber.

His teacher had been quick to not only teach him spells to help him make a magical map, but also to give him plenty of books about all sorts of Charms.

“I shouldn’t say this,” had said Tilly Toke the first day when he had handed over several thick tomes, “but you’re my favorite student, Mr. Riddle.” He had beamed a wide, pearly white smile at him. “You have a natural talent for Charms and such thing must be nurtured. I see great potential in you.”
Harry had grinned back, flushing with pleasure.

Moreover, not only was learning more Charms giving him much enjoyment, but his Dark Arts lessons with his brother quite unexpectedly proved to be his favorite part of the weekdays.

Not due to the spells and curses themselves – some quite fascinating and others just plain disturbing or outright horrifying – but because Tom was always in a very good mood. During all the lessons, his brother was very nice to him, patiently explaining wand movements and how to best pronounce the spell-words.

Indeed, whenever Harry successfully cast a dark spell, Tom would actually smile at him, looking proudly satisfied.

However, some things had made him uneasy. One day, they had been practicing the Slashing Curse.

“Sectum!” Harry said, flicking his wand just as his brother had taught him, aiming straight at the dummy before him.

A wide, gaping wound opened across the chest of the fleshy mannequin, spurting a blood-like liquid. A moment later, the dummy shimmered and the wound closed itself up and the stains vanished.

Harry panted as he rubbed his scar. It always happened when he cast Dark Arts spells: his scar would tingle pleasantly, as if it was vastly enjoying the experience.

It couldn’t actually be his scar, he had mused, so Harry had ascribed it to his brother’s feelings, given that Tom always looked happy when Harry perfectly executed a curse. It seemed that just how he could tell when his brother was angry, through the scar, he now could also feel when Tom was highly content.

Nevertheless, it wasn’t that which disturbed him, but the surge of warm, fuzzy delight and sheer pleasure he had felt when casting the spell.

“It feels so good,” he finally breathed out. He dazedly shook his head, before he bit his bottom lip fretfully. “Too good, actually.”

“Of course it feels good,” interjected Tom, lightly smirking at him. “Power is meant to feel good, little brother.”

“I suppose,” muttered Harry, frowning before he added anxiously, “but it kinda feels… er, addictive.” He shot his brother a disquieted glance. “And the Prewetts twins have told me just that, that the Dark Arts are addictive and that’s why there has been wizards who had delved too deeply in the Dark Arts and bad stuff happened to them, always.”

Tom scoffed snidely. “That’s a load of rubbish. And we’re just learning the basics, for now, so there’s nothing to be worried about.”

His brother waved a hand dismissively before he approached the dummy. “You did well, but it’s best if you aim at one of the upper thighs.” He pointed a finger just at the place. “Here, or here. According to Grindelwald’s book, that’s where the Femoral artery is. And if you cast the Slashing Curse there, your opponent will bleed to death in just a few minutes.”

Tom paused before he patted the dummy’s throat. “Or aim here – thus.”
He took several steps back, his dark blue eyes glinting gleefully, as he intoned, “Sectum!”

Such was the force of the spell that the mannequin’s head flew off, leaving a hacked neck gushing out a great fountain of blood-like liquid.

At the spectacle, Harry’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. “Um, you want me to know how to chop someone’s head off?” He quirked an eyebrow at his brother. “Are we planning on decapitating people?”

“We might,” said Tom coolly. “If you’re dueling against an enemy it’s kill or be killed, little brother.”

Harry nodded slowly, a bit dubiously. But then he reckoned Tom could be right. His brother seemed quite certain that their involvement with Grindelwald could land them in the middle of a battle. And if not, Tom had said, becoming an excellent dueler was still ‘imperative’, no matter where life led them.

It wasn’t all fun, though. Just the day after that lesson, Tom had found him in their dormitory, when Harry had been on his bed, snacking on an apple whilst he practiced wand movements from one of the books Mr. Toke had given him.

“I’ve finally received them from Flourish and Blotts,” said Tom excitedly. “They cost me a small fortune, but I’ve already flipped through them and they’re worth every galleon.”

And with that, he dropped a bunch of thick, glossy books on Harry’s bed, and quickly sat down.

“Look,” said Tom, as he opened the cover of the first book.

There was a big picture of a beautiful blonde, blue-eyed witch. She graciously smiled at them, as she intoned in a soft, melodic voice, “Welcome to ‘Learning German in Three Years: Level One’. Please read the Index to see the full list of Lessons contained in this book. Lesson One: Greetings. Good evening – Guten Abend. Repeat after me.”

“Guten Abend,” said Tom effortlessly.

“Correct. Perfect pronunciation,” said the picture of the witch, charmingly smiling. “You can proceed to the next page of Lesson One.”

Then she went still, and Harry was quick to groan, “Don’t tell me you want us to–”

“We’re learning German,” interrupted Tom swiftly, widely smirking at him.

“Do we have to?” whined Harry piteously.

More work – just what he needed! And he had thought magic school would be fun.

“Yes, we do,” retorted Tom curtly. “It’s a German Dark Lord who’s taking over Europe, so it’s German what we must learn.”

Harry sighed wearily, before his expression brightened. “Isn’t there some spell for that?”

“Some spell,” began Tom dryly, “that you can cast on your head and it will just suddenly make you know German?”

Harry quickly nodded at him, very hopeful.
“No, brother, there isn’t;” said Tom tartly, crushing Harry’s optimism.

Shooting the books a disgruntled look, Harry’s shoulders slumped.

Wholly ignoring Harry’s pouting sulk, Tom began stacking up five books. “They have exercises and even corrects your mistakes and bad pronunciation.” He plopped those five books on Harry’s lap, as he added, “I bought two copies of each. Those are yours.”

Then he stuck his own books into his schoolbag and swiftly rose to his feet. He shot Harry a firm look, as he said sternly, “I’ll be testing you myself to make sure you’re studying German, so you better stop being lazy.”

And with that, he left the bedroom, leaving a grumpy Harry behind.

In the next second, Harry suddenly realized that he could take advantage of the situation, and he quickly went to his trunk, grabbing the heavy pouch of galleons that Alphard had saved from his monthly allowance, and the book that Dorea had given him.

He intercepted Tom on the stairs, just before he had stepped into the common room.

“Wait!” Harry panted out. The moment his brother halted and shot him a quizzical glance, he said quickly, “If you want me to learn German, I will, but I want something from you in return.”

He pushed the book and pouch into Tom’s hands, and his brother frowned as he looked down at them. “‘Obscure Brews to Correct the Senses’? What’s this?” His eyes narrowed suspiciously as he hefted the pouch. “And where did you get this money from?”


He quickly explained matters to him, obviously leaving Alphard completely out, and not mentioning either that in thirty-five percent of the cases the potion turned the drinker blind. He had already checked, and that warning hadn’t been on the book. And he was pretty certain his brother would outright refuse and yell at him if he ever found out about that tidbit.

Thus, he finally ended with, “It takes six months to brew, but it’s not difficult, according to Dorea. Only that the ingredients are very pricey but with those galleons it should be enough.”

Tom shot him a calculating glance, before he drawled slowly, “It’s a big favor you’re asking-”

“What,” groused out Harry, “and learning German during three full years isn’t?”

He crossed his arms over his small chest and huffed. He wasn’t going to yield. It was just perfect that he could ask Tom to brew the potion in exchange for him learning German. After all, he was owed another favor for searching for the Chamber of Secrets – but he wanted to keep that one for future use.

“Very well,” finally said Tom grudgingly. “I’ll see to it, and I’ll start brewing after the holidays.” He shot him a snide look. “At least, I’ll never have to see those ridiculous, ugly eyeglasses of yours again.”

Aspersions on his beloved glasses not bothering him one bit – he was still keeping them, afterwards- Harry toothily grinned at him, vastly satisfied.

From then onwards, Harry barely had a spare moment. Between learning Charms and going to
Tilly Toke’s office as he slowly constructed the magical map, studying German, going every day to the Dueling Chamber, having secret Quidditch practice on Sundays, and then also carrying his tasks of looking for the Grey Lady and the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, he had his hands full.

Furthermore, Harry had the sensation he was being followed.

It had happened several times when he had been meandering about the castle, examining classrooms for any indication of some secret entrance, whilst glancing around, hoping to see a ghostly figure. He had felt the heavy weight of a pair of eyes on the back of his head.

At first, he had spun around hopefully, thinking that perhaps that ‘Santi’ person had decided to make an appearance, as he had promised. But it wasn’t. Once, for a very brief second, he had caught sight of a hem of robes vanishing around the corner, as whomever it was broke into a sprint.

Determined and peeved, Harry had instantly followed, running as fast as he could. But when he reached the corridor, the person was gone. For a moment, Harry thought it could have been Dumbledore.

After all, ever since his encounter with the wizard and the whole Lord Horkos’ issue, the Transfiguration Professor had been keeping a close watch on him and Tom. Furthermore, sometimes, during class or from the wizard’s seat at the staff’s table of the Great Hall, Dumbledore would shoot him brief, concerned looks.

As much as Harry had decided that the wizard meant well, he was grateful that Dumbledore hadn’t approached him and pressed the matter.

However, Dumbledore always wore very wacky robes, either of some bright, blinding color, or with animated figures like stars, suns, or ginger-bread men, winking, waving or bouncing around along collar and hems. With that wardrobe, Dumbledore would certainly make a terrible spy.

And the robes he had seen had been black – like a student’s. But with no other clues to go on with, Harry had been stumped.

It soon vanished from his mind as two events transpired in Slytherin House.

On the Saturday that he had been exhausted from all his activities and had decided to skip breakfast and sleep in, he had finally dragged himself up to the common room an hour later.

There, he had seen that the whole House was in a full-blown celebration. Many were waving embossed, glossed letters, which they all seemed to have received by owl during breakfast.

With glasses of butterbeer in their hands – clearly smuggled from Hogsmeade by some older Slytherin – they were raising them in the air and toasting.

His yearmate, Druella Rosier, was in the very middle, beaming with pleasure.

For once, given that whenever he saw her she would nastily glare at him with a scrunched up face, she looked very beautiful. All golden hair, blue eyes, and delicate, breath-taking features – funnily enough, looking very much like that woman Harry had now began seeing in his dreams, when he felt as if he was being lovingly cradled while a soft voice sung Alice’s lullaby.

But between that, and his childhood’s nightmare about red eyes and a flash of green that still sometimes crept on him in his sleep, Harry had long since stopped paying attention to his weird dreams.
Just then, Algernon Wilkes had hushed all the rest, before he said exultantly, “Cheers – to the new Rosier Heir!” He shot a glance at Druella, as he asked quietly, “What’s his name again?”

“Evan,” replied Druella, glowing with pride. “Evan Rowan Rosier.”

Algernon nodded, before he cried out, “To Evan Rosier!”

“To Evan Rosier!” chimed all the rest.

A bit bemused by the whole scene, Harry would only find out later in that evening what had happened.

He had met Alphard in the kitchens, as usual, to work on their Herbology homework, and he was quick to inquire.

“Oh, that was because Druella’s mother finally had a baby boy,” said Alphard as he munched down one of the cream pastries the house-elves had baked for them. “The Rosiers are in their eighties, and they’ve been trying for ages. So now, Druella finally has a sibling.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot to his hairline, as he thought about the whole joyous spectacle he had seen. “Is it always a big deal?”

Alphard gave him an incredulous look. “Of course! Because the baby is a male, so the Rosiers now have an heir, at last, and because…” He trailed off, eyeing him strangely. “You don’t know? No one has told you, huh?”

“Well,” began Alphard slowly, “all wizarding families have trouble having children. There’s always plenty of stillbirths and miscarriages.” He shot him a pointed glance. “Haven’t you noticed that most pureblood students are only child?”

Perplexed, Harry stared at him, before he frowned. “But your family is very large.”

Alphard shook his head. “That’s only because it’s a Black tradition to try as many times as it takes to have at least two or three children, because loads of Blacks have died young. There must be spare children so that there’s always at least one surviving heir.” His expression turned sad, as he added, “But we still have had plenty of stillborns or squibs in the family line. My mother lost three babies.”

Puzzled, Harry pointed out, “But then, why did the Malfoys kill their female children in the past? The Prewett twins told me that.”

“They told you, eh?” said Alphard wistfully.

At that, Harry shot him a cautious look.

Soon after they had become friends, Alphard had asked him hopefully, “Do Felicity and Felix ever speak about me? We were friends, you know, when we were younger.”

Harry hadn’t known quite what to say, because except that day when the twins had told him about Abraxas Malfoy being a half-Veela, they had never mentioned much their other former childhood friends.

He reckoned they would have said something about Alphard, if they knew he was his friend. That,
exactly, had been his reply to him, though Alphard hadn’t looked much heartened by it.

Furthermore, after the Gryffindor’s Halloween party was long passed and gone, and the Prewetts had stopped being so awkward around him due to it, he had gone back to spending much of his free time with them. And Harry was well aware that Alphard suffered a bit because of it.

Just the other week, when he had been playing on the grounds with the twins, engaged in a fun snowball war, he had seen Alphard in the distance, standing by the entrance of the castle, gazing at them with a mournful, longing look.

Alphard sighed softly, before he glanced back at Harry and waved a hand. “That’s just because the Malfoys didn’t want to have their estates and fortune divided among several descendants. So they always had as many children as it took until a boy was born, and then they discard the rest. But it still wasn’t easy for them.” A musing expression spread on his face, as he added, “There are some few exceptions, of course. Like the Prewett line, that has the luck to bear twins now and then. And like the Weasleys, who have no trouble and always have loads of children.”

He paused, before he continued adamantly, “But that’s just it. In the Old Days, all wizarding families were like the Weasleys. They had bunches of children - eight, ten, twelve!” He snapped his fingers. “Like that! Very easily and without any problems.”

Cocking his head to a side, Harry asked intrigued, “So what changed?”

“No one really knows,” said Alphard, shrugging his shoulders. “Well, my kind has always believed it’s because of the muggleborns—” He broke off, his grey eyes going wide, and he shot him a quick, apologetic look.

Harry shook his head in amusement. “It doesn’t bother me, Al. You don’t hafta tip-toe around me because of that.”

“Alright,” said Alphard a bit hesitantly, before he regained force. “Well, you know about the whole Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin thing, right?”

After taking a long sip from his hot chocolate, Harry nodded. “Yup. Slytherin didn’t want muggleborns in Hogwarts and they fought about it.”

“Exactly,” piped in Alphard. “Father told me long ago that Slytherin had several valid reasons. Like not wanting wizarding culture to be corrupted by the muggle one and things like that, but also because Slytherin had been the first to realize what was happening.”

The boy paused as he selected another pastry to pop into his mouth, and after he had swallowed it down with a blissful look on his face, he continued, “By then, all these problems in having children—the squibs, the stillborns, and such- had been going on for some centuries. And Slytherin thought it was because wizarding kind had been marrying muggles and muggleborns, and passing along some deficiency to their descendants which made them have trouble with fertility—”

“Oh!” interjected Harry in sudden realization. “So that’s why Slytherin was the first to create Fertility Potions, then? The twins told me that too, though they didn’t tell me the reason.”

“Yes,” said Alphard, gravely nodding at him. “But it was also more than that. Slytherin believed that even if a wizarding family remained pureblooded, without mixing with any muggles and muggleborns, they were still being affected.”

He scrunched his face up, looking as if he was racking his brain. “Father told me it was something like… like as if the muggles and their muggleborns have some sort of flu, or something in their
bodies, that wizards caught when they were around them.”

Bewildered, Harry stared at him with wide eyes, before he shook his head. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Alphard sighed. “Well, I don’t really know that much about it.” He frowned, looking as if he was thinking hard again, and he began slowly, “Slytherin believed that they carried some disease, something that wasn’t a disease for them, but that it was for wizards and witches, and that it was this that affected us and made us have problems with having children.”

Harry frowned deeply, but suddenly a spark of a memory lighted in his mind, as he remembered one of Alice’s history lessons about the Conquest of America.

In the next moment, he breathed out, “Oh, like the Indians!” Alphard shot him a nonplussed look at that, and Harry quickly explained, “When the muggles from Europe went to America, loads of Indians died because the Europeans had some bug or something that was bad for the Indians.”

Still looking confused, Alphard said hesitantly, “Um, yes, maybe it’s something like that.”

“But is it true?” pressed on Harry, a mite disturbed. “In the case of muggle and muggleborns with wizards – is there really something that’s being passed on by just being around each other?”

“No one really knows for certain,” said Alphard with a sigh. “Even now, from what I’ve heard, plenty of Healers have looked into it and they can’t agree. They bicker and argue, but none of them have come up with any solid evidence.” He shot him a brief glance, as he added quietly, “But most dark purebloods firmly believe that Slytherin was right, about that and how mixing with muggles and muggleborns make descendants be weak in magical power.”

Harry stared at him, a bit astonished, then he shook his head. “But then, did Slytherin’s Fertility Potions work in the end?” He frowned musingly, as he added in the next second, “Though from what you’ve told me, it doesn’t seem so-”

“That’s just it,” piped in Alphard brightly, “they helped a bit but not enough. So, according to Father, Slytherin came up with more solutions. He made Breeder Potions.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked curiously as he picked up his cup of hot chocolate.

“Well, there’re two kinds that I’ve heard of,” said Alphard smiling at him, looking proud of himself, as if he was vastly enjoying sharing his knowledge. “Apparently, Slytherin came to the conclusion that one way to stop wizards from mixing with muggles and muggleborns was to give them another alternative and help them along with it. That is, for wizards and witches to choose magical creatures instead. So the first type of Breeder Potions he created was for that.”

He waved off a hand as he added quickly, “Because of course we’re different from them. The only magical creatures that are completely compatible with us are Veelas. To have children with them, wizards and witches don’t need potions, but for all the rest, they do.” Alphard grinned at him, looking as if he found it vastly funny. “There’re for all sorts!”

“Really?” muttered Harry bemusedly. Well, given how Tom had looked all disgusted when he had said that ‘wizards even rutted with magical creatures’, it seemed that there was one point in which his brother didn’t agree with their ancestor.

Alphard adamantly nodded at him. “Slytherin apparently thought it was very important because, by mixing with magical creatures, new powerful magical blood was injected in wizarding lines. Of course, since not all wizards and witches liked mixing with non-humans or halfbreeds, Slytherin
came up with another type of Breeder Potions. This one for purebloods, for Ganymede wizards and Sappho witches.”

“The what and what?” Harry blinked at him, before he brought his cup to his lips as he waited for clarification.

His friend gave him an incredulous look. “You know, wizards and witches that like their own gender. That second type of Breeder Potions was for those kind of couples to be able to have children.”

Harry was caught in mid sip. His hot chocolate went up the wrong way and came out to be splattered all across the table, as he choked out a strangled, “W-what?”

In the bat of an eyelash, a house-elf popped into existence and cleaned with the mess with a snap of his fingers. Though Harry was still so stunned by what Alphard had said, that he didn’t even thank the little creature.

First, Tom had told him that boys could do the sex thing with other boys, and he still hadn’t figured that one out. And now Alphard was telling him that - that-

Paling, Harry stared at the other boy with a horrified look on his face, as he gestured frantically with his hands, finally putting them before him as if encompassing a huge belly, as he stammered, “You mean – you mean that wizards take that potion to get preggers?”

“Mordred save us!” exclaimed Alphard, blanching just as much as Harry. “Not nowadays!” His nose scrunched up. “What wizard would want that? To waddle around and be all fat and moody all the time…”

The boy shook his head, and pointed out with a wizened air, “Pregnant people get very nasty, you know? My brother told me that when Mother was carrying me, she was unbearable and would yell at every little thing.” He shuddered. “And she’s already bad enough when she’s normal.”

Harry stared at him, before he bit out peevishly, “But you just told me that that potion was for-”

“I was speaking about centuries ago!” interjected Alphard quickly. “Those kind of potions haven’t been used in ages. At least I hope not!” He shivered. “Nowadays Ganymede wizards and Sappho witches have all sorts of other things they can use, like Surrogacy Rituals, Inheritance or Blood Fusing Rites, and that sort of thing.”

At that, Harry didn’t even want to ask. He truly didn’t want to know. The Wizarding World was honestly a very bizarre place.

Inevitably, though, his thoughts turned to Julian Erlichmann, as constantly kept happening to him lately.

Tilting his head to a side, Harry asked musingly, “Is it a common thing in the Wizarding World for people to fancy their own gender?”

“Common?” Alphard blinked at him. “What a strange question. Um, I don’t know. It’s not common or uncommon. It just is, isn’t it?” He shot Harry a puzzled glance then. “Isn’t it the same in the Muggle World?”

“No!” said Harry, shuddering as he remembered what Tom had revealed about poor Terry of their neighborhood. Then he frowned. “Well, I don’t know either if it’s common. It happens, apparently, but muggles don’t like it.”
Alphard’s eyebrows quirked upwards. “Muggles are so weird.” He shook his head, before he added pensively, “I suppose it’s because their sort in the Muggle World have no way of having children. I mean, if Ganymede or Sappho couples didn’t have children, then other wizards would mutter angrily about it.” He waved a hand dismissively. “It’s always all about passing on our magical blood. So as long as they do it, no one really cares about anything else.”

Dazed, Harry merely shook his head slowly.

Just a week after that conversation, Harry witnessed a scene quite by accident.

Returning from having spent some time with the Prewett twins, playing Exploding Snaps with Felicity while Felix negotiated and traded Chocolate Frog cards with Algie Longbottom, he had come upon Dorea Black and Abraxas Malfoy in the middle of a heated argument. At such late hour, they had been alone in the common room, and didn’t even become aware of his presence.

“…the girl is cut out from the same cloth as her Russian mother, I’ve heard,” Dorea Black was saying bitingly. “A nasty piece of work, no doubt. And two years your elder and schooled at Durmstrang, no less. I wonder how you’ll manage.” She shot Abraxas a mocking, taunting look, before her voice turned stern, “But then, you don’t seem to think you have much choice - you either marry the Von Krauss girl or convince Old Maxy to let you have Walburga. Against that, perhaps I’d also be choosing the German chit, but my point is that you don’t have to-”

“It has nothing to do with you. Just stay out of my business,” interrupted Abraxas Malfoy in a chilly tone of voice, his silvery eyes flashing. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I stick my nose where it’s not wanted because I care about you,” snapped Dorea impatiently. “You’ve been a friend of my nephews since the cradle, and for years I’ve been waiting for you to grow a backbone and stop allowing your grandfather to pull all your strings. That will be the day when I’ll respect you and stay out of your business, Abraxas. And I do hope it happens soon, for your sake, because if you let Old Maxy betroth you to Kasimira Von Krauss, you’ll be miserable for the rest of your life. That’s for sure.”

Abraxas Malfoy’s eyes turned as frosty as a wintry lake, before he simply turned around and swiftly took the stairs down to the dormitories, leaving Dorea in the dust, looking angered and impotent with worry at the same time.

As much as it had intrigued Harry at the time, he soon forgot it when Slytherin House had another reason for celebration, which Harry would have dearly liked to know about beforehand. However, he didn’t, because Alphard hadn’t breathed a word to him that it was his birthday.

Thus, when he got back to the common room on that day, after a long session of working on his map in Professor Toke’s office, he found all the Slytherins gathered there, once again with smuggled butterbeer.

Alphard was surrounded by stacks of presents and his siblings, cousins, and aunt.

As much as Harry would have liked, he couldn’t openly show himself friendly with Alphard, so all he could do was sit to a side, well apart from all the rest, as he quickly mused about what he could give to his best friend in the school.
After all, he owed Alphard for lending him the Comet 180, for the pouch of galleons to buy potion ingredients, and for his treasured book of ‘The Most Extraordinary Chaser Tactics and Maneuvers of the Century!’ – even though his current copy was the one bought by Tom, since his brother had burned Alphard’s to cinders.

However, there was a huge obstacle: he didn’t have a single knut. And he knew that asking Tom for one of his innumerable pouches of galleons would be a waste of breath, not to mention that he didn’t have the time or opportunity to buy anything.

Suddenly, an idea struck him like beam of sunlight, and Harry squirmed on his seat excitedly.

It took him great patience to wait until the party started to dwindle in order to shoot Alphard a surreptitious look, as he subtly gestured at the boy to meet him outside.

Harry just had to wait for a brief moment in the corridor before Alphard came stumbling out.

“Prat, you should’ve told me,” chided Harry instantly. He widely smiled at him in the next second. “Happy Birthday! I have a present of sorts for you. We’re going exploring.”

At that, Alphard’s big grey eyes sparkled as he breathed out joyfully, “An adventure! Really?”

“Yup,” said Harry, impishly grinning at him. “At least, I hope it will be. But it’s already way pass curfew so we’ll need Potter’s Invisibility Cloak. Could you ask him to lend it to you for this night?”

“Sure!” piped in Alphard. “He won’t refuse, I’ve turned twelve today! Wait for me here.”

He was gone so fast that it almost looked as if the boy had done that Apparition thing Tom had told him about.

Twenty minutes later, Alphard returned, running, heaving and panting, but with a wide, triumphant grin on his face as he pulled out the Invisibility Cloak from one bulging pocket of his robes.

“Here,” he gasped out, recovering his breath. “Take it.”

Unwittingly, Harry had grabbed it just so, that his fingers had brushed one of its corners. Feeling a weird tingle, he stared down at that bit of cloth, seeing again the strange symbol he had briefly caught sight of before, when Charlus Potter had been under the Cloak.

Blinking, he touched it again, feeling once more the prickling sensation on the pads of his fingers, and he gazed at the symbol with puzzlement.

He couldn’t really tell what it was, exactly. It wasn’t embroidered, but rather just thin threads of glowing silver magic that formed a small triangle, with a circle and perpendicular line inscribed within it.

“Pull the Cloak over us both,” urged Alphard, abruptly pulling Harry from his inspection.

Harry did so, quickly, and he saw that the Invisibility Cloak was so large that it more than covered them.

As they started making their way out of the dungeons, Alphard asked eagerly, “Where are we going?”

“Shh,” whispered Harry, “we can still be heard.” He then shot him a wide grin. “And you’ll just
have to wait and see, won’t you?”

After climbing several floors and making a wholly unnecessary round because Hogwarts had just then decided to shift her moving stairs on them, and after they had had to plaster themselves against a wall and slowly edge along it for a bit when they had crossed paths with Professor Galatea Merrythought, they finally reached the statue.

Harry glanced around, making sure no one was in sight, and at last pulled off the Cloak, as he declared proudly, “Here we are.”

Alphard blinked, stared at the statue of the one-eyed, humpbacked witch, and then said with a hint of disappointment, “Gunhilda of Gorsemoor’s statue? I’ve already seen it before.”

“That’s her name?” said Harry distractedly as he got on his tiptoes and pressed down on the hump that glowed red and gold to his eyes.

Grating against the stone floors, the statue immediately shifted to a side to reveal a dark, narrow tunnel.

Glancing at his friend and seeing his gobsmacked expression, Harry smirked smugly, not knowing how much it looked like one of Tom’s.

“A secret passage!” finally gasped out Alphard, astounded. “How did you discover this?”

“By accident,” replied Harry vaguely.

“Where does it lead?” breathed out Alphard with wide, bright eyes.

Harry toothily grinned at him. “No idea. That’s the adventure. Are you up to it?”

Alphard’s reply was an enthusiastic smile that beamed like a thousand suns.

Thus, with Lumos spells on their wands, they started making their way. And it was a very long way, quite unexpectedly. Harry had simply thought that it would take them to some abandoned part of the castle, but as minutes ticked by and began to blur together, it became evident that he had been mistaken.

“Tempus!” cast Alphard at one point whilst Harry maintained the Lumos spell on his wand for them. “It’s been forty five minutes already.” The boy shot him a disconcerted look. “Where could it be taking us?”

“Haven’t the foggiest,” replied Harry excitedly. He then shot him a careful look. “Erm, but if you want to turn around and go back-”

“No,” said Alphard instantly, before he widely smiled. “I’m sure it will pay off. Besides, it’s your gift to me. Let’s continue.”

Grinning gratefully, Harry nodded.

Just about ten minutes later they reached the end of the secret passageway. They halted and stood before a few steps made of earth that led to a trap door on the ceiling of the tunnel.

The boys glanced at each other excitedly and then rushed forwards at the same time, pushing up against the trap door with all their might. It gave way, and panting with giddiness, they climbed out to be surrounded by darkness and a dead silence.
“Lumos!” they both cast at the same time.

The place was washed with the light coming from the tip of their wands and they glanced around. They seemed to be in some kind of cellar. The room was filled with shelves, stacked with boxes of all colors, amidst wooden crates.

Harry approached a shelf and gazed down at one of the boxes, seeing a label on its top.

“Honeydukes,” he read out loud, thinking that it rang a faint bell in his mind. He had heard that name somewhere before, but he couldn’t quite remember. He shot his friend a quizzical glance. “Does it mean anything to you, Al?”

“Honeydukes!” breathed out Alphard, instantly appearing at Harry’s side to peer down at the box. “It really is! We’ve found the Leprechaun’s pot of gold at the end of the rainbow!”

“Huh?” Harry blinking bemusedly.

Alphard grinned at him widely, looking extremely joyful. “We’re in Hogsmeade!” He shook his head, as if he could hardly believe it. “Honeydukes is the sweetshop.” He then added in a dark grumble, “Cygnus is always rubbing it in, how he has loads of fun with his friends when they come to Hogsmeade and how I have to wait until I’m in my third year - and he always brings whole bunches of candies but doesn’t share with me!”

“Oh, right!” said Harry, suddenly remembering. “For their Halloween party, the Gryffindors bought their candies from here.” He glanced around, finding a door at the very end, and then piped in enthusiastically, “Let’s go to the store, then!”

Beaming at him, Alphard quickly followed.

As they stepped into the front of the shop, Harry whispered urgently, “Let’s make our lights fainter. We don’t want to be seen.”

After doing so, they each explored the store, breathless with wonder, awe, and giddiness at everything they saw: cauldron pastries, acid pops, chocolate fudge, canary creams, blood-flavored lollipops, cockroach clusters, chocoballs, Drooble’s best blowing gum, exploding bon-bons, fizzing whizbees, jelly slugs, ice mice, licorice wands, pepper imps, fudge flies, sugar quills, peppermint toads, and all other of assorted sweets.

“It’s too bad that I can’t boast to Cygnus about this,” commented Alphard distractedly as he inspected a box of sugar quills.

At that, Harry turned around and stared at the boy’s back, a wide, affectionate smile soon spreading on his face.

It was just like Alphard to simply realize things without needing to be told, to just know Harry’s mind and his wishes. The boy seemed to have a knack for it. Just like now, when his friend implicitly knew that Harry wanted to keep the tunnel a secret from all others.

With a smile still on his face, Harry went back to his explorations. It was truly paradise, and without a second thought, he happily began pocketing some Chocolate Frogs.

“What are you doing?” said Alphard, starting at him.
“Taking some,” replied Harry absentmindedly. “They’re delicious. I had some in the Hogwarts Express—”

“But that’s stealing, isn’t it?” interjected Alphard in a hushed voice.

Abruptly halting, Harry blinked at him. It hadn’t even crossed his mind.

He was so used to nicking stuff with Tom when Alice took them into commercial London that he had stopped wondering long ago if it was wrong or not. And his brother had always said that they were entitled to take things that weren’t being looked after. Tom opined that it was the shopkeepers’ own fault for not keeping a better eye on their wares.

Harry cast a longing glance at the Chocolate Frog in his hand, as he mumbled softly, “But they taste so good… I love chocolate…”

“Um,” said Alphard, for a moment looking a tad conflicted. Then he brightened and gestured at the ancient cash register on top of the counter. “Take them. Next time we come here, I’ll leave some galleons there to pay for our stuff. But don’t take too many, or they’ll notice.”

Shooting him a grateful look, Harry pocketed the last of his Chocolate Frogs while Alphard grabbed three sugar quills.

Then the boy gazed out through the window of the shop and shot Harry a yearning look. “Do you think we could perhaps see Hogsmeade?”

“Of course,” said Harry warmly. “It’s your birthday. We can do whatever you wish.” He widely grinned at him. “Let’s go exploring then.”

He threw the Invisibility Cloak over them and Alphard was quick to stick a hand under the hem to turn the knob of the front door. It didn’t give way, and the boy shot Harry a crushed look. “It’s locked.”

“Oh, I know a Charm that might work,” whispered Harry swiftly. “Lemme try.” Sticking out his wand, he muttered quietly, “Alohamora!”

A click, and the door slightly parted open. Harry shot Alphard a triumphant grin, while his friend stared at him with big grey eyes and breathed out, “That’s a third-year spell!”

“Professor Toke has been teaching me some stuff,” said Harry dismissively, then he added excitedly, “Let’s go!”

They scurried out of the shop and Harry just halted for a brief moment to cast a locking charm on the front door of Honeydukes.

As they started meandering along the main road, they saw that Hogsmeade was a very charming and picturesque little village, with quaint thatched cottages and pretty stone houses with flowers and small gardens, all covered in snow.

“It’s one of the few fully-wizarding towns left,” whispered Alphard to him as they walked. “It was founded by Hengist Woodcroft, over a thousand years ago, around the same time that the Founders finished building Hogwarts, I’ve read.”

Suddenly, they both halted as they heard loud noises coming from a pub a few feet away from them. According to its sign, it was ‘The Three Broomsticks’, and the whole village seemed to be gathered there.
Through the windows of the pub, they saw a crowd of witches and wizards, with pints in their hands, as they surrounded someone who seemed to be making some grand speech. There were also journalists there; some taking pictures with photograph cameras that puffed smoke, others with flying quills that skidded across floating parchments.

“What do you think is going on?” murmured Harry curiously as they crept closer.

It was then when he caught sight of the face of the wizard who had his audience avidly listening to him. A man wearing rich, dark blue robes, gesticulating grandiosely, with funny, thin moustaches that curled into spirals at its tips.

Instantly recognizing him from pictures, Harry said dumbfounded, “That’s the granddad of that stuck-up Ravenclaw git, Tiberius. Charlemagne McLaggen. What’s the Minister of Magic doing here?”

“Oh, I think I know!” whispered Alphard animatedly. “Just a week ago, The Daily Prophet said that McLaggen had started touring the country. Because he had already vetoed Dumbledore’s Law three times, but Dumbledore’s faction in the Wizengamot still had the majority. And since the Minister doesn’t have the power to veto more than thrice, it seems he chose his only other measure left. He announced there would be a plebiscite."

Harry shot him a pensive frown, raking his brain. “Plebiscite? You mean that thing when people get to vote for or against a law?”

“Exactly,” piped in Alphard, nodding. “So McLaggen began his campaign, visiting all wizarding towns and giving big speeches about the evils of Dumbledore’s Law and the bad consequences that there would be for us if it was approved.” The boy shot the crowd in the pub a musing look. “Hogsmeade must be McLaggen’s last stop.”

“Oh.” Harry glanced again at the wizard and then caught sight of someone right besides him: a curly blonde witch, who looked vaguely familiar to him.

“Who’s that standing next to McLaggen?” he murmured, puzzled.

“She’s Edgar’s mom - that Hufflepuff in our year. Remember him, from Charms?” said Alphard in a hushed voice. “She’s Aurora Bones, the Minister’s Undersecretary.”

Frowning, Harry glanced back at her, intently studying her features, and it suddenly clicked. His mouth hung open. She was the witch whose head he had seen in Dumbledore’s glass sphere thing! A spy on McLaggen, then! Well, Dumbledore certainly was a crafty, resourceful wizard.

Not that it bother him one bit. Actually, he was quite happy with the discovery. After the things Tom had told him about the Minister, with the man not wanting to help muggles in case of war, he didn’t think he liked Charlemagne McLaggen much.

Soon after that, they continued meandering along the village’s main street, beginning to reach its outskirts.

Abruptly, they nearly jumped in startlement when a door was banged open, and two wizards came out from a dusty, dirty-looking pub that seemed to have a couple of dodgy characters inside.

“I don’t want ye to come to my pub again,” one of the wizards spat harshly. He was tall and burly, with a mane of long, tangled hair and a scraggly beard, wearing stained, greyish robes that looked to have seen better times.
The man was aggressively holding the other wizard by the arm, as if he had forcefully pulled him out of the pub. But it was this other wizard who was very familiar to the two boys, and thus, several feet away from them, Harry and Alphard froze in their tracks at the same time.

“No matter how many times ye come and sit at one of my tables,” said the scruffy-looking wizard, apparently the pub-owner, “it won’t make me speak to ye.”

Albus Dumbledore gazed at the other wizard with a weary, beaten expression on his face, as if he was carrying a crushing weight. Harry had never seen the wizard like that: with slumped shoulders, slightly hunched forwards, as if wanting to protect himself from hurtful words being volleyed at him.

“I need for us to speak to each other, Aberforth,” said Albus Dumbledore quietly. “I believed you desired the same.”

Under the Invisibility Cloak, Alphard let out a shocked exhalation of breath, before he whispered quickly to Harry, “Aberforth! He’s Albus Dumbledore’s brother! I heard about him from Dorea, who has a friend in Beauxbatons. He was their Professor of Care of Magical Creatures for many years. And suddenly, a year or so ago, he just packed up and left. So, he came here to open a pub? That’s strange, isn’t it-”

“Hush!” whispered Harry in alarm, worrying they might be heard. But given that they were some distance away from the two wizards, it didn’t seem as if they had been.

“I believed,” continued Albus Dumbledore, “that you had come here to be close to me. To attempt-”

“Ye know very well why I came to Hogsmeade,” interrupted the other man sharply, piercing Dumbledore with a hard gaze. “I didn’t come here to rekindle our acquaintance, but to keep an eye on ye. To make sure ye don’t make the same mistake twice.”

“I’m trying to mend our relationship,” said Albus Dumbledore softly, a heart-wrenching plea in his voice. “If you would just allow me-”

“The only way you will ever make it up to me is if you avenge our sister’s death. Kill Grindelwald, and then, I’ll forgive you.”

With stunned, bewildered, huge wide eyes, Harry and Alphard glanced at each other.

Aberforth Dumbledore was answered with silence, and the wizard let out a dry, acerbic laugh. “But ye won’t, will ye, Albus?” His face became like hard stone. “Not even for Ariana or me, do ye have the strength to kill her murderer.” He took a step closer to Albus Dumbledore, hissing out, “Don’t have the guts to kill yer past lover, do ya?”

Harry’s jaw dropped, Alphard blinked thrice.

“I’m not… I….” Albus Dumbledore didn’t seem to find his words. The wizard shook his head slowly, sadly, mournfully, casting his brother an entreating glance, before he seemed to shake slightly, a ripple going through his body, as he forced words out of his mouth, breathing them out, “I fear to see him face to face.” He closed his eyes, heaving a deep breath. “Even after so long, I fear what he might say, what he might offer.” He slowly opened his eyes again, to gaze at his brother with frightening intensity through his half-moon spectacles, as he added in a thread of a murmur, “Because he can offer a way of having Ariana back, and I would be tempted.”

Both wizards seemed to still in the dead silence that reigned after those uttered words, staring at
It was Aberforth who at last spoke, his shoulders stiff, his expression angered, as he bit out, “I know what ye’re speaking about. I was there when ye two talked about ‘em, when ye plotted how ye would find ‘em and use ‘em.” He skewered his brother with a piercing gaze, as he spat furiously, “Never bring Ariana back with the Stone. I’ll kill ya if ye do.”

“He doesn’t have it,” murmured Albus Dumbledore quietly. “But I believe he might have some clues about it’s location-”

“Never use it!” bellowed Aberforth irately at him, his big hands clenching into fists, trembling, before he shook his head violently and spat, “That’s not the way to make it up to me. I told ye what I wanted already. Kill him! Until then, don’t come to my pub, don’t speak to me!”

And without a second glance, he swirled around and went into his pub, slamming the door shut with shattering force.

Aberforth’s last words seemed to leave Albus Dumbledore devastated, as if someone had ripped his heart out and torn it to pieces. The wizard was staring with unseeing eyes into vacant space, looking smaller, diminished.

Harry’s mind was swirling with a mesh of loud, flabbergasted thoughts, a mess of them that seemed to be thundering against his very skull, hardly knowing what to make of everything he had heard. He didn’t know where to begin.

Though, he didn’t have the chance to even muse for a second, because suddenly, several things happened very quickly, one after the other.

Abruptly, Albus Dumbledore stiffened, and he spun around, a frown on his face, before his spectacled gaze landed on the boys, looking straight at them.

“He sees us,” breathed out Harry, his green eyes going wide, half gobsmacked and baffled, half frantic with alarm.

“Let’s go before he catches us,” whispered Alphard urgently, looking wildly scared and worried, as he tugged on Harry’s arm. “Charlus will never forgive me if his Cloak is taken-”

Bang! A door was thrown open loudly, and a cacophony of discordant sounds and voices rang noisily, from halfway of the other end of the street. The crowd of The Three Broomsticks were leaving the place, many starting their way back to their homes, whilst Charlemagne McLaggen was posing for the cameras one last time, giving wide smiles as the light bulbs flashed.

Then, from across the distance, the Minister of Magic seemed to suddenly catch sight of Dumbledore, and his smile froze on his face. It became forced then, as the wizard took several steps to one side, clearly obstructing any journalist from seeing and becoming aware of Albus Dumbledore’s presence.

In a few moments, the Minister was done giving some more words for the reporters, and the journalists disappeared with cracking sounds.

Harry had the inkling that if they had seen Albus Dumbledore at the other end of the street, they would have remained behind, like wolves scenting blood, because right then, the Minister of Magic began to stride straight towards Dumbledore, a hard expression on his face.

A sound of feet crushing old, fallen tree leaves made Harry snap his head around and he saw
Dumbledore coming towards them. The wizard didn’t look at all pleased.

With a hitch of breath sticking in his throat, Harry was quick to grasp Alphard by the arm, pulling him along, backwards, with every step Dumbledore took forwards.

“Albus!”

Harry and Alphard froze when the Minister of Magic reached Dumbledore.

“I would like a word with you,” said Charlemagne McLaggen sternly. “I’ve heard some very disquieting rumors about how you’re leading a subversive, vigilante group - The Order of something-”

“I do not think this is the proper place to sustain such conversation,” interrupted Dumbledore quietly, a glance landing briefly on the boys, before he gazed back at the other wizard, and added courteously, “Perhaps we could go into-”

“Here is just fine,” snapped the Minister of Magic irritably. “There’s no one around.”

“I do believe we should best-”

“Stop dillydallying!” interrupted McLaggen angrily. “I demand to know what you think you’re doing with this Order of yours.”

The boys were pierced by Dumbledore’s glance once more. And for a moment, it seemed the wizard was going to reach for his wand, surely to cast a spell that would prevent them from listening in, but then a pensive expression crossed the man’s face for a split second, and the motion was aborted.

Harry and Alphard blinked, to then glance at each other with equally quizzical, wondering, and puzzled expressions on their faces.

“The Order of the Phoenix is no subversive, secret organization,” said Dumbledore calmly. “Any witch or wizard willing to aid the cause of preventing the Dark Lord from gaining more power is welcomed to become a member. Of course, once they become members, we do grant them anonymity, if so they wish.”

“It’s nothing but a group of crackpots attempting to undermine the foundations of my Ministry! To unseat me from my position!” hissed out McLaggen, before he pulled himself up to his full height and added in a very low, ominous tone of voice, “I could have you all brought up on charges of mutiny and rebellion against the established authority.”

Dumbledore peered at the Minister from the rim of his half-moon spectacles. “I was not aware that forming political groups had become illegal, Charlemagne.”

The Minister of Magic’s nostrils flared. “I want you to disband it.”

“I have no reason to do so,” said Dumbledore pleasantly.

McLaggen puffed up like an angered peacock. “Look here, Dumbledore, I’ve been more than patient with you-”

“As I have with you,” interjected Dumbledore in a quiet yet hard tone of voice. He then arched an expectant eyebrow at the wizard. “Have you accepted the Czechoslovakian envoys’ treaty?”
The Minister of Magic froze, before his eyes narrowed, as he hissed out, “How do you know? I took every measure to ensure their visit remained a secret. You have someone in my Ministry working for you!” His eyes became mere slits, as he added angrily, “Perhaps it’s my own Head of International Magical Cooperation. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that Faustus Prewett has become one of your more fervent supporters in the Wizengamot, Albus! It’s him, isn’t it? You’ve turned him against me – I’ll have him sacked!”

“Faustus Prewett does not ‘work’ for me,” interjected Dumbledore calmly. “He is his own man, with his own opinions and convictions. A more loyal wizard to the Ministry of Magic you will not find. Your accusations are utterly unfounded.”

McLaggen piercingly stared at him, before he muttered, “We’ll see. I’ll certainly be looking into his actions.” He squared his shoulders as he demanded sharply, “If he’s not your spy in the Ministry, then explain to me how you knew about the Czechs’ visit.”

“Why, last weekend I visited some friends I have in that marvelous country,” said Dumbledore placidly, “and since I had some spare time, I decided to pop into the Ministry. Jerabek, the Minister, happens to be an old acquaintance of mine, and it would have been very discourteous of me to not pay him a visit whilst I was in his country.”

“Ah! Now I understand why I had the envoys badgering me with their nonsense,” spat McLaggen furiously. “You filled their minds with your ridiculous ideas regarding the German Minister of Magic-”

“Grindelwald’s official title nowadays is the Austro-German Minister of Magic,” remarked Dumbledore pointedly, intently staring at McLaggen from the top of his half-moon spectacles. “That alone, should tell you much.”

Looking irked and irritated beyond measure, McLaggen briskly waved a hand. “He was elected by Austrian wizards and witches. I’ll hear no more about your baseless accusations regarding that he was the one who killed the former Austrian Minister-”

“Quite right, I see no point in rehashing the discussion we maintained in Dionysius’ Abode,” interjected Dumbledore firmly. “You know my views on the matter. They haven’t changed. However, I still urge you to heed them.”

“Produce these so-called ‘sources’ of yours, and I might consider it,” bit out Charlemagne McLaggen. “Who do you have spying on Grindelwald?”

It was that, out of the whole conversation thus far, which suddenly made Harry’s chest constrict with a piercing, frenzied worry. Julian! It had to be Julian Erlichmann. Surely Dumbledore wouldn’t- 

“The identity of my informants must, above all other things, remain undisclosed,” said Dumbledore unyieldingly, his expression stony.

If he could have exhaled with profound relief, Harry would have. Instead, he gazed at Dumbledore with big, grateful eyes. He would even hug the wizard if he could. One thing he did, though, was to admire him greatly.

By seeing him in this new light, in this new role, as Dumbledore crossed swords with the Minister of Magic, Harry realized that despite his earlier misgivings about the wizard – given his reactions when they had met in the orphanage- he had greatly misjudged him, unfairly, subjectively. Here was a wizard he could like and respect, a wizard he could even want to follow and support, if he
one day had the freedom to do so.

“Then we’re at a standstill, yet again,” groused out McLaggen bitterly.

“Only because you refuse to pay credence to my assertions, Charlemagne,” said Dumbledore, his voice low and gentle. “You do not trust my word, and it saddens me greatly.”

McLaggen bristled at that, but remained silent.

Letting out a weary sigh, Dumbledore then inquired softly, “I would like to know how your meeting with the Czechoslovakian envoys proceeded-”

“I sent them packing!” snapped McLaggen impatiently. “What else could I do? They had the gall to ask for an allegiance – for me to send my Aurors if they were invaded by Grindelwald! They’re mad! Nothing of the sort is going to happen.”

Dumbledore shook his head, looking mournful. “Grindelwald will attack them on March the fifteenth.”

Harry stared at him, feeling his body was about to sag in sudden relaxation. Dumbledore knew. Julian Erlichmann must have told him in the end. It didn’t come as such a great surprise, but it did lift from his shoulders a heavy burden that he hadn’t been aware he had still been carrying.

“Ludicrous!” cried out Charlemagne McLaggen. “Grindelwald is a Minister of Magic, he’s not going to invade anyone!”

“He is.”

Both wizards gazed at each other in tense, poignant silence, and Harry took that as his cue to leave.

The conversation seemed to be nearly over and given McLaggen’s fed up expression, it didn’t look as if the wizard was going to remain there for much longer. And he certainly wanted to be long gone by the time Dumbledore was alone again, with a chance to catch them.

Thus, he gripped Alphard’s arm and slowly began to pull him away, with careful steps, as to not make a sound. His friend seemed to be of a same mind, because he kept pace with Harry, without uttering a word, the Cloak securely fastened over them.

By the time they reached Honeydukes, Harry was fast to cast a spell to open the door and then swiftly lock it back, before he quickly pulled Alphard into the store’s cellar.

It was only when they were deep inside the secret passageway, that they finally pulled off the Invisibility Cloak and halted, to stare at each other.

“Dumbledore decided to let us hear them,” said Alphard, breathless with puzzlement. “He wanted us to know about all that stuff they discussed. Why could it be?”

Harry didn’t know. He truly didn’t. But he didn’t waste time wondering about it. He would simply accept it.

Thus, he merely shrugged his shoulders.

In the next second, he skewered his friend with a gaze, and said urgently, his tone adamant and firm, “We cannot tell anyone – about any of the things we heard.”

Alphard blinked at him, bemused. “Who would I tell?”
‘Your father’, would have said Harry, highly worried. Apparently, though, Alphard wasn’t even considering that possibility. And Harry was very grateful for that.

So he simply nodded and turned to continue their return back to Hogwarts.

In the days that followed, as November came to an end, Harry was a bit jumpy, with the expectation that Dumbledore would approach him, wanting a word with him—about the things they had heard in the man’s conversation with his brother, the many others from the chat with the Minister of Magic, and about the fact that Harry and Alphard had been breaking all sorts of school rules by being in Hogsmeade, compounded to that, their use of an Invisibility Cloak.

However, Dumbledore never did. The wizard had even stopped casting him those concerned looks of before, after the Lord Horkos issue. It was as though nothing had ever happened.

It highly perplexed Harry, but he could hardly complain. In the end, he decided he quite preferred the current situation of utter silence.

His days of peace of mind, though, wouldn’t last very long, since December would prove to be a month of revelations and stunning discoveries.
Part I: Chapter 22

Julian Erlichmann stood before a wide table in the Dark Lord's study, his sky blue eyes analyzing the battle plans spread before him. He carded his fingers through his curls of short, auburn hair as he forced his handsome features to remain placid instead troubled.

He was a young man in his early twenties, but he had discovered that the feeling of youth vanished before the certainty of death in the near future.

He had always known he would die young. His one constant friend and companion all throughout his life had candidly forewarned him of the fact a long time ago.

He glanced around the room, half hopeful whilst he chided himself for it. By nay, he didn't see Santi.

He dryly chuckled under his breath at that. For as long as he remembered, Santi had always been a constant presence in his life.

When he was a toddler, his mother had believed he played with an imaginary friend. Santi was that, for much of his childhood, until Julian came to understand that the man -who played with him when his parents were constantly occupied with their social ambitions, who cheered him every time he waved his faux child's wand, who clapped at his small accomplishments, who cherished him and tussled his hair with fondness and affection, who made himself glow beautifully in golden light when Julian wanted to see something 'pretty' or made himself solid when a little Julian wanted a hug- was very much real, but only showed himself to him.

"Why to me and not others?" he had once asked, yawning as Santi tucked him into bed, when he had been eight years old.

"Because you're special, you're worthy," Santi had said softly, tenderly sweeping one of Julian's auburn curls to one side. "Because you remind me of him."

"The boy with the green eyes and the lightning bolt scar?" little Julian had asked excitedly, his blue eyes shining.

"Yes."

"When will I meet him?" Julian asked quickly, before his small face scrunched slightly, fretfully. "Will he like me? Will he be my friend?"
"I wish he could," Santi said quietly, eyeing him sadly. "But he won't, Julian. You'll be older than him and you'll never meet. But you will see him, just twice."

Julian had felt devastated at that. He had always listened when Santi told him about the green-eyed boy called simply 'Harry', how Santi was waiting for him, how the boy was very special. And he had never failed to detect the yearning in Santi's voice, wanting to have that boy finally there, with him.

Nevertheless, Santi had been a brother, a father, a friend, a mentor, and a guide. It had been thanks to Santi that he had gathered the courage to stand up to his father when he had been ten years old.

Julian had always loved the Arts: Painting, Architecture, Sculpturing, but above all, Music. Of course, such interests were not valued in an heir of the powerful and ancient bloodline of the Erlichmanns, purebloods in Magic but also in German ancestry.

Santi, with his usual honesty, which could sometimes be brutal, had made matters very clear to him.

"Durmstrang is not the place for you. If you don't fight to go to Beauxbatons, you'll be miserable."

He had carefully taken Julian's chin, raising it to look into his eyes, as he added quietly, "You have to grasp the chances you have to attain things that will give you joy, because they will be slim and few, and you don't have many years left."

The ten-year-old Julian hadn't understood it at the time, but it had been his first forewarning of how short his life would be.

However, he had hatched a plan, and after months of negotiations, his parents and he had come to an agreement: he would go to Beauxbatons as long as he continued studying the Dark Arts in private; he was forbidden from interacting with mudbloods; and during the summers when he went back home, he would be tested by a tutor of Dark Arts, and if he failed, he would be sent to Durmstrang. Needless to say, if his parents even heard a whisper of a rumor that he had befriended a mudblood or even a halfblood, he would be shipped post-haste to Durmstrang as well.

And so, he had entered Beauxbatons Academy and a whole world of beauty and splendor had opened before his eyes. He had seen the Wizarding World from a vastly different perspective than the one taught to him by his parents.

Indeed, ideas of blood purity seemed to matter little to the many students of the school, even those who were purebloods themselves and came from highly respected families. Among those, Laurent Didier, above all, had showed him a whole other side of things.

He had met Laurent in his first day of class, and all throughout their stay, they had taken the same elective classes of Magical Songcrafting, Wizardry Painting, and Magical Instruments. They shared the same passion, though whilst Julian leaned towards Music, Laurent was a truly gifted painter. And while Laurent's family happily and proudly encouraged him, Julian was always very careful his parents never found out about his electives.

With that, he had help from Santi, who had appeared often during his Beauxbatons years, to be a friend and confidant, but also to teach him the Dark Arts, as Santi had promised he would, so that Julian never failed his summer tests.

As much as Julian disliked it, it had soon become clear to them both that he had an affinity for the Dark Arts and a natural, instinctual grasp of them. His parents, too, were quick to pick up on that, as he proved his curse-casting abilities and awed them, and their concerns dwindled, granting him
greater freedom.

It was thus that he was allowed to spend several holidays with his best friend's family. If his parents would have ever found out what would come of that, Julian knew he would have never been given permission.

Julian had been in awe of the warmth and love that pervaded in Laurent's family, he had basked in their joy of his music and songs, he had had teary eyes when Laurent had gifted him with a beautiful magical silver flute that became his favorite instrument, which he came to play like a master, earning moved tears from Laurent's family or delighted sighs of musical pleasure.

The Didiers had encouraged his passion by taking him to the see the most famed Songmasters in the Grand Conservatory of Magical Music of wizarding Vienna, they had even offered to take him in and finance his career in Music after Beauxbatons.

He had been tempted, but love for his parents, however little they understood him, had kept him from accepting.

However, love of another sort had then struck him. When Julian had been fourteen, he had hoped his life-long companion could be a lover too, his first.

After Julian made his stammering declaration, shy, nervous and flushing, Santi had indulgently smiled at him. "It's not me you love, but your friend."

Julian had blinked, stared down at the magical flute in his hand, and had suddenly realized the truth of those words. And indeed, soon after, with Laurent Didier he had known a love as none other.

But things had slowly started to change, the summer when he had turned fifteen and his father had demanded he returned home for the holidays. He had a 'special visit of great educational value' prepared for Julian.

That summer, Julian had been taken to Nurmengard Tower. The Dark Lord's higher ranks were holding a vast meeting amongst themselves, and they had brought their children along, so they could mingle together, turning the occasion into a social gathering for the younger generations.

Julian had not enjoyed the 'opportunity' of making useful connections, as his father had put it. But it turned interesting when Santi, who had accompanied him -remaining invisible and unheard to all but him, as always- had urged him to follow him into the dungeons. "There's someone I want you to see."

Curious and intrigued, Julian had complied. Doing his best to ignore all other prisoners, he had finally reached a secluded cell, at the very end of the last subfloor of the dungeons, well apart from all the others.

There, he had seen a woman with strong features, the signs of torture, rape, and starvation clear on her body and tattered clothes. She had been lying haphazardly against a wall, her eyes closed.

"Meet Sybilla Spyros," Santi said to him, his gaze pinned on the woman.

Julian shot him a quizzical glance. "Who is she?"

"A true Seer, of Cassandra's line."

"Impossible!" burst out Julian disbelievingly. "There are none left of that line. Haven't been for
"They remained hidden," Santi said patiently, before he gestured coolly at the woman. "She is Cassandra's last true descendant. And I mean 'true' because she's the last with Cassandra's Curse. Her son doesn't suffer the full effect, and her granddaughter will have scant of it."

Julian didn't doubt his words for a second. By then, he had already known that Santi knew things that had not happened yet, just as he had known that Santi was able to do things that weren't possible. The man had proved both in several occasions. Julian had thought him to be a very powerful wizard and Seer, who preferred anonymity.

"What is she doing here?" Julian asked bewildered. Then a thought entered his mind, and he turned to fully face Santi, as he breathed out, "You want us to save her?"

"Save her?" Santi chortled, looking vastly amused, before he shook his head. "She doesn't want saving-"

"Listening to you, I would think you were speaking to yourself, boy," suddenly said a hoarse, sharp voice, her German heavy with a Greek accent.

Julian spun around to see the Seer gazing at him with heavy-lidded dark eyes, and he suddenly felt a shudder creeping down his spine. He had never seen such deep hatred in anyone's eyes before, even though it didn't seem to be directed at him but at the whole world in general.

The witch chuckled dryly, sounding like stones grinding against stones. "But you aren't alone, are you, boy?" Her eyes flickered around. "I knew you would come to see me. My Inner Eye Saw. Are you going to remain cloaked from my sight, creature?"

Julian saw how Santi did something then: he shimmered for a brief moment and then stood there, looking as solid and real as Julian had scarcely seen before.

"I finally lay eyes on you," said the witch hoarsely, her dark eyes narrowed and skewering. "For the first and last time, eh?"

Julian shot Santi a baffled glance at that, and his life-long companion grinned without any mirth, as he intoned, "Sybilla here is going to be killed tomorrow, by the Dark Lord." At Julian's look of alarm, Santi was quick to add, "Oh, fret not. She already knows. She wants it to happen. After all, she allowed herself to be captured. You see, she has great plans of vengeance. Her hatred for all wizarding and muggle kind is so vast, that she cares little of the cost to her."

"Vengeance for what?" murmured Julian bewildered.

"For her suffering, and the suffering of her long line of ancestors which she has always felt as her own, through her Inner Eye. Suffering brought upon by wizards and muggles alike," said Santi calmly, before he turned to the Seer and arched an eyebrow. "I suppose I would be wasting my breath if I asked you to reconsider your plans?"

"You dare presume tell me what I should do?" the witch bit out sharply, her fury and disgust clear on her ravaged features. "You, who are an atrocious accident of nature, a freak, a mutation, an abomination!"

"Is that what I am?" Santi chortled loudly. "Why, the Centaurs see the trail that my existence leaves when they read the Stars and call me 'The Fates'. I rather prefer that poetic connotation to my being." He grinned widely. "It has a nice ring to it, wouldn't you say?"
"Centaurs!" shrieked the witch contemptuously. "That just shows how little they know!" She pinned Santi with dark eyes narrowed to slits, as she spat out, "If you had any sense and any feeling of responsibility, you would have killed yourself millennia ago, abomination!"

Santi shook his head slowly. "Don't think I didn't consider that alternative a long time ago, Sybilla. But I came to the rather accurate conclusion that ceasing my existence, such as it is, would cause more harm than remaining alive."

The Seer shot him a repulsed look, before she hissed out, "It matters not. You can't do anything to thwart my plans." Her dark eyes shone brightly, as she added gleefully, "The boy is already here, in this present, in this line. Has been for some years. He's in London, in the orphanage." She shot him a mocking look. "But you don't dare find him now, do you? Too soon, and it will end in catastrophe."

Santi remained silent, merely gazing back at her impassively.

She chuckled acidly, before her gaunt features morphed into a triumphant expression, as she breathed out exultantly, "He's here because of the Truth I will speak to that wizard who calls himself a Dark Lord, and because of the memories I will allow him to take. I've Seen the boy's past, present, and future. And I've Seen how the plans I've already put into motion will make him my catalyst, my tool."

"He is the catalyst," interjected Santi shortly, "but the 'tool' for your revenge, that he will not be, Sybilla."

The witch stilled, before her dark eyes narrowed, as she hissed out, "I don't believe you. I Saw!" She pointed a finger straight at Julian. "He will be the Helper. And the other boy with is the Finder and the Key. My Inner Eye has Seen."

Julian stared at her, utterly baffled and nonplussed at those words.

"It pleases me to tell you, that even though you're the most powerful Seer in ages, your Inner Eye does not always See everything," quipped Santi nonchalantly, widely grinning at her. "Indeed, compared to my own ways of knowing, it's sadly lacking." He took a step forward to be inches away from her through the bars of her cell, as he added coolly, "Part of your plots will bear fruits. But the end result will not be entirely what you expect and desire."

The Seer's eyes narrowed further, now merely slits, as she shook her head and spat, "I don't believe you."

"Good," said Santi shortly, beaming a gorgeous, pleased smile at her. "I rather prefer you don't." Abruptly, the smile vanished from his handsome face, and he crouched to the floor, to be at eye-level with the Seer, and he said softly, "I tried to make Helena help you and yours, that you must believe."

"Helena!" the witch spat with violent, seething hatred and contempt. "She's the cause of all our misery – I have never wanted her 'help!'"

Santi remained silent for a long moment, before he nodded acceptingly. Then he swiftly stood up and turned to Julian. "Come, we're done here."

And without a parting glance towards the Seer, Santi shimmered into a translucent state and led the way.

"I didn't understand much," admitted Julian in a whisper as they began climbing stairs.
"I know."

Julian shot him a puzzled glance. "Then why did you want me to see her and hear all those things?"

"For several reasons," said Santi slowly. "Firstly, I wanted you to meet the Seer whose actions began the change. She was supposed to flee with her husband and son. She knew it. But instead, she remained behind, waiting for Grindelwald's followers. That shifted things. Secondly, that 'plan' she spoke about, the one she already put in motion, she did that some years ago, contacting a certain group of people, revealing herself as a Seer and speaking some selected Truths to them."

He shot Julian a glance, his voice turning softer, "It will have a direct impact on you, some years from now."

Julian shook his head. "I don't understand."

Santi warmly smiled at him. "I know. But you will remember everything that was said here today, and when the time comes, you will comprehend everything. You will understand what your role will be in the great scope of things."

He paused for a moment, before they entered the vast chamber where the children of the Dark Lord's followers were mingling together, and intensely bore his gaze into Julian's, as he said pointedly, "But for the next few years, I don't want you to worry about any of this. I want you to do what I've always suggested."

Julian tilted his head to a side. "Grasp any opportunity for joy with both hands?" He grinned widely in understanding. "Laurent."

Santi nodded, smiling fondly as he tussled the fifteen-year-old boy's hair.

Julian had done exactly that, from that day onwards, and by the time Laurent and he were in their last year of school, they had made great plans for their future together: they would spend a couple of years in Italy, so that Laurent could apprentice under the great wizarding painters of the land, then they would go to Austria, for Julian to attain his Songmastership in the Vienna Conservatory.

However, all those secret plans had been crushed when, a few months before their graduation from Beauxbatons, the European Dueling Championship had been declared. Julian's parents had registered him instantly and were most stern and firm about the matter.

"I know just how much you excel in the Dark Arts and dueling," his father had told him sharply in a floo-call. "You will win this Championship and bring honor to our name. A bright, glorious future awaits you if you succeed in this, Julian."

If he had known beforehand what his father had been referring to, he would have taken Laurent and fled.

Santi had known and warned him, though. With a heavy expression on his face, he had said quietly, "I cannot prevent this. Whether you participate in the Championship or not, your father will succeed in his plans for you. And if you escape with Laurent, it will not end well."

Julian had gazed at his lifelong companion, and asked softly, "What does my father want from me?"

"He wants you for Grindelwald."

All color had vanished from Julian's handsome face, his sky blue eyes wide with horror. "As a
lover… For power? For social standing for the family? To climb up the ranks?" Santi didn't answer, but it wasn't required. Julian knew. He had shaken his head. "Why does my father think I can entice the Dark Lord! I've heard about the string of lovers he's had."

"Because your father has made a recent discovery," Santi had cut in. "Some rumors he's heard and given credence to – and they're true."

It was then when Julian was told the story of Albus Dumbledore and Gellert Grindewald, and he could hardly believe his ears.

"They were lovers when they were teenagers?" gasped out Julian incredulously. "The Albus Dumbledore? The famed English wizard, member of his country's Wizengamot, Professor of Hogwarts?"

"Yes."

Julian shook his head, trying to grasp the notion. "But what does that have to do with me?"

"You possess an uncanny resemblance to him, when he was young, when he met Grindelwald," Santi said candidly. "Now, your father is aware of this, and he knows it will snag Grindelwald's attention, that it will appeal to him. The Dark Lord will want you."

"But I have Laurent and I only want him!" said Julian desperately.

Santi shot him a sorrowful look. "I already told you. If you flee with him, your father will find you, and –"

"And Laurent will be killed," concluded Julian on his own. He shot him a frantic look. "Are you sure? Laurent is a Didier, they are an important family in France, with many connections. My father might not dare kill him because of that."

"He will," Santi said simply. "He will make it look like an accident, and he'll take you away to Germany, and no one will be the wiser." His expression softened, as he added, "If I could save you from what's to come, I would."

"You can do anything, Santi," interjected Julian sharply. "I've known that for a long time, even though I don't understand it. Is it that you can't 'save me', or that you won't?"

"I can but I won't," replied Santi, looking as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, his expression wretched but at the same time decisive. "You must understand, the cost for everyone involved of me sparing you what's to come is much greater than the benefit of saving you from it."

That very precise moment was the first and only time in Julian's life when he felt a powerful surge of fury, deep hurt, and hatred for Santi, and he had yelled, half sobbing, half chocking his words out in a shout, "I see, so it's all For the Greater Good – as the Dark Lord's motto goes! My happiness, my life, is to be sacrificed for the common good of all the rest?"

"Yes. It's hard, but true. I'm deeply sorry," muttered Santi quietly. "Given what I am, I can't act according to anything else."

Julian let out a bitter laugh. "And if I do what my father wants – where does that path lead to? This path you want me to follow! Oh, but I already know, don't I? That 'role in the greater scope of things' you mentioned a few years ago, this is where it begins, isn't it? My time for 'joy' has ended."
"Yes," said Santi quietly, before he grabbed Julian by the shoulders and embraced him tightly. Julian could feel the warmth of him, the affection, and also the heart-felt sorrow, as Santi murmured softly into his ear, "It's also the best path for you, Julian. I've never lied to you, and I'm not lying about this. Do you think you would be happy if you lived for some years longer but Laurent died? Because that's the trade. In all the possibilities that can be, born from the decisions you can make, you always die young, Julian. You never escape your father's grasp, nor the one the Dark Lord will have on you. The only significant difference between all the paths, the only difference that will matter to you, is Laurent's future."

Julian, who had remained stiff until then, felt his body go limp as he leaned into the embrace and whispered, "What am I buying for him, then?"

"Decades of life. Laurent will live until an old age. And he will be content with his spouse. Not happy, as he was with you, but it will suffice him."

After that, there was only one possible course of action for him, the one Santi had desired and had known he would take. Julian's bitterness and anger towards his life-long companion, who had been a brother, a father, a friend, a confidant and a mentor, had melted away then, because he had made his choice, willingly, with knowledge of the consequences. For that, he was grateful to Santi. He entered the new path of his life without a blind over his eyes.

And it was thus, and with steely determination, that in the weeks preceding the Championship he trained arduously, and when the tournament commenced, he performed brilliantly.

He won, becoming the youngest European Dueling Champion in several centuries, and the only satisfaction he got wasn't born from his sudden fame throughout the wizarding newspapers of Europe, or from his parents' praises, congratulations and evident pride in him, but from knowing he was embarking on the best possible path, not for 'everyone involved', not for 'the greater good', but for Laurent.

The two months after the Championship and before their graduation from Beauxbatons, he lived them to the fullest with his lover, with unrestrained passion, with exultant freedom and joy for life, becoming so wrapped up in Laurent's warmth, devotion, and love, that Julian felt he would carry it with him when he was gone.

Though, he didn't breathe a word of his plans to Laurent. How could he explain, when he couldn't tell about Santi? And how would his lover understand without that explanation? So he preferred to leave Laurent in the dark, knowing that it was for the best.

His parents didn't attend his graduation ceremony, his father being too occupied with family business and with tasks for the Dark Lord, his mother with social obligations that would further their family's clout and connections much more than being present in her son's celebration of the end of a school career.

"Have pictures taken for the newspapers," was the only thing required of him. He had understood, but furthermore, he hadn't felt their lack of presence.

Laurent's whole family had attended and he had always felt part of them, so welcoming they were. Even Aurora Bones – Laurent's mother's sister – and her family had portkeyed in, especially for the occasion.

Julian had met the curly blonde witch several times before, when she had been visiting the Didiers at the same time that Julian spent one of the holidays with them. He had always liked her -friendly
and kind as she was— even when he was aware of her position in the English wizarding government, as Undersecretary of the Minister of Magic.

Furthermore, Beauxbatons had been graced with the presence of an honored guest. Though seeing Albus Dumbledore around the school was not something very surprising. Gossip about the many times Dumbledore visited the school, and the reason for it, had become stuff of legend. Many students had witnessed it in different years, and Julian himself had seen it with his own eyes.

Once, when he had been walking down a corridor near the teachers' quarters, he had caught sight of Albus Dumbledore knocking on the door of their Care of Magical Creatures Professor. The door was yanked open, and in the second that it took for Professor Aberforth Dumbledore to see who it was on the other side, the door was already being slammed shut on the older brother's face, without a word spoken.

After Santi's revelation pertaining to Albus Dumbledore's past, the scene had made much sense, and Julian had felt a surge of pity and compassion for the man, standing there, unwanted and unforgiven by his own brother. It couldn't be an easy thing, to lose a sister because of a lover and one's own mistake.

As much as he felt certain empathy towards the wizard, however, he hadn't expected what would come from that day.

After the ceremony, he had been celebrating on the splendorous gardens of Beauxbatons, with his school friends and Laurent's extended family.

His lover was good-naturedly teasing him, which always seemed to be Laurent's version of the beginning of publicly acceptable foreplay.

"Oh, look at you, mon cher," Laurent was whispering into his ear in a silky French, "so dashing in your primp formal pureblood robes, looking so proper – the good little Erlichmann Heir." He let out a soft rumble of a chuckle. "I want to devour you and mess you up, Julién – so tempting." And with that, he playfully bit into the crook of Julian's neck, swirling a tongue along for full measure.

Julian could only chuckle and tilt his neck to a side to grant more access. He saw the scandalized looks they were gathering from parents and grandparents of some of the students, and it only made it all the more enjoyable.

In complete contrast with Julian, Laurent's style was eclectic, which was all the rage in Beauxbaton's subculture of the tight-knit group of students who called themselves the 'liberal thinkers', which Laurent belonged to and exemplified with utter disorderly perfection: his clothes a mesh of colorful gypsy drabs, accented with wizarding fashion here and there, his fingers, and even cheeks most of times, displaying small splats of paint, and with a muggle cigarette hanging from his lips or between his fingers, which had become very avant-garde and a symbol and statement against the 'stuck-up' generation of their parents and forefathers and their pureblood ideals.

With his broad shoulders, tall frame, sun-tanned skin, hazel eyes and shoulder-length wavy dark blonde hair, which he wore tied by the nape, Laurent was a pleasure to behold. Even his atrocious German and heavily accented English made Laurent charming, in Julian's view, and it always made him smile, besotted.

After Laurent had nibbled his way from the base of Julian's neck to his ear, lingering for some time on the lobe, he snapped his head away, looking thoroughly satisfied, and then called out to a passing by house-elf carrying a tray filled with hors d'oeuvres and flutes of French champagne. He took charge of distributing the flutes among the members of his family, to then raise his into the
"A salut! To my lover, Julién, the top student of our year, the youngest European Dueling Champion in so and so many centuries, and the winner of Beauxbaton's Award of Magical Excellence, and etcetera, etcetera, because I lost count of all his awards during the ceremony!"

Laurent winked at Julian and rakishly grinned. "How many were there, mon cher?"

"That's the spirit!" chortled Laurent, bobbing his flute high in the air. "To Julién - Salut!"

"Salut!" cheered the Didiers and extended family, before they all bent elbow and drunk their champagne in one fell swoop.

Julian was then pulled into an tight embrace as Laurent kissed him smack on the lips, which grew into a full-blown sensual experience with caressing tongues, the lingering taste of Laurent's muggle cigarettes which Julian had come to love, and the shared slight sweetness of French champagne.

Given the strict German upbringing of his childhood, it had taken Julian some time to get used to his lover's exuberance and utter flaunting disregard of all rules of propriety. But it had been precisely that freedom of spirit that had first drawn him to his best friend-turned-lover.

When Laurent had been satisfied, the French wizard had slightly pulled apart to whisper softly in Julian's ear, "Je t'adore, mon coeur." And then he had proceeded to pass him along his family and relatives, who congratulated Julian, kissed him on both cheeks and gave him little tokens and gifts, making him feel deeply touched.

The last one was Aurora Bones, who stuck to a traditional English greeting and skipped the kissing on the cheeks, though she did give him a loose hug before patting him on the back.

She didn't release him immediately, however. Instead she leaned forward and murmured, "I would like to speak to you in private, Julian." Then she snapped her head up and waved someone over. "Oh, there he comes."

Julian caught sight of bright magenta robes and saw Albus Dumbledore making his way towards them, briefly pausing here and there to amiably greet acquaintances.

"I have heard much about you, Mr. Erlichmann," said Dumbledore the moment he finally reached them. "It's a true pleasure to finally meet you."

Julian shook the wizard's hand, as he shot the pair a speculative glance. "It's my pleasure too, Mr. Dumbledore."

They exchanged so more polite pleasantries, giving each other leave to be addressed by their first names, before Dumbledore said quietly, "Perhaps we should carry any further conversation to a more private setting. If you will, Julian?"

Casting him a quizzical glance, Julian nodded and started following the pair back to the Palace of Beauxbatons.

They were suddenly waylaid by Laurent, who seemed to have popped from thin air to scowl at his aunt, as he said in a heavily accented English, "And w'ree megghht you be going?"

"We would like to discuss certain things with Julian," retorted Aurora Bones firmly, "in private."
"Wiz Julién, and wizout me? I zink not," said Laurent sharply, instantly looping an arm over Julian's shoulders, as some sort of pointed statement.

Julian felt an undercurrent of tension between nephew and aunt that he couldn't quite decipher, as his gaze turned from one to the other.

"You're most welcome to join us, Mr. Didier," said Dumbledore diplomatically.

"A very wize concezzion from your part, Mr. Dumbledoor," quipped Laurent curtly.

And so the four of them entered Beauxbatons and chose an empty classroom for their impromptu meeting.

Julian was not all that surprised to see Santi already there, having known what would happen and where they would be. He was silent, shimmering as he leaned against a wall, his milky eyes flickering between Julian and Dumbledore.

"I 'ope zis is not what I'm theenking, Aunt," remarked Laurent sternly as he pulled a chair out for Julian and then perched himself on one of the armrests, like some imposing and protective shield-wall. "I told you I didn't vant you to recrute 'im."

Julian arched an eyebrow at that. "Recruit me?"

"Oui!" said Laurent crisply. "Last yeer Aunt Au'o'a started askeeng me very probing questions about you and your fameely, Julién. Of courze, I told her nozing!" He then pointed an accusing finger at his aunt. "I knew vhat she waz sniffing after, and I told 'er in no unzertain terms to back off!"

Dumbledore cleared his throat as he steepled his fingers over the table. "Mr. Didier, we mean no harm to your friend-"

"My lover!" snapped Laurent, glowering at the wizard. "Julién iz my lover, not just my freend. And you do mean 'im 'arm." He gestured at Aurora Bones and Dumbledore, as he turned around to gaze at Julian. "Zey want to recrute you for zis Order of ze Phoenix zey 'ave back in England." He let out a mocking scoff. "Zey're a bunch of Brits zat believe ze new German Minister of Magic iz a Dark Lord!"

Julian stared back at his lover at that, and Laurent's piercing hazel gaze spoke volumes to him. Of course, Laurent was well aware of the truth that the rest of Europe refused to even entertain. He had told him about his family and their involvement with Grindelwald. Laurent knew that the wizard was indeed a Dark Lord, though evidently, his lover didn't want him to admit that before Dumbledore and Aurora Bones.

Shaking his head at Laurent, Julian glanced back at Dumbledore, and said quietly, "I see. Let's not beat around the bush, then. You know my father is one of the Dark Lord's Haupke Kommandaten."

"We do," said Dumbledore, before his expression turned grave. "We had a spy in Grindelwald's middle ranks. He was found out and killed. However, just before it, he was able to send a brief communiqué to me, where he divulged your father's plans for you."

"Wat plans?" demanded Laurent sharply.

Ignoring his lover's outburst, Julian stared fixedly at Dumbledore, as he intoned carefully, "Are you aware of all that it entails?"
"I am," replied Dumbledore softly.

Julian knew it exactly at that moment, when Aurora Bones shot Dumbledore a quizzical glance, while Dumbledore's bespectacled gaze was studying his features closely, a strange expression on the wizard's face - recognition, sadness, pain, but also a firm determination.

Julian exhaled slowly. Yes, Dumbledore knew that they looked alike, and that it was precisely this fact that his own father wanted to exploit, hoping that Grindelwald would fall for it and desire him as a lover. And apparently, given Mrs. Bones' nonplussed expression at that very moment, Dumbledore was keeping that little tidbit for himself.

Of course, neither he or Dumbledore were about to say it openly, so Julian merely nodded, as he said smoothly, "Yes, my father wants me to become Grindelwald's follower."

Laurent's head snapped around so fast that Julian was certain it must have hurt.

"I beg your p'a'don?" said Laurent, bristling as he skewered his lover with an angered gaze. "And you refuzed, non?"

"I accepted," said Julian quietly.

"Wat?" snapped Laurent as he stood up to his feet, looking furious. "Wat about Italy? Wat about our plans? Wat about Florenz and Vienna? We've been planneeng it for ages!"

Julian couldn't look at him, so he merely shook his head.

At that, Laurent was quick to swirl around, glaring and pointing an accusing finger at his aunt and Dumbledore. "Zis is all your fault! Au'o'a, I told you neve' to approach 'im-

"You want me to become your spy, yes?" interrupted Julian, staring straight at Dumbledore.

The wizard slowly nodded at him. "We greatly require your help. As an Erlichmann, you will not be suspected and will have access to Grindelwald himself and his plans." Dumbledore peered at him from the top of his half-moon spectacles. "If you agree to become our spy, we will prepare you for your role, and give you assistance and protection-

"I must think about this, for a moment," interjected Julian as he rose to his feet, briefly shooting Santi a pointed glance.

The moment Laurent instantly came to his side, with every intention to follow, Julian was quick to say gently, "Alone. I will not be long."

And with that, he left his lover behind, soon hearing Laurent's voice rising and speaking in a furious, fast French as he railed at Dumbledore and his aunt.

Chuckling with fondness under his breath, Julian walked along a corridor, with a silent Santi floating by his side, until he reached the nearest bathroom.

His warm smile faded then, as he opened a faucet and splashed water on his face, to then stare at his own image in the mirror before him.

'Boyishly handsome' is what people had always said about his looks, with his big sky blue eyes and short auburn hair that curled charmingly at the ends. But he saw it clearly: even without the signs of slight age, the crooked, broken nose, and the long hair and beard of Dumbledore, he did look uncannily like the wizard - a young, fresh, new version.
Julian closed his eyes for a brief moment, sighing wearily, before he glanced at Santi, who was silently observing him.

"You knew this would happen," whispered Julian, gazing at him intently. "You didn't tell me the whole truth about what my 'role in the greater scope of things' would be. Not only Grindelwald's lover, but also a spy for Dumbledore and thus a traitor to my own family." His blue eyes narrowed, as he demanded sharply, "What is it that I'm buying now?"

Santi shot him a quizzical glance at that, and Julian gritted out impatiently, "By following my father's wishes and becoming the Dark Lord's lover, you said I would be saving Laurent. So by becoming Dumbledore's spy, what will I be winning?"

"You'll save lives-" began Santi softly.

"Lives of strangers, no doubt!" bit out Julian irritably. "I'm not altruistic – that's not enough for me!"

Santi stared at him fixedly, before he said in a murmur, "You will help Harry."

"Harry," Julian breathed out, startled, before he chuckled wryly under his breath. "Of course. Your 'Harry', my 'Harry'. My actions as a spy will help him, then." He shook his head, rubbing his face before he exhaled softly. "Isn't it strange? All my life I've been hearing about him from you, yet you've never told me anything that is relevant about 'Harry'. Who is he, really, why is he so important, I've asked you, and you've never said."

He closed his eyes, letting out a deep breath as he murmured, "I've never seen him, never met him, and yet, I feel close to him. It is as if we were strangely connected – I feel it, somehow." He shook his head slowly, before he opened his eyes and skewered Santi with his gaze. "I want to know him, to be in his life, to be his 'friend', as I wished when I was a child, to aid him, to know he's safe, to know he's happy, to know he'll have a good life and I'll be in it. And yet, you told me long ago, that I wouldn't be in his life. So why do I care for him?"

He arched an eyebrow at Santi, before he asked poignantly, "That was your reason for filling my mind with thoughts of him since I was a toddler, was it not?" He gestured jerkily at his chest, at his head. "To create this 'connection' to him, that I feel."

"Connection?" muttered Santi, eyeing him weirdly, before he shook his head and added quietly, "I have done nothing to create this connection you speak of." An expression of pensive wonder spread on his shimmering face, as he said slowly, "But I think I might know what it could be. Through Time, sometimes I've observed how two people, whose actions greatly impact each others' lives, become bonded in a way, in a relation of cause and effect, no matter the distance, no matter if they're acquainted or not."

"I've heard about that before," interjected Julian, frowning. "Theories about the interlinkage among souls, of wizards and witches and magical beings. Do you believe it?"

"Perhaps," said Santi hesitantly.

Julian stared at his life-companion, and pressed on sternly, "Does Harry feel it, the way I do?"

Santi let out a heavy sigh. "If it does exist, if it's true, then he might, probably without realizing what it is – yet unwittingly following what it makes him desire." He glanced at Julian, and added quietly, "He is very sensitive to Magic, more than he should be by innate nature. Yet, at this point, I only know that he will think of you frequently, and that once, he will even save your life, by
preventing someone from disclosing to Grindelwald your role as a spy."

"I see," muttered Julian under his breath, before he pinned Santi with a speculative glance. "Will I also be saving Harry's life by being Dumbledore's spy?"

"No," replied Santi shortly, before his voice turned gentle, as he added, "But you will save a group of people who in return will meet Harry, veering him into a path he must take."

"What path?" demanded Julian, feeling a sudden frisson of perturbed worry.

"Answers to many of your questions are awaiting you at Nurmengard," said Santi sternly. "I cannot tell you. You must discover things on your own, at your own time."

"You always say that," mumbled Julian, disgruntled.

In the next second, he squared his shoulders and briefly stared at his own reflection in the mirror, before he said curtly, "Very well, I'll tell Dumbledore what he wants to hear. But I will not truly be his spy until I determine that it's the best thing to do."

Without a second glance at Santi, he strode out of the bathroom. Soon reaching the classroom where the others awaited him, he yanked the door open and said tersely, "I'll do it. I'll be your spy."

Utter chaos ensued after his statement, since Laurent proved to be intractable.

It was Dumbledore who finally rose to his feet and wisely put an end to it, saying courteously, "It's clear you have much to discuss between you in private."

He shook Julian's hand, as he added, "You have my gratitude for hearing our request. We'll be waiting for your decision. You can send Aurora an owl with your answer. If it's favorable, we'll meet again shortly and we'll prepare you."

The two weeks that followed that day were not spent how Julian had initially planned. He and Laurent had stayed in the Didier's summer cottage in Nice, and instead of ardently and passionately making love to each other, they spent it in heated arguments, with Laurent yelling at him, dramatically slamming doors, and hurling vases against walls.

It was just two nights before the day in which Julian had been ordered by his father to return to Germany, that Laurent finally crept into their shared bed. Julian had stiffened at first, thinking he was going to be yelled at some more, but his lover then hugged him tightly from the back, caressing his curls of hair and pressing soft, yearning kisses along his neck, as he whispered in a quiet French, "I don't want to lose you. So I will accept this. Even though I hate it and fear for you."

Aurora Bones was contacted the morning after and soon they had her and Dumbledore flooing directly into their cottage.

"If Julién iz doing zis," Laurent said warningly the instant the pair stepped into the parlor, "I vant to be involved."

Mrs. Bones and Dumbledore shared a glance, and Julian knew they had anticipated that much and that it satisfied them greatly.

"These are Bones heirlooms that will prove quite useful," said Aurora as she handed a pair of beautiful crystal figurines in the shape of doves, one for Julian, the other for Laurent. She then
glanced at her nephew, as she added sternly, "You must go to Florence and apprentice under
Migliani, as you had planned." She gestured at the doves in their hands, as she continued, "Through
these, Julian can send you letters and even flasks with his memories, of things he sees, battle plans
he finds and such…"

She demonstrated by conjuring a piece of rolled parchment and an empty vial. Muttering an
incantation at one of the doves, it opened its beak and swallowed the parchment and flask, only for
them to float out of the beak of the twin dove in the next second, both objects then gently landing
on the table.

Aurora Bones glanced at Julian. "It will not be suspicious if you are sending letters to your closest
friend of Beauxbatons. You can even say that your dove is Laurent's parting gift to you. Yet, to
your reports to us, you will need to charm them with an encryption spell, that will make it look as if
you were writing merely about day-to-day anecdotes, innocent narrations not related to your
missions as one of Grindelwald's followers. Then, from Florence, Laurent will send your letters and
flasks by owl to me."

She proceeded to teach them the incantation for the doves, and to Julian, as well, the encryption
spell. Of course, Laurent was quick to demand to know it too.

Fortunately, Dumbledore had firmly refused. Julian certainly didn't want Laurent to ever hear
anything about him becoming the Dark Lord's lover.

After that, Julian and Dumbledore had spent the rest of the day alone, as the wizard taught him
many spells that would aid him in his spying activities, whilst giving him instructions on the issues
he wanted to know most about.

It was clear what Julian's main mission was: study the powerful wards of Nurmengard, report on
their characteristics so that Dumbledore would find spells to disable them, at which point, Julian
would receive detailed instructions of how to bring the wards down so that certain prisoners in the
dungeons could make their escape with Julian's aid.

"The day you free them," Dumbledore had said before he left the cottage, "you must come to
Hogwarts, Julian. Laurent will be alerted and he will be waiting for you there. I'll make sure you're
both protected so that you may carry on with your lives without fear of Grindelwald's vengeance."

Julian nodded, even when he knew it would never come to happen. And then, something just made
him say the next words. Perhaps he wanted some tacit acknowledgement from Dumbledore, for the
wizard to reveal that he knew exactly what he was sending Julian to do - what he would be for the
Dark Lord, if his father was right.

"Gellert, not 'Grindelwald'," he murmured quietly, piercing Dumbledore with his gaze. "He's
Gellert to you, is he not?"

Dumbledore started, looking momentarily taken aback, before he stared at him fixedly and gave
him a long, considering look.

"He was Gellert to me, a long time ago," Dumbledore said at last, his voice turning soft and gentle,
as he added with a hint of worry, "Do not let him be Gellert to you, my boy."

Those were the last words Julian would ever hear from Dumbledore in person. It was the last time
he ever saw him.

The last day, when he parted from Laurent, was very hard for him. Santi had insisted he should
break it off before leaving for Germany, but Julian hadn't been able to do it.

He preferred his own way of letting Laurent know their relationship was over: at some point, he would just send reports and flasks of his memories through the dove, not personal letters to Laurent. His lover would understand what it meant but he would be in Florence, unable to do anything about it. After all, someone who wasn't Grindelwald's follower couldn't find Nurmengard.

"He could end up doing something foolish," Santi had insisted sternly, "if he suddenly stops receiving letters from you."

"If I tell him now that my father intends to make me the Dark Lord's lover," interjected Julian tiredly, "he will do something foolish. I know him. He'll just kidnap me and take me to some remote corner of the world and my father will find us – you're the one who warned me about it!"

He then shot him a demanding glance. "Do you know for a fact that Laurent will do something dangerous that might get him killed?"

"No," Santi grudgingly admitted. "Yet I still think-"

"Enough said, then."

Armed with valor and determination, Julian finally returned to his country of birth. His parents received him just as he had expected, going straight to business, instructing him what he should say and how he should behave when he was presented to Grindelwald, what robes he would wear, what platitudes and praises to speak.

Three days later, his eighteenth birthday was celebrated which much pomp in the Erlichmann's ancestral and palatial estate amidst the dense forests and peaking mountains near the German border with Austria.

La crème de la crème of dark wizarding society of Europe were invited, with the 'German Minister of Magic' as the guest of honor, of course.

However, Julian hadn't been prepared for the encounter.
Part I: Chapter 23

During his years in Beauxbatons, Julian had seen pictures of Grindelwald in the newspapers, of course. And he had had faint, vague recollections about the man, from when he had been a child and Grindelwald had visited his father in their home.

Seeing him in person, when he himself was an adult wizard who had already experienced attraction to his own kind and knew the pleasures of the flesh, was quite a different matter.

In the midst of his birthday celebration, his father had waved him over. And Julian had seen him standing next to Grindelwald, with a large crowd surrounding them with adoring, enchanted, servile, greedy, or sycophantic expressions on their faces, as they listened avidly to the Dark Lord's every word.

His father had whispered something in the Dark Lord's ear and the wizard's hazel eyes had flickered to him. Julian had almost halted in his steps as he made his way towards them.

Grindelwald's hawk-like gaze had roamed along his body to end up studying his face. And Julian saw it then, in the Dark Lord's hazel eyes: a glint of surprise and startled recognition, as if the...
wizard was beholding a ghost. The glint turned into one of interest, which quickly became a hungry, covetous spark as Grindelwald kept staring at his face.

Just mere feet from the man, Julian had suddenly felt something very potently, and he had shivered with unwanted pleasure.

Santi had abruptly shimmered into existence right by his side, as he whispered urgently in German, "You're very sensitive to Dark Magic, as you already know. That's his power and magical core you're feeling. Don't let it ensnare you."

It was a moot point. Julian hadn't been able to help himself. He had exhaled deeply, trying to steady his breathing, as he finally stood before the Dark Lord, under the wizard's piercing gaze.

His father had made the proper formal introductions and Grindelwald had soon taken Julian by the arm, gently escorting him to a more secluded corner of the vast, elegant ballroom.

"I've heard many great things about you, from your father," had intoned Grindelwald softly, his hazel eyes still fixed on his features, closely roving over them. "And I have read much about you when you won the European Duelling Championship. I congratulate you, Julian. Such a great accomplishment for one as young as you."

With something stuck in his throat, Julian had only nodded jerkily, feeling like an utter fool. Yet the evening had soon become something out of a dream.

Like in one of those romantic novels that some of his female friends in Beauxbatons had gushed about, Julian had found himself the object of much charming gallantry, softly spoken praises, and admiring, passionate looks. He had been heavily courted. Grindelwald certainly didn't waste any time in obtaining something he desired.

The wizard had even asked him to show him the 'splendorous, famed gardens of the Erlichmann estate'. And as Julian complied and meandered along the charming, pebbled paths along ponds, fountains and statues, being gallantly carried by the arm by Grindelwald, he had seen his parents gazing at them from the arched windows of the ballroom, glowing with pride and satisfaction, as they whispered to one another.

In his parents' view, the evening was a complete success. Grindelwald had asked them for permission to induct him in his ranks. Moreover, Julian was given private chambers in Nurmengard Tower itself, right next to Grindelwald's. Not much subtlety there, though the Dark Lord didn't press the matter after that. He had taken his time.

Julian began by being just one more follower, though he was initiated right into the mid-level ranks. However, he had been unprepared for Grindelwald's courting tactics.

He had thought he would have to deal with an imposing, dominant man, who took what he wanted and demanded obeisance in all aspects. After all, Grindelwald was the Dark Lord and Julian just a lackey; if the man wanted to take him to bed, Julian could only comply.

He should have known better. Grindelwald's debonair air and suave, charming and gallant ways were legendary. In the first year as the man's follower, the wizard never made any sexual overtures towards him, never pressured or coerced him in any way.

Instead, there were heated, desireful glances now and then, soft pats on the shoulder, brief caresses along an arm or knee that seemed nothing more than accidentally lingering touches. It was done so artfully and subtly that for many months Julian wasn't quite sure if he was interpreting the situation
Furthermore, Grindelwald was quick to exploit Julian's weaknesses: the man enthralled him with his vastly superior knowledge, sharing such with him as well as life stories and personal experiences, with trusting openness; giving Julian precious and unique tomes of books to read from his own personal collection; feeding Julian's own need for affection and attention by becoming his mentor in the Dark Arts, by teaching him such powerful dark rituals and spells that Julian had never even imagined he could come to know or master; by openly praising Julian's magical abilities and encouraging more excellence from him; and ultimately, by showing interest in the things that Julian loved the most.

Countless evenings Grindelwald made Julian sing and play his magic flute for him, alone in Grindelwald's chambers, only illuminated by the fireplace and few candles, infusing the rooms in a cozy, intimate ambiance. The Dark Lord always showed true, honest enjoyment and his praises were candid as he encouraged Julian to keep practicing his art in his spare time.

Julian was aware of such manipulations, such as Grindelwald purposely showering on him the affection his own father had not when he had been a child, yet he was unable to make himself care about it.

The trap was set and Julian ended up willingly stepping into it. Grindelwald never initiated the intimate aspect of their relationship. It had been Julian who, one night after a session of flute-playing, had stood up to then lean forward to tentatively press a soft kiss on the seated wizard's lips. Grindelwald hadn't moved and had allowed Julian to slowly and hesitantly take control, as his exploring touches turned into caresses and then passionate grabs.

It was what was ultimately expected of him, after all, but not only that, it was what he had truly desired as well, like a hungry need that had grown to an unbearable level and had to be quenched.

Yet the first six months of his intimate relationship with the wizard had been torturous at best. It was as if a dam had been broken the moment Julian initiated the sexual aspect of their relationship and Grindelwald hadn't repressed himself any longer; there was no affection in it, but lust, hunger, and anger.

Julian was well aware that in those months he wasn't being seen.

The love that the Dark Lord held for Albus Dumbledore, who was now clearly an enemy, was something Julian came to slowly understand in those months. It was a twisted thing, fueled by hurt, longing, need, and obsession, but also, fury and hatred due to a perceived betrayal. All of that was unleashed on Julian, as Grindelwald became brutal when he took him, clawed at him and bit down on his shoulder as he released deep inside Julian with punishing thrusts, inaudibly groaning out "Albus" instead of Julian's name.

With shuddering effort, he made himself bear it and was nothing if not pliant and never said a word against it, though those feelings that had started to blossom during the gentle 'courting stage' had been stumped.

It was also then when he sometimes came to truly despise Albus Dumbledore, when Grindelwald's hazel eyes turned clouded and hazed, unfocused as if lost in a memory, in those moments when he violently subdued Julian in bed and used him as a substitute to dole out his punishment.

It was in his second year as Grindelwald's follower, when he rose to the highest ranks as he proved himself invaluable to the Dark Lord, as he excelled in everything Grindelwald taught him, as his input in planning meetings were listened to and seriously considered, as he broke the six-month
mark of being the Dark Lord's lover against all expectations and followers started whispering about him, enviously, angrily, or with some admiration, that things slowly started to change.

Julian could never pinpoint when it actually happened, but one day the glances Grindelwald shot him were not just heated and lustful, but became thoughtful stares.

And in the days in which they spent much time together out of bed, it wasn't only Julian enjoying the man's company and words, but the other way around as well: Grindelwald's lips began to hitch upwards now and then, or the man started to outright laugh and chortle at some witty quip Julian made, or his hazel eyes brightened at the sight of him, or a blissful expression of true enjoyment spread on the man's handsome face as he relaxed and fell into a placid slumber as Julian played the flute for him.

It was then that when Grindelwald looked at him, Julian realized the wizard was truly seeing him, for the first time. He would catch an expression of wonder briefly crossing the man's handsome features, or a softening look in the hazel eyes as their encounters in bed stopped being brutal, and tender, affectionate caresses began to be involved.

The night when Grindelwald groaned out Julian's name instead of Albus', an unwanted feeling surged in him due to it, of joy, gratefulness, and of sheer longing need being finally satisfied. It was then when Julian realized his downfall had begun, since the Dark Lord became 'Gellert' in his mind.

"You're a gem," Gellert would softly murmur into Julian's ear as they lay satiated in bed, their limbs entangled with each other's. The first time the wizard said it, his tone of voice sounded a bit perplexed and awe-struck, as if wondering at his own developing sentiments.

It soon became Gellert's affectionate pet name for him when they were alone - 'mein Edelstein', 'my gem'- and Julian's insides would twist and recoil when hearing it because it always made him rejoice, much against his will and better judgment.

The situation became worse when Gellert proved to be too understanding of Julian's nature, accepting it and seemingly cherishing him all the more for it.

Indeed, it caught Julian unawares one day, just like in many others, when Grindelwald had accompanied him down to the dungeons to observe how Julian put into practice all the dark curses the Dark Lord had been teaching him.

"You don't enjoy causing pain," suddenly said Gellert quietly, when the prisoner Julian had been subjecting to a curse finally stopped screaming and fell into unconsciousness.

Julian stiffened at that, lowering his wand, being unable to stop his hand from shaking at the frisson of fear that spread through him.

From the first day when Grindelwald had showed him the dungeons, Julian had done his best not to show abhorrence on his face when seeing the heart-wrenching state of the prisoners: skeletal, starved, gazing out with dull eyes, looking lifeless whilst cramped in horrid, fetid tiny cells, lying among their own waste.

They were the people Dumbledore wanted Julian to save, after all. The Jews that had been disappearing from both the Wizarding and Muggle World for the last few years, and who had clearly been tortured in all possible ways.

It was an unbearable sight for him, but Julian had been very careful to never allow his face to show
his true reaction to it.

With a flick of his wand and a muttered incantation, Grindelwald mended the ripped ribcage of the unconscious prisoner.

Julian swallowed thickly and stood still as the wizard turned around to gaze at him, half-expecting he would be punished for not being cold-blooded enough.

A pensive expression spread on Gellert's face as he regarded Julian closely, as if trying to puzzle out the intricacies of some strange, fascinating being. "You take pleasure in the Dark Arts themselves, which stands to reason given you're naturally talented in them, yet you don't take pleasure in using them for torture."

Julian remained still in wary silence, not quite sure where the remarks were going to lead.

"It's something quite unusual in a dark wizard of your caliber and bloodline," continued Grindelwald, now looking half amused, half exasperated, a glint of tickled fondness shining in his hawk-like eyes as his lips quirked upwards. "The feeling of such power over others calls to all of us of our kind, though clearly not to you."

Taking hold of Julian's left hand, the wizard brought it up to his face and brushed his lips against the knuckles in a soft, gallant kiss, gently dropping it as he said musingly, "It's another unexpected little thing about you that I find strangely compelling."

Flabbergasted, Julian merely stared back at him, his sky blue eyes growing big.

Gellert chortled loudly, as he trailed a caress down Julian's cheek. "I do like the look on your face when I don't act like the big, bad Dark Lord you surely expected me to be."

And with that, and a jaunty wink, the wizard turned around and started to amble his way out of the dungeons, not pausing as he added over his shoulder as an afterthought and lofty warning, "It doesn't mean, mein Edelstein, that I give you leave to quit your practice sessions with the prisoners. Carry on without me and let their screams sing to me as I make my way up."

A bit numbed, partly relieved, partly disturbed, Julian obeyed instantly.

It was shortly after that that he noticed how his status among the ranks changed. No longer did other followers whisper nastily behind his back, calling him the Dark Lord's whore or boy-toy. The cleverer, who realized how the tides were flowing, treated him with much respect and calculating amiability, not only for being the son of Egon Erlichmann but also the Dark Lord's 'favorite', as became his unofficial title, since he was too young to be part of the Haupte Kommandanten and certainly didn't have enough clout and experience to substitute the vaunted Konrad Von Krauss as Grindelwald's Right Hand.

His ascendancy was clear when Grindelwald started to take him along with him everywhere.

In the meetings in the Reichstag, before Herr Hitler and his cronies, he was introduced as Grindelwald's personal secretary. After all, to those muggles, Grindelwald was a wealthy industrialist and fervent nationalist, owner of countless factories that were producing airplane and submarine parts, artillery and guns.

Grindelwald was accepted into their group in an advisory capacity, though it was obvious to Julian that quite a bit of mind-nudging and compels took place often with a surreptitious flick of the Dark Lord's wand, since the muggles always ended up doing what Grindelwald suggested. Just as he was certain that the moment the top tier of Nazi hierarchy stopped being useful, they would all be
swiftly obliviated.

The Dark Lord's growing affection for him became evident, as well, in the trust the wizard started to bestow upon him.

This became clear the day that Gellert handed to him a thick pile of old, yellowed parchments, as he pierced him with his hawk-like gaze and intoned gravely, "Only Konrad knows about this, and now you."

Julian had a full week of sleepless nights, all his candles burning out to be left as nothing more than melted wax, as he submerged himself in the research that Ulrich Von Krauss had so long ago pieced together.

His father had always told him that Ulrich Von Krauss had been an utter fool, pathetically pinning after Grindelwald since they were young boys in Durmstrang, following the man in their decades spent in travels whilst spending every last knut of the Von Krauss's once formidable fortune, and even being stupid enough to sign a marital contract for his heir without realizing the trap in it.

After all, it was common knowledge and source of much derision that the family of Konrad Von Krauss's wife had tricked them. The fortune Ludmilla had inherited from her wealthy Russian family had not gone to replenish the Von Krauss's empty coffers, as traditionally happened with the riches of married witches, but rather, Konrad's wife still held complete control over her fortune, only to pass it down to her daughter when the time came.

Ulrich Von Krauss had left nothing to his son except numerous estates, the majority of which had become abandoned and dilapidated since Konrad didn't have funds of his own to maintain them.

Nevertheless, utter careless idiot as Ulrich Von Krauss had certainly been in many aspects of his life, it was clear to Julian that the wizard had been a brilliant scholar and historian.

The night he finished reading the wizard's research, Julian was left breathless with wonder, his mind spinning, his blue eyes unfocused and wide.

It was a loud clearing of a throat that yanked Julian from his absorption. He blinked as he glanced at Santi, who was shimmering and standing right next to the desk, gazing down at him with an expectant expression on his face.

"So now you know," said Santi jovially, when Julian remained mute.

Julian stared at him before his gaze swiveled back to the stack of parchments, his voice hoarse as he croaked out, "Is it all true?"

"It is," replied Santi, humming contently under his breath as he perched himself on the edge of the desk.

In that instant, Julian abruptly became agitated and frenzied with fear, and he gestured wildly at Ulrich Von Krauss' research. "Why would Gellert want me to know so much? I don't want to know this! It's dangerous information!"

His earlier missions during his first year as a follower had been to go through the warehouses the Nazis had, filled with the things they had stolen from Jews' homes. They had to detect anything magical in nature and study it carefully in case of traces, clues, and hidden information - anything pertaining to some 'great treasure' the Jews were keeping hidden.

No one in Grindelwald's ranks actually knew what that 'treasure' was, though there was much
speculation going around. And he was no fool: he knew what it meant to be the second person, besides the Dark Lord himself, to know about the truth.

A couple of months ago, when he had wanted a more precise time-frame than Santi's usual vague response of "your life will be short", because by wizarding standards a short life could be eighty years old, he had demanded another answer from his life-long companion.

Santi's reply of "you won't live to see your twenty-fifth birthday" had certainly shortened his expectations, though he had been twenty when he had asked, and knowing Santi, it could mean he had just a few months left or perhaps a couple of full years.

Thus, the last thing Julian wanted was to know what the true object of the Dark Lord's Quest was – information that put his already shortened lifespan at risk, clearly.

Julian shakily carded his finger through his short auburn hair, and breathed out frantically, "Gellert will soon realize what a foolish mistake he made by giving me this and he'll snuff me out like this!" He snapped his fingers. "What could have possessed him to trust me with such information!"

A realization struck him, and he gazed at Santi with wide, fearful eyes. "It's a test, isn't it? He suspects me. He-"

"He doesn't suspect you," interjected Santi calmly, before he shot him a wide, beaming smile that had a taunting quirk to it. "You've played your part well and you've made him become very fond of you. Men make stupid mistakes when blinded by affection. A Dark Lord is no exception."

Julian scowled at him with irritation as he bit out acidly, "There's no 'affection' and the Dark Lord would certainly not be swayed by something like that-"

"No affection, really?" interrupted Santi, arching an ethereal eyebrow at him, looking as if he expected Julian to suddenly pour his heart out. "From neither side? Why, and I was quite certain you had fed each other love potions."

Not at all amused by Santi's humorous quips, Julian shot him a dirty look and turned away from him, not wanting for a second to think about the maelstrom of conflicting emotions he had been feeling lately.

It was then when Santi's playful expression vanished from his face, turning grave, as he said sharply, "I told you not to become enthralled by him. I warned you what would happen, and you've utterly disregarded my-"

"I have not become 'enthralled'!" snapped Julian, spinning around to glare at him. "I'm not a schoolboy anymore. Stop treating me as such."

"By the way you've been acting I would say you are," interjected Santi harshly. "You think Dumbledore hasn't noticed how your reports have been lacking? How they've become shorter and shorter with each passing week? He already suspects that you have become infatuated with Grindelwald."

"My reports are short because I have no more information to give him," gritted out Julian, his posture becoming defensive, utterly ignoring that last accusation.

Nevertheless, in his view, his statement was true. During the first year, he had given Dumbledore every possible detail about the wards of Nurmengard. In that respect there was nothing more he could do.
It was Dumbledore who was working with that information and had already concluded that the wards were too powerful to bring down completely. The wizard had informed him that he was coming up with spells that would momentarily disable the wards for a few minutes – long enough for Julian to use portkeys that would take the Jewish prisoners away from Nurmengard and into the Forbidden Forest of Hogwarts.

Moreover, after many months of testing the waters with some followers who didn't seem too firm in their convictions or fanaticism, or who flinched and recoiled from torturing prisoners, he had managed to recruit two as spies for Dumbledore.

Granted, he hadn't dared attempt to recruit one of the Haupte Kommandanten. Instead, one was in the low ranks and the other in the mid, but it would still be two spies he would leave behind when he was no longer around, so he wouldn't be leaving Dumbledore in the dust.

And from all the other discoveries he had made, it had been Santi who had stopped him from informing Dumbledore of the two most important ones.

Indeed, a few months ago when Gellert had started showing him too much trust, and he had become uncomfortable with it, he had been granted access to the other side of the floor from where his quarters and Gellert's were. The Dark Lord had finally allowed him to enter his office.

It had been the subject of much gossip that the Dark Lord had spent much of his time during the past couple of years entrenched in his office, apparently absorbed in a pensieve filled with mysterious memories.

Julian had finally seen it then. Though the night he had used many of the spells Dumbledore had taught him in order to covertly enter the office without detection, Santi had popped into existence the second Julian had aimed his wand at the pensieve.

"Don't even attempt it," had bit out Santi, angered, alarmed, and panting, as if he had barely made it in time in order to stop him, from wherever Santi went when he wasn't with Julian. "You don't have the skill or power to break the wards around it without Grindelwald finding out. Let it be."

Julian had shot him an annoyed look at that. The gossip about the Dark Lord's pensieve was the one rumor he had informed Dumbledore about and of course that Dumbledore's immediate order was to find out what memories it contained.

"Dumbledore wants to know," Julian had finally interjected tiredly.

"I bet he does," Santi had remarked wryly. He gestured at the pensieve, as he added coolly, "Those are the memories that Sybilla Spyros allowed Grindelwald to wrench from her mind after he had gouged her eyes out to turn her into an Oracle. They are the remains of the threads of recollections that weren't savaged by the poison she took to destroy her own mind. They are the things she wanted Grindelwald to know about so that he would act according to her plans. And they are precisely what I never want Dumbledore to know about."

Julian had stared at him, mouth partly hanging open before he snapped it shut, and breathed out, as he remembered her from so long ago, "Sybilla Spyros..." He had shaken his head slowly, before he inquired with deep curiosity, "What do the memories show?"

"Much," had retorted Santi tersely. "And I'll tell you soon, but not yet."

Julian had simply nodded, reconstructed the Dark Lord's wards around the office, and gone back to his quarters, knowing that being patient with Santi always bore the desired results.
The other piece of gossip among the ranks that had also proven to be true was the presence of Anacleto Armonios as a guest of the Dark Lord. Indeed, the infamous creator of the Time-Turner, former Spanish Unspeakable being hunted down around the world by Aurors of several countries, was living right there, across the corridor from Grindelwald's office.

Seeing the man with his own eyes, having confirmation that the rumors were true, had left Julian gobsmacked, wondering what the Dark Lord could possibly want from a wizard with such a despicable reputation.

Furthermore, Santi's reaction had left him even more flabbergasted.

"Not a word about Armonios to Dumbledore either," Santi had warned him sharply, spitting out the former Unspeakable's surname as if it was the vilest thing, deep-rooted contempt and hatred clear in his voice.

Never had Julian heard Santi speak about someone in such violent tones, and he had only been able to stare at Santi as his eyebrows shot upwards with disconcert.

The one thing he had written to Dumbledore about was the very same artifact that the Dark Lord himself had proudly shown to him.

The Globe occupied a whole vast corner of Grindelwald's office, and as Julian gazed at the innumerable colorful flames brightly glowing and dotting it, and as Gellert explained to him its function and how it worked, the last surviving glimmer of hope that Julian had been holding had crumbled.

Up until that day, he had still considered the slight possibility that Santi could have been wrong, that perhaps there was truly a way out for him, that perhaps Dumbledore could uphold his end of the bargain and help him escape with Laurent once Julian freed the Jewish prisoners of Nurmengard.

However, in the following days, as he finally found a book in Gellert's library with detailed information about The Globe – 'Obscure and Forgotten Dark Lords and their Inventions' - and when he had read about it and realized he had no way of destroying it, he had finally known that Santi had been right all along, and that he must have been referring to The Globe itself when he had warned Julian so long ago that wherever he fled to, his father and Grindelwald would find him.

Furthermore, he had even gone as far as giving Dumbledore the book title, to see if the wizard could discover something from it that Julian might have overlooked. Dumbledore's response had been grim: they indeed had the book in Hogwarts' Restricted Section but after reading it, he saw no way in which Julian could disable The Globe. The message was clear; Dumbledore himself was powerful enough to do so, if he was in its presence, but not Julian.

To Julian, it felt as if the last door of his cage had been irredeemably slammed shut. Moreover, the news of the existence of such an artifact as The Globe had certainly rattled Dumbledore. The wizard had wanted to know if there was anything that might lead Julian to believe Grindelwald had created any of the other inventions mentioned in other chapters of the book.

Not really knowing what Dumbledore had been inkling at so worriedly, and too despondent and depressed, Julian had merely flipped through the book with little interest, seeing nothing of notice and thus replying to the wizard in the negative.

Casting aside such dour recollections, Julian stared back at the stack of parchments, plopping down on his chair as he tiredly rubbed his face.
At last, he muttered under his breath, "I can hardly believe it." He shot Santi a quizzical glance, as he added, "How much does Dumbledore know about this?"

"He can only know what is common knowledge, what can be found in textbooks regarding the subject."

"Very little, then," mused Julian pensively. "In History of Magic they only told us very briefly the story of how the muggle Jews in Ancient Egypt cherished the muggleborns born in their midst, thinking of them as gifts sent to them by their God. How with their help, they managed to break free from slavery and escape."

He then gestured briskly at Ulrich Von Krauss's research. "But the books certainly didn't say anything about how the legend of the Vessel is fact and not just some nonsensical muggle myth. Certainly didn't say that it was really used back then and what for, and again much later in 1692 for the second and last time in history!"

Julian paused to pierce Santi with wide eyes, as he breathed out haggardly, "Are you absolutely sure that all of Von Krauss's speculations are correct?"

"Yes," replied Santi shortly.

Julian didn't question it, and quickly, he flipped through the parchments until he reached the large drawing of a beautiful, complex, intricate symbol he had studied before.

Tapping it with a finger, he muttered under his breath, "Beauxbatons' textbooks didn't say anything about these Guardians, either - descendants from those muggle Jews of Ancient Egypt, who have protected their wizards and witches throughout time as they moved from country to country..."

Julian trailed off, a realization suddenly striking him, and he breathed out, "This is why Gellert makes his followers take both muggle and wizarding Jews, whole families in fact, and why they are stripped naked the moment they are taken to the cells, every inch of their bodies searched for a 'mark'." He gestured adamantly at the picture. "It's this symbol they are unknowingly looking for, because Gellert wants to find one of these Guardians, because he wants to find and use the Vessel."

He yanked out the very last parchment, and flattened it on top of the desk, as he added anxiously, "And look what Von Krauss's conclusions are. In the two times the Vessel was used, its power was never fully unleashed. The first time, it was used correctly, of course, since the Jews themselves created the artifact. They did everything right. The most powerful wizard among them willingly offered himself up—who, according to Von Krauss, was also the only Lord-level wizard of those times. He made the three required sacrifices to fuel the Vessel: magic, life, and body. But the Jews didn't need the Vessel to be fully powered, so they didn't let the sacrifices compound with each other and grow within the artifact for too long. They were cautious and used it just a few months later."

Julian turned over the parchment and pointed at the next paragraph. "The second time, in 1692, the Jews heard about the intentions of the International Confederation of Wizards, how they were looking for powerful magical artifacts to protect wizarding kind from the crazed, religious muggles rampaging around the world with their witch hunts. The Guardians contacted the Confederation, revealed the existence of the Vessel and offered the use of it, with the caveat that Jews, both muggle and wizarding, would be wholly spared from the effects of it."

Pausing to click his tongue scornfully, he then added, "The Confederation made a complete mess of it. Too scared of the muggles and their sheer numbers, they didn't follow all instructions. Allegedly, there was no Lord-level wizard or witch in existence at the time, and the Confederation"
didn't dare wait for one. They chose three wizards, each to give one of the sacrifices into the Vessel. Obviously, the power unleashed from the Vessel was too feeble, it didn't fully work. So the Confederation had no other resort than to come up with the Statute of Secrecy, just laws that are hardly effective…"

He trailed off, shaking his head bemusedly. He had always wondered why the Jews were the only ones exempted from the Statute of Secrecy. Most believed it had been an oversight.

Even Grindelwald, the few times the wizard had been confronted about the issue by other Ministers of Magic, used the excuse that it wasn't legal for the Jews to not be bounded by those laws as a reason to justify why he was 'imprisoning' Jews in his country.

Yet Grindelwald knew the truth, just as Julian did right then. It was owed to the Jews since they had allowed the use of the Vessel. That it hadn't gone as expected had been the fault of the International Confederation of Wizards, yet they still had to uphold their end of the deal by at least excluding the Jews from the Statute of Secrecy.

Julian skewered Santi with his gaze, as he said slowly, "If they had done as the Jews instructed and the Vessel had fully worked, the solution would have been magical. It would have changed everything. Wizarding kind would have owed the Jews much."

The realization struck him hard. The Jews had wanted to help.

The day he had truly decided to aid Dumbledore was the day he saw the Jews in their cells in the dungeons of Nurmengard. It was more out of pity for them, than real conviction, that he had chosen to become Dumbledore's spy.

His feelings for them changed into admiration as months passed and the prisoners remained staunch in their silence, no matter the torture they were subjected to, no matter how their other likewise imprisoned relatives –fathers, grandparents, siblings or children- were tortured or killed in front of them. None of them ever spoke a word.

Admittedly, there were those who screamed in crazed terror, but those never lasted long; those were just muggle Jews who had been caught up in it and truly didn't know anything. The others, however, the survivors, were wizards – either that, or there were truly Guardians amongst them. And yet, so far, none of them had given any indication that they knew anything about the matter. Thus far, Grindelwald had been thoroughly unsuccessful in that regard.

"Very true, wizarding kind would have owed them much," interjected Santi placidly, before he eyed him closely with a grave expression on his face. "Yet you can see the danger in it, can you?"

"Of course I do!" replied Julian vehemently. "Even in 1692, the Guardians of the Vessel didn't intend for it to be used to its full power – their instructions to the Confederation of Wizards ensured that it wouldn't."

His sky blue eyes flickered back to the last of Ulrich Von Krauss' conclusions, and he said anxiously, "He believed that if the Vessel was fully powered, with the three sacrifices coming from one individual with magical levels of a Lord, leaving the magic of the sacrifices to interact with each other, compounding and exponentially growing within the Vessel for at least five decades, the power then unleashed would be such that it would affect the whole muggle populace of the world."

He found the sentence that had made his insides twist and recoil with sheer horror and fear, to then whisper shakily, "The effects of it, he termed them the Winds of-"

"Gellert cannot possibly think
he can control the repercussions of this! It's sheer lunacy!"

Santi quirked an eyebrow at him, as he said loftily, "And here I've often heard you say that you didn't care about the common good."

Julian shot him a hard look. "I care about the fate of the people I love. Laurent, for starters." He gestured angrily at Ulrich Von Krauss' research, and snapped, "If Gellert uses the Vessel as Von Krauss suggests, Laurent will one day wake up to find himself living in a devastated world – that's why I care!"

In the next second, he frowned at the parchments as he muttered, "Yet he needs a sacrifice. Gellert is certainly not planning on being it." Julian's head jerked upwards, staring at Santi as he breathed out, "Dumbledore."

"It won't be Dumbledore," retorted Santi calmly.

"What do you mean?" demanded Julian sternly. "If the rumors about his magical prowess are to be believed, he's the only other Lord-level wizard out there, besides Gellert himself."

"There are others."

"What others?" Julian frowned at him. "Who is he going to use?"

"You don't need to concern yourself about this," said Santi, waving a hand dismissively. Rising to his feet, feeling an ominous, apprehensive coil twisting his insides, Julian scowled at him and bit out impatiently, "Who is he going to use as the sacrifice, Santi?"

But Santi wouldn't answer, and Julian was only told not to reveal Ulrich Von Krauss' research to Dumbledore.

Julian hadn't needed the warning. He was no fool and he trusted Dumbledore as far as he could throw him. By then, he knew how Dumbledore's mind worked, and if the old man was told about the Vessel and Gellert's plans for it, Dumbledore would have no other choice but to act on the information, knowing that Gellert would realize who had leaked it to him.

It was the type of hard decisions that a wizard in Dumbledore's position had to make: to sacrifice an individual for the sake of the cause and common good. However, Julian wasn't going to give the old man any reasons to blow his cover and thus sacrifice him. Julian was determined to live as long as possible.

Nevertheless, in the following day, Julian discovered why Gellert had given him such information.

Grindelwald had indulgently smiled at him as Julian had no other choice but to voice admiration for Ulrich Von Krauss' discoveries and plans, making the Dark Lord believe that he was fascinated by the whole matter and was breathless with anticipation to see the Vessel finally being used to its full capacity.

"Now you know what to look for," Gellert had said to him, his hawk-like eyes glinting as Julian returned Von Krauss' research to him.

Indeed, given the lack of results in the torture of Nurmengard's Jewish prisoners for years, the Dark Lord had had no other choice but to entrust someone with the knowledge of what he was looking for. It was thus that Julian had been chosen and now knew that the mark he had to look for on the prisoners' bodies was actually the symbol of the Guardians that Ulrich Von Krauss had
depicted.

Julian had accepted his new mission with an enthusiastic nod of the head, yet his actions had been vastly different.

For two years, given that he was expected to break out the prisoners of Nurmengard, he had carefully established a friendship with the guards of the dungeons. He knew about their lives, he inquired after their children, spouses, girlfriends and boyfriends, he brought them bottles of Firewhiskey, played wizarding cards with them, drank and teased and taunted, and was soon welcomed and treated as one of the bunch.

However, cautious to maintain his cover, he had never interacted with the prisoners other than to torture them, keeping his abhorrence and distaste to himself.

That night, at last, he decided to make his first overture towards them, especially given what he knew about them from Von Krauss' research. A sense of admiration, duty, sorrow, and mercy was what compelled him to do it.

He slipped out of Gellert's bed and made his way to the dungeons. Greeting the guards, trading some jokes, and finally being patted on the back and told to "have fun with 'em", Julian acted as if he was going to have a night round of blood sport and was left to his own devices.

As soon as he entered the corridor holding the prison cells, he waved his wand and cast a silencing spell at the entrance.

The sight of the slumbering prisoners was horrific, the stench unbearable, the gloom, dankness, and grimness, suffocating. Yet, in the middle of the corridor, he sat on the cold stone floors, crossed-legged, and took out his beautiful, silver magical flute.

He heaved a deep breath, brought his lips to it, and played. He chose the most uplifting, hope-bringing, soothing, cradling song of his repertoire, his fingers flying across the keyholes, producing the trill of a phoenix to rise from his flute, heightened and meshed with the heavenly, enthralling voice of sirens.

He suddenly felt like one of those famous SongSorcerers who entranced their audience and moved them like the waves of a tide, as the prisoners stirred and their eyes cracked open.

It was a wondrous, powerful thing, Music, he had always known, but never had he felt more deeply touched as right then, as he saw life being suffused back into dull eyes that began to stare at him, as skeletal chests heaved and released deep sighs of peace, as dry lips cracked, bled, and stretched to form placid smiles on sunken, haunted faces.

It was a macabre spectacle, like gaunt puppets slowly coming to life, yet it made joy burst and course through his body.

In many faces, he saw awe, shock, or wonder, as they gazed at him. In others, he saw a glint of recognition or a sparkle of sudden frantic hope.

Some stirred and dragged themselves to be closer to him through the bars of their cells, their eyes riveted on him, drinking him in.

Yet when one of them seemed to be about to speak to him, he heard one other of them say sharply in a hoarse voice, "Not yet!"

Julian stilled and stopped playing at that, and attempted to find the one who had spoken, but none
of them said another word.

Frowning, he attempted to explain the situation. He revealed who he was and what his intention would soon be. They all gazed at him but otherwise remained silent.

Similar things happened when he went to the other levels of the dungeons – seven in total, when once there had only been three.

It wasn't until he reached the first subfloor, where the prisoners who had been there the longest were held, that something different happened.

Their reaction to his playing had been the same, however, when he started to explain who he was, he was shortly interrupted.

"We know who you are," said a voice coarse from lack of use, sounding like the crackling of old leaves. "You have tortured us before."

Quickly standing up to find the one who had spoken, Julian reached their cell, seeing an old man slowly making signs with his skeletal hands. A man in his forties was lying next to him, his gaze focused on the old man's hands, while two children, with bellies bulging out from starvation, were slumped against the man's sides, their drowsy, sunken eyes gazing back at Julian with reanimated curiosity.

"Yes, I did, because I had to," said Julian quickly, his tone of voice entreating. "But it's finally come the time for me to tell you that I mean no harm to you. I'm here to-"

"We know. He will bring pain and he will sing to you with the voice of hope, of sirens and phoenixes," said the man in his forties, as if repeating a long ago memorized litany, his gaze flying from the old man's gesturing hands to flicker from Julian's face to the flute. "You're the spy of the Companion of the Phoenix."

Julian stared at him, bemused. There was only one wizard he could possibly think of as being 'the companion of a phoenix', thus he nodded, as he said quietly, "Yes. I'm working for Albus Dumbledore. I'm here on his behest-"

"No. You're here because you're meant to be here," interjected the man hoarsely, his eyes leaving him to gaze again at the old man who had started making signs with his hands once more.

The man nodded, before he turned to Julian again. "I am Aaron." He slowly lifted a hand, his face straining with effort, as he gestured at the old man by his side. "He is my grandfather, Abel Boschkowitz. He does not speak. He tore out his own tongue a long time ago. I am his voice."

Julian stared at them, horrified. "Why did he tear out his-"

"He wants you to know," interrupted Aaron, looking weary, his voice starting to sound more haggard and hollow. "Observe."

It happened as if in slow motion. The old man slowly parted open the top of his prison garbs, showing a skeletal chest. Many of the other prisoners that had been intently gazing at them, clutching bars to slowly rise to their feet or dragging themselves across their cells to be at an angle in which to look at them, did the same. And as if one, following the old man's lead, they all touched their chests at the same time.

It was a breathtaking sight in the midst of the gloom and darkness of the dungeons. They shone. Many chests suddenly glowed with an intricate symbol spanning across the entirety of their torsos,
The light silvery white. "The Guardians," Julian breathed out in understanding as he recognized the symbol from Ulrich Von Krauss' depiction.

They were all touching their chests, but just some had the glowing mark. Nevertheless, there were more than he had dreamed possible. Those of the mark were the Guardians, the muggle Jews who kept the secret of their 'treasure', amongst other things. The rest who were touching their chests but didn't glow with the symbol could only be those the Guardians protected: Jewish wizards and witches.

Julian's gaze swiveled back to the mute old man. "And you're their leader."

Abel Boschkowitz nodded and started to make signs with his hands once more.

"My grandfather," began Aaron slowly, his eyes riveted on the old man's hands as he translated, "says you must come here, to play for us, for as many nights as you can. Only then, one day, we will speak to you again. For now, we must wait."

"Wait for what?" said Julian, frowning with uncertainty.

Aaron didn't reply. The gaunt man rested back against the wall of their cell and closed his eyes with exhaustion, as the two children by his side burrowed themselves against him, peering up at Julian as they blinked slowly.

Feeling half triumphant and excited, half bewildered and bemused, Julian left them in peace, though he did as asked and visited all of the floors as often as he could manage to slip from Gellert's bed in the middle of the night without being detected. From hence forward, he found a new purpose for his flute-playing: he gave them hope, he knew well.

However, it was when the Dark Lord finally made his move and conquered Austria that many things changed for Julian.

He had taken painstaking care to inform Dumbledore about all the details regarding Gellert's plots and strategies – and quite a brilliant plan they conformed.

The Nazis occupied the country under feeble excuses, the muggle soldiers' food supplies were doused with Pepper-Up and Strengthening Potions to make them indefatigable, and mind-altering potions were used on the water supplies of muggle cities so that when the citizens 'legally' voted for the annexation of their country to Germany, ninety-nine percent voted in favor.

Meanwhile, Gellert's Haupte Kommandanten had several Nazi Commanders under the Imperius Curse so that they led their divisions of soldiers to surround a building – which was, unbeknownst to them, the Austrian Ministry of Magic.

Sieged by muggle soldiers that vastly outnumbered them, the Ministry wizards knew they had limited options when Gellert and his followers broke into the Ministry. Most of them swiftly surrendered and Gellert was quick to kill the Minister.

Julian had been directly involved as well, since he was expected to prove his mettle in battle. He couldn't disappoint.

He had been given the leadership of the squad of followers that had to deal with the Auror Department – much to Dumbledore's satisfaction, since the old man had required one thing from him.
It had shocked and vastly disappointed him when Dumbledore had made clear in his missives that he wasn't going to appear on the day of the conquest in order to fight against Gellert. Dumbledore wasn't even going to send Order members to aid the Ministry. Instead, Dumbledore needed to allow it to happen, and required proof of how potions were being illegally used on muggles, on both citizens and the Nazi soldiers.

Julian understood Dumbledore's reasoning and tough decision—it was clear that the Austrian case was going to be used as an example, to convince as many as possible that Grindelwald was a Dark Lord—yet he had still hoped that Dumbledore would directly take a hand in matters and halt the Dark Lord once and for all. It would have ended Julian's turmoil.

But no, besides information and evidence, Dumbledore required one thing from Julian: that he saved the sister of Faustus Prewett, the Head of International Magical Cooperation in England, a wizard whom Dumbledore was subtly courting to his side.

Julian had been sent a picture of the woman and her husband, an Auror in the Austrian Ministry. If it didn't cast suspicion on him, Julian was to save them both. Yet, even then, he had known that if they died, it would serve Dumbledore's purpose as well. Faustus Prewett would not side with the Dark Lord if the man's actions cost him his sister.

It was thus, that when he fought against those Aurors who refused to surrender, he had personally killed Nettie Prewett's husband without a second thought, only showing what mercy he could by dispatching him quickly.

With skills he had displayed in the European Dueling Championship having been further honed with nearly three years of direct tutelage from the Dark Lord, Julian had performed excellently, being thoroughly unmatched.

Furthermore, as much as he despised torturing helpless prisoners, he had discovered that dueling against armed, qualified opponents in the heat of battle was a much different experience that he vastly enjoyed.

His squad and he were left to carry on the 'clean-up stage': that was, vanishing the dead bodies, and with information gathered from the Ministry's own personnel records, going to the homes of those Ministry officials who had fought against them and died. Their families would be taken as prisoners, so that those who surrendered and survived would know the punishment that befell the others, even if they could never speak of it.

Indeed, the rest of the followers went around forcing Unbreakable Vows from those who had surrendered, so that the truth of what had happened never came to light.

The world would believe that the Austrian Minister of Magic had died of some illness, that some Ministry workers had been sacked or willingly resigned for some reason or other, which would explain their absence, and the disappearance of their families would be left as a mystery for quite some time.

Moreover, presented with the fact that their muggle counterparts had voted to become annexed to Germany, the story was that the Austrian Ministry had decided to do likewise, in order to not have a fragmented country.

It was thus that Grindelwald went from being the German Minister of Magic to the Austrian as well, with conjoined title and position, by 'legal means'.

Grindelwald's intricate, masterful plan of conquest worked without a hitch, only Dumbledore
knowing the truth behind it due to Julian's information.

Hence, Julian ended his duty by visiting the last of the homes of those who had died at the Ministry. He hadn't expected what he had found in Nettie Prewett's home: she had been alone, yet her robes displayed such a huge, protruding belly that it was clear she was expecting a baby at any given moment.

Julian had been taken aback. Dumbledore certainly hadn't mentioned her circumstances; probably hadn't known himself. It was then when he had decided he would do his best to free her at some point. Nevertheless, at the time being, he could do nothing if not magically bind her and take her back to Nurmengard with all the rest.

If he had known beforehand what her fate would be, he would have killed her on the spot and considered it a great mercy.

However, he hadn't expected the next stage of Gellert's plan or what the festivities after the triumphant conquest of Austria would entail.

All of the Dark Lord's ranks gathered that night to celebrate the victory, at a vast clearing in the forest that surrounded Nurmengard Tower.

In impeccable uniform and robes, Julian stood amongst the Haupte Kommandanten, besides his father, while Gellert, in front of them, gave a grandiose speech that ensnared his ranks.

The captured families brought from Austria were grouped together, standing in the middle of the clearing, bounded and surrounded, their expressions terrified.

It was when he caught sight of the prisoners of the dungeons being led into the clearing, that Julian felt a frisson of apprehension and misgivings. The Jews were being formed into lines, facing the Austrian prisoners, as if to stand as witnesses.

Glancing around, Julian discovered that the ranks looked clueless, except the Haupte Kommandanten, who were staring forward with expressions of awe, wonder, and great anticipation.

Suddenly, a dome-like shield encompassed the Austrian families, and Gellert raised his wand in the air as he started enchanting words in a language wholly unknown to Julian.

Abruptly, he felt a powerful surge of magic bursting out from Gellert's wand -so obscure, potent, and dark as he had never felt before- and black rays shot out to strike each of the Austrian prisoners.

Julian turned to his father, bewildered. "What-"

"Necromancy," whispered Egon Erlichmann sharply, his gaze riveted on the spectacle. "The Dark Lord is creating a new breed of Inferi."

"Inferi!" choked out Julian through a suddenly dry throat, to then quickly grasp his father's arm with frantic urgency. "There's a pregnant woman among them, Father!

"Hush! It's of little importance-"

"She's a pureblood witch!" said Julian frenziedly.

Egon Erlichmann shot his son a harsh, reprimanding look, grabbing him tightly by the arm to keep
him in place. “The Dark Lord would not care about the matter. The process cannot be disrupted for such an insignificant issue.”

For a second, Julian stared at him with utter incredulity, before he violently shook him off and leapt towards Grindelwald, ignoring his father's shout.

Screams suddenly pierced the air and Julian skidded to a halt, right next to Gellert, his eyes wide as he fixedly stared forward. It was too late.

The Austrians' skins were rippling, their backs arching, their eyes suddenly becoming dull, empty and soulless, as teeth sharpened, fingernails became claws, bodies turned cadaveric, the flesh becoming rotten and greyish, and clumps of hair fell from heads.

There was no spark of intelligence in the new Inferi but some sort of primal, animalistic awareness, as they growled and savagely threw themselves against the dome-like shield of magic that kept them separated from Grindelwald's followers, as if they wanted nothing more than to attack and tear apart. They didn't move slowly, as Julian had read that Inferi did, but with beastly strength and quickness.

With a sense of otherworldly, nightmarish detachment from reality, he saw how the followers who had been guarding the Jews selected some of them. He even caught sight of Abel and Aaron Boschkowitz, with the little boy and girl he had assumed were Aaron's children. They weren't grabbed, but seven others were, to be dragged and then unceremoniously thrown through the dome-like magical shield that caged the Inferi.

The Inferi bore down on them like a pack of ravenous animals, clawing, tearing apart, chewing, killing, growling and feasting, whilst the guards held back the other Jews, some of whom were crying out in shock and horror.

Suddenly, a piercing shriek resounded across the clearing. It wasn't a scream, but a hollow, hair-splitting, inhuman sound. It came from the Inferi who had once been Nettie Prewett. Robes that had become slashed and torn as she had fought with the others of her kind to reach the humans that had been served as food, now revealed an immense greyish belly that was rippling as she arched on the ground while the sound kept coming from her throat.

Something was clawing its way out from her, and in the next instant, it tore out from her belly and broke free. Several of Grindelwald's followers loudly gasped. It was a monster of a baby, with claws, jagged teeth, and rotten flesh. It crawled and then sped forward as fast as a flash, leaving mother behind to attack one of the corpses and sink its teeth to devour with savage hunger.

The once Nettie Prewett was soon on its feet again, belly ravaged, nothing but flaps of skin and hanging entrails, as it showed no awareness of its baby and just turned around to leap at another corpse.

The sight of it all was too much. Julian became dizzy, faint, and disoriented. He suddenly swayed where he stood and then landed on hands and knees, hacking, crying and retching, and he couldn't stop.

The horror of it, the piercing, gut-wrenching guilt and helplessness he felt, the very nightmarish, gruesome images, were forever branded in his skull.

"Get up!" he heard his father's voice say furiously, as a boot kicked one of his legs. "You're embarrassing the family – get a hold of yourself!"
"Julian is not a hardened follower as you are, Egon," said a voice in chiding tones. "You should show some understanding and compassion to your son."

Suddenly, he felt several spells cast on him, and Julian's mouth became freshened and his stomach settled itself.

Still on hands and knees, he glanced up through blurry, watery eyes to see Gellert gazing at him with a sympathetic expression on his face.

The Dark Lord offered him a hand, and Julian hesitantly took it. He was helped up and then taken by the elbow, Gellert holding him up in a supportive way as he glanced at the monstrous, baby-like creature that kept feasting.

"A pureblood baby, from what I overheard you say to your father," said Grindelwald, a moue of discontent twisting his lips. "A pity."

With a flick of his wand, the Dark Lord cast the Killing Curse at it, and Julian quickly turned his face away from the sight, to then stare at the wizard.

"The road to triumph is not an easy one," said Grindelwald, gesturing at the Inferi. "But there is no dishonor in feeling revulsion." Casting a reprimanding, dark look at Egon Erlichmann, he then gazed back at Julian, his expression softening. "With time, you'll become hardened to such unpalatable sights." His voice lowered to a mere, intimate murmur, as he added, "Let me comfort you tonight, mein Edelstein. You deserve as much. I've been told you dueled superbly in the Ministry."

Without waiting for a reply, Julian was led away by Grindelwald after the wizard gave some curt, short instructions to his ranks regarding the Inferi, who were to be kept in a section of the forest, for later use.

Later that night, when Julian slipped from Gellert's bed and escaped to his own quarters, as he turned on the shower, he didn't rub himself clean and raw as he once did during the first months of torment and intimacy with Gellert.

Instead, as warm water trickled down his back, he softly touched love-bites, sighing and closing his eyes, remembering the sweet, soothing nothings whispered into his ears, the comforting arms gently embracing him, the tender caresses and touches, the slow love-making as he had held unto Gellert as if he was a lifeline.

He didn't react when he felt a presence in his bathroom and the press of eyes gazing at him.

"I'm losing myself," Julian muttered as he rested his forehead against the tiles. And he finally admitted to himself and said out loud the feelings that had been warring within him, "Despite everything, even what happened tonight, I'm starting to love him."

"There's no happy ending possible for you and Grindelwald."

Julian opened his eyes, and through the sheet of pouring water, he shot Santi a dour look. "I know that. It's just that- " He swallowed thickly, before he attempted to speak again, his voice a dejected whisper, "I don't know if I can do it anymore. To hurt someone I care about. To betray him-"

"You are a spy," pointed out Santi coolly. "To betray is what you do. You've known that from the start."

With all sense of modesty around Santi having been lost a long time ago, Julian angrily turned off
the water and stepped out, trickles of drops trailing down his naked body as he glared and remarked tartly, "You're a callous bastard when you speak so bluntly."

"I've never lied to you." Santi quirked an eyebrow at him. "I'm not going to start now in order to soothe your feelings."

Julian scowled sourly as he wrapped a towel around his waist, making way to his bedroom as Santi floated and trailed after him.

"You have to distance yourself from him, in your mind."

At that, Julian shot him an incredulous look as he plopped down on his bed. Letting out a humorless bark of laughter he then said acidly, "And pray tell, how do I do that?"

Santi gazed at him with a pensive, considering expression on his face, which soon turned calculating, before he said slowly, "Perhaps I should reveal to you that you'll know love with someone else, before you die. Perhaps knowing that helps?"

Taken aback, Julian stared at him. "What on earth do you mean?"

"She'll be of much help to you," said Santi, now smiling warmly. "She'll give you what you need, and love you greatly." He paused, to then add hesitantly, "And you'll come to love her too, in a strange sort of way, I believe."

"She?" Julian gaped at him before he scoffed. "In case you hadn't noticed by now, my inclinations don't lean towards the female persuasion."

Unconcernedly shrugging his shoulders, Santi took a seat at an armchair as he made his body turn solid. "It will not matter. You'll be drawn to her. You'll meet her again soon."

"Again? So I already know her?" Julian deeply frowned at him, unable to imagine whom it could possibly be. Crossing paths with one of the girls from Beauxbatons didn't seem likely.

Casting such thoughts aside, Julian shook his head disparagingly as he groused curtly, "I don't want a relationship with anyone else. I betrayed Laurent by being with Gellert. And now you're telling me I'll betray Gellert by being with a witch on the side? No."

"It doesn't matter what you say," remarked Santi contently. "It will happen all the same. She'll be important." His lips quirked upwards as he pinned Julian with a fixed stare. "Harry will know about you through her."


"Yes," replied Santi placidly.

Julian felt an odd sense of joy at the idea, his expression relaxing as his lips tilted into a soft smile.

Santi gazed at him knowingly, looking satisfied with himself.

After that, as impossible and troubling as thoughts about having a secret affair with a witch were, Julian didn't press to know more about the matter.

It hadn't served the purpose Santi had surely intended. No sense of detachment grew in him after knowing Gellert wouldn't be his last lover; that apparently he would love someone else, that hopefully by then, feelings for Gellert would not be an issue, since he couldn't afford it.
On the opposite, it distressed him. Betraying the ones he loved by being with others was a horrible sensation.

Even after all his time with Gellert, in some guarded corner of his heart he still held his love for Laurent, untouched and untainted, guarded zealously as a precious thing, and yet it would still conflict him.

Much to Santi's aggravation, Julian had not cut ties with Laurent as he had once promised. He still received letters weekly, coveting and cherishing every last word from Laurent, whilst replying and playing along, writing about their plans for the future.

Such a connection had been his lifeline in the first six months of intimacy with Gellert when he had been Dumbledore's replacement and a whipping boy in bed. And then, even after the discovery of The Globe, when he had known there was no hope left for him, he had still written back to Laurent, willfully deluding them both, making plans like glorious dreams of love and freedom that would never come to happen.

Santi said he was selfish and cruel by stringing Laurent along and giving him hope.

But Julian simply couldn't let go. It sustained him, the lies he wrote and the fantasy world they created.
Part I: Chapter 24

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AN:

Hmm, well, I’ve realized that there isn't much I can answer to questions in reviews without spoiling the plot. So you'll just have to be patient and see your questions answered in future chapters.

Now, as promised, here's the fast update. This chappie starts with a Julian part, but then it's back to Hogwarts.

Enjoy and let me know what you think!

Part I: Chapter 24

After Julian's performance and success in the Austrian Ministry -just like how he had transitioned from being the Dark Lord's boy-toy, to his lover, and then his favorite- he indisputably became Grindelwald's protégé, being directly involved in planning the conquest of Checoslovakia.

Though, many of those plans had already been developed by Grindelwald some time ago, some of which Julian thoroughly despised.

It was when he had nearly spent three years as Gellert's follower that the wizard chose to share with him one of Konrad Von Krauss' reports.

Up until then, he had only known that Konrad had been sent to England a few days before Julian himself had been inducted into the ranks. Not having Konrad around had been a vast relief, given that the Erlichmanns and Von Krausses were feuding rivals since time immemorial.

As the date approached in which Konrad would return to Germany, Grindelwald had handed Julian a scroll of parchment sent by his Right Hand, chortling as if he had just read the funniest of jokes.

Julian hadn't been able to make much sense of the information. All Konrad wrote about was 'the Parselmouth boys': how he had legitimimized the caregiver of a muggle orphanage called St. Jerome's, a girl who was closest to 'the boys'—some muggle woman by the name of Alice Jones—and he was sending those memories in flasks; how he had constructed a muggle identity as the long-lost son of some muggle Lord, and was thus known as Alistair Ashcroft.

How with that identity he had procured a job in the Foreign Office to thus leak more information to an old muggle politician by the name of Winston Churchill, and had also formed an acquaintance with Sarah Jones, sister of the Alice woman, thus creating an indirect link to 'the boys', to be used when and if the Dark Lord decided—for what purpose, it didn't say.

And finally, how he had at last found the underground group of Communists that were causing so much trouble in muggle circles and killed the leader, noting that a man named Robert Hutchins was part of the group, coincidentally linked to 'the boys' because he was courting the Alice Jones
woman.

Gellert crowed with laughter. "Isn't it just the most marvelous of ideas, that tidbit about the camps?"

"Hmm?" Julian said distractedly, staring at the scroll, still stuck with the first baffling fact, if Konrad's information was to be believed. He slowly shook his head and peered up at the Dark Lord, as he breathed out disbelievingly, "Parselmouths, truly? In this day and age? Who are they?"

"Never mind about that," retorted Gellert curtly, waving a hand dismissively before his hazel eyes glinted with amusement and he chortled loudly. "What do you say to the part about the Communists, mein Edelstein?"

Julian blinked in puzzlement before he read that part again. The leader Konrad had killed had been a wizard, a halfblood in fact: the father a muggle, the mother a witch and German Jew who had apparently disappeared.

The man had escaped from persecution and landed in England with his own evidence and ideas of what was happening to the Jews in Germany. Clearly, the halfblood had known that Jews were 'disappearing' because Grindelwald was capturing and imprisoning them in Nurmengard. Yet the halfblood couldn't say such to the group of muggle Communists he had formed. Apparently, he told them Jews were being carted off to mysterious camps.

It seemed to be the explanation that had taken hold and spread, being believed by some few muggles—mostly Communists and Jews, their relatives and acquaintances, that knew nothing of the Wizarding World, nor about the Guardians, evidently— but who knew Jews were 'disappearing'.

"Camps?" finally echoed Julian, disconcerted.

"Yes, camps," said Gellert, a crooked grin on his face. "Muggles like to throw each other in these so-called labor camps." He sighed wistfully. "I remember, long ago, that Ulrich told me how camps have been used throughout muggle history. It's hardly an original idea." His hazel eyes glinted as he added with amusement, "Yet, after the annexation of Austria, my puppet and his lackeys are beginning to wonder what to do with the Jews. Wouldn't you say that the idea of camps presents a simple solution?" He chortled. "Oh, the irony!"

Julian could certainly see the horrid irony of the halfblood's lies about camps becoming true, but he still found the concept a bit flummoxing.

"When Konrad comes back, it will be his task to work on the matter," decided Gellert in a positively cheerful tone.

Some months later, Konrad Von Krauss did come back, and it was the day when Santi's prophetic statement of "you'll find the answers to all your questions in Nurmengard" began to come true.

Gellert had vanished into Anacleto Armonios' quarters, giving Julian precise instructions to guard the door and not let anyone disturb them. Apparently, whatever Armonios had been working on had finally bore some fruits and he was prepared to earn his keep by dazzling Gellert with his brilliance.

Julian had been standing in the corridor, twitching with curiosity, when he had seen a tall, imposing man with icy blue eyes and strictly-cropped ashy blonde hair, clicking his boots on the stone floors as he made his way towards Julian's post.

With eyes widening for a fraction of a second, Julian recognized the wizard immediately.
Konrad Von Krauss' lips flattened into a severe line full of distaste as he caught sight of Julian, his icy eyes narrowing as he scrutinized him. Even though feeling a frisson of apprehension and wariness, Julian put up with the inspection with a calm expression on his face.

"Stand aside, boy," Konrad commanded curtly as soon as he reached him.

"The Dark Lord asked not to be disturbed," Julian said softly, showing nothing but meek politeness.

"He'll want to see me," retorted Konrad briskly, piercing him with a chilling stare.

"As you wish," said Julian pleasantly, bowing low as he took a step away from the door he had been guarding.

Without a second glance at him, as if Julian was too lowly to be worthy of further notice, Konrad entered the rooms.

A click, and the sound of wards securing the quarters once more, made it evident to Julian that the conversation to be held had to be a very important one. Having been intrigued by Anacleto Armonios' presence in Nurmengard for too long a time, he finally decided to take action.

Using the set of spells taught to him by Dumbledore in order to eavesdrop through wards without being detected, Julian was able to hear every astonishing, flabbergasting, mind-boggling word spoken.

And suddenly, everything he had ever known about Santi throughout his entire life, all the mysteries, all the unexplainable facts, and so much more, abruptly fell into place like the pieces of some gigantic puzzle that had baffled him for a long time. It was as if a blind had been ripped from his eyes and everything became bright and clear; everything finally made sense.

He was breathless with the revelations, and that night, as much as sex with Gellert had become a wondrous, fabulous experience, he had faked a stomachache and thus been dismissed from his duties as a lover.

Pacing in his rooms, Julian had awaited for Santi, because Santi would appear, because Santi would know what happened that day. It had been long anticipated and planned, Julian was able to realize.

And then, Santi shimmered into existence and Julian swirled around, staring at him, with eyes filled with wonder and awe.

"I finally know who you are," he breathed out, his mind still a whirlwind of thoughts, but it was a cohesive one.

He brought up a hand towards Santi, and the man seemed to realize what Julian needed and became solid just as Julian's fingers trailed down Santi's cheek, mesmerized as he observed Santi's naturally tanned skin that faintly glowed with golden specks, the curly dark hair and handsome face, the milky eyes that swirled with sparks, like stars, constellations and nebulas floating across the sheer irises. Were they really, or just a reflection of something within?

"Santiago Torres," said Julian at last in a soft, fascinated murmur. "The young, brilliant Spanish Unspeakable who discovered the clams in Atlantis and was directly affected by their Sands of Time, who vanished to never be seen or heard from again. Anacleto Armonios was your boss, the one ultimately responsible for what happened to you – that's why you despise him."
Mutely, Santi merely nodded, and Julian let out a whoop of victorious joy as so many of his speculations were confirmed.

With sky blue eyes shining, Julian continued excitedly, "I know who our Harry is as well. The anchor, the soul, the time-traveler Anacleto spoke about. The baby that Gellert suggested. He told Anacleto that the Sands of Time had to be directly applied to the baby."

He paused and slowly shook his head in wonder, as he added in a whisper, "And it has already happened. I'm living in the secondary timeline."

Startled, Santi stared at him. "How did you come to that realization?"

Julian scoffed and replied tartly, "It wasn't easy to wrap my mind around such revelation, or to accept it as true, but it was evident because Gellert knew how the practical aspects had to work, of something that's supposedly impossible. He knew more than Anacleto himself, in that respect!" He shook his head, before he frowned and demanded, "Did Sybilla Spyros tell him about it, or did she leave the knowledge in the memories she allowed him to take from her?"

"She didn't tell him about that," replied Santi quietly. "Grindelwald saw himself in one memory of her visions, throwing Sands of Time on a baby and enchanting a spell."

Julian nodded, before he frowned at him in deep pensiveness, his voice slow as thoughts unraveled into words, "I always thought you found me first, and then spent your life with me as I grew up, whilst you waited to find some boy called Harry you greatly cared about. But it was the other way around, wasn't it?" He gazed at him searchingly. "You found him first. When did it happen?"

"A few months from now. This November."

With his suspicions confirmed, Julian chuckled wryly under his breath. "Of course, Time isn't linear to you as it is for the rest of us..."

He trailed off and then murmured quietly, "All the things about past and future that you knew and I never could explain why, other than to think you were a Seer." He shot him a piercing look. "And you often said you were one of a kind. You told Sybilla Spyros that the Centaurs called you The Fates. It's rather accurate, isn't it? You can jump through Time with the natural ease of someone swimming through tides."

"Something like that," said Santi pleasantly, his lips quirking upwards.

"In what century were you living in when you felt it?" inquired Julian, fixedly staring at him. "Because you felt it somehow, didn't you, when a baby was affected by the Sands of Time, as you were. Was it a pull, a connection, a sudden awareness of some sort?" He tilted his head to a side, his gaze riveted on Santi. "You felt there was suddenly someone like you out there and you searched for him. For years, centuries, eons?"

Before Santi had a chance to reply, Julian shook his head at himself, as he amended, "No. You cannot really tell, can you? How can you possibly measure Time when it's not linear to you."

He blinked at him. "If I asked for how long you've existed you wouldn't be able to answer, would you? Time can be an eternity or the blink of an eye for you."

"True," said Santi calmly.

Frowning, Julian continued, "You looked for him, in all the possible timelines he could have landed in, and you found him in this one, some months from now. And then you traveled to the past of this timeline and found me." He skewered him with a hard gaze. "The decisions you've made me take-"
He rose up a hand as soon as Santi opened his mouth, looking hurt. "No, I made them willingly. I know. My point is that the paths I've taken are serving as a catalyst, for things to go your way. To shape this timeline as you need it to be. Your reasons and motives are not the same, but you, like Gellert, want this secondary timeline to be the one which survives. In your case, it's because you want Harry and he's here."

Julian paused as a sudden spark of understanding lightened in his mind. He felt grimness and anger in Harry's behalf, yet sorrow, sympathy, and pity for the being before him.

"You could spare him from it," he murmured quietly. "You could travel to the future and prevent Gellert from using the Sands of Time on Harry and let him have a normal life. But you won't, because you've always been lonely."

Santi narrowed his milky eyes at him, clearly not caring for his words, but Julian trudged on firmly, "Unlike other magical creatures that are considered 'immortal' because they live for millennia, your existence is unlimited and there isn't anyone else like you - no one that could be a companion. Anyone 'normal' you could possibly love and care about would eventually die." He skewered him with a demanding gaze. "But Harry won't? Will he become what you are? How does it work, how long will it take?"

"I don't know," admitted Santi reluctantly. "The transformations on me caused by the Sands of Time weren't instantaneous. They occurred erratically. Thus, I have no way of predicting how it will work in Harry's case or even if he'll fully become what I am."

"But he already has an ability that was not his by inherent nature," interjected Julian thoughtfully. "You told me that, once, regarding his magic-sensitivity. So, do the Sands of Time affect the body-"

"The soul. They transform the soul," retorted Santi shortly. "And the changes will be reflected in the magical core and body that his soul is in – that's what will grant him abilities as time passes, but I cannot predict which or when."

"I see," mumbled Julian, his eyes slightly widening with wonderment. In the next instant, he frowned deeply. "I don't understand one thing. Gellert said the time-traveler had to die before he was born in the future, because how can he be born with the same soul if his time-traveler self already has it? Doesn't it mean that Harry will be trapped in a loop?"

"No," said Santi with a heavy sigh. "There'll be no loop because the timelines will not go on coexisting beyond the day in which Harry is made to time-travel. Only the so-called secondary timeline will remain after that."

Julian frowned, not really understanding the explanation. He shook his head, before he said insistently, scowling at him, "Be that as it may, it still means that Gellert is planning on killing Harry before he's born in the future. How can you have him as a companion if he's going to die?"

"His soul won't," replied Santi wearily, not looking as if he enjoyed the topic of conversation. His lips twisted in a pained moue. "It will be preserved in a locket and transferred into another body, a baby's. He'll be reborn, in a manner of speaking."

"Doesn't sound too good," muttered Julian, glaring and feeling a mite indignant.

Santi clenched his teeth as he gritted out, "I'm not going to discuss this further with you. It is what it is."

As if to make his point, he vanished from sight without another word and Julian was left blinking
at empty space. It was certainly a touchy subject.

It was several days before Santi returned, and as soon as he made an appearance in Julian's chambers, he was glowered at.

"Where in Merlin's beard have you been?" snapped Julian crossly. "Did you go traipsing into the future to see how Harry will turn out?"

Santi's eyebrows shot upwards. "What's the matter with you?" His lips then quirked upwards as he tutted tauntingly, clearly in a cheery disposition, "And using light wizarding expressions in a tower full of dark wizards isn't the wisest of choices."

Utterly ignoring Santi's humorous quips, in no mood for them, Julian pointed a finger at the book lying on his desk, as he said irritably, "That's what's the matter with me."

Just the day before, Gellert had said to him with a wry chuckle, "He abhors the 'ghastly, uncivilized, horrid little country', as he calls it. I cannot send Konrad back to England so soon, he would never forgive me. Thus, I'm giving this mission to you, mein Edelstein."

Julian had been given a portkey, instructions, and a very familiar book – 'Obscure Dark Lords and their Inventions'.

"For some reason, Gellert is interested in two Parselmouth boys that live in some muggle orphanage," said Julian frowning as his voice then turned puzzled. "I would understand it if the boys could actually be Parselmouths, but I don't see how they can. A Parselmouth hasn't been born in India in centuries and the only other bloodline with the trait was Salazar Slytherin's, and everyone knows it died off ages ago. It's clear that Konrad must have made a mistake..."

He trailed off, his brows furrowing, before he grabbed the book and flipped through it, until he pointed a finger at the first page of a chapter. "Gellert wants one of those boys to read part of this chapter. That's all he said. He gave me a portkey that will take me to the orphanage, along with the boy's name and one of Konrad's pensieve memories. So I'll know what the boy looks like-"

It was then that Santi broke into loud guffaws, heaving and grabbing his midriff as he bent forward and kept laughing.

At first bewildered, Julian stared at him, startled. When his life-long companion just kept chortling, apparently at his expense, he scowled at the man, highly annoyed.

"What's so amusing?" he snapped, irked.

"You still haven't figured it out, eh?" said Santi with a last chuckle. "Well, behoove me if I spoiled the surprise."

"What surprise?" said Julian, thoroughly disconcerted.

Ignoring the question, Santi glanced at the portkey lying on the desk. "When will it activate?"

"In fifteen minutes," replied Julian, still frowning bemusedly.

Santi shot him a wide, pearly-white grin. "I came just in time, then. I'll come along with you."

"If you wish," said Julian, eyeing him suspiciously. "What aren't you telling me?"

"You'll soon see," quipped Santi cheerfully.
Julian scowled, before he shook his head and said gravely, "I don't know if I'll carry out this mission." He gestured at the book, frowning. "That chapter regards the Dark Lord Horkos and the artifact he created." His voice turned anxious, as he added, "Why would Gellert want a magical child to know about Horcruxes? I don't like it one bit."

Indeed, when Gellert had given him his mission, he had instantly recognized the book as the one in which he had found the information regarding The Globe. It was then, also, when he suddenly understood why Dumbledore had asked him if he believed that Grindelwald might have created any of the other artifacts mentioned in the tome.

He could understand how it could greatly worry Dumbledore if Gellert had made a Horcrux, but really, the whole notion was rather ridiculous. Grindelwald had never given any indication that he was remotely interested in immortality, and if he did, the wizard would certainly come up with some other way.

Tearing out a piece of one's soul to hide it in an object that could be easily destroyed wasn't the brightest of ideas. Yet, to some ignorant little boy who knew no better, it might. And Julian certainly didn't want to be the one responsible for some innocent boy doing such a horrid thing to himself.

"Do proceed with the mission," said Santi gravely. "Believe me, it's for the best."

Yanked from his musings, Julian glanced at him, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I'll explain soon," said Santi, before his lips quirked in amusement as his milky eyes trailed over Julian. "You are going to change, aren't you?"

Julian's lips twisted with distaste as he glanced down at himself.

Earlier in the day he had accompanied Gellert to a meeting in the Reichstag, and he had dressed to play the part, since when he had become Gellert's personal secretary to the eyes of the muggles, they had demanded that he became a member of one their organizations, giving proof that he was a 'pure Aryan'.

Julian had felt quite insulted and indignant at the request. The Erlichmanns –just like the Von Krausses, before Konrad had been made to marry the Russian Ludmilla– had always been very proud that they were not only purebloods that could be traced back to Roman Times, but also of pure German stock.

After being educated in Beauxbatons, Julian didn't care much about such matters. But when a bunch of pathetic muggles who were being led by the nose dared to question his blood purity, it did irk him.

Gellert had crowed with laughter, finding it vastly amusing. The Dark Lord had certainly had a blast forging papers for Julian, giving him a purely muggle ancestry.

It was thus that he was still wearing the SS Nazi uniform, with high black leather boots, puffed black pants, stiff uniformed black jacket with lapels displaying the silver stripes, stars, and the SS insignia that looked like two lightning bolts, along with the military-style peaked cap, red armband with the swastika cross, and belt with the Meine Ehre heißt Treue –'My honor is loyalty'- motto on the buckle.

"Or are you planning on giving the Brits a nasty fright at the mere sight of you?" said Santi with a chortle.
"You have a point," said Julian wryly.

In no time, he changed into a plain wizarding attire that he then proceeded to transfigure into cotton shirt, wool vest, and simple muggle worker-class pants, casting glamours on his features, giving him a forgettable, common face.

Soon, with book in hand, they were both taking the portkey to be swept away.

The London muggle neighborhood didn't impress Julian much. In fact, it was quite ghastly.

From Konrad, he knew that Dumbledore had already paid the 'Parselmouth boys' a visit. Thus, they would need to go to Diagon Alley at some point if they were starting Hogwarts in September. It would be the best opportunity in which to do it, and thankfully, Julian knew his way around wizarding England, having traveled to the country with his parents.

The inconvenience was that he had no way of knowing when the boys would go. So he prepared himself for a stake out that could last days or even weeks.

He chose an expanse of wall between two houses across the street from the orphanage and cast a Muggle-Repelling Charm on a two-square-meter area, in which he conjured a plush, comfortable sofa and proceeded to Disillusion it and himself.

Santi shot him an incredulous look. "You aren't planning that we spend the night here in the middle of a street, are you?"

"I have little choice," replied Julian, not too thrilled with the idea himself. "And it might be several nights, in fact."

He could see a muggle pub down the street. It would have to do for when he needed a restroom and required some sustenance, though he knew well that English food and cuisine was quite horrid. No, he wasn't looking forward to the experience.

"It won't, thankfully," muttered Santi under his breath, as he took a seat on the sofa.

"Hmm?" said Julian distractedly, turning his head around to face him again.

It was quite a tedious night, since Santi refused to say anything about the Parselmouth boys, nothing stirred in the orphanage, and muggle passersby were very boring to observe. So Julian could only entertain himself with a book he had already read several times and ended up dozing off and quickly falling asleep.

The following morning he was awakened by a cacophony of excited, shouting voices, travel trunks being dragged, and a large motorwagon blaring its horn.

"What's happening?" said Julian worriedly as he watched the activity coming from the orphanage and spilling into the street, making him instantly rise to his feet, alert.

Santi didn't answer him, since he was observing the proceedings with an amused look on his face.

The driver of the motorwagon, a rather handsome muggle, was helping two women to load trunks to the vehicle, whilst a flock of girls and boys of all ages were running in and out of the house, carrying things with them, yapping, shouting, and jumping with joy and anticipation.

It was quite a disorderly chaos, though the strictest looking of the women made short work of it and soon had the children inside the motorwagon, still and silent, though their faces still expressed
their happiness.

Clearly they were having a trip of some sort, and Julian could only exhale with relief when he didn't catch sight of the face he had seen in Konrad Von Krauss' memory.

When they all seemed about to leave, the handsome muggle halted before opening the driver's door of the muggle contraption, as he took a backward look at his passengers and frowned. "Where are the boys, Alice?"

"Harry has a terrible stomach ache, poor dear," replied a rather pretty young woman who was seated at the front of the vehicle, besides the strict-looking one. "Tom is staying with him and Magda will watch over them."

"Old John will be disappointed," remarked the muggle man, not looking too happy himself as he entered the motorwagon and took the driver's seat. "He rather enjoys Harry's company."

"I know, Robert," said the woman sympathetically. "But he'll see him next year."

Having heard the names, Julian stared. Robert and Alice could only be the Robert Hutchins and Alice Jones of Konrad's report. 'Tom', since Julian hadn't seen the boy amongst the others, clearly was Tom Riddle, the target of his mission. But the other name…

As he watched the motorwagon drive away, Julian spun around, seething and furious, and spat, "Our Harry is here? You let him be raised in a muggle orphanage?"

Santi quirked an eyebrow at him, and retorted coolly, "Surely you must have realized. You were there when Sybilla said-"

"I didn't make the connection until now!" snapped Julian angrily. "I remember she said that the boy was already in the orphanage – but I didn't think she meant a muggle one!"

"How many wizarding orphanages do you know of?" demanded Santi pointedly.

"I've never stopped to consider the matter," bit out Julian crossly. "I assumed he was in a magical one! I assumed there had to be something of the sort here in England."

"The location alone of their flames in The Globe should have made you realize that Harry was in a muggle neighborhood-"

"What?" snapped Julian, frowning. "Their flames? You mean Harry's flame in The Globe?" He shook his head. "How was I supposed to know-"

"Grindelwald looks at their flames often," interjected Santi impatiently. "Surely that made you see their flames as well-"

"I never look," interrupted Julian in a whisper, before he lifted his head up to glower at him, his voice gaining force, "When I'm in Gellert's office, I never look at it. I don't like the reminder of what it means for me."

Santi snapped his mouth shut at that, and looked at him with sympathy and compassion, as he said quietly, "I understand."

Julian heaved a deep breath, before he frowned and gestured briskly at the shabby orphanage. "How could you have let him be raised by muggles? In such environment! To not know he's a wizard, to be surely confused and –"
"I hardly had anything to do with it," said Santi stiffly, a hard expression on his face. "You have your beloved Gellert to thank for that."

Julian frowned, before he narrowed his eyes and demanded curtly, "Explain yourself."

"What do you think the incantation Grindelwald used when he doused Harry with the Sands of Time was for?" said Santi tiredly. "It served to guide and control the time-traveling. To fix the number of years, months, days, down to the last hour, that Harry was to travel into the past. And to fix the precise location in which he had to appear." He pointed a finger at the doorstep of the orphanage. "Right there."

Julian glanced at the site, before he shook his head confusedly. "I don't understand. Why did Gellert want Harry to be in this orphanage?"

"Because here's where Tom Riddle was born," replied Santi calmly, "and raised."

"What does the object of my mission have to do with anything?" said Julian exasperatedly. "He's just some muggleborn-"

"He's not."

Julian shot him a disbelieving glance and said matter-of-factly, "If he was born in a muggle orphanage, he can only be a muggleborn. It's the only explanation possible."

"The story of how it came to happen matters little," interjected Santi dismissively. "Just know that Gellert wanted them to be raised together, and so they were, since they were told by the caregivers that they're fraternal twins." He paused, before he added musingly, "Though I gather that Tom must have found out the truth by now."

Julian stared at him, utterly befuddled. But before he had the chance to ask another question, the front door of the orphanage was opened, capturing his attention. He instantly recognized the first boy that surreptitiously slipped out into the street. He looked exactly the same as in Konrad's memory: quite a handsome boy of aristocratic features, silky black hair perfectly combed and neatly arranged, dark blue eyes that looked too serious, and with a solemn, adult-like demeanor, though in this instance, he wore an expression of annoyance, as if the boy regretted not being someplace else.

The other boy that came barreling right behind him, bubbling with excitement, was much different, and Julian felt all air leaving his lungs in a whoosh of exhalation. He couldn't peel his eyes away. All his life he had heard about this boy, and dreamed and imagined what he would look like. It felt surreal now that he finally saw the boy in the flesh. Julian drank him in, noticing that Santi's description had been sorely lacking. There was the lightning bolt-shaped scar on the forehead, and the green eyes, yet he hadn't expected their beautiful shape and shade, nor the rather hideous, rounded eyeglasses that covered them.

The little boy was very good-looking, but what drew the eye the most was the good-natured, cheerful, and carefree air about him, and the mischievous, impish grin on his face, as if he had just gotten his own way. All in all, it made him look rather adorable.

"Eins," Julian finally breathed out, as he kept staring. And at his own words, he suddenly felt a powerful surge of apprehension, grief, and regret, along with an abrupt constriction on his chest.
"One?"

Julian peeled his gaze away from Harry and glanced back at Santi. "Yes, one." He sighed deeply, before he added in a low murmur, "When I was eight years old, you told me I would never come to know Harry, but that I would see him twice - just twice. I never forgot." His gaze swiveled back to the boy that was making his way down the street. "This is one. The first time. And there will only be one other. My time is running short."

Santi said nothing to that, and Julian was grateful for it.

Without another word, he was quick to vanish the disillusioned and conjured sofa, and dispel the Muggle-Repelling Charm. With a last flick of his wand, he cancelled the disillusion on himself and quickly proceeded to follow the boys with book in hand, maintaining the required distance as to not be noticed.

When the two boys hopped into the monstrosity that muggle Londoners seemed so fond of, Julian ripped a couple of hairs from his head and quickly transfigured them into pennies, thus paying his fare and climbing into the double-decker bus.

He followed them all through their meanderings, his eyes fixed on Harry, until they discovered the Leaky Cauldron and finally entered Diagon Alley. There, Julian instantly transfigured back his clothes into plain robes, though he kept the glamours on his face.

It was Harry's expressions that he enjoyed the most, as the boy's green eyes widened and sparkled with awed fascination and wonder, keeping a constant jubilant chatter, as his gaze snapped from window display to window display.

"He reminds me of you at that age," said Santi softly, his expression wistful while he glided along Julian's side as they both trailed after the boys.

At that, Julian shot him a wry look. "When I was innocent, unspoiled, and untainted, you mean?"

"Yes," replied Santi bluntly, yet with a hint of remorse in his voice.

"And for how long will he remain thus, do you think?" retorted Julian, feeling a frisson of sadness. He sighed heavily. "It's not right." He briefly glanced at Santi as he added quietly, "I understand your reasons for letting Gellert use the Sands of Time on him and thus make him his tool, but it's still not right."

They fell silent after that, both simply gazing at Harry and basking in the boy's reactions as he discovered the Magical World.

It was when the boys entered Flourish and Blott's that Julian knew it was the perfect opportunity to execute his mission. However, with book in hand, he hesitated.

"You must do it," said Santi sharply, as they stood at one side of the entrance of the store.

Julian clenched his jaw and glowered at him. "To let an innocent boy read such dangerous information?"

"Tom Riddle doesn't have an innocent bone in his body," scoffed out Santi tartly.

Julian frowned at that, before he glanced at the aforementioned boy through the windows of the shop, who was absorbed with some book whilst Harry kept glancing outside, clearly longing to explore all the other stores.
"I don't know what kind of person he is," said Julian shortly, glancing back at Santi. "But he's still just a child, and the information Gellert wants him to read is extremely harmful if employed."

Santi clucked his tongue with dissatisfaction, before he eyed Julian with a considering expression on his face. "You once asked me what Grindelwald had seen in Sybilla Spyros' memories."

"I know he saw himself using the Sands of Time on –"

"Yes," interrupted Santi quickly, "but before finding that memory, he had spent many years studying the innumerable others. There were two, in particular, which helped him understand what it all meant."

Julian stared at him, deeply intrigued. "Go on."

"In one memory," said Santi quietly, "he saw himself, imprisoned in Nurmengard."

"What?" choked out Julian, utterly taken aback. "You must be joking-"

"I'm not," snapped Santi impatiently, before he chuckled with much amusement. "Oh, believe me, Grindelwald was quite enraged when he saw that. He, the Dark Lord, being a prisoner in his own Tower! How dare them!"

As Santi chortled, Julian shook his head slowly, feeling a sudden piercing pain in his chest as he whispered, "So it means he was defeated?"

Santi observed him with narrowed eyes, and said gruffly, "I hope you're not feeling sorrow for him." Then he waved his hand dismissively. "Never mind. As I was saying, he saw himself, old and shrunken, in a small cell at the top of the Tower, but with a guest. A wizard who broke in and declared himself to be Lord Voldemort, demanding to know where Grindelwald's wand was-"

"Gellert's wand?" interrupted Julian, bewildered. "Why would another wizard want-"

"That's not relevant to the issue at hand," said Santi with exasperation. "The importance of the memory resides in the characteristics of the wizard who called himself Lord Voldemort - with snake-like features and red eyes."

"Red eyes," murmured Julian under his breath, frowning. "I've read about that. Allegedly, it happens to wizards who delve too deeply into certain Dark Arts which cause them to lose part of their humanity." He shot Santi a perplexed glance. "I don't understand."

"Let me continue, and you will," interjected Santi shortly. "In that memory, Grindelwald refused to give Lord Voldemort the information about the location of his wand and Voldemort killed him."

Gellert killed. Julian froze, and then took a shuddering inhalation of breath, but didn't interrupt.

"In the other memory," continued Santi swiftly, "he saw himself, looking as old as in the first one, yet free. With a disfigured face shrouded by a grey cloak, having a meeting with another wizard, who was referred by others as Lord Slytherin. This wizard was handsome, young, and yet, from time to time, his eyes would flash red when his temper arose. After seeing that, Grindelwald realized that he was seeing memories of two different futures, and that Lord Voldemort and Lord Slytherin was the same wizard, who had turned out differently due to having different pasts-"

"And then Gellert saw the memory of him using the Sands of Time on a baby," breathed out Julian as understanding dawned on him, "and he knew he could create that different timeline, where he isn't killed in a cell in his tower but free and alive, in the company of this 'Lord Slytherin'..."
He trailed off, frowning. "Red eyes." He glanced down at the book in his hands, his eyes widening, as he whispered, "Horcruxes. Lord Slytherin with red eyes. Parselmouth boys." His gaze snapped to see the boy inside Flourish and Blott's, as he gasped out, shocked, "Tom Riddle?"

"Yes," said Santi with much satisfaction. "He is truly a descendant of Salazar Slytherin. And he's the one who becomes Lord Voldemort in the original timeline, and Lord Slytherin in this one. No fool, Grindelwald came to the rather wise conclusion that if he had to deal with another Dark Lord as a rival, he preferred one who was sane and could thus be controlled and manipulated."

"But if Tom Riddle comes to have red eyes," said Julian apprehensively. "It means he will make horcruxes-"

"Don't you understand?" interrupted Santi impatiently. "Grindelwald is not going to let him make horcruxes. He doesn't want him insane and thus uncontrollable. He has already told his spy at Hogwarts to destroy the copy of that book. Tom will never find it in the Restricted Section. Your mission's true purpose is to wet Tom's appetite for immortality, to let the boy know that it is possible."

Julian shook his head uncomprehendingly. "But you said Lord Slytherin's eyes flashed red in the memory. So he must've made-"

"Just one," said Santi shortly. "Inevitably, he must create one horcrux, the same one Lord Voldemort made accidentally and unwittingly, and which Lord Slytherin will make on purpose."

Julian frowned at that, but before he could ask, Santi continued swiftly, "Whether as Lord Voldemort or Lord Slytherin, Tom Riddle has two weaknesses: his unquenchable hunger for power and his deep-rooted fear of death. Grindelwald will exploit both in order to manipulate him. He'll use the first weakness by presenting himself to Tom as a mentor and later as an ally, supposedly. The second, by offering Tom another means in which to attain immortality."

He pinned Julian with piercing gaze, as he added, "Grindelwald will demand much in return, of course. But he's well aware that this Tom Riddle who'll become Lord Slytherin has a third weakness he didn't as Lord Voldemort. The only attachment he has ever formed towards another human being. Harry. That's why Grindelwald wanted them to be raised together."

"That's what Harry's role will be in all of this?" demanded Julian suspiciously. "To be used by Gellert to pull Tom Riddle's strings?"

"Harry's roles will be many," replied Santi tersely. "As you know, he's-"

"Yes, yes," snapped Julian impatiently. "I mean besides being used to create this timeline. Is Gellert interested in Harry for any other reason?" He suddenly frowned. "Konrad said both boys were Parselmouths. " He eyed Santi searchingly. "I don't understand how it's possible. But if you say Riddle is truly a Slytherin and thus a Parselmouth, then Konrad is right and Harry is a Parselmouth too? How?"

"That's a topic for some other day," said Santi hurriedly, as he gestured at the book in Julian's hands. "You must act now before it's too late."

With his fingers tightening around the book, Julian demanded harshly, "Are you sure I'll not be the cause for that boy to make horcruxes, besides the one you say is necessary?"

"Yes," replied Santi with exasperation. "This Tom Riddle will not discover how horcruxes are made when he's young. It will be Grindelwald who will tell him how, many years from now."
"Very well, then," said Julian with a sigh, before he yanked open the door of the store and slipped inside.

It was very easy. A Disillusioning Charm cast on himself. Place the book on the floor, right in front of Tom Riddle's feet while the boy was focused in reading some other tome, leaving the book opened in the chapter regarding Lord Horkos. Giving the boy time to see it and grab it.

And precisely when Tom Riddle reached the page Gellert had told him, stand behind the boy, towering over him, so that his presence was felt. Tom Riddle turned around, frowning, without being able to see a disillusioned Julian, and then, with a flick of his wand, the book was vanished from the boy's hands.

Yet, as Julian started to make his way out of the bookstore, he paused for a moment, gazing at Harry, who was still yearningly looking at the bustle and activity outside, through the windows of the shop.

Right then, Julian felt the inexplicable urgent need to grab the little boy and whisk him away. To protect him, to spare him much, perhaps? Julian didn't quite know, but he hesitated for a moment, trembling with the urge, whilst he seriously considered the possibilities.

"Let's go," said Santi, his milky gaze flickering from Julian to Harry and back, to end up frowning at Julian.

Jerked out of his thoughts, Julian peeled his eyes away from the little boy, and sighed. "Yes. Let's."

As they left Diagon Alley, Julian whispered to himself the reminder, grim and sorrowful, "Eins."

He didn't like German, decided Harry as he scowled down at the picture of the blue-eyed, blonde woman who had just chided him for his "terrible, horrifying pronunciation! Do make an effort, boy!"

"I am!" snapped Harry at the book, extremely peeved.

He was in a very bad mood that day.

It was Sunday, there were no classes, and there he was, lying against the trunk of a tree with book on lap, wrapped up in one of Tom's Slytherin scarves he had stolen, because for some reason his brother's scarves always felt softer and warmer.

He was before a lovely view of the frozen Black Lake that was being taken full advantage of by a group of Hufflepuffs that were having the time of their lives by skidding and sliding along the ice.

Another group of students, not far away, were playing with the snow that beautifully covered the grounds of Hogwarts, throwing snowballs at each other and even making a snowman.

A snowman! Harry sniffed with envy. Everyone was having fun, and in the meanwhile, he was stuck with learning German, because if he didn't, Tom would know.

His brother always tested him, and if Harry couldn't convincingly prove he was indeed studying, then Tom refused to tutor him in the two classes he was still having trouble with: Potions and Transfigurations.

Not only that, but Christmas Holidays were in two weeks and Tom had already 'informed' him, in a
rather high-handed manner, that they were going to stay put.

The last thing his brother wanted was to return to the orphanage, and Tom was going to approach Headmaster Dippet to ask for permission to stay at Hogwarts.

Harry had never felt so angered and indignant in his life. He missed Alice and his friends and he had been looking forward to seeing them. Christmas was his favorite holiday and it was always spent with much fun in the orphanage, in his opinion.

Thus, first, he had attempted to convince his brother with pouts, big, teary eyes, sniffles, and whimpering, wheedling tones. When that didn't work—and Harry had been a bit stumped, because he could usually soften Tom up when he employed such tactics- he had ended up having a heated match of shouts and yells in the middle of the common room.

Nothing good came out of that, since they could both be as impossibly stubborn, and Tom had been furious with him for being the reason they caused a 'scene' before their housemates.

Furthermore, he couldn't even ditch German in order to play with his friends because they were all busy with other stuff.

Algie Longbottom's older sister, the rather serious, strict-looking Augusta, had become engaged to their cousin Francis Longbottom. The girl was over the moon—the first time Harry had ever seen her even smiling- and the Gryffindors were throwing her a party in their Tower, so Felix and Felicity were unavailable.

The twins had invited him over, but Harry knew he wouldn't be welcomed by their housemates—Halloween had proved that. So he preferred to spare himself the trouble and stay far away from the Gryff's Tower that day.

And then, Alphard was busy with his siblings, aunt, and cousins, because they were 'managing a family crisis'.

Earlier in the day, during breakfast in the Great Hall, whilst Augusta Longbottom made her announcement at the Gryffindors' Table to be received by much cheer from that rambunctious, loud lot, the Blacks at the Slytherins' Table were receiving letters by owls, all at the same time.

When they read the missives, their reactions were plenty: beautiful Lucretia had her mouth hanging open, her handsome brother Orion flushed with rage, Alphard choked on his sniggers, his older brother Cygnus lost all color on his face, and their sister Walburga…

Well, Walburga trembled, her face contorted, and she screeched at the top of her lungs with roaring fury, "HOW DARE SHE!"

Heads snapped around at that, students of other houses staring at the girl with surprise and gossipy curiosity.

Outside of the common room and especially in the Great Hall, Slytherins always comported themselves with much decorum and solemnity, so an outburst like Walburga's was indeed rare. Though when it happened, it always seemed to be Walburga.

Dorea Black, the only one who had just flinched when reading her letter, had immediately stood up, reached her niece, and hissed out commandingly, "Not here. We'll all discuss this later."

For once, Walburga instantly obeyed, though it was clear it took her great effort to rein in her temper in order to proceed with her breakfast quietly. All the Blacks did that, staying for the full
duration of the breakfast as if nothing had ever happened, before they silently rose up as one and followed Dorea's lead out of the Great Hall and into the dungeons.

Harry didn't find out what had happened until Alphard made a hand sign to meet him in the kitchens.

As they skipped the Great Hall and partook of their lunch amidst the solicitous house-elves, his secret friend explained the situation to him.

"We received news that my father's cousin, Cedrella Black, eloped," said Alphard chuckling and looking highly cheerful. "I'm glad for her, really. Besides Dorea, she was my favorite relative – always gave me candies and fun toys and she told the funniest jokes!"

Grinning, the boy popped a potato chip into his mouth. After crunching it down, he piped in, "She's been a spinster for ages. She's around fifty, so we all thought she was going to die an old maid." His grey eyes sparkled. "But at last she did it! She's been in love with Septimus Weasley since their days at Hogwarts, but was never allowed to accept his courtship. And now, they escaped, went to Gretna Green and got married in a muggle church, with priest and all!"

Alphard chortled happily. "The Black Sheep Curse strikes again! See what I mean?" He then shook his head and added with exasperation, "I don't know why no one believes my theory. How much more proof do they need? Really!"

Bemused, Harry kept staring at the boy in silence, remembering the tidbits he knew about the Weasleys. Not much. From Alphard, he knew that family always had loads of children without any fertility problems like the rest. And from the Prewett twins, he knew they were weird and had a Leprechaun somewhere down their line, which apparently explained their weirdness.

"I will miss her, though," said Alphard suddenly, his voice small and sad.

"Miss her?" interjected Harry, frowning. Then he rolled his eyes. "It can't be that bad. It's not like she died."

Alphard shook his head. "It's even worse than if she had died, at least for the rest of the family. Father has already struck her out from the family tree and records and left her knutless. She cannot even use the Black surname anymore, not legally, at least."

Baffled, Harry pointed out, "But the Weasleys are purebloods, aren't they? So why is it so bad that she married one? Is it because they're light wizards?"

"Oh no, that wouldn't have mattered so much," replied Alphard with a wave of his hand. "It's because they're considered bloodtraitors – they've always liked muggles and muggleborns and are quite open with their views. And it's because they lost all their prestige and respect when they lost their fortune."

Harry scowled, feeling directly insulted. "So just for being poor-"

"It's because of the way they lost their fortune," interrupted Alphard quickly, seeing Harry's expression. "They weren't rich, but Septimus' father did have a respectable amount of galleons in his vaults, from what I've heard." He shook his head disparagingly. "But Weasleys have always been very strange. The wizard apparently thought that muggles were very funny and inventive and some years ago, when muggles invented that thing…" He trailed off, his face scrunching up with effort. "That thing they use because they can't cast Lumos Spells… eclec- eclectitty-"

"Electricity?" prompted Harry, blinking.
"Yes!" breathed out Alphard, looking relieved. "And then they made those things that look like upside-down pears made of glass…"

"Light bulbs?" said Harry, now chuckling in amusement.

Alphard stared at him, as he said uncertainly, "Hmm, yes, I suppose that's their name." He heaved a sigh. "Well, it seems that Septimus' dad thought it was the brightest of ideas for the Wizarding World as well." He rolled his eyes. "What do we need those bulbs for when we already have candles and spells?"

He shook his head disparagingly. "Anyway. The wizard invested all his galleons in those houses that muggle have in which they make stuff, and he bought those things that make other things."

Completely lost for a moment, Harry tried to fathom what the other boy was talking about.

"Oh!" he said at last. "You mean he bought a factory and machinery to make light bulbs?"

"Yes, that," said Alphard, shooting him a look as if Harry was slow of understanding and his explanation had been as clear as crystal. "So for starters, purebloods like my parents were angered because the wizard had invested in the Muggle World. It's something simply not done, you know? Purebloods like to keep wealth in the Wizarding World and not give it to the muggles."

The boy paused, a pensive expression spreading on his face. "I suppose it wouldn't have been that bad if the wizard's business had been a success and he brought back money into the Wizarding World. But it was a catastrophe. Apparently, he discovered that electricity and magic don't work well together. So his bulbs were useless in our world. But then he decided to adapt the bulbs so that they could work just with magic."

Alphard snorted loudly. "That didn't go well. He experimented and blew himself up. Not even the house where the bulbs were made or the things that made other things were left. So Septimus was left without a father and poor. And the family name was left in the mud."

After that rather bemusing explanation, Alphard had to leave, because the Blacks were having a meeting to discuss how they would 'confront the humiliating situation' of Cedrella's elopement with a Weasley and decide how they would present a solemn, united front against the 'ridicule, scorn, and derision' from other dark purebloods.

It was a grave family crisis that had to be quickly dealt with, apparently.

And given that Tom was entrenched in the library as usual, Harry was left all by his lonesome, with just a nasty, pushy book for company.

"Let's try again!" snapped the pretty witch of the picture, her hair by now looking frizzy and her expression frazzled and tetchy. "Where is the nearest Floo connection? Repeat after me. Wo ist die nächste Flooverbindung?"

Harry sighed, before he mumbled, "Woe is dye nachta Flooberdung?"

"No! No!" bellowed the witch, yanking her hair. "Wo ist die nächste Flooverbindung!"

Glowering at her with all the power of his frustration, Harry yelled back, "I'm saying it right, you hag! Woe is dye nachta Flooberdung!"

"Is that atrocious German I'm hearing?" said a lilting, drawling voice.
Harry snapped his head around and glared at Abraxas Malfoy, who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere and was now standing besides Harry's tree, looking down at him with an expression of disdainful amusement.

"Sod off, Malfoy!" bit out Harry, slamming his book shut.

He hadn't crossed words with Abraxas Malfoy since the Hogwarts Express. It was certainly the first time the boy talked to him or even approached him. But Malfoy simply rubbed him the wrong way, especially because Harry would sometimes stare at him from a distance, feeling funny and a bit entranced, and Felix Prewett was always taunting him about it. And to add insult to injury, Abraxas Malfoy was always intensely observing him too, but as if waiting for Harry to grow horns or something.

"Sod off?" drawled Abraxas as if tasting the words in his mouth. "No one has told me before to 'sod off', as you so eloquently put it. I get the gist of it, though." His lips curled upwards in sheer disgust. "A muggle expression, is it not?"

"Yeah, and I've got plenty more for you," growled Harry. "Bugger off, piss off, go take a hike and get lost, stuff it and leave me the hell alone, stick it up yours and-"

"I'm attempting to carry a conversation with you, Riddle," interrupted Abraxas, darkly glaring at him. "You do know what that is, yes? What civilized wizards do from time to time? Rings any bells?"

Harry scowled with deep irritation. "What the hell do you want?"

Abraxas arched a pale eyebrow at him, his silver eyes briefly glancing at Harry's book, as he asked coolly, "Why are you learning German?"

"None of your bloody business," said Harry gruffly, as he rose to his feet. He scowled, highly miffed, when he saw that Abraxas towered over him. He shot the boy a glower and snapped, "Is that all? You can leave now."

Seeing that Abraxas didn't move and kept staring at him with puzzled, narrowed eyes, Harry huffed and started to move away.

He was suddenly forcefully grabbed by the arm and pulled back, and he swirled around, trying to shake himself free as he yelled, "What the hell do you think you're doing? Let go, Malfoy!"

Abraxas stared down at the arm he was tightly clutching, frowning. "You're solid."

Harry blinked, gobsmacked. "Solid?" He then snorted loudly. "Of course I'm bloody solid! That's my arm you're grabbing. What's the matter with you?"

Looking thoroughly confused, Abraxas gazed down at him. "What are you then?" He frowned. "A golem?"

"A what?" Harry stared at the boy, nonplussed.

"Don't play dumb!" hissed out Abraxas impatiently. "I saw how the Bloody Baron touched you and he didn't go through! And I know you're working for the Dark Lord!"

"I'm working for…" Harry's mouth dropped open. Then he shook his head and scoffed, "You've gone mental, Malfoy."
"Don't lie to me, golem!" spit out Abraxas in a frosty, sharp tone. "I want to know what you're doing for the Dark Lord."

Harry shot him an angry, exasperated look. "I'm not a bloody golem – whatever that is!"

Abraxas frowned deeply and then pinched the arm he was holding and twisted the flesh, hard.

"Ouch – that hurt, you bastard!" bellowed Harry furiously, shoving the boy away and finally gaining his freedom.

He didn't waste a second in whirling around and breaking into a run.

"Stop right there or I'll tell everyone you're looking for the Chamber of Secrets!"

Harry choked, skidded to a halt, and slowly turned around to stare at Malfoy with wide eyes.

"What?" he croaked out faintly.

Abraxas smirked, looking triumphant as he coolly sauntered towards him, his silver eyes glinting. "Yes, I do know that much, at least. The Dark Lord wants you to find it and open it, doesn't he?"

He cocked his head to a side, a thoughtful expression spreading on his ethereally handsome face. "And then what? Does he believe the legends about the monster?"

Recovered from his shock, Harry bit out crossly, "For the last time, I don't work for the Dark Lord. And I'm not that golem thingy. I'm just a person!" He huffed. "And I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not looking for any chambers-"

"Please, don't insult my intelligence," sneered Abraxas incensed. "After that rather pathetic display of hissing like an idiot at the furniture in the common room, I've seen you searching the school up and down."

"You're the one who has been following me around!" gasped out Harry, jolted, before he pointed an accusing finger at him and spat with indignant fury, "Stop spying on me, Malfoy, or I'll-"

"Or you'll what?" interjected Abraxas loftily. "I can do whatever I please. And I want to know what the Dark Lord has asked you to do."

"I've got nothing to do with any Dark Lords!" snapped Harry, vexed beyond endurance.

Abraxas' silver eyes narrowed, as he demanded, "Then explain how come my grandfather was ready to get you expelled from Hogwarts and he didn't because he received a letter from the Dark Lord."

Stiffening for an instant, Harry then relaxed and shook his head, blinking at the other boy dumbly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You do," insisted Abraxas, his gaze sharp and suspicious. He paused, his eyes travelling over Harry's body, before he frowned and said slowly, "Very well. If you're not working for the Dark Lord, prove you're not a golem."

"I don't even know what a golem is," said Harry with exasperation. "So how do I do that?"

"It's simple," said Abraxas stoically. "I came prepared."

He pulled something shiny and silver from his school robes' pocket and presented it to him.
Harry automatically grabbed it and then stared down, seeing a small, sharp dagger. He snapped his gaze up to the other boy's face, his eyes wide, as he asked warily, "What do you expect me to do with this?"

"Make a cut on the palm of your hand."

Harry shook his head. "This is stupid. If I wasn't a person I wouldn't have a brother, would I?" He shot him an irritated look and added dryly, "Haven't you seen Tom around?"

"Tom is not your brother," scoffed out Abraxas. "You look nothing alike."

"That's because we're fraternal twins, you idiot!" bit out Harry churlishly.

Unimpressed and clearly unconvinced, Abraxas said curtly, "Cut and prove you're just a boy."

"Fine," gritted out Harry, briskly holding the dagger and sliding its tip through the palm of his left hand, his jaw clenching in pain. "There. Satisfied?"

Abraxas harshly grabbed his hand and yanked it upwards to inspect it closely. He dragged a fingertip across the wound, making Harry hiss under his breath, and then collected trickles of blood on his finger pads, rubbing them together as if to feel the texture of Harry's blood.

In the next moment, he dropped Harry's hand and plucked the dagger from Harry's hold, pocketing it back as he frowned. "You're just a person." Abraxas skewered him with his silver eyes. "Then you're no mudblood and neither is Tom, if he's really your twin. And if so, you're both Parselmouths."

Harry froze for a split second before he let out a loud guffaw. "You're bonkers! We wish!"

"You are," said Abraxas sternly. "That morning, when the whole House found you hissing at things in the common room, I thought what everyone else did – that you were just deplorably attempting to imitate the hisses of a snake. But I've heard you hissing when you go around inspecting classrooms at night." He shook his head musingly. "You wouldn't keep doing it unless you could really speak Parseltongue. And I don't really know what a Parselmouth sounds like, so I realize that you could be one."

"I'm telling you, I'm not," said Harry vehemently as he scowled at the boy.

Abraxas suddenly smirked at him. "You are. It's the only explanation of why the Dark Lord might be interested in you – why he stopped my grandfather from kicking you out from Hogwarts."

The moment Harry opened his mouth to speak again, Abraxas swiftly raised a hand, as he drawled placidly in his lilting voice, "I never thought Tom was anything but a person, because I've seen ghosts go through him. And I've observed him and know his type." His lips twisted with snide disdain. "After seeing how he has dealt with the Slytherins and students of other houses, it's clear. He's nothing but an uppity social-climber that has ideas above his station and thinks that being intelligent and good at the Dark Arts, as he proved to be when he attacked Walburga Black with a dark curse none of us knows, is enough to make others bend to his will."

He waved a hand dismissively. "Like him, I've seen plenty." He pinned Harry with his gaze, his lips quirking upwards, as he added, "Like you, though, I have not." He cocked his head to a side. "And yet you're both Parselmouths and don't want anyone to know. I would have expected for Tom to reveal his ability to make others fawn over him. Evidently, you're keeping it a secret because you have some other agenda." He arched a pale eyebrow. "Perhaps you're waiting to find the Chamber of Secrets, so that it would prove you're Parselmouths, hmm?"
"You're mad," snapped Harry briskly. "Nothing of what you said is true. You're way off." He fiercely scowled at him. "And don't say things like that about my brother! He's worth ten of you-"

"Hardly," scoffed Abraxas. "Even if he's a Parselmouth, his lowly upbringing shines through. He comes from muggle slums." He shot him a sneer. "Just like you. And given your surname, you can be nothing if not halfbloods."

Harry bristled with fury at the insults, but Abraxas cut him short as he snapped, "Save it." He pierced him with hard, silver eyes as he added in a low, slow voice, "If you want me to keep my mouth shut about the things I know about you, you'll not mention this conversation to anyone, not even your brother." His eyes narrowed to mere slits, as he added sharply, "And when I come around wanting to talk to you, you'll behave civilly and respond in kind. Do I make myself clear?"

With eyes widening for a moment at the threat, Harry then glowered hatefully at the boy, his shoulders tense and stiff as he spat acidly, "Yes."

"Tut-tut," said Abraxas, shaking his head mournfully. "That was not a civil tone of voice. Try again."

Harry's hands clenched into fists, trembling with rage, as he gritted out, "Yes."

Abraxas chidingly clucked his tongue. "Not good enough. Say it gently. And no glaring."

Harry hissed under his breath, before he took a deep breath and reined in his temper. He relaxed his shoulders, stared back at the boy, and muttered quietly, "Yes."

Abraxas smirked widely, his silver eyes sparkling as he intoned softly, "Good boy."

At with that, he calmly turned around and sauntered back to the castle, leaving Harry shaking with fury.
Part I: Chapter 25

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AN:

Thanks to all of those who reviewed!

I'm glad that last chapter answered many of your questions. But fear not, there are still many other mysteries to solve and plot twists to unravel. So don't think that was the end of it, lol. ^^

And oh yeah, Abraxas was quite a cunning little bastard and badass with Harry. What he did, in essence, was to blackmail Harry into starting a forced friendship -as one reviewer described it so perfectly- and it's basically because he's truly interested in him.

We'll see how their relationship will evolve, as well as with Tom, as the fic progresses, because Abraxas will be one of the important characters of the fic.

Note: This chapter is shorter than usual, because I decided to post what I already had instead of making you wait, probably weeks, for the full thing. If you like this method better -in smaller doses but more frequent- then let me know and I'll start doing it for all future updates.

I hope you enjoy it!

Part I: Chapter 25

Harry fully blamed his brother for his current predicament.

He was lying against the headboard of his bed, flipping through a catalogue of Monsieur Ermenegilde's 'haute couture' collection of formal dress robes, all of them exorbitantly pricey, whilst feeling utterly clueless regarding what kind of attire his brother expected him to choose. Fashion definitely wasn't his thing.

Headmaster Dippet had gladly allowed Tom and him to stay at the castle for Christmas Holidays. In fact, it seemed any student who wished to do so didn't even have to ask for permission. The Headmaster was a fanatic observant of all wizarding traditions, and those who stayed at Hogwarts would be required to attend the Yule Ball.

Apparently, wizards didn't celebrate Christmas but Yuletide, some pagan wizarding tradition that came from the Germanic Goths, and had something to do with Astronomy and Winter Solstice, and with all sorts of legends and rites like something called the Wild Hunt and whatnot.

To Harry it seemed very much like muggle Christmas, at least as far as decorations went. The Great Hall had become adorned with green and red ribbons, holly wreaths, and garlands here and there, along with twelve enormous pine trees that had been charmed to have a constant soft drift of snow falling down on them from the enchanted ceiling, while a flock of fairies fluttered through their branches.
That, he liked. What he did not, was the whole Yule Ball business. All the students that were staying, especially the girls, spoke of nothing but what dress they were going to wear and what boy they hoped would ask them out.

When Tom had informed him about the Yule Ball - giving him one of his many pouches of galleons he had earned by selling essays to other students, so that Harry would order for them two sets of dress robes from Monsieur Ermenegilde's shop - he had also commanded him to find a date for himself.

A date! Harry had been horrified.

"Who are you going to take?" he had demanded grumpily.

"Olive Hornby," Tom replied, smirking at him.

Harry had scowled darkly. That explained why he had lately seen his brother constantly around Hornby and her little Ravenclaw friends who so liked to torment poor Myrtle.

After that, he had been stumped. He would have spared himself the angst and suffering by asking Felicity, but the Prewett twins were not going to stay at Hogwarts. Like many purebloods, they were going back to their homes.

Indeed, while the rest of the school made preparations for the Yule Ball, the Slytherins spoke of nothing but the 'Winter Season'. It seemed that from Christmas to New Year's Eve there was going to be a succession of social gatherings.

He heard them speak of the Rosier's Ball, the Wilkes' soiree, the Black's Wild Hunt party, the Malfoy's masquerade gala, the Avery's midnight dinner, and even a Ministry Ball that Charlemagne McLaggen was throwing in his manor and to which all the Slytherins would be attending with their parents.

At least, Harry had vindictively enjoyed seeing the glint of envy in his brother's eyes, surely because Tom was not invited and was thus going to miss so many opportunities to 'forge important social connections', as his brother had once put it.

However, Tom had been behaving very mysteriously since earlier in the day.

During breakfast in the Great Hall, his brother had received a package from an owl of Flourish and Blott's.

"At last!" Tom had muttered under his breath, paying the bird quite a load of galleons, sticking the package under his arm and standing up, to then leave his half-eaten breakfast behind as he hurried out of the Great Hall without another word or backward glance.

And during the whole day, Tom had seemed distracted during class, frowning to himself, impatiently tapping his fingers on the desk, and utterly ignoring Harry's probing questions.

Harry sighed as he glanced down at a picture of a young wizard striking poses while wearing some weird ensemble of pointy hat, flashy silver tunic, and bright pink and green polka-dotted bowtie – 'The latest Parisian style!' read the banner above the photo.

Suddenly, the curtains of his bed were yanked open and Tom appeared before him, staring down at him, his dark blue eyes sparkling as he rushed out in a quiet whisper, "I've finally found something. Come!"
Harry shot him a bewildered look. "Come where?"

"Just follow me – be quick!" said Tom hurriedly, already turning around and making his way to the door.

Bemused, Harry gladly left Monsieur Ermenegilde's catalogue behind and trailed after his brother. All his questions were shot down as they climbed up moving staircases, Tom refusing to say a word 'out in the open'.

Harry groaned when they reached the library.

"Do we have to go in there?" he whined mournfully. "What do you want to show me-"

"Hush!" snapped Tom, grabbing him by the hand and forcefully pulling him along. "Not a word until we're alone."

Sighing, Harry followed him into the depths of the library, passing through rows of shelves and some tables occupied by a few Ravenclaws here and there.

Finally, they stood before the grates barring the way to the Restricted Section. Tom waved his golden pass at them and they parted open. They both slipped inside and Harry followed his brother until they reached a nook in one shadowy corner, boxed in by several shelves filled with dusty, grimy tomes.

Tom dropped his schoolbag on the only small table in the place, and then whipped out his wand. "Eligo Salazar Slytherin's tree-line!"

Several books came shooting out the nearest shelf and landed on the table. Without another hitch of breath, Tom was quick to open them, flipping through their yellowish pages.

Finally, he arranged them in a line, one next to the other, and then gestured at them.

"Take a look," he commanded shortly.

Quirking an eyebrow, now intrigued, Harry obeyed. He blinked when he saw that all the books were opened on pages that displayed tree-lines that were nearly identical. It was no surprise that the name on the top was Salazar Slytherin's, though it was connected by a line to a name that sounded vaguely familiar to him.

"Honorea Woodcroft," said Harry, frowning pensively. "Woodcroft? I've heard that name before-"

"She was the daughter of Hengist Woodcroft," interrupted Tom curtly, "the founder of Hogsmeade."

"Oh! Yeah," said Harry brightly, fondly remembering Alphard's ramblings when they had been exploring the village under Charlus Potter's Invisibility Cloak, breaking all sorts of school rules. He shot his brother a curious look. "So Slytherin married this Honorea witch… did he love her?"

"What does that matter?" bit out Tom, casting him a contemptuous glance. "She was a pureblood witch, daughter of a very well respected, influential wizard. Salazar must have chosen her for that," he added with a sneer, "not due to any romantic sentimentalities."

Harry huffed, feeling a mite disappointed. He would have liked the idea that their ancestor had some redeeming qualities and had married out of love and not self-interest.
Seeing his expression, Tom said superiorly, "Slytherin was a ruthless, practical man. As he should be." Then he scoffed, looking irked and disgusted. "Though many historians do like to write about how Salazar was really secretly in love with Rowena Ravenclaw or truly pinning after Godric Gryffindor." He suddenly smirked with dark amusement. "Funnily enough, no one dares to speculate that he was enamored with good, chubby Hufflepuff."

Harry snorted at that, but before he could voice any opinion, his brother eyed him closely, as he demanded, "Besides what is common knowledge, what do you know about Salazar Slytherin?"

"Hmm… I know he was the first to create Fertility Potions," replied Harry slowly, not mentioning the information he had learned from his secret friend. It still made him shudder and blanch when he remembered Alphard's revelations about Breeder Potions.

"You don't know much, then," said Tom sternly, looking vastly annoyed. He heaved a deep, steadying breath, as if gathering patience, before he gestured at a couple of chairs. "Very well, let's take a seat and I'll explain the most important parts."

Harry complied and his brother was quick to begin, by demanding, "Do you remember Alice Jones' history lessons, about the era before the Plantagenet kings?"

"Er…" Harry trailed off, hesitantly. "Um, not really-"

"Do you remember Professor Binn's lectures in History of Magic, then?" snapped Tom irritably. "About Merlin and Arthur Pendragon."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I know the story but not because I paid attention to Binns. You're the only one who doesn't fall asleep!" He huffed, miffed. "I know a bit because I read the textbook for the essay we had to write about the-"

"About the Fall of the Druids," interjected Tom sharply. "Exactly." He shot him a vexed glare, before he continued, "As you should know, after the destruction of Arthur Pendragon's kingdom, Druids were persecuted and killed off by muggles. It's said that it was the Druids themselves who had found Merlin as a young boy and raised him and taught him magic. But only a few survived the decades of scouring after Pendragon's death and before the rise of the Plantagenets. Of those of Ireland, Cliodna was the last one of their kind."

"Cliodna?" piped in Harry, perking up. "I have a Chocolate Frog card of her! It did say that she was a Druidess-"

"Whatever your stupid card says," interrupted Tom, darkly aggravated, "I'm sure it's not much." He briskly gestured at the shelves around them. "It took me a long while to find and piece together the full account of it. She was the last Druidess, yes, but she also took it upon herself to teach others about Magic, so that her kind's knowledge wasn't lost. She went around the British Isles, visiting village after village, finding magical children and choosing the worthier among them."

He paused to then shoot Harry a pointed look. "In Scotland, she found Helga Hufflepuff. In Ireland, Rowena Ravenclaw. In England, she found Godric Gryffindor, in a southern town that nowadays bears his name – Godric's Hollow. In northern England, in what is today Lancashire county, she found Salazar Slytherin, in a town called Woodcroft."

"Woodcroft?" Harry stared at him, bemused. "As in Hengist-"

"Yes, as in Hengist Woodcroft," retorted Tom impatiently. "The wizard was the Chieftain of the wizarding town, and it's believed that before marrying Honorea, Salazar Slytherin knew her from
there, when they were little children, before Cliodna took him away."

Tom waved his hand dismissively, before he continued, "Cliodna had other pupils, of course, but several years later, when she died, it was the four most outstanding of her students who decided to continue her work but in a more organized, permanent way-"

"And they founded Hogwarts," breathed out Harry, startled and then fascinated by the whole story.

"Yes," said Tom curtly. "Meanwhile, the wizarding village of Woodcroft was attacked and burned to cinders by neighboring muggles. The Chieftain, Hengist, managed to escape with his daughter, and he adopted the name of his former town as his surname." He paused, before adding musingly, "As a reminder and way of honoring those who had died, I suppose. Moreover, rumors about Hogwarts had already spread among wizarding communities, so he travelled to Scotland in search of it. Evidently, he was successful, and that's when he finally founded Hogsmeade."

"Nice!" said Harry, grinning widely. "So besides Slytherin, our other ancestor was the daughter of the Chieftain of Woodcroft and founder of Hogsmeade!"

Tom shot him a scathing look. "Hengist was remarkable, yes, but from what I've read, Honorea was quite useless. Just a pureblood witch with a renowned father that Slytherin used, to have her bear pureblooded children for his line – nothing more."

Harry glowered at him and then scoffed. "I don't care what you say. I still think it's wicked."

Tom leveled a snide glance at him, before he gestured at the books impatiently. "Now that you know a bit of his background story, look at his tree-line of descendants and tell me what you see."

Piqued, Harry moved his chair closer to the table and peered down at the nearest book. He then frowned, puzzled, trying to untangle all the connecting lines that seemed to loop up and down all across the page.

"What's with all the twists?" he groused out, his eyes narrowing with the effort of attempting to follow the lines. "It's impossible to understand!"

"That's what incest looks like in a tree-line," replied Tom placidly, then smirking at Harry's shocked expression. "Oh yes, there you have it – uncles marrying nieces, cousins paired with cousins, siblings with siblings, and every other combination possible."

"That's – that's disgusting!" choked out Harry, his small nose scrunching under his big, round eyeglasses.

Tom's dark blue eyes glinted and his smirk widened as he said loftily, "I wouldn't say that. I would call it necessary and understandable. The Slytherins weren't the only ones who took such measures to preserve the blood purity of their line. Most of our housemates' family lines are filled with incest as well."

Squicked and grossed out, Harry shook his head, before he inspected the page again, focusing on the notations in parenthesis underneath some names instead of the connecting lines.

The first that caught his attention was a Slytherin who had the label of 'Founder of the True Blood Alliance', making him remember the Prewett twins' explanation about the Egeriana Rose that the members of that group used as a symbol.

Then, he found something else: a Sidony Slytherin, one of the few who was matched with someone outside the family – with an Ignacius Peverell, in her case – with a note under their linked names
that prompted the reader to 'See Potter line for information of descendants'.

Harry's gaze snapped up, his eyes wide with happiness. "We're related to the Potters?"

He very much liked Dorea's secret beau. Charlus Potter had not only lent Alphard and him his Invisibility Cloak that day in which they had gone exploring down the secret tunnel behind the statue of Gunhilda of Gorsemoor, but was also very kind, warm, and friendly to him.

Just the other day, when he had been leaving the Great Hall after lunch, they had crossed paths.

"A pretty little bird has told me that you're quite fantastic on a broom," Charlus Potter had whispered, winking at him, before he huffed with mock annoyance. "Indeed, lately, my own girl has been doing nothing but singing your praises when instead she should be paying attention to the naughty things I do to her." He had shot Harry a rakish, challenging grin, as he added, "Oh, but I am looking forward to matching skills with you in the pitch and see if she's right!"

And with that, the fifth-year Gryffindor had strolled away, and Harry had only stood there, in the middle of the corridor, in silence, because he had been too stumped and taken aback, and then highly peeved for a moment.

Dorea always told him very sharply to keep his mouth shut about his secret Quidditch training, saying that she wanted to give Charlus Potter a nasty surprise next year during Quidditch matches. And then, evidently, she turned around and spilled the beans to Charlus! Boyfriend and 'naughty things' involved or not, that wasn't an excuse, as far as Harry was concerned.

But then, he had felt rather happy with himself and content with the prospect of playing against Charlus, not only the Gryffindors' Captain but also such a brilliant Chaser that he had beaten the talented Dorea in all matches.

So this new discovery of being related to a boy he liked and admired made him feel quite joyful and proud.

"Related to the Potters?" scoffed out Tom disdainfully. "The connection is too distant to be significant, little brother. We're not cousins with them or anything of the sort."

At that, Harry's shoulders slumped dejectedly, his disappointment deep and crushing.

Tom released an annoyed sigh, as he then said crisply, "I wanted you to notice the last of the line, not waste time with nonsense."

Harry shot him an irked glower, before he grabbed the book, looked and found, and read out loud, his tone waspish, "Sherisse Slytherin. Death, 1340. Dragon Pox. Age 15." He glanced up at his brother, and snapped, "So what?"

"So, you halfwit," said Tom tetchily, "that information evidently isn't correct because here we are-" he gestured grandiosely at themselves "- alive, descendants of Salazar Slytherin. And she was the last known one." He then pointed at the other books lying open on the table, displaying the tree-lines, as he added with much contempt, "And all the others have the same. Not one says anything different about Sherisse Slytherin."

Closing the book in his hands and sighing, Harry muttered quietly, "We already knew that everyone thinks the line died off ages ago." He gestured at the book resting on his lap. "You can't be surprised."

"I wasn't," retorted Tom solemnly, before he abruptly smirked smugly. "But I found a different
version regarding her death."

Tom grabbed his school bag and took out a glossy, bright, colorful magazine.

At the sight of it, Harry's eyebrows shot upwards and then he guffawed loudly. "The Witch Weekly!" He started sniggering, his green eyes tearing. "You've become a fan of a rag for chits? What – hope to see yourself nominated as The Most Charming Smile?"

He chortled and his brother shot him a murderous glower as he spat, "Shut up, you twit!"

Harry couldn't stop laughing, though. He had often seen Felicity Prewett and her Gryffindor girl friends with that rag, gawking and blushing at the pictures of handsome wizards awarded for stupid stuff –The Dandiest! The Dreamiest Eyes! The Most Scrumptious! The Most Yummy Body!– and then pouring over hairstyle advice, and best fingernail color-charms to match robes of that shade or other, and gossip about who married whom and who cheated with whom and when and why, and such.

It wasn't until Tom used the rag to whack him on the head with full force, making his skull throb, that Harry ceased his amused chuckles and snickers in order to rub and soothe the forming bump.

"It isn't mine, you idiot! It's Hornby's. Olive and her little Ravenclaw friends have been yapping about an article in this magazine the whole week," said Tom, his tone snide and poignant, which suddenly made Harry feel all warm and fuzzy inside, and he grinned to himself, feeling vastly vindicated.

Ha! He had known that his brother couldn't truly like Olive Hornby. Granted, she was very pretty, smart, and a pureblood, and already had Tiberius McLaggen eating out of the palm of her hand, but she was also very nasty and cruel to other girls who were lacking and easy prey, like Myrtle.

"They thought it was utter rubbish, and kept making fun of it," continued Tom acidly, still glaring at Harry, "but as I heard more and more about it, I decided to read it for myself."

He brusquely opened the magazine and flipped until he reached a page, to then shove it along the table towards Harry.

"There, read it, and stop acting like the lamebrain you are!" hissed out Tom, shooting him a venomous look.

"Alright, alright," said Harry in an appeasing tone of voice, "keep your bonnet on."

He rolled his eyes and grabbed the thing. What he saw first was a full, lengthy article that occupied most of the page.

He cleared his throat, and said carefully, as to not arise his brother's temper again, "Erm, I don't suppose it's the piece about 'How to Make your Hair Sparkle like a Fairy's', right?"

"No," said Tom testily. "It's the column by the margin."

"Right," said Harry, glancing at it and trying his best not to find anything amusing in it. "So it's this column written by the… er-" he had to badly rein in his need to chortle "-um, The Pink Quill?"

"Yes," bit out Tom, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

"I see," said Harry tactfully, as he gazed at the small moving picture of the old witch who called herself 'The Pink Quill': she had a long, thin face, with bright emerald, winged eyeglasses and a
peacock feather sticking out from the bun at the back of her head, which bobbed up and down in the air as she moved and gave a shark-like smile.

Seeing no way around it, he heaved a sigh and began to read.

My dear, avid readers and beloved fans, this week I will reveal another heart-wrenching, tragic story of a famous witch swindled, misused, abused, and mistreated by a heartless, despotic wizard.

Researching, unearthing, and unraveling this particular tale has been a project of mine that has lasted for countless months. At last, I'm prepared to give you the unadulterated facts, the brutal truth, that only I have been able to bring forth to light.

I begin the tale by asking you to remember: Who was Sherisse Slytherin?

Witches like myself, vastly educated and knowledgeable regarding the history of the most prominent and important wizarding families, will instantly recall her as being the last descendant of the infamous, dangerous, and deranged Salazar Slytherin, the darkest and most cruel of wizards in English wizarding history.

Witches like myself, enthusiast, devoted, and dedicated self-taught historians, will even know that, according to all publicly-accepted and known accounts, Sherisse Slytherin, like her parents, died in the calamitous outbreak of Dragon Pox in Hogsmeade in 1340, which devastated the wizarding community by taking the lives of many in village and Hogwarts Castle.

At the tender age of fifteen, the last of the Slytherins died. But – did she really? Was it truly due to Dragon Pox, like her parents?

I have unburied the truth: No.

The first fact that made me question the records of renowned historians, regarding Sherisse Slytherin's cause of death, was an unresolved mystery. If she had died two weeks after her parents, as is widely claimed by established authors, what happened to the famed collection of books, heirlooms, and fortune that the Slytherins had amassed for three centuries since the times of their abominable forefather?

Most historians would answer that they were simply lost and destroyed with the passage of time, that perhaps they were plundered and stolen by others after Sherisse's death, or even, that they are still intact, hidden somewhere in Hogwarts, in the legendary, mythical Chamber of Secrets, zealously guarded by the monster within.

I, however, do not believe in fairytales or vague, dismissive answers meant to excuse one's own ignorance and make light of a serious, grievous question. What was the fate of the Slytherins' possessions – who took flight with them?

It was through an old acquaintance of mine – a passionate, ardent, self-taught historian like myself, who throughout her life had formed an impressive collection of rare books – that I found the answer.

In her library, I found an old tome, written by a wizard two centuries ago and published posthumously, only for his research to pass unnoticed, ignored, or ridiculed by wizarding academic circles.

Allow me now to reveal the truth Mortimer Mullhorn had painstakingly unearthed. Sherisse Slytherin did not die of Dragon Pox, but from complications during childbirth.
Childbirth! Many of you must be shaking your heads, in disbelief. From childbirth, at the age of fifteen, when she was unmarried? Yes, my dear, beloved readers.

Her story was clearly a tragic one. After having lost her parents, amidst an outbreak of Dragon Pox and with death surrounding her, she gave birth. The sire, a mysterious M.G..

Mortimer Mullhorn must have known the identity of the wizard who so callously impregnated the young Sherisse Slytherin, only to take the child with him and flee.

In the ensuing chaos produced by the laments of the relatives of those who were dying during the outbreak, the mysterious, ruthless, despicable wizard took his child, and all of the Slytherins' amassed possessions, and escaped.

Mortimer Mullhorn must have discovered the wizard's full name, since his annotation of the wizard's initials – M.G. – had been quickly scribbled, as if it was a reminder to himself, to be further expounded upon.

Alas, he did not.

Mr. Mullhorn died before completing his research, before finishing writing what would surely be an account regarding M.G.'s identity, background, and further fate after fleeing from Hogwarts and Hogsmeade.

It was Mortimer Mullhorn's son who published his father's unfinished work after death. It is so, that we will never come to know who the odious M.G. truly was.

Yet, there was a child, my dear, faithful readers. Sherisse Slytherin was not the last of her line.

Thus, could it be that there are descendants of the ignoble Salazar Slytherin amongst us, this very day, keeping themselves hidden in our midst?

Could it be that there are Parselmouths, those with the darkest and most dreaded and feared of magical abilities, who are deviously passing themselves off as good, honest wizards and witches?

I dare to believe it possible, and shudder.

Harry finished the article and stared at Tom, his eyes wide, his breathing haggard, and his heart loudly thumping in his small chest.

"Is it true?" he breathed out, hope powerfully swelling within him.

"It has to be," said Tom firmly, his lips then stretching into a triumphant smirk. "It's the only explanation possible, given that we exist."

Then he swiftly dug into his schoolbag and brought out a very worn, battered old book.

He presented it to Harry as he said with much self-satisfaction, "I ordered it from Flourish and Blott's. It took them a while, but they found a copy of Mullhorn's book in a small wizarding bookstore in Ireland, and they purchased it for me."

"That's the package you received today," murmured Harry quietly, understanding downing on him as he automatically took the tome. He fixed his brother with a penetrating gaze. "Is she right, then? Did this Mullhorn chap-"

"Yes," replied Tom instantly, then indolently gesturing at the book in Harry's hands. "It's all
exactly like she wrote. Mullhorn's account of what happened to Sherisse Slytherin. The tree-line he made for the Slytherin family – with the annotation of the M.G. initials as the sire of her child. It's all there."

"M.G.," whispered Harry slowly, in wonderment.

"Exactly," said Tom, a smug smirk on his face. "He must be our father's ancestor. Whoever he was, his descendants at some point came to have the Riddle surname."

"And now we finally have our first clue!" piped in Harry excitedly, glancing down at the book in his hands with wide, bright eyes. "Granted, initials isn't much, but it's a start, isn't it?"

"It is," drawled Tom superiorly. "And you have me to thank for that."

"I do," said Harry softly, glancing up at him with a warm, beaming smile. "This is great, Tom!"

That night, Harry could barely sleep, so joyful and exhilarated he was. They were one step closer to finding their dad, because he just knew that he was somewhere out there, waiting for them.
Harry sighed, drowning his sorrows in a porridge that seemed tasteless to him.

The school was having their last breakfast before the holidays: the fairies were fluttering around the beautifully decorated pine trees; at the front of the Great Hall, the Herbology Professor, Herbert Beery, was cheerfully waving his wand, conducting a motley group of students that conformed the school's Choir –mostly Hufflepuffs with a few Gryffindors and Ravenclaws here and there, because apparently all Slytherins felt that it was beneath them to perform for the masses and make utter fools of themselves- who were singing the 'Yuletide at Hogwarts' carol, accompanied by an enchanted harp that looked as if invisible hands were plucking its strings; the other teachers at the Staff's Table were animatedly talking among themselves, wearing festive attires –most notable, Dumbledore's quirky robes that displayed dancing snowmen and prancing reindeers with red noses; while many students were absent from their House tables because they were getting ready to take the Hogwarts Express in two hours.

And Harry was depressed because he wouldn't be going with them and he would miss the festivities at the orphanage. Moreover, he still didn't have a date for the Yule Ball.

Just then, he caught sight of Myrtle Mimbleton and quickly glanced down at his porridge once again.

During the last few days, he had seen Myrtle often shooting him glances from the Ravenclaw Table: sometimes the looks she gave him were bright and hopeful, filled with expectant anticipation; other times –when it was clear Harry wasn't making a move to ask her to the Ball- they were impatient, peeved, and angered.

He heaved a martyrized breath, and then glanced around, inspecting his options.

Inevitably, his gaze first landed on a second-year Gryffindor girl, who was excitedly chattering
with her friends—one of the few times he had seen her acting in a carefree manner.

She wasn't pretty nor ugly, and in precisely that moment, her plain features seemed to be illuminated with inner joy, none of her usual prim, strict seriousness showing.

Nevertheless, it wasn't her looks that mattered to him, but rather what he knew of her.

Minerva McGonagall had been the one who had saved him, one day, long ago, when he had been cornered by Walburga Black and other Slytherins. Minerva had stumbled upon them and then, swiftly, turned around to fetch the Prewett twins' cousin and Head Girl, Muriel.

Ever since, the second-year Gryffindor girl would, from time to time, glance at him. Not with pity - or he wouldn't even consider her, feeling too affronted by it- but rather with sympathy and worry.

He had heard that she was bookwormish, very bright, and excellent in Transfiguration –allegedly, Dumbledore's favorite. Moreover, he had never seen her simpering, giggling stupidly, or coyly fluttering her eyelashes like some other girls. At least, he would be spared that in a dance partner.

Furthermore, it had been Felicity Prewett who had first suggested Minerva, just the other day in the Gryffindors' common room, when he had grumpily admitted he still didn't have a date.

"She's quite nice, actually," said Felicity Prewett, to then shake her head in puzzlement. "I don't know why no one has asked her yet."

"Because she's an unbearable stickler for rules!" groused out Felix angrily. "She confiscated my muggle photo parchment thing-"

"It's called a poster," interjected Felicity shortly.

"Right - that," snapped Felix, then looking mortally offended as he continued, "Minerva confiscated my poster – Confiscated! When she doesn't have the right –she's not even a Prefect!"

"Oh, just you wait," said Felicity in a relishing, vindictive tone of voice, "she'll be made a Prefect in her third year, no doubt about that." She glared at her twin, as she added poisonously, "And you deserved what she did – you went around with a poster of a naked muggle woman-"

"She wasn't naked!" roared Felix defensively. "The girl was wearing those things muggles put on when they go into the sea!"

"A bathing-suit," said Felicity in a suffering tone of voice, before her beautiful mismatched blue and brown eyes narrowed. "It was scandalizing! It fully displayed her legs, arms, and shoulders!"

At Harry's half-amused, half-nonplussed expression, the girl swiftly turned to him as she clarified, "Our cousin Ignatius works under Father in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, so he gets to travel a lot and always sends us souvenirs." She huffed peevishly, as she added, "And last week he was in America, and he sent Felix a poster of a muggle actress-"

"Rita Hayworth," breathed out Felix, his expression dreamy and utterly besotted. "She's so pretty."

Felicity shot him a disgusted look. "She has no shame. And you and your little friends were in the middle of the common room, ogling at her poster like salivating Trolls!"

Felix snapped his head around at that, to glower at her as he spit out accusingly, "Oh, that's rich coming from you - when you gawk at the pictures of wizards in The Witch Weekly!"
Felicity's face turned as red as her hair, before she folded her hands on her lap and said primly, "I don't gawk. I merely glance at the pictures of important wizards who are the recipients of celebrated awards." She cleared her throat, and added airily, "And that day when you caught me at it, I was just looking at the picture of Professor Tilly Toke, because he had been awarded as The Most Gallant-

"Oh, yes, because 'Tilly Toke has an Order of Merlin First Class!'" mimicked Felix in a high-pitched, simpering tone of voice. "He tricked a dragon and saved so many muggles! Tilly Toke is so fabulous, brave, and handsome!"

Felicity blushed profusely –her twin having evidently just repeated words out of her own lips– and Felix cast her a revolted look before he turned to Harry and said entreatingly, "Cousin Ignatius sent that poster to me as a joke, you know? He likes to send muggle stuff from the countries he visits. My friends and I did no harm by looking at a picture of a muggle celebrity." His voice lowered with anger, adding as if his honor had been profoundly impeached, "And Minerva treated us as if we were a bunch of perverts! Took the poster and then went to tattle-tale on us to Muriel!" He shook his head firmly. "You can't take someone like that to the Ball."

"Rubbish," snapped Felicity, bristling and looking affronted. "Minerva is very nice, no matter what you say." She glanced at Harry as she added cajolingly, "I don't think she'll mind that you're one year younger than her, and she's a Quidditch fan, so you'll have plenty to talk about." Then her expression brightened. "As a matter of fact, it's rumored that she's going to be the Team's new Chaser. Those who went to the first tryouts have said that she's actually very good. And she's an excellent dancer too-

Felix let out a loud guffaw, half snorting, half chortling, as he said mockingly, "Oh yes! I heard that when it was her turn to dance with Dumbledore, she swooned as soon as he placed a hand on her waist!" He rolled his mismatched eyes. "Who swoons, I ask you!"

"She fainted?" said Harry amused, though not surprised by the circumstances.

He had already discovered that the Head of other Houses had been giving dancing lessons: Perpetua Fancourt, the Astronomy Professor, to her Ravenclaws; Dumbledore to his Gryffindors; and Tilly Toke to his Hufflepuffs –much to the envy of girls of other Houses.

His Head of House, Horace Slughorn, however had not, because, apparently, most purebloods were given dancing lessons since the cradle. Though Harry suspected that not all were actually good at it.

Indeed, his yearmate, Thaddeus Avery, hulked around like a clumsy Troll at the best of times. And the Slytherin Keeper, Anthonin Dolohov, was dexterous when playing, but off a broom, the boy walked awkwardly, stomping around as if he had the heavy feet of a Giant.

Nevertheless, their Potions Professor had clearly forgotten that there were two Slytherins –Tom and him– who didn't have the 'advantage' of a pureblood upbringing.

Harry didn't know any type of dancing except the Charleston and the Swing, and that was only because when Robert Hutchins had gifted the orphanage with a radio, Alice was at first –before she started tuning the wireless only to the News, to listen about Germany like someone possessed– so excited that she left the radio on channels that played the latest hits and thus she taught them the dances that were all the rage.

It had been much fun, Harry reminisced with a nostalgic pang, though it hadn't prepared him for the Yule Ball. Alice thought that ballroom dancing was outdated, antiquated, stuffy and boring.
Though, according to Tom, formal wizarding dancing wasn't exactly like muggle ballroom dancing.

"It's not like the muggles' Fox-Trot," Tom had said with a disdainful sneer, his tone then turning drawling and arrogant, "Wizarding dancing is one of much more elegance and sophistication, in which every turn and twist has a meaning and a foundation in wizarding traditions and rites."

It was then that Harry had discovered that the week Tom had spent with Olive Hornby and her Ravenclaw friends, at all hours, wasn't just because he was learning about The Pink Quill's article in the Witch Weekly, but because the girls had also been teaching him how to dance.

Seemingly, Tom was a natural at it, and had shortly become a superb dancer. At least that was the gossip traveling through the school's grapevine, which was evidenced by the flock of girls who had started giggling and fluttering their eyelashes at his brother, more insistently than ever, clearly hopeful that Tom would ditch Olive Hornby at the last hour and instead choose one of them for the Yule Ball.

"Yes, well, Minerva fainted because…" Felicity trailed off, looking discomfited and hesitant. Finally, she let out a heavy sigh and mumbled grudgingly, "Fine. Everyone knows why she swooned. She has a huge crush on Dumbledore. Outside of class, she becomes a complete ninny around him."

Felix shot her a triumphant grin at that, and then pointed out in a sensible tone of voice, "Exactly. He tapped his temples with a finger. "She's not right in the head. What girl would fancy Dumbledore? He's ancient!"

"I'll let you know," Felicity huffed out, incensed, "that Dumbledore is in his eighties and thus a wizard in his prime. He's brilliant, powerful, and quite attractive-"

"Oh, so now you fancy Dumbledore as well as Tilly Toke!" blustered Felix, going red with anger, to then growl accusingly, his eyes narrowing, "You're only twelve! You shouldn't be fancying anyone!"

"You're one to speak!" snapped Felicity indignantly. "You're twelve as well and you go around making eyes at that nasty hag of Olive Hornby, like a love-sick puppy! And it's even more pathetic because everyone knows that she fancies Harry's brother!" She squared her shoulder and lifted her chin up. "Besides, that I understand the appeal of Professor Toke and Professor Dumbledore doesn't mean I seriously fancy them. My point is that since Minerva likes Dumbledore, she's a safe option for Harry."

"Safe?" said Felix crisply, his eyes narrowing with suspicion as his gaze flickered from his twin to Harry and back. "Why should you care if she's 'safe'?"

Felicity's cheeks went pink, and she shot an absent-minded Harry a surreptitious glance, before she edged closer to her twin and breathed out in a joyful, secretive whisper, "Remember what Mother told me? That one day I would just know – that when I met my Match, I would just feel it, like a tug in my magical core?" She daintily touched her chest. "Here. Like she did-"

"That's a load of cadswallop!" snorted out Felix derisively. "That Match stuff is utter rubbish that only silly little girls believe!"

Felicity's soft expression vanished from her beautiful face, as she bit out angrily, "It's not! You know Mother was supposed to marry Charlemagne McLaggen but she didn't because she then met Father at a Ministry Ball and instantly felt that he was the one for her! Don't mock it – it's true."
She shot Harry a covert glance, as she added in a low murmur, deeply blushing, yet looking enraptured, "I've felt it. So I know what I'm talking about."

"You have felt nothing!" roared Felix, looking beside himself with fury. "You're too young to even think of such things and I will not allow it anyway-"

"Allow it! How dare you think I need your permission-"

"I'm your twin – your brother! Father and I are the ones who decide, and it's my duty to protect you-"

"Protect me! Don't make me laugh – I'm the one who's always taking care of you, not the other way around! And Mother thinks it should be a witch's decision, so I'll be bonded with whom I choose, it will not be up to you or Father-"

"Over my dead body!"

The subject of the conversation went wholly unnoticed by Harry, who had long ago disconnected his mind from the twins' loud ramblings, as he often did when they engaged in a full battle of snipping and bickering.

And thus, he finally slipped away, undetected as the twins kept railing at each other about something or other, with his head buzzing since the Prewetts had given him much food for thought.

Indeed, now that he glanced at Minerva McGonagall again, he finally came to a resolution. As soon as he finished his breakfast, he would arm himself with valor and go over to the Gryff's Table and ask the girl to the Ball.

Just as he made his decision, he was yanked from his musings when an owl swooped down and dropped an envelope in his bowl of porridge.

Grumbling with irritation under his breath – since that same owl had also dropped a letter for Tom, though just to one side of the boy's plate and not in his food - Harry lifted up the soaked envelope and flicked his wand at it, casting a drying and restoring charm.

"It's from Alice," said Harry happily as soon as he took out the letter and recognized the penmanship.

At that, Tom scoffed scathingly and abandoned his envelope back on the table, without giving it a second glance, to go back to his 'healthy' breakfast, which unlike Harry's, consisted of 'nutritious' stuff like fruits.

Tom had already forced Harry to eat an apple, after all, so that should satisfy his brother – though it rarely did. But Tom seemed to have many other things on his mind and thus didn't push the issue, for once.

Along with the letter, a newspaper clipping had slipped from the envelope, though at first Harry didn't pay any attention to it. He was rather absorbed with Alice's writing.

She sounded sad and mournful since they would be staying at their 'boarding school' instead of returning home to the orphanage. Mostly, she seemed sorrowful that they wouldn't be spending together their birthday on New Year's Eve, expressing how much she missed them and longed to be with them in their day of celebration. Though she did imply she would be saving their birthday presents for when they returned for summer holidays, which made Harry grin widely.
Finally, in a decidedly melancholic, reminiscing mood, she prompted Harry to take a glance at the newspaper clipping she had sent him, to make him remember how much fun they had had 'that day'.

Curious, Harry picked up the clipping and roved over the article.

It was a commemoration of the former monarch of Great Britain and Emperor of India, George the Fifth, who had died over two years ago and had been much admired for being what a King of the English people should be – of 'stern features', 'strong, self-possessed, and stoic in the face of adversity', and with a 'powerful, authoritative presence that commanded and gained instant respect and obeisance'.

It went on to describe the celebration of the King's Silver Jubilee that had marked the monarch's 25th year of reign. The large, black and white still-picture that accompanied the article showed exactly that: the crowds standing all along a wide street, with sticks in hands that had small English flags made of paper, and the ornate, golden carriage that carried George the Fifth, with glittering crown, jeweled medals on chest, and heavy cape on shoulders, amidst his escort of royal guards in their crimson uniforms, with sheathed swords, mounted on magnificent horses.

Harry remembered it clearly. He had been eight years old, and Alice had taken them to central London, to wait for the royal procession in front of Westminster Abbey.

He had been bubbling with excitement, wanting to see 'the King! The King!', and a man in the crowd had smiled down at him, asked Alice for permission, and then effortlessly lifted him up so that he sat on the man's shoulders and had a clear view of the street. And the people had cheered and clamored and waved their paper flags, and women and little girls had thrown flowers to the street, to adorn the way, as the King's carriage passed by in a sedate pace.

Looking solemn and grave, King George hadn't waved, but instead curtly inclined his head in greeting, and the crowds roared, and Harry had jovially shouted along with them, fascinated by the spectacle and by the fact that that man was actually 'their King'.

With a reminiscing, fond smile on his face, Harry gazed again at the picture of the newspaper clipping. And that's when he suddenly saw it, depicted on the festive adornments hanging from the windows of a shop.

At first he froze, his eyes wide and incredulous, then he gaped, as it all suddenly clicked in his mind, the revelations shocking, and finally he breathed out in a thread of a gobsmacked whisper, "The Tudor Rose."

In the next second, he swung his head around to stare at his brother, and said in a loud, exhilarated voice, "It's the Tudor Rose, Tom! That's why I thought it looked so bloody familiar – I had seen it before, of course – but in the Muggle World!"

"What are you blabbering on about?" snapped Tom, darkly vexed as he lifted his gaze from his breakfast.

"We have go to the library – now!" said Harry urgently, picking up envelope, letter, and clipping, and shooting to his feet.

Tom arched an eyebrow at him as he drawled mockingly, "You want to go to the library?"

"Yes, right now. Let's go!"

However, his brother didn't move – didn't even twitch. Tom just went back to his breakfast, fully
ignoring him, clearly thinking Harry must have been babbling about some idiocy and simply not understanding.

Growling under his breath, Harry wasted no time in yanking Tom up by the arm and instantly pulling him along, brusquely and with utter disregard if his grip was too forceful or bruising.

He made a run for it and yanked his brother along. Several times, Tom tried to break free as he furiously hissed at him, but Harry just gripped harder and pulled more brutally, never halting his pace.

He broke into the library in a full sprint, and when Ciceron Plume barked "No running in here!" from his desk by the entrance, Harry paid it no mind and only stopped when he reached the Potions Section, releasing his brother and panting as he caught his breath.

He whipped out his wand in the next instant, and having seen Tom performing the Electus Charm so many times before, he perfectly executed the required wand-movements and said hastily, "Eligo Egeriana Rose!"

The 'woosh' was loud as hundreds of books shot out from surrounding shelves and landed in a pile on top of the nearest table.

Harry gawked, dismayed, at the sheer number of them.

"Egeriana Rose?" bit out Tom, looking vastly annoyed. "That's what all this is about?" He scoffed scornfully. "I already know what it is. A potions ingredient Slytherin used for Fertili-"

"I know that too," snapped Harry impatiently. "It's not about it being a Potions ingredient, but…" He trailed off and shook his head. "Just bear with me, will you!"

He spun around and briskly cast a spell to send the books back to their places, and tried again, amending, "Eligo description of the Egeriana Rose!"

This time it seemed that the books that merely listed it as an ingredient were excluded – as had been his intention– since only ten books or so landed on the table.

Harry sighed wearily, before he plopped down on a chair and said briskly, "Help me go through these."

"If you told me what you're looking for," gritted out Tom, appearing to be highly irked, as he took a seat in a fluid, elegant motion, "it would be easier."

"I'm not quite sure yet," retorted Harry as he grabbed the nearest book. "I just have some suspicions. Simply look for the book that has the lengthiest description of the Egeriana Rose, telling about its origins and stuff, and I'll try to explain."

Just as he saw that the first book had nothing but a short paragraph only mentioning the magical properties of the Rose, making him shake his head with irritation, he began as he took another tome, his words rushing out, "I first saw the Egeriana Rose on Maximillian Malfoy's robes – remember, when the loon tried to strike us with his cane, at the platform of the Hogwarts' Express in King's Cross Station?"

"I remember," said Tom dryly, flipping through a book as he shot him a piercing glance and frowned. "Though I don't remember seeing any flower on his robes-"

"Well, I do," said Harry curtly, finding that the tome in his hands just explained how the Egeriana
Rose had to be watered and treated if it was cultivated in a magical greenhouse.

He released a frustrated breath and took the next one, as he continued, "Then I saw the flower again, on your Hogwarts a History book, when you showed me the picture of a painting that was a copy of Slytherin's original portrait that had been destroyed or lost, or some such thing." He waved his free hand dismissively. "And then I saw it again, that day in Defense Against the Dark Arts, when Professor Galatea Merrythought said those nasty things about Veela because she wanted to rile up Abraxas Malfoy, because she hates Veela due to what happened to her brother…"

He trailed off and shook his head. "Never mind about that. My point is that she, like Maximilllian Malfoy, and the portrait of Salazar Slytherin, wore the flower here." he pointed at the middle of his chest with a finger "-right here."

Harry closed the book in his hands shut, having found nothing useful, and added quickly, "It always looked very familiar to me. So I asked the Prewett twins about it and they told me that it was called the Egeriana Rose. That Salazar Slytherin had worn it as a symbol of his discovery of the flower as a magical ingredient, of his Mastery in Potions, and his invention of Fertility Potions. And they also explained that Professor Merrythought and Malfoy's grandfather wore it because it was a symbol of a group they were members of – The True Blood Alliance." He paused to cast his brother a pointed look. "And the other day when you showed me the books with Slytherin's tree-line, one of his descendants was pointed out as the founder of that very same group. So that was confirmed."

"You have told me nothing new," interjected Tom acerbically, scowling at him. "I already knew about all of that through my research." He held up the book that he had been inspecting, as he added tartly, "That much is said in this tome as well-"

"Why didn't you say before," snapped Harry crossly, irreverently plucking the book from his brother's clutches, earning him an irked glare from Tom which he wholly ignored.

He quickly flipped through the pages until he found the chapter about the flower, and he scanned the sentences with his gaze, trailing a finger under the words. "Right. Discovered by Slytherin… first to use it as an ingredient… it's full name is Verus-cruor Egerianus…. named by him… Verus-cruor, meaning 'true blood' in Latin-" his eyebrows shot up at that "- because for the flower to have heightened magical properties it should not only be picked at midnight during a full-moon, but should also be given a drop of blood from a pureblood witch or wizard, as Slytherin discovered. Well," he added in a wry mutter, "that explains where the True Blood Alliance's name came from and why they use the flower as a symbol of blood purity."

His gazed focused back on the text, becoming intrigued by the revelations, as he kept reading. "Slytherin named it Egerianus too, after Egeria, a water nymph who was a willing servant and used her magical powers to aid the famed witch Diana of Roman Times, who did great wonders by using her knowledge of Healing and Midwifery to help witches give birth to healthy infants. Diana became a legend to muggles, who now think she was just some mythical deity - Goddess of the Moon, Fertility, and Hunting."

Tom interrupted with a contemptuous scoff. "One more proof of muggle stupidity."

"Well, yes, I suppose, in this case," muttered Harry, his forehead then scrunching up at the next part. "The Verus-cruor Egerianus is a flower indigenous…" He trailed off, frowning deeply, raking his brain. "That means that - that…"

"That it can only be found in that area," said Tom, shooting him a snide look. "That it is a native, local plant, you dimwit."
"Right. I knew that," mumbled Harry, his cheeks turning bright red. He cleared his throat. "Yeah, so it's indigenous to – Ha!" He whooped triumphantly, pointing a finger at the page. "It's indigenous to Lancashire and Yorkshire county, only varying in color!"

"So?" drawled Tom unimpressed. "I don't see how it has to do with anything-"

"I has to do with everything," interjected Harry adamantly. "Don't you remember? You said Slytherin was from Woodcroft – a town that today would be in Lancashire county-"

"And?" demanded Tom sharply, glowering with vexation. "I don't see how it has to do with anything-"

"And?" interjected Tom sharply, glowering with vexation. "He went back, obviously. I read he travelled widely across the whole of England after founding Hogwarts with the others, because in the Forbidden Forest he didn't find any magical plants that would serve as a base for creating a Fertility Potion. I waved a hand airily. "Evidently, he discovered the Egeriana Rose when he went back to what remained of Woodcroft, since it's hardly likely he had discovered its magical properties when he had been a child before Cliodna took him away."

"Yes, yes, that sounds possible enough," said Harry, before he carded his fingers through his hair with exasperation. "But don't you understand? The Egeriana Rose looked so familiar to me when I saw it on Maximillian Malfoy, Slytherin's portrait, and Professor Merrythought, because I had seen it before – because the Egeriana Rose is the Tudor Rose!"

He plucked out Alice's newspaper clipping and briskly flattened it right next to the book's picture of the flower, pointing at the muggle photo of the article, right at one of the shop's decorations depicting the royal emblem of the Tudor House, as he added, "Part of it, that is. Look at the number of petals of the Egeriana Rose, and their shape – it's exactly like the one in the Tudor Rose, Tom!"

Frowning, his brother brought up his chair to be next to his, to then gaze at the pictures with narrowed eyes. "Perhaps. It must be a coincidence, clearly-"

"No, it's not," gritted out Harry. He shook his head, and added impatiently, "Don't you remember what Old John Bryce told us, about his days as a soldier during the Great War?"

Tom shot him a scathing look, as he said contemptuously, "I never paid any attention to that stupid, blabbering oaf. He hardly knew anything about the politics involved-"

"Don't insult him," bit out Harry instantly, angrily glowering at him. He then huffed, as he added sharply, "Well, if you had listened, you would remember he said, that during the Belgium campaign, he was part of the British 55th Infantry Division. He grinned widely in remembrance. "Their motto was 'We win or die, us who wear the Red Rose of Lancaster!'. And he was part of that division because he was a 'Lancastrian at heart', as he put it, born and raised in the city of Preston."

He shook his head with fond affection, before he continued quietly, "And I remember clearly because, days before, Alice had been teaching us about the War of the Roses-"

"I hardly believe that you really remember her lessons," interjected Tom, giving him a look that patently showed Harry just what his brother thought of his mental capacities.

Deciding to let it go and not get drawn into a fight of spitting insults, he finally admitted grudgingly, "I remember because by then you had started tutoring me after Alice's lessons." He glared at him. "And you were so harsh and nasty about it that I had no choice but to learn."

"Ah. That explains it," drawled Tom superiorly, smirking.

Harry merely rolled his eyes at that. "My point is that the War of the Roses ended when the
Lancasters' Henry Tudor married Elizabeth of York, uniting the two Houses under one throne. Alice said that was when the Tudor Rose was made up: a combination of the Lancasters’ Red Rose and the York's White Rose, you see?" He excitedly gestured at the book. "And this says the Egeriana Rose is indigenous to those counties – being red in Lancashire and white in York! Its two variants form the Tudor Rose!"

"I don't see the relevance," said Tom in a bored tone of voice. "It just means that muggles of those two lineages chose the Egeriana Rose as a heraldic emblem for their Houses, obviously without knowing it was a magical flower." He waved a hand dismissively. "It wouldn't be the first time a flower or plant was used as a symbol. The Scots have the thistle as their national emblem, the Irish the shamrock, and the Welsh the leek. Not to mention the French Royal House of the Anjou, who used the Fleur-de-lis."

Harry reined in his urge to yank his hair in exasperation, and heaved a deep breath, before he said pointedly, "Yeah, alright, but are the thistle, shamrock, leek, or lily magical flowers or plants? I've never heard anything of the sort. So are they?"

"No," conceded Tom grudgingly, his tone acerbic.

Harry grinned at him widely. "And do they have any significance in the Wizarding World besides the one they have in the Muggle World?"

"No," snapped Tom, his eyes narrowing.

"Exactly!" said Harry triumphantly. "But the Egeriana Rose does! And things get leaked between Muggle and Wizarding World all the time, don't they?" he added animatedly, rushing out, "Take the Hogwarts Express –it's a muggle train! And gramophones and photograph cameras and indoor plumbing - all copied from muggle inventions and then adapted. And it's the other way around too. Look at all the famous wizards and witches and creatures of the Magical World that are part of muggle fairytales and myths. And the-"

"Yes, I get your point," interrupted Tom caustically, his expression reluctant and increasingly turning darker with each passing second. "Just tell me whatever idiotic speculation you believe as true."

"Not yet," said Harry coolly. "When did the War of the Roses happen?"

"You should know yourself-"

"I do," cut in Harry, toothily grinning. "But I want you to say it and realize what it means."

Tom shot him a glower, as he bit out impatiently, "From 1455 to 1485. And that's pertinent because?"

"Because Sherisse Slytherin gave birth in 1340!" said Harry enthusiastically. "It all adds up! From when her baby was born to 1455, there was plenty of time for her descendants to have gone to-

"No wizard would have gone to the Muggle World," hissed out Tom, glaring darkly, looking personally insulted.

"They would if they had no other choice," retorted Harry vehemently. "According to The Pink Quill, M.G. fled from Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, didn't he? He left Sherisse to die, took the baby, and supposedly the Slytherins' possessions too, and he fled."

His green eyes flashed with the excitement of his own discoveries, as he continued, "But someone
must have witnessed some part of it, right? Mortimer Mullhorn must have found something – a written record, a piece of parchment, a letter, part of a diary- something that a witness must have written down, because if not, he wouldn't have found out about M.G.. That means someone knew and they must've alerted others, and M.G. fled because he didn't want to be caught. He was a criminal after all, at least for having stolen Slytherin things. And having done something like that to such a famous family, where could he go but to the Muggle World?"

"That's utter nonsense," said Tom bitingly, a fierce scowl on his handsome face.

"No, it's not," snapped Harry decisively. "Everyone thinks Sherisse was the last Parselmouth and Slytherin because M.G. and his descendants hid in the Muggle World and never dared to show their faces in the Wizarding one. Because they must have feared that people would know what their ancestor, M.G., had done – surely because at the very least, the things they had stolen from Sherisse and her dead parents would be taken back. They hid, and that's why no one ever heard about any Parselmouths after Sherisse."

"What are you getting at?" demanded Tom sharply, his dark blue eyes narrowing.

"My point is," replied Harry in a victorious tone of voice, "that they went to the Muggle World, lived amongst them, and they must have known they were descendants of Slytherin - whether M.G. told his child that or either because they realized it themselves." He waved a hand dismissively. "After all, according to the tree-lines you showed me, all of Salazar Slytherin's descendants were Parselmouths. The trait never even skipped one of them. The same must have happened to Sherisse's descendants. Since they were Parselmouths, they must've realized they were Slytherins, and as such, they would have felt the right to use the Egeriana Rose, wouldn't they? It has such significance in the Wizarding World -because Salazar used it as his personal symbol, because his descendant and founder of the True Blood Alliance used it as the emblem of his group too- that they would have displayed it, proudly, as a mark of their ancestry – yet safely, because they did it around muggles."

Tom's eyes narrowed further, now mere slits, as he hissed out angrily, "If you're implying-"

"I'm not implying but saying!" snapped Harry, furiously slamming his hands on the table. "It all fits together and it can't all be a series of coincidences, Tom! You're just being pigheaded because you despise the idea that our ancestors were cowards and mingled with muggles. But as soon as I saw the Tudor Rose-" he gestured briskly at Alice's newspaper clipping "- and recognized it as two Egeriana Roses put together, I realized that they were directly linked. That Sherisse's and M.G.'s descendants, at least one of them, passed himself off as a muggle and he used the Egeriana Rose. Whoever was the first Lancaster or York to use the Rose as a 'heraldic emblem', as you called it, wasn't a muggle but a wizard – a Slytherin and a 'G'."

He pushed himself off the table, rising to his feet, and demanded sharply, "Do you know which Lancaster or York was the first to use the Rose as a symbol of 'their House'?"

"No," bit out Tom poignantly, glowering at him, looking indignant, revolted, and clearly too disgusted with the possibility of Harry's speculations being true.

"Exactly as I thought," said Harry nonchalantly, "because Alice never went into that." He skewered his brother with a piercing gaze, as he concluded firmly, "But that 'Lancaster' or 'York' is Sherisse's and M.G.'s descendant. He's our clue. We find out who he was, and we'll find our father." He gestured pointedly at their surroundings. "We'll not find books about Muggle History here."

"That's where we'll find our answers."
"I'm not going to the orphanage," spit out Tom harshly, his dark blue eyes flashing and his face contorting with rage.

Harry cast him a long, slow glance, before he shrugged his shoulders impassively. "Fine, stay here. I'm off. Got some packing to do and a train to catch."

He spun around, only taking Alice's letter and newspapers clipping with him, and sauntered away.

He counted one second, two seconds, three and-

"Harry!" he heard Tom's hissed out, infuriated shout behind him, along with the sound of scrambling, hurried footfalls rushing up to him.

Harry devilishly grinned to himself, feeling vastly smug, and kept walking, coolly ignoring when Tom caught up to him and briskly matched his pace, seething by his side, but silent.
Part I: Chapter 27

Tom and Harry finally arrived to the front steps of the orphanage.

The trip back had not been particularly pleasant.

After leaving the library, they had reached their dormitory in order to pack their things and change into muggle clothes. Tom had still been in an acerbic, moody disposition, dragging his feet as if hopping to delay them and make them miss the train. So Harry had taken matters in hand and had made use of his ample array of Charm spells to swiftly pack all their things in their trunks.

Thankfully, they were just in time to catch the last of the carriages that left from Hogwarts' entrance to take them to Hogsmeade's Station.

With much on their minds, they chose a secluded, empty compartment, all to themselves, in the Hogwarts Express. For the whole duration of the trip, Tom had not spoken a word to him, only looking out through the window, his face increasingly turning darker the closer they got to London.

Once they arrived at King's Cross Station, it had been easy, at least. One of the spells Harry had cast on their trunks was the Feather-Light Charm, so that they would have no problem pulling them around. And Tom hadn't brought Lord Horkos.

"At least I can spare him from suffering two whole weeks at the orphanage," Tom had said crisply before they left Hogwarts, when his brother was still speaking to him. "He'll be fine in the Owelry. He likes it." He had smirked at Harry, looking highly pleased. "He's always screeching, attacking, and intimidating the other owls, and already got for himself the best niche in the place."

Thus, only carrying trunks that weighted nothing, they had taken a series of double-decker buses to reach their neighborhood. The sky had already turned dark by the time they made their way to St.
Jerome's, leaving tracks on the snowed streets.

At present, they were climbing up the doorsteps of the orphanage, with silence still reigning heavily between them.

For a moment, Harry paused before knocking, as he frowned, puzzled.

The house looked a mite blurry to him. He took off his eyeglasses, inspecting them, but he saw no smudges on the lenses. Releasing a sigh, he put them back on, realizing what it must mean.

As he rapped his knuckles on the door, he could hear a loud mix of voices coming from within the house, all sounding cheerful and excited, and he smiled with anticipation.

They didn't have to wait for long. The door was drawn open and Magda peered down at them, surprise painted on her face. She and another one called Karen were the two girls who had replaced the odious Mr. Jenkins as caregivers, a long while back.

"What are you doing here?" She blinked at them bemusedly. "Alice said you were staying in your boarding school."

"Evidently not," said Tom caustically, glowering up at her as if a greater fool he had never encountered, before he snapped angrily, "Are you going to let us in or not?"

"No need to get nasty," Magda huffed out, moving to a side to allow them in.

Tom shot her one last glare as he stepped inside, briskly dragging his trunk after himself, and Harry merely followed at his heels, shaking his head.

Harry was assaulted by all sorts of sounds when they entered the playroom, where all the orphanage seemed to have gathered to spend their last hours together before having to turn to bed.

The room was already decorated for Christmas. There was a rather scraggly, small pine tree at one corner, with paper decorations that seemed to have been cut out from newspapers and colored with crayons. The brick fireplace had countless of ordinary grey socks hanging from the mantelpiece, though they looked to be stuffed with candies. And the walls were given a festive touch with garlands and wreaths pinned here and there.

Moreover, the voices of children were meshed with the Christmas carols that came from the radio at one corner of the room, and the ensuing cacophony was loud.

It was Alice who saw them first. Her look at first startled at the sight of them, then beaming with happiness as she rushed up and pulled Harry into an embrace, making him drop his trunk.

"Oh, you came back home!" she gushed joyously, before she released him and gazed down at him, looking worried. "But why didn't you write to let us know? I would have waited for you at King's Cross. You didn't have any problems, did you?"

"It was a last minute decision," said Harry, smiling up at her, "so we didn't have the chance to let you know beforehand." He then rolled his eyes. "And of course we didn't have any problems. We know our way around London."

Alice didn't seem to be too mollified by that, still looking apprehensive that she hadn't been there to accompany two little boys.

"Well, I'm glad you changed your minds," she said at last, her tone warm, as she then glanced at
Tom to give him a welcoming smile. She clearly knew better than to try to hug him.

It was then that his friends caught sight of Harry, bubbling with enthusiasm as they rushed up to their little group.

"I knew you would come for Christmas!" said Amy Benson, giving him a tight, lingering hug, blushing as she looked into his eyes and added tentatively, "You missed me, didn't you? Tell me you did. That's why you came, right?"

Harry heard Tom hissing something under his breath, and he glanced at his brother to see him darkly scowling, his eyes narrowed at the girl. Well, no surprise there. Tom had always hated his friends.

"Let the boy have some breathing air, Amy," said Eric Whalley, rolling his eyes, before he patted Harry on the back. "Good to have you here." Then he added in an excited rush, "You gotta tell us all about your prissy school for stuck-up rich kids. You never say much in your letters-"

"Oh, yes," breathed out Amy, her blue eyes wide with curiosity. "Did you meet the sons of Lords? Are they really very nasty? What do they wear-"

"Look what I got for my birthday!" piped in Billy Stubbs, apparently unable to contain his excitement for much longer.

The boy held up a large cat that had missing tuffs of hair and a rather vicious air about him, as evidenced by all the scratches on Billy's hands and face.

"Alice found him in the streets. He was starving, poor thing!" said Billy, looking down at his pet with a soft, adoring expression on his face.

Just then, Harry heard Alice muttering under her breath, "… more trouble than it's worth… wouldn't have brought it in if I had known…"

"I've named him Puff!" declared Billy proudly. "After Puffy the Bunny, you know-" He clamped his mouth shut, paling, as he shot Tom a terrified look, before he quickly looked away and swallowed, remaining silent.

Tom, for his part, smirked widely at the boy, the dark expression on his face vanishing to be replaced by a smug, self-satisfied look.

"Er, yes," said Harry quickly, forcing a smile to stretch on his lips. "So Puff, eh? He looks very nice, Billy." Though he made no attempt to pet the thing.

"He's a wild beast," snorted out Eric.

"No, he's not!" snapped Billy, bristling defensively. "He just needs time to get used to other people." The boy glanced down at the cat in his arms with loving, misty eyes, as he reached out a hand to pet him. "Don't you, Puff?"

As soon as they boy touched him, the cat spit out a dangerous hiss, flung out a paw to slash the boy's hand with its claws, and then jumped out of Billy's arms, dashing away.

"Puff!" cried out Billy, vanishing from their side as he scrambled after the cat.

"See what I mean?" said Eric in a suffering tone of voice as they observed their friend disappear through a crowd of children.
Abruptly, a loud wail rose above all other sounds and voices, and Harry glanced around, startled. "What's that?"

"A baby," said Amy, pointing a finger towards the other end of the room. "Karen found her two days ago at the doorsteps."

Indeed, Harry saw the caregiver with a baby in her arms. One of Amy's friends, Matilda, was with her, cooing and making faces at it.

"Mati has taken a shine to her," piped in Amy, not looking too happy that her friend had abandoned her for a baby. She huffed. "She even goes to the nursery to watch over her. So Karen allowed her to name the baby. She's called Mottie."

Harry winced. Ouch. Poor thing. His expression must have been very telling because Amy giggled, as she said, "I know. It's an awful name."

"Who cares about the baby," said Eric, rolling his eyes, before he added enthusiastically, "Tell him about all the other things that have happened!"

"Like what?" prompted Harry, intrigued.

Eric shot him a large, wide smile. "Look around. Notice anyone missing?"

Frowning, Harry scanned the room with his eyes, and then, "Where's Dennis?"

Amy giggled happily and Eric toothily grinned at him, as he said with much relish, "You should have remembered the date of his birthday. We noticed you didn't say anything in your letters so we didn't tell you. We wanted it to be a surprise." His grin widened and became so large that it seemed to occupy the entirety of his freckled face. "Dennis Bishop turned eighteen just two weeks after you left. And Jake last month. So-"

"They've left!" exclaimed Harry exultantly as the realization struck him.

He hadn't even thought about his childhood tormentor when he had been at Hogwarts. And much less about Jake, one of Dennis Bishop's friends who liked to say cruel things to the younger children and make them cry. Though the boy never bullied them physically as Dennis did, nor had he targeted Harry, surely because he was already Dennis' exclusive prey.

The news decidedly put him in a very cheerful, festive mood, and he beamed back at his friends.

"Yup," said Eric, his eyes glinting. "They're gone and good riddance to them."

"Oh, but that's not all," said Amy enthusiastically. "We've got new children-

A group of little children came careening, bumping into her and nearly knocking her over if it wasn't for Eric's fast reflexes, who quickly grabbed Amy to steady her, as the runts took no notice and kept running and happily shrieking as they chased each other.

"Watch where you're going, you midgets!" shouted Eric angrily, as he finally released Amy's arm.

"Who are those?" said Harry, utterly gobsmacked as his gaze followed the little children around the room.

Tom and him had always been the youngest in the orphanage. Even as they grew up, St. Jerome's hadn't received any new children, because they already had a full house.
That the orphanage had taken in a baby left at their doorsteps, that was understandable, since the nursery had been empty for as long as he could remember, so they had the space for it. But having new little children?

Alice, who had thus far been content to let Harry have his reunion with his friends without budging in, was who replied, clearing her throat.

"They are John, Matthew, Anne, and Peter," she said. "They are from another orphanage that had to close due to lack of funds from the government. They sent their children to other orphanages in the country and four came to us."

She paused, looking anxious and fretful as she glanced at Tom and him.

"We didn't know you were coming for Christmas Holidays," she began, her tone apprehensive. "So we…" She sighed heavily. "Well, come and you'll see, and I'll think of something."

With that, and calling out, "Magda, will you please come along to help?", Alice made her way out of the room, with Tom and Harry following her as they pulled their trunks after them: Harry bemused, Tom looking incensed.

After climbing stairs and reaching the floor of the boys' quarters, Alice opened the door of their bedroom.

Harry gaped, releasing the handle of his trunk, at the sight. The room was an utter mess: their closet was wide open with all sorts of things sticking out; their two beds were a mass of disorderly bed sheets, blankets, and pillows; there was a new cot in the middle; and someone had drawn all over their walls with crayons - there were colorful squiggles, doodles, stick figures, suns, flowers, butterflies, other incomprehensible swirls and lines, and whatnot.

"Peter likes to draw," said Alice in a small voice, looking deeply apologetic.

"You gave our room to others?" hissed out Tom, his voice so furious, sharp, and incisive that it sounded like a whiplash.

Alice flinched, before she glanced at them beseechingly, and said softly, "We didn't have anywhere to put them." She shook her head, looking angered. "Kathy wrote, saying that we didn't have space for extra children, but they didn't care. All orphanages are in our situation. So we had no choice but to put Peter, John, and Matthew in your room. And little Anne in the one Dennis Bishop shared with Jake."

Harry sighed, before he gave her a gentle smile. "It's alright. Tom and I can just sleep in the…" He frowned uncertainly. "Um, in the…"

"What – in the kitchen?" snarled Tom, to then lower his voice and whisper poignantly in his ear, "Like house-elves?"

Harry winced, and then bit his bottom lip, saying nothing to that.

"You see? We should have never come back here," continued Tom in a venomous, furious whisper. "We're not wanted."

As if to prove his point, Tom then turned around to skewer Alice with a dark gaze as he sneered, "What were you going to do when we came back for summer holidays? Kick us to the curb?"

"Of course not!" said Alice, shocked. She gestured at their bedroom anxiously. "This is only a
temporary solution. We would have restored your room to how it was before, by then." She gazed
at them entreatingly. "You must understand, we didn't think it would affect you. We didn't know
you would be coming for Christmas."

She shook her head, distressed, before she tapped a finger on her chin.

"Oh, I know!" she said suddenly, her eyes bright. "We'll move Peter, John, and Matthew to little
Anne's room, and she can sleep with me in mine, for the time being. And so," she added, giving
them a big smile, "you can have your room back."

"We better," bit out Tom acidly.

Alice engaged the help of Magda to tidy their room up, pull out the extra cot, and then move the
three little boys' things from their closet. They travelled up and down the corridor, carrying things,
from their room to the one that had once been Dennis Bishop's.

It didn't take that long, though all the while Tom's expression darkened like gathering clouds in a
storm.

When Alice and Magda were finally done, and left them alone in their bedroom, Harry released a
sigh as he plopped down on his bed.

"This is horrid," said Tom angrily as he kicked a leg of his bed. He caught sight of a bright pink
and yellow butterfly with a smiley face, drawn on the wall just above his bed, amidst beaming suns
and flowers, and his scowl turned even darker.

He spun around to glower at Harry, as he spat out, "Being back here is like being in prison, for life!
I can't stand it. We cannot even do magic!"

Harry could do nothing but give him a sympathetic look. It did feel a mite strange to be back after
having experienced Hogwarts for some months. Oh, he was happy to see Alice and his friends
again, but the orphanage suddenly seemed so lackluster and grim in comparison.

And he was well aware of their limitations regarding magic. Horace Slughorn had called them into
their office, during the first week at Hogwarts, to explain about the Statute of Secrecy and the
Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. They had already known quite a bit
about such things, from their Hogwarts letters that had also included a long list of rules they had to
follow and laws they were subjected to.

To Harry's surprise, though, their Head of House had also revealed to them that when Dumbledore
had visited the orphanage, he had cast a ward on the house, following Ministry Law regarding the
homes of muggleborns. Apparently, if they did magic in the orphanage, the ward would instantly
alert the Improper Use of Magic Office of the Ministry and they would be punished with expulsion
from Hogwarts.

"Can you see it?" snapped Tom, who was now piercing him with his eyes.

Harry blinked. "See what?"

"The ward Slughorn told us about, you fool!" snapped Tom impatiently. "Is it there?"

At that, Harry glanced around, and said hesitantly, "Um… I don't really know… I see nothing,
except…"

"Except what?" demanded Tom instantly.
Harry sighed wearily. "It's nothing. The walls just look a bit blurry." He gestured sadly at his eyeglasses. "I think I need new lenses."

"The walls?" said Tom frowning, to then add pointedly, "Just the walls?"

"Oh." Harry shot him a bewildered look before he glanced all around their room again. "Um, yeah, I think so. But surely it's just because my eyesight got worse. I don't see anything glowing. Nothing like what I see in Hogwarts-

"Do your eyes hurt?" pressed on Tom insistently. "Do you feel a headache?"

"No," replied Harry frowning.

"Then it's not your eyesight," said Tom slowly, a pensive look on his face. "If you see the walls blurry, it must be the ward."

"You think?" muttered Harry, as he turned his face to inspect the wall at his side.

He peered closer at it, frowning when he thought he saw something. He couldn't quite tell. It was blurry, but for a moment something had appeared: fade, little marks that had vanished in the next second, he believed.

It disquieted him. After Dumbledore's visit to the orphanage they had had several weeks before going to Hogwarts and he hadn't seen anything blurry then – not the walls nor the orphanage from the outside.

And suddenly he could see traces of the ward now? In the months he had been at Hogwarts, his strange ability had grown?

One thing was to see Hogwarts' wards, that were known to be very powerful, or the glowing magic of the horn of the unicorn they had been shown during Care of Magical Creatures, and such, but to start seeing magic in wards that were not that powerful was another matter altogether.

What would happen later? Would he start seeing magic in every little thing of the Wizarding World? It would be very bothersome - horrible, in fact. He would only find reprieve in the Muggle World. Or perhaps he could turn it off, somehow?

Harry shook his head, casting aside such gloomy thoughts. He was making a storm in a teacup. Surely it wouldn't come to that.

"This is just great," said Tom acerbically, scowling darkly. "So Slughorn was right and Dumbledore did cast a ward on the orphanage."

Pulling out of his musings, Harry glanced at his brother, his expression quizzical. "What about outside? The Ministry of Magic can't have a way of knowing if we use magic outside the orphanage."

"They do," grumbled Tom angrily. "Because of The Trace."

"Trace?" Harry frowned, nonplussed. "What trace? Slughorn didn't say anything about any traces."

Tom scoffed loudly. "Of course he didn't. They don't tell children - especially not muggleborns, like we are supposed to be." A disgusted expression crossed his face. "Of course, halfbloods and purebloods are surely told by their parents."
"Will you just tell me what it is?" urged Harry impatiently.

Tom shot him an annoyed look. "The Trace is a charm put on underaged wizards. When any magic is performed in the vicinity of the underaged wizard –outside of Hogwarts, evidently- the Ministry of Magic is alerted to the spell that was used, the location of the caster, and the time. Once the wizard becomes of age, the charm vanishes by itself." His expression darkened considerably. "Dumbledore must have cast it on us when he came here, and we didn't notice." He then added with a sneer, "So no, we can't even use magic outside the orphanage."

Frowning, Harry shook his head. "If we have this Trace thing on us, then why did Dumbledore also cast a ward on the orphanage? It's rather pointless, isn't it? The Trace would already tell the Ministry if we used magic."

"It's because we're supposedly mudbloods," said Tom crisply. "And the Ministry likes to have a tight leash on them. They take no chances, just in the eventuality that The Trace on one of them could weaken or go faulty. I read it happened once, some years ago, when the electricity in a mudblood's house somehow interfered with the charm. So that's why the Ministry also requires that a ward is cast on mudbloods' homes."

"Oh," said Harry, his shoulders slumping.

After that, Tom went back to scowl at his surroundings -particularly at the bright doodles on the walls- and it was then when Harry suddenly noticed the absence.

Feeling a frisson of alarm and anxiousness, he turned to his brother. "Where's Nagini?"

Clearly utterly unconcerned, Tom waved a hand dismissively. "She's a smart little snake. She must have slipped out and gone back to the backyard. We'll look for her in the morning."

Nagini was not a happy little snake when they found her under the bushes of the backyard, the next day. No, she was in a decidedly tempestuous, foul mood.

After they had gone around, hissing her name, she had only replied with a waspishly hissed, "I'm here!"

Following the direction of where the hiss had come from, they had finally crouched before the shrubbery to see her yellow eyes glaring up at them from amidst the branches of a bush.

At first, she didn't seem in a disposition to come out from her hiding place, surely because she was too miffed at them.

Though, before they could speak another word, her eyes vanished, and then they saw her quickly slithering out from under the branches, to then pull herself up to her full height, supporting and balancing herself with the end of her tail, as she began ranting angrily.

"They came into my domain-" Harry didn't have to ask to know that Nagini considered their bedroom her territory "-and moved things around, making a mess, and nearly stepped on me! And then they shrieked when they saw me – as if I was the ugly, smelly one and not them!"

She let out a hiss, that somehow sounded indignant and furious to his ears, as her thin body vibrated with anger, swaying and undulating.
"You've left me alone for - for..."

Well, Tom had taught Nagini how 'humans' measured time with the positions of the sun in the sky and the passage of sunsets, and about clocks and calendars and such, but Harry could hardly expect her to have a gadget that told her how many weeks had gone by.

"Four months," he supplied helpfully.

"Four months!" she hissed accusingly. "All alone, with no one to pet me and rub my scales and tell me how beautiful and wise I am!"

She flicked the tip of her tail at him, as if to denote how lowly he had become to her eyes, by being so cruel as to not be around to cherish and pamper her like she deserved.

"I've been very cold too!" she hissed crossly, now dragging her tail across the snow, as if to make her point of all the awful things she had been subjected to. "Out here, with no warm things, and this nasty, prickly white thing that gets in between my scales-"

"Enough complaining!" hissed Tom sharply. "You're not a nestling anymore. And we'll not put up with your temper tantrums!"

Nagini let out a vibrating, angered hiss.

'Master' or not, as she called Tom, she wasn't one to cower before him. She was too spirited and temperamental for that, much to Harry's satisfaction.

"I am a nestling!" she hissed, sounding as if she had been deeply insulted and offended beyond measure. "I'm still little and small and young. I demand care and worship! And you're not a good Master. You're not worthy of me!"

And with that, she flung around and quickly slithered back to her bush.

"Then freeze out here," hissed Tom furiously, "and see if I care!"

Harry sighed as his brother rose to his feet and swiftly made his way back to the house, looking as if he had been both deeply hurt and affronted by his snake's words.

"Nagini," hissed Harry, his tone soft and cajoling, "come back with me, please-"

"No!" came from the bush.

"You don't want to stay outside for longer, surely," hissed Harry persuasively. "Let me take you back to my room, where it's warm and comfortable."

"No!"

"I'll let you sleep on my pillow," offered Harry entreatingly, "and I'll fluff it up for you, and I'll scratch your scales for as long as you want."

Yellow eyes suddenly appeared in the bush, peering out. "What else?"

Harry's lips quirked upwards in amusement, before he coaxed some more, "I'll praise you every day. I'll tell you how smart and pretty and wonderful you are, because it's the truth. And you're right and Tom is a git, but you know we adore you."

"How much you adore me?"
"We revere you," hissed Harry softly. "We treasure you, because we're yours and you're ours. And we love you, and only you."

After some more persuasions, flatteries, and promises spoken, Harry returned to their room with a Nagini under his sleeve, who would demand a whole day of constant petting and praise before she was ready to remotely begin to forgive them.

Christmas passed by in a flash, as happened with all good things and times of much fun.

Harry played around with his friends, and helped Billy Stubbs to chase after his infernal cat the many times Puff made a bid for escape from the boy's lovingly yet suffocating clutches, and he sang Christmas carols at the top of his lungs with Amy Benson, along and in tune with the radio, and he spun the wildest of lies as he answered all of Eric Whalley's questions regarding his fellow classmates of his 'boarding school' –what their names were, sons of that Lord or politician or banker or other, what they wore, how they spoke and such- and how many times he had been canned on the hands or buttocks, as was expected from a British school, and even what his subjects were –History of Magic became History of England, Charms, Transfiguration and Potions morphed into Natural Sciences, Astronomy transformed into Geography, and so on.

And he smacked his lips and licked his fingers with contentment after the feast they had for Christmas Day - roast turkey covered in bacon, with cranberry sauce and roast potatoes, and pigs-in-a-blanket with hot gravy, with a delicious fruity pudding for dessert. Harry had stuffed himself silly and reveled in the feeling of a full tummy.

Kathy Cole had become the Matron years ago, but her cooking skills were unparalleled and she still took pleasure in exercising them for Christmas Dinner, especially since she saved money during the whole year in order to give the children at least one full meal at Christmas.

Harry thought that not even Hogwarts' food could compare to her Christmas cooking, so suffused he was with the lively, festive, affectionate mood of the orphanage.

And after that, he had happily hoarded the candies from the grey sock they gave him, and he had flushed and beamed and smiled when he had been given a Christmas present, for which all the caregivers had pitched in.

Kathy Cole, Alice, and Magda had bought the balls of yarn of some pricey kind of wool which was so very warm and soft, and Karen had made use of her knitting skills and had woven a jersey for him.

"It's emerald green, see?" had said Karen proudly when Harry had joyfully put the jersey on, marveled. It was the nicest piece of clothing he had ever seen. "To match your eyes." She then handed over another brightly wrapped up box, as she added, now quietly, "Your brother's is midnight blue. Like his eyes, too. Will you give it to him?"

Harry had nodded and taken the gift, his smile wilting a bit. Indeed, the one thing that had dampened his spirits had been his brother's attitude. Tom had refused to take part of the celebrations. The boy hadn't even attended Christmas Dinner.

"Everyone here is nothing but a muggle," Tom had sneered with revolted contempt when Harry had been attempting to persuade him to leave their bedroom and come down with him, to join the
rest. "They're worthless and insignificant. I have no wish to be around them. It's unbearable."

"Suit yourself," Harry bit out crisply. "Just stay here and sulk and brood while I have fun with 'the muggles', then."

"I won't be sulking," drawled Tom arrogantly. "I can't do magic but that doesn't mean I can't read magical books." He gestured at his trunk and smirked self-complacently.

Harry had merely shot him a disgusted look before he left, loudly slamming the door shut behind him.

Tom was missing from the festivities, but at least his absence had been filled by the one person outside the orphanage who had been invited to spend Christmas with them.

With much interest, Harry had closely observed Robert Hutchins. After all, that day when they had gone to King's Cross Station with Alice and Bob in order to take the Hogwarts Express, his brother had told him a load of surprising revelations.

Thus, wanting to confirm Tom's words, Harry had watched how Robert Hutchins seemed to be very attentive to Alice, solicitously refilling her glass of punch, gently touching her arm as he spoke to her, seating himself right next to her during Christmas Dinner, whispering things into her ear, gallantly asking her to dance with him when the radio played a slow-paced, mellifluous tune... and all the while, Alice blushed and looked flustered, but also beamed and smiled and softly laughed with much joy.

Was that how grown-ups who fancied each other behaved? Harry certainly wasn't an expert on the matter. He knew he was quite clueless in that regard, in fact. But perhaps Tom was right and Robert Hutchins had every intention of popping the question soon.

The other caregivers certainly seemed to believe it. Magda and Karen had kept shooting glances at Robert and Alice, whispering amongst themselves, giggling, while Kathy Cole merely sighed now and then, looking as if she had given up on the whole matter and had simply decided to allow it to happen.

It left Harry feeling exultant and deeply cheerful. If his two favorite people on the whole world got together, it would be fantastic. Especially because Tom had said that Alice and Robert wanted to adopt them after they got married. And even if they were currently trying to find their father, Harry could think of no one else he rather have as parents than Alice and Bob.

Nevertheless, even when his mind had been filled with dreamy possibilities of his life with Alice and Hutchins, he hadn't forgotten his plan.

Thus, that night, when Robert gave his farewells and went to fetch his coat and bowler hat from the hanger at the entrance of the house, Harry made his move.

"Wait!" he called out, just as the man was opening the front door.

"Yes?" said Hutchins gently, one hand on the door as he wrapped a scarf around his neck with the other. "What is it, little fellow?"

"I wanted to ask a favor from you," said Harry slowly, as he quickly thought of a way to explain his request. "Um, Tom and I have to work on an essay during the holidays. It's for our History of England class."

Hutchins quirked an eyebrow. "I see. Do you want me to help you with it?"
"Er, no," said Harry, before he sighed. "Well, yes, in a way. We need to go to a library." He shuffled his feet, nervously. "And we were hoping that you could take us to one. If it's not asking too much."

"Certainly," said Hutchins, smiling warmly at him. "I'll be glad to take you anywhere you want." He paused, a pensive expression spreading over his face. "If you need to go to a library, we could go after New Year's Eve. By then, they'll be open again." He shot him an inquisitive look. "Or do you need to go sooner-"

"No, that's perfect," said Harry beaming. "Thanks!"

"Good, then. We'll make plans in your birthday," said Hutchins, before he waved a hand in parting. "Cheerio!"

Vastly satisfied, Harry had proceeded to enjoy the following week at the fullest, particularly the day of his and Tom's birthday. As always, it was celebrated along with the end of the year, with cone paper hats and trumpets, and a huge chocolate cake that Alice had baked especially for him, knowing it was his favorite.

He had even managed to convince his brother to attend and participate. Though he knew Tom had only agreed because of the presents. Indeed, Robert Hutchins gave the boy a ton of new books, while Harry got from the man a wonderful aircraft model, of one type the Germans had invented and used in the Great War. From the caregivers, they received new second-hand clothes, which were much needed since Tom had grown up quite a bit and Harry's old clothes were too tattered from rips that had been mended too many times.

It was after a whole day of cheer, games, and fun -for Harry, that is- when he received an unexpected surprise when they were in their room, about to get ready for a night of sleep.

Tom was on his bed, with Nagini on his lap -petting her, since the snake had finally forgiven the boy just the other day- while he flipped through his new books with the other hand.

Harry, for his part, was happily playing with his airplane. So it was him who first heard and noticed something rapping against their window.

Carefully leaving his treasured new toy on the bed, he stood up to see an enormous bird impatiently tapping on the glass with its beak.

In a moment, he opened the window and the bird quickly flew inside, dropping a basket on Harry's bed. The owl looked as intimidating and vicious as Tom's Lord Horkos, and after dropping his package, he seemed to shoot his surroundings a disgusted look before swiftly flying away.

Nonplussed, Harry blinked.

"What's that?" demanded Tom, closing a book shut as his gaze zeroed in on the basket on Harry's bed.

"Haven't the foggiest," said Harry, utterly puzzled as he approached it.

He had just flicked the lid of the basket open when something dashed out from it, so fast that it was nothing but a blur to his eyes.

Then, he stared at the tiny thing crouching on his bed. It could fit in an adult's hand, and at first, it looked like a kitten, with dark grey fur and eyes of a light grey shade that seemed very familiar to him. Though, as he inspected it closer, Harry saw that it couldn't actually be a kitten. There were
some differences. It had no whiskers, the tips of its tiny ears were bent down like a puppy's and its muzzle wasn't flat like a cat's but a bit protruding, like a puppy's as well.

The little creature would look very adorable and beautiful if it wasn't hissing, with its tail puffed and the hairs of its spine standing out, bristling. It looked ready to strike out at the smallest incitement.

"It's a – a…" Harry stuttered, baffled. "Um…"

"Another usurper!" hissed Nagini furiously, uncoiling herself from Tom's lap to threateningly sway from side to side, her yellow gaze fixed on the little creature on the other bed. "I will not share my humans with another beast!"

Just then, as if egged on by her hisses, the little creature seemed to morph. It arched its spine, let out a dangerous hiss that clearly wasn't like a snake's because Harry didn't understand it, and its tail hooked forwards as it changed. A series of clacking sounds issued, like metallic pieces clicking together one after the other, as the tail progressively transformed from base to tip, fur changing to hard husks that snapped together and ended with a stinger. It had become a tail of a scorpion, ready for attack.

"Holy cricket!" Harry exclaimed as he jumped backwards, so shocked they could have knocked him over with a feather.

"What the hell is that!" said Tom in alarm, instantly jumping to his feet and whipping out his wand to aim straight at the creature. His face darkened and his fingers clenched around his wand, as he spat, "It must have been sent to kill us!"

"Kill us?" mumbled Harry disbelievingly, as his surprise started to recede away. He shook his head and shot his brother a look of warning. "You can't use magic, remember!" Then he frowned as he glanced again at the bristling and hissing little creature, noticing its eyes once more.

"Is it not wanted?" hissed Nagini demandingly, her gaze flickering from Tom and him and back. Her tone turned gleeful and giddy as she added, "Can I eat it, then?"

With a sinking feeling in his chest, Harry muttered in a hiss for both Nagini and his brother, "Wait. Do nothing yet."

He inched closer to the basket on his bed, careful not to make any sudden moves. The little creature spat out a hiss and seemed to tense further, but it didn't jump at him or attempt to strike him with its stinger. Thus, Harry slowly peered into the basket. He saw a book there, but more importantly, a scroll of rolled parchment.

He slowly took it out and read it quickly.

Happy Birthday! I didn't forget, see? Oh, so many things have happened during the hols, but I'll get to the point and explain my present.

Remember that I told you Father was negotiating Dorea's marital contract with the Potters? Well, they finally reached an agreement, and Dorea and Charlus announced their engagement during our Wild Hunt Party. We were all so very happy for her. Most of us, that is. Not my vile sister, of course. Walburga got very nasty. Remember all the things I explained?

Well, 'Burga was furious because she doesn't like the Potters and she thinks it's unfair that Dorea isn't paying the Malfoys the bride-debt we owe them, so she went and told Father a bunch of things. All lies, of course!
Dorea wouldn't be so stupid as to lose her maidenhood before she was married. But 'Burga told Father that she had seen Charlus and Dorea doing stuff at Hogwarts... you know what kind of stuff I mean... and Father was very angry and alarmed, so he went and forced Dorea and Charlus to wear the Black Chastity Rings until they got married when they left Hogwarts.

I think it's pointless, because Dorea wouldn't do anything silly, but still, it's an insult, you see? It made people wonder and gossip. And that kind of thing isn't good, even when I understand that Father did it because he wanted to protect Dorea.

Anyway, it was all my sister's fault. Charlus thought the whole affair was very funny. He took a glance at the Chastity Rings and laughed, putting them on their fingers while he made a speech. It was quite good and it served to restore their good reputation, but still, Dorea was furious at Walburga.

But clearly, Aunt 'Rea couldn't do anything in retaliation to 'Burga, because if not Father would have suspected that my sister's lies were true, so I did, instead.

That night I slipped into Walburga's bedroom. She sleeps like a Mountain Troll, nothing can wake her up, so it was very easy and so much fun! I used my collection of magical, venomous beetles and let them run amok inside her bed. And I used a Balding Brew from our Potions Storage and spread it on her hair – there's no way to reverse that by magic, you know?

It was fantastic! Fifteen minutes after I left, her screams woke up the whole house. We all rushed to her bedroom and saw her covered with boils and rashes caused by the beetles that were climbing all over her, and with her head completely bald! She will have to let it grow back naturally!

She was furious, and of course that they all knew it had been me, and Walburga was quick to accuse me, but it was so worth it! I even took a picture of her. I'll show it to you when we're back at Hogwarts. You'll laugh so hard, just like I do every time I glance at it!

Anyway, Walburga wanted retribution, as I had anticipated. But I hadn't expected she would do something so vile. She had been trying to convince Mother to kill my crup for ages, and I handed over the perfect excuse. Apparently, what I did to 'Burga was the last straw, according to Mother. I knew then that they were plotting to murder my crup for real, this time.

I will miss him terribly, but I rather he's with you and alive than with me and dead. You'll love him! And you can take him with you to Hogwarts too. Walburga might suspect but he'll be different, so she'll have no evidence that he was my crup.

I just told them that I let him go. And you'll have to say that your muggle parents bought him for you, from the pet store in Knockturn Alley, Beasts & Vermin.

I've sent a book that explains everything about his kind. I severed the magical link that bound him as my familiar, so to make him yours, you just have to give him your finger. Then, you'll see what I mean about 'Burga not being able to tell if he was my crup or not.

Oh, give him a new name too!

Your best friend,

Alphard Black

Harry blinked and he shot a bewildered look at the little creature on his bed. "It's a crup, apparently."
"That's no crup!" hissed out Tom angrily, wand still pointing forward. "I've read about them and seen pictures. They look like a Jack Russell terrier with forked tail - not like a kitten with a scorpion's tail!" His dark blue eyes then narrowed on the scroll of parchment in Harry's hands, as he demanded sharply, "Who wrote to you? Who has sent this?"

"Um... well...." Harry trailed off, blanching.

Evidently, his secret friend hadn't thought about Tom when sending him the crup. Perhaps Alphard thought that his brother and him had separate bedrooms and thus that he would have the chance to tell his 'muggle parents' to lie to Tom about where the crup came from.

"Never mind about that," he finally said loftily, as he approached the creature. He was quite nervous at first, as the little thing kept bristling and spitting out hisses, its scorpion tail swinging forward from side to side.

Arming himself with valor, he bit his bottom lip as he presented a finger, just like Alphard's letter had said.

The little creature cocked its head to a side and then tentatively sniffed at it. Expecting the worse, Harry tensed, but the crup then licked his finger, and for a moment Harry thought the little creature was thinking matters over, as if trying to decide if he was worthy or not.

In the next second, Harry felt a stabbing pain and winced as the little creature sank its tiny fangs in his finger pad. It all happened in an instant: the crup's tail changed back, its dark grey fur became pitch black, its eyes went from light grey to bright green just like Harry's, and it purred loudly as it kept licking Harry's finger, looking up at him with big, glowing cat-like eyes.

"Well," said Harry sighing with relief. "He's not dangerous anymore." He chuckled happily as the crup kept purring and licking him, now looking like an innocent, cuddly little kitten. Harry smiled down at it as he tilted his head to a side. "I wonder what name I should give you."

"Give me that!"

"No – wait!" Harry shouted as Tom ripped the letter from his hand. "It's private – it's mine – you've got no right!"

He furiously attempted to get it back from his brother, but Tom was having none of it. Harry was brusquely shoved away as Tom started reading, his expression turning darker and angrier with every passing second.

"What's this?" snarled Tom the moment he finished, waving the piece of parchment in front of Harry's nose. "Alphard Black – 'your best friend'? Since when!"

"None of your bloody business," snapped Harry angrily, his eyes narrowing.

"You better start explaining, little brother," said Tom in a dangerously low tone of voice, his expression looking murderous. "I was under the impression that you didn't have any contact with him after the way he ignored you in the Hogwarts Express, when we were kicked out of their compartment!"

Harry crossed his arms over his small chest and glared. "Well, you were wrong."

"Explain!" commanded Tom harshly.

Harry gritted his teeth but in the end saw no way around it, so he fully revealed all matters
regarding how he had ended up being 'secret friends' with Alphard Black.

"So," bit out Tom when Harry finished his tale, "Dorea Black persuaded you to give her nephew another chance. The Comet 180 you use during your secret Quidditch practices isn't Dorea's, as you told me, but Alphard's. And the pouch of galleons you gave me to buy potions ingredients isn't Dorea's but Alphard's as well." His eyes narrowed to slits, as he added furiously, "You've been friends with him during all these months! And you've been lying to me all this time!"

"So what?" snapped Harry crossly, as he jutted his jaw out.

Looking incensed beyond measure, Tom spat, "You're my brother! You should never lie to me!"

"That's rich coming from you!" scoffed out Harry, glowering darkly. "You keep plenty of secrets from me, I'm sure."

"That's not the point!"

It all got worse from then onwards. They shouted at each other, traded accusations and threats and old resentments, and they were both as furious with each other and as stubborn.

"Fine," said Tom poignantly, in the end, "I will tell no one about your secret little 'friendship'" he contemptuously sneered the word out "- with Alphard Black." His eyes narrowed, as he added sharply, "But at the very least you'll make full use of it and take advantage of the boy and ask him for certain things I want."

"I'm not going to take advantage of my friend!" shouted Harry furiously, glaring daggers at his brother.

"You had no compunction in accepting his broom and pouch of galleons," sneered Tom acidly.

Harry stiffened, feeling deeply insulted, as he spat, "That was different! They were gifts and favors from a friend. I was not ripping him off!"

"Same thing," said Tom curtly, waving a hand dismissively. "I've heard about certain books the Blacks have in their library. You'll ask Alphard to borrow them."

"I will not," bit out Harry angrily. "If you want books, you ask him!"

"See if I don't," snapped Tom, before a devious smirk spread on his lips. "He's your so-called friend and I'm your brother. I'll ask and he'll have no choice but to comply."

Harry snorted loudly at that. "You're an idiot if you think he'll do whatever you want. He's not stupid and he doesn't like you."

"We'll see," snarled Tom, before he threw the letter back to Harry and briskly turned around to reach his bed.

Nagini, who had remained tensed and coiled as if ready to spring upon the new creature in the room, was only pacified when Tom went back to pet her. The little crup, for his part, had been contently licking its paws, clearly no longer finding any threats in the occupants of the room and wholly ignoring the snake that had been furiously hissing at it.

Thus, Harry simply placed the basket on the floor and took the book out, leaning on his pillow as his little crup climbed onto the nook between his neck and shoulder, purring loudly as he gave Harry's neck affectionate, little licks. Amused and already beginning to feel quite fond of the little
animal, Harry caressed its black fur as he began to read and inform himself.

The book Alphard had sent was called 'All You Need to Know about the Magnificent Scorcrups', and it explained much and Harry's puzzlement slowly began to vanish.

'Scorcrups' were no ordinary crups but a cross of three magical creatures, especially bred by wizards: of a Crup, inheriting from that breed a deep sense of loyalty and protectiveness towards its owner, being those creatures the best and fiercest of guardians; of a Black Scorpion of the Gobi Desert, having the tail of such creature when sensing a threat or danger, along with the venom in its stinger that was of a magical kind, that could either paralyze its victim or kill in instants, depending on the Scorcrup's sense regarding the degree of danger presented to its owner; and finally, of an Egyptian Kneazle, gaining its 'sleek beauty, figure, and elegance of appearance', along with a sharp, deeply intelligent mind that could understand human mannerisms, breed as they were to be the companions of wizards and witches.

Quite fascinated, Harry went on to discover that his Scorcrup wouldn't grow any bigger. They were always small, a trait inbred on purpose, so that they could be quick and inconspicuous when protecting its owner. Furthermore, they bonded with their owner through the taste of blood, their coloring of eyes and fur changing to mimic that of its master.

Harry peered at the cat-like eyes that were as green as his, and chuckled as he gently carded his fingers through the little creature's soft, black fur, making it purr even louder.

He then shut the book as he glanced at it again, and mused. "All you need now, to be fully mine, is a name."

He heard a snide scoff coming from Tom's side of the room and wholly ignored it as he kept gazing at his crup with deep affection.

"Oh, I know!" he said joyfully, as he brought up the crup to his face, inquisitively peering at it. "What do you think of 'Ulysses'? Like the muggle warrior of Robert Hutchins' tales. He was real, you know? I found that in a History of Magic book. The man came across all sorts of magical creatures in his travels, like Cyclops, Sirens, Lamias, a six-headed Cerberus, and even the famous sorceress Circe and the enchantress nymph Calypso!"

The little creature licked Harry's nose, and he chuckled. "I'll take that as a yes, then."

That night, he placidly slept with little Ulysses nuzzling and snuggling his neck, feeling vastly content with his new familiar. He owed Alphard Black a big one.

At first, Harry had been a bit concerned about going around the orphanage with his Scorcrup, but the book had said that the little creatures didn't do well in small enclosures and so Harry had decided it was best to take Ulysses out of his bedroom.

He had been a mite apprehensive, since if the crup suddenly decided there was a threat to him, its tail would change into a scorpion's, and how would he explain that?

Nevertheless, the book had said that Scorcrups were very intelligent and could somehow understand its owners, thus Harry had talked to Ulysses at length, giving him firm instructions of how to behave.
Tom had said nothing to that, and Harry had the inkling that his brother was gleefully expecting him to mess things up, surely because it would mean a load of trouble for him and it could end up with him having to get rid of his new pet.

His brother could be nasty and jealous just in such ways. Regardless, Harry had faith in little Ulysses and he took the chance.

The first to see them was Kathy Cole as she came out of her office. She took one glance at Harry, with Ulysses happily perched on his head, and the Matron grumbled under her breath, "… orphanage's turning into a zoo…. I'll have a word with Alice about bringing in strays all the time… I'll have to put my foot down… "

Harry had inwardly grinned at that, giving the Matron a cheery wave of the hand. It perfectly suited his purpose: that Ulysses was some stray he had found on the streets was the perfect excuse.

Furthermore, his friends had mostly loved the little 'kitten', and Ulysses had behaved admirably, allowing himself to be petted and pawed at without complain, merely purring contently and licking cheeks.

"He's so adorable!" Amy Benson gushed as she took Ulysses into her arms and snuggled her face on his soft fur.

"He's nice, I suppose," said Eric Whalley, squinting at the Scorcrup. "But he looks a bit weird, doesn't he? Must be from a cross with some strange cat, with those funny ears and no whiskers…" The boy shot Billy a glance, and added tartly, "At least he's better than Puff, that's for sure."

"Shut it," grumbled Billy Stubbs, though his voice lacked force. He looked mournful and dejected. Having given up on his unruly cat by then, the boy had stopped looking for it and had left the vicious Puff in peace. He had been sniffling and moping around for days, due to that.

Inevitably, Billy brightened in the next second and extended his arms towards Amy, as he urged, "Give it here. You had him long enough."

A brief quarrel ensued between boy and girl, which quickly ended with Billy lovingly cradling Ulysses and softly cooing at him, while Harry watched with an amused and satisfied grin on his face.

After that, he happily went around the house with Ulysses on him at all times. The little creature had a distinct preference for either sitting on his left shoulder or lying on his head. And no matter how much Harry moved around, shrugged or bobbed his head up and down, the Scorcrup seemed secured on his place of choice and effortlessly hanged on. Harry didn't know how the little creature managed that, because he was never clawed at.

"Must confuse your scarecrow's hair with a nest," Tom had remarked snidely at the sight.

The only other one who wasn't happy with the new arrangements was Nagini. She was a very possessive little snake, and after Lord Horkos, the appearance of yet another pet hadn't pleased her one bit.

Harry had tried to explain, but in the end it was Ulysses who had resolved the matter. Every time Nagini viciously hissed at the little Scorcrup and made an attempt to strike, Ulysses had been quick to change his tail into his lethal, hooked one.

He did just that: no hissing, bristling, or spitting, just the flash of a tail of a scorpion and Nagini was wise enough to clamp her maws shut and back off. Oh, she grumbled much and complained
and demanded to be petted even more, yet she began to wholly ignore the 'new usurper'. She had a very developed instinct of self-preservation, that one.

It was just three days before they had to return to Hogwarts that Robert Hutchins finally turned up in his motorwagon. As they had planned in secret during New Year's Eve, Harry had been prepared for the expedition. He had warned his brother and managed to cajole him into wearing the jersey Karen had knitted for him, along with the pants they had been given for their birthday.

Harry himself was proudly wearing his green jersey and his new pair of second-hand knickerbockers, along with cap on head and Slytherin scarf around the neck – he didn't have anything nicer than that.

"You'll have to dress smartly," Hutchins had pointed out. "I'll be taking you to the best public library there is in London, and we'll all have to be in our best or we'll be kicked out."

Robert Hutchins was quite the picture himself. Harry had never seen the man with anything other than working clothes. It was quite a change to see him in suit and tie, no stubble along the jaw and with hair neatly groomed.

He had the feeling that if Alice had been there, she would have flushed at the sight of the man. Thankfully, she wasn't, because Harry had asked Bob to keep their little trip to the library a secret, because if Tom and he were successful, he knew what it would lead to and he didn't want to hurt Alice's feelings.

Hutchins hadn't pressed him about his need for secrecy. The muggle was nice and respectful in that way, and he had merely winked conspiratorially and ruffled Harry's hair.

Thus, with no observers lurking from the windows of the orphanage –Alice being too busy with taking care of the laundry– Harry was quick to pipe in excitedly as soon as his eyes landed on the motorwagon, "Can I drive?"

"Sure thing," said Hutchins, grinning like mischievous little boy himself. "Let's hop on."

And thus, they made their way to central London, with Harry beaming as he sat on Bob's lap, since he didn't reach the pedals and needed the man for that, but the wheel was all his and Hutchins aided him with making the shifts with the stick. Tom merely sat at the passenger's seat, scowling in silence as Harry fully enjoyed himself and honked all the way out of their neighborhood.

That little trip would trigger a series of events that would end by shocking him deeply, leaving him wholly unprepared for it. Harry would later look back at that day as the moment when it had all truly began for him, and he would rue it, because if he had known the consequences, he would have never gone into that thrice-be-damned library.
Part I: Chapter 28

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AN:

Thanks for the uplifting reviews! It makes me very happy to know that you liked the last chapter! : )

This time, I only need to address one point some reviewers have brought up:

I know that many are fed up with Tom's bad mood and nasty attitude towards Harry. But it's just the kind of stage in which they are right now: as quarrelling, twelve-year-old brothers who bicker and snap constantly at each other.

I simply wanted to reflect that, so we'll then see how their relationship matures and progresses as they get older.

Nevertheless, don't expect Tom to ever be nice and warm with Harry, he just isn't the type.

He has already shown, in some scenes, jealously over Harry and much protectiveness as well, even though he wouldn't openly admit it. That gives us a glimpse of how he feels for 'his brother' and shows how he has been affected by Harry's companionship.

As Santi pointed out to Julian Erlichmann, this Tom Riddle, unlike the original one, has a deep attachment to someone other than himself –Harry– for the first and only time.

So Tom does care, but his moodiness won't change until he becomes more assured of himself in his new surroundings and 'place in the world', so to speak. His bad temper reflects his childliness, in my view. He can be adult-like in many ways but not in that, yet. Also, be being his bad-tempered self around Harry, without repressing his true nature, denotes that he trusts him and is comfortable around him. I think that's important.

Tom will become more suave when he grows up, but I won't make him the cuddly, loving type. It would be too out of character and I don't like Tom Riddles like that, or Voldemorts.

He'll still be dominating, arrogant, and a jerk, the only difference is that he'll come to openly show affection for Harry, from time to time, and that Harry will grow up and pull his weight around, being able to match him.

The changes will take time, though.

That said, enjoy this chappie!
Harry felt very proud of himself when he perfectly parked the motorwagon along the curb, with little help from Bob. He even shot his brother a smug smirk, but Tom didn't seem to notice. The boy had remained quiet for the whole duration of the trip and now looked to be in deep, contemplative thought.

He harrumphed, peeved, at his brother's lack of attention to him. Nevertheless, as they climbed out of the motorwagon, such thoughts vanished as he glanced around their surroundings.

Tom and him had never been in that part of London before. The broad, stately street was filled with imposing, solemn-looking buildings that had flags, statues, and monuments here and there.

"Well, here we are," said Robert Hutchins, as he started gesturing at some buildings across the street. "That over there is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Next to it, is the Ministry of Defense, and further along, the Cabinet Office." He shot them a smile as he turned around and gazed up the building in front of them. "And here's the best and largest library in London."

It looked just like the other buildings, though inside it was even more awe-inspiring.

It was huge and everything looked pristine, dignified, and elegant. The walls were paneled with dark wood, with some large portraits decorating them, depicting very grave-looking muggles who must have been important political or historical figures of past times. There were grand chandeliers hanging high up in the ceiling, nice desk lamps on tables here and there amongst the innumerable rows of bookcases, along with majestic sofas, winged armchairs and low tea tables. There were also many display cases with tops made of glass, protecting what seemed to be old historical records and documents.

Harry saw people too. They looked like bankers or government officials, given their top hats, expensive-looking pinstripe suits, and their chained silver or gold clocks hanging from their vests. Some were smoking pipes or had tumblers filled with some liquor, as they read newspapers or talked amongst them. It looked more like some sort of social club than a library, at least in the area that those men were hanging around.

Right in front of the middle of the vast library, there was a ring-like high table, with a woman inside, taking tomes from a column of books as she briskly stamped them, one after the other.

She was a rail-thin woman, with stringy brown hair tightly pulled into a strict bun, sallow-faced, wearing a pair of black-framed, squared eyeglasses.

As they approached her, she glanced up and her expression soured.

"No children are allowed here," she said sharply, to then glance away and continue with her stamping.

Robert Hutchins cleared his throat, and said gently, "Please, ma'am, if you will-

The librarian gave a loud stamp on a book, and then grabbed a fountain pen to point with it at a plaque hanging from the edge of her desk. It read in big bold letters: NO CHILDREN ALLOWED.

She waved off a hand impatiently as if dismissing them from her sight, without another word.

Unflappable, Hutchins persisted, stepping closer to the woman's desk, as he began softly, "Please, missus, these are my nephews and it's their birthday today." The man placed his hands on Tom's and Harry's shoulder, pointedly pulling them against his sides in an affectionate gesture, as he
continued entreatingly, "There's nothing they like more than books, so I promised I would bring
them here. It's my birthday present for them, so just for once, couldn't you make an exception?"

"I don't intend to ever make any exceptions," said the woman curtly, without looking up from the
books she continued stamping. "I kindly ask to remove yourselves from this library."

Hutchins frowned, before he bent down to Harry and whispered urgently, "Do your thing."

Harry blinked up at the man, bewildered, as he whispered back, "What thing?"

"What you do when you want to get out of trouble with Alice," clarified Hutchins in a hasty
whisper, grinning, "and when you wheedle your twin into doing what you want."

Harry felt his face go red. It was like suddenly being caught with a hand in the cookie jar. He
hadn't thought anyone had noticed his tricks.

The man knowingly winked at him, and Harry almost huffed, before he quickly complied.

He stood on his tiptoes and clutched the edge of the woman's high table with his fingers, to pull
himself upwards so that his head could be seen. Blinking several times, he made his eyes turn
watery, and he made them big and 'adorable' as people often said, as he peered up at the librarian.

"Please, nice lady," he said in a small, childish, soft voice, "let us stay. My brother and I will be
very good. We just want to read some books because we love them so much and don't have the
money to buy books for ourselves. We won't take long…"

The woman paused in her stamping and gazed down at him, her lips pursing into a flat, thin line as
she began to shake her head.

Though before she had a chance to open her mouth, Harry continued, now sniffing piteously,
pulling a vulnerable expression on his face as his bit his bottom lip and made it tremble, "We are
very well behaved. We will cause no trouble. Promise."

"I'll watch over them," said Robert Hutchins firmly. "We will not bother anyone."

To wrap up the act, Harry let out another sniffle and peered up again at the woman with wide,
bright, tearful eyes, as he whimpered, "Please…"

She glanced down at him and her expression softened marginally. She dropped the stamp in her
hand and released an annoyed sigh, before she said briskly, "Very well, then."

And with that, she came out from her table and placed her hands on her narrow hips, as she asked
impatiently, "What kind of books are you interested in?"

in particular, before they were involved in the War of the Roses. Their origins and stuff."

The librarian arched a surprised eyebrow at that, clearly startled that two little boys could be
interested in such things.

"I see," she muttered, before shaking her head. "Follow me, if you will."

She marched off and they quickly sped up to match her brisk pace. They went along rows upon
rows of shelves, turned corners, made twists, and kept walking and walking through what seemed
like an endless, orderly maze.
Finally, the woman abruptly halted and gestured at the enormous bookcase before them. "The books you're looking for are in the third to fifth shelves." She shot them a stern look of warning, as she added sharply, "Keep your voices down and don't put a toe out of line or I'll have to ask you to leave."

Harry nodded firmly, and the woman gave him one last glance before she flounced away.

They settled their things on the nearest table, and Hutchins offered gently, "Would you like my help with your homework?"

"Um, no, thanks," said Harry, warmly smiling up at the man. "We're supposed to do our essay all by ourselves. And we can manage."

Hutchins nodded and ruffled Harry's hair, grinning, "Good." He then gestured at a distant table as he added, "I'll be over there reading the newspapers. When you're done, let me know."

After the man left, they took a seat and started taking out papers and pencils from the rucksack they had brought along.

"Quite a performance you gave back there," suddenly gritted out Tom, piercing him with a dark gaze as he paused in his shuffling of papers.

"Huh?" said Harry pulling a dumb expression on his face, just as he was grabbing a pencil. "What d'ya mean?"

"It reminded me," continued Tom, his voice dangerously lowering, "of the several times you've done something similar to me."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Harry blinked, his expression utterly baffled. "I've never done any 'performances', as you put it. I was truly very worried and sad when the librarian told us we had to leave-"

"Don't lie," spat out Tom, his eyes narrowing to slits as his fingers clenched on his sheaf of papers. "You've done the same to me as you did to that muggle woman! You manipulating, little-"

"I haven't the foggiest what you're talking about," interjected Harry, puffing out his small chest and looking deeply insulted and indignant. "I have never manipulated anyone." Then he waved a hand dismissively. "And enough chattering. We have work to do."

Tom shot him one last dark, suspicious look before they rose to their feet and started taking books from the shelves the librarian had indicated.

"It's going to take us ages," grumbled Harry under his breath, as he began flipping through the first thick tome, looking with dismay at the countless other books left.

And indeed it did. His eyes got watery and blurry from so many paragraphs of useless information and so many pictures of this and that Lancaster or York, who had no relevance to their quest. It was an endless, tedious perusal, and Harry missed magic so much just then. If they could flick out their wands, a simple Electus Charm would spare them much time and trouble.

They both kept making notes, jutting down the information of possible candidates, but none seemed to fit the requirements. All the pictures of portraits they saw were of men of the House of York or Lancaster, with doublets or shields or capes with the Red or White Rose – but it was always an emblem, carved or forged in iron, woven with thread, and such, always depicted and represented, never displaying the real flower itself.
"There has to be someone who wore the Egeriana Rose like Salazar Slytherin did," groaned Harry about an hour later, slamming shut the latest of books that had yielded no results. "He has to be in these books, somewhere!"

"This is pointless," groused out Tom, looking tired and vastly annoyed. "It's evident. You were wrong-"

"I'm not!" snapped Harry, glowering at him. "I know I'm right. Everything I said made sense." He shook his head, sighing wearily, before he added gruffly, "Let's keep looking."

He didn't know how much time passed, but as he was gloomily muttering to himself, briskly flipping pages after pages of useless information, he suddenly caught sight of something.

His heart skipped a beat and he quickly flipped back to the page where he had seen a flash of a picture, and he stared.

"Tom," Harry breathed out, his eyes wide, fixed on the page of the book in his hand. "I think I found him."

His brother instantly brought his chair closer to his, and gazed down at the book as he demanded in a rush, "Who? What is it? What did you find?"

"Look," whispered Harry quietly, pointing at the picture of a man's portrait.

He was dark haired and black-eyed, with beard and moustache, of plain features, wearing chainmail and black armor, with gauntlets and a magnificent jeweled sword, along with a small crown on top of his helm. The tunic covering the armor depicted squared sections: ones with red background, the others with black, with emblems of his House woven in golden thread.

Nevertheless, it wasn't any of that which had caught his attention, but what he had pinned on his tunic.

"It's the Egeriana Rose," he murmured breathlessly. "He's wearing the flower itself, right in the middle of his chest, like Salazar Slytherin."

Tom frowned as he inspected it, and muttered uncertainly, "It could be a coincidence… It wouldn't entirely prove he's the one we're looking for-"

"No, look, look!" interrupted Harry excitedly, his eyes roaming a paragraph. "It says here that this man, the First Duke of Lancaster, was the first to adopt the Red Rose as a heraldic device which became the emblem of the House of Lancaster following the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. He was also the first one to use it, you see!"

"Even so," began Tom tartly, "it's not evidence enough-"

"He was born in 1340!" gasped out Harry as he caught sight of the man's birth and death dates. He shot his brother a dumbfounded look. "Sherisse Slytherin gave birth to her son in 1340…" He shook his head, dazzled. "I thought he would be some descendant… I hadn't imagined it would be their son!"

"Let me see that," snapped Tom shortly, quickly pulling the book towards himself, frowning as he began reading. "John Gaunt, or John of Gaunt-"

"Exactly!" piped in Harry, marveled and brimming with triumphant joy. "Gaunt as in the 'G' of M.G., Tom!" He gestured wildly and animatedly with his hands. "This is it – this is him, their very
own son!"

Tom's frown deepened as he glanced back at the page. "He was the First Duke of Lancaster, member of the House of Plantagenet and the third surviving son of King Edward the Third of England."

"He must have hoodwinked the muggles, clearly," interjected Harry vehemently, before he paused, hesitant. "Though I don't know how he could have done it. The Prewett twins told me about the Obliviators that work in the Ministry of Magic, but erasing the memories of muggles wouldn't have done the trick, would it? What did he use, then?"

"I think I know," muttered Tom pensively. "I've read about spells and magic that are called the Mind Arts, about Legilimency and Occlumency in particular. A wizard that can master those can do all sorts of things, even implant thoughts and fake memories in the minds of others."

Harry gawked at him. "Really? Are you sure such things can be done?"

"Of course I'm sure!" snapped Tom waspishly. "I even have proof. I know that Dumbledore can do it, for instance!"

"Professor Dumbledore?" Harry stared at him, flummoxed. In the next second, he deeply frowned and demanded sharply, "What do you mean? How do you know?"

"Never mind about that," said Tom coolly, waving a hand dismissively. "It lacks importance. The point is that such things are possible, and he can do it." He then glowered at him, as he added venomously, "I would even know more about the subject if you hadn't flapped your gums and told Dumbledore my owl's name! When he raided the Restricted Section he didn't leave any books about the Mind Arts either. They are considered Dark, because, for instance, a wizard who yields Legilimency can violate another person's mind against their will."

"Are you telling me," said Harry slowly and disbelievingly, "that Dumbledore can read people's minds?"

"It's not reading minds, exactly," retorted Tom superiorly, "but yes, he can do it. Legilimens need to stare into someone's eyes in order to access their mind. I even read that those powerful enough can cast the spell wandlessly and nonverbally."

"And you think Dumbledore can do that too…." Gobsmacked, Harry trailed off, before a wave of deep alarm swept over him. "Hang on! If he can read minds, he could know everything - he could have seen in our minds about Grindelwald's letter and the books!"

"Don't be a dimwit!" bit out Tom with vexation. "Do you really believe that if he had, he would have just left us alone?" He shook his head, as he said fiercely, "No, I don't think he's used Legilimency on us." He scoffed snidely. "He probably thinks that using it on students is ignoble and below himself." He skewered him with his eyes, as he added crisply, "But it doesn't mean that he wouldn't in the future, if he has grave, pressing reasons with which to mollify his conscience. So I don't trust him and I rather be prepared. That's why I want the books about the Mind Arts that the Blacks have in their private library, because by mastering Occlumency you can shield your mind against a Legilimens!"

"Oh," said Harry blinking. He then huffed. "You should have explained that before! If it's for that, then I can ask Alphard." He shot his brother a warning look. "To borrow those books for a couple of weeks, not steal them, mind you."
"That's good enough," said Tom pleasantly, widely smirking at him.

Harry shook his head, and then frowned, musingly. It would be a good idea to be able to 'shield one's mind', as his brother put it, though not from Dumbledore. He was more concerned about any possible interaction they could come to have with the Dark Lord Grindelwald, given the wizard's unexplainable interest in them.

Furthermore, he had given his oath to Tom that he wouldn't say anything to Dumbledore about Grindelwald's letter and books, but now there was another way in which he could let Dumbledore know about their predicament without breaking his promise to his brother.

Indeed, if Tom was right, then he could just stare into Dumbledore's eyes pointedly and let him know that he wanted his mind to be read. And then Dumbledore would know about Grindelwald, and the wizard could help them!

Harry immediately decided he would do precisely that, but after March the fifteenth. He couldn't go and bother Dumbledore before then, when he knew the wizard must be very preoccupied and busy with planning things to prevent Grindelwald and the Nazis from conquering Czechoslovakia. Thus, after Dumbledore did his stuff and saved the country, he would definitely go to the man.

Satisfied with his resolution, he glanced back at his brother. "What else does the book say?"

Tom frowned as he continued reading. "He was called John 'Gaunt' because he was born in a Belgium town named Ghent-"

"Oh, but then, I don't understand," interrupted Harry, puzzled. "Gaunt fits with the M.G. initials, so it must have been his true surname, right?"

"Yes," drawled Tom, casting him an arrogant look. "It's obvious that he was skilled in the Mind Arts and used them widely to plant memories about his birth and about himself in all the years in between before he appeared before the muggles, passing himself off as the son of the English King."

"That's a lot of work," remarked Harry, his eyebrows shooting upwards.

Tom scoffed loudly. "He had the incentives for it, didn't he? Why, living as a King's son and a Duke – he must have had a very lavish and comfortable life."

"True," said Harry thoughtfully, nodding. "A much better one than the one he could have had in the Wizarding World, because of the things his father M.G. had done."

"Precisely," said Tom tersely, before he returned to the book. "He had many children with his two wives and mistresses. His legitimate male heirs included Kings Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI. His legitimate daughters became Queen of Castile and Queen of Portugal…"

Harry shook his head, bemusedly. "They couldn't have been his. I've heard that there isn't a drop of magical blood in any of the Royal Houses of Europe." He grinned at his brother. "I asked the Prewetts twins about that because I wanted to know if-"

"Of course they weren't his children!" interrupted Tom impatiently. "John Gaunt was a Slytherin and he knew it. As you said, he proudly used the Egeriana Rose and made it an emblem. A Slytherin, proud of his ancestry, as he was, would have never bedded filthy muggle women."

Harry decided not to remark on that 'filthy' comment and simply let it go, as he pressed on, pensively, "So he tricked his wives and mistresses as well?"
"Obviously," said Tom tartly. "He wouldn't have had any other choice. Given his position as a duke, it was his duty to have heirs. It would have been demanded and expected of him." He glanced down at the book, tapping a finger on it, as he mulled. "John Gaunt must have used the Imperius Curse on men of the Court… perhaps he even gave them Polyjuice Potions with his hair, so they would look like him when he made them bed his wives and mistresses… yes, that's very plausible."

"The Imperius Curse?" mumbled Harry, his features turning pale and sickened.

Tom shot him an annoyed glare. "It's a dark curse that-"

"I know what it is!" snapped Harry bristling, his face gaining back its color in indignant anger. "Alphard told me all about the Unforgivable Curses, thank you very much!"

"At least he's useful for something," retorted Tom acidly, giving him a snide look.

Harry glowered at his brother, and then huffed impatiently. "Let's get to the point. He didn't have children with his muggle women, but he must have had children with a witch, because we're his descendants. So, when did he die, supposedly?"

Tom glanced at the page, and replied shortly, "In 1399, he was fifty-nine years old, and died of old age."

Harry snorted loudly. "Right, sure. As expected, it's utter rubbish. We know wizards can live for two hundred years." He glanced musingly at his brother. "So he faked his death and returned to the Wizarding World, wherever he had hidden before, and had children with some witch."

"That's a valid supposition," conceded Tom as he nodded magnanimously.

Widely grinning, Harry declared with much self-satisfaction, "So there we have it! Wizards don't tend to move around much. They like to stay in the houses and towns and such of their parents, grandparents and forefathers - especially purebloods, from what Alphard has told me. And John Gaunt was a pureblood and a Slytherin, and the Duke of Lancashire, to boot, precisely of the same county Salazar Slytherin came from."

He rested his back on his chair and his grin widened even further, as he concluded exultantly, "So that's where we have to look for Gaunts. In muggle towns and cities of Lancashire. And probably Yorkshire too, since it's a neighboring county and also the place of the Egeriana Rose. So we're done here!"

"Not even remotely, you little twit," said Tom caustically, as he gestured at the blank papers in front of him. "Even if what you said makes sense, we still have to-"

"Tut-tut," Harry interrupted, clucking his tongue tauntingly as he grinned toothily. "I'm not a 'twit', am I?"

Tom stared and frowned at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," said Harry, grinning with much smugness and vindictive pleasure, "that I was right about every little thing! It was thanks to me that we found John Gaunt, not you. So you can't call me stupid anymore, can you?"

Fiercely scowling and glowering at him, Tom turned silent for a moment, as if trying to devise a way in which to give Harry a devastating retort.
"Come, come, dear brother," drawled Harry mockingly, his lips quirking upwards. "Why do you look so sour? You've done exactly this, plenty of times to me. Now it's my moment of glory and revenge. So say it! Say I was right and say 'thank you for all your wisdom and brilliance, dear brother'."

Tom's glower turned murderous and Harry happily chuckled at the sight, before he prodded his brother with a jabbing finger on the ribs, as he intoned cheerfully, "Come, come, it's not so hard, just slooowlyyy move your lips and say it."

"I will not say anything of the sort!" snapped Tom acidly, glaring daggers at him, before he lifted his chin up and added superiorly, "And if you had let me speak before, you would know that my point is that we're not done here!" He gestured angrily at the blank papers before him. "Hutchins will want to see the essay we're supposedly writing for school. So we still have to do that before we can leave!"

"Oh no," said Harry indolently, comfortably sprawling on his chair and crossing his arms behind his head. "I've made all the important discoveries. So I'm going to rest now while you work. I deserve it. This part is all yours, dear twin of mine."

Tom shot him a seething glare and spat, "You'll pay for this!", before he violently grabbed pencil and paper, and began perusing at books as he scribbled with jerky, stabbing motions, even piercing through the paper once or twice.

His brother only paused to shoot him venomous glowers now and then, as he worked at a furious pace.

And Harry, for his part, chuckled under his breath. Why, he could almost imagine he could see dark clouds gathering and smoldering above his brother's head. It all made Tom look like a thwarted little boy throwing a temper tantrum in silence.

At the sight, Harry's devilish grin widened, stretched, and turned into a full-blown smirk.

When Robert Hutchins took them back to the orphanage, Harry had already formulated his plan – for the next stage of their quest and for something else he needed to speak about with the man in private. And he had to get rid of Tom for that.

Thus, as soon as they climbed out of the motorwagon, he was quick to turn to his brother, ordering shortly, "Get in the house."

"I beg your pardon?" snapped Tom, looking affronted, as his eyes narrowed dangerously.

Harry shot him a frustrated look. "We know what our next step has to be. I'll take care of it! And it's best if I speak to him alone. So just go away!"

"Watch how you speak to me, you uppity little runt," hissed out Tom, seething. "That you managed, for once, to show a spark of intelligence doesn't mean that-"

"Oh, just go away and let me do my stuff," bit out Harry with exasperation. "We'll talk later!"

He quickly swirled around and started to approach Robert Hutchins, leaving his brother behind.
Thankfully, he soon heard Tom furiously stomping his way up the steps and then slamming the entrance door shut behind him.

Hutchins' gaze flickered from Harry to the orphanage and back, looking concerned. "Is there a problem?"

"No, everything's just fine," said Harry, smiling up at the man. He had already decided there was no convincing lie he could tell about the matter, so he didn't beat around the bush. "The thing is that we want to ask another favor from you."

"Yes?" prompted Hutchins gently.

"We're looking for our relatives," said Harry in a hushed tone of voice. "They're called Gaunt – that's their surname, I mean, and-

"Relatives?" interjected Robert, frowning at him with puzzlement. "But I thought you boys had none. Alice told me your mother died in the orphanage after she gave birth to you both, and that your father was dead too-

"Our father?" interrupted Harry, staring at him befuddled. He then shook his head. "No. We have no way of knowing that, do we? We think he could be alive and we want to find him. And we have reason to believe that some Gaunts could be relatives of his and so, also ours."

"I see," murmured Hutchins softly. "My apologies, then." He gave him a warm smile. "Of course that I'll be glad to help you in any way I can, but I don't see how I could be of much use."

"Well, we think the Gaunts could be living in Lancashire or Yorkshire," said Harry hastily. "And I know Old John Bryce is from Preston, so I was hoping you could ask him to write to people he knows in Lancashire, to see if any of them have heard of any Gaunts living in those parts."

"Ah," said Hutchins, a wide smile spreading on his face, "of course I will. But I can be of further use to you as well. I'm from Yorkshire myself."

Utterly surprised, Harry stared at him. "You are?"

Robert grinned. "Yes, I'm from Leeds. As a matter of fact, it was when I was working in a factory there that I met Old John – he was a fellow worker. And we both have many acquaintances there, so we can help you with that as well."

"That would be great!" said Harry joyfully, beaming at him. "Thanks!"

"It will take a while, you understand?" said Hutchins quietly, now looking worried. He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder as he added in a low, gentle voice, "And I don't want you to get your hopes up. I truly wish we manage to help you find these relatives, but if it happens to be that there're none, the disappointment could be crushing for you. So you must accept the possibility beforehand."

Harry nodded at him with a grave expression on his face. "I do."

"Good," said Hutchins, warmly smiling.

"I don't want you to tell Alice about this," said Harry abruptly, gazing up at him imploringly.

The man frowned and then his expression softened, as he shook his head. "It wouldn't hurt her feelings, Harry. She wouldn't begrudge you your desire to find relatives. On the contrary, she
would understand and she would encourage you."

"Yeah, I suppose," said Harry, fretfully scuffling his feet, "but it's not just about that." He bit his bottom lip nervously. "It's because… um, well… I've been watching you two and I think that…" He sighed and peered up at him with big eyes, as he rushed out, "Well, if it's true that you are planning to marry Alice, I know that you're also considering other stuff…. I mean, I want to find my father, because I want to know about him, I want to ask him questions, I want to understand, but if he knew Tom and I were here and didn't care, it changes things."

He shook his head, exasperated at himself, as he jerkily carded his fingers through his hair, trying to find a way to express his thoughts and wishes. "But not really, you see? Even if he hadn't known, he's a stranger to me. Of course that I would care for him, if we find him, but he would still be a stranger." He gazed up at the man again, his cheeks flushing, and just blurted out very quickly, "But you're not, and I like you and I rather have you as a dad than anyone else, so if its true that you and Alice were thinking about adopting Tom and me, then I want it to happen even if I find my father, because I love Alice and you and I want you to be my parents!"

And with that, he turned tail and dashed into the orphanage, too mortified to stick around and with no wish to see how his declaration had been taken.

Unbeknownst to him, he left behind a Robert Hutchins who at first looked thoroughly startled and surprised, and then smiled widely, with deep warmth, affection, and contentment.

… once upon a time, there was a good little wolf mistreated by all the lambs…

He was dreaming, enfolded in cotton waves of warmth and love as a beautiful voice sang Alice's lullaby, the tone soft, worried, and concerned as it rose and fell like a placid, slow tide stroking a beach, the sound lulling and cradling, making him contently sigh in his sleep.

… once upon a time, there was a bad black unicorn, a little ugly fairy, and a shy dragon...

The song echoed in his mind, as the face of the woman of his dreams, hallucinations, and imagination formed from amidst fogs and clouds. Her hair golden, long, and soft. He stretched out a hand and touched it, giggling at the sensation. She was so beautiful, like an angel. Her eyes, pale blue, were gazing at him with such warmth and love. Her features delicate and breathtaking, so very familiar to him.

… there was also once, an evil prince, a beautiful witch, and an honest pirate...

He knew her and loved her, and he touched her cheek and she smiled as she continued singing.

… there were all these things, once upon a time, when I dreamed of a world turned upside down...

She held him in her arms and stroked his hair, as she rocked him, murmuring his name, telling him secret things that only they shared.

…Antares...

They weren't alone, a glowing ghostly form was with them, observing, smiling, whispering, as they floated, surrounded by mist and rays of sun.
His hair was caressed, a lingering touch on his scar and the fingers trailed down to his cheek, lovingly, tenderly, and so longingly, as his name was called again, with yearning.

...Harry...

He pressed his cheek against the warm hand, contently nuzzling it, wanting more of that feeling of belonging and love.

"Harry…"

He floated as his name echoed in his mind, parting through fogs and clouds, surging upwards and rolling along waves of warmth, as the hand cupped his cheek.

"Harry!"

His eyes slowly parted open, heavy with sleep. He was surrounded by darkness except for the light that came from a shimmering, glowing figure.

"What?" he said groggily and disoriented. Someone had called his name, hadn't they?

He blinked confusedly until he noticed the warm hand on his cheek.

Startled, he jerked backwards, and instantly grabbed his eyeglasses from the rickety nightstand. As soon as he put them on, everything came into focus, and he gasped at the sight of the man seated on his bed.

"You!" he spluttered incredulously. "What are you doing here!"

"Lower your voice," said the strange Santi person.

Bewildered, Harry sat up straight on his bed and glanced around. He was in his room but he could barely see much, the curtains of their window were drawn shut and there was utter darkness except for Santi who seemed to be glowing with an inner light of his own.

"You don't want to wake up Tom, do you?" said Santi, as he rose up. "Let's go outside."

The young man didn't wait for him. He glided forward and went through the door, as if it was made of nothing but air.

Utterly perplexed, yet also mystified, Harry quietly followed and carefully closed the door shut behind him.

In the middle of the corridor, he spun around to see Santi waiting for him, calmly leaning against a wall.

Harry blinked, shook his head, and then snapped, highly miffed, "How did you get in here? I've been looking for you, for weeks, in Hogwarts-" he gestured wildly with his hands at their surroundings "-because you said you would come back and explain things to me, and you end up showing up here?"

"I wanted to see you," said Santi simply, giving him a wide, gorgeous smile.

Harry scowled, as he demanded curtly, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Santi arched an eyebrow at him. "You already know who I am."
"I know your name," bit out Harry impatiently, "but not much else." He ran his fingers through his hair, briskly, as he added, "You told me a bunch of stuff that makes no sense, and you gave me the 'task' of making the Grey Lady speak to me, and that's it!"

"And you haven't fulfilled your task yet, have you?" retorted Santi in a chiding tone.

"I tried!" huffed out Harry, peeved. "But she always flees from me." His green eyes narrowed. "And I still don't understand why it's important that she tells me stuff about herself!" He pointed an accusing finger at him. "I don't know you, I don't know her, and I'm not interested."

Santi released a heavy, weary sigh. "You will come to understand much, but first you must learn about her story, and you can only do that if you manage to convince her to tell you." He pierced him with his strange, glowing milky eyes, as he added, "I told you I am your protector. And I told you that what she has to reveal is important. That is enough."

"No, it's not," gritted out Harry with exasperation. "I'm not your lackey. I want answers-"

"That's why I came," interjected Santi, grinning widely. "Precisely to do that – give you some answers. You have just discovered John Gaunt, haven't you?"

Harry's eyes went wide and he gaped. "How can you know that!"

"I know many things," said Santi, chuckling merrily. "I did tell you that I can bend Time at my pleasure, if you'll remember?"

"And that's a load of codswallop!" said Harry, irked. "I've never heard of something like that being possible, not even in the Wizarding World!"

Santi shrugged his shoulders unconcernedly. "You'll soon start to believe me." He then smiled. "Now, wouldn't you like to know more about John Gaunt? Or, better said –since you already discovered what you need to know about him – wouldn't you like to know about his father, the elusive M.G.?"

"Well, yes," stammered Harry, taken aback. "I would like to know, but-"

"Then I'll tell you," said Santi cheerfully, his milky eyes sparkling. He then tapped a finger on his chin, musingly. "Where to start? I suppose the basics are required, first. He was called Morgon Gaunt, an ordinary wizard in all aspects, from a pureblood family that had never distinguished itself in any way. The Gaunts had no great fortune, no high social standing, all their members hadn't been particularly intelligent, powerful, resourceful, nor socially or politically skilled. They were mediocre, below the mark, and as such, ignored and spurned by other pureblood families of higher standing." He shot a sharp grin at him. "The one thing they had, was ruthless ambition. They coveted what other pureblood families possessed –fortune, prestige, respect, status, and such. And it was Morgon Gaunt who decided to get it, no matter the cost."

"I see," muttered Harry, staring at him. "It's good to know his full name, but I already know what he did."

"But you don't know the details, do you?" interjected Santi, indulgently smiling at him. "And it's in the details that the truth lies."

"Um, alright," said Harry slowly, bemused. "So what are those details?"

"The first relevant one, is that Morgon Gaunt was the Caretaker of Hogwarts back in those days," replied Santi placidly. "As all the rest of his family members, he wasn't particularly skilled in
magic, and he had worked as the caretaker of the castle for many decades. He was around his eighties, when he took action." He waved a hand dismissively. "You can imagine the situation. And embittered wizard, with a job he considered to be below him, resentful and jealous of the students that surrounded him, and most of all, envious of the Slytherins."

"Of Sherisse Slytherin and her parents, you mean?" piped in Harry, now gazing at him with deep curiosity.

"Precisely," said Santi, his tone of voice low. "Back then, the Slytherins held much social and political power, being the descendants of one of the Founders and having lived in Hogwarts since the days of their ancestor. Hogwarts was their dominion, so to speak. Those who didn't revere them, feared them."

"I understand," said Harry, nodding, to then add with a pinch of impatience, "But what about Sherisse? I would like to know a bit about her."

"I was just getting to that," said Santi, his lips hitching upwards in amusement. "Sherisse was a nice girl - there's no other way to describe her. Her mother had only been able to give birth to her, and so Sherisse was greatly coddled and treasured by her parents, to such point that their overprotection resulted in her being naive and innocent. She had a sweet disposition, and was liked and loved by all. Her beauty and kindness, along with her name, meant that she had many friends and admirers. She was the little princess of Hogwarts, in short."

Harry swallowed thickly, feeling his stomach rolling sickly, as he whispered, "And Morgon Gaunt, then… he…"

"Morgon Gaunt," said Santi with a grim, grave expression on his face, "hungered for her. During his duties as the Caretaker, he would watch her, laughing with friends, being fawned over and adored, and he hated, resented, and despised her, just as much as he coveted her. He wanted what she had and what she could give him. So one night, when young Sherisse was in the dungeons, making her way to her family's chambers, Morgon assaulted her. He dragged her into an empty room and forced himself on her."

He paused, before he added quietly, "I'll spare you the grisly details. After that, Sherisse was left so traumatized that she changed, understandably. She shied from the company of others, she became quiet and taciturn, and of course, her belly started to grow. The moment her parents took notice, they demanded to know who had done it. But Sherisse wouldn't say a word. Morgon Gaunt was still lurking, and she was terrified of him after the horror and violence of her rape. But then, her parents began to see how Sherisse blanched and trembled at the sight of the Caretaker of Hogwarts in the corridors. It was then that they knew. Her parents were about to take full revenge on Morgon, to torture and kill him, in short, when-"

"The outbreak of Dragon Pox," mumbled Harry, his face pale and drawn out of all color.

"Yes," said Santi tersely. "Her parents were two of the first to die. Thus, she was left alone and unprotected. Moreover, Morgon Gaunt had been no fool. When he had assaulted her, he had made her disclose many secrets, particularly how to take care of the wards of her family's chambers. It was so, that when she was giving birth, Morgon easily pulled down the wards and entered her room. He had known she was due soon, and he wanted to be there to reap his reward. While she was in labor and screaming in pain in her bed, unattended, Morgon went around the rooms, taking everything of value – their galleons, heirlooms, books, jewelry, and such. He used their own trunks to put the things inside, and then shrunk and pocketed them. After that, he simply stood and watched from one corner of the bedroom, as Sherisse finally gave birth to a baby boy. Morgon instantly took his ill-begotten son and fled, leaving her there, dying from blood loss."
"But who saw him?" said Harry hoarsely, his throat dry and tight. "I'm sure there was someone who saw what happened. There had to be a witness."

Santi shot him a large smile, looking proud of him. "Indeed, there was."

"Who?" pressed on Harry, half intrigued and half angered. "And why didn't they stop Morgon? Why didn't they do something? Why didn't they help her!"

"He didn't help her because he didn't have the time for it," replied Santi, his lips twisting. "He came into her room because he heard her crying out for help, when Morgon was taking the baby from her. She was a Slytherin, but she was also good and innocent, he would have saved her, but she died too quickly. The childbirth hadn't been easy, it had ripped her body - she bled to death in seconds, as Morgon was fleeing from her room. The one who answered her call for help was only able to get a glimpse of the fleeing Morgon with baby in arms. After that, the witness was quick to alert one of the teachers he was… acquainted with, let us say, and he communicated what he had seen. The teacher alerted other professors and they gave chase to Morgon Gaunt all the way down to Hogsmeade, casting spells at him, trying to stop him. But Morgon apparated away, and that was the last anyone ever saw of him."

"But who was it?" said Harry insistently. "Who was the witness?"

Santi grinned widely at him. "That's for you to find out. That's your second task."

Harry shot him a look of utter disbelief, and then snapped angrily, "What? You must be joking!"

"I'm not," said Santi, chortling and chuckling. "All the tasks I give you are important, for your own sake." He shot him a jaunty wink. "So I do hope you succeed in them."

And with that, he gave him a cheery wave of the hand. "See you soon. Ta-ta!"

"You come back here!" bellowed Harry furiously at the suddenly empty corridor. He then stomped a foot on the floor out of sheer frustration, violently carding his fingers through his hair, grousing darkly under his breath, "Shows up out of the blue, tells me a bunch of stuff, and gives me more tasks! As if I hadn't enough on my plate-"

"What are you doing?" said a vexed, demanding voice.

Startled, Harry nearly jumped in the air. He swirled around and saw his brother peeking out from the parted door of their bedroom, in his pajamas, with disarrayed, tousled hair, and eyes heavy with sleep.

Tom shot him a bleary glower. "Why are you out here?" He glanced around the corridor, frowning. "I heard you shouting. Who were you talking to?"

"Um, it was nothing," said Harry quickly. He shook his head and mumbled, "Erm… I think I was sleepwalking."

Decidedly looking more awake and alert, Tom narrowed his eyes at him. "You have never sleepwalked in your life. I should know." He released a heavy sigh and added with annoyance, "Was it the red eyes again?"

"Huh?" Harry stared at him.

"Your stupid nightmare," bit out Tom impatiently. "Was that what woke you up?"
"Oh. Yeah!" said Harry instantly. "It woke me up and scared me, and then I couldn't get back to sleep so I came out here to… um, well, just spend some time and talk to myself until I got sleepy again." He ducked his head down in contrition. "Sorry that I woke you up."

"I can't believe you're still such a baby… frightened of silly, little nightmares," said Tom, casting him a disgusted look. He shook his head and grumbled darkly, "Fine, come along then. I'll let you sleep with me so that you don't have that nightmare again."

"Really?" said Harry, perking up.

Ever since they had started Hogwarts, his brother had refused to let him sleep with him, as they always used to do when Harry had his nightmare of the red eyes and the flash of green light, because it always made his scar hurt and when Tom touched and caressed it, for some reason the pain always went away.

But Tom had decided that they were not little boys anymore, and hadn't allowed the tradition to continue, much to Harry's sorrow.

"Yes, really," snapped Tom shortly. And he spun around and went back into their bedroom, leaving the door open for Harry.

Beaming happily, Harry rushed inside.
They arrived at King's Cross Station with all their things: their two trunks which were now quite heavy given that the Featherlight Charm had worn off, and the basket containing little Ulysses.

Leaving his friends behind at the orphanage hadn't been that much of a sorrowful experience, since Harry had missed Hogwarts much, despite everything, and couldn't wait to see his good friend Alphard Black again. Parting from Nagini had been another matter altogether.

Harry had felt very guilty for having to leave her alone for many months, once more. It saddened him greatly, and the little snake hadn't taken it well.

"Why can that thing," she spat in a furious hiss when Tom and him had been getting their things ready that morning, her yellow eyes glaring at the little Scorcrup that was placidly curled up on top of Harry's head, "go with you, and I can't? It's not fair!"

"As you well know, it's because you're a snake and snakes aren't allowed at Hogwarts," hissed Tom curtly, before he shot Harry a narrowed-eyed look. "Nor are Scorcrups, for that matter-"

"Ulysses is like a kitten!" interjected Harry defensively, crossing his arms over his small chest. "And cats are allowed, aren't they? They can't tell me I cannot have him!"

"We'll see," said Tom caustically, though his dark blue eyes had a certain gleeful glint in them, as if he thought Harry's beloved little pet would be kicked out of the school and he couldn't wait to greatly enjoy the event.

After that, the conversation had progressed to become a loud match of angered hisses between Tom and Nagini, and Harry had left his brother to deal with her.

Tom had promised her all sorts of things for when they came back for summer holidays, in repayment for abandoning her for the next months, but the little snake was utterly unimpressed and unmoved, only turning more enraged.

"Perhaps I won't be here when you return!" she had hissed in the end, her tone both furious and
sounding deeply hurt. And without another word, she had flung herself out the window.

They had seen her quickly slithering down along a pipe, and then crossing the backyard to end up vanishing into the shrubbery.

Harry shook his head sadly at the recollection, but he was pulled out of his musings when Robert Hutchins placed a hand on his shoulder.

Alice had already fetched a trolley and both muggles had helped load their trunks and Ulysses' basket on it.

"Why don't you go on ahead with Tom, Alice?" said Hutchins gently. "I would like a word in private with Harry, if you don't mind."

Harry tensed at that, biting his bottom lip in apprehension. Alice gave them a curious look but was quick to comply, taking the trolley with her, and even though Tom followed, the boy shot them a suspicious, narrowed-eyed glance.

The moment they were left alone in front of the train station, Robert glanced down at him. "I'd like to discuss what you said the other day-"

"I'm sorry!" blurted out Harry, flushing and fretting nervously. "I know I shouldn't have said those things-"

"There's nothing you should be sorry about," interjected Robert, giving him a warm smile. The man then crouched on the sidewalk to be at his eye-level, putting his hands on Harry's small shoulders, as he added softly, "Everything you said is true. Alice and I have been talking about getting married, and about…" He trailed off, to then smile widely at him. "And we have every intention of adopting you and Tom the moment we are husband and wife. We've already talked about it to Mrs. Cole, and after many lengthy discussions, she saw things our way and has agreed to it. She already has the adoption papers prepared-"

"Oh, thank you!" cried out Harry joyfully, leaping forward to hug the man with all his power and love, feeling as if all his dreams were suddenly becoming true. His brother and him would finally have a family, and better parents than Alice Jones and Robert Hutchins he couldn't imagine or wish for.

The poor man had to stick a foot back to retain his balance and stop them from tumbling over on the street.

"You won't regret it!" promised Harry fervently as Hutchins chuckled and affectionately embraced him tightly.

"Of course we won't regret it," said Robert in amusement, gently pulling Harry backwards to gaze at him with eyes sparkling with fondness and contentment. "You must already know that Alice and I love you boys very much." His expression then turned grave, as he added quietly, "You must understand, it won't happen immediately. I have many things to settle beforehand. It will take me several months to have everything in order."

The man paused, and suddenly grinned. "I want to buy her a nice engagement ring for when I propose, and to get her a beautiful house as well." His lips twisted wryly. "The house I have at present at the back of my store is only fit for a bachelor, not a large family. So I still have to save money for a couple of more months…" He trailed off and chuckled under his breath. "Indeed, I've been saving for many years. I think I started in earnest since the first time I saw Alice. My heart
must have known what I desired even before my head did."

A mite befuddled, Harry could merely blink at him. "So… um…"

"What I mean," said Robert, smiling warmly, "is that I've been looking at cottages for sale in Southend-on-Sea." He shot him an inquisitive look. "You boys like it there, don't you? You, at least, have much fun when we visit Old John. Would you like to live there?"

"Yeah!" breathed out Harry, his eyes wide with surprise and happiness. "It's great! I love the beach and the sun, and I could swim every day!"

"Thought so," said Hutchins, chuckling indulgently. "Alice likes the town too, and she enjoys the seaside just as much." He ruffled Harry's hair, as he added with a conspiratorial wink, "But let's keep it a secret between us, yes? I want the house to be a surprise for Alice. It's going to be my wedding present for her." He paused, his expression turning serious. "And don't tell your brother either. I know he can be a tad difficult. After I've proposed to Alice, I would like to tell him myself that we want to adopt you both." He shot him a concerned, quizzical glance. "Do you think he'll agree?"

At that, Harry bit his bottom lip anxiously. He hadn't even stopped to consider what Tom would think about the whole affair. In fact, he was quite certain that his brother would furiously refuse to be adopted by muggles, even if it was Alice and Robert.

A determined, fierce expression crossed Harry's face in the next second. It didn't matter. He would make Tom agree, or else. He wasn't going to allow his brother to spoil things for them. Alice and Robert were the best and kindest people they knew. And they even put up with Tom when he was in his nasty moods, with much patience and understanding, to boot.

"Don't worry," Harry vouched firmly. "Tom will agree."

"Let us hope so," muttered Hutchins quietly under his breath, before he smiled gently. "But yes, I'm sure that between you and I, we'll be able to convince him."

The man rose to his feet, to then give him a wide grin. "On another note, you'll be happy to know that Old John and I have already written to our acquaintances in Yorkshire and Lancashire. Our friends will start asking around about the Gaunts soon. I expect we should have some results in a couple of months."

"That's fantastic, thanks!" piped in Harry, giving him a beaming, grateful smile.

"It's our pleasure to help you, little fellow," murmured Robert softly, ruffling Harry's hair. "Now let's get going, or they'll start to wonder…"

After that, Harry felt as if he was walking on glorious clouds of sheer bliss.

Even Alice must have noticed something was up, because when they parted ways at the train station, Harry had given her a kiss on the cheek when she had leaned down to hug him.

She had blinked at him, looking both bemused and tickled with pleasure at the unexpected show of affection. Harry hadn't been able to help himself, feeling so filled with brimming love and gratefulness for her and Robert.

It wasn't until they were in the Hogwarts Express itself that his feet landed on earth once more. As they went down the corridor of a wagon, hauling their trunks, he noticed the many Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws that greeted Tom from their compartments, waving and inviting him over.
Whether they were those to whom Tom had sold essays or acquaintances the boy had made for self-interested, devious reasons of his own, Harry didn't know. Regardless, he was quite satisfied and content when his brother gave them charming, gorgeous smiles but nevertheless made his excuses and kept following Harry. And at least they wouldn't be crossing paths with Olive Hornby and her flock of Ravenclaw friends, since those girls had remained at Hogwarts for the Yule Ball.

They even passed along one of the compartments occupied by some of their housemates. Only two of them took notice. Amidst Orion Black, Thaddeus Avery, Neron Lestrange, Priscilla Pucey and Capricia Carrow, Alphard Black and Abraxas Malfoy were the only ones who glanced at them through the window of their compartment's door.

Harry had let out little Ulysses from his basket by then, and the Scórscrup had been happily perched on his left shoulder when those two boys caught sight of them. Alphard shot him a covert grin, looking vastly satisfied at the sight, his expression softening as he glanced at his former familiar, while Malfoy blinked and then arched a pale eyebrow, curiosity and intrigue clear on his perfect, handsome features.

It was when Tom and he finally found an empty compartment for themselves that Harry realized why his brother had been so keen to stay with him instead of mingling with 'useful connections'.

"What did Hutchins want with you?" demanded Tom shortly, as soon as they stowed their trunks away and sat down, pinning him with a narrow-eyed gaze.

Harry huffed at that, before he said loftily, "Oh, nothing much. He just wanted to tell me that he and Old John Bryce have already written to their friends for the Gaunt thing."

"Nothing else?" pressed on Tom, eyeing him very suspiciously.

"Nope," said Harry with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders, to then wholly ignore his brother as he played with Ulysses, chuckling when the little Scórscrup pawed and chased after the thread Harry had yanked out from his Slytherin scarf.

The first months back at Hogwarts flashed by in a flurry of activity.

The news of Dorea Black's betrothal to Charlus Potter had spread like wildfire. It seemed that the couple was on the lips of everyone in the school during the first few weeks, as the couple went around, openly hand-in-hand for the first time: Dorea Black looking quite self-satisfied and smug, her beauty resplendent with inner joy as well, while Charlus Potter looked mightily proud, strutting around with squared shoulders and swelled chest, when he wasn't carrying an absolutely besotted, dumb smile on his face, as he if didn't yet give credence to his good luck and couldn't quite puzzle out how he had managed to finally obtain his heart's desire.

The flutter of gossip that followed them was plentiful and expressed all sorts of sentiments.

"… Must she have everything? She walks around as if she was the prettiest and smartest girl in Hogwarts, and she's not! And she's a Slytherin to boot – she shouldn't be with a Gryffindor, it's not right...."

".... I don't know what he sees in her. He's so handsome and brilliant, and such a fantastic Quidditch player, and wealthy and a pureblood too, he could have anyone! And he chose a Black? They're all mad and dangerous those, always doing all kinds of evil Dark Arts..."
"… I heard they've been a couple in secret for ages! They had to, because Abraxas Malfoy's grandfather wanted Dorea Black for himself and the old wizard threatened he would kill anyone she married!"

"Oh no, it was her father who wanted her for himself! It's him who vouched to kill her and anyone else she chose! You know how those Blacks are, marrying each other, and doing incest left, right, and center - it's disgusting! Someone like that shouldn't be with our housemate, we must make Charlus see reason!"

"… What's so good about Potter, I would like to know! I've been courting Dorea for ages, sending her all sorts of gifts – I've spent a fortune, and all the while she rejected me because she wanted Potter? He's an idiot – not good enough to even wipe her shoes! Myself, on the other hand…"

"They make such a nice couple! They really look good together, and it's clear they love each other greatly!"

That last comment Harry had overheard from a group of Hufflepuffs. It had already become evident to him that even though some students of other Houses spurned them for being too good-natured, kind and simple, lacking ambition and wit, supposedly, they were nonetheless the only ones in the Castle that apparently could see the reality of the situation, instead of being misguided by prejudice, envy, or resentment.

Meanwhile, Charlus Potter seemed happily deaf to all criticism while Dorea seemed to vastly enjoy it, shooting vicious, smug smirks at the girls that glowered at her.

Thankfully, gossip about the couple was soon replaced with excitement due to the beginning of the Quidditch Season of Hogwarts. The House Teams had been arduously training during the first term of school and were finally prepared to start the competition for that year's Quidditch Cup.

The first match was between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, and Dorea had instructed Harry to watch the game so that he could see Gryffindors' Quidditch strategies and how their Chasers, especially Charlus Potter, played. He had orders to keenly observe and learn their flight maneuvers and Chaser tactics and formations.

Not that Harry needed any additional incentive; he wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Finally seeing a Quidditch match for the first time left him breathless and filled with awe, joy, and exhilarated thrill.

He hadn't been at the Slytherins' stands, since his housemates were cheering for Ravenclaw. Instead, he had been right smack in the middle of the Gryffindors, plenty of which had at first glanced at him suspiciously and with much mistrust, being Harry the only one in green and silver amidst gold and red. But as he yelled out encouragements and jumped up and down with Felicity and Felix Prewett, waving banners of Gryffindor House that depicted a ferocious roaring lion and such, the rest of the Gryffindors soon forgot his presence and cheered along with him, boisterously and so rowdy and loudly that Harry didn't think he had ever had so much fun in his life.

It was when he was making his way back to the Castle, with the Prewett twins and Algie Longbottom by his side, all of them excitedly discussing every little move made during the match and filled with pride and joy since Gryffindor had beaten Ravenclaw spectacularly, that two of Abraxas Malfoy's lackeys made their presence known.

Neron Lestrange and Thaddeus Avery used their big bulks to slam into the Prewetts and Longbottom, sending them tumbling down on the ground as they caged Harry in between them,
while they began to spit out insults.

"Rooting for the enemy, Riddle?" snarled Neron Lestrange furiously, jabbing an elbow into Harry's ribs, so hard and violently that Harry didn't see it coming and gasped in pain. "And I thought that a filthy mudblood like you could sink no lower, you little traitor-"

A loud, spitting hiss resounded and little Ulysses instantly leapt from Harry's head to his shoulder, his spine arching and his puffed out tail instantly transforming. With a series of clacking noises, his tail changed into hard husks that clicked together, hooking forward, stinger poised and menacingly swaying.

"That's a – a …" spluttered Thaddeus Avery, instantly jumping backwards, his eyes wide with fear.

Neron Lestrange didn't look much better, the boy had paled and quickly withdrawn.

"I knew it!" Walburga Black was suddenly before him, her face twisted with rage. "I knew it was no mere kitten!" She fulminated Harry with her gaze as she demanded in a furious screech, "Where did you get a Scorcrup from?"

Harry didn't fail to notice how the girl shot a glance over her shoulder, eyes narrowed with much suspicion and anger, her gaze directed at her brother Alphard, who was several feet away with another group of Slytherins.

"It's none of your bloody business," retorted Harry coolly, as he grinned at little Ulysses and gave him a grateful pat on the head. The Scorcrup had now focused all his attention to the girl before them, tail still like a scorpion's and ready for attack. "But if you must know, my parents got him for me from Beasts and Vermin in Knockturn Alley."

Walburga narrowed her dark grey eyes at him, as she spat out, "You're lying! Scorcrups are very expensive and everyone knows that your disgusting muggle parents are paupers-"

"They've been saving for the whole year to buy me a good birthday present," interjected Harry airily, before he narrowed his eyes at her and bit out acidly, "Not that it's any of your damn business-"

"I don't believe you!" she hissed out venomously. "I think that-"

Harry snorted scathingly. "And I care about what you think because? Sod off, Black!" He made a move to bump his shoulder against hers so that he could help Felicity Prewett, who was still wincing on the ground from the hard shove Avery and Lestrange had given her.

He was yanked around when Walburga grabbed him by the arm, her eyes glinting viciously, as she snarled, "Even if he's yours, only cats, owls, and toads are allowed at Hogwarts. Not Crups and even less Scorcrups." She shot him a vengeful, nastily gleeful look, as she added poignantly, "I'll be telling Professor Slughorn and you'll have to get rid of it!"

And with that, the girl whirled around and made a mad dash towards the Castle, clearly with every intention of fulfilling her threat right away.

"Go ahead!" yelled Harry after her, chortling unconcernedly, as he then offered a hand to Felicity, which the girl took to pick herself up from the ground, blushing and softly thanking him.

Not that Harry noticed. He was crowing triumphantly inside his head, instead. He had been no fool. The first thing he had done when stepping into Hogwarts was to go straight to his Head of House's office.
He had already been there once before, when Slughorn had explained to Tom and him about the Statute of Secrecy and such.

The wizard's 'office' – an understatement if he had ever heard one – was very vast and spacious, filled with plush settees and sofas, and lavish tapestries and paintings and drapes of velvet cloth that hanged from the ceiling, arranged grandiosely, and with nice vases and all sorts of other decorations and trinkets.

Horace Slughorn was a creature of comforts, clearly, and his 'office' was certainly much different from Professor Tilly Toke's, which was small and simple.

The vast room even had a large cabinet of shelves filled with framed magical photographs, signed, displaying this or that famous figure of the Wizarding World: the inventor of that Potion or other, a Chief Editor of The Daily Prophet or famed columnist, owner of such and such racing-broom company, wizards or witches that had this or that influential or high position in the Ministry of Magic or Wizengamot, and so on and so forth.

Hearing the wizard speak of them, one would think their success in life had all been thanks to Slughorn, since the Slytherin Head of House gave much credit for his former students' triumphs to himself, and had carried on to blabber about all the nice gifts they sent him yearly, in gratitude, allegedly.

Slughorn had taken one look at Harry with little Ulysses perched on the top of his head as they entered the office, and the wizard had excitedly rushed around his desk to peer at them.

"Oho! A Scorcrup, I believe!" boomed Slughorn cheerfully, eyeing Ulysses with great interest, probably noticing their same coloring of eye and hair. "They are quite unique, fascinating little creatures." His eyes suddenly sparkled, as he rubbed his hands together. "I wonder if you would allow me to extract some of the poison it holds in its stinger. The venom of the Black Scorpion of the Gobi Desert is quite a rare, expensive-
"

In that instant, before Harry could say a word, his familiar somehow got a drift of what the wizard's intentions were, because Ulysses jumped from Harry's head to his shoulder and arched his spine, spitting out a loud hiss as his fur stood up and his tail puffed out.

"Ah! I see the books didn't lie," said Slughorn, letting out a nervous chuckle as he quickly stepped backwards, safely away from Ulysses' range. "Has the intelligence and perceptiveness of a Kneazle as well!" He then shot Harry an entreatingly persistent glance. "But perhaps, if you asked him nicely to allow me to-
"

Another spit of a warning hiss, and Ulysses' tail swiftly transformed into a scorpion's, pointedly flashing the wizard with its stinger.

"I see. I'll take that as a refusal," mumbled Slughorn, his tone despondent and vastly disappointed, casting one last covetous look at Ulysses' stinger before the little creature regained his usual appearance and hoped back on Harry's head to calmly curl himself up in a satisfied manner.

The wizard released a mournful sigh before he beamed at Harry jauntily. "Well, m'boy, what do you require of me?"

"I want to make sure that I can keep him in the castle," said Harry at last, to then add vehemently, "He's really just like a kitten. He's harmless, truly!"

Slughorn gave him a skeptical glance at that, but Harry was quick to peer up at the wizard with big,
teary green eyes, as he said piteously, "You and the rest of professors know that Tom and I are really orphans, Sir. We have so very little. And Ulysses here was a present from a good friend I have in Hogwarts. And I can't return him." He made his eyes go huge, as he added with a sniffle, "Surely I can keep him, please? He's the only thing I have."

"Yes, the Staff knows about your situation," said Horace Slughorn, his expression softening with sympathy as he patted Harry on the shoulder. He looked to be musing things over, and then he merrily winked at him. "I'll have a word with Headmaster Dippet to let him know about your request and sincere motives for it. I'm sure he'll agree to make an exception in your unique case."

And apparently Dippet did, because the following day Slughorn told him he would be allowed to keep his familiar at school, albeit with some stipulations.

"It's known that Scorcrups follow their owners' instructions to the letter, m'boy," said Horace Slughorn with a wizened air, before he added in a stern voice, "As long as you tell him to never attack a student or professor, no matter the circumstances, it will be quite alright."

Thus, Harry did as required, though it didn't stop Ulysses from spitting out threatening hisses and flashing his scorpion's tail when the situation warranted it. But the little creature only did that to bullying Slytherins, for the rest, the Scorcrup had become some sort of mascot, vastly fawned over.

Indeed, after he had been given permission by Dippet and Slughorn, he had carried Ulysses around wherever he went, and it had gained him an unexpected surge of popularity.

Girls and even some boys would stop him in the corridors, to giggle and croon at little Ulysses and pet his soft fur. And the little creature seemed to bask in the adoring and gushing attention, always pulling cute little stunts like mewling and purring and curling up or prettily yawning to show his tiny fangs and pink tongue or using his paws to softly pat at caressing fingers and coil his tail around wrists.

Moreover, the Scorcrup seemed to have taken an instant liking to Felicity Prewett. Every day in which Harry spent some time with his friends in Gryffindor Tower, little Ulysses immediately jumped into Felicity's arms and started licking her nose and cheeks, tickling the girl with his tiny rough tongue, making her giggle as she cooed at him, looking utterly enchanted and enamored, as she pressed her face on his soft black fur and scratched the back of his tiny ears and petted and coddled him.

Little Ulysses became like a loud purring machine at the mere sight of the girl, fact that seemed to delight everyone who witnessed it.

His Scorcrup was quite the little charmer, who clearly knew what he was about.

Furthermore, in exchange for Harry learning German, Tom had fulfilled his end of the bargain and had begun brewing the eyesight-correcting potion of Dorea Black's book. With the pouch of galleons Tom now knew came from Alphard, he had purchased by owl all the necessary ingredients, most of them from the apothecary in Diagon Alley. The eyes of a magical creature near extinction Dorea Black had once mentioned, had come from one in Knockturn Alley.

Then, with his own potion supplies of weighting scales, cauldron, and stirring rod, Tom had chosen one of the numerous empty rooms in the maze of corridors of the dungeons and had proceeded to begin brewing.

It would take six months, so Harry was well aware he would be taking the potion just before the school year ended. Not that he was in any hurry. Given the potion's rate of success and possible
harmful consequences, he was in no rush.

And since Tom had been nice and taken care of the potion, Harry had further repaid him by asking the favor from Alphard.

"You want the Mind Arts books my parents have in their library?" said Alphard dumbfounded, blinking at him.

"Not all of them!" clarified Harry quickly. "Just one or two – whichever are the best. And I just need to borrow them for some weeks, nothing more."

Alphard shook his head, as he said, mystified, "But how did you know my parents have such books?"

Indeed, how did Tom know everything? His brother just seemed to have a knack for it. Though Harry suspected the boy must have been doing some heavy eavesdropping around their common room, and probably one of the Blacks had boasted to their friends about the libraries in their homes.

"Dunno," mumbled Harry, shrugging his shoulders. "I just heard someone saying so, I think."

Alphard shot him a piercing glance but didn't press the matter. His expression turned pensive, as he said quietly, "Well, we have many of those kinds of books. What are you interested in, exactly?"

"Legilimency and Occlumency," replied Harry promptly.

At that, Alphard's eyebrows shot upwards. "Gulping gargoyles! What on earth for? I haven't read about that myself but I know what they are!" He gave him an anxious look, as he added in a hasty whisper, "They are considered Dark, Harry. If anyone saw you studying those things it could mean trouble for you."

"We'll be careful, don't worry," said Harry soothingly.

"We?" echoed Alphard, before he huffed and crossed his arms over his chest, a scowl on his face. "Ah, now I understand. It's for your brother that you're asking!"

"It's for both of us!" interjected Harry vehemently. "Fine, so he was the one of the idea. But he's told me that they are very useful so I agreed to ask you and to study them." He peered at his friend entreatingly, as he added in a soft voice, "Please, Al. It's me that's asking for the favor, not Tom."

Alphard deflated, his lips twisting wryly. "Alright, alright." Then he frowned and shook his head. "But I cannot possibly write to my father asking for those books. He treasures the Black Collection greatly and he would never send me one of its books to Hogwarts. Not to mention that if he knew I was lending them, he would have my hide."

"Oh," mumbled Harry in disappointment, his shoulders slumping. He released a heavy sigh. "I understand-"

"I didn't say I wouldn't get them for you, though," piped in Alphard, mischievously grinning at him. "If you don't mind waiting, I can get those books when I go back home for summer holidays."

Harry gazed at him, concerned. "But if you take the books without asking for permission first, won't your dad notice anyway?"

"Oh, certainly," said Alphard unperturbed. "But I plan to take them just before I have to leave for
Hogwarts for our second year." He shot him a very toothy grin. "So by the time my father finds out, I'll already be back here. And he cannot punish me when I'm in Hogwarts, can he?" He rolled his eyes, and flapped a hand dismissively. "I'll get a Howler and that's it."

"Um…” said Harry hesitantly, shooting him a worried, rueful glance. "But I don't want to be the reason you get in trouble with your dad…”

Alphard let out a guffaw and then sniggered. "I'm always getting in trouble with my parents! One more time will be of little consequence." He patted Harry on the shoulder, and winked at him. "Don't worry. Everything will work out just fine, you'll see. I'll lend you those books next year and then I'll return them to my father by owl along with words of deep repentance and such." He chuckled under his breath. "I'll get a slap on the wrist and that will be the end of it."

"If you're sure," said Harry slowly, to then beam at him, "then thanks!"

Furthermore, soon after that, Harry was apprised of other good news.

One day during breakfast at the Great Hall, when he was seated amidst his first-year housemates, a flock of owls swept in, dropping newspapers as usually happened.

Given the sudden stream of gossipy whispers and animated voices that rose in the Hall, Harry took an interest and peered with curiosity at The Daily Prophet in Tom's hands.

At the front page there was a big moving picture of the Minister of Magic, Charlemagne McLaggen, with a forced smile on his face, yet his expression was clearly pinched. Right above it, in black, bold letters, the title of the article read: 'Dumbledore Wins Plebiscite! New Law Passed!'

Harry was instantly reminded of what Alphard had told him when they had been under Charlus Potter's Invisibility Cloak in Hogsmeade and had seen the Minister and Aurora Bones in The Three Broomsticks. Just as he recalled all the angry comments the Slytherins had made during the first term of school, regarding all the things that the law Dumbledore had been striving to pass in the Wizengamot entailed.

Apparently, through the plebiscite, the British wizarding community had voted in favor of Dumbledore's suggestions and the wizard had finally triumphed, trumping and thwarting McLaggen.

As the article explained, following the Law, a new department had been created in the Ministry of Magic: the Muggle Liaison Office, that had already placed a portrait of an inconspicuous wizard in Downing Street Number Ten, to take notice and hear everything that went on in the Muggle Prime Minister's office. The fireplace there had been connected to the Floo Network as well, and Minister Charlemagne McLaggen had already made use of it to pay a visit to his muggle counterpart and reveal the existence of the Wizarding World to him.

Harry almost choked on his bit of toast as he read that over his brother's shoulder, breaking into guffaws and sniggers. He could almost imagine it, Neville Chamberlain gawking and gaping as his fireplace suddenly burst into green flames, to then spit out a wizard covered in soot, with robes and yielding a funny-looking stick in hand.

It was a wonder he hadn't received a newspaper clipping from Alice with the news that the Prime Minister had kicked the bucket from a sudden nasty shock. Poor sod.

Harry shook his head in amusement and kept reading. Though the article didn't explain what Neville Chamberlain's reaction had been or what had been discussed between the two Ministers. It
was just tilted as a success and 'the beginning of new era of Muggle-Wizarding Cooperation'.

Dumbledore's Law required all that, as well as-

"This is not to be borne!" spat Capricia Carrow angrily, throwing her newspaper with disgust on the table. "There goes the Statute of Secrecy! Now all those filthy muggles will know about us and they'll-

"Only their Minister has been told," interjected Abraxas Malfoy coolly, arching a pale eyebrow at her. "It's not the end of our world as we know it."

Before her friend could retort, Priscilla Pucey said acidly, "It's as close as it can get." She glanced around and then lowered her voice to a mere whisper, hushed yet furious, "We all know what Dumbledore's Law's true purpose is. Now McLaggen will have no choice but to help muggles in case of war. It won't be as easy for him to make an allegiance with the Dark Lord. And we were counting on that - that his fear of the Dark Lord would make him cower like the pathetic, powerless wizard he is, and agree to a peace treaty!"

"What makes you think the Dark Lord wants peace with England?" drawled Abraxas placidly, his silver eyes glinting as his lips quirked upwards. "Truly, Pucey, I thought you had much more sense."

"What do you know?" breathed out Capricia Carrow, as she, Priscilla, and Druella Rosier leaned forward, as if they wanted nothing more than to pry all his secrets from his lips. "What has your grandfather told you?"

"I know much," said Abraxas, smirking at them widely, clearly savoring their desperation, "that I'm not allowed or willing to divulge."

Then the boy covertly shot Harry a glance, with silver eyes that seemed to be gleaming with a knowing, satisfied glint in them, as if Abraxas had come back from Winter Holidays with a wealth of new secret information and it was somehow related to him. Harry could only frown at the boy, puzzled and miffed.

Clearly not noticing the silver and green gazes briefly locking together in a silent battle of wills, the girls shot Abraxas a vexed glare at his response, before they returned to their Daily Prophets as they angrily whispered amongst themselves.

"I'm more annoyed about the changes in Hogwarts' curriculum," remarked Orion Black then, glowering at the newspaper article as his handsome features twisted with anger and contempt. "Care of Magical Creatures to be really left as a third-year elective? I thought they wouldn't dare! I enjoy that class. I don't see why I should suffer the lack of it just so that stupid mudbloods aren't shocked during their first year by knowing about 'dangerous' magical creatures. If they can't take it, then they shouldn't be here in the first place!"

"It isn't going to affect us," piped in Alphard Black, rolling his eyes at his cousin as he finished munching down a sausage. "The article says that those changes are only going to be implemented next year. So it's the new students that will have that class as an elective, not the rest of us."

"That's beside the point, Alphie," groused out Orion darkly, glaring at him. "It's the principle of the matter. New pureblood students will be affected, won't they, and all future generations as well - and all just to coddle mudbloods! As if their vile presence among us wasn't already harmful enough!"
Harry knew that if it had been a couple of months ago, Tom and he would have been the recipients of pointed Slytherin glowers at Orion Black's last comment about mudbloods.

However, it was clear to him that after Tom had carried on the 'first stages' of his 'plan' –the whole issue of selling essays to students of other Houses to prove to the Slytherins that it was smarter to have Tom working with them rather than against, besides having attacked Walburga Black with some unknown Dark Curse that not even Dorea had been able to heal easily, along with threatening their housemates with bodily harm if they kept bullying Harry– had changed things for them.

The additional presence of Ulysses, who had already proven his worth against the thickheads of Thaddeus Avery and Neron Lestrange who apparently hadn't taken Tom's words too seriously about not touching Harry, had become a further incentive for the Slytherins to watch how they treated the two 'mudbloods' in their midst.

Their housemates wholly ignored them for the most part, if they weren't approaching Tom for essays and tutoring sessions, gritting their teeth yet paying for in full. Tom was no altruist, after all.

Thus, the Slytherins acted as if Tom and he weren't seated at their sides, and carried on to discuss at length all the possible political ramifications of Dumbledore's Law and how it would affect their families' positions and clout, and whatnot.

From Tom, Harry only heard some words muttered pensively under his breath, "… this changes much…"

Not that Harry had any idea what his brother meant, because Tom wouldn't say, and Harry had other matters to deal with so he hadn't cared much.

Indeed, by the second week of March, just after the second Quidditch match in which the Hufflepuffs had pummeled the Ravenclaws –the Huffs weren't so kind after all, at least not in the Quidditch Pitch– he finally completed his map of Hogwarts.

Only a few finishing touches were required but he didn't want to make those in the presence of Professor Tilly Toke, who had helped him much and further taught him the rest of the charms he would be needing to tweak his map in private.

It was thus, that he was in the kitchens, staring proudly at his map. Ulysses was on the table, on top of a slab of meat much bigger than himself but which he was nonetheless attacking ferociously with claws and tiny fangs, hissing with pleasure at the taste and with tail happily swinging.

The house-elves had already become used to his familiar and were always quick to present a plate of juicy raw meat when Harry showed up with Ulysses.

At the moment, Harry was gazing at his map with a satisfied, smug grin on his face. It was perfect. As soon as he had opened it, the large piece of parchment had rippled and began to shift and morph, forming a model of Hogwarts' Castle.

Just how he had seen some people do with a sheet of paper with which they formed the shape of animals and such –the caregiver Karen was always doing that, to then gift them to the children of the orphanage– the parchment folded itself to become Hogwarts, as large as two heads put together, and turning nearly transparent so that everything inside could be seen: all the classrooms and floors, the small moving staircases, the Great Hall, the towers, the dormitories of the Four Houses, and such.

There were many labels that indicated what was what, as well. And small black crosses made of
magic floated inside some small rooms – those that Harry had already checked for the entrance of the Chamber of Secrets. Those that he remembered, that was, because he had inspected plenty more but couldn't precisely tell, in the model, which rooms they had been.

Now that he was alone, he flicked his wand and uttered a charm. In a flash, a pale cord-like coil of magic appeared sticking out from the castle from the third floor, attached to a lump of parchment labeled as 'Gunhilda of Gorsemoor Statue'.

With another charm cast, the label 'Tunnel to Hogsmeade' appeared above the cord. Harry had every intention of being very thorough in completing his map. He expected he would be adding quite a bit as he continued his exploration of the castle.

All that he needed for the time being was a name for the map and key phrases to open and close it. Tilly Toke had said that all good mapmakers always enchanted their creations in such ways, so that they would only work for them. Harry had thought it was a rather brilliant idea. He didn't want anyone else knowing the secrets of Hogwarts he could come to discover.

He was precisely musing about what name and phrases he could use, when a voice startled him.

"I thought you'd be here! You weren't in the common room."

"Al!" gasped out Harry, scrambling to hide the map in time.

He wasn't successful, since Alphard instantly appeared beside the table and pounced, asking with much curiosity, "What's that?"

Harry ceased his attempts, and sighed as he presented it before his friend's gaze. "Erm… well, it's a map of Hogwarts."

"Really?" said Alphard excitedly, perusing it with his light grey eyes, before he gave him a quizzical glance. "What are you planning to use it for?"

At that, Harry stared at his best friend. Because, truly, Alphard Black was his best friend, even if they had known each other for just a couple of months. It was funny how those things worked.

Before going to Hogwarts, he would have said that Eric Whalley and Billy Stubbs were his closest friends, having known them for years, but things had changed now that he couldn't talk to them about the Wizarding World or Hogwarts. He had felt it, a sort of wall between them, when he had been in the orphanage for Christmas Holidays.

On the other hand, there were the Prewett twins, and even though he felt very close to them as well, Felicity and Felix had other friends, in Gryffindor, and couldn't spend all their spare time with him.

Alphard was different. The boy didn't have any real friends except him, and though they met in secret in the kitchens and couldn't openly go around the school having fun together, they still spent most of their time with each other, when Harry wasn't with Tom in the Dueling Chamber practicing Dark Curses from Grindelwald's Durmstrang textbooks or studying German.

Moreover, Alphard had done plenty of things for him, asking for nothing in return except his friendship. And it wasn't fair that Abraxas Malfoy, of all people, knew more about Harry than Alphard did. Granted, Malfoy had discovered the secrets all on his own, but still, it wasn't right.

Thus, he now peered at his best friend, giving him a long, considering look. In the next second, he made up his mind.
Harry gestured at the chair beside him, as he said gently, "Take a seat. I wanna tell you some stuff."

Alphard cast him a curious glance and was quick to comply, then gazing at him with much intrigue and interest.

"Tom and I don't have muggle parents, Al. We're orphans..." began Harry in a quiet voice.

And he told him everything he could.

About what Tom had told him about their mom, how she had given birth to them in a muggle orphanage and gave them their names to then die. How Tom had one day showed him a little snake he had found some years ago in the backyard of their orphanage, how Harry had realized that it wasn't that the snake could speak English but that he could understand her hisses. About Dumbledore's visit and how the wizard had reacted when he had seen Nagini and had heard them speak to her. About what the Sorting Hat had told Tom –he left out his own experience with the Hat because he still didn't understand much of what the Founders' judgments had been blabbering on about.

He also told Alphard about the magic he could see in the Castle and in some of the creatures they were shown during the class of Care of Magical Creatures, and then about The Pink Quill's article in The Witch Weekly and Mortimer Mullhorn's unfinished book, which all had led them to finally find out about John Gaunt during Christmas Holidays.

He left out any mention of Santi and the Grey Lady, because he didn't quite know how to explain that.

Throughout it all, Alphard gawked and gaped and choked and gasped, but didn't interrupt.

And Harry finally finished by telling him what had happened with Abraxas Malfoy and how the boy had realized that Tom and he were Parselmouths, looking for the Chamber of Secrets.

"He thought you were a golem!" cried out Alphard just as soon as Harry said his last word, as he choked on peals of guffaws and sniggers. Then the boy suddenly clamped his mouth shut and stared at Harry, with an astonished, dumbstruck expression on his face. "Then... you really are a Parselmouth?"

"I haven't lied!" snapped Harry, bristling defensively. "Everything I said is true!"

"I know," mumbled Alphard under his breath. "I know you wouldn't lie." He shook his head, looking dazzled. "But it's a lot to wrap my mind around, you know?"

And then the boy went back to stare at him with big grey eyes, still looking baffled and flummoxed.

Harry squirmed on his chair, feeling anxious and awkward. "Um... that's all I had to say."

Alphard blinked at him, and said very slowly, his tone of voice bewildered and perplexed, "So you and your twin are really descendants of Salazar Slytherin and you're looking for these Gaunt relatives that are also Slytherins-"

"Yeah," said Harry quickly, before he waved a hand dismissively. "But a good friend of mine is already helping us with that."

Alphard stared some more, then shook his head as if he was trying to sort his thoughts into some
measure of order, and muttered pensively, "And Abraxas Malfoy saw how the Bloody Baron touched you without going through, and you have Magic-Sight-"

"Magic-Sight?" interrupted Harry, gazing at him nonplussed. "You mean that what I can do has a name? It's not some freakish ability, but a known one?"

"Of course," said Alphard matter-of-factly, perking up, "it's a magical trait, just like Parseltongue, and just as rare, at that." He shot him a befuddled, quizzical look. "Maybe that's why you went through the painting of the bowl of fruits. Maybe that's some other strange ability."

Harry blinked at him, to then shrug his shoulders. "Could be. I don't really know."

Alphard shook his head, muttered something unintelligible under his breath, and then his eyes suddenly sparkled and his face brightened as he piped in excitedly, "But, then, this is awesome, Harry! You're a true Slytherin and a Parselmouth and you're looking for the Chamber of Secrets!"

He leaned forward to peer at Harry's map, as he added animatedly, "That's what all these black marks are for, right? Places you've already checked for the secret entrance?"

"Um, yeah," said Harry, a bit disconcerted by his friend's abrupt reaction.

Alphard beamed at him, shooting him a large grin. "Then I want to help! It will be so much fun!"

"Really? You do?" said Harry surprised, then widely smiling at him with much fondness.

"Of course!" said Alphard excitedly. "And Ulysses here can be of much help too." He affectionately patted the head of the little Scorcrup that was happily munching down what was left of his slab of meat. "The three of us can look for the Chamber of Secrets together!"

Harry's green eyes widened, and he gasped out happily, "The three of us! I know just what name to give it!"

In a flash, he whipped out his wand, gave it a flick, intoned the enchantment, and declared, "The Three Musketeers' Map!"

The words floated in beautiful silver letters just above the model of the Castle, baptizing it.

"The what?" Alphard stared at silver letters with a blank expression on his face.

"The Three Musketeers!" said Harry effusively, to then look at him with utter disbelief and groan, "Don't tell me you don't have those books in the Wizarding World?"

It had been one of his favorites stories. Back when Robert Hutchins had started bringing books to the orphanage -to read them to the boys putting it in his own words- and after having told the tales of The Iliad and The Odyssey, one of the many other books had been about the adventures of The Three Musketeers.

Harry even remembered how in those days he had played with his friends, breaking branches from the bushes so that they could yield the sticks as if they were rapiers.

Amy Benson had been Queen Anne, and at first, Eric Whalley, Billy Stubbs, and he had all wanted to be D'Artagnan. They had quarreled and bickered until Harry decided that, to be fair, none would be D'Artagnan, and that they would be instead the three brave musketeers, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. They had even convinced other children to play with them and had prodded each other with their sticks and shrieked and laughed as they all fought; Eric, Billy, and Harry against the other children who were the bad musketeers loyal to Richelieu.
In fact, Harry had even tried to rope his brother into their game, so that they could also have the evil Cardinal Richelieu. Really, Harry had thought his brother was perfect for the part. But Tom had shot him a look filled with scathing contempt and had gone back to his boring, stupid textbooks.

Pulling out of his reminiscences, Harry piped in excitedly, "They're fantastic! They're three men that guarded and fought for the King and Queen, and they had these funny-looking thin swords that were called rapiers, and they saved plenty of times the French Queen and King and the whole Kingdom from the evil Cardinal Richelieu's plots! They had loads of adventures and stuff."

"Oh!" said Alphard brightening. "Sounds good, I guess."

Harry nodded repeatedly, grinning widely. "You, Ulysses, and I will be like the Three Musketeers, because we'll go exploring together, having fun, helping each other, and things like that! And they had these words they always said before going to fight. Watch!"

Giddily chuckling, he tapped his map with his wand and cast a series of charms, muttering the phrases under his breath.

When the map had folded itself to look like a blank parchment, he gave it a tap, exclaiming excitedly, "All for one and one for all!"

It worked perfectly and the parchment rippled and morphed and shifted until it formed the model of Hogwarts, with the map's new name floating above in silver letters.

Harry gave it another tap, as he intoned merrily, "Adventure accomplished!"

And the Castle unraveled itself to become once more a blank piece of parchment.

"Nice!" breathed out Alphard admiringly.

Harry beamed proudly. "Pretty wicked, eh?"

"So when do we start looking for the Chamber of Secrets?" asked Alphard, so enthusiastic that he was almost jumping up and down on his chair.

"Tomorrow night," decided Harry, his green eyes sparkling and with a wide, happy grin on his face.

Alas, they hadn't been able to use the map then, because the next day March the fifteenth arrived, and left Harry devastated.
On the morning of March fifteenth, Harry woke up feeling full of excitement and in a very cheerful disposition. He donned his Slytherin uniform and followed his housemates into the Great Hall for breakfast with much enthusiasm.

Nearly bouncing on his seat as he munched down eggs and sausages, he waited for The Daily Prophet. Alas, he was greatly disappointed when the flock of owls swept in and dropped the newspapers to their subscribers. Tom's copy of The Daily Prophet had no newsworthy article on the front page.

Nevertheless, Harry didn't fail to notice that there were several students around him who had also waited for the newspaper with great expectations. Alphard's brother who was in third year, Cygnus, had looked extremely disappointed when reading his Daily Prophet. Similarly, Abraxas Malfoy had a displeased, impatient expression on his pale, handsome face. Both boys had clearly been informed, during their Winter Holidays, of what would be happening on that day.

The other two boys who had read their newspapers with great intensity were Tom and Alphard, which hadn't surprised Harry one bit.

After all, he had been the one to tell Tom about the things he had overheard when he had been in Phineas Nigellus' portrait in the Blacks' townhouse of Grimmauld Place, while Alphard had been with him under Charlus Potter's Invisibility Cloak when Dumbledore had his conversation with Minister Charlemagne McLaggen in the middle of Hogsmeade's main street.

After that day, Alphard and Harry hadn't discussed again all the things they had overheard when Dumbledore had spoken to his brother Aberforth, or with McLaggen afterwards. The first conversation had left them too flummoxed and uncertain about what to truly believe, while the other had greatly satisfied and calmed down Harry.

However, it seemed to have left Alphard a tad worried and apprehensive, but Harry hadn't pressed his friend to know the reason for it and the boy hadn't offered an explanation either.

It was thus that in the two classes he had following breakfast, Harry had been very absentminded
and distracted.

For the first time, he barely paid attention in Charms, and in Potions he had nearly made his concoction explode if it wasn't for Tom, who had instantly grabbed his wrist when Harry was about to throw fairy wings in his cauldron instead of beetle eyes.

"Focus on what you're doing!" Tom hissed out under his breath as he pulled Harry's hand away from the cauldron. He shot him an extremely annoyed look as he added in sharp whisper, "We won't know what has happened today until later in the evening or tomorrow, at best. So concentrate on your task, you dimwit!"

Harry hadn't retorted. His brother had been in a foul mood since crawling out of his bed, surely because Tom had noticed, just like Harry, how Dumbledore had been missing very frequently from the Great Hall in the last couple of weeks, which they both knew had to mean that the wizard was very busy in making preparations to thwart Grindelwald.

Harry didn't fully know what to expect. But after hearing about the so-called 'Order of the Phoenix' that McLaggen had mentioned so angrily, it was evident that Dumbledore had followers and fighters of his own.

So perhaps Dumbledore and his Order were out there, battling against Grindelwald and his forces. Maybe, just as he was stirring his brew with a rod, Dumbledore was engaged in a full-blown duel with Grindelwald. Perhaps the wizard would even kill Grindelwald! That's what Dumbledore's brother had wanted, wasn't it? And Harry wouldn't mind, for once, that someone was killed.

The Prewett twins fully believed that Grindelwald was evil, a danger to everyone, and thus had to be stopped. On the other hand, Tom admired the wizard greatly and thought that Grindelwald's ideals -about wizarding superiority and his intention of subduing muggleborns and muggles to establish wizarding kind as the masters and rulers of the world- were great, 'logical and very sensible', as Tom had once put it. His brother was just weird in that way.

Harry, for his part, was simply worried about the fate of those whom Grindelwald was trying to conquer and about the man's weird interest in Tom and him. Hence, if Dumbledore offed the dark wizard, he would have one less concern on his mind.

Moreover, if Dumbledore just thwarted Grindelwald it would be good enough as well, since Harry had every intention of asking Dumbledore to Legilimize him so that the wizard would know about Grindelwald's letter and books, and could thus help Tom and him to get out of that trap.

It was during lunch that he was finally apprised of what had occurred that morning.

Dumbledore was still missing from the Staff's Table -which Harry optimistically took as a good sign- and most students were utterly startled when another flock of owls flew into the Great Hall, dropping 'The Daily Prophet: Special Edition!'!

Harry choked on his goblet of pumpkin juice as he caught sight of the front page's title of his brother's newspaper: 'The Dark Lord Strikes Again!'!

"Dark Lord! What Dark Lord?" was the first cry, sounding shocked, alarmed, and full of disbelief, that broke the silence of the Great Hall as students stared dumbstruck at their Daily Prophets.

The flabbergasted yell seemed to break the dam, and screams and shouts and cries meshed together in an incomprehensible cacophony. Even the Slytherins looked surprised and had much to say.

"He's taken over Czechoslovakia… but why so openly?"
"Oh, so now the Daily Prophet says that they knew all along that Grindelwald wasn't just the German Minister of Magic but also a new Dark Lord with 'heinous intentions'?” said Orion Black with a scathing snort. "As if they hadn't been calling the fool of Dumbledore an alarmist warmonger who was only making up stories about a Dark Lord because he was after McLaggen's job…"

"The Hungarians have allied themselves with the Dark Lord – he struck with joined forces!” breathed out Capricia Carrow, looking ecstatic with joy.

"This doesn't make any sense," muttered Priscilla Pucey, frowning deeply as her gaze scanned the article. "I thought it would be like what he did in Austria. Why reveal himself as the Dark Lord so soon?"

"Because he wants open war to begin," drawled Abraxas Malfoy in his lilting voice, his silver eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "This was his plan all along, Pucey. He has finally upped his game."

Meanwhile, Harry was nearly on top of Tom as they both read the article. With his face drawn out of all color, his heart suddenly thundering hard in his chest to then drop, and his stomach twisting and coiling sickly, feeling such a surge of crushing emotions that he couldn't even speak, just feverishly read with wide eyes, he learned about everything that had happened.

The Daily Prophet began by stating that they had always believed Dumbledore's claims regarding the German Minister of Magic. That they had always thought it was very suspicious how Austria had willingly annexed itself to Germany; that they had known there had been foul play when the Austrian Minister of Magic suddenly dropped dead from some illness and the Ministry was quick to allow Grindelwald to become their Minister as well as Germany's.

Yes, The Daily Prophet had known all along and were now bringing the exclusive news that the Dark Lord had struck again and conquered Czechoslovakia in a few hours, making use of his muggle German forces, his countless followers, and the Hungarians –since the muggles of that country had allied themselves with the Dark Lord's 'minion, a funny-looking muggle called Adolf Hitler', while their Ministry of Magic had made a treaty of allegiance with Grindelwald.

The Germans had invaded the regions of Bohemia and Moravia, which had become part of the Third Reich, whilst the Hungarians had taken over the Carpatho-Ukraine region and were moving onto the Slovakian one. Czechoslovakia had thus been divided between them and ceased to exist as a country.

All done in one morning, which proved Dumbledore's claims in the Wizengamot that Grindelwald had been breaking all sorts of international laws by infusing Pepper-Up and Strengthening Potions in the food and water supplies of muggle German soldiers – which, of course, the Daily Prophet had believed all along.

Thousands of muggles who resisted the invasion had been killed and about a hundred wizards of the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Magic who, unlike the Austrians, hadn't surrendered but battled fiercely. They had been no match against the numbers of Grindelwald's followers and Hungarian wizards, even though one Ministry of Europe had answered the Czechoslovaks' call for help.

Indeed, while the Slytherins quietly whispered amongst themselves with much excitement, as the rest of the students broke into a pandemonium of terrified yells, tearful or dismayed cries, and shouts of disbelief, fear, and alarm, the teachers at the Staff’s Table looking too shocked and surprised to do anything other than murmur hastily, discussing the article among themselves, Harry kept reading, petrified, feeling as if he had been struck by a lightning bolt, and learned more.
It seemed that Mr. Jerabek, the Czechoslovakian Minister of Magic, had been making Floo calls to his counterparts in Europe for the last couple of weeks, desperately trying to form allegiances.

The Daily Prophet claimed it was due to Dumbledore's instigation, since the wizard had been seen visiting every Ministry of Magic in Europe to convince them of the danger posed by the Dark Lord Grindelwald.

Jerabek had been one Minister to believe him and the wizard had attempted to take measures to be prepared for an invasion. The article speculated much of how Dumbledore could have known about the attack on the country beforehand.

At that, Harry's heart skipped a beat with frantic apprehension. He knew the answer to that: he knew who was working as Dumbledore's spy in Grindelwald's ranks. And his anxiousness, distress, crushing guilt and devastation only increased as he frenziedly wondered what could have happened to the young wizard he had never met but couldn't stop thinking about.

Had Julian Erlichmann's role as a spy been discovered after this? Was he still even alive?

Harry's teeth sunk into his bottom lip, making them bleed, as he kept reading, his breathing haggard and slow.

Only the Bulgarians had answered Jerabek's call for help, and as Grindelwald's forces attacked the Ministry, Bulgarian Aurors had flooed into the building, lead by their Head Auror, Valko Krum. They had all been killed, outmatched and vastly outnumbered.

After over a hundred wizards and witches had died in the Ministry, Jerabek had finally surrendered to the Dark Lord.

"Oh, that's Julian Erlichmann! He's so handsome!" gushed out Druella Rosier suddenly.

Harry's heart stilled as he snapped his head up to stare at her, seeing that the pretty girl was gazing with adoring eyes at the next page of her Daily Prophet.

With his heart pumping frenziedly once more, he didn't even ask Tom if he was done reading the first page and quickly flipped the newspaper unto the next.

It was filled with moving pictures, the very first showing a wizard who could only be Jerabek: on his knees, his head hanging low, his robes bloodied and filled with gashes, as the wizard upheld a wand in his hands and broke it.

Before him stood Grindelwald, whom Harry instantly recognized from other pictures that had been in The Daily Prophet: the wizard was dressed in pristine and impeccable robes, looking imposing and magnificent, with a crooked smirk on his face as he accepted the broken pieces of Jarebek's wand, a symbolic gesture of surrender the Dark Lord must have demanded.

And then, Harry finally saw him for the first time: a young wizard standing right next to Grindelwald, with short auburn hair, sky blue eyes, and a boyishly handsome features. There were signs of battle on his robes and even face, which had a wound on the cheek, yet he wore a stoic and solemn expression as he witnessed the Czechoslovakian Minister of Magic's submission.

It had to be Julian Erlichmann, and he was alive and well.

For a moment, Harry felt he could breathe again, yet as he kept staring at the picture, replaying itself, he believed he noticed something in Julian's eyes. For a flicker of a second, they seemed to be filled with sorrow, consuming guilt, and broken defeat, as if he was a trapped man who had
given up all hope. And Harry thought he understood, because Dumbledore had done nothing, and it could only mean that Julian was still required to be a spy.

However, Julian Erlichmann's sky blue eyes went back to be impassive the following instant, and Harry doubted himself. Perhaps he had just imagined it, as a reflection of the crushing emotions he was feeling.

"Very clever," he suddenly heard Tom mutter under his breath, his tone sounding admiring and gleeful, "to reveal so much to the papers… Grindelwald must have paid a journalist to bear as witness, and take pictures and notes as the attack was launched… After this, no one will dare oppose him…"

Harry understood what his brother was speaking about when he tore his gaze from Julian Erlichmann and glanced at the next moving picture.

It showed what looked like a derelict, abandoned old factory, surrounded by several tanks and many soldiers in Nazi uniforms, most of them looking bored or annoyed. The note beneath the photo explained that the factory was in fact the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Magic, and that the German muggle soldiers were unwittingly sieging it; 'their commanders were under the Dark Lord's Imperius Curse! Tactic first employed in Austria!'.

Then he gazed at the following picture and frowned with puzzlement, disconcerted by the weird-looking figures that seemed to be attacking Ministry officials, leaping on them so quickly that they were mere blurs in the photo. The only thing that could be seen were flashes of jagged teeth and claws ripping into wizards and witches that were attempting to flee or defend themselves with spells.

Just then, Neron Lestrange said with much vicious relish, "The Dark Lord used Inferi!"

"They don't look like the Inferi I've heard about," remarked Orion Black, frowning deeply, staring at the same picture Harry was trying to understand. "Inferi are slow, not-"

"They're a new breed created by the Dark Lord himself, it says," gasped out Priscilla Pucey, her tone awed and fascinated. "In fact, they think they were the Austrian families that had disappeared – the family members of those who had resigned or had been sacked when the Dark Lord took over the Austrian Ministry of Magic!"

"Those weren't dismissed from their jobs, and certainly didn't resign," interjected Abraxas Malfoy, superiorly smirking at them. "They were killed because they fought back." He gestured at the picture with a smooth, poised motion of a hand. "My grandfather told me the Dark Lord's followers went after their families, to make an example out of them. Now people will know - those who oppose the Dark Lord will pay the price not only with death but also by having their families end up as these new Inferi."

The Slytherins around the boy stared at Abraxas with wide, amazed, transfixed gazes, while Harry kept frowning at the picture, trying to understand what his housemates were talking about: what did they mean by 'Inferi'?

He couldn't distinguish much, but just then, one of those blurry things slowed down in the photo, snapping its head up, and Harry choked and his stomach plummeted and churned sickly when he saw some cadaveric creature of greyish skin that hung and looked rotten, with entrails spilling out from a huge gap, as if some animal had bitten out a large chunk of its belly or something had clawed its way out of it.
As ravaged as the frightening-looking creature was, it vaguely resembled a woman, with long, tangled, and dirty streaks of auburn hair hanging from a scalp that was bald in patches.

"NO! Aunt Nettie!" The distraught cry broke over all the other voices that had been filled with horror and fear and choked sobs as the students kept reading the article and came upon the pictures.

Harry glanced up with startled eyes, having recognized the voice, and his face drained from all color and his body froze as he caught sight of Felicity Prewett, looking wretched and devastated as she trembled and cried and sobbed on her twin's chest, while Felix looked shocked into speechlessness, as white as a sheet of paper, jerkily patting Felicity on the back in some mechanic attempt at comfort.

With the realization slowly sinking in his mind, Harry's horrified gaze flickered from the picture to the twins and back.

And suddenly, just as Alphard whispered under his breath in a frail, weak voice, "... but… Dumbledore knew beforehand….", voicing precisely one of Harry's thoughts that kept reverberating in his mind with hammering force, the boy gazing uncomprehendingly at Harry with big grey eyes, as if silently pleading to be given an explanation, and as Felicity's sobs became louder and more disconsolate, and just as Headmaster Dippet finally rose from the Staff's Table and opened to his mouth to calm down the students and have some order back, it all became too much, and Harry abruptly shot to his feel, dizzily swaying for a moment, before he dashed out of the Great Hall.

He heard Tom calling out after him, but he didn't stop.

He felt tears blurring his sight as he ran out the front doors of Hogwarts, as he kept seeing in his mind flashes of what the twins' aunt had become, of Julian Erlichmann's eyes and the emotions he thought he had seen there, of the details and description and account of how many had been killed, and his throat tightened into a painful knot as his chest began to heave choked breaths.

Suddenly, Harry slammed into someone hastily rushing towards the school in big strides. He was nearly knocked over but a hand grabbed him gently by the arm, steadying him.

"Mr. Riddle," said a voice, sounding concerned. "Are you quite well, my dear boy?"

Harry peered up, managing to see the wizard's face through the tears in his eyes that had started rolling down his cheeks, and he felt such a sudden surge of fury that he couldn't speak.

Albus Dumbledore was gazing down at him worriedly. And the wizard looked awful, just as when Harry had seen him talking with his brother Aberforth in Hogsmeade: with shoulders slumped forward as if he was carrying an insurmountable burden, with a pale and gaunt face, stricken by some deep emotions. Yet, there was not a single scratch on the man's face or a gash or tear on the wizard's robes. Dumbledore wasn't coming from any battle.

It was that which made Harry be able to speak through the knot constricting his throat like merciless iron claws, his anger great and fierce because he had put all his hopes on the wizard before him and had been profoundly crushed and let down.

"You knew!" Harry chocked out in a hoarse, haggard voice, glowering up at Dumbledore with an accusing, furious gaze. "I know you knew because Julian Erlichmann is your spy and he must've told you! I know you knew because you told Minister McLaggen the exact date! And you did nothing!"
Any gentleness in Dumbledore's expression vanished, his face turning grave and stern, as the wizard placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and began to herd him. "Let us get inside the castle and you and I will have a conversation that has been long due."

"No!" cried out Harry, violently ripping himself from the wizard's grasp, instantly spinning around and dashing away as if escaping the clutches of some great monster.

"Mr. Riddle!" called Dumbledore after him, sounding highly troubled and concerned.

Yet Harry kept running because he didn't want to hear any explanations and empty excuses. He wouldn't be able to endure it. As much as he blamed Dumbledore, it had been his fault too. All those terrible deaths were on him and Dumbledore, and the thought of it was unbearable.

Harry had run and run until the tears streaming down his face and the heaved sobs choking out from his throat had been so much that he had stumbled and tripped and nearly landed on his face. He had found himself on the bridge that crossed the Black Lake and led to Hogsmeade, and he had slumped down on the wooden floorboards there, sinking his face on knees folded against his chest.

He had never felt so miserable, distraught, and wretched in his life, as if one of those Dementor creatures the Prewett twins had told him about had sucked everything out of him, any sparkle of positive feelings or lingering hope, and he had been left as a grief-stricken mass of endless shuddery sobs.

He had tried to calm himself down, to stop crying, but it had been to no avail. Those pictures of The Daily Prophet were branded with fire in his mind, and the shouts and screams of the students and Felicity's sobs rang in his ears, like hammers pounding on an anvil, every strike battering unforgiving, truthful words: 'You knew and did nothing, too'.

"It's not your fault."

Harry snapped his head up from his knees, yet didn't gasp in surprise as he would have done in any other circumstances. Indeed, he saw Santi crouching right before him, as if the strange man had appeared out of thin air, shimmering in faint golden light, but Harry merely stared at him numbly with bloodshed, puffy eyes.

"It's not your fault," repeated Santi, his expression sympathetic and his tone soft and soothing, as he sat before Harry, crossing his legs and opening his arms, the offer and appeal implicit.

Harry knew what that entreating gesture meant and for once he didn't care about how angry he had been at Santi or about how little he knew about the weird young man.

He only remembered that dream about the mysterious, beautiful woman who always cradled him with profound love and sang Alice's lullaby to him, and those fingers that had caressed his hair and scar and cheek, and he had woken up to realize that it had been Santi who had been touching him so gently and calling out his name with such longing at first, to then say it more forcefully to wake him up.

And all of a sudden, he wanted that again: that warmth and strange feeling of belonging he had felt in the dream as Santi's hand had caressed and cupped his cheek.

Without a thought, he unfolded his knees and sank forward into welcoming arms that quickly
embraced him tightly as Harry choked and muffled his sobs against Santi's chest. He frantically clutched the man's shirt with his small hands, abruptly needing the close contact and solace the warm body offered, whilst Santi tenderly caressed his hair, murmuring soft, comforting words into his ear.

As he heaved out his unrelenting, distraught sobs, Harry didn't even question when Santi began to sing Alice's lullaby to him in a soft whisper. He didn't pause to wonder how Santi could know it, he just felt the assuaging effects. Slowly, he began to feel soothed, and his sobs halted to become silent streams of tears that soon dried out and merely left him sniffling and hiccupping, feeling suddenly peaceful, as if something inside him that had been frantic had finally settled itself, calmly and placidly.

Harry curled himself up in Santi's embracing arms, feeling completely languid and relaxed, as he let out a soft sigh and rested his forehead on the man's chest. He felt like in his dreams, enveloped and snuggly surrounded by warmth, tranquility, and cottony softness that simply felt so right.

"There you are! Why are you rocking yourself like a deranged dimwit?"

Harry was so startled by the sharp, angered voice that he jerked backwards from Santi's embrace, flushing with embarrassment and mortification at being caught cuddling like a toddler.

Tom was standing before them, with a darkly annoyed expression on his face, looking at him as if he was some sort of lunatic.

And then, his brother's words sank in and Harry blinked, dumbfounded. He hadn't been rocking himself, Santi had been rocking him. And yet Tom was towering over them, looking straight through Santi as if the man wasn't there, his dark blue gaze piercing Harry quizzically and with impatience.

Harry gaped incredulously, his gaze flickering from Santi to Tom and back.

"He cannot see me or hear me," said Santi, his lips tilting upwards in a shadow of a grin. Then he shot Tom a glance, looking angered or irked at the boy's presence and interruption.

"What are you gawking at?" demanded Tom frowning, following the direction of Harry's gaze and then glancing around, befuddled, before he turned back to Harry and snapped sharply, "What's the matter with you?"

Harry was struck speechless, blinking uncomprehendingly, and Santi chortled as he rose to his feet.

"I'll leave you two alone," said Santi, his lips twisting wryly, not looking too pleased with the situation.

The man then leaned down, and for a moment Harry thought Santi was going to kiss him on the head, which would have been beyond strange. Yet the man did something just as weird instead: he trailed a finger along Harry's scar, the touch caressing, tender, and gentle, yet Santi's face looked both pensive and annoyed, as if there was something about the scar that bothered him greatly.

"I'll see you soon," Santi murmured, giving Harry one last soft, lingering look before he simply disappeared in the next instant.

"It has addled your pitiful brain, I see," bit out Tom, scowling as he crossed his arms over his chest and glared down at Harry.

"What?" said Harry, still utterly disconcerted, his gaze fixed on the empty space Santi had left
behind. It had been by far the most peculiar interaction he had had with the man - and with his brother in the mix, it felt too bizarre.

"This," said Tom impatiently, yanking out from his robes' pocket his rolled up Daily Prophet to pointedly wave it before Harry. He glowered at him as he added shortly, "You have taken the news badly, evidently." He shot him a disgusted look. "And you rushed out of the Great Hall to come here to cry like a little bitty baby."

Tom paused, leaning down to grab Harry's chin and inspect his face closely. In the next moment he let go, his eyes locking with Harry's as he scoffed snidely, "Yes, you have been crying." He shook his head angrily. "You're such a pathetic idiot. You're blaming yourself. It's not your fault!"

At that - the same words Santi had spoken- Harry let out a mirthless bout of laughter, finding the situation surreal.

"You've lost your marbles," groused out Tom under his breath, disparagingly and scathingly, eyeing him carefully as if to ascertain the degree of Harry's mental trauma, and scowling at him as if fully blaming Harry for the things he made Tom do.

Apparently, Tom came to the conclusion that the situation was dire and wouldn't be resolved with a few sharp words, since he then shot the wood boards of the bridge's floor a look of distaste before he heaved a displeased sigh and sat himself down, crossing his legs - right where Santi had been, which made Harry chuckle hollowly even more.

"Stop laughing like a loon!" snapped Tom incensed. He unfurled his Daily Prophet and slammed it on the floor. "What happened wasn't your fault!" He poked Harry's forehead with a finger, hard, as he added impatiently, "Do you hear, you thickheaded fool?"

Harry choked on his last chuckle before he fiercely shook his head and opened his mouth.

"Yes, yes," said Tom impatiently, not giving him a chance to speak, "I know you're feeling guilty." He gave him a contemptuous look. "You just love to feel responsible for things you are not!"

"I am responsible," muttered Harry quietly. He glumly gestured at the newspaper lying between them, and added with his heart in his throat, "Thousands of muggles died-"

"So what?" interjected Tom, waving a hand dismissively. "There are too many of them as it is." He scowled and sneered acidly, "They breed like rats."

Harry glared daggers at him, but ignored the comment and continued, his voice low and dejected, "And over a hundred wizards and witches-"

"Who deserved it fully for being imbeciles!" bit out Tom caustically. "They should have surrendered instantly instead of opposing Grindelwald." He gestured sharply at the Daily Prophet, skewering him with his dark blue gaze. "This was my point all along. See how easily the Dark Lord has taken over another country? See why I said that it's best for us to play his game and be on his side? What happened proves it."

"It proves nothing except that I should have done something," barked Harry angrily, his small hands clenching into fists, "just as Dumbledore should've, because we both knew the date on which Czechoslovakia would be attacked and we didn't prevent it!"

Tom pierced him with narrowed eyes, as he hissed out poignantly, "So you blame me as well, I suppose? Because I made you choose."
"I don't blame you," interrupted Harry, shaking his head with exasperation. "I know that when you made me take that oath it was because you thought you were doing what was best for us. You made me choose between preventing you from telling Grindelwald about Julian Erlichmann being Dumbledore's spy or try to save the Czechs by telling someone about the secret meeting I witnessed when I was in Phineas Nigellus' portrait, because you didn't want me to do something stupid."

He pinned his brother with his gaze, as he added quietly, "And I don't regret saving Julian. I would choose him all over again." He paused, to then grit out, unforgivingly angry at himself, "But don't you see? I let you convince me how silly anything I could do to prevent the attack would be – because if I wrote to McLaggen or the Ministry of Magic, they wouldn't believe a schoolboy or would ask me a load of questions I couldn't answer, and because if I wrote to Churchill, I would be breaking the Statute of Secrecy and could get expelled from Hogwarts."

"And all of that is true," said Tom sharply, glowering impatiently at him, to then add with much scornful snide, "The risks and costs to you, for just letting you feel like a little hero by saving those people, was too high."

Harry let out a frustrated sigh, carding his fingers through his disorderly hair. "You and I will never see eye-to-eye about these kind of things." He shook his head mournfully and despondently. "I would have gladly put up with any consequences and costs, Tom, if it meant the attack would have been fully stopped." His jaw clenched as he peered up at his brother, and said with fierce determination, "But I've learned my lesson. Next time, I'll do what I feel is right no matter what you say, because your priorities will always be different than mine."

Tom looked troubled for a moment, his eyes narrowing with anger, but then seemed to decide that Harry's new resolve would cause no problems for them. He waved a hand dismissively, as he scoffed and drawled loftily, "You found out about the date by mere chance. There won't be a next time."

Harry said nothing to that because he wasn't about to tell his brother about the plan that had begun to form in his mind.

He had Tom to thank for the idea, due to one of his brother's bouts of envy, but Tom certainly wouldn't be too pleased if he found out what Harry was plotting. It would involve much research, but above all, a trip to Diagon Alley. And for that, he would have to wait for their summer holidays – perhaps he would tell Tom then, since he would need his brother's galleons.

The guilt weighed heavily on Harry after what happened to Czechoslovakia, but his new firm resolution served to alleviate some bit of it. Although, it was impossible for him to forget because the school didn't.

The change in Hogwarts was immediate and drastic: great fear was palpable in the air. The students didn't go about being bubbly and carefree, but were quiet and subdued, filled with anxiousness and apprehension every time owls flew in to deliver The Daily Prophet.

The news in subsequent weeks were dismal. Now the whole of Europe was aware that Grindelwald was a Dark Lord and everyone was quaking with terror: the Ministers of Magic scrambling, at their wits end, trying to devise some way for their countries to be spared.
"I bet most of them are already secretly negotiating agreements of allegiance with the Dark Lord," Tom had remarked with much smugness and glee, before he drawled contemptuously, "Politicians are just like that, little brother. Out to save their own skins, always remember that."

Harry had evidence of it when Charlemagne McLaggen had given an interview to The Daily Prophet, reassuring the wizarding community that he had always been working with Dumbledore behind the scenes. And of course that when he had vetoed Dumbledore's law in the Wizengamot and openly stated that Dumbledore's claims about the German Minister of Magic being a Dark Lord were utter lies, he had only done it to confuse Grindelwald and make the wizard believe that the Ministry was at odds with Dumbledore. It was all part of a strategic plan to outsmart and befuddle the Dark Lord!

McLaggen had attached himself to Dumbledore like a desperate leech, since in the eyes of the wizarding community Dumbledore had been vindicated and they all fully supported him now. The Daily Prophet no longer described him as a dotty, batty wizard who cried out wolf because he was an ambitious schoolteacher who wanted to become Minister. Dumbledore had become their pet mascot, the new hero, his many accomplishments now rehashed and extolled.

Indeed, one of their front page articles had cried out: 'Dumbledore will save us all!', which had apparently been said by a member of the Wizengamot, one of those who had been in McLaggen's faction and most vocal when excoriating Dumbledore with virulent vitriol.

The press had become so hungry for Dumbledore that journalists crowded the outer gates of Hogwarts during all days and hours, to such point that the trips to Hogsmeade for the upper years had been cancelled because the carriages couldn't pass through without students being assaulted by wizards and witches with photo cameras and Quick-Quotes Quills.

Through it all, Dumbledore seemed unaffected, pleasantly and politely ignoring his sycophantic fans who had started to demand and expect him to solve all the problems in the world. Even the students in Hogwarts looked at their Transfiguration Professor with new eyes, shinning with desperate hope. And Dumbledore remained his usual self, gentle and calm, teaching his class as if not noticing the tension and fear that hung above everyone like a suffocating mantle.

However, the wizard did try something out of the norm: he attempted to speak to Harry when crossing paths in the corridors or even by asking him to remain after class, to discuss one of Harry's essays, allegedly.

His hurt and fury at Dumbledore not having been abated one smidgen, Harry always churlishly ignored such attempts.

"He might end up giving you detention with him," Tom had bit out angrily, his eyes narrowing to slits, "just to force you to speak with him."

Tom was a teacher's pet with all professors, charming them by being brilliant, answering all questions, handing in flawless essays and by being noble, humble, soft-spoken and impeccably well-mannered – with everyone but Dumbledore, whom he had always treated with frosty politeness.

Harry perfectly knew why. Dumbledore had seen Tom's true self when the wizard had visited them at the orphanage and no amount of faked charming and gallant ways from Tom's part would make the wizard forget. Not that Tom had ever tried to employ such tactics on Dumbledore, as he did will all the rest. His brother had always mistrusted the wizard from the start, and it had grown into full-blown despise and hatred the more Dumbledore attempted to speak to Harry.
And Tom being Tom, had fully taken advantage of Harry's ill feelings towards the wizard and the chance of manipulation to suit his own purposes, by hissing out poignantly, "Never forget how much Dumbledore has disappointed you, little brother. All those deaths you cried about were his fault."

Harry coolly ignored such comments, as he did every time Tom gleefully rejoiced when reading news about Grindelwald's subsequent little triumphs, pointing them out to Harry to convince him they were on the 'right side'.

Nevertheless, Harry's plan of asking Dumbledore to Legilimize him had flown out the window. If Dumbledore hadn't confronted Grindelwald when the man's own brother had asked for the Dark Lord's death and when Czechs' lives had been on the line, what would Dumbledore do to help Harry break the ties Grindelwald had forged by sending his letter and Durmstrang books? Nothing, was the answer Harry was certain about. He could no longer rely on Dumbledore; he had that very clear.

From Alice's newspapers clippings to Tom, they learned that the situation in the Muggle World was just as bad. With the invasion and conquest of Czechoslovakia, Hitler had broken the Munich Agreement that Neville Chamberlain had been so proud of, and now Winston Churchill was no longer a cantankerous, alcoholic old man, and warmonger whose good days in politics were long gone, but the new rising star.

Muggle Britain was in a panic, accusing Chamberlain of naiveté, cowardice, and of having appeased the Germans without yielding any good results while they demanded for Churchill to be given a significant post in the government.

Harry rather pitied Chamberlain; the muggle now knew that all the troubles were being caused by a wizard yet couldn't tell his voters. He was certain the poor sod was going to be unceremoniously kicked to the curb as soon as it was time for new elections for Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, he stopped worrying about the muggles as Alice kept writing, insisting all was well back home, despite the current mood of anxiousness and fear in London.

Indeed, he had to deal, in his own flesh, with the changes in Hogwarts. He had had an inkling of just how bad things would become merely three days after the news in The Daily Prophet regarding Czechoslovakia.

Harry had noticed that Felicity had been absent from all the classes Slytherins and Gryffindors shared together, and one day after class, he had halted Felix, asking after her. The boy hadn't looked well: all his mischievousness and joking and carefree disposition had been gone, currently always looking pale and withdrawn.

"You know what happened to our Aunt Nettie, right?" said Felix in a small, stricken voice. He shook his head, becoming alive for one brief moment with anger. "Everyone saw the picture, everyone's talking about it – how that despicable dark wizard...." His hands clenched into fists that trembled, his teeth clenching hard, as he bit out, "How Grindelwald made her an Inferi."

After hatefully and violently spitting the words, the boy deflated, his shoulders slumping dejectedly, his mismatched eyes turning dull, as he added in a crestfallen murmur, "Felicity was very close to her and doesn't stop crying, mourning her. That's why she hasn't been coming to class." He shot Harry a desperate look. "I've tried everything! I don't know what else to do or say to comfort her. She just sits there in our common room, refusing to come out. She's only eating because I'm bringing her food!"

The boy's mismatched eyes suddenly sparkled as he tightly clutched Harry's arm, frantic and hopeful. "Maybe you should go see her! Maybe she'll pay
attention to you!"

Extremely worried, Harry had instantly agreed. Felix had given him the week's new password for the Fat Lady, but his attempt had been thwarted as soon as he climbed through the portrait hole. The moment Harry had stepped into red and gold common room, his path had been instantly blocked by a seventh-year Gryffindor.

The tall, burly boy had grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt, without even letting Harry say a word, as he spat out with fury and hatred, "No Slytherins will ever be allowed here again! Go back to your slimy nest of snakes!"

Harry had been thrown back through the portrait hole with such violent strength that he had nearly flown through the air, smashing his wrist against the balustrade of the moving stairs opposite to the Fat Lady.

Tom's expression had been murderous when he had seen Harry's bandages. Harry's wrist had been throbbing so unbearably painfully that he had had no other resort but to go to the Infirmary. Miss Nightingale, the school's Mediwitch, had healed his broken wrist in a jiffy, though nevertheless wrapped it with a tight bandage so that Harry wouldn't move his tender wrist too much in the following days.

"Who hurt you?" hissed out Tom demandingly, looking furious beyond measure, his dark blue gaze fixed on him.

Harry shook his head, refusing to give the boy's name. He didn't want his brother to attack anyone and get in trouble, and it was his own problem to deal with. Moreover, he first wanted to comprehend what had happened.

Frowning at his bandaged wrist, he murmured quietly, "I don't get it. The Gryffindors warmed up to me after I was with them in the Quidditch stands, cheering for their team. They haven't been grumbling when they saw me with the twins in their common room, and now…" He trailed off, gesturing with a hand at the bandages on the other, as he peered up at his brother, befuddled. "I don't understand."

Tom shot him an impatient glance as he bit out tartly, "Isn't it obvious? Slytherin House has always been associated with Dark Lords. Now that Grindelwald has come into the open as a Dark Lord, the students of other Houses are scared." He tightened his fingers around his wand, his jaw clenching, as a dark gleam glinted in his eyes. "And since they're scared, they're going to take it out on the Slytherins."

Harry bristled defensively, feeling deeply insulted and indignant. "Just because Salazar Slytherin is thought by some to have been a Dark Lord doesn't mean that they should blame everyone in Slytherin House every time a Dark Lord pops up! Salazar wasn't even a Dark Lord in my view – he didn't go around gathering followers, like a maniac!"

Tom cast him a scathing look. "That doesn't matter. He was the first to uphold pureblood ideals, the first to work to give proof that they were founded in fact and research and not just baseless prejudice. Every Dark Lord that has risen in wizarding history has supported Salazar's claims regarding muggles and mudbloods, just like Grindelwald is doing at present. So of course they're going to blame us." He paused to then sneer hatefuly, "And the Gryffindors will be the worst of them. They're simple-minded bullies to the core." He narrowed his eyes to mere slits, as he added sharply, "I'm forbidding you from going to their Tower ever again."

At that, Harry just nodded, not wanting to argue with his brother. He had no wish to step again into
their common room but he would find a way in which to speak with Felicity as soon as possible.

Alas, he had found no way to do so in the next days because the girl remained absent from classes. In the end, he had trudged to the Owtery.

Nasty bird that he was, Lord Horkos had refused to pay attention to him when Harry had yelled at him to come down from his niche. Finally, he had employed one of the charms Professor Tilly Toke had taught him in private, and had accioed the damned bird.

Screeching furiously, Lord Horkos had tried to stab his face with its sharp beak, but Harry had been no fool. He had brought along with him his faithful protector. One spat out hiss from little Ulysses and a flash of his scorpion's tail, and Lord Horkos had settled down, shooting Harry a vicious look but grudgingly allowing him to tie a letter around its leg.

The letter he had written to Felicity was, he knew, quite awful. He was terrible at trying to comfort girls, and he was rather glad that he was writing to her instead of seeing her in person, especially if she was constantly sobbing as Felix had said – crying girls had always made him feel very uncomfortable and awkward.

Harry had simply written asking if she was well and pointing out that he was missing her terribly. For some inexplicable reason, his lackluster, rushed, scribbled sentences seemed to do the trick, because Felicity Prewett was out and about the next day, looking gaunt and downcast yet blushing and giving Harry a faint, shy smile from a distance.

Regardless, he had had no chance to speak to her because she was always surrounded by housemates who glared at him. With a sense of impending doom due to what Tom had said, Harry had seen how his brother's words turned out to be prophetic.

The Gryffindors began to move about the school in packs, like lions protecting each other wherever they went, always casting suspicious, dark looks at the Slytherins. They, above any other students of Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw, were jumpy, as if expecting some Slytherin to suddenly go bonkers, cackle evilly, declare allegiance to the Dark Lord, and start casting Dark Curses left and right.

At first, Harry thought it was ridiculous, but the situation became grave as The Daily Prophet kept vilifying Grindelwald, reporting about such impossible and outlandish things that the Dark Lord was allegedly doing that Harry became convinced that the journalists really had no idea about what the wizard was truly up to and were simply making it all up to sell newspapers.

And it seemed to work, since all students were now buying The Daily Prophet, and tensions grew and tempers began to flare.

By mere chance, Harry witnessed when the situation escalated and finally exploded, one evening when he had been coming from the library with Tom after they had worked on a Potions essay.

He had no idea how it had begun, but they came upon a full-blown battle of flying hexes and hurled jinxes between a very large group of Gryffindors of all ages and a bunch of Slytherins who were decidedly greatly outnumbered.

Given Tom's bloodthirsty gleam in the eyes when talking about Gryffindors, Harry had been worried his brother would instantly jump into the fray.

He had been surprised when Tom had shoved him into a nook of a wall, instantly going into it himself, as he whispered sharply, "It's best if we're not involved."

Well, that certainly let Harry understand that smug, proud true descendant of Salazar Slytherin that
Tom was, his brother still preferred to be deviously careful and keep up his untarnished good reputation with the teachers instead of helping out his housemates.

However, it made Harry hesitate when he saw Walburga Black, Thaddeus Avery, and Neron Lestrange among the small group of Slytherins. There were older Slytherins too, but even so, they were too few compared to the Gryffindors.

"It's not a fair fight," murmured Harry apprehensively, wincing when he saw Walburga take a hit and then screech like a deranged banshee as she spat out some very nasty hex. "The Gryffs are too many."

He had no fond feelings for his housemates, who had stopped bullying him but still from time to time spat out cruel insults at him for being a 'mudblood'. That didn't mean, though, that he liked to see them being hurt by others in such an unjust, uneven confrontation.

Little Ulysses, who was perched on his left shoulder, seemed to sense his anxiousness, since the Scorcrup hissed and fretted, puffing out his tail.

"That's Gryffindor bravery for you," drawled Tom sarcastically, his tone venomous.

"We have to do something to help," said Harry urgently, shooting his brother an entreating look as he patted Ulysses on the head to calm him down.

As if he had been heard, one of the older Slytherins yelled just then, "Someone go get Wilkes!"

Instantly understanding the reason, Harry dashed out of the nook like a flash before Tom could react and take hold of him. Running with all his might, it didn't take him long to reach the dungeons and their common room.

Algernon Wilkes was the Head Boy, one of The Two –leader of Slytherin House along with Dorea Black- and a seventh-year. All Slytherins of that year had been entrenched with piles of books in the common room ever since they began frantically studying for their N.E.W.T.s, thus Harry had known exactly where to look for the boy.

As he pelted into the common room, with Ulysses effortlessly hanging onto him, Harry gasped out between panted breaths, "Slytherins – attacked by Gryffindors – corridor in second floor!"

The seventh-year girls and boys stared at him and then jumped to their feet, unceremoniously flinging and discarding books to a side as if they were yesterday's rubbish, the manic gleam that had been glinting in their eyes ever since studying like possessed, foul-tempered creatures that snapped at younger Slytherins at the slightest rise of a voice, shone even brighter – all of them clearly welcoming the distraction and excited with a sudden rush of bloodlust.

It made Harry wonder if he shouldn't have just gone to fetch a teacher instead.

"Lead the way, Riddle!" commanded Algernon Wilkes enthusiastically, whipping out his wand as his yearmates followed suit.

Harry nodded, glanced at Ulysses who was still sitting on his shoulder, and instructed hurriedly, "Stay here and wait for me."

The Scorcrup meowed at him, sounding miffed, yet when Harry shot him a stern look, Ulysses jumped unto the nearest armchair in the next second, sitting up with his tail flicking to the sides with great agitation. It was clear the little creature wasn't too pleased at being left behind.
Now without having to worry that his familiar might harm someone when protecting him if he was involved in a fight, Harry swirled around and hastily broke into a run, hearing all the seventh-year Slytherins following at his heels.

When he reached again the altercation between the students, Harry was fairly certain that someone must have cast a silencing spell around the area, because given the loud screams and shouts, it was impossible that no teacher had still not heard the fight and come to put a stop to it.

It was when Wilkes and his fellows jumped into the fray with gusto, that Harry caught sight of the new participants in the battle. Alphard must have been coming from somewhere with Dorea Black and Charlus Potter, encountering the fight, because the couple was there, bellowing at each other.

Dorea was standing with the Slytherins, with hands on her hips, looking furious as she yelled at her betrothed, while Charlus was right before her but on the Gryffindors' side of the corridor, with squared shoulders, shouting back, looking mulish and filled with righteous, indignant anger.

Meanwhile, Alphard stood behind Dorea and near his sister Walburga, who was still fighting like one of the Furies, unmerciful and with much relishing and vicious glee.

The boy had his wand in his hand, yet he looked uneasy and uncertain, as if he wanted the whole thing to stop and didn't want to participate at all but loyalty to Slytherin House and family made him remain.

It was when someone shot a very nasty hex at the poor boy who had made no attempt to attack anyone -causing tentacles to spurt from Alphard's head to coil around his throat and choke him, making the boy gasp, trip, and crash to the stone floors hard, slamming his head- that Harry had enough.

It was the last straw, and seeing that his brother was still in his shadowy nook calmly observing the fight from a safe distance, Harry bellowed, "Tom, join in!", as he then let out a battle cry and leaped into the fray, furious.

He instantly jumped in front of Alphard, protecting his secret friend by standing as a shield against incoming hurled spells, having faith that the boy could deal with the tentacle-hex himself and cancel it.

With Algernon Wilkes and the rest of the seventh-year Slytherins there, the fight had become a fair one in numbers, and Harry didn't think he had ever had so much fun: his heart was pumping fast with anger and rushes of thrill, as he casted every hex, jinx, and charm he knew of.

He didn't think he had ever used so many spells, not even during Defense Against the Dark Arts when Professor Galatea Merrythought had started to teach them how to duel. The experience was gripping, riveting, and exciting, especially when Tom finally appeared next to him, shooting Harry a glower yet soon beginning to cast spells with amazing precision, aim, and speed.

It was a pandemonium and chaos of shouted and bellowed spells and streaks of light striking every which way, which suddenly halted when a Gryffindor yelled in alarm, "Pringle!"

And they saw the Caretaker of Hogwarts, Apollyon Pringle, clanking his wooden leg on the stone floors as he rushed towards them, bellowing, with his pet Rascal the Raven swooping in to viciously peck at anyone in reach.

Everyone scattered and scrambled, fleeing from being caught and getting the sadistic, torturous detentions the Caretaker was infamous for.
Harry made a dive to help Alphard, but was yanked away by a furious Tom. He nevertheless saw that Dorea Black took care of her nephew, quickly pulling Alphard along with her as everyone ran in every possible direction.

"We can't go to the dungeons," said Tom sharply, still clutching Harry's hand tightly as he pulled them around another corner. "Pringle must have seen there were Gryffindors and Slytherins. The first he'll check will be the ways that lead to the dungeons and the Gryffindors' Tower. We must go somewhere else!"

Without halting their mad dash, Harry nodded, letting his brother take them wherever he thought was safest.

They ended up in the Astronomy Tower, gasping and panting to catch their breaths.

Recovering, Tom glanced around, looking satisfied as he said superiority, "He won't think to look here. Only couples come up to this place."

Harry let out a weary breath as he slumped against a battlements of the Tower, feeling exhausted as he took in the beautiful view of the placid, starry night, the surface of the Black Lake that sparkled with moonlight as if it was encrusted with jewels, and the tiny dots of light coming from Hogsmeade.

"Were you wounded?" demanded Tom, approaching him and eyeing him closely with inspecting, narrowed eyes.

Harry huffed indignantly. "Of course not." He shot him a toothy grin. "Didn't you see me? I gave as good as I got and then some, and I deflected all hexes with Shield Charms." He gave him a smug look, as he intoned airily, "I'm quite good at those."

"What I saw was you diving for the floor," pointed out Tom acerbically, "landing hard on your knees."

"That only happened once!" snapped Harry, highly irked. "Because I didn't recognize the color of the spell and I didn't want to take the chance that a shield wouldn't stop it!"

That seemed to satisfy Tom, since the boy then proceeded to let him fully know what he had thought of Harry's decision of getting involved in the clash between Houses. Harry had to suffer nearly a quarter of an hour of Tom's ill-humored and furious remarks, as they waited for the proper moment to go back to the dungeons.

"And you know that I want to be a Prefect," hissed out Tom acidly, "because I have every intention to be Head Boy in seventh-year. It's an important and useful position of power, you lamebrain! And I won't get it if I'm given detentions just because you decide to play the hero to help your stupid little friend!" He pointed a finger at him, as he spat poisonously, "Next time I say we don't get involved, you heed my words!"

"Yeah, yeah," yawned out Harry, flapping a hand dismissively, before he whined, "Can we go back now? It's getting chilly out here." He demonstratively shivered and peered at him piteously.

"Are you a wizard or not?" bit out Tom angrily, flicking his wand to cast a Warming Charm on Harry, as he glowered with much annoyance.

They waited for a couple of more minutes, Tom seething in silence, whilst Harry sighed, until his brother finally decided enough time had gone by to safely make their way back.
Harry hadn't expected what waited for them in their common room.

The whole House seemed to be gathered there, even those who had participated in the fight: everyone seated in settees, sofas, couches, and armchairs, leaving an open space right in the middle, where Dorea Black and Algernon Wilkes were standing and bickering.

It seemed all Slytherins had been informed of the events and they were in the midst of a collective discussion, very grave and serious given their expressions.

"Oh, you're finally here!" said Dorea the moment she caught sight of them. She briskly gestured at two vacant chairs. "Take a seat. The current conversation pertains to you as well-
"

"They're just mudbloods!" interjected Algernon Wilkes glaring, with arms over his chest, apparently continuing a quarrel that had been interrupted by Tom and Harry's appearance in the common room.

"Yes, they are," she snapped impatiently, as if in that evening she had heard the remark far too many times for it to be further tolerable, no matter what well-bred pureblood politeness dictated. "And they are Slytherins too, whether we like it or not. Students of other Houses regard them as such, so they will be targeted again."

Harry had already taken his appointed seat, baffled and puzzled by the whole reunion, and Tom had followed after him. It seemed to serve Dorea's purpose, since the girl approached Harry and carefully grabbed one of his hands, startling him when she held it up in the air, displaying his bandaged wrist.

"See?" she said pointedly, glancing at the students around her. "He already had this when he jumped into the fight. I saw it." She turned to Harry and demanded shortly, "You had been previously attacked by a Gryffindor, correct?"

Harry scowled at her, not liking to be put on the spot and feeling quite peeved. The girl was scarily observant, trait that she shared with Tom and which had always irked him in his brother who always seemed to detect and know too much.

"Yes," he admitted in a reluctant grumble as Dorea pressed him by glowering at him.

She gently let go of his wrist, and swirled around to glare at her housemates. "We already agreed that the youngest are the weakest chinks in our armor. She gestured at Tom and Harry, as she added sharply, "And they are first years. Hence, even if they're mudbloods, we'll protect them as well."

The moment Algernon Wilkes opened his mouth again, Dorea snapped angrily, "Harry showed loyalty to us by helping us in the fight." Her eyes narrowed pointedly at the Head Boy. "And from what I've heard, he was the one who came to fetch you." She pierced everyone who had been involved in the clash with the Gryffindors with a hard gaze. "None of us would have made it out unscathed if the seventh-years hadn't come. And we owe Harry gratitude for that, too. We always protect our own and loyalty and aid always has to be repaid, or have you forgotten our ways!"

"He did it on purpose," spat Walburga Black, glowering at her aunt before she turned her vicious, enraged glare to Harry. "He surely realized that if he did something to help, we would then feel obliged to repay the favor, as per Slytherin House rules-
"

"He's a mudblood, he couldn't have possibly known about our set of rules, 'Burga," interjected Dorea with vast annoyance. She then gestured at Alphard, who was sitting at the other end of the
room with a bandage wrapped around his head. "And he helped your brother, even though Alphie has insulted and mistreated him as the rest of us have."

The lie to cover up Harry's actions and motives, and keep the boys' friendship a secret, rolled out of her lips smoothly. Even Alphard managed to not show an inking of emotion, catching himself in time without shooting Harry a grateful smile.

"I think it's quite settled and there's nothing more to discuss about this matter," said Dorea firmly. "The Riddle twins will be assigned to a group of five, and will be given escorts to move around the castle, as the rest of you will." She pointedly glanced at all the students below third year at that, before she looked at the older Slytherins, adding commandingly, "Now, let's take a look at our schedules to see at what hours and days we each have spare time to carry on our guard duties."

Harry was left thoroughly dumbfounded and astonished.

Tom and he were assigned to a first-year group consisting of Alphard, Abraxas Malfoy, and Orion Black. Antonin Dolohov, the older Slytherin whose schedule of free time matched that of when their group of five had to move around Hogwarts to go to class, was appointed as one of their escorts.

Harry disliked Dolohov immensely, having had to deal with the Keeper of Slytherin's Team every Sunday morning when he had his secret Quidditch lessons with Dorea, since they had required a Keeper and Dolohov had been in serious need of extra training. The older boy despised him openly, yet suddenly seemed to take his duty very seriously and hadn't even sneered at him when hearing he would be appointed to Harry's group.

It was in the following day that Alphard had clarified matters to him.

During breakfast, the whole student body had to listen to very stern, angered, and reprimanding words from Headmaster Dippet, who had been apprised by the Caretaker about the fight that had occurred between Gryffindors and Slytherins. He even threatened that the next time something of the sort happened, the whole school would be given detention.

Harry didn't think the speech had helped much: it only served to make the Gryffindors angrier, as if feeling they were being unjustly punished, the Slytherins turn stiffer and more suspicious and alert, and made the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws glower at the other two Houses accusingly, for causing so much trouble.

When he had skipped lunch in the Great Hall to meet Alphard in the kitchens, he had finally expressed his incomprehension.

"What was all that about – those House rules your sister and aunt mentioned?" said Harry, peering at Alphard with utter puzzlement. "About loyalty and helping each other and stuff. I thought that Slytherins never did anything in exchange for nothing, not even doing favors for other Slytherins."

"Well, that's the whole point, isn't it?" said Alphard, looking amused. "I don't know who came up with the rules, but they have been around for ages, precisely because Slytherins are self-interested and it worked against them when the House was isolated from the rest of the school, by being under direct criticism or attack from the other Houses and things like those. There are a couple of rules that specify that, in such circumstances, rivalries within Slytherin House have to be set to a side so that we can present a common, united front against enemies, and that for once, good deeds between Slytherins had to be repaid, to forge tighter ties and unity."

The boy paused and shot Harry a large grin. "Good deeds like what you did." He puffed out his
chest proudly as he added, "When Dorea became part of The Two, she was the one who insisted for those old rules to be applied and reestablished. And I think it has finally paid off."

Well, Harry at last understood why Tom hadn't beeped a word or bristled with wounded pride when they had been told they needed protection. Harry had been certain Tom must have felt grievously insulted at the implication that he couldn't protect himself. Yet, his brother had coolly accepted the help offered without voicing a word against it.

"Is the situation with the Gryffindors really that bad?" Harry muttered with an uncertain frown, addressing his other concern.

"You tell me," retorted Alphard wryly, gesturing at the bandage around his head and the one around Harry's wrist. He then heaved a deep sigh as his shoulders slumped. "It was bound to happen with Grindelwald coming out as a Dark Lord…"

The boy trailed off and suddenly grasped Harry's arms so abruptly that it startled him.

"You must believe me," said Alphard vehemently, his tone of voice pleading and nearly desperate, as he shook his head fervently, "I had no idea what had happened to Felicity's and Felix's aunt! I liked her. When our families were still allies and I was friends with them, I saw her a couple of times and she was always very kind to me. I didn't know that she would be turned into one of those horrid new Inferi!"

Harry stared at him, his eyebrows shooting upwards in sheer taken aback surprise. "It never even crossed my mind, Al. Of course you didn't know!"

"The twins think I did," muttered Alphard despondently, releasing Harry's arms to lean backward, looking crestfallen. "Before, they just ignored my existence because our families became enemies. Now, it's even worse - they glare at me and I can see the hatred in their eyes."

"You're imaging things," said Harry soothingly, quite convinced of the truth of his assertion. "The twins wouldn't blame you for what happened to their Aunt Nettie. How could you have had anything to do with that!"

Alphard shot him a scowl, as if Harry was being disingenuous on purpose. "You know why, already. You know my parents support the Dark Lord. And they surely must have known something about his plans, but my parents never tell me anything about such issues! And the Prewett twins obviously think I was told!"

"Oh," mumbled Harry, not knowing what to say to that.

"I've been worried about it ever since we heard Dumbledore talking to Charlemagne McLaggen in Hogsmeade," admitted Alphard, anxiously nibbling on his bottom lip. He shot him a nonplussed look. "I've seen Dumbledore trying to speak to you. Do you have any idea why he didn't prevent-"

"No," replied Harry shortly, his tone waspishly, not wanting to discuss that particular matter.

Alphard clearly had a wise respect for Harry's moods, and didn't press the issue, though the boy looked as if he had to reign in his curiosity with much effort. Nevertheless, as open as he always was, Alphard carried on undaunted, as he voiced his concern, letting Harry finally realize why the boy had been so quiet and worried as of late.

He understood that Alphard feared for his parents and felt much sympathy for the boy due to it. But the extent of how Grindelwald's actions were becoming so widespread and far-reaching, left him stunned.
What had always concerned him was the Dark Lord's interest in Tom and him, and how the trouble Grindelwald was causing in Europe could affect the muggles he cared about: Alice, Hutchins, and his friends in the orphanage. But he hadn't realized it would be also affecting Alphard in ways he hadn't considered.

"The Dark Lord will want to take over our Ministry of Magic at some point," whispered Alphard somberly. "All his supporters in Britain have only given him financial support thus far, but when the Dark Lord comes here, I'm sure he'll demand much more. He won't be satisfied with more of my father's galleons. He will expect Father to fight when he takes over the Ministry, you see?" He shook his head gloomily. "And my father will, proudly and willingly. But the Austrians and Czechs didn't have a Dumbledore, did they? The battle for Britain will be fierce, I'm sure. And what if my father doesn't survive it?"

Harry stared at the boy, feeling utterly torn. He didn't want Grindelwald to win, yet he didn't want Alphard's father to die either – or any relatives of his housemates, as a matter of fact. He wouldn't even wish that for his worst enemy, not when he knew what it was to be without parents.

"Can't you convince your dad to stop supporting the Dark Lord?" suggested Harry musingly, trying to come up with some simple, quick solution. "You know, become neutral or something of the sort."

"No," said Alphard with a despairing, loud snort, shaking his head. "My parents wouldn't care about what I say. I'm just the spare son. Only Cygnus' opinion counts, since he's my father's heir." He sighed dejectedly before he added in a quiet, apprehensive murmur, "And Cygnus is already taking his duty very seriously."

"Right," muttered Harry under his breath, his eyes widening with understanding. No wonder that Alphard's older brother, whom Tom had once pegged as the 'silent, analytical, observant type', had suddenly become more grave, distant, and introspective, always reading every article in The Daily Prophet with much intensity, carrying a stern expression on his face, the fourteen-year-old boy looking as if he had forced himself to mature into a grownup overnight.

As Harry received news through Alice's newspaper clippings about how Muggle Britain had publicly pledged support to Poland in the event of an invasion, war seemed imminent, while the agitation and tension in Hogwarts only increased further.

It didn't help matters that Dorea Black and Charlus Potter weren't on speaking terms.

"I'm his fiancée! Charlus should be loyal to me, and only me - not to his housemates!" was what Dorea had apparently told Alphard when she had been venting her anger and frustration, since it seemed that what Harry had witnessed in the fight was a simple matter of Charlus taking his housemates' side and Dorea hers, each believing their housemates' claims of who had been the first to strike with spells when clashing in the corridor.

Indeed, Hogwarts became polarized into two sides: those who supported the Slytherins, which were few in other Houses, and those who followed the Gryffindors' lead.

The last Quidditch match for first place -Slytherin versus Gryffindor- exacerbated the already frazzled nerves, volatile high tempers, and violent rivalry.

Harry had attended, this time firmly standing in the Slytherins' stands, and even Tom had come along in a show of House solidarity, surely with ulterior motives added in the mix, as always was the case with his brother.
Throughout the whole game, Harry had gawked. He had never seen anything like it. It was fierce, brutal, ruthless, and unmerciful, with Jocunda Sykes, the Flying Instructor and Quidditch Referee, constantly blowing her whistle and shooting red sparks from her wand the countless times a foul was committed, by both teams just as frequently.

Every dirty trick in the book was employed: Beaters slamming Bludgers into Seekers or Keepers instead of Chasers, Chasers grabbing the broom tails of the other team's players, legs kicking out and elbows jabbing into ribs when two opposing players flew side by side, Quaffle being stolen by a Beater instead of a Chaser, Seeker purposely colliding into the opposing team's Keeper just when a Quaffle was incoming towards the goal hoops, and every other thing Harry hadn't even imagined or thought possible.

Jocunda Sykes was beyond herself with fury and yelled so much that she went hoarse, having to point her wand at her throat to make her voice work and be heard.

Moreover, Dorea was by far the fiercest of them all – the girl was certainly venting her spleen in the Pitch.

With eyes as wide as moons, Harry had gawked incredulously when Dorea had ripped a bat from the clutches of one of her Beaters and slammed a Bludger right smack in the middle of her fiancé's head. And she even loudly cackled with vicious satisfaction when Charlus Potter went tumbling over his broom and landed painfully on the ground from quite a height.

Miss Nightingale was there to heal the boy in a jiffy and Dorea was heavily punished for her foul, though she certainly didn't seem to mind having to be out of the game for a full hour.

She had evidently given clear directions to her team, who completely focused in making Charlus Potter's life impossible. Oh, the boy was certainly the biggest threat, being Gryffindor's Captain and their best Chaser, but Harry had the inkling Dorea was making him sweat out of personal revenge.

However, Charlus hadn't restrained himself either. Just about fifteen minutes after Dorea had been allowed back into the game, the boy had launched himself from his broom, leaping at Dorea right when they crossed paths in the air, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her down with him into the void. Gratefully, they hadn't been flying too high, so when they crashed unto the sandy ground they weren't greatly hurt – not enough to be carried away. Though they certainly had much energy and anger left.

Harry didn't think any spectator could tell what was going on down there, even if people had those crafty, useful Omnicular things, because Dorea and Charlus became a mass of entangled limbs as they struggled and rolled and rolled and kept rolling together, bellowing who-knew-what at each other.

It was the most perplexing, worrisome, funniest, and scariest thing Harry had ever seen, and for a moment he even thought Dorea would start letting her fists fly to beat her betrothed to a pulp – pureblood girl notwithstanding, Harry knew out of personal experience just how 'unlady-like' she could be.

It had finally ended when Jocunda Sykes had tore them apart, blowing on her whistle like a desperate madwoman at the end of her rope, which left half the crowd nearly deaf.

In the end, though, as brilliant as Dorea was on a broom, Charlus was better and his Seeker far surpassed the Slytherins'. The match came to a conclusion when the Snitch was caught, Charlus having already scored many points, surpassing those obtained by Dorea and her Chasers.
The boisterous cries of joy and roars of triumph from the Gryffindors' stands and the insults they bellowed at the Slytherins were so loud that flocks of birds in distant trees of the Forbidden Forest fled away into the skies, the cacophony having startled and scared them off.

With much frosty poise, the Slytherins orderly marched off from the Pitch with chins raised high, not displaying one smidgen of the crushing disappointment they felt as Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup.

The Gryffs didn't waste the opportunity to rub it in and cruelly taunt and mock the Slytherins for their humiliating defeat, so Harry had been thoroughly stunned when he had come upon something three hours later after the end of the match.

It had been nightfall by then, and he had been hurrying along the maze of corridors of the dungeons, to not be caught out of his dorm when curfew struck the clock.

And there, he had seen it, right against a wall: a translucent shimmering mantle of silvery, whitish magic, with two bulges underneath it.

Harry had halted his strides, gaping when he realized what he was seeing. Under Potter's Invisibility Cloak, there was Dorea and Charlus, still in their Quidditch uniforms and thoroughly dirty, wrapped together, with hands and limbs all over each other, making smacking, wet noises that made Harry turn beet red.

"No – don't put your hand there, Charlus!" cried out Dorea in alarm. Though apparently it was too late, because the girl then shrieked in pain and peeled herself away from her fiancé's frisky clutches.

Both still under the Invisibility Cloak and having taking no notice of Harry standing there, gawking with a discombobulated expression on his face, Dorea scowled at the iron band on her finger as she snarled furiously, "I should poison Walburga for this!"

Not wanting to even imagine where Charlus' hand had been, which had clearly made the Black Chastity Rings they wore punish them in warning, Harry already felt way too traumatized and he instantly turned tail and fled like a frightened fawn of the woods.

He wasn't even able to stutter out what he had seen to Alphard. He wouldn't have needed to ask, because by the following day, Dorea and Charlus were out and about in the school, once more hand-in-hand and beaming happily, as if they hadn't nearly killed each other in the Quidditch Pitch like lunatics nor quarreled and publicly rowed spectacularly after they had been divided in their loyalties to their respective Houses.

At least, Harry saw that he wasn't the only one thoroughly gobsmacked. Plenty of students gaped uncomprehendingly at the couple.

"I knew they couldn't stay angry at each other for long," Alphard had piped in when they had met in the kitchens, looking vastly cheerful and content. He snickered under his breath. "Specially after playing against each other – they've always loved their rivalry in the Quidditch Pitch!" He grinned widely at Harry, as he added joyfully, "I dare say that now that they're back together, things between Gryffindor House and ours will calm down a mite. They will make sure of it. So we should start looking for the Chamber of Secrets, don't you think?"

Harry blinked at him, utterly nonplussed at how Alphard had jumped from one disconnected idea to the other, and he said hesitantly, trying to be tactful, "Um… I didn't think you were up to it because you were so worried about your parents' involvement with the Dark Lord, after the fall of
"Oh, that," said Alphard, waving a hand dismissively. "There isn't much I can do about it, is there?" He shrugged his shoulders as he popped a small roasted potato into his mouth. "I'm fine now." He widely grinned at him. "And Dorea is back with Charlus so all is right and well in the world, in my view. I'm not going to worry about anything else." He leaned forward and peered at him excitedly. "So, when do we have our first adventure!"

Harry happily beamed at him with the power of a thousands suns. He didn't think he would ever be so fond of someone as he was of Alphard.
Part I: Chapter 31

"We stink," pointed out Alphard, snickering when he caught sight of Harry's scrunched up nose.

Ulysses let out a meow of agreement, though there wasn't much Harry could do about the way they looked and smelled.

They had been exploring the castle for the last two months and the end of June, and thus the school year, was approaching.

Thankfully, now that he counted with Alphard's and Ulysses' help, the search for the entrance of the Chamber of Secrets was much faster.

After all, Tom was certain that Salazar Slytherin must have marked the secret entrance with a symbol of a snake, and that was what Harry and Alphard went around looking for.

"It would make sense," Tom had said superiorly, shooting Harry a pointed glance. "We need to look at a snake or representation of one in order to be able to speak Parseltongue. Hence, Salazar must have marked the entrance with a figure of a serpent. I'm sure the only way in or out of the Chamber is through the use of Parseltongue – that way, Salazar ensured that only Parselmouths,
namely him and his descendants, could access it."

Harry had nodded, since it sounded convincing, though he hadn't expected what his brother's continued research would lead to.

Ever since they had found out about John Gaunt in the muggle library during their Christmas Holidays, Tom had looked into wizarding families with renewed fervor. The boy hadn't found a single mention about any 'Riddles', which hadn't surprised Harry the slightest given what the Gringotts' goblin had told them, but he had found a bit about the Gaunts.

" 'Minor pureblood family of no consequence'," Tom had hissed out, quoting from the battered, old book that he was angrily waving in front of Harry's face. "That's all it says about the Gaunts! And it's the only book that even mentions them." The boy's dark blue eyes narrowed to slits, as he spat furiously, "They couldn't have been so insignificant if M.G. managed to slip in and out of Hogwarts to impregnate Sherisse Slytherin, could they? M. Gaunt must have been very resourceful, cunning, and powerful to manage that!"

Harry had bitten his lip, knowing he couldn't tell his brother about what Santi had revealed to him regarding Morgon Gaunt.

Moreover, he was quite certain Tom wouldn't be at all pleased to know that Morgon Gaunt had been a mediocre, embittered old wizard, and just the Caretaker of Hogwarts, to boot.

By the looks of things, it was clear that his brother was of the idea that their ancestors from that side must have been impressive and noteworthy, even if everything indicated they had been cowardly hiding amidst muggles since Morgon Gaunt did his nasty deeds.

"And we know that M. Gaunt took off with the Slytherins' belongings," continued ranting Tom angrily. "We saw that locket in Borgin and Burkes. And if Slughorn is right about it, then it is a Slytherin heirloom and it's clear that the Gaunts sold it at some point." He skewered Harry with a piercing, narrowed-eyed look. "And it should belong to us! We must steal it before that Hephzibah Smith witch Slughorn blabbered about buys it!"

Harry became alarmed at that. He had thought he had managed to convince his brother to wait until they were older. They were only in their first-year of Hogwarts and he certainly didn't feel prepared to pull off a heist of that magnitude.

"When we go to Diagon Alley to buy our school supplies for next year," Tom added in a firm, decisive tone, "we'll go to Knockturn Alley and take a closer look at the locket and we'll inspect Borgin and Burke's store and their security measures. We must begin to plan the theft."

After that, Tom had continued doing even more research in Hogwarts' library, three days later presenting a long parchment filled with notes to Harry. It was a list of all the possible magical creatures that could be guarding the Chamber of Secrets. All of them with one sole trait in common: they were part snake and could be understood by Parselmouths.

"If the legend is right and Salazar brought in some kind of monster to guard his Chamber of Secrets," Tom had intoned arrogantly, as he handed over the piece of parchment to Harry, "then he must have chosen a creature only he could communicate with and give orders to. Read that list and be prepared."

By then, Tom had already known that Harry had resumed his exploration of the Castle, though Harry had certainly not told him about Alphard's involvement or even about all the things he had disclosed to his friend.
Nevertheless, he had shared that piece of parchment with Alphard and the boy had paled when reading it.

"All of these are terribly dangerous creatures," choked out Alphard, gazing at Harry with big grey eyes filled with apprehension. He gestured at the parchment jerkily. "Lamias, Nagas, Leviathans, Gorgons, Chimeras, Basilisks!"

"Yes," Harry conceded undaunted, to then grin brightly at his friend as he pointed a finger at his brother's notes. "But look there. Tom has also written about the things that can be used to protect oneself from those creatures."

Lamias and Nagas were half-human creatures with the bottom part of their bodies being like a long serpent's tail, as closely related to each other as merfolk and sirens were.

There were differences, though. Lamias were all females and used their magic to look like their victim's most desired woman or man, in order to suck out their life-forces and feed from their lust through a kiss. Apparently, they also preferred to steal babies and feed from their lives to gain youthfulness. On the other hand, Nagas were all males, bulky, fierce and strong, who hunted down muggles with spears to eat their flesh.

Harry certainly didn't want to know how they reproduced with their own kind, being all female and all male, respectively, but he had read that wizards, in turn, hunted Lamias and Nagas to use their parts as ingredients for those Breeder Potions Alphard had told him about, for Sappho witches and Ganymede wizards, first invented by Salazar Slytherin so long ago.

Leviathans were huge seven-headed sea monsters that lived in every ocean, part serpent, but also part crocodile and could thus also live on the ground, while Gorgons were women with serpents for hair whose gaze turned their victims into stone, and Chimeras had the body of a lion, with a tail that ended in a snake's head and with the head of a goat rising on their back at the center of their spine, and they breathed fire and were vicious.

And finally, the Basilisks, which concerned Harry the most because unlike the others there wasn't a simple thing that could ward them off. Their direct gazes killed instantly, and the reflection of it petrified the victim.

It was with that that Harry and Alphard had the most trouble when trying to find a way to protect themselves in the eventuality that they found the Chamber and were faced with a Basilisk.

Nevertheless, preparing themselves for the other creatures hadn't gone all that well either.

Lamias couldn't bear the smell of onions, Nagas for some reason fled with fear from chili peppers, Gorgons couldn't stand lemons, poppy seeds made the Chimera's three heads sneeze and sneeze until they choked so hard that they swallowed their own breathing-fire and scorched their throats, and Leviathans keeled over and fell asleep if they smelled bat dung. Magical creatures were very bizarre, had been Harry's conclusion.

He had slipped into Horace Slughorn's potions storeroom to steal the dung and had then happily gone to the kitchens with Alphard, asking the house-elves for the rest of the things. He had put everything in a bowl, meshed it all together and pounded it into a pulp until it became a juice with small bits and pieces.

"This is what we have to do when we go looking for the Chamber," Harry had said grinning, as he proudly and demonstratively applied the concoction on his face. "Whichever creature there's in the Chamber will smell this on us and-"
He had released a yelp when his face suddenly went red and throbbed and ached, his eyes tearing from the onion, his skin painfully tingling from the astringent lemon juice and unbearably burning due to the chilly peppers, with the poppy seeds and bat dung only making everything all the worse.

He had cried out so loudly, attempting to scratch his face off, that Alphard had quickly cast an Aguamenti spell, dousing Harry with water to help him scrub off the concoction. It had been so bad that Harry's skin was left pink and raw, and he had ended up paying a visit to the Infirmary.

Miss Nightingale had shaken her head and clucked her tongue at him, as she said chidingly, "What were you thinking, boy, putting those things on your face?"

"Um… I read in the Witch Weekly that it was good for getting rid of pimples," mumbled Harry, shamed-faced, as he made up the only lie that could sound half-convincing.

Miss Nightingale shot him an incredulous look as she flicked her wand and cast a spell to soothe Harry's skin. "Bat excrement, onions, chilly peppers and whatnot, for pimples? And you don't even have pimples, child!"

"Er… I do. Here, I think," said Harry lamely, pointing at his chin.

The mediwitch leaned forward and squinted hard, until she huffed. "You have nothing, Mr. Riddle! Don't be ridiculous. I could have expected something like this from some of the girls, but not you. I've never taken you for a vain boy."

She shook her head when she was done with him, adding sternly, "Next time, instead of taking advice from that rag, you come to me first if you ever have acne!"

Mortified, Harry muttered a thanks and ran back to the kitchens, where Alphard was waiting for him just to guffaw and snicker when Harry told him about the mediwitch's sharp remarks.

In the end, they had wisely chosen to simply string lemons, chili peppers, and onions together and wear them around their wrists and necks. That left the poppy seeds, which they carried in small pouches tied to their belts, and the bat dung – which they could only smear on their faces in streaks running along their cheeks and foreheads.

Furthermore, Alphard had finally bought by owl two hand mirrors from a store in Hogsmeade and ridiculously expensive drops of Phoenix tears from the Apothecary.

The idea was that if they ever came upon a Basilisk, they would have the mirrors in hand so that the reflected creature's gaze could only petrify them, and the Phoenix tears to counteract the creature's poison, since it was the only thing that could heal a wound infected with a Basilisk's lethal venom.

"If it is a Basilisk," Alphard had intoned gravely and a tad nervously, "then it's best if I'm the one who's petrified, because then you'll have the chance to quickly close your eyes and speak to it in Parseltongue and ask it to not attack us. And you can levitate me to our common room afterwards and fetch Dorea. She'll know what to do to unpetrify me."

Harry had nodded, a mite uncertain because he dearly hoped the 'monster' wasn't a Basilisk. It was by far the most dangerous of all.

Hence, every time they waited for their roommates to fall asleep in order to put on everything and slip away to inspect the Castle, they stank, as Alphard had just remarked so precisely.

Harry was quite sure that if anyone saw them, the person would be rolling on the floor laughing.
themselves silly. Alphard and him had to look very weird, like a pair of wild indians from the Amazons, with stringed vegetables and lemons hanging from their necks and wrists and dung all over their faces, not to mention Ulysses with his small bandit's mask.

Indeed, it seemed that the Scorcrup had a keen sense of smell, and just how the bat dung, onions, lemons, and chili peppers bothered the magical creatures that could be guarding the Chamber of Secrets, they also annoyed Harry's familiar.

The first time they had gone out, little Ulysses had constantly sneezed so hard and his tiny nose had twitched so much that the Scorcrup had finally let out a piteous meow as he pressed a small paw against his nose.

Harry resorted to cutting a small, triangular piece of cloth from a clean sock, charming it to block smells and then tying it around Ulysses' muzzle. The Scorcrup had been quick to catch on, and he could easily roll up his mask with a paw to make use of his nose to sniff around things or just as simply roll it back down when he was perched on top of Harry's head and needed to avoid suffering the stench that came off his owner.

Moreover, Ulysses had already proven that his senses were as useful as they were keen.

The little Scorcrup could hear the flap of wings of the Caretaker's nasty pet crow Rascal the Raven and the clank of Apollyon Pringle's wooden leg on the floors way before either Harry or Alphard could take notice.

Ulysses always quickly patted Harry on the forehead with a paw, warning him, and thus allowing the boys to swiftly change directions and flee into another corridor before they were caught out of bed after curfew.

The Scorcrup's sense of smell had also led to some discoveries.

"He's like a bloodhound," Harry had said, marveled and enthused, one night when Ulysses had hopped off his head to land on the floor and rush forward along a corridor, with his tiny nose pressed against the floor as he went sniffing around.

The boys had scrambled after him and halted before a large cabinet that Ulysses was clawing and sniffing at with much eagerness.

"What have you found?" said Harry curiously as he eyed the cabinet that had caught his familiar's attention.

It was large, black, and with double doors. Intrigued, he opened them, but there was nothing inside, just an empty space wide enough for someone to fit in if ducking and crouching.

"Oh, I think I know what it is!" breathed out Alphard enthusiastically, his grey eyes big as he trailed a finger along the frame of the doors. "See these marks here? They are magical Runes."

Harry bent forward and squinted at them with puzzlement. "So?"

"I think it's a Vanishing Cabinet!" declared Alphard excitedly. "I've heard of them. They are not very common. They always come in pairs and they're used to go from one cabinet to the other." He glanced around, bemused. "Though it doesn't look as if this cabinet's match is around here."

"They are used to travel from one spot to another?" said Harry, his eyebrows shooting upwards. He opened the double doors again and gazed into the emptiness, mystified. "Where do you reckon this one leads to?"
Harry was about to put a foot inside when Alphard grabbed his arm and swiftly pulled him back, as he said anxiously, "You shouldn't. Their magic form some sort of portal between the pair, but they aren't very reliable, that's why there aren't many and not commonly used for travelling."

"Oh," said Harry, deflating. However, as they left, he shot the cabinet a lingering look and marked its location on The Three Musketeers' Map, vouching to explore it some other time when he was alone.

A couple of weeks after that, they were almost done going through all the rooms of the seventh floor, since it was the floor in which Harry had started in when he had been looking for the Chamber of Secrets by himself, and now that they were three, they had quickly gone through the rooms left.

They had divided the task between the three of them and separately perused their assigned rooms. Sometimes, Alphard or Ulysses would fetch Harry when they discovered something that could be suspicious, and Harry would trail after them into the room they were checking out and hiss in Parseltongue at the furniture or decoration that could be hiding the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

Alas, it had yielded no results thus far, but at least, in just two months, they were nearly over their inspection of the top floor of Hogwarts.

Harry thought they were managing it at an excellent rate, since Tom expected him to complete his scrutiny of one floor of the Castle every year.

At present, with Alphard snickering about their smell, they were climbing up a moving staircase to reach the seventh floor and finalize their examination of it.

The boy suddenly stopped chuckling as he shot Harry a quizzical glance. "Things between you and Abraxas have gotten stranger, haven't they? What do you think he meant with the things he said to you?"

Harry released a weary sigh at that. Abraxas Malfoy had become unavoidable ever since Slytherin House imposed its rule that every Slytherin had to move around the Castle in groups of five, with one of the older Slytherins escorting them like a guard.

Indeed, Alphard's hopes that the tension and enmity between Slytherins and Gryffindors would diminish after Dorea got back together with Charlus Potter hadn't become true. The couple certainly tried to soothe the tempers of their respective housemates, but constant news about the Dark Lord and the fear it inspired worked against them.

At least, there had only been a few skirmishes between older Slytherins and Gryffindors, which had been quickly halted since the teachers had started to make rounds around the school precisely to break off in time any quarrels. Harsh detentions were doled out to those involved and Headmaster Dippet gave stern, reprimanding speeches during lunch in the Great Hall, but it hadn't gone beyond that.

Nevertheless, Slytherin House's tactic meant that Harry was constantly in the company of his group: Tom, Abraxas Malfoy, Alphard and Orion Black. The pity was that he couldn't openly be friendly to Alphard and that they had to curtail the frequency of their secret meetings in the kitchens.

Furthermore, he couldn't even go to the Dueling Arena with his brother to practice Dark Curses from Grindelwald's books, since when they weren't in class, they were expected to be safely
ensconced in their common room. And the older Slytherins were always checking up on them to
make sure the younger years were complying.

Tom hadn't been at all happy with the limitation, given that it meant they could only keep up with
their study of German. They did that in the midst of their common room and no one had shot them
a suspicious look due to it, thus far.

Well, Abraxas was the exception, because now that Harry was always around him, the boy kept
glancing at him more frequently and intensely than ever before.

"Why is Malfoy always looking at you?" Tom had demanded one day, looking extremely foul-
tempered. His dark blue eyes narrowed to slits as he skewered Harry with his gaze. "Has anything
happened between you? Has he spoken to you?"

"No," Harry lied smoothly, remembering what Abraxas had threatened to do if he ever told his
brother about their conversation. He rolled his eyes. "Malfoy is just weird. Pay no attention to
him."

Tom wasn't at all mollified, and he said insistently, his tone sharp and acerbic, "He stares at you,
and smirks, as if there's some undercurrent between you two - as if he knows something and is
holding it over your head."

Harry gritted his teeth. His brother was seriously too bloody observant and perceptive. He reined in
his temper and coolly shot him a glance, frowning when he saw the glint in his brother's eyes.

Tom looked angered and deeply annoyed, and something else Harry couldn't quite put his finger
on. Well, he figured his brother didn't like that he could be interacting with yet another person.

"He's not my friend," said Harry firmly, trying to soothe his brother's ruffled feathers.

"Of course he's not," scoffed out Tom. "He's a Malfoy and a pureblood, he wouldn't be interested in
someone like you – not when he thinks you're a mudblood." He let out a snide sound from the back
of his throat as he added matter-of-factly, "And even if you were a pureblood, you wouldn't catch
the attention of someone like him."

Harry frowned at that, starting to get really angered. Ever since Tom had first caught sight of
Abraxas constantly glancing at him, his brother had been treating him very nastily and
disparagingly, even more than usual.

"And why is that?" he gritted out crossly.

Tom gestured at him, as if making his point, and said scathingly, "Because of the way you look –
always disheveled and with your hair sticking up as if you have just rolled out of bed." He shot him
a contemptuous sneer. "And because you're a simpleton, and you have no manners and you don't
groom yourself and always wear wrinkled clothes and you gobble down your food like a savage
and your vocabulary is pathetic."

Harry slammed shut the Charms book he had been reading and glowered at him, snapping
waspishly, "Right. So he couldn't be paying attention to me because of the way I am, and yet you
want to know why he's glancing at me all the time, showing interest. So which one is it?"

"I just want to know what's going on!" hissed out Tom furiously, leaning forward to have his face
inches away from Harry's, his eyes narrowed to mere slits.

At the end of his rope, Harry shot to feet and hurled his book at his brother's head, as he yelled with
anger and exasperation, "Nothing is going on!"

And he marched off from their dormitory, bristling and seething.

The next morning, he had realized just how mistaken he was.

A hand shaking his shoulder had waked him up, making him mumble words of complain and groggily open his eyes.

"What on earth?" grumbled Harry sleepy as he grabbed his glasses from the nightstand and put them on, peering at the figure standing by his bed.

There, was Abraxas Malfoy, apparently having cancelled the charms Harry always cast on his bed's curtains, clearly to intrude upon his sleep.

"What are you doing, Malfoy?" spat Harry, frowning when he glanced around and saw the darkness in the room. "What time is it?"

"Six in the morning," drawled Abraxas impassively in his lilting voice.

"What?" choked out Harry scandalized, before he groaned loudly and snapped with much anger, "Why the hell did you wake me up? Bugger off, Malfoy, and let me sleep!"

He plopped back to bed and rolled to a side, giving the boy his back as he darkly grumbled under his breath.

He heard Abraxas tsking chidingly, and suddenly, his body was tingling as if a thousand ants were crawling all over him.

Yelping, Harry shot up from his bed, bewildered, and then caught sight of Abraxas smirking down at him with satisfaction. Harry's green eyes narrowed with fury.

"Cancel the hex you cast on me!" he bellowed, as his skin kept unpleasantly twitching, making him shiver in disgust.

Abraxas arched an eyebrow at him, his smirk widening. "I will if you behave. Do you not remember our agreement?"

"Fine, I'll be civil to you!" spat Harry impatiently. "Now take it off!"

"I think not," drawled Abraxas pleasantly, shooting him a mocking look. "Your tone is not very nice, is it?"

Harry gritted his teeth, and then leaped to a side and took his wand from the nightstand, in a flash pointing it under Abraxas's chin, poking at him hard, as he growled, "Take. it. off."

"My, my, not a morning person, are we?" intoned Abraxas, yet he flicked his wand at him and Harry suddenly felt deep relief as his skin stopped itching.

The boy then proceeded to causally sit down on Harry's bed, in a fluid, poised, elegant motion, to then gaze at him with his silvery eyes.

Harry could merely gape at him, dumbstruck.

"I received this last night," said Abraxas placidly, taking out a scroll from the pocket of his tunic-like nightgown. "I have not told anyone yet. I decided you should be the first to know."
"Know what?" said Harry nonplussed, starting to think that he was perhaps in a dream, given Malfoy's bizarre behavior.

Abraxas held up the scroll, as he drawled loftily, "This is my marital contract. My grandfather finally concluded negotiations yesterday. I am officially betrothed."

He arched a pale eyebrow when Harry remained mute, blinking at him. "Congratulate me, Riddle, it is what a civilized, well-mannered wizard would do in such occasion."

Harry shot him an incredulous look at that. Malfoy himself didn't seem too thrilled with the event. Indeed, the boy's expression was closed off and a tad rigid.

He shook his head, casting the boy another disbelieving glance as he bit out, "Have you gone bonkers, Malfoy! You've woken me up at six in the bloody morning to tell me that you're engaged? And I care because?"

"My fiancée is Kasimira Von Krauss, Riddle," said Abraxas slowly, as if wanting to give Harry time for the fact to sink in, as if it should mean something devastating for him.

"Who?" Harry frowned, the surname vaguely ringing a distant bell.

Abraxas' pale eyebrows quirked upwards as he stared at him. "Surely you are not serious. Kasimira Von Krauss - the daughter of Konrad Von Krauss, the Dark Lord's right hand man."

"Oh. Right, if you say so." Harry then stared at him, utterly confused. "That's all very well for you, I suppose. But why are you telling me?" His green eyes narrowed as he snapped impatiently, "What the hell do you really want?"

Abraxas let out a suffering sigh, before he fluidly rose to his feet. He pointedly waved the scroll in the air, as he widely smirked at him and drawled smugly, "For you, this means we shall be seeing much of each other in the future. After all, I am expected to spend some holidays with my fiancée and her father in Germany."

And with that, the boy sauntered back to his bed.

"What! What's that supposed to mean?" yelled Harry after him, perching from the side of his bed to stare at the boy's back, feeling thoroughly perplexed.

Malfoy didn't reply and Harry had the inkling that they boy couldn't hear him. One of the spells he always cast around his bed was a Silencing Charm, and given that none of their roommates had woken up with Harry's bellows, it was clear that Malfoy hadn't cancelled that particular charm.

He certainly hadn't told Tom about that interaction with Malfoy, but he did to Alphard. And it was precisely on that subject that his friend was currently questioning him.

"I haven't the foggiest what Malfoy's up to," replied Harry with exasperation, before he huffed, vastly miffed. "As far as I'm concerned he can just sod off and get himself lost in a forest. He just seems to like to-"

"Play with you," said Alphard, finishing the sentence for him and frowning.

"Yeah, I suppose," bit out Harry, peeved.

Alphard shot him a careful glance, his expression turning pensive. "But Abraxas wouldn't be yanking you around if he had no purpose behind it. He isn't the type."
Harry released a weary exhalation of breath. "Well, I know he came back from Winter Holidays knowing something – something his nasty old grandfather must have told him, because he keeps shooting me these pointed, knowing looks…"

"Something about what?" prompted Alphard, glancing at him with befuddlement and much curiosity.

Harry had some suspicions that it was all related to Grindelwald, but of course he couldn't tell Alphard that. He had never told his friend about the meeting he had witnessed in Grimmauld Place, when he had been in Phineas Nigellus' portrait – Alphard's very own ancestor in the boy's family's very own townhouse, at that. No, he had no intention to ever tell his friend about those things or about Grindelwald's letter and books.

"Don't know," mumbled Harry, shrugging, just as he was about to step onto a landing.

To his misfortune, the moving staircase suddenly shifted before they had the chance to get off, and Harry grumbled darkly under his breath, glaring up at the castle.

Hogwarts was clearly in one of her mischievous moods once more, and she always seemed to enjoy pulling those stunts particularly on him, if the behavior of the magic covering her walls was anything to go by - just then, the magic he could see with his ability was vibrating and pulsing as if she was having a jolly good laugh at his expense.

Vexed, Harry shot the Castle glowers in every direction, whilst he waited for her to decide to which floor she was going to move her staircase to.

They finally landed on the fourth floor and Harry was quick to get off the stairway before Hogwarts could change her mind. They were now forced to take a roundabout route to make their way to the seventh floor.

However, before they had the chance, Ulysses startled them by suddenly hopping off Harry's head and rushing forth along a corridor, sniffing at full speed. The boys ran after the Scorcrup, Alphard excited and Harry glancing around with curiosity.

He had never been in the fourth floor before, since he didn't have any of his classes there. Furthermore, he was utterly flummoxed when they followed Ulysses until they came upon an enormous mirror hanging on a wall in the middle of the corridor.

"Is there something behind?" Alphard asked bemused, as he stared at the little Scorcrup that had begun to spit hisses at the huge mirror whilst scratching its ornate frame with his claws.

Meanwhile, Harry was staring at the mirror with a dumbstruck expression on his face, gaping, before he clutched Alphard's forearm and breathed out slowly, "Al, it's covered with Salazar Slytherin's magic."

Alphard snapped his head around so fast that there was a cracking sound, and he gazed at Harry with eyes filled with awe and fascination. "What are you seeing?"

"A net of silver and green magic," mumbled Harry, without being able to peel his entranced gaze away from the mirror, "covering it. Just like the magic I always see on the wall that leads to our common room."

Alphard's grey eyes grew as wide as moons, as he whispered excitedly, nearly bouncing up and down on his toes, "Do you think this could be the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets?"
"Maybe," said Harry uncertainly, as he ripped his gaze away to glance at the frame of the mirror. He frowned, as he murmured, "But there are no snakes there."

Alphard snorted and rolled his eyes. "Your brother was wrong, then. It seems Salazar didn't use something so obvious as the figure of a snake to mark the entrance, doesn't it?"

"There's something written up there, though," whispered Harry, craning his neck to gaze up at the top of the mirror. There were incomprehensible words inscribed on the upper frame, and he frowned as he took several steps forward to be in front of the mirror and take a closer look.

Just then, he caught a glimpse of something from the corner of his eyes and he brought his head back down to stare forward. There was a very clear reflection of himself on the mirror, but he didn't have strings of vegetables dangling from his neck and wrists, or a hand mirror tucked under his belt, or his face covered with bat dung.

It was him, yes, but he was happily grinning, with Tom at his side. His brother had an arrogant smirk on his face and his dark blue eyes were gleaming with giddy gleefulness and excitement, as they were when practicing Dark Curses from Grindelwald's Durmstrang textbooks when they were in Slytherin House's secret Dueling Arena.

Tom had an arm over Harry's shoulders, pressing them together, the gesture looking protective and affectionate. That wasn't the strange part, though, but the others in the reflection.

Alice and Robert Hutchins were there, holding each other's hands, standing right behind Harry and Tom, gazing down at them with wide, loving smiles on their faces.

The mysterious, breathtakingly beautiful woman of his dreams was also there, beside Harry, her delicate features looking content and proud, a shadow of a smile slightly tilting up one corner of her lips.

And at the back, along with Alice and Hutchins, there were two more that Harry instantly recognized.

One was Julian Erlichmann, but not looking stoic or haunted as he had looked in the picture of the Daily Prophet when the young man had been standing next to the Dark Lord while the Czechoslovakian Minister of Magic was on his knees breaking his wand in half. In the mirror, Julian looked joyful and carefree, and he had a hand on Harry's shoulder, squeezing it gently as he winked at him and laughed happily.

The other figure was Santi, just how the man had looked like when he had comforted Harry on the bridge, shimmering in golden light, his handsome face wearing a soft expression, his milky eyes filled with yearning as he gazed at Harry and tenderly and possessively carded his fingers through Harry's disorderly mop of hair.

There they were, all looking blissfully happy, and it felt so right that Harry kept staring with a wide smile and a mesmerized expression on his face.

All those disconnected people together, surrounding him, yet... something nagged at the back of his mind. Yes, they were people that didn't know each other in some cases: Alice and Hutchins had never met Santi or Julian, Tom didn't know about Santi, and Harry himself had never met Julian in person, whilst the woman of his dreams who always sang Alice's lullaby to him and filled him with love was still a mystery.

For a moment, he felt utterly bewildered, but he beamed a grin in the next second, chuckling as he
touched his own shoulder, his reflection doing the same, coming in contact with his brother's arm and Julian's hand. He could almost feel Santi's fingers caressing his hair too, like had happened on the bridge.

"Oh, it's you and me!" suddenly exclaimed Alphard joyfully. "Are you seeing it? Do you think it shows the future?"

His friend's words took a moment to sink in through the misty happiness filling Harry's mind and he snapped his head around to stare at the boy. "What?"

Alphard was gazing at the mirror, beaming and chortling. "Ah, good pass!"

"What are you talking about?" said Harry, blinking at the boy, disconcerted.

"You just passed me the Quaffle in an spectacular move!" said Alphard, his light grey eyes still fixed on the mirror, looking entranced and marveled. "Aren't you seeing it? We're playing Quidditch, just the two of us, and my parents are there watching! They are smiling and clapping and cheering us on. It must show the future! It must mean that some day I'll tell them about you and they'll accept our friendship instead of disowning me!"

Realizing what the boy was saying and seeing his friend's enthralled expression, Harry was gripped by such a sudden surge of trepidation and misgivings that he instantly jerked Alphard away from the mirror, as he rushed out worriedly, "No, I don't think it shows the future, Al."

Alphard blinked at him in confusion. "Why not? Didn't you see it?" At Harry's alarmed and troubled look, the boy frowned. "What's the matter?"

Harry didn't reply as he shot the mirror a wary and apprehensive look. Thankfully, they were not close enough for its surface to show anything.

He frowned as he caught sight of Ulysses. Unlike the two of them, the little Scorcrup wasn't stupidly staring into the mirror but apparently had kept scratching its frame, persistently.

"Ulysses senses there's something behind," pointed out Harry.

At that, the little Scorcrup turned around to bob his head up and down as he let out a meow of affirmation.

"Right. Let me try then," muttered Harry, whipping out his wand and swiftly casting, "Dissendium!"

It was one of the several charms he had found in books in the library, commonly used precisely to reveal secret passages that were being kept hidden by statues, portraits, and the like.

He had already tested it on the statue of the one-eyed witch and it had worked. Though if he ever needed to use the tunnel to Honeyduke's cellar, he would still prefer to push down her hump, which he always saw covered in Godric Gryffindor's red and golden magic.

However, nothing happened in this case.

"Of course!" Harry breathed out in the next second, as he glanced back at the mirror from a distance. "It still has Salazar Slytherin's magic covering it. I see it again now… So what should work is…"

He trailed off as he closed his eyes tightly, imaging Nagini in his mind as clearly and with as many
details as possible. He managed it in an instant, since he had frequently resorted to that ever since they had begun looking together for the Chamber of Secrets and he had to go around hissing at anything Ulysses and Alphard found in rooms and thought suspicious.

Keeping his eyes shut, imagining he was speaking to Nagini, he hissed, "Open!"

He heard Alphard gasping and he immediately snapped his eyes wide, grinning triumphantly when he saw that the mirror had moved. It had shifted as if it was a door, parting open a few inches from the wall. There was some sort of huge hole behind it, but it was too dark inside to see anything.

"It IS the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets!" gushed out Alphard, his eyes big and filled with thrilled excitement. He grabbed Harry's arm and jumped up and down. "We did it! We found it!"

The boy suddenly clamped his mouth shut and paled a mite, as he locked gazes with Harry and swallowed thickly. "Then we should get ready."

They nodded at each other in mutual, instant agreement, and as if one, they checked they had everything in place - the bat dung smeared on their faces, their vegetables and lemons hanging from their necks and wrists, the pouch containing poppy seeds tied around their belts, and the tiny glass vials with Phoenix tears in their pockets- and they finally pulled their hand mirrors from under their belts.

It was when Harry was wielding the small mirror in his left hand that he caught sight of something as he approached the enormous one covered in green and silver magic.

The incomprehensible words that were inscribed in the upper frame of the large mirror - 'erised s'traeh ruoy tub ecaf ruoy ton wohs I'- were reflected in Harry's hand mirror, and he could understand them now that he saw them backwards.

"I show not your face but your heart's desire," he read out loud, nonplussed.

"That's what it says there?" said Alphard, peering into Harry's hand mirror. He chuckled merrily. "It makes sense. That's why I saw us playing Quidditch together, with my parents watching and cheering! That's certainly something I want..." He blinked and his shoulders slumped. "Oh, but then it means that it wasn't really showing the future."

The boy looked deeply dejected and disappointed before he shot Harry a curious glance as he piped, "But you didn't see what I did, did you? What did you see, then?"

Harry was still too baffled to answer him. The mirror had supposedly showed him his 'heart's desire'? If so, he could understand why he had seen Alice and Hutchins with him, and Tom, looking as he always did, with an arrogant smirk and eyes gleaming with gleeful viciousness, only just with an arm around Harry's shoulders.

He could even comprehend the reason for the mysterious woman's presence in the image, since in his dreams he always felt love for her. But Santi and Julian Erlichmann? He 'desired' them?

Harry didn't even know them, even if he constantly thought of and worried about Julian, and even if he had begun to like Santi a bit after the way the man had comforted him on the bridge. Yet, he didn't 'love' them as he loved Alice, Hutchins, and his brother.

Moreover, the mirror had showed him Santi and Julian wholly focused on him: Julian looking happy, winking and smiling at him, with a hand on his shoulder and squeezing, as if they were very close, friends or something of the sort; and Santi caressingly trailing his fingers through Harry's hair, with that weird longing look in his strange milky eyes – like they had been on the bridge and
also when he had woken Harry up from his dreams to tell him about Morgon Gaunt. So… he 'desired' all that?

Harry felt stupefied, and suddenly, very awkward and discomfited due to the puzzling thoughts swirling in his mind.

He vehemently shook his head, getting rid of such notions, and went back to concentrate on the task at hand.

"It didn't show me anything important," he stated shortly as he waved a hand dismissively. He gave his friend a quizzical look. "Are you ready?"

Alphard hesitated for a second before he nodded and beamed at him. "Sure! Let's plunge in!"

Noticing the pause, Harry eyed him closely. His expression softened as he intoned gently and understandingly, "Al, if you're afraid, you don't need to come with me. I can manage on my own—"

"Well, I am a bit afraid, of course. Who knows which of the creatures is in there," interrupted Alphard in a hushed whisper, tilting to a side to take a peek into the darkness behind the mirror. He stepped back into place to shoot Harry a firm look. "But I promised I would help you find the Chamber of Secrets and I'm not about to abandon you when you'll need my help the most! And we're as prepared as we can be." He puffed his chest out. "I am ready."

"If you're sure…" murmured Harry quietly, a bit uneasy for his friend but not wanting to insult him either by implying that perhaps it was best for the boy to remain behind.

"I am," said Alphard decisively.

Harry nodded and gave him a small grin, before he checked again that everything was in place. He saw Alphard doing the same, touching his face to confirm that the bat dung was still there, looking only a mite nervous.

Even Ulysses made his own preparations. The little Scorcrup used a paw to roll down his bandit's mask over his muzzle and then climbed up Harry's leg, to jump on his shoulder and finally land on top of Harry's head, hissing as he transformed his tail into a scorpion's.

Harry finally yanked the mirror of desires fully away from the wall and they all stepped into the hole.

"Close!" he hissed, and he watched as the back of the mirror settled back into place, plunging them into absolute darkness.

"Lumos!" whispered Alphard.

The moment the tip of the boy's wand lit up, they realized they weren't in a hole but some sort of huge, round tunnel made of metal.

"What is this?" said Alphard bemusedly, glancing around.

"I think…" Harry frowned. "Um… I think it's a pipe, actually."

"A pipe!" Alphard's grey eyes went as wide as saucers. "But it's humungous! And that can only mean that—"

"That the creature is big," murmured Harry pensively, as he nodded. "A Leviathan or Basilisk, I
"Oh this is so not good," whispered Alphard shakily, paling dramatically. "Those two are the worst out of all of them! One as big as a manor and with seven heads, the other with a gaze that kills!" He frantically patted his face and brought up his left hand brandishing the small mirror. "Dung for one and mirror for the other, remember!"

"I will," Harry said, smiling at him soothingly. "Let's get going."

And they did, just to find, when they walked down the pipe for a few feet, that there were torch holders embedded on the metallic walls of the pipe. The holders were silver, decorated with small serpent figures, many still carrying torches that didn't seem to have been used in ages, all blackened, grimy, and dusty.

"This is the way to the Chamber of Secrets!" said Harry excitedly as he pointed at one of the ornamental snakes. "Tom wasn't that mistaken after all!"

"I suppose," muttered Alphard grudgingly, before he eyed the torches quizzically. "Let me try something."

The boy cast a spell that immediately made the lined up torches lit up, all the way into the distance.

"You have to teach me that spell!" said Harry marveled.

"Certainly," said Alphard, looking quite proud of himself.

They were all tense and alert as they followed the torches into the depths of the pipe: Harry and Alphard with their fingers tightly clutching their wands and with mirrors held upwards, Ulysses with his scorpion's tail poised for attack.

However, their journey down the pipe proved to be utterly uneventful. The walked for over an hour and saw nothing at all except more torches, until they finally reached the end.

Harry stared, blinking, at the block in their path. It was a gigantic boulder, which looked as if it had been jammed into the end of the pipe. He hadn't expected that.

"Erm… Open?" he hissed uncertainly.

Thankfully, it did the trick. The boulder rippled and changed into rocks that crumbled to the ground, the noise loud and nearly deafening. The clouds of dust nearly choked them and made them cough repeatedly whilst little Ulysses sneezed.

When the dust had settled down, they finally stepped through the wide opening, careful of not tripping over rocks and pebbles to not make any noise, and with mirrors and wands in hand.

As soon as they went through, Harry saw for a moment how the rocks morphed back to form a boulder that began to cover the end of the pipe. The light of the torches vanished and they were suddenly enveloped in pitch-black darkness.

"Lumos!" whispered Harry warily, straining his ears in case the creature was lurking around wherever they were.

When the light of his wand bathed their surroundings, they realized they had stepped into some sort of-
"It's a cave?" whispered Alphard sounding extremely disappointed. "The Chamber of Secrets is just a cave?"

Harry glanced around, blinking. He had certainly expected something else – something more magnificent and awe-inspiring, for sure. However, it did indeed look like a common cave, just very vast.

Feeling a frisson of apprehension, he briefly closed his eyes and quickly envisioned Nagini in his mind, to then hiss loudly, "Um, we are two boys and a Scorcrap and we... er... come in peace! Don't attack!"

And with that, he opened his eyes and glanced around, his fingers tightly clutching his wand and dearly hoping Tom had been right and that Salazar Slytherin had indeed chosen a creature that could understand Parseltongue.

"What did you say?" whispered Alphard, eyeing his surroundings anxiously as if expecting the creature to pounce on them at any given moment.

Harry told him and his friend eyed him with utter disbelief before he broke into peals of laughter.

"We - come in - peace?" choked out Alphard in between guffaws so loud that it made dust and dirt fall down on them from the top of the cave.

"What's wrong with that?" demanded Harry, scowling at his chortling and snickering friend. He huffed, thoroughly annoyed, as he gritted out between clenched teeth, "I didn't prepare a speech for the monster! If you were expecting some hoity-toitory, snooty grand speech then we should have brought Tom along and he could've delivered! That's right up his alley, not mine!"

That shut up Alphard instantly, the boy squaring his shoulders as he said indignantly, "I didn't mean it that way. I rather be with you than your twin. I don't want Tom to tag along. Looking for the Chamber of Secrets is our adventure, not his, right?"

"Exactly," said Harry firmly, his vexation vanishing instantly as he gave him a pleased grin.

"Good." Alphard nodded, looking mollified and relieved, and as he then began to walk around the cave, sticking close to Harry, both alert and on guard.

It was then that Harry caught sight of stalagmites sticking up from the ground and stalactites hanging from the cavernous, rocky ceiling. But the long ones, he realized, were only those at the sides. Those in the middle of the cave were just stumps, as if something had broken them in half.

He took a closer look at one of the stumps on the ground that had something sticking on it. As he inspected it, he saw that it was a flimsy, very thin layer of something yellowish and nearly transparent, looking a bit rigid and very wrinkled.

With much curiosity, Harry poked it with a finger. At his touch, it crumbled and fell to the ground as it turned to dust.

Harry shot Alphard a bewildered glance as he whispered urgently, "That was skin, I think. Which one sheds its skin, the Leviathan or the Basilisk?"

"Both," replied Alphard, his grey eyes wide as he nervously glanced around, gripping his wand tighter. "This is not the Chamber but the creature's lair, then?"

"Maybe," said Harry frowning, as he glanced once more at the stalagmites that were mere stumps
on the ground. "Or just some cave the creature passed through, very long ago by the look of things. The skin turned to dust the moment I touched it – it must've been ancient. And I don't see any bones around, and there would be left over bones in its lair from whatever the creature eats, right?"

"True," murmured Alphard, looking mightily reassured that they couldn't be, in fact, in the monster's den.

They soon decided they couldn't leave without finding out more and began to fully explore the cave.

It took them hours, since the cave was huge, filled with twists, nooks, and paths that led to other caves; such a maze of them that they ended up being irredeemably lost, exhausted, beyond sleepy, and with their tummies grumbling with hunger. Not even Ulysses managed to sniff his way into finding again the boulder that hid the pipe. All boulders looked alike and apparently smelled the same.

And for once, Harry dearly regretted that his Magic-Sight ability wasn't stronger, because if it were, he could have perhaps seen the magic of the boulder and thus found it again in order to return to Hogwarts through the pipe.

Alas, their situation became so dire, as they frantically tried to find a way out of the caves, that Harry whooped with joy when Alphard suddenly cried out frenziedly, "Light! I see light coming from over there!"

They desperately rushed towards the source, the light getting bigger and bigger and blinding them as they approached it. And suddenly, they were careening out into open air, panting for breath, worn out and drained from all energy, and with their sides aching.

"Sunlight!" breathed out Alphard ecstatic, as if the feeling of rays of sun on his dung-smeared face was the most glorious sensation he had ever felt.

Though, after long hours amidst the darkness and dampness of the caves, with only the Lumos of their wands to give them some light, Harry did feel quite content to see the sun as well.

Then he glanced again at it, as he murmured, dismayed, "It's dawning. We spent the whole night! And where the bloody hell are we?"

They both looked around, utterly bewildered. They were on a hill, filled with wide openings - cave entrances pilled together, one on top of the other and at all sides, indicating that they had indeed been in a system of caves.

Far away, in the distance, Harry suddenly spotted Hogwarts, looking tiny, yet to his eyes beautifully glowing with the colorful magic of its wards.

"Hogsmeade!" abruptly gasped out Alphard.

Harry swiveled around to gaze into the direction his friend was pointing a finger at. He blinked. The town was below them, just some short distance away. He could clearly see all the thatched houses and quaint cottages, with its main street already showing signs of early morning activity.

"Well," said Harry vastly relieved, "we know where we are, at least." He frowned the next second, shooting Alphard a bemused glance. "But that cave couldn't have been the Chamber of Secrets or the creature's lair. There was nothing in it." He shook his head as he added in a musing mutter, "We must've overlooked something. Maybe it was one of those torch holders… they had decorative figures of snakes, after all… we should try pushing one of them or I could speak Parseltongue to
them and see if they reveal-"

"There were hundreds of torch holders!" interjected Alphard, looking deeply alarmed. "You want
to go back to the caves and find again the pipe to check every single holder?"

"Not today!" said Harry, his eyebrows shooting upwards. "We're dead on our feet – we need some
sleep!"

"Thank Mordred," faintly whispered Alphard to himself, rubbing a hand over his sweaty forehead,
and then scrunching his nose with disgust when he just managed to get his fingers icky with bat
dung. "And we urgently need to take a bath too." He shot Harry a desperate look, his expression
piteous. "How are we going to get back?"

Harry grimaced as he glanced at Hogwarts, looking so far away and small. He let out a deep, weary
sigh as he patted Alphard on the shoulder. "The only way we can, Al. We already tried to find the
pipe and failed. We'll have to walk back and hope that no one will see us entering the Castle." He
brightened and glanced up through his fringe of disorderly hair to the creature tiredly curled up on
the top of his head. "You will help us with that, right?"

He caught Ulysses mid-yawn, though the little Scorcrup reassuringly patted his forehead with a
paw in response.

Harry grinned at Alphard. "See? Ulysses will be on guard and he'll let us know if he hears any
teachers strolling about the castle when we slip inside. And I doubt there will be any, not at this
ungodly hour."

And so, they began their arduous trek back to Hogwarts. Thankfully, it had been Friday when they
had initiated their expedition, which meant they had the entirety of that Saturday to drop dead from
exhaustion on their beds - which they certainly did, not even waking up to have meals.

However, in the two weeks left of school, Harry would have very little rest and the summer
holidays he was looking forward to with much excitement and expectations would prove to be
daunting, unnerving, and deeply disheartening.
"I don't get it," said Harry bemusedly as he took another glance at Felicity's Daily Prophet. "What are Dumbledore and McLaggen arguing about now?"

It was Sunday morning, the last day of school, and the Prewett twins and him were in an empty classroom. He had finally managed to get together with them, out of sight from their respective housemates. It hadn't been easy, but through a series of exchange of letters by owl they had all agreed on where to meet without rising suspicion from their Houses.

Earlier in the morning, during breakfast, the students had received their Daily Prophets and Harry had been confused when he had read the front page's article of Tom's newspaper.

Felicity huffed as she took her Daily Prophet and unceremoniously stuck it inside her school bag as if it was a dirty, smelly sock that was offensive to her sight. "Of course you don't understand. They don't really explain what is truly happening – they still write as if the Minister of Magic believed and supported Dumbledore's claims from the start!"

"No need to throw a hissy fit, sis," said Felix rolling his mismatched eyes.

"Of course I do!" snapped Felicity incensed, her ginger curls bobbing up and down as she swirled her head around to glower at her twin. "The gall of it! If it wasn't for Father's letters we ourselves wouldn't even know what's going on!"

"Er, right, so what is going on?" pressed Harry with curiosity.

"Just another quarrel between Dumbledore and Minister McLaggen," replied Felix, letting out a
tired sigh as he dismissively flipped a hand.

"About what, exactly?" said Harry insistently, though he eyed them warily in case it had anything to do with the Dark Lord. Talking about Grindelwald was a very touchy subject, and he took special care of never mentioning the Inferi or asking about it. What had happened to their Aunt Nettie was something the Prewett twins had never again broached.

"I'll tell you about what," bit out Felicity, her beautiful features darkening with anger. "McLaggen thinks recruiting more Aurors is enough. All he's done to prepare for war is lower the NEWT requirements for those who want to become Aurors, to make the Ministry test to become an Auror easier to pass, and to shorten the years of training."

She scowled as if Charlemagne McLaggen was standing right there and she could harshly impress upon him her dissatisfaction through her glare, as she added crisply, "But Dumbledore has been trying to convince the Winzengamot that other measures are necessary." She leaned forward toward Harry, as she whispered secretively, "Dumbledore insists that the Ministry's Unspeakables should be working on creating new wards that could protect wizarding houses, towns, and areas like Diagon Alley, from muggle weaponry. He thinks Grindelwald might use muggle warfare inventions against us and he wants wizarding communities to be protected against such things."

Felix nodded with a wizened air about him. "Yeah, from those pomp things that muggles throw from the skies."

Harry stared at the boy in befuddlement for a second, before his face cleared with sudden understanding. "Oh, you mean bombs?"

"Exactly!" piped in Felicity, though her expression turned worried and concerned the next instant, as she pined Harry with her mismatched eyes and added quietly, "Rumors say that those thingies destroy whole buildings and kill everyone around. Is it true?"

"Well, yes," muttered Harry, blinking at her. "I've never seen it happening myself, but I know a man who fought in the muggles' Great War and he always said that bombs flattened everything in the area they were dropped in." He frowned at her, nonplussed. "But Diagon Alley has wards, doesn't it? And Hogwarts and wizards' houses-"

"Not against new muggle things!" interjected Felicity quickly, her hands fretfully twitching on her lap. "Wizards don't know how muggle weapons work, and we've never been in a situation like this one, where new muggle weapons could be used against us in a war that's going on in the Muggle and Wizarding World at the same time!"

"True," said Felix, bobbing his head up and down. "According to Father, after what happened to Czechoslovakia, all the Ministries of Magic left in Europe are scrambling to get their hands on magical artifacts that can be used as weapons, against Grindelwald's muggle and wizarding forces alike."

"That's the problem," pointed out Felicity, her expression vexed. "McLaggen refuses to make his Unspeakable work on creating a new type of ward that could work against muggle weaponry because he says that they should focus on offensive measures and not defensive ones." She leaned forward to add in a rushed out whisper, "Father says that they are trying to figure out how to use the magical artifacts they have in the Department of Mysteries as weapons. And, apparently, McLaggen even paid a visit to Gringotts, trying to convince the Goblins to lend the Ministry the magical treasures and artifacts they've been stealing and hoarding since the dawn of times."

Harry brightened at that, a sudden surge of hope rising in him. "Did the Goblins agree?"
"No, of course!" snorted out Felix, rolling his eyes. "They're like dragons when it comes to their stuff. And I dare say that they couldn't care less about what happens to wizards." He shot Harry a pointed look. "They've never liked our kind, you know? They are happy enough to serve us by keeping our galleons in their vaults but that's just because they earn hefty profits from it, nothing more."

"Very true," said Felicity in small, sad voice. "If we had treated them better in the past, we wouldn't be having these problems now. They would probably be our allies instead of standing by the sidelines gleefully waiting for our downfall."

Felix loudly scoffed, before he griped acerbically, "Even if we had been all lovey-dovey with them, Goblins would have never helped us, Lissy. They care about nothing but their treasures."

"Maybe," retorted Felicity, her voice firm and strong as she shook her head. "Still, I think it's utterly folly that McLaggen is once more disregarding Dumbledore's suggestions. If Dumbledore thinks wards are important then the Minister should be focusing on that!"

"Dumbledore is not a Seer, sister," pointed out Felix, looking exasperated and annoyed beyond measure, clearly having had that very same discussion with his twin many times before. "He doesn't have to be right about every little thing! Even if you think that the sun sets at his say-so and that he farts rainbows!"

"I beg your pardon!"

As the twins unsurprisingly engaged in a round of heated bickering, Harry was left bemusedly pondering about the whole matter, a frisson of apprehension ominously coiling in his stomach. It didn't help matters that he had one more thing left to do before the End of Year Feast in the Great Hall.

Indeed, an hour and a half later he was standing in the middle of an empty classroom in the dungeons, uneasily shifting from one foot to the other as Tom used a ladle to pour a potion into a flask - the very same potion his brother had been brewing and letting stew for the last six months, keeping his end of the bargain in exchange for Harry learning German in three years.

Alphard was there, as a friend and to lent moral support, Harry surmised, and Dorea too, since the girl had sternly ordered him to fetch her when he would be taking the eyesight-correcting potion.

"It seems to be of the proper color and consistency," declared Dorea approvingly as she took the flask from Tom's hand and brought it up to her face to inspect it closely.

"Of course it is," drawled Tom arrogantly, shooting her a scathing look, "I was the one who brewed it.

Harry, for his part, was eyeing the cauldron from where the potion had come from with apprehension and revulsion. There was still some left there, and it was bubbling and churning, looking like vomit and giving off an awful stench.

"Here you go, Riddle," said Dorea, holding up the flask to Harry. "Bottoms up!"

Harry grudgingly took it, his nose scrunching in disgust as he caught a horrible whiff coming from the vial. He glanced at the girl as he said in a small, piteous voice, "Do I have to drink it all?"

"Yes, you do," replied Dorea curtly, casting him an impatient look.
"Are you sure about this?" suddenly whispered Alphard to him, standing close so that they couldn't be overheard by the other two. He eyed Harry anxiously as he added in a hasty murmur, "You know that the potion's rate of success isn't that good-"

"Hush!" whispered Harry in alarm, covertly glancing at Tom and Dorea who were several feet away. "Tom doesn't know about that – it wasn't in the book." He then shot his friend a pointed look. "And you know that if I don't take it Dorea won't let me try for the Team next year."

Alphard's shoulders slumped at that and the boy remained quiet, merely giving him a brief nod of the head.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" snapped Dorea, scowling at Harry, with hands on her waist as she tapped a foot on the floor.

Harry released a heavy sigh before he pinched his nose with one hand, tilted the tip of the vial into his mouth with the other, and scrunched his eyes shut. The potion tasted as horribly as it looked and smelled, slimy clumps of who-knew-what thickly rolling down his throat as he gulped.

Abruptly, his grasp went limp, making the flask fall and smash against the stone floors, loudly breaking into shards of glass, as he was suddenly encompassed by burning waves that lashed throughout his body. Everything seemed to sizzle and spasm in unbearable scorching pain.

He heard Alphard crying out in dismay, sounding as if it came from a faraway distance, and he found himself bending in half, heaving and choking, his hands attempting to grip his throat and face which seemed to be throbbing and pulsing.

"Don't rub your eyes!" Dorea's voice yelled, as Harry felt delicate hands clutching his wrists, preventing any further movement. "Touching your eyes now is what could make you blind, boy!"

Harry hadn't even realized that he had been attempting to scratch his eyes out – his eyeballs felt as if they were blistering and melting, everything felt so hot.

"What?" Tom's voice snapped furiously. "'Obscure Brews to Correct the Senses' didn't say anything about the drinker going blind!"

"Of course it didn't, Riddle," said Dorea with vexation, her hands releasing Harry's wrists, the girl apparently turning around to deal with his brother. "That book was written for Potions Masters. The author assumed the reader would implicitly know about the risks inherent in every brew-"

"If I have to take care of a blind brother for life I'll make you rue the day you were born, Black! I'll make you suffer worlds of pain-"

"I would like to see you try, Riddle!" said Dorea's voice sneeringly.

"Shut up you two, you're not helping matters!" abruptly roared Alphard at the top of his lungs, sounding both angered and frantic, as he grasped Harry's shoulders and gave him soothing pats. "Hang on there, it will be over soon. Right, aunt? Right?"

"Get out of the way!" bit out Tom's voice and, suddenly, a pair of hands were tilting up Harry's face, carefully and gently, as Tom's voice lowered as he added in a quiet murmur, "Keep your eyes closed and don't touch your face. Everything will be fine, I promise, brother."

"It hurts," whispered Harry in a small voice, making considerable efforts to obey the instructions, his hands twitching at his sides with the need to bring them up and rub away the incessant stabbing prickers that were painfully piercing his closed eyes.
"I'm sure it does," said Tom, sounding angered and annoyed but also clearly staving off his temper to remain calm for his sake, before his voice became as hard as stones as he added darkly, "Don't worry, if you go blind I'll make her pay. And I'll also find a way to cure you, you have my word."

Vastly comforted by that, since he knew that once his brother made up his mind he was capable of attaining anything, Harry did his best to remain still and collected instead of allowing himself to be gripped by frenzied worry.

"When will he know if it has worked?" demanded Tom's voice harshly.

"As soon as it stops hurting," replied Dorea stiffly. "When that happens, he can open his eyes again. Then, we'll know."

"You better pray to whatever you believe in that it works, Black," spat out Tom's voice, the tone very low and menacing. "If I'm saddled with a disabled twin-"

As Tom kept venting his spleen and the two of them traded threats, sneers and scathing remarks, Harry suddenly felt it happening: just as abruptly as the pain had come, it left as swiftly.

When he slowly and very carefully opened his eyes, he was encountered with the sight of Alphard's face. While Tom and Dorea were still railing at each other, his friend was standing right in front of him, his concerned expression brightening and turning vastly relieved when their gazes locked together.

"Your eyes are green," whispered Alphard, letting out a long, deep exhalation of breath. "They aren't milky – they don't look blind. How is your sight?"

Harry blinked and then stared at the boy's face. It was filled with details he had never seen before: some tiny freckles on the bridge of the boy's nose, small lines around the corners of the lips as they quirked upwards into a wide grin, flecks of blue in Alphard's grey eyes and so forth.

Marveled by a clarity he had never experienced before, Harry glanced at his surroundings, feeling awe and a powerful surge of happiness.

"It worked!" he breathed out cheerfully. "I'm fine – I'm more than fine! It's fantastic!"

That alerted the other two and Tom and Dorea were soon crowding around him.

"See! I knew it would go well!" said Dorea dismissively, clearly downplaying the whole affair to then shoot Tom a reproving glare for his attitude.

Tom, for his part, was eyeing Harry closely with dark blue eyes narrowed to slits, apparently inspecting every inch of him.

"We were lucky," he stated in the next instant, murderously scowling at the girl before he turned to widely smirk at Harry, bringing a hand forward. "Well, at least I won't have to see you wearing your stupid, ugly glasses ever again. Give them to me."

At that, Harry plucked them out from the pocket he had stowed them away into for safekeeping, quickly taking a step back when his brother made a move to swipe them out of his hands, clearly with every intention of breaking them in half.

"I'm keeping them," said Harry hastily as he held them up to Dorea. "Can you, er… make the lenses be normal? I mean, you know, with no-"
"Oh, you want them to have no augmentation?" said Dorea, gazing at him quizzically before her expression cleared and turned triumphant. "Why, excellent idea, Riddle! You want to keep wearing them so that when you play Quidditch without your glasses the Gryffindor Team will think you're playing with bad eyesight. The misconception will give us a further advantage!"

As the girl quickly cast a spell on the eyeglasses, Harry stared at her with bemusement. He hadn't even thought about that. No, his reasons were other: firstly, he couldn't go back to the orphanage without his glasses, he had no way of explaining why he didn't need them anymore; secondly, he was used to and liked to feel the weight of them on his face; and foremost, they had been Alice's present to him, he would always treasure them due to that.

It was thus that he finally found himself in the Great Hall, at the End of Year Feast, wearing his modified glasses though now with a superb, sharp and unencumbered sight, with Tom seated by his side, not looking too content that Harry was still using his 'ludicrous, hideous, round glasses' that according to Tom made Harry look more stupid than he already was.

Even having the Great Hall all donned in Slytherin colors and banners didn't seem to have uplifted Tom's mood.

It hadn't been that much of a surprise when Headmaster Dippet had made his speech, making the final count of House points. The Gryffindors might have won the Quidditch Cup, but as expected, given the jeweled hourglasses hanging outside the Great Hall, Slytherin won the House Cup. And it was all due to Tom, every Slytherin knew that.

When the Headmaster announced it and changed the decoration of the Great Hall, even some of their housemates had nodded at Tom or shot him brief, curt approving glances.

Tom had loftily and arrogantly nodded back, since those points of advantage over the Ravenclaws were due to all the questions the boy answered with utter perfection during class or due to all the essays he had sold to Slytherins and the tutoring lessons he imparted at a price. Yet, after that, Tom had gone back to darkly scowl down at his bowl of soup.

Harry didn't think it was so much due to the eyeglasses-affair but to the fact that they would soon be back in the orphanage. His brother had certainly tried to slither out from having to return, but Harry had given him no quarter.

"I showed you the letter I received from Hutchins two weeks ago," Harry had said sternly. "His friends and Old John Bryce's have already given him a list of names – of all the Gaunts they've heard about who are living in Lancashire or Yorkshire. Hutchins says he has a whole list of names and addresses. We have to go back!"

Furthermore, Robert Hutchins had even made preparations for them. The man had insisted that the North was no place for two young boys to be traipsing about with no adult as guide and guardian.

According to the muggle, northern England was nothing like London: it was a land of 'mining towns, and mills and factories, with widespread poverty, and constant Union strikes that turn violent and dangerous since the police always break them up with the use of their batons, and even gunshots are fired when workers retaliate by throwing stones and wrecking factories or burning machinery. No, you boys cannot go without me.'

Apparently, the plan was that they would take a train to Liverpool, where a friend of Hutchins would be waiting for them. The man had generously offered his home for the three of them to stay and use as a base, allowing Hutchins the use of his motorwagon, so they could travel across the counties, towns and cities, paying visits to all those Gaunts, during a whole week.
Harry didn't know what excuse Hutchins had given Alice to explain why they would be gone from the orphanage for so long and with him, but in his letter, the man had assured him that everything was settled.

"Besides, you cannot stay," Harry had added to end the discussion. "No students are allowed to remain at Hogwarts during Summer Holidays."

"I heard that a Gryffindor did, last year," pointed out Tom, fiercely scowling at him.

"Oh, that was Minerva McGonagall," said Harry, flapping a hand dismissively. "The Prewett twins told me that was only because her mum was sick and Minerva's dad didn't want her to catch it. It seems it was some illness that is dangerous for children. So Headmaster Dippet let her stay because he's friends with Minerva's dad." He rolled his eyes. "It was a one-time thing."

"I see. It was a personal favor, then. It's all about connections and favoritisms and nepotism as always," grumbled Tom darkly, for the first time looking angered and annoyed at the very same things that he had always hailed and considered positive, useful human traits – 'corruption is what oils the world's cogs and makes it work to perfection', as his brother had once put it.

Harry had the inkling that what bothered Tom wasn't the fact that McGonagall had been allowed to stay at school once, but rather that Tom wasn't yet in a position in which he had those 'useful connections' he could take advantage of.

"I'm going back to the orphanage," Harry had finally stated curtly. "If you want to try and convince Dippet to let you stay, then do it. I'm still going."

Tom had grunted at that, remaining silent, but when Harry had been packing all his things, his brother had followed suit.

Since then, Tom had been in a very tempestuous, dark mood and Harry, no fool, had been tiptoeing around him.

"What does he see in her? He could have any witch, and he fancies her?"

At those violently and viciously spat out words, Harry gazed up from his plate of delicious food to glance at the Slytherin girls that were shooting glares towards the Staff Table.

During the Feast, all his housemates had been behaving themselves very smugly and proudly after they had won the House Cup, but apparently he had missed some new trail in the conversation.

"She's pretty," said Thaddeus Avery gruffly, a half-chewed potato dropping from his flapping mouth along with a thread of saliva.

"That's revolting - swallow before you speak, you disgusting idiot!" snapped Capricia Carrow, glowering at the boy.

"Pretty or not," interjected Priscilla Pucey, her eyes narrowed to slits, "she's still a halfblood!" She then swiftly turned to the boy at her side, as she demanded sharply, "You wouldn't give someone like her the time of day, would you?"

"Certainly not," drawled Abraxas Malfoy impassively, as he kept cutting his food into tiny bits, in such a poised, elegant and delicate manner, as if he was in display in some type of showcase, that Harry nearly snorted into his pumpkin juice.

Harry only realized what they were griping about when he caught sight of Professor Tilly Toke at
the Staff Table, seated right next to Miss Nightingale. The two of them were very close together, whispering among themselves, Tilly Toke gorgeously smiling while the Mediwitch blushed and fretted with her hair or laughed and giggled at some joke or funny thing the wizard must have said.

Utterly surprised, Harry stared at the pair, blinking.

"Well, they have been at it for the last couple of weeks," remarked Druella Rosier, her beautiful fair features becoming marred with contempt. "He is clearly courting her in all seriousness."

"He could do much better," groused out Priscilla Pucey, viciously stabbing her food with a fork.

'Last couple of weeks?' Harry wondered to himself, though, admittedly, he wasn't one who took notice of such things, so he could have missed it altogether.

Nevertheless, the news left him in very high-spirits. Lately it seemed that all his favorite people were getting together: first Robert Hutchins with Alice, then Dorea Black making up with Charlus Potter, and now his two favorite adults in Hogwarts - his Charms Professor and Hogwarts' Mediwitch who was always so nice to him.

He was in such a cheerful mood that he even grinned and waved at the couple seated on the High Table when he left the Great Hall. His good spirits didn't last for long, though. Midway towards their dorms, they were halted by an older Slytherin carrying a note for them from Horace Slughorn.

When he and Tom went to Professor Slughorn's office to receive their pouches of galleons with which to buy their school supplies for next year, as the wizard's brief letter had instructed, they were greeted by surprising news that took him aback.

"What?" said Harry, thinking he couldn't have heard correctly.

"Professor Dumbledore has expressed a wish to talk to you," repeated their Head of House, his walrus-like, thick mustache twitching. The wizard leaned his hefty belly over his desk, as he pierced Harry with a curious gaze. "He wants to have a word in private with you, and suggested that he could kill two pixies with one stone and just give you the galleons for you boys himself, when you go see him."

Horace Slughorn paused and glanced from Harry to Tom and back, as if expecting them to clarify Dumbledore's puzzling motives.

When they remained frozen and speechless, the wizard let out a disappointed sigh and waved a hand dismissively. "I had no reason to refuse his request, m'boys. So you should best go to his office, Harry."

"I'm afraid, sir," abruptly intoned Tom, very politely and looking downcast, "that will not be possible. The Hogwarts Express will be parting in thirty minutes and my brother-" he shot Harry a harsh, chiding glance "-still hasn't finished packing." He turned to beam a charming, pearly-white smile at Slughorn. "But I, on the other hand, am all done, sir. I'll go see Professor Dumbledore myself."

Slughorn frowned at him uncertainly. "I must say that Dumbledore expressly said that it should be Harry-"

"He has packing to do," interrupted Tom, sounding deeply apologetic. "You wouldn't want us to miss the train, would you, Professor?"

Harry glanced from one to the other, and began hesitantly, "Maybe I should go."
"Oh yes, time is ticking, you're quite right!" said Tom looking flustered and anxious, and with that, he grabbed Harry's hand and swiftly pulled him out of the office, with one last parting, "We'll see you next year, sir!"

The moment they were in the corridor, Tom dropped Harry's hand, and spat furiously, "How dare him!"

Harry glanced at him uneasily, before he released a weary sigh. His anger towards Dumbledore after the Czechoslovakia debacle had faded away with the months, and though the wizard's attempts to talk to him after class or when they crossed paths in corridors had annoyed him, he was well aware that he couldn't keep ignoring the man's existence forever.

"I will have to speak to him eventually, Tom," he said tiredly. "I might as well get it over with now."

"I think not," snapped Tom, glowering at him as they made their way to their common room. "Never forget how he has let you down. Remember all the deaths he didn't prevent. You already know that he cannot be depended upon or trusted!" His eyes narrowed to slits as he added poisonously, "I never want you to be alone with him. I never want you to even speak to him if I'm not present."

Harry eyed him uncertainly. "But maybe he wants to explain-"

"What he's doing is keeping our money hostage," hissed out Tom, so enraged that Harry's scar started throbbing painfully. "Thinks he can outmaneuver me, does he? I'll show him! As if I am going to be outsmarted by the likes of him."

His brother didn't give him the chance to say another word, and was gone so fast that it seemed that Tom had apparated himself into Dumbledore's office to deal with the man, leaving Harry blinking as he stood in front of the wall that led to their common room.

Fifteen minutes later he was standing outside the front doors of the Castle, with his trunk and Ulysses in his basket, standing in the queue for the carriages that were taking the students to Hogsmeade's station.

Tom soon arrived, pulling his trunk and with cage in hand, with a wide, smug smirk on his face.

"What's happened to you?" said Harry dumbfounded, as he caught sight of the cuts and smalls wounds scattered on his brother's hands.

"Lord Horkos wasn't too happy when I went to fetch him," said Tom matter-of-factly, shooting his vicious owl a stern look, before he pointedly sneered at Harry. "Not that I can blame him. He certainly remembers what he's going back to and isn't too thrilled by it."

Harry rolled his eyes at that. Really, that bloody owl of his brother's had become too pampered during his stay at Hogwarts' Owlery. A stint in the orphanage would do him some good. The nasty bird didn't have it as bad as Nagini, after all. She had been stuck in the orphanage's shrubbery all the while, poor thing.

"What happened with Dumbledore?" he then asked when they were alone in a carriage.

Tom scoffed snidely. "The old dingbat acted as if nothing was the matter and he had been expecting me to show up all along." He shot him a supremely self-satisfied smirk, as he continued in a low, nastily relishing voice, "But I know he must have been crushed that he didn't get the chance to have you in his clutches."
It was clear that having pulled one over Dumbledore had drastically changed Tom's mood, because his brother spent the whole trip in the Hogwarts Express smirking at empty space.

Harry, for his part, soon forgot about Dumbledore and was pleasantly occupied with wonderful daydreams. Having seen Professor Tilly Toke all cozy with Miss Nightingale made him remember what most would most surely be awaiting him when he returned to London.

Hutchins had said nothing in his letter about Alice, but Harry reckoned that the man had probably proposed by now, and it meant that the muggle must have already bought the cottage in Southend-on-Sea.

He could clearly picture what was going to happen. As soon as they got to King's Cross station, Alice and Hutchins would be waiting for them, and they would be adopted and taken to live in Old John Bryce's town – they would end up as neighbors! And he liked the old man very much, and he would have a glorious summer, listening to the old muggle's tales about the Great War and swimming in the sea and making sand castles in the beach and going exploring with Tom.

And then they would take a week to go looking for Gaunts with Robert Hutchins, and they would find their father and he would be able to finally ask him all the questions he wanted answers for. And he would have a father, besides Alice and Robert as parents, and everything would be as it should, at long last.

It was going to be the best summer, ever!

"This is the worst summer of my life," grumbled Harry, utterly dispirited and depressed as he lay on his bed, lifelessly staring up at the ceiling.

"I told you we shouldn't have come back," bit out Tom acidly, his dark mood as bad as ever since they had arrived at London.

It had been months of pure torture, and Harry was counting the days for when they had to go back to Hogwarts. Only three days left, thankfully!

It had all gone down the drain when they had left Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters and entered the muggle area of King's Cross station. Harry had been utterly confused by the sights: people rushing by, with trunks or suitcases filled to the seams, glancing over their shoulders with fear and apprehension; soldiers marching by, who didn't look older than twenty, beardless and pimple-faced, looking scared as they gripped their rifles against their sides; children being pulled by their hands, crying and looking confused and panicked; and altogether such a rush of frantic activity as Harry had never seen before.

"What's going on?" said Harry completely baffled as he glanced around.

Tom frowned at a group of soldiers making their way to a train platform. "It looks as if the armies are mobilizing."

Harry snapped his head around to stare at him with wide eyes. "Mobilizing? But that would mean that we're at war-"

"We don't know what it means, yet," snapped Tom shortly, his frown turning into a scowl as he prompted Harry to move along the crowds. "Let's go. The muggles aren't here. Alice and Hutchins
must be waiting for us outside."

They soon saw that the street of the station wasn't any better: motorcars rushing to the curb, chauffeurs of wealthy people unloading uncountable suitcases, boxes, and crates; poor people in layers of ragged clothes, looking as if they were wearing everything they possessed, counting shillings and pounds in agitation, as they loudly wondered if the prices of train tickets had skyrocketed again.

"Everyone's leaving London," bit out Tom darkly, murderously glaring at Harry, "while we are arriving. Brilliant idea, little brother."

Harry didn't say anything to that, he was starting to feel really troubled and worried as he glanced at harried passersby without recognizing any single one of them. "Where are they?"

It was an hour later when they saw Magda puffing and huffing, panting as she suddenly appeared amongst the crowds, running towards them wearing the tattered grey dress and apron she used in the orphanage.

"Get your things, quick!" said the caregiver without wasting any time in welcomes.

"What on earth is going on?" snapped Harry crossly, stomping a foot on the pavement out of sheer exasperation and anxiousness.

"Don't you know?" Magda shot them an incredulous look. "Doesn't that posh boarding school of yours keep you up-to-date with the news?"

"No!" gritted out Harry impatiently.

Magda huffed. "Well, I haven't got the time to explain now! We must catch the last bus of the Emergency Line or we'll have to wait three hours for the next one!"

And with that, she turned heel and rushed down the street, forcing Tom and Harry to scramble after her whilst carrying their trunks and cage and basket of their respective pets.

"It's been months of utter madness here in London, let me tell you," said Magda once they were inside a double-decker bus, squashed amidst all the other bus-goers like sardines in a can. "Don't you know that the Prime Minister announced that if Germany invades Poland we're goin' to declare war?"

Harry shot his brother an infuriated look at that, highly suspicious that Tom had kept him out of the loop. The last of Alice's newspapers clippings that Tom had shared with him had said that Britain had pledged support to Poland, but not that they were threatening Germany with open war between them.

"Did you know about this? Did Alice tell you in her letters-"

"No," bit out Tom, a seething expression crossing his face.

"Well, maybe she doesn't want to worry you, does she?" pointed out Magda as she caught sight of Harry's scowl. "But that news has everyone in a fix! Folks leaving the city, left, right and center, to go the country – those who are lucky, mind you. Folks who have relatives outside London or own summer houses, that is!" She huffed as if the injustice of it all was too much to bear. "People like me don't got anywhere to go, do we?"

"What's that?" said Harry, flabbergasted at the sight of sacks lined up like walls around some street
corners that he saw through the bus' windows.

"Have you been livin' under a rock, boy?" Magda cast him a disparaging look. "What do you think they're? Air raid shelters, of course! They're all over London – everything's been turned into one, the basements of factories, schools, hospitals, department stores, and even tube stations and underground tunnels. The sacks of sand mark where folk can find a shelter in case of emergency. There're sirens all over the place too!"

Harry stared at her, deeply frowning as he prompted, "Emergency…from what?"

"The Luftwaffe," she whispered anxiously in response, as if saying the name too loudly had the power to summon the dreaded German Air Force to appear above their heads. The girl even shot a fearful, apprehensive look to the skies through the bus' window they were crammed against.

Harry shared with Tom a glance that spoke volumes, before he turned to the caregiver once more, as he muttered under his breath, "Right. So things are bad here, are they?"

"Yay, but we are lucky, we are, at the orphanage," whispered Magda secretively, glancing around as if anxious that she could be overheard by the other bus-goers, "because the house is old and got a wide cellar, you know? Not our neighbors, though. We had to turn them away, we had, when they wanted to use our basement. But we can't all fit in there, can we!"

Harry quickly nodded in agreement, before he paused and cast her an alarmed look. "Hang on. Why did you come to get us and not Alice and Hutchins?"

"Oh, that," said Magda, letting out a nervous little cough as she jerkily waved a hand dismissively. "Nothing terribly bad, don't fret. But you'll soon know when we're back home."

That didn't reassure Harry one bit, on the contrary, he was left so filled with misgivings that he questioned Magda incessantly, but the girl wouldn't budge and refused to explain until they were back in the orphanage.

When they finally entered the house, it was so changed that it looked completely foreign to him. Gone were all the colorful decorations and toys lying all around the place like in Christmas Holidays. Now it was grey, dark, and grim, as if the house had been stripped to its bare essentials, feeling gloomy, desolate, and oppressive.

"Where's everyone?" said Harry in puzzlement, having expected to see all the children running around and his friends waiting for him, as usual.

"In their rooms," stated Madga curtly as she helped them haul their trunks towards the stairway, "because."

"I still don't understand why he did it, Kathy! How could he!"

The distraught, sobbed shout resounded throughout the whole house, and Harry halted, mid-motion of putting a foot on the first step of the staircase, when he recognized the voice.

He was halfway down the corridor that led to the kitchen -since through its parted door he could see Kathy Cole and Alice Jones inside, seated around the table with cups of tea in hand, Alice with her head bowed down, letting out disconsolate sobs and cries- when Magda stopped him.

"Don't go there," whispered the caregiver sharply, shaking her head at him as she pulled him away. "Alice needs some time alone."
"Be proud of him, girl!" came Kathy Cole's stern voice. "He's doing his duty, he wants to fight for our country and our liberty, lass!"

"He has two fingers missing!" cried out Alice wretchedly. "The army doctor should have turned him away not given him the all-clear!"

"He can still hold a gun, can't he? Two missing fingers from a left hand is nothing!"

To Harry, it seemed as if his world had violently tipped over, his face lost all color and his stomach began to roll sickly as he grasped Magda's apron and demanded desperately, "Where's Hutchins?"

"He enrolled in the army, two days ago," murmured Magda, a pained expression etched on her face. "As a volunteer."

Harry frantically shook his head, as he choked out hoarsely, "No. He couldn't have. He promised he would…"

He clamped his mouth shut, dropping his gaze to the floor, staring at the wood boards in silence, feeling as if he was sinking into the dark, suffocating depths of moving quicksands.

"He took me to a side before he left," whispered Magda, as she took out something from her apron's pocket. "Asked me to give you this and tell no one about it."

Snapping his head up, Harry swiftly yanked the envelope from her hands, instantly tearing it open, with his heart loudly thumping in his chest and his breathing hitching in his throat as he unfolded the piece of paper inside. It was the list Hutchins had mentioned: the names of Gaunts, with their complete addresses in some cases or just the name of the towns they lived in, in others.

At the very end, there were a couple of sentences that looked as if they had been scribbled down in a rush:

_I know how much you want to find your relatives, but I ask you to wait. Do not go up North without me. I wouldn't forgive myself if something happened to you up there. Wait for me. I'll be back._

"What does he say?" asked Magda, brimming with curiosity.

"It's none of your damn business!" yelled Harry at her, suddenly feeling so angry and scared and fearful that he wanted nothing more than to lash at the stupid woman for butting her gossipy nose into his affairs, his hand curling into a fist and crushing the paper within it.

"Well, I've never!" huffed out Magda, puffing like an affronted pigeon before she briskly flounced away.

At Tom's unsympathetic and impatient prodding, Harry moved mechanically as they took the stairs and dragged their things into their bedroom.

He felt utterly numb, even after he let Ulysses out of his basket and sat on his bed with the little Scorcrup on his lap licking and gently nibbling on his fingers to get a reaction out of him.

"What did you expect!" suddenly snapped Tom crisply as he stood before him, looking thoroughly vexed with Harry's behavior. "I told you he would end up fighting, didn't I? Stupid, pathetic muggle that he is, with his ridiculous and sentimental sense of honor. I told you he would end up dead."

"HUTCHINS ISN'T GOING TO DIE!" bellowed Harry at the top of his lungs, frenziedly and so
enraged at his brother that he shot to his feet, making Ulysses fly through the air, as he leapt at Tom and smashed a fist into his face with all the strength that his anger and fear lent him.

In the blink of an eye, Tom's wand was painfully poking his throat, his brother's expression thunderous and so murderous with rage that Harry's head felt as if it was about to split open due to the piercing pain coming from his scar.

"You hit me," hissed out Tom, seething, furious, and half shocked and disbelieving, bringing up his left hand to touch the dark bruise already forming around his eye.

His brother's wand stabbed into his throat even deeper, and Harry trembled with the need to pound Tom into a pulp and throttle him and make him hurt until he swallowed his words and reassured him that he was mistaken and that Hutchins would be alright and would come back to be their dad and love them as he had promised.

"Go on," Harry whispered harshly, locking gazes with Tom, as he grinned nastily at him and prodded him further. "I know you want to hurt me back. Use one of the dark curses from Grindelwald's books that you enjoy casting so much. Come on, do it!" He shot him an ugly sneer as he added scathingly, "Or are you too much of a chicken?"

Tom gritted his teeth, letting out a low hiss through them. "Count your lucky stars that I can't do magic here, little brother." His dark blue eyes narrowed to enraged slits, as he spat, "This once, I'll forgive you."

Harry let out a hollow, mocking laugh at that, as he bit out contemptuously, "You're only 'forgiving me' because you're a coward. Because of our Traces."

He shot Tom a disgusted look as he turned away, extremely disappointed that his brother wouldn't be helping him vent his frustration and fear, with so much bundled, frantic energy and swirling, frenzied emotions that he didn't know what to do with himself.

Tom didn't speak to him from then onwards, though he did darkly glare at Harry and venomously sneer at him constantly, and Harry nastily snickered every time he caught sight of Tom's black eye and reveled in the satisfaction that he had at least caused that.

Nevertheless, Harry's dejection was profound after he had stuck Hutchins' letter in the hole they had under the loose floorboard of their bedroom. He couldn't even muster any interest in looking for Gaunts, even if he had the list.

He knew what it all meant.

According to what Magda had said, muggles fully expected that Poland would be next, and Harry knew that Grindelwald would not stop until he had at least conquered the whole of Europe, and Dumbledore had already proven he wasn't up to task of preventing it.

As weeks passed, he had no idea where Hutchins was, but he knew how the muggle was going to end up. Old John Bryce's tales about the Great War, that had always sounded so exciting, adventurous and courageous to him, turned into nightmares, where he saw Hutchins lying in rat-infested trenches, starved, filled with lice and ill with fever and disease as he drunk from muddy water, coiled and trapped in barb wire as his body shook every time it was pierced by artillery bullets, desperately scrambling on hands and knees as he choked and suffocated in a field infused with mustard gas, being brutally tortured as a prisoner of war, or with his head split open from a bullet and whatnot.
It became so severe that Harry felt he wasn't sleeping a wink and dark circles appeared under his eyes, and one night, during his nightmares, his frantic screams had even woken Tom up.

"I've had enough!" spat Tom, finally speaking to him for the first time as he harshly shook Harry awake. The boy looked as exhausted as Harry felt, as if Harry's nightmares hadn't been letting him sleep either, looking thoroughly ruffled and disheveled.

Tom finally glowered at him as he slipped into Harry's bed and grudgingly threw an arm over Harry's shoulders, pulling him close, as he bit out impatiently, "Fine. Hutchins isn't going to die, alright?"

"Alright," murmured Harry softly as he groggily stared at him, half taken aback by his brother's unusual display of consideration and kindness and half relieved to feel Tom by his side. He sunk into his brother's arms, cuddling up under the sheets, and had his first night of true rest since returning to the orphanage.

However, the optimist attitude that Tom faked for his sake was offset by everyone else's behavior. Harry had soon realized that everyone had gone a tad bonkers.

Billy Stubbs went around the house clutching a pillow, which he gripped frenetically over his head every time he heard a loud noise coming from outside.

"That was a motorcar in the street, again," pointed out Harry tiredly. "Why do you go around with that, anyway?"

Still crouching on the floor, with pillow over his head and eyes wide with fear, Billy gasped out, "To protect me from a bomb! What if the walls fall down on us, huh?"

Harry shared a glance with Eric Whalley at that, both of them shaking their heads and muttering under their breaths. Out of everyone in the orphanage, only Eric had remained sane, in Harry's view.

Amy Benson had once yelled at Eric and him, accusing them of being 'immature boys' and of not taking matters seriously, and from them on had stuck with her girl friends. They all went around the orphanage moving in packs and clutching each other, looking terrified and frequently sobbing on each other's shoulders.

The caregivers weren't any better.

"What do you mean that we cannot play outside?" demanded Harry utterly scandalized. "It's summer! It's hot! We cannot be cooped up in here all the time!"

"Oh yes," snapped Karen at him, "just go outside and play in the backyard so that the Germans see you from their airplanes – they'll be very happy to drop a bomb on you, I'm sure!"

"They cannot see us from up there!" retorted Eric Whalley, Harry's sole brother-in-arms in fighting for their playtime rights.

"Do you want to take the chance?" bit out Karen snarkily at them – she, who had always been the most soft-spoken and gentlest soul from the lot of caregivers, as much as Alice had once been. "Be my guest, then!"

"They've lost their marbles, they have," whispered Eric at him when the girl had left, looking thoroughly shocked. His eyes went wide when suddenly catching sight of someone over Harry's shoulder, and he added in alarm, "Alice! Let's scram!"
And they swiftly did, in a panic and scared out of their wits.

It was Alice who, from the start, had laid down the new rules in the house. They were forbidden from going out to the street, their usual trips to commercial London had been cancelled for the foreseeable future, every time one of the children dared to raise their voice too loudly, she would ill-temperedly snap at them to be quieter, and she didn't want to hear any complains about the food served or the scarcity of it.

Furthermore, Alice stuck around the radio like someone possessed, her eyes always bloodshot and puffy as if she was constantly sobbing in the solitude of her bedroom, with a case of dark circles and bad hair worse than Harry's. There was a new radio station that had begun broadcasting, giving news, suggestions and advice, and Alice was assiduously loyal to it and followed it to a T.

For starters, Blackout had been enforced in London, which meant that as soon as the sun set all lights had to be turned off, and in the orphanage they were all left in utter darkness and had to frantically grip the banisters at night to be able to reach their rooms, because candles –the only thing that could be used since their light couldn't be seen by airplanes in the sky– had become expensive and couldn't be afforded.

Then, for buying food, Karen and Magda went out, always together and rushing to get it over with in the briefest amount of time possible. Following the radio station's suggestion, the orphanage was stocking up as much as it could, mostly buying non-perishables like cans of food and sacks of potatoes and beans, all of which were strictly rationed since it seemed that everyone was doing the same and prices had skyrocketed.

Harry's tummy was constantly grumbling and even when he was awake he dreamed about tasting again Hogwarts' food and partaking of its sumptuous feasts.

Though he certainly didn't dare complain to Alice about it, not after the day he had seen her shrieking hysterically at the radio after the news it had delivered.

"The IRA just had to plant a bomb now! Twenty-five dead in Coventry? As if we didn't have enough on our plates with the Germans! Now the Irish too! The Irish!"

She had looked so sleep-deprived and demented that Harry had only mustered up the courage to ask her for news about Hutchins one day. In retrospection, he didn't know where he got the bravery and gumption from.

"Of course I've been writing to him!" snapped Alice at him, scowling as if Harry had just cast aspersions on her honor and pre-wifely duties. "The army is forwarding my letters to him – wherever he is, because he can't say where he is, can he? That's what he wrote to me last time." She let out a crazed bark of laughter, as she mimicked viciously, "I'm well, my love, do not concern yourself over me. I'll soon be back with you!" She cast Harry a dark, seething look, as she bit out angrily, her arms frantically flailing around, "As if that is supposed to comfort me! It doesn't comfort you, does it, Harry? So of course it doesn't comfort me – why should it? He should have never enlisted – he's a middle-aged man, he's in his thirties, practically ancient! Don't you agree? Don't you? Don't you?"

Harry instantly nodded, utterly scared of her, and didn't think twice before he turned tail and fled from her. After that, he gave Alice a wide berth.

Regardless, the worst thing of all had been the air raid sirens all around London. They had gone off, blaring and unbearably screeching, twice – which proved to be the most miserable nights of Harry's life.
The first time, they had all been climbing up the stairs to reach their bedrooms for a night of sleep when suddenly the sirens' wails had pierced the silence.

"THE GERMANS! The Germans are coming!" screamed Karen at the top of her lungs, standing petrified in the middle of the stairway, blocking everyone's path.

"Get a hold on yourself, lass!" said the Matron, Kathy Cole, dealing her such a forceful slap on the face that the young caregiver's head had snapped around to a side, but at least it had done the trick and Karen had been yanked out from her paralyzing fear and had jumped into action.

All the children had been hastily pulled into the basement as the sirens from the city kept blaring, and it hadn't been at all comfortable. Magda might have boasted that they at least had a cellar of their own, but it wasn't large by any stretch of the imagination.

There were some pillows and bed sheets that were distributed around, but all the cans and sacks of food were stored down there, barely leaving enough space for all of them to sit on the floor, squashed together. Harry had even ended up ensconced on Tom's lap since there wasn't an inch of space to spare.

Furthermore, between the cries and sobs of the girls, and everyone jumping at every little noise that came from the outside, fearing a bomb to drop on the house any given moment, nobody had been able to sleep a wink.

The dire circumstances, though, seemed to have resuscitated Alice's nice old way of being. She had been the one who gave soft, comforting words, and hugged crying girls and gently and motherly caressed their hair, and began to retell the fairytales of old to give all of them a sense of normalcy and peacefulness. It didn't work very well, everyone was too scared, but at least she gave it all her effort.

By morning, with all of them groaning with hunger and thirst –since Kathy Cole had refused to open the stores of food, "What if we have to stay down here for weeks? Food must be rationed!"- and sheer exhaustion, it had been Alice who had bravely climbed up to the main floor to check if all was right.

She had come down a few minutes afterwards, beaming. "It was a false alarm – the radio said!"

It didn't mean that hysterics hadn't once more erupted the second time it had happened. By the end of it, Harry was counting the seconds for when they would finally have to return to Hogwarts. As much as he loved his friends in the orphanage, he wasn't about to stay out of solidarity. The orphanage, and London as a whole, had become a very grim place.

The only flip side was that he had been able to quickly convince Nagini to forgive them and return to the house, the day he had finally slipped into the backyard, careful that no caregiver saw him or he would have to suffer such yells that would render him deaf, as had already happened every time he made bids for more liberty.

He had done his best to explain the danger she was in if, in her anger towards them, she remained living under the bushes. But the snake had only stared at him blankly as he told her about bombs, airplanes, and the Germans.

"Look," he had finally hissed impatiently, "if you want to be blown into smithereens then stay here with your hissy fit, but if you value your hide, you'll come inside with me!"

He wasn't actually certain that inside the house was safer than out, in case of dropping bombs, but
he couldn't offer anything better. At least, though, they could protect her if something happened, if she was with them.

Nagini had swiftly relented as soon as Harry made a move to go into the house without her, and once in their bedroom Harry had been quick to pass her to Tom. Leaving his brother to soothe, pamper and praise her until her wounded feelings had been mollified, which took most of the summer, to Tom's ill humor and Harry's vindictive snickers.

Finally, it was three days before they had to return to Hogwarts and Harry could no longer postpone the inevitable.

"Go on," he once again insisted to Tom in a wheedling, cajoling tone of voice, "go tell Alice that we have to get out to buy stuff for school."

"You're such a pathetic little crybaby," sneered Tom contemptuously, "scared of an itty, bitty, lowly muggle chit."

"She's turned vicious when she's not all nice because the stupid sirens are blaring!" snapped Harry defensively, bristling with wounded pride.

Tom scoffed at that, shooting him a superior look before he coolly sauntered out of their bedroom.

Harry counted the seconds before he jumped to his feet and tiptoed outside, leaning over the banister of the staircase to peer down at Alice and Tom engaged in a full-blown battle of wills.

Alice was scowling, with a harsh expression on her face and hands on her hips. "What do you mean that you have to go out? Absolutely not! It's madness in the streets – it's no place for two little boys!"

"We're not little boys anymore, woman!" snapped Tom, looking darkly indignant. "We're twelve years old, and if we want to leave we don't require your permission."

"You do need my permission because you don't have the keys for the front door, do you?" remarked Alice waspishly. She then paused, looking puzzled and concerned, abruptly like her old usual self, as she inquired softly, "Are you sure that your boarding school is still operating? Most schools have shut down."

"Our school hasn't," interjected Tom with an impatient sneer. "It's in Scotland, if you'll remember."

Alice shook her head, looking both sad and apprehensive as she said quietly, "Scotland is in the same situation as we are, from what I've heard in the radio."

"Be that as it may, our school is still remaining open," insisted Tom acidly, clearly about to lose his patience with her.

Though Harry knew he wasn't lying. They had wondered about it, but just the other day they had received their Hogwarts letters, with the list of books and other supplies they would need for second year.

"Well, if you're certain," murmured Alice hesitantly.

"I am," bit out Tom, before he swiveled around and left her in the dust without another word.

When he climbed up the stairs, he pulled Harry inside their room as he hissed out hastily, "Let's be quick, before the stupid muggle changes her mind and insists that we need her company."
And they did, though Harry would end up wishing they had gone to Diagon Alley some other day, because the experience certainly scarred and changed him; Tom would say for the better, but Harry was never sure about that.

It would seem to him that his childhood harshly ended that day, never to be gained back.
Part I: Chapter 33

It took them five hours to get to the meatpacking district where the Leaky Cauldron was located in, when before it had only taken them two. It was clear that the whole business of London only having 'Emergency Line' buses in operation was a drag.

The pub, unlike the first time they had seen it, wasn't filled with all sorts of wizards and witches having lunch or cheerfully partaking of drinks. It was nearly empty instead.

The young bartender, Tom, even glanced up at them hopefully, only to look downcast when they kept going until they reached the side alley that led to Diagon.

Harry wasn't that surprised by what he encountered in the commercial wizarding street: there were some people here and there, hastily dragging their children along as they shopped as fast as they could, shooting nervous, apprehensive glances over their shoulders as if expecting Grindelwald to suddenly pop in with his full force of Germans, Hungarians, and new type of Inferi, like he had done in Czechoslovakia.

The mood was certainly a tense, fearful one; not even the colorful window displays and moving, eye-catching store signs managed to put harried shoppers at their ease or entice them.

Furthermore, business must have been very dire as of late because in all the stores they went into, the attendants looked vastly relieved and grateful to have two clients at least.

They bought new clothes for themselves, since Tom had grown in height several inches, and Harry was proud to see that he had grown a bit himself - not as much as his brother, to his misery, but still, something was something.

When only their textbooks were left to buy, Harry halted Tom in the middle of Diagon Alley.

"Go buy our books, I have something else to do," he said hastily, shifting on his feet a tad nervously, "and give me one of your pouches of galleons."
Tom arched an eyebrow at that. "One of my pouches of galleons?" His eyes narrowed to slits, as he demanded sharply, "For what?"

"It's none of your business," snapped Harry impatiently. "I just need some galleons to buy some stuff." He huffed crossly. "It's not as if you don't have plenty! You've made a fortune selling essays and giving tutoring lessons!"

"It's still my money," hissed out Tom poignantly. "I'm not giving you a sickle unless you tell me what you want it for."

"You owe me," retorted Harry pointedly.

Tom shot him a sneer. "I brewed the potion for your eyesight, didn't I?"

"That was in exchange for me learning German!" snapped Harry, crossing his arms over his chest as he scowled at him. "Which I've been doing." Then he glanced around before he lowered his voice to a mere whisper, "You still owe me for looking for the Chamber of Secrets."

"Your search has yielded no results yet," bit out Tom acidly. "I'm not going to pay you for that, when you've been failing-"

"But I'm going to keep looking for it, aren't I?" said Harry heatedly. "Look, just give me the money and I'll explain later what my plan is!"

Tom narrowed his eyes at him, before he said in a low, menacing tone of voice as he handed over a small leather pouch, "Very well, but you will tell me what you're up to, or else."

"Yeah, yeah," grumbled Harry as he yanked the pouch from his brother's hands. He instantly spun around, saying in parting over his shoulder, "I'll see you in a bit!"

And with that, he rushed down the street. Soon, he arrived at a second-hand clothes shop he had caught sight of before.

A bell jingled as he entered the store. It was gloomy and dusty, with racks filled with hanging garments, barely leaving any room in which to move along the small, narrow aisle. At least, though, all the attires he caught sight of looked very old fashioned.

"May I help you?" said a solicitous voice as the shop attendant suddenly appeared before him.

She was a very plump witch, wearing a very ugly dress filled with lace and frills, with three sets of shawls thrown over her shoulders, with colorful beads, dangling and flashy.

Harry stared at her, boggled at her attire, before he squared his shoulders and said hurriedly, "I need a complete set of clothes of the fourteenth century, or that look from those times."

The witch's eyebrows shot upwards at that, as she asked with curiosity, "Is it for a costume party?"

"Er, yeah, exactly!" said Harry instantly. "Do you have something like that?"

The shopkeeper eyed him from top to bottom, probably taking his measures with a discerning eye, before she beamed a smile at him. "I believe I do!"

She was gone in a flash, surprisingly moving very fast for a woman of her girth, and came out of the depths of her store proudly holding an outfit hanging from a perch.

Harry gaped at the garbs, utterly horrified. He couldn't even figure out what it was, exactly. It was
so filled with humongous frills layered one on top of the other that it looked as if it only consisted of puffs and ruffles.

"Not something like that!" he said aghast, taking a step back from the frightening thing. "I need something dignified!"

The witch glanced from Harry to the attire and back, looking nonplussed. "It is dignified. I don't see what's wrong with it."

Harry shook his head disparagingly. "I need something a nobleman could have worn."

At the woman's blank stare, Harry reminded himself he was speaking to a witch and not a muggle, and swiftly amended, "Something a dark pureblood could have worn back in those days."

"A dark pureblood," echoed the witch, abruptly going stiff. Her eyes narrowed, as she snapped very suspiciously, "What kind of 'party' are you attending, boy?"

She looked ready to whip out her wand and cast ropes at him to hand him over to Aurors, or something of the sort.

"I didn't mean dark pureblood as in a dark wizard!" interjected Harry quickly, fretfully carding his fingers through his hair. "I just meant…"

He trailed off, and then bit out peevishly, "Look, I'm just going to some costume party as you said." He pointedly brought up his pouch of galleons, making the coins inside jingle. "I have money to spend. So do you want to sell me some clothes, or not?"

Apparently, he stopped looking dangerous and suspicious to her at the sound of gold, and the witch nodded, albeit still a bit stiffly.

The second outfit she brought back was much better. It was a curious ensemble, but quite complete, consisting of a linen shirt, a dark blue doublet, a cape-like thing, and puffed out, short pants that came with a set of white stockings. She even had a pair of heeled shoes with golden buckles to go along with it. The problem was that the attire was stained all over and clearly moth-eaten, given the many holes in the clothes.

"If you want me to clean and mend it for you," said the witch briskly, "and adapt it to your measures, it will cost extra."

It was evident that his mention of 'dark' had cost him any traces of lingering amiability from her part, but at least she seemed satisfied by the number of galleons she found in his pouch when he tossed it at her.

Fifteen minutes later, he left the store, carrying his new purchase stuck inside his rucksack.

He met Tom outside Flourish and Blotts and helped his brother by carrying some of the shopping bags bulging with everything they had bought for their second year at Hogwarts. Thankfully the bags had been cast the Feather-light spell, by one of the shopkeepers that Tom had so thoroughly charmed with his politeness and smiles.

"We have to go to Knockturn Alley now," whispered Tom as they made their way towards the end of Diagon. "We cannot be seen entering it. We must be careful."

"Yeah, I know," mumbled Harry, not forgetting how the witch of the second-hand clothes shop had treated him.
As they stood under the sign of Knockturn Alley, waiting for the secret message to appear so that they would be able to speak the key phrase in order for the stores' true wares to be revealed before their eyes, Harry caught sight of a couple striding into the archway across the street from them.

There was a flash of blue and the pair disappeared as the walled archway swiftly began to close itself up after them. Harry had only been able to catch a brief glimpse of the street the archway hid away.

He knew what it was. Alphard had told him about Leisure Alley and the age-line in the archway that forbid the passage of underaged wizards. Nevertheless, for a second, he had seen that while Diagon Alley was quite empty, Leisure Alley wasn't. He had managed to glimpse several couples strolling by and groups of adults chattering amongst themselves as if they hadn't a care in the world, coming out from shops, pubs or restaurants.

"Hurry! Don't stand there like an idiot," snapped Tom at him, yanking him by the hand and pulling him into Knockturn Alley.

Harry felt chills as they quickly moved along the shadowy and labyrinthine alley. The piled up roofs of the shops ensured that they were cast in darkness, and it only made him feel uneasy since it seemed that everyone was out and about in Knockturn.

Tom calmly and self-assuredly strolled along as if he fitted right in, though he had taken his wand out. Harry had immediately followed suit, even if they knew they couldn't use magic because of their Traces, and unlike Tom, the fact made him nervous and jumpy given their surroundings.

He saw clutches of very dodgy characters maliciously staring at them from shadowy corners, and hags haggling over some wares openly sold in the middle of the alley, along with some dark creatures that he recognized from Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons but had never seen before in person.

Indeed, they encountered a woman writhing against a wall, with her dress bundled up to her knees, as a very pale and thin man was plastered against her, making sucking noises as the woman loudly moaned.

Harry lost all color at the sight, and stammered, "That's a – a – a vampire…"

"It is," said Tom coolly, as he swiftly pulled him away from the pair. "It seems that Knockturn Alley's inhabitants have become more confident with the news of the Dark Lord's triumphs."

Harry swallowed thickly at that and was vastly relieved when they finally reached Borgin and Burkes.

They both said the key phrase out loud, and the shop's previously nearly empty window display became filled with all sorts of artifacts and scary-looking shrunken heads or cut off skeletal hands that twitched, and the like.

"There it is," breathed out Tom, his dark blue eyes gleaming covetously as he took a step forward. "The auction for it hasn't ended yet."

Harry shot a glance at Slytherin's locket before he murmured under his breath, "What do you want to do now?"

At that, Tom turned to face him as he bit out poignantly, "What do you think? This part is up to you. What are you seeing?"
Harry shot him an incredulous look. "That's why you brought me here? To see if I saw the store's wards? I can't even fully see the ward that Dumbledore cast on our orphanage! What made you think that I could see this one?"

"Can't you?" snapped Tom impatiently, before he sneered. "At least try, you simpleton!"

Harry scowled at him, and with a huff turned to face the shop again. He even took off his eyeglasses when he thought he could see something fuzzy, like happened in their room in the orphanage, but it was to no avail. Whatever magic he saw was too faint to puzzle out, and it appeared and vanished before his eyes intermittently and too quickly.

"I can't," he said shortly, shooting his brother a glower. "And even if I could see the wards clearly I wouldn't understand them. I told you that wards are filled with Runes, and I don't understand Runes, do I? For that, I'll have to wait until third year, for the elective course."

"We don't have to wait until third year to learn about Ancient Runes," sneered Tom acidly. "We can teach ourselves by studying the subject in the library."

Harry stared at him, utterly horrified, as he echoed disbelievingly, "Study. in the library."

The two words he hated most in the world were 'study' and 'library', and his brother just had to put them together. Moreover, he wouldn't be caught dead in the library! Dusty, gloomy, and enclosed places that they were, where one was boxed in by shelves at all sides and couldn't even speak loudly like a normal person! Granted, he had gone a couple of times to Hogwarts' library to fetch books on Charms, but he always got in and out as fast as he could.

"Are you sure you cannot see them?" pressed Tom, looking highly irked. "We could write down the Runes and then look them up in Hogwarts' library."

Harry gave it another shot, glancing again at the shop, but then vehemently shook his head. "I can't."

"You're useless," hissed out Tom angrily. "I was counting on you for this!"

"Well, it isn't my fault, is it?" said Harry hotly. "I cannot force my stupid ability to become stronger at the drop of a hat, can I? And even if I could, I wouldn't! I don't fancy going around seeing things flashing all over the place!"

Tom shot him a contemptuous, disgusted look, before he spat in a whisper, "Then let's go. It's useless to plan the theft now when we don't even know what wards Borgin and Burkes has."

Tom gave the locket a hungry, lingering look before he briskly marched off, while Harry was more than glad to leave the place, even when he knew that his brother was seething given the ache in his scar.

Nevertheless, he happily followed at Tom's heels as they made their way out of Knockturn.

Just as they stepped into Diagon Alley, a series of very strange, high-pitched whizzes resounded, one after the other in seconds.

"What's that?" said Harry utterly puzzled, glancing around. "Did you hear-"

There was a strident, deafening sound and all went suddenly white.

He was flying, flying through the air, as his ears rang with a high-pitched noise. Suddenly, he
painfully crashed against the cobblestones of the street, and he instinctually brought his arms over his head as things started to pelt down on him, hitting him hard and painfully.

He cried out, in fear and shock and utter confusion, as he heard screams and yells and shouts of horror and frenzy all around him.

As debris stopped raining down on him, he started to cough and choke, his eyes watering with the clouds of smoke and dust that were billowing up into the sky.

"Tom!" he cried out haggardly, scrambling on hands and knees over rubble and pieces of bricks and shards of glass and who-knew-what.

Everywhere he looked, parts of the facades of buildings seemed to be crumbling down, store signs crashing to the street, and what was left of windows finishing to crash down. There were wizards and witches, and children too, looking dazed and disoriented, tripping and walking around like headless chickens. Some storekeepers were outside, frantically waving their wands, preventing the front of their buildings from collapsing altogether.

Near him, Harry saw his rucksack lying amidst debris, with its strap snapped, and their shopping bags torn open, the things they had once held scattered all over the place. But he didn't see his brother.

"TOM!" he yelled desperately at the top of his lungs, so frantic and panicked and fearful, as he had never felt before in his life.

He didn't even care that every part of him was throbbing painfully, that he could feel bruises and aches all over his body, or that his hands and face were covered with cuts and small bleeding wounds, as he moved forward.

Then he suddenly caught sight of his brother, lying several feet away amongst debris, unmoving and white-faced.

With a scream of horror lodging in his throat, Harry rushed forth, tripping several times over pieces and chunks of things before he managed to throw himself at his brother's side.

"Tom! TOM!" he cried out frenetically, as he took the boy by the shoulders and shook him with violent despair and anguish.

"Stop, you're hurting me, you imbecile," said a weak yet infuriated voice, and Harry halted and stared and let out a powerful exhalation of relief as he saw his brother's dark blue eyes cracking open to glower at him. "Get off!"

Harry instantly pulled away, haphazardly landing on his behind, as Tom slowly sat up, glancing around with narrowed eyes as he demanded crisply, "Where are our wands?"

At that, Harry jumped into action, thankfully catching sight of both of their wands lying amidst shards of glass two feet away.

Yet, as he pulled himself to his feet and scrambled in their direction, he halted to a screech at what he saw right in front of him. It was then that he finally understood what had happened. It wasn't Diagon Alley that had been directly struck; the main street had only felt the repercussions of it.

Indeed, where once he had seen the walled up archway, there was nothing left, giving him an unencumbered view of what remained behind.
Gone was the street he had caught a glimpse of. Leisure Alley was now nothing more than piles upon piles of rubble. There wasn't a single building, store, pub, dancing hall, or restaurant standing.

And he froze, his eyes wide with horror, as he saw blood seeping and flowing from the mounds of debris, hands and feet, and half faces sticking from under the wreckage, as muffled cries and screams sounded from the depths.

For a moment, which felt like an eternity, Harry could only stand there, staring at the spine-chilling, gruesome sights of carnage.

Nothing had prepared him for it, not even Old John Bryce's stories about the Great War. Hearing about it was nothing like seeing it.

Abruptly, he was yanked out from his horrified stupor when Tom appeared by his side, handing him his wand as he pocketed his own and said sharply, "Let's get our things and leave."

Harry stared at his brother as he mechanically took his wand, blinking dumbly at him for a second, thinking he couldn't have heard correctly.

"What?" he croaked out.

"Let's get going!" hissed out Tom impatiently, as he started to turn around, searching with his gaze for their purchases.

"We can't leave!" roared Harry, as much as infuriated as he was incredulous. "We must help those people! They are buried alive beneath the rubble!"

Tom swirled around and instantly clutched Harry's wrist painfully, as he snarled furiously, "We can't do magic, you half-brained idiot! Or have you forgotten about our Traces?"

"Bugger our Traces!" bellowed Harry, violently attempting to free himself from his brother's hold.

"I'm not getting expelled from Hogwarts," spat Tom at him, seething, "just because you want to play the hero!"

Harry gritted his teeth before he stuck his wand inside a pocket. "Fine! I don't need my wand, anyway. There're wizards all around who can do magic and be of help!"

And with that, he spun around and began to run down Diagon Alley, in search of as many grownups as he could find.

Some people seemed to have recovered from their shocks, but to his confusion, they weren't running towards what was left of Leisure Alley. Instead, they were taking their children and wives and husbands, and hurrying towards the exit of Diagon Alley.

"What are you doing!" yelled Harry at them, disconcerted and furious. "You must help – stop, stop!"

"They think the bombing was just a prelude," he heard Tom's voice saying sneeringly behind him. "It's everyone for themselves in circumstances like these, little brother, as you should already know! They think the Dark Lord is about to appear."

Harry stood, stunned at that, gripped by a sudden rush of stomach-churning apprehension, before he shook his head.
No, Grindelwald wasn't going to show up. Whatever the Dark Lord's plans were for England, it clearly didn't involve conquering them that day.

The wizard hadn't done what he had in Czechoslovakia: he hadn't first invaded the country with his muggle Nazi forces and surrounded the Ministry of Magic with them. He couldn't have, or there wouldn't have been any people in Diagon Alley to begin with. Everyone would have been too terrified to even go out.

No, Grindelwald had clearly given orders to throw bombs on Leisure Alley and just that - to inspire fear and panic, evidently. To make them know how vulnerable they were.

Harry clearly remembered what the Prewett twins had told him. Dumbledore had foreseen this, had even tried to convince the Wizengamot and Charlemagne McLaggen that new wards should be created, to protect them from muggle weaponry.

Dumbledore had tried. Apparently, the wizard had indeed been doing his best, but was thwarted by cowards and idiots at every turn.

Harry clenched his teeth as he saw more wizards and witches fleeing without sparing a second glance backwards, and didn't think he had ever felt so crushed or disappointed by people.

"Let's go," said Tom's voice acerbically and with much fed-up vexation. "Aurors will take care of this, brother."

Harry snapped around to yell furiously at him, "Do you see any Aurors around, eh? EH?" He threw his hands up into the air. "Who knows when they'll turn up! And in the meanwhile, people could be dying over there!"

He didn't waste any more breath on his brother and ran back towards what was left of Leisure Alley.

Midway, he only paused when he caught sight of someone familiar.

Only some storeowners seemed to have remained in Diagon Alley, frantically casting spells on their stores so they could finish repairing them as quickly as possible before fleeing themselves. It was one of those, looking as if he was nearly done, who caught his attention.

Quickly remembering the wizard's name, Harry frantically ran up to him as he cried out desperately, "Mr. Ollivander, please, you must help!" He gestured frenziedly at Leisure Alley. "There are people stuck there and I can't do magic. Please!"

The thin, old man halted mid-motion of casting a spell and gazed down at him with those strange moon-like eyes. His glance then shot towards Leisure Alley, the wizard's forehead crinkling, looking hesitant, as if he didn't want to get involved yet was mulling matters over.

"Please, sir!" insisted Harry imploringly.

"Very well," said Ollivander grudgingly in a low, quiet voice.

Harry shot him a look filled with gratefulness before he rushed out urgently, "Get more people to help us, while I do what I can!"

And with that, he moved as fast as he could towards Leisure Alley.

He started climbing mounds of debris, prying off with his bare hands as many blocks and bricks as
he could. His fingers were soon bleeding raw as he kept trying to unearth someone who was buried under the wreckage.

He had managed to clear a whole arm, and it was bleeding and thankfully twitching - he could even hear the owner of the limb screaming from under the rubble - but he wasn't managing it fast enough.

Frantically, Harry glanced around and caught sight of his brother, as cool as you please, picking their things up from Diagon Alley.

"Tom, come and help me, damn you!" he bellowed furiously. "We can get our stuff later!"

From a distance, Tom stood straight up and shot him a contemptuous look as he stuck a textbook into a shopping bag. Though, with a thoroughly annoyed, dark expression on his face, his brother set the bag to a side and began to grudgingly make his way towards him.

Given how his scar was throbbing, Harry knew his brother wasn't at all pleased with the demands he was making on him, but at least Tom was complying.

With Tom's help, which wasn't as effortful as Harry would have liked, he nevertheless went much faster with his task of clearing stuff off from the buried person.

They soon saw that it was a witch, in fact, and her screams had become mere faint gurgles that abruptly halted.

Fraught with distress and panic, Harry used all the strength he could muster to tear off a block of stone from her, and then went still as he stared down.

Both of her legs had been blown off, leaving nothing but gory stumps of hanging flesh and flaps of skin from which blood seemed to have been pouring out endlessly. But now, only trickles were rolling down, and her unearthed arm had stopped moving.

He saw Tom pressing his fingers against the witch's wrist, before he shot Harry an irked look and stated acidly, "She's dead."

Harry stared at him, mute, for a second, before he croaked out weakly, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," bit out Tom churlishly as he made a move to stand up, with every intention of leaving.

Harry instantly seized his arm, pulling him back, as he roared, "Then onto the next one!"

And he yanked him along towards a half buried torso he saw a few feet away. Just as they began working on rescuing that wizard, Ollivander suddenly appeared with a whole bunch of other people.

It seemed he had done as Harry had asked and had managed to convince other storeowners to show a thread of human decency, solidarity and compassion, since they all instantly jumped into action and started casting spells to levitate the rubble.

Harry saw that Tom stood up at that, and left, standing to a side with no intention of being of any further help.

Nevertheless, even though he cursed his brother's uncaring and selfish ways under his breath, Harry kept at it, helping as much as he could with his bare hands.
With the use of magic from the adults, it all proceeded much faster than before, but the results weren't good. They rescued a tiny old wizard who gave his last dying breath just as Harry gently tried to pick him up, since an iron window frame had pierced the old man's chest. There was a young witch with half her midriff blown off, a wizard with a crushed skull, and a young man who had bled to death from a missing arm.

It was when they were almost done unearthing a witch who was still coherent and breathing, screaming herself hoarse due to the mangled foot that was hanging from a thread of skin from her ankle, that something suddenly happened.

Before his eyes, Harry saw sheets of magic slowly crumbling down all around them, but given the frantic cries of dismay from the storeowners that had been helping, it was evident that he wasn't seeing it due to his ability.

He shot Tom a frightened look at that, thinking that perhaps he had been wrong and Grindelwald was somehow bringing down the wards in order to make an appearance.

Tom must have thought the same because he clutched his wand, though his brother didn't look nervous or highly agitated and worried as Harry was, but giddy with expectation and anticipation.

All of them, except Tom, jumped when a series of cracking sounds echoed loudly, and Harry stood still, his eyes wild and wide, before he caught sight of the new arrivals.

He recognized them only due to the clothes they wore: there was an army of Aurors in their red cloaks, along with a bunch of witches and wizards in green tunics – Healers, from that wizarding hospital the Prewett twins had told him about, St. Mungo's.

They had all apparated at the same time and there was a tall, burly Auror who was barking out instructions. They all moved with extreme efficiency and in an orderly manner, rushing towards the mounds of rubbles, managing to do very fast and swiftly what had taken Harry and the storeowners a long time.

They were rescuing people left, right and center, commanding the storeowners to help them along to move the wounded towards their shop's fireplaces to floo them to St. Mungo's, or to grasp objects that vibrated and turned blue, making the holder disappear with the injured person – portkeys, Harry realized, since Professor Tilly Toke had described them in Charms class – or just disapparating with the most serious cases.

And then, Harry suddenly caught sight of a wizard who was standing at the sidelines, donned in rich, pompous clothes, with a blonde moustache ridiculously curled at its tips, glancing around like a stranded fish, his mouth hanging open, looking like a stupefied idiot who didn't give credence to what he saw.

Harry had the sudden violent urge to leap at Charlemagne McLaggen and strangle him and savagely bash his head until the Minister's brains were splattered all over the rubbles.

It had been the Minister's fault, for not having listened to Dumbledore, once more. It should have been McLaggen dying under the debris, like all those others, in Harry's infuriated opinion.

But there the wizard was, alive and well. It was just as Kathy Cole liked to say: 'A bad weed can never be plucked out'. Strangely enough, the times Harry had caught her muttering the phrase under her breath, she had been scowling at Tom from a distance.

It soon became apparent that Harry was just getting in the way and that he could be of no further
use, and he dragged his feet, exhausted, until he reached his brother.

Before he could even open his mouth, Tom seized a passing-by Healer, and snapped commandingly, "Heal us. We live with muggles, we cannot return looking like this."

The old witch blinked at them, her gaze then zeroing in on Harry's face and hands, and nodded, briskly casting a series of spells on them.

Harry felt the effects immediately: all the aches that had been mercilessly plaguing him abruptly vanished, the back of his head stopped throbbing, his fingers tingled as their skin grew back, and his face twitched as cuts and small wounds closed together.

Nevertheless, Tom must have understood how worn and exhausted he felt because he didn't say a word as Harry slumped against a wall in Diagon Alley, while Tom went around picking up their purchases.

It wasn't until they reached the Leaky Cauldron that Harry mustered the energy to speak. "We need to use the bathroom."

Tom, the bartender, stared at them with wide eyes before he instantly nodded and indicated where the loo could be found.

Once there, Harry gazed at himself in the mirror. He was healed, with not even scars left behind, but he looked as if he had bathed in blood. There were even clumps of bits and pieces of flesh, hair, and skin stuck on his hands and fingers.

Feeling strangely detached, he opened the faucet, but when water started to pour on his hands, his breathing suddenly turned haggard and hitched, and he began to frenetically rub his hands clean.

It seemed to him that the blood and bits of others refused to come off, and feeling a sudden surge of frenzy and panic, he vigorously and frantically scrubbed harder.

"Stop! You're scratching yourself raw, you dimwit!" hissed out Tom, brusquely yanking Harry's hands away from the faucet. "You're already clean. What's the matter with you?"

Harry frowned, feeling a bit disoriented and nonplussed, until he stared at his own hands and realized his brother was right.

"Sorry," he mumbled as he turned away from his brother's piercing, narrowed eyes.

"Here," said Tom crisply, grabbing a set of newly bought and fresh clothes from one of the bags and pushing them into Harry's arms. "Change."

Harry complied as Tom stuffed their bloodstained, torn clothes in a rubbish bin.

They spent the four hours that it took them to return to the orphanage by bus in complete silence.

It was already nightfall when they stepped into the house, and the moment Harry crossed the threshold, he abruptly found himself tightly embraced by frantic arms.

"The sirens sounded!" said Alice frenziedly over Harry's head, as she clutched him tighter against her. "I was mad with worry! We all thought it was an air raid and you still hadn't returned!" She choked out a half-sob, before her voice turned marginally calmer as she added, "It was only a false alarm, thankfully, but I was still-"
"A false alarm?" echoed Harry, letting out a flat, mirthless bark of laughter. "Tom and I are lucky to be alive."

"Come!" snarled Tom, violently yanking Harry out of Alice's arms and pulling him up the stairs, nearly frog-marching him until they reached their room, shoving Harry to his bed.

Standing before him, Tom glowered and hissed out furiously, "Do you realize what you nearly told her?"

"She should know," whispered Harry, glaring up at him. "The muggles should know what is truly happening."

Tom shot him a disgusted look as he bit out, "Don't you realize what happened means? The Dark Lord just wanted to terrorize the English wizarding community. He wasn't conquering us! He was making us fear him." His eyes narrowed, as he added pensively, "For some reason, it's evident that he's leaving England for last. To be the crown jewel of his empire, the cherry on top of the cake… to be calmly savored at the very end… yet…"

He trailed off, pacing the room, before he turned around, frowning. "Yet, it can only mean that there's something in England that he wants and is leaving for last."

"Something like what?" said Harry, deeply frowning himself.

"I don't know," retorted Tom curtly. "But it must be something very valuable and important."

Harry stared at him at that, before he shook his head and muttered, "I think he was taunting Dumbledore. I think that with that attack, Grindelwald was forcing Dumbledore's hand. He wants to be confronted by Dumbledore, face-to-face."

Tom scoffed snidely. "Why? Just because people say that the fool is as powerful as the Dark Lord?" He shot him a scathing sneer. "I will believe that when I see it."

Harry didn't say anything else, but he was certain he was right. It all made so much sense now, what he had overheard in Hogsmeade: the conversation between Dumbledore and the owner of the Hog's Head pub – 'Aberforth', Dumbledore's brother, according to Alphard.

Everything indicated that Dumbledore and Grindelwald personally knew each other from the past, somehow. Moreover, given the harsh words Aberforth had spoken, their sister had died, and it had sounded as if Dumbledore and Grindelwald were to blame for that.

And why else would Grindelwald bomb Leisure Alley but not muggle London, if he wasn't trying to get a rise out of Dumbledore, besides the whole terrifying the wizarding community stuff.

It seemed to him that Grindelwald wanted wizarding Britain to become involved in the war, so that Dumbledore would be forced to, as well. After the attack on Leisure Alley, things would change in the Ministry of Magic, that was certain.

"We would know more if I had the Daily Prophet," said Tom acerbically, anger clear on his face.

Harry sighed at that. On their first week of 'holidays' in the orphanage, Tom had used Lord Horkos to send a letter, along with a generous pouch of galleons, to the Daily Prophet, expressing his wish that his subscription was extended for several years and to receive the newspaper not only at Hogwarts but during his holidays as well.

His brother had been answered by a very brief letter that stated that 'per new Ministry regulation'
they were not allowed to send their newspaper to the homes of muggleborns.

Tom had been furious. "I understand that McLaggen doesn't want the muggle relatives of mudbloods to find out who is causing all the trouble-" he had sneered the word out as if everyone was being pathetically hysterical about the Dark Lord's rise for no reason "-but I told them I wasn't a muggleborn!"

"You gave them your address didn't you?" Harry had pointed out sensibly. "So they know you're in a muggle orphanage."

Tom had cast him a dour, seething look at that, but undaunted, had tried again, this time sending the headquarters of the Daily Prophet several pouches of galleons.

He had received them back, along with a letter saying exactly the same as before.

"Since when isn't there a worker who's willing to disregard ethics and laws in exchange for money?" had groused Tom darkly, as if his whole set of cynical notions of how the world functioned was being threatened and hanging by a thread, and thus would need to be thoroughly revised and perfected.

"I'm sure there must have been someone in the Daily Prophet dying to become corrupted," Harry had said soothingly. "But they must have been scared to do so. Scared of the Ministry and their punishment, if they were caught."

Tom had stared at him, looking utterly surprised, as if Harry had just spouted the most enlightening and wise words he had ever heard. "You're quite right, little brother. Fear is always more powerful than greed. I should have remembered that."

"Sure," Harry had muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Well, we won't know about the repercussion of the destruction of Leisure Alley," intoned Tom at present, his voice low and clearly vastly annoyed, "until we're back at Hogwarts."

Harry said nothing to that, still seated on his bed, his mind filled with images. It felt as if they were burnt with fire in his head, all those sights of people with blown off limbs, torn faces, crushed skulls, mangled and dangling feet, spilled entrails and whatnot. He didn't think he would ever forget.

He stared down at his hands, and whispered quietly, "It's war."

It must have sounded incredibly stupid to his brother, but Tom didn't say a mocking word in response. To Harry, though, those words encompassed everything he was feeling.

It had finally happened, what Tom had predicted all along: war was at their front step and they had just experienced its cruel savagery and ruthless brutally first-hand.

And it wouldn't be the last time, Harry knew. He made a decision right then.

That night he felt asleep, feeling hollowed.
Part I: Chapter 34

On the morning of August 31st, the day before they had to leave for Hogwarts, the city’s sirens blared loudly, rudely waking up the whole orphanage. But they were letting out a different sound than the usual strident noise alerting a possible air raid; in this occasion the sound was low, monotonous and constant, sounding very ominous.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Harry groggily as he sat up on his bed, rubbing his eyes tiredly. Through the tattered curtains of their window, he even saw that the sun hadn’t yet dawned.

Soon they were hearing the rush of frantic feet and fearful screams. Harry ran out of their bedroom, swiftly followed by Tom, to see all the children in the corridor or coming out from their own rooms, looking terrified.

“Are we going to be murdered in our beds!” wailed the caregiver Karen, standing rooted in place in her nightgown, clutching her chest in panic.

Just then, a series of harsh poundings resounded from the main floor, as if someone was impatiently knocking on their front door with all the strength they could muster, and all of them jumped in the air, further startled.

“Let me through!” snapped a voice, and Kathy Cole appeared, looking disheveled, carrying the only candle in the whole house.
Alice was behind the Matron, holding little Anne in her arms and protectively clutching her – one of the new children that had been sent to St. Jerome’s from another orphanage that had shut down, before Christmas.

Harry wasn’t even surprised to see that Kathy Cole had apparently spent another night sleeping in Alice’s bedroom, crammed with Alice and little Anne. Since the start of holidays, the Matron had been staying over in the orphanage.

Tom had once sneeringly opined that Kathy Cole’s husband, the nasty old Mr. Cole, greedy and well-to-do owner of some shops, must have fled the city taking his grownup children with him, leaving Kathy behind.

Nevertheless, they all trailed after her as Kathy rushed down the stairs and yanked the front door open.

There was a man there, looking vexed – a Constable, given his black uniform, the baton and pistol he carried on his belt, and the funny-looking, peaked helmet he wore.

“Who is the Matron of this orphanage?” demanded the Constable shortly as he glanced down at a piece of paper in his hand and read out loud. “A Mrs. Katherine Cole.”

“I am,” said Kathy, holding up her lit candle to peer at him with a frown on her face. “What’s all this about?”

“Children are being evacuated from London,” replied the man sharply, shooting the inside of the house a scathing look. “You have fifteen minutes to get your orphans ready.”

Cries broke out at that, all the children sounding confused and scared.

“What does evakated mean?”

“Where are they taking us?”

“We can’t leave! What about our stuff?”
“It was about time the Ministry thought about people!” someone yelled above all others, and Alice appeared in front of the Constable, apparently having set down little Anne to confront the man with an angered expression on her face. “I heard in the radio, the other day, that paintings from the National Gallery had been taken to Wales! Shameful it is, to care about art before the lives of people!”

“Count yourself lucky that the government spared a second thought on the orphans in London, missus,” retorted the man gruffly, shooting a snide glance at his surroundings. “I wouldn’t have, if it had been up to me.”

“You cannot expect me to get everyone ready in fifteen minutes,” interjected Kathy Cole sternly, bristling and jerking her head to a side like an angered horse. “Why wasn’t I notified about this beforehand? Why didn’t I receive any letters-”

“I’m just followin’ orders, ma’am!” snapped the Constable irritably. “You have fifteen minutes or we’re leavin’ without you.”

And he pointedly stepped to a side as he gestured at what was waiting outside.

It was a Ford COE Stake Bed truck, Harry saw as he peered out from the open front door; an enormous, army-type one, like the ones he had seen rushing down the streets filled with soldiers when he and Tom had been taking a series of Emergency Line buses to reach the district of the Leaky Cauldron.

“The children can only bring some essentials,” continued the Constable, looking once more at his piece of paper as he began to read out loud, “Two pairs of socks, two pairs of pants – or dresses in the girls’ case– two undergarments, and one pullover or jersey.”

Kathy Cole stiffened before she spun around and loudly clapped her hands, as she yelled commandingly, “You heard the chap, children! Get dressed and bring those things from your rooms!”

Pandemonium ensued, with all the children disorderly rushing to their bedrooms, still looking confused and frightened but apparently also too scared about the possibility of being left behind, so they all followed the instructions as fast as they could.
Harry saw the Constable taking Mrs. Cole to a side, handing over a clump of things as they hurriedly whispered among themselves.

Without another hitch of breath, he covertly slipped closer to them.

“… to the countryside?” Kathy was murmuring, frowning deeply. “Are my orphans going to get separated?”

“Host families in the country are being paid by the government to take city children as guests,” retorted the man curtly. “But that will not be the case of orphans. Some local, country schools have been turned into refuges. You and your orphans and caregivers will be living in one of those.”

“For how long?” demanded Kathy Cole sternly.

“For as long as it takes!” snapped the Constable, before he added sharply, “I suggest, ma’am, that you help your orphans along. You’ve been appointed to a train that leaves in two hours and the streets are going to be congested. We must depart as soon as possible.”

“Where does the train leave from?” piped in Harry anxiously.

At that, the Constable gazed around, before he glanced down and caught sight of him, his expression souring when realizing that an orphan was addressing him.

“From King’s Cross station, boy,” bit out the man with vexation, “where else!”

Harry nodded, feeling vastly relieved, and didn’t stick around when Kathy Cole started badgering the man with questions again.

He instantly reached his brother and grabbed him by an arm, swiftly pulling him up the stairs.

“What are you doing?” hissed out Tom.

“We have to go with them,” said Harry urgently as they entered their bedroom.
“We will not!” snapped Tom, glowering at him. “We’ll go to Hogwarts. Tomorrow.”

“Of course we’re going to Hogwarts!” said Harry, as he hastily began to get dressed. “But it took us four hours to reach the Leaky Cauldron, if you’ll remember. What if it takes us longer to reach King’s Cross station tomorrow? What if there aren’t buses left? I’m not taking the chance. We’ll go to the station with them and spend the night there.”

“You have a point,” conceded Tom grudgingly, looking vastly annoyed by events.

Once they were dressed, they began to swiftly pack their belongings.

Harry was done in seconds, since he merely tossed all his things into his trunk. He didn’t even have to waste time with Ulysses because the smart, little Scorcrup had apparently caught a drift of what was going on and had jumped into his basket without needing to be prompted.

Tom wasn’t as quick, though. The boy was taking his time in neatly folding his clothes, as always, and orderly stacking his books inside his trunk, while dealing with Nagini.

“What do you mean that you’re leaving?” the snake hissed, coiled on top of Tom’s pillow on the bed. “You’re not leaving me behind again – I demand that you take me with you!”

“You already know that Hogwarts doesn’t allow us to have snakes as pets,” hissed Tom, angered and impatient as he continued folding his clothes. “I’m not telling you again. You’re staying here.”

Peeved, Harry grumbled under his breath and stomped to Tom’s bed, where the boy had neatly laid out all his things, and just grabbed them in his arms and unceremoniously dropped them inside his brother’s trunk.

“The world isn’t going to end if your clothes get wrinkly, Tom!” Harry snapped at him, slamming the lid of his brother’s trunk shut when he was done.

Tom poisonously glared at him for that, but Harry ignored it as he caught sight of the empty cage on top of their nightstand.
“Where’s your owl?”

“Lord Horkos goes hunting at night,” replied Tom acerbically. “Evidently, he hasn’t returned yet.”

“Well, he’ll just have to find us, won’t he?” groused Harry as he grabbed the cage and shoved it into his brother’s arms, adding in a low grumble under his breath, “And perhaps he won’t and he’ll make my day.”

“Don’t leave me!” hissed Nagini, no longer sounding furious but scared, wounded, and desperately imploring.

Harry bit his lip at that, but Tom utterly ignored her and didn’t spare her a backward glance as he pulled his trunk outside the bedroom.

Harry followed suit, but once in the corridor he gently handed over Ulysses’ basket to his brother as he said hastily, “Start taking our stuff downstairs. I have something to do.”

“What?” demanded Tom, piercing him with narrowed eyes.

Harry glanced around before he lowered his voice to a whisper, “I have to get Hutchins’ letter from under the loose floorboard.”

At with that, he slammed their bedroom’s door shut on Tom’s face.

When Harry reached the main floor, he encountered a flurry of frantic activity.

The caregiver Magda was taking the garments the children were bringing to her, packing them in rucksacks or tablecloths that she tied up with a knot, looking frazzled, weary, and ill tempered.

“Where do you think we’re goin’, Amy Benson? To a ball?” the caregiver snapped. “No, you can’t take those silly hair ribbons with you!”
“We’re not bringing along that flea-bitten cat!” she then yelled at Billy Stubbs, who had apparently gone to considerable efforts to find his pet.

The vicious cat certainly didn’t look as if he was thankful for it, since he was spitting and hissing and squirming as he scratched Billy’s hands and face. But the boy just stubbornly and resolutely held him tighter.

“I cannot leave Puff!” cried out Billy Stubb distressed. “What if a bomb drops on the house when we’re gone? What if he dies!”

“We’re not taking him and that’s the end of the matter!” bit out Magda, looking disheveled and beleaguered.

Billy let out a wailing sob when he was made to drop the cat, which instantly dashed away, leaving the boy disconsolate.

Meanwhile, the Constable was standing by the front door, impatiently tapping a boot on the floor as he kept shooting glances at his pocket watch, as he announced, aggravated, “Five minutes left, folk!”

“Not those, lass!” Kathy Cole was berating Karen, who had come out of the kitchen, grabbing her apron’s hem upwards to use as a basket, stuffed with apples, a plucked chicken, and loafs of bread.

The Matron then pointed a finger at Alice, who was just then stepping out from the stairs that led to the basement, wobbling and panting with the effort of carrying heavy sacks of beans under her arms and cans of food that were bulging from her apron’s pockets.

“Follow Alice’s example, you silly girl!”

“I said nothing about bringing food with you!” interjected the Constable as he caught sight of them. “There’s no room for it-”

“I hardly think there’ll be much food to be found in the countryside, will there!” yelled Kathy Cole angrily as she spun around to glare at the man with hands on hip. “I’m not letting my orphans
starve for months – we’re bringing as many sacks and cans as we can!”

The Constable scowled but wisely kept his mouth shut, since Mrs. Cole could certainly be intimidating and scary when in a fury.

A couple of minutes later, Kathy barked at them to form a line, and when they complied she went around hanging something from every child’s neck.

Harry glanced down at the rectangular bit that was strung around his neck by a cord. The cardboard cover was brown, and in the small sheet of paper inside he found several things scribbled down: his name, gender, birthdate, and the address of St. Jerome’s Orphanage.

“These are new things issued by the government,” announced Kathy Cole. “They are called identity cards. It’s of the utmost importance that you always have them with you.” She shot them a stern look, as she added sharply, “If you get lost or separated from us, only by showing these things to an officer will they be able to know how to help you and what to do with you. Do you understand, children?”

“Why would we get lost?” someone asked frantically.

“Because such things happen!” snapped Kathy Cole impatiently. “We’re not the only ones who are being evacuated – there’ll be people rushing all around us!”

And with that, the caregivers began to herd them out of the house and into the street.

It was then when the Constable took a bag from the truck and started distributing its contents among the children.

“What’s this?” a girl said nonplussed.

“A gas mask,” breathed out Harry, staring at the one in his hands, recognizing it from Old John Bryce’s description and how soldiers in the Great War had used them.

The Constable shot him a glower when the children who had heard him let out cries of panic and
fear, glancing around the street as if expecting to suddenly find it filled with clouds of poisonous, lethal air.

“Silence!” roared the man, looking thoroughly fed up. “They’re only a precaution. Now let’s get moving!”

The Constable irritably began to help the children climb into the back of the truck, before he caught sight of Tom and Harry bringing their things over.

“What do you want those for?” demanded the Constable poignantly as he glanced at Lord Horkos’ empty cage and Ulysses’ basket, before he saw the trunks they were dragging. “I said you could only take with you some garments!”

At the man’s angered shout, Alice and Kathy Cole snapped their heads around and hurried towards them.

“What’s all this about?” said the Matron, frowning at them.

“They’ve said their boarding school is remaining open,” Alice interjected quickly, looking flustered and agitated with worry.

“Nonsense!” bit out Kathy Cole crossly. “All schools have closed. They’re coming with us to the countryside.”

“But ours hasn’t!” cried out Harry.

Kathy skewered him with a scowl, before she stated curtly, “Even so. You’re coming along.”

“We received a letter from our Headmaster,” interjected Tom coolly, the lie smoothly rolling from his lips. “We are obliged to go. The school has evacuation plans of its own.”

Kathy narrowed her eyes at him as she said crisply, “Where is this letter? I want to see it.”
“I had no reason to keep it,” intoned Tom calmly. “I threw it away.”

“It’s true!” piped in Harry adamantly, to then glance at them imploringly. “The train for Scotland leaves tomorrow. Can’t we go to King’s Cross station with you now?”

“Of course you can!” said Alice fervently.

“There’s no train leaving for Scotland tomorrow,” pointed out the Constable angrily as he glared at them. “What are you boys playing at?”

Harry was stumped at that, and could only stare at the muggle without knowing what to say.

“Our boarding school is a private, wealthy one,” sneered Tom acidly, shooting the man a scathing look. “Our school hires its own train to take students up to Scotland.”

“Orphans attending an uppity posh boarding school?” the Constable said sarcastically. “Sure, as if I’ll believe that. Don’t pull my leg, boy! Who do you think you’re speaking to-”

“They aren’t lying!” interjected Alice anxiously, before she straightened up to her full height and spouted out a lie herself as if it was an incontrovertible fact that cinched the deal, “I’ve seen the train with my own eyes!”

“There isn’t any space in the truck for those things!” snapped the Constable, furiously gesturing at the trunks.

“We’ll see about that! We’re not leaving the boys behind!” bit out Alice before she ran up to the driver, who was impatiently seated inside the front cabin.

The man only scowled and glared, not moving an inch, clearly not liking to be ordered about by her. Though, when Alice began to hysterically shriek at him, the man soon paled and did exactly as she asked.

Their trunks ended up being stuffed in the front cabin of the truck, propped up, with Harry and Tom crammed beside them, leaving the Constable hanging outside one of the doors of the truck,
grasping the frame and standing on the footledge.

“Let’s get rolling, Pete!” commanded the Constable as he pounded a fist on the roof of the truck.

As they made their way towards King’s Cross station, Harry saw that it was happening all over London.

The city was fraught with despair, fear, wretchedness, and foremost, with tears.

Similar trucks to theirs were parked along curbs, with policemen, officers, and other Constables herding children into them, with their parents standing in front of their homes, mothers wailing as they waved white handkerchiefs, husbands comforting them, saying it was for the best, that their children would be safe in the countryside, with strangers.

Furthermore, it wasn’t only children who were being evacuated. Pregnant women or with babies or toddlers in their arms were also being taken into trucks, treated gently in their cases. And disabled people too, Harry saw when they passed by a hospital and an asylum.

King’s Cross station was even worse. It was flooded with people: groups of children crying out, scared and sobbing, wanting to return to their parents, as they were led to platforms by policemen; invalids being hurried along by frenzied nurses; mothers with babies looking frantic as they jumped into departing trains; and even some children scattered here and there that seemed to have gotten lost from their group, standing in the middle of pushing crowds, looking terrified as they glanced around with fearful, wide eyes, waiting for an adult to take notice and help.

“Stick together, children!” yelled Kathy Cole at the top of her lungs so that she could be heard over the cacophony of the station. “Grasp each other’s hands and don’t let go! Whatever you do, DON’T LET GO!”

They all clutched each other frenetically, but it was impossible. The crowds were crushing and suffocating, and they found themselves being squashed and shoved at all sides.

And Harry couldn’t even take a hold of any of his friends’ hands, because he and Tom were fully occupied with dragging their trunks and the cage and basket of their pets.

When he saw that the distance between him and St. Jerome’s group became larger and larger, till
he could scarcely catch a glimpse of them through the crowds that seemed to have swallowed them up, Harry yelled frantically as he began to quicken his steps as fast as he could, “Wait! Please wait!”

“For what?” snapped Tom by his side. “We’re not going with them, so what’s the point of rushing to follow them?”

“I want to see them leave,” said Harry in a soft voice. “I want to make sure they’ll be alright. I want to say farewell to my friends and-”

He was roughly knocked over by a large woman bowling over the crowds with a shrieking toddler in her arms.

“Watch where you’re going, you cow!” bellowed Harry furiously at her as he picked himself up from the floor before he was crushed by feet.

Darkly scowling, he rescued Ulysses’ basket just in time before it was trampled all over, and lifted the lid to check that his Scorpcrup was well. Ulysses looked thoroughly disheveled and ruffled, with his fur standing on end, yet seemed unharmed.

Harry gave him a comforting pat on the head before he closed the basket and stuck it under an arm, grasping his trunk’s handle once more.

“There they are!” he cried out joyously when he caught a brief glimpse of Alice and rest standing in a platform several feet away.

The caregiver was frenziedly glancing around, with hands anxiously clutching her chest, evidently looking for them.

Harry rushed forth, dragging his trunk with all the strength he could muster.

When he finally reached them, they had already started boarding the train. Though he was quick to release his trunk and gently settle Ulysses’ basket on top when he saw Alice dashing towards him.
He was abruptly enfolded in a smothering embrace as Alice cried out, overwrought and distressed, "I'll write to you, no matter if I have to cross a whole county to find a Post Office. I'll tell you where we are and I want you to write back - you must promise! I need to know where you are and how you're faring, Harry. Promise, my sweet, lovely boy!"

“I will,” mumbled Harry against the folds of her grey dress.

Alice pulled him away to gaze down at him with tearful eyes, as she tenderly swept a curl of hair from his forehead, nodding jerkily at him.

And before Tom had the chance to take a horrified step backwards, the woman launched herself at him and tightly crushed him against her bosom, as she said fervently, “Be good and brave, Tom. And take care of your brother!”

“Alice!” yelled Kathy Cole from a distance. “There’s no time for partings. The train’s about to leave!”

Alice released Tom at that, giving them a fearful, anxious glance filled with concern, looking extremely hesitant about leaving them there. While Tom was glowering darkly, as he dusted off his clothes with a hand as if wanting to get rid of the grime left there by the muggle’s touch.

When the train’s whistle shrieked loudly, Alice bit her lips and glanced at them again, but then ran back to the others.

Harry stood there, completely still, watching his friends.

“Why isn’t he coming?” he heard Amy Benson yelling frenziedly, as she turned her face to look at him again. “What are you doing, Harry? Hurry!”

“Harry and Tom have decided to go to their school,” Kathy Cole said loudly over the noise of the station, as she grasped the girl and began to shove her towards the train.

“What? He can’t! We cannot leave Harry behind – what if we never see him again! What if-”
“Get in, lass!” snapped the Matron, pushing Amy inside.

Billy Stubbs and Eric Whalley, for their part, faintly waved their hands at him. Billy was clutching a pillow the boy had somehow managed to smuggle into the truck without the Constable noticing, clearly still hopefully believing that it could protect him from a bomb. And Eric was ashen faced, truly looking scared for the first time, giving Harry a weak, forced grin.

Harry stood rooted in place, as they all disappeared inside the train, as the train’s wheels began to roll and rumble, as it became smaller and smaller, until it was a mere speck in the distance.

“Will we see them again?” said Harry quietly, his gaze fixed on the tiny dot.

He suddenly realized he should be frantic and desperate with worry, or even perhaps crying, because who knew what would happen to them – a bomb could very well fall in whatever country town they were going to live in, and kill them all- yet he only felt numb and empty.

“Hopefully not,” sneered Tom scathingly as he turned around without casting a second glance.

Not even Tom’s cruel, odious words pierced through the armor of insensibility that seemed to encompass him, and Harry trudged through the crowds, following Tom towards someplace in the station in which they could sit down.

During the night they spent in the railway station they didn’t sleep a wink; between the constant flow of frantic evacuees rushing through, and King’s Cross’ clock chiming loudly every time it struck an hour, it was impossible. Not to mention Harry’s frequent trips to the nearest loo, to make sure everything was well, given his situation. Though at least Tom wasn’t suspicious. His brother seemed to ascribe his need to go to the bathroom to jitters and nerves.

Thus, when they were finally ensconced in a compartment of the Hogwarts Express the following morning, they were both exhausted and moody - the dark circles under Harry’s eyes, caused by the stress of their ‘holidays’, being even more prominent.
Midway during the journey, Harry bit his lips, trying to rein it in, but failed again, releasing a giggle.

It made Tom snap his head up once more, to pierce him with narrowed eyes, whilst Harry scowled down at himself.

It happened again, and Harry fretfully squirmed on his seat, biting down on his tongue and pressing his lips tightly together.

“We should change into our school robes,” said Tom sharply, abruptly standing up to open their trunks.

The boy tossed Harry’s uniform on a seat before he stood in front of him with arms crossed over his chest, his dark blue eyes gleaming as he commanded, “Strip.”

“What?” choked out Harry, gazing at him disbelievingly.

Tom’s lips curved upwards as he intoned coolly, “I want you to strip off your clothes before me, little brother.”

Taking an alarmed step backwards, Hary stared at him with eyes as wide as moons, as he said scandalized, “Are you hearing yourself? I’m not changing in front of you, you perve!”

And in the bat of an eyelash, Harry dashed to their compartment’s door.

Tom swiftly blocked his way, shoving him back inside as he said calmly, “We’ve shared a room all our lives, I’ve seen you naked plenty of times.” His dark blue eyes glinted as he trailed his gaze up and down over Harry, drawling softly, “You haven’t anything that I haven’t seen before, do you?”

When Harry stood there, speechless, Tom pounced on him.

“Geroff, you sicko!” yelled Harry frenziedly, batting his brother’s roving hands away.
But it was to no avail, the moment Tom had him trapped and pinned against the compartment’s windows, the boy tore off Harry’s shirt, yanking it upwards through Harry’s head, discarding it on the floor.

Frantically, Harry instantly covered as much as he could of himself with his skinny arms, stupidly feeling like a shy maiden protecting her innocence.

“I knew it!” snarled Tom furiously, glowering at him with a murderous look on his face.

“Hello, Master,” hissed Nagini triumphantly, poking her head out from Harry’s arms, from her place coiled around his bare chest.

At that, Harry dropped his arms, defeated, and glared down at her. “I told you not to move so much! Your scales tickled me, it made me giggle!”

Before the snake had the chance to open her maws to defend herself, Tom shoved Harry angrily as he snarled, “You know that snakes aren’t allowed at Hogwarts—”

“I couldn’t leave her in the orphanage!” interjected Harry hotly. “There’s no one there, and Billy Stubbs was right. What if a bomb drops on the house? What if she died from that or from hunger?”

“Snakes are smart, they are survivors,” bit out Tom infuriated. “She would have been fine!” He shot him a dark glower, as he added sharply, “I’m not getting expelled for this. I’m not taking care of her. This is your doing, so you deal with it!”

“Fine, I will!” snapped Harry crossly.

He gently settled Nagini on a seat, and as he changed into his Slytherin uniform he hissed disparagingly, “Your Master is a selfish, uncaring git, you know?”

Nagini bobbed her head up and down, shooting Tom harsh, reproving glances or wounded ones as Harry kept hissing similar things at her, all with the purpose of making Tom change his mind.
However, it didn’t work. Once Tom had changed into his school robes, the boy gritted his teeth but nevertheless turned a deaf ear to Harry’s and Nagini’s hissed aspersions on his person, picking up a textbook and by all means making himself look as he if was wholly immersed in it.

Thus, it was so that Nagini’s stay at Hogwarts began.
Part I: Chapter 35

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AN:

Lol about the Hetalia comments. I’ve heard about it but I’ve never watched it, but if you guys say it’s bad then I won’t ;)

Answering some questions, yes, everything portrayed in the last chapters is true. I always like to make my fics as realistic as possible, and especially this one, when Tom and Harry are living during one of the harshest times of modern history.

It all happened: the sirens placed all around big cities, all the places that were turned into air raid shelters, the Blackout, the rationing of food, the identity cards and gas masks given, the paintings of London’s National Gallery being taken away and the like from museums, and the evacuation of children and others from major cities, the first one being on August 31st 1939, the one Harry and Tom experienced.

From what I know, evacuees that were taken to the countryside lived through very rough conditions. And by the end of the war, 3.5 million people in England, mainly children, had experienced evacuation.

On another note, for those who have asked, Part 2 of this fic will not come until Part 1 is done. I don’t know yet if I’ll be writing and posting some Part 2 chapters mingled with those future ones of Part 1, to give us a glimpse of what will come. Anyway, the full extended Part 2 will come later.

But everything that happens in Part 1 is deeply linked to what will happen in Part 2, so I wouldn’t recommend skipping chapters until Part 2 appears, because if not you will not understand a thing.

In Part 2, I will not waste time rehashing the past, I’ll assume you’ve read Part 1 because if not it would be like writing the whole fic again in backflashes. And I’m not going to do that, sorry.

Oh, and thanks to the reviewer who pointed out my mistakes when using ‘Tom and he/him’. I
always had doubts which one was the correct form. ‘Tom and he’ has always sounded strange to me for some reason, but you’re right that it should be ‘Tom and he’ when the boys are the subject of the sentence, and ‘Tom and him’ when they are the object. Though I’ll be using ‘he and Tom’ in the first case, because it just sounds better to me than ‘Tom and he’ when in the middle of a sentence. And the I/me trick helped too – thanks ^_^

If this mistake is something that has bothered many readers, then let me know and I’ll fix it in all past chapters!

Part I: Chapter 35

Harry caught sight of Tom precisely where he had expected his brother to be: ensconced in one shadowy corner of Hogwarts’ library, at a table filled with neatly stacked up books.

He dashed towards him, and when he reached Tom, he glanced around, making sure there was no one close by, before he leaned forward and whispered quietly, “I want you to find a way to disable our Traces, at least for a couple of hours if not entirely, without the Ministry finding out.”

Tom quirked an eyebrow at him, as he drawled arrogantly, “I’m already looking into that, little brother.”

And he pointedly gestured at all the books orderly set on his table, half of them probably having come from the Restricted Section.

“Good,” said Harry, straightening up as he curtly nodded at him.

Though he knew his brother wasn’t working on the issue for the same reasons he had.
During the second week of school, Tom had found books under his pillow once more: Grindelwald’s Durmstrang textbooks on the Dark Arts, levels 3 and 4.

Tom had been giddy with excitement, while Harry had groused out, “We aren’t even done with Level Two from last year. How are we supposed to be done with all of them this year when we can’t even go to the Dueling Arena? The older Slytherins are keeping a close eye on the younger years, even more than before!”

“We have to find someplace else in which we can practice dark curses,” Tom had said, with a frown on his face. “Perhaps somewhere on the grounds of Hogwarts—”

“No,” had interjected Harry firmly. “The new wards of the school extend over the whole grounds and even the Forbidden Forest. And they have similar Ancient Runes as the older wards of Hogwarts – so it’s clear that they can also detect the use of illegal dark curses.”

Tom had stared at him with a smidgen of surprise. “You can see the new wards?”

“Yes,” Harry had said calmly, no longer feeling miffed about it. “Apparently, my ability is getting stronger. I’m beginning to see every bit of magic that is powerful.”

Especially the new wards, that glowed like burning fires to his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” demanded Tom at present, piercing him with narrowed eyes, a glint of curiosity in them.


And with that, he left for another part of the library, not sticking around to hear his brother’s opinion on the latter matter.

After what he had lived through during the holidays – the distress and constant fear and panic in London and of the people he cared about in the orphanage, and specially the brutal carnage of the destruction of Leisure Alley – he had made a firm decision that night when they had returned from
Diagon, which involved many things.

The evacuation he had experienced and returning to Hogwarts had only solidified his determination, as if a blind had been ripped from his eyes.

The students had had their Daily Prophets in the Hogwarts Express, with the news of what had happened to Leisure Alley. Thus, during the Sorting of the new first years, most had barely paid attention to it.

Not even Harry, because he was occupied with the understanding that dawned on him.

Students were horrified and scared by the news, as expected, but swiftly, Gryffindors started glaring at Slytherins from across the Great Hall, and harsh whispers began, as Slytherins sneered and other Houses bristled.

And the rivalry between Houses that had seemed to him so serious last year, suddenly became stupid to his eyes.

So what if dark purebloods usually ended up in Slytherin House, and historically, they had supported Dark Lords? His housemates were the children of Grindelwald’s supporters in England, if anything, not the enemy themselves. Yet students acted as if Hogwarts was the whole world, given the renewed surge of quarrels that seemed so petty to him now.

They had read the Daily Prophet and seen the pictures of what was left of Leisure Alley, but it didn’t seem as if they actually understood.

They hadn’t experienced the panic in London, the frenzied stress and fear permeating all around when the sirens blared alerting a possible air raid, they hadn’t seen people dying in the debris of Leisure Alley, and the pandemonium of the evacuation of children from London and the wretchedness it had caused.

Harry had.

It didn’t make him feel more experienced, knowledgeable, hardened or superior, just very wary and aware, as if he had harshly woken up from a fantasy, from the sense of seclusion and protection that Hogwarts gave, and seen reality in all its gritty ugliness.
He didn’t know whether to pity the other students or himself, at that. He didn’t dwell much on the matter, either way.

Harry considered himself to be in the midst of war, and he took it seriously and was never again going to feel so unprepared as that day in Leisure Alley.

Furthermore, all the things that had happened during the first term of their second year reinforced his decision.

Two days after the beginning of class, they had received Daily Prophets that reported Grindelwald’s newest attack. The Dark Lord had conquered Poland, employing the same methods as in Czechoslovakia.

The only difference was that no one had gone to the Poles’ aid.

After the Bulgarian Ministry of Magic had lost their Head Auror, Mr. Valko Krum, along with their entire Corps of Aurors when they had flooed into the Czechoslovakian Ministry to help them out, all the other Ministries of Magic were too scared to do the same for Poland.

The front page of the Daily Prophet had been filled with pictures of the attack, like last time. And there had only been a tiny article at one margin, written as if it was an afterthought, reporting that after the ‘Nazy’ occupation of Poland, Muggle Britain and France had declared war on Germany.

The Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, had formed a War Cabinet, naming ‘a funny-looking muggle by the name of Winston Church’ –the Daily Prophet hadn’t even spelled the man’s surname right– as First Lord of the Admiralty, which ‘for some unknown reason seems to make English muggles very happy’.

Days later, it reported that the Muggle Royal Air Force had begun raiding German ships and that their British Expeditionary Force had crossed to France. And apparently, wanting to seek help, Neville Chamberlain had asked the portrait in his office if he could see the Minister of Magic.

Harry had sadly shaken his head when he had read that. No one had answered Chamberlain’s request or paid him a visit. There was turmoil, havoc, and mayhem in Ministry of Magic, after what had happened to Leisure Alley.
The Wizengamot had cast a vote of no-confidence against Charlemagne McLaggen, the wizard being discharged from his post, fully stripped away from any privileges.

Harry had expected to see the wizard’s grandson, the pompous Ravenclaw prat of his year, Tiberius McLaggen, shamed and with shoulders slumped.

Instead, he had seen the boy boasting to Olive Hornby and her entourage of girl friends.

“He is not a McLaggen anymore,” Tiberius had blustered, puffing out his chest. “He has dishonored the family and Father has disowned him from our name, our vaults, and estates.”

It had been the Prewett twins who had further clarified matters to him and informed him about Charlemagne’s fate.

“Well, I’ve never liked him much,” said Felicity in a soft voice, cringing, “but to be betrayed by his own family…”

“When he saw how the winds were blowing,” piped in Felix, lowering his voice to a secretive murmur, his mismatched eyes gleaming with the excitement of revealing to Harry the nasty events, “the poor sod passed onto his son the title of Head of the McLaggen Clan. Thought it would be best, to spare his family.” He winked at Harry and snickered. “But I bet he wasn’t expecting that the first thing Tiberius’ dad would do was to disown him!”

“Oh, it’s terrible! Don’t laugh!” snapped Felicity at his twin, scowling. She shot Harry an anxious glance, as she added quietly, “It’s really the worst thing that can be done to a pureblood wizard. He’s been left with nothing!”

Felix carelessly waved a hand. “He got what he deserved, in my view.” He leaned towards Harry, and added animatedly, “Father says that Charlemagne has left the country. He’s probably fled to America, scared of being lynched by the angry mobs of wizards here!”

Felicity glared at him for that, but then piped in cheerfully, “Things are going to get better, though, now that he’s gone. The Wizengamot has declared a State of Emergency to put some order, and given that, they now have the power to choose an Interim Minister of Magic until there’s peace and elections can be held.”
And so they had done, choosing one of their own: Gravius Marchbanks.

The wizard’s picture was splattered all across the Daily Prophet during a whole month. He was an old man but not shrunken and small. Instead he seemed brimming with energy, strength, and stern determination, tall and burly, with white hair strictly cropped and blue eyes that looked both wise and fierce.

“This is awful,” Alphard had bemoaned, his face pale. “He’s vicious, Harry! He was the Head of Law Enforcement for decades before the Wizengamot made him an Elder, supposedly because he was brilliant and very efficient. Efficient my behind!” He shot Harry a fretful, despairing look, as he gestured wildly with his hands. “I’ve heard that half the dark wizards in Azkaban are there because of him. He hates my kind, he detests the Dark Arts - he’s utterly unfairly prejudiced!”

That day, when Harry had met the Prewett twins in their usual empty classroom, to spend sometime together, unsuspected, he had seen that his ginger-haired friends had an entirely different view on the matter.

“This is fantastic!” Felicity had cried out, cheerful and triumphant. “He’s an old friend of Dumbledore and he was one of the few Elders who believed him from the start. The first thing he’s done is to make Dumbledore the Supreme Mugwump of the Wizengamot.” Her beautiful mismatched eyes had glowed, as she added fiercely, “Grindelwald doesn’t stand a chance now that Dumbledore finally has political power!”

Harry hadn’t been too sure about that, but at least he had seen that things had improved.

One of Gravius Marchbanks’ first acts as Minister was to follow Dumbledore’s advice and put his Unspeakables to work in creating new wards.

For that purpose, the Ministry had even hired American wizards, ‘Specialists in Muggle Weaponry’, allegedly, to help English Unspeakables with their task.

It seemed that in the Union of Wands and Staffs of the Americas, wizards lived closed together, intermingled with muggles, happily so, and knew all about them.

Three months later, on a Sunday, the Heads of House had gathered their students in the Great Hall, and they had all seen, through the magnificent, high-arched windows, an army of Unspeakables
and five Americans going around the Castle, with concentrated and serious expressions on their faces, waving their wands.

It took them a whole day, during which everyone was forced to remain in the Great Hall so they wouldn’t get in the way.

Harry had seen the new wards forming before his eyes. They glowed as if alive and dancing: a net of coils of flames, they looked like.

Furthermore, the Daily Prophet had said that the Unspeakables and Americans would be paying a visit to every wizarding town and community, to cast the new type of wards that would protect them from bombs and supposedly any other type of muggle weapons.

The wizarding commercial area had been protected likewise - what was left of it, that was, because the rubbles of Leisure Alley had been cleared, the gap it had left behind had been sealed off, and only Knockturn and Diagon Alley remained.

Apparently, the Ministry of Magic had no funds to spare to reconstruct Leisure Alley, and out of respect to the dead, wouldn’t do so, regardless.

Moreover, the Ministry had taken further measures to protect themselves. They had changed locations.

They had bought the building of a muggle department store that had recently gone out of business because there weren’t any muggles left in London with the disposition of going shopping, and they had hired an army of wizarding architects.

The new Ministry’s headquarters were going to be completely underground.

“Seven levels, it has,” Felix disclosed to him. “And they’re putting in those muggle inventions – those cages that go up and down.”

“Elevators, you mean?” Harry supplied helpfully, staring at the boy in amusement.
“Yes, that,” said Felix, flipping a hand dismissively. “And everything’s going to be black - black tiles everywhere.” The boy shook his head, looking bamboozled. “One would think that if they’re under the earth, they would want to make it a bit more cheery, right? It sounds very ghastly and depressing to me-”

“Rubbish!” snapped Felicity, lifting her chin up. “It’s going to be very elegant and dignified.” She clamped her hands together, as she breathed out ecstatically, “And Father has said that there’s going to be a fountain made of gold – it’s already finished, he has seen it. It was Minister Marchbanks’ idea. It shows the unity of the magical races against the Forces of-”

Felix loudly snorted. “Right. There’s a Goblin gazing at the figure of a wizard with adoration.” He rolled his eyes. “As if a Goblin would ever do that!”

“It’s a representation!” bit out Felicity bristling, scowling at her twin. “Of our unity against the Forces of Evil!”

“Well, it’s a stupid one!” yelled Felix back. “The Goblins are laughing their arses off - don’t care two figs about Grindelwald and his ‘Forces of Evil’, do they?”

Thus, given everything, Harry had put his decision into action.

Firstly, he had decided that no matter how grim and horrible libraries seemed to him, he was going to suck it up and learn subjects that would be useful.

He could have done so much if he knew about Healing, when he had been trying to help those people in Leisure Alley. Even if he couldn’t cast magic, knowing how to detect if a bone was broken, a spine snapped or an organ pierced, would have helped much.

Harry didn’t understand why the subject wasn’t a course in Hogwarts’ curriculum, in fact; specially given the times they were living in. But he wasn’t going to wait around for the teachers or the Headmaster to realize the folly of its lack, if they ever did.

And of course, he had realized his brother was right. He couldn’t wait until third year to know about Ancient Runes. Wards were all around and it could be useful, someday, to know how to cast them or bring them down.
Secondly, he resolved that playtime was at an end. He had too many things to do and no time to waste, not only for teaching himself new things, but also for doing the tasks Santi had appointed to him.

Granted, he still didn’t understand half the things Santi had told him, but if the strange man believed that doing the tasks was in Harry’s best interest, then he would fulfill them and hope that what he learned from doing it would prove to be useful in the future.

For that purpose, he had begun researching as much as he could about portraits.

The plan had formed in his mind by the end of last school year, but the time and effort he was putting into hashing the details of his plot were infused with renewed focus and determination.

And for the first task Santi had given him, Harry had started searching the Castle again for the Grey Lady, now with tenacity and perseverance instead of reluctantly like in his previous weak attempts.

Hence, given his resolutions, the day that the announcement appeared in Slytherin’s common room that Quidditch trials were starting, he had marched up to Dorea Black and told her that he wouldn’t be participating.

“You mean to tell me that I spent all those Sundays last year, training you,” she hissed out furiously, “and even giving you that book so that you could correct your atrocious eyesight, and now you’ve suddenly decided you’re not interested in Quidditch? I could’ve been preparing someone else, Riddle! How dare you lay all my efforts to waste!”

“I’ll play next year,” Harry interjected coolly. “If things are better-”

But the girl left in an infuriated huff before she could hear him. Harry shrugged at that. It wasn’t Dorea’s reaction that concerned him.

His best friend hadn’t taken it well.

“But – but,” choked out Alphard, his grey eyes wide, looking extremely hurt, “I was looking forward to playing with you! I even bought a new broom so that you could keep my Comet 180. I even practiced during the whole summer so that I could be as good a Chaser as Dorea says you
“You don’t need me, Al,” said Harry softly, as he patted him on the back comfortingly and reassuringly. “I’m sure you’re going to be chosen for the Team.”

“That’s not the point,” said Alphard in a small voice. “I wanted to play with you. I wanted to have fun and beat the Gryffindors, together.”

The boy looked so crushed, devastated, and hurt, that Harry decided right then to put into action his other plan. His friend deserved nothing but complete honesty from him, and to understand the why of his decision.

Thus, right there, in the kitchen amidst the house-elves that were too busy preparing lunch for the Great Hall to pay them any attention, he had cast a Muffling Charm around them, and for full measure lowered his voice to a mere whisper, “There was something I didn’t tell you last year, Al…”

And he told the boy about Grindelwald’s letter and books.

By the end of it, Alphard was gawking at him with big grey eyes and hanging jaw, as Harry concluded, “So we don’t know how he found out that we’re Slytherin’s descendants and Parselmouths, but apparently he’s interested in—” he grimaced “—well, in being our ‘mentor’ of sorts, from afar.”

He shook his head and bit out gruffly, “Tom is over the moon about it, but I don’t like it.” He shot his friend a puzzled, apprehensive look. “I mean, what does he want from us, eh? Why is he interested in us in the first place?”

“‘Why’?” echoed Alphard, blinking at him. Then he straightened up with a jerk, as if someone had pinched him out of his stupefaction, and declared vehemently, “He’s interested because you’re Parselmouths, obviously!”

Frowning and thoroughly unconvinced, Harry said slowly, “Only because we’re Parselmouths?”

“‘Only because’?” repeated Alphard disbelievingly. “Of course it’s due to that!” The boy shook his head before he intently pierced him with his eyes. “Harry, I don’t think you realize what a big
deal it is to purebloods!"

Oh, Harry had a fairly good idea about that, especially after he had introduced Nagini to Alphard.

When he had taken her from the orphanage, he had believed that Tom would help to take care of her. On the Hogwarts’ Express his brother had crushed those hopes, though, and hadn’t changed his mind.

Thus, Harry, although it pained and saddened him, had to resort to keeping Nagini inside his trunk. He wanted her to be in Hogwarts, away from possible bombings of London, but he didn’t want to get expelled if someone caught sight of her, not with everything he had to do in the school.

So, he was only able to sneak her food from the kitchens, as often as possible. Nagini hadn’t been a happy little snake, but her temper had smoothened a bit when Harry had started to let her out at nights.

He waited about an hour after all his roommates had fallen asleep, and then took her out of the trunk and into the corridors of the dungeons, allowing her to slither around and get some air and exercise while he occupied himself by reading a book on Healing or Ancient Runes.

One night, however, Harry had been so immersed in his reading that he had lost sight of her. He had looked for Nagini, frantic with worry, in every nook and cranny of the dungeon’s corridors.

When he thought the worst had happened -that perhaps the snake hadn’t paid attention to his warnings and had gone up to the other floors of the school and had been found by a teacher- he saw her slithering towards him very fast, looking panicked.

“I want to leave!” she hissed, sounding utterly terrified, as she tried to climb up Harry’s legs so frenziedly that she failed.

Harry picked her up in his arms, frowning. “Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you everywhere-”

“I don’t want to be here!” Nagini hissed, as she tightly coiled herself around his arm, her thin body trembling. “Take me away!”
“Away where?” hissed Harry, his frown deepening with both puzzlement and concern. “What’s the matter?”

Nagini snapped her head up, piercing him with her yellow eyes, as she shivered and rushed out in agitation, “It scares me! I was only looking for someplace nice and comfortable –” she managed to somehow shoot him a look that seemed angered and accusing “- because I didn’t want to return to that nasty, smelly trunk!” Her head lowered as she added in a tremulous, quiet hiss, “I kept going down and down, I smelled food, and then I saw bones - and then I saw It!”

At the terrified look she gave him, Harry stared at her, his heart starting to pump loudly in his chest, as he intoned very slowly, “What did you see?”

“It looks like me but very big!” she said in a gasped out hiss. “It was sleeping, but It scared me, It felt wrong…” She hesitated, as if trying to find one of the words Tom had so long ago taught her in order to better express herself. “It felt very dangerous. My… instincts… yes, my instincts made me feel I shouldn’t be around It. That It would kill me!”

Harry’s breath hitched with excitement and he quickly urged, “Show me! Show me where you went!”

“No! I want to leave this place,” hissed Nagini furiously. “I don’t like it here. I don’t want to be where It is!”

“If you show me,” said Harry cajolingly, “I’ll find some other place for you, alright?”

Nagini shot him a mistrustful glance. “Promise?”

“Yes!” Harry hissed with exasperation.

The little snake skewered him with her yellow gaze before she coiled her tail to spring herself out of Harry’s arms. In a dash, Harry followed her as she quickly slithered down the corridor.

He stared, befuddled, when Nagini halted in a shadowy cranny of a wall.
“I went in there,” she hissed quietly, flicking her tail at something.

“Lumos!” whispered Harry, to then crouch as he held up his lit wand.

There was a very small opening at the base of the wall, and when he brought the light closer to it he saw that it was actually a pipe.

Harry sighed, rubbing his face with weariness as disappointment encompassed him. There was no way he could fit in there; it was apt for just mice, at best.

Regardless, what Nagini had revealed to him was discovery enough.

Since the beginning of term, he and Alphard, along with little Ulysses, had resumed their search for the Chamber of Secrets, beginning on the sixth floor since they had finished with the seventh before the holidays.

After finding the huge pipe hidden behind the Mirror of Desires – the name they had anointed it with, given what it showed and the backward phrase inscribed on its upper frame- they had narrowed down the type of monster to either a Leviathan or a Basilisk.

That meant that they still went around with bat dung smeared on their faces to fend off a Leviathan.

Now, there wouldn’t be any need for that anymore.

Thus, Harry jumped to his feet as he instructed quickly, “Wait for me here!”

He was gone before Nagini could complain.

Careful of not making any noise, Harry finally reached his dormitory and didn’t waste any time in waking Alphard up.
Harry instantly covered his friend’s mouth with a hand, as he whispered hastily and with much excitement, “Don’t speak, just follow me. I have something to show you.”

The boy stared at him groggily, looking sleepy, startled, but then intrigued.

When Alphard nodded, Harry grabbed him by the hand and swiftly pulled him along, so fast that the poor boy tripped several times on the hem of his long, nightgown tunic.

Once they reached the cranny of the corridor, Harry picked up Nagini and made prompt introductions, “Al, this is Nagini, a snake Tom found in our orphanage years ago.”

Alphard stared at the little snake with a thoroughly gobsmacked look on his face, as he croaked, “Wha-”

But Harry didn’t give him a chance to speak, so enthused he was, as he shot Nagini a look, and hissed, “This boy is Alphard Black-” his look became stern when he saw the gleam in her eyes as she gazed at Alphard “-he’s a friend, Nagini! So don’t even think of biting him, understood?”

“Yes, Master,” hissed Nagini reluctantly, looking thoroughly disappointed.

Harry snapped his head up to glance at Alphard. “Al, she’s told me that…”

He trailed off and blinked. The boy was frozen in place, staring at him with huge grey eyes, looking astonished, dazed, and awed.

“What’s wrong?” said Harry worriedly. “Are you alright?”

“You hissed,” breathed out Alphard, staring at him with eyes as wide as platters, “and she hissed back… it sounded like gibberish… but you were both trading hisses…”

“So?” Harry frowned at him, and then said with exasperation, “You already know I’m a
“Yes,” said Alphard slowly, still looking dumbfounded and bedazzled, “but knowing is very different than actually seeing it, hearing it…”

“What do you mean?” demanded Harry hotly, feeling quite indignant. “You’ve heard me speaking Parseltongue many times before, Al! Or did you think that I was making it up, that I lied when I told you that I was a-

“No, I believed you, of course,” interjected Alphard quickly, before he huffed and said matter-of-factly, “But last year you were hissing at walls, furniture, and ornaments! It’s not the same. Hearing you carrying a conversation with a snake-” the boy intoned the word with reverence, as if snakes, by association to Parselmouths, had suddenly become glorious mythical creatures of great renown and godly-like subjects deserving worship “-is very different. That is in truth actually speaking Parseltongue, in my opinion.”

Then Alphard went back to stare at him again with big grey eyes, looking breathless and entranced.

Harry merely rolled his eyes. That was when he learned that the whole fascination with Parselmouths definitely had to be a pureblood thing.

“Right,” muttered Harry under his breath, before he pointed a finger at the small pipe Nagini had discovered. “Never mind that, Al. What I wanted to tell you is that…”

And he proceeded to quickly explain what the snake had found, and for full measure, he even asked, “It didn’t have seven heads, did it?”

“No, just one, very big,” hissed Nagini, giving a shiver, before she pierced him with her gaze and added sharply, “and very ugly,” as if she wanted to make sure Harry knew he would never be conferred the honor of beholding a creature as dazzlingly beautiful as her, lack of impressive size regardless.

Harry shot her an amused look at that, before he said excitedly to Alphard, “It’s confirmed. The monster is not a Leviathan – it’s a Basilisk!”

That seemed to snap Alphard out of his trance, and the boy shifted nervously on his feet, shooting a
wary glance at the small pipe at the base of the wall before them.

“The Chamber of Secrets must be underneath the dungeons or even deeper - in the foundations of the Castle, because Nagini said she went down,” murmured Harry quietly as he crouched on the floor, staring at the pipe. He released a heavy sigh and carded his fingers through his hair. “So we know it’s there, through here, but unless there’s some spell that I haven’t heard about that can miraculously turn us into a mouse, or something, I don’t see how we can—”

“There is!” gasped out Alphard, his expression bright and enlivened, making Harry glance up at him, disconcerted. “If we’re lucky, it could help us with this. I’ve always wanted to learn how to do it.” The boy puffed his chest out proudly. “Us, Blacks, are usually capable of mastering it, you know? It’s a trait, in our line.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” said Harry, utterly puzzled, before his eyes shone with hope. “Do you mean that there’s actually a spell that changes people into mice?”

“No, it isn’t a simple spell,” said Alphard enthusiastically, “it’s a type of Human Transfiguration. Very advanced, of course. And not everyone can do it. It takes years to learn!”

Harry gave him an utterly confused look. “It takes years to learn how to change into a mouse?”

“Not into a mouse,” replied Alphard vehemently, before he gave a hesitant pause. “Well, it could happen of course, no one knows beforehand what animal they can turn into, if at all.” He shot Harry a beaming grin. “A wizard’s animagus form will be that of an animal that is akin to him – that’s what it’s called, Animagus Transformation, and you have to register in the Ministry and everything, because if not it’s illegal!”

Thoroughly taken aback, Harry murmured slowly, “You mean to tell me that some wizards can turn into animals? What - permanently?”

“Oh no, you can shift back and forth into your animagus form,” said Alphard knowledgably, before he scrunched his nose. “No wizard would remain in his animagus form forever. From what I’ve heard, it’s not a good idea, it makes you have the characteristics of your animal when you’re back to being a wizard. And some have even gotten stuck in their animagus form without being able to shift back!”

As it dawned on him what Alphard was saying, Harry jumped to his feet, his eyes sparkling with
excitement. “So you think that we should learn how to do this, er… animagus thing, because then we could fit in there—” he gestured at the pipe “—and finally find the Chamber of Secrets!”

Smiling widely, Alphard nodded, as he piped in, “Hopefully, we’ll both succeed, and if we’re lucky, either you or I will have an animagus form that is small and useful.”

“Fantastic!” said Harry joyfully, before his shoulders suddenly slumped, dejected. “But it takes years, right?”

“Yes, but it’s the only thing I can think of,” retorted Alphard adamantly. “From what I know, there are Human Transfiguration spells that can turn parts of your body into that of an animal, but not your whole body – and that’s what we need.” He shot him a large grin, as he added, animatedly gesturing with his hands, “If we start learning how to do the Animagus Transformation right away, then by the time we’re in fifth year we could be doing it! And we’ll still keep looking for another entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in the meanwhile.”

Perking up, Harry beamed at him. “Sounds like a good plan.”

Alphard happily nodded, as he intoned, “I’ll ask Mother to send me books about Animagus Transformation—”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” interrupted Harry uneasily. “We should first see if the library has books on that.”

Two days after the beginning of their second year, Alphard had received a Howler.

Hearing the voice of the boy’s mother shrieking, left Harry with no doubts from whom Walburga had inherited her screechy voice.

Alphard’s parents hadn’t been at all happy when they had discovered two books missing from their library. Though the Howler hadn’t mentioned anything about the matter, just told Alphard very loudly and furiously that he was going to pay for his misdeed when he returned home for Christmas, and that he shouldn’t be expecting any gifts for the foreseeable future, not until he got his first grey hairs.

His friend had gone pale, yet had tried to give Harry an unconcerned shrug of the shoulders and a
However, Alphard hadn’t dared to further risk his parent’s wrath and had lent Harry the books on Occlumency and Legilimency for just three days before returning them by owl.

When Harry passed them on to his brother, along with the time constraint, Tom hadn’t been pleased.

And three days proved to be too few, because it seemed that the Black books were protected with all sorts of magic that made it impossible to make copies of them with the use of spells.

Tom had apparently foreseen the problem, but hadn’t found a way around it in three days, thus had to resort to taking some notes by hand about the subjects covered by the books.

It had left Tom completely dissatisfied and the boy was currently trying to find a way to buy tomes by owl from a bookshop in Knockturn Alley, without anyone finding out about it, of course, since the subjects, at least Legilimency, were considered Dark.

“Oh no, don’t you see?” said Alphard, waving a hand dismissively. “My mother will be very proud of me when I tell her I want to start studying the Animagus Transformation. She will gladly send me all the books I want, for that. It’s a Black thing.” He then shot Harry a wicked grin. “And it will make her forget about the other books I took from the Black library without permission.”

“If you’re sure,” said Harry, beginning to nod.

He yelped in the next second, staring disbelievingly at Nagini. The little snake was coiled around his ankle, with sharp fangs pressed against his flesh. She hadn’t sunk them in fully, but had pierced through his skin slightly.

Alarmed, Harry instantly clutched his ankle, his eyes wide with panic. “You’re venomous, Nagini, you know that!”

They had had ample proof of it throughout the years, when Nagini managed to instantly kill the mice in the orphanage by just biting them once.
“I didn’t let my poison flow, Master,” hissed the snake calmly, before her tone turned sharp and angered, “You were talking to the stupid boy and ignoring me. You promised you would take me away from here! I demand you do it now!”

Harry let out a deep exhalation of sheer relief, before he glowered at her, hissing hotly, “Yeah, yeah, you call me ‘Master’ because I’m the one who’s taking care of you, but you wouldn’t dare do to Tom what you just did to me. He would have snapped your neck for that!”

Nagini flipped her tail dismissively, undaunted and unrepentant. “But you’re a nice Master. I’m not worried.”

“Unbelievable,” grumbled Harry darkly under his breath as he picked her up. “You have no shame. You’ve become worse than Tom.”

Nagini flicked her forked tongue out to kiss the skin of his hand, as she preened and hissed smugly and contently, “I know.”

“That wasn’t a compliment!” snapped Harry, scowling, as he began marching down the corridor.

“Where are you going?” whispered Alphard nonplussed, quickly catching up to him.

“I have to take her out of the castle,” said Harry with a sigh. “She fears the Basilisk and refuses to stay here.” He frowned pensively as he kept walking, and cast his friend a quizzical glance. “Do you think I should take her to the Forbidden Forest?”

Alphard’s eyebrows shot upwards, before he paled a mite and said nervously, “Well, I suppose it’s a good place for a snake, but…” He lowered his voice, as he continued apprehensively, “But there are Centaurs in the Forest and all sorts of other dangerous creatures.”

Harry snorted at that. “I would worry more about them than Nagini. She can be a very vicious little snake, let me tell you.”

“Here,” he then said as he passed Nagini to Alphard and took out his map from a pocket.
Apparently, being told that Nagini could be vicious hadn’t put Alphard at ease when having to handle her, since the boy had instantly pulled her far away from himself, leaving half her body dangling in the air, as he stared at her with a white face and a scared, fixed gaze, as if ready to jump backwards at any given moment that Nagini could fancy making a lunge at him.

Harry merely shook his head as he unfolded his piece of parchment, tapping it with his wand. “All for one and one for all!”

With the model of Hogwarts Castle in his hands, indicating their precise location as they trudged forwards, the boys swiftly slipped outside the Castle without being detected.

Alphard was kind enough to cast Warming Charms on them -since by late October the grounds had already become covered with snow and the nights were very cold- while Harry took Nagini again as they neared the Forbidden Forest, explaining as much as he could.

“A forest,” she hissed sounding puzzled, before her yellow eyes brightened with fascination and excitement. “That’s a place with many trees, yes?”

Harry shot her a glance, feeling a bit guilty. The snake had hardly seen many trees or greenery in her life, since she had always been in London, stuck in the orphanage. She had certainly had a very restricted life, especially for one of her kind.

“Yes, and I’m sure you’ll love it,” hissed Harry softly, his tone then turning firm and stern, “but did you listen to what I said about Centaurs?”

Nagini bobbed her flat head up and down. “Yes, they are horses.”

“No,” groaned Harry, “they are part horse, part human.” He shook his head disparagingly. “And from what I know they are very intelligent and consider themselves superior to humans, so don’t go around calling them nags or something of the sort.” He blinked, and then shrugged. “Well, call them whatever you want, they won’t understand you, anyway.”

“I will,” hissed Nagini, looking thoroughly pleased. Her eyes suddenly gleamed, as she asked avidly, “Are they tasty?”

Extremely alarmed, Harry hissed sharply, “Don’t you even try! They are big and you’re too little –
they’ll trample all over you with their hooves, Nagini!”

“I’m not little!” she stated in a bristling hiss. “I’ll grow to be a very big snake. I know it.”

“Sure you will,” said Harry with a roll of his eyes, “but until that happens, I don’t want you going biting more than you can chew, understand? You couldn’t even gobble down one of their hands, right now, as much as you tried.”

Nagini let out a harrumphing hiss, but seemed to forget about the matter altogether when they reached the edge of the Forbidden Forest, her giddiness at the sight evident by the way she started squirming in Harry’s arms.

He gently placed her on the grass, as he hissed sternly, “I’ll meet you right here every Saturday.” He gestured at the distant Castle. “You’ll know it’s a Saturday because people will be out and about. And you must remember to be here after the sun has set, over the lake.” He pointed a finger in its direction. “When it starts to get dark. Alright? This is important because I won’t be going into the forest looking for you, Nagini.”

“I understand, Master,” she hissed quickly, shooting desirous glances into the Forbidden Forest. She halted to shoot him an inquiring look. “Are there kinds like me in there?”

“Snakes? Yes, I reckon there has to be some.”

Nagini let out a long, vibrant, gleeful hiss. “I’m going to find a mate, then!”

And after that declaration, the little snake dashed into the darkness.

Mind boggled, Harry was left utterly speechless and discombobulated, his eyes popping out, before he roared, “WHAT? You come back here!”

“What did she say? What did she say?” pressed Alphard, bouncing on the heels of his shoes with curiosity.

Harry told him, carding his fingers through his hair so forcefully that he didn’t realize he was
tearing some off, as he added angrily, “I don’t know where she got that from! I never said a word to her about ‘mating’. Where on earth did she get that idea?”

Alphard started guffawing and laughing so hard that the boy bent over, clutching his midriff, as he choked out in between chortles. “You sound like a father worried about his daughter’s virtue!”

“I don’t,” snapped Harry, scowling. “It’s just that she really is too young and little, Al!” He threw his hands up into the air. “And what am I supposed to do if she has babies?

She’s become too much for me to handle, already!”

His friend didn’t seem to understand the gravity of the situation, though, since the boy kept chuckling and snickering.

“Oh shut up!” bit out Harry, thoroughly miffed.

It only made Alphard laugh harder and Harry left with a huff, dismayed by the possibilities of what he might one day encounter when visiting Nagini.

Nevertheless, after he had told Alphard about Grindelwald’s connection to him and Tom, his friend had understood his reason for not wanting to be in the Slytherin Quidditch Team.

Harry let him believe it was just because he wanted to use every single second of spare time to study Dark Arts from Grindelwald’s books, to be prepared. He didn’t tell him about all the other things he was doing as well.

Alphard felt so anxious and concerned for him, and the boy had taken the matter so seriously, that he didn’t question where Harry was all the time, when they didn’t have class.

When Alphard was chosen as a Chaser for the Slytherin Team, as Harry had known would happen, it also meant that they didn’t have much time to spend together, and their search for another entrance to the Chamber of Secrets inevitably dwindled.

Harry wasn’t concerned about it: it wasn’t a priority for him anymore.
He didn’t tell his brother that, of course, but really, they already knew they were Slytherin’s
descendants and Tom only wanted to find the Chamber so that he could take Malfoy there, as a
witness to the evidence that Tom and Harry were Parselmouths and Salazar Slytherin’s heirs. All
because Tom had his sights on becoming the leader of Slytherin House.

Harry didn’t see the point. That wouldn’t help them in the war.

And he was occupied in far too many other things: in the tasks Santi had given him, in learning
Ancient Runes and Healing, in continuing studying German, and the Dark Arts from Grindelwald’s
books, in finding somewhere he and Tom could go practice dark curses without being detected by
wards, and then he would also have on his plate learning Occlumency and Legilimency with Tom,
and the Animagus Transformation with Alphard, when the boys got around getting their respective
books on the subjects.

Finally, though, all his efforts began to pay off. The very first occasion happening on the day Harry
had been dreading: the Yule Ball Celebration.

It would place another duty on his shoulders, a very awkward, bizarre one, but it would also solve
several problems in one stroke.
Part I: Chapter 36

Harry was in a very bad mood. The Yule Ball was certainly more trouble than it was worth. He had hoped that by the time the celebration approached, he and Tom would have been able to go to the orphanage for Christmas, like last time.

However, two weeks ago he had finally received a letter from Alice. St. Jerome's children and caregivers were still in a refuge in a small country town, with no expectations of returning to London anytime soon, even though England hadn't been bombed by Germans yet, as far as muggles knew.

Alice had expressed that they were all well and that their living conditions weren't that bad. Harry hadn't believed it. How could he, when she had written to him on the margins and blank spaces of an old newspaper and with a coal stick? The fact that Alice couldn't find paper and pencil was indication enough of how dire things had to be for them.

Moreover, Yuletide at Hogwarts wasn't like in the previous year. Most students had remained at school because, after Grindelwald had openly come out as a Dark Lord, there was such fear in Wizarding England that parents felt that Hogwarts was the safest place for their children.

Even most dark pureblood children had stayed, unlike before.

"Well, there isn't going to be a Winter Season," Alphard had piped in, when he explained why the Blacks and most Slytherins were staying at school. He deeply sighed as he played with his plate of food in the kitchens. "My parents and other purebloods cannot throw parties after what happened to Leisure Alley, can they? It would look very bad." He shot Harry an apprehensive look as he lowered his voice to an uncomfortable, apologetic whisper, "They cannot let anyone suspect that they support the Dark Lord. They have to keep up appearances. So we're staying put at Hogwarts,
like all the rest."

Not only that, but the Castle seemed to be infused in a fever of exalted gossip of who was going with whom, what they were going to wear, what new hairstyle or fashion was going to be displayed, which dances there were going to be, and whatnot.

Harry didn't understand it. They were in the midst of war and girls and boys were more worried about having a date, getting someone popular to hang from their arms, and having a jolly good time.

"It's because no one wants to think about war," muttered Alphard, sighing sadly when Harry had grumbled about the matter. The boy then shot him an interested look. "Who are you going to take, in the end?"

"Dunno," retorted Harry peevishly, as he savagely speared a potato with his fork.

Alphard snickered at that, already knowing about Harry's ill-fated attempts in getting a partner.

Harry had remembered Felicity's suggestion for the last Yule Ball and had had every intention to march up to Minerva McGonagall to ask the older girl to be his date. Unlucky, he had gotten wind that she had already been asked by a fourth-year Ravenclaw.

Not yet daunted and dispirited, he had then decided to resort to a good friend.

"I'm going with Algie Longbottom," Felicity had said softly, looking downcast and regretful. Two high spots of pink colored her cheeks, as she added nervously, "He asked me first... If I had known you would have...

She trailed off as her blush intensified, shooting him a fretful and deeply apologetic and remorseful glance.

Harry sighed in disappointment as he left the Gryffindor common room, only to be halted by Felix as he was about to climb into the portrait hole.

"You're an idiot," stated the red-haired boy, huffing with annoyance. "My sister waited for days, hoping you would ask her." Felix rolled his mismatched eyes at Harry's bemused expression. "You're completely oblivious, aren't you?"

Harry frowned at him, utterly confused. He had thought the boy would rail at him for attempting to ask Felicity out. After all, he had seen Felix glaring at and warding off all the boys who had given the merest inkling of being interested in Felicity. Felix had always been very protective of his twin; Harry had had ample evidence of that in the past.

"Next year," added Felix, looking irritated, "ask her before anyone else, you dunce. I rather it's you than any other boy. I know you wouldn't dare do anything frisky with her."

Harry frowned at him, utterly confused. He had thought the boy would rail at him for attempting to ask Felicity out. After all, he had seen Felix glaring at and warding off all the boys who had given the merest inkling of being interested in Felicity. Felix had always been very protective of his twin; Harry had had ample evidence of that in the past.

"Why does everyone think I should be worrying about girls?" Harry had groused out with vexation, as he violently carded his fingers through his hair, when he vented his spleen with Alphard.

Tom had been worse than Felix Prewett, demanding to know who Harry was taking to the Yule Ball, looking angered, irritated, and impatient. Which made no sense, because Harry's scar had
throbbed with pain when he had told his brother he was going to ask Felicity Prewett out, and then Tom had sneered and berated him when he had disclosed that Felicity was taken and that he didn't have anyone else.

"You are going to make me look bad if you don't have a partner," Tom had snapped, shooting him a scathing look. "Get someone worthy and learn how to dance! You will not make a fool of yourself - it would reflect badly on me and I won't have it."

Harry had shot him a dark scowl at that, because Tom had already been inviting over Olive Hornby to the Slytherin's common room, and the Ravenclaw girl had been simpering and fawning over Tom ever since, gushing about what a perfect couple they made and how everyone was going to envy them on the dance floor of the Yule Ball.

"I don't fancy anyone!" bit out Harry at his friend, before he huffed, affronted and crossed. "I have other things to think about. Who cares about dates and girls!"

"Everyone our age and older," piped in Alphard matter-of-factly, with an exasperated roll of his grey eyes. "We are thirteen. Of marriageable age, already, in the Wizarding World."

Harry cast him a disgruntled look. Tom and he would be turning thirteen soon, in New Year's, but he didn't see what that had to do with anything. He wasn't interested in girls, didn't even think about such things. Though he knew he was in the minority.

His very own roommates didn't seem to think about anything else, especially Orion Black who had become a consummate flirt with anything that moved, Neron Lestrange who smirked and leered at anything female, and Thaddeus Avery who stuttered and salivated like a Troll at anything more passable than a light post.

Abraxas Malfoy was another matter altogether. Now everyone knew that the boy was engaged to Kasimira Von Krauss, which apparently meant a great deal to their circle of purebloods since the boy's clout and prestige in Slytherin House seemed to have heightened after the news, if possible. Though Malfoy wasn't taking anyone to the Yule Ball. Apparently, per propriety rules, he couldn't and had to go alone.

Not only that, but Alphard was certainly right that thirteen marked an important age for purebloods. The other Blacks in their year were already suffering the consequences of being of legal age to be married or betrothed.

Alphard had told him that the Rosiers had approached his parents, and negotiations were well under way.

"Now that Druella's mother has baby Evan, the Rosier line is secured with a male heir," the boy had explained with a knowledgeable, worldly air about him, "but that means there's even more pressure for them to procure a good marriage for their daughter." Alphard scrunched his nose up in disgust. "Druella is very beautiful, I grant you, but she's still a selfish, spoiled hag. I do really pity my brother Cygnus." He let out an aggrieved, lamenting sigh. "Cygnus is not happy about it but he'll end up doing his duty because he's the heir. Father is very pleased with the match between our House and the Rosiers. 'Especially in times of war, allegiances with other powerful pureblood families are crucial', it's what he's always said."

And apparently, after Old Maximilian Malfoy had scorned Walburga, Alphard's parents had decided to kill two birds with one stone and secure the Black legacy by uniting the two branches of the family. It had been decided that Walburga would be engaged to Orion Black.
"But... he's your first cousin, isn't he?" Harry had choked out, thoroughly taken aback when Alphard had broken the news to him.

Alphard had blinked at him uncomprehendingly. "So?"

Harry had shaken his head and swallowed his remarks.

Though, unlike Alphard's older brother Cygnus, who seemed to take his responsibility to the family very seriously and by looking at him no one would be able to tell that the boy wasn't happy with the future bride chosen for him, Orion Black didn't seem to have any intention of changing his ways.

The handsome boy had a flock of students trailing after him and clearly took great pleasure in flirting back with them. It had led to several tumultuous scenes in the Slytherin common room, as Walburga Black shrieked like an infuriated banshee at Orion and the boy merely sneered at her and dismissively turned heel to lay his charms on thick on the nearest pretty thing.

Alphard, on the other hand, had it easy. It didn't seem the boy's parents were concerned about making a match for him, since he wasn't the heir. The boy had been simply instructed to be his cousin's—the pretty Lucretia Black's—escort for the Yule Ball.

Thus, all in all, it meant that everyone in Slytherin House had their dates and partners. All except Harry, and he had never felt so harried about the matter.

"Then I'll ask Myrtle Mimbletinion!" he bellowed, exasperated, when Tom once again badgered him about the issue.

His brother had already shot down every possible candidate that had crossed his mind, and Harry was thoroughly fed up.

"Moaning Myrtle?" hissed out Tom, his dark blue eyes flashing dangerously, his tone laced with deep disgust and contempt. "The mudblood mocked by the whole school? I think not."

"Who I take to the stupid, bloody Ball is my problem, not yours!" Harry snapped, as he slammed the door of the bathroom shut on his brother's face.

He was very late. He had spent the last hours meandering about the Castle like a lost soul, moody and disgruntled as he saw the whole school getting ready for the ball, as he dragged his feet, wishing he could just skip the whole thing.

The other Slytherin boys were already changed and dressed, with their dates awaiting in the common room, especially Tom who looked as if he had stepped out from some magazine, with his dark hair perfectly groomed and his spotless, rich formal dress robes of Monsieur Ermenegilde with white bow tie and stiff collar.

Harry, on the other hand, still had no clue what he was going to do. Though he was seriously considering the possibility of just asking Myrtle to get it over with.

He wasn't exactly looking forward to it, the girl still seemed a tad unbalanced, but he was at the end of his rope and he had seen Myrtle hanging in the corridors, at times scowling darkly at the couples passing by, other times glancing hopefully around for someone to ask her.

Sighing, Harry got undressed and sank into a bathtub filled with bubbly, purple water, tiredly closing his eyes. For a moment, he had the fleeting idea he could just soak there and pretend he had fallen asleep.
"So here you are."

Harry's eyes flew wide open and he yelped at the sight, seeing the ghost partly submerged in his water, staring at him with a scowl on her face.

He flattened himself to one side of the bathtub, frantically hoarding more bubbles with his arms to cover his parts, as his face turned red and he croaked out, flustered and disconcerted, "What are you doing here!"

The Grey Lady gave him a long, unperturbed glance. "Looking for you."

"What?" said Harry disbelievingly, to then feel a surge of anger. "I've been the one looking for you all over the castle for months! And you've been fleeing from me every time you've seen me coming!"

Undaunted, the ghost shot him a cool glance, as she said sharply, "I've changed my mind. I have realized that Santiago isn't going to make you help me until I've told you my secrets."

Harry blinked at her. "Santiago? Who the hell is Santiago?"

"Santi, boy!" snapped the Grey Lady, scowling at him. "Are you really as slow witted as you seem?" She gave him an impatient, irritated look as she floated up from the water, and added tartly, "Never mind, I know the answer already. Come, let's go."

Feeling utterly bewildered, Harry stared at her. "Go where?"

"I have something to show you," she replied shortly. "Now be quick about it."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" said Harry disconcerted, sinking deeper into the bathtub. "I'm not even dressed!"

The Grey Lady's lips twisted in a grimace as she shot the bubbles Harry was frenziedly using to cover himself a disparaging look. "I'm not interested in seeing your dangling bits, boy!"

"My what?" choked out Harry, scandalized, feeling he couldn't be getting any redder given the way he felt his cheeks blazing.

The ghost let out a scoff, leaning forward to peer down at Harry's bubbles, as she said flatly, "Nothing impressive down there. I've seen better in my day. Now that we're through with that, get up and follow me."

Beet red, Harry stared at her with mouth hanging open, not knowing if he should feel offended and outraged or just mortified and appalled.

"Very well," snapped the Grey Lady impatiently when he remained still and speechless. "Then preserve your modesty and come find me in the place we first met."

And with that, she swiftly whooshed upwards and disappeared through the ceiling of the bathroom.

Blinking, Harry finally shook his head, still feeling a mite perplexed. In the next second, he was quick to act, though. He doused himself with an Aguamenti Charm and then cast several drying spells.

He hesitated for a moment, as he glanced from his discarded Slytherin uniform to the dress robes he had laid out. He decided on the latter, to keep up appearances, and donned the garbs quickly.
It wasn't that hard to slip through the Slytherin common room unnoticed. The Yule Ball would be commencing soon and the room was filled with people and couples chattering excitedly.

He even caught sight of Tom, with Olive Hornby hanging from his arm, shooting smug looks at girls who were enviously gazing at her. Tom, for his part, didn't seem to be paying much attention to his admirers for once, since the boy was glancing around with searching, narrowed eyes and an angered expression on his face.

Quite sure he knew who Tom was looking for, Harry carefully tiptoed along the walls, ducking now and then when his brother's gaze roved over, and finally pelted out of the common room.

Now intrigued and excited by the unexpected encounter with the ghost, Harry quickly began climbing his way up.

On the ground floor, he saw plenty of students already making their way to the Great Hall, as lively music began to sound. And even though he waved at acquaintances here and there, like the Prewett twins with their dates and Dorea Black and Charlus Potter already hand-in-hand and glowing with besotted, sappy happiness, he didn't halt.

By the time he took a turn to take the moving stairs that led to the seventh floor, there was absolute silence and no one in sight.

"Are you looking for the Chamber of Secrets again?"

The lilting voice startled him so much that Harry nearly jumped in the air. His heart was thundering in his chest as he swirled around and saw Abraxas Malfoy standing a few feet away from him, in velvety pale grey dress robes that accentuated his fair features, though the boy looked distinctly ruffled, breathing hard, as if he had had quite a run.

"Bloody hell, Malfoy, you scared me!" snapped Harry, before he narrowed his eyes at the boy, angered. "You've been following me! I told you not to do that!"

Recovering his breath, Abraxas Malfoy indolently leaned against a wall and drawled placidly, "Of course I followed you. I saw you in the common room, you were behaving very suspiciously."

"So what?" bit out Harry, scowling darkly. "I told you not to spy on me again."

"And I told you I would, if it pleased me," intoned Malfoy calmly. He tilted his head to a side, pinning him with his silvery eyes as he demanded, "Where are you going?"

Clenching his teeth, Harry gritted out, "It's none of your business. Scram and leave me the hell alone, Malfoy. Don't you have a ball to go to?"

Abraxas arched a pale eyebrow at him. "I have no interest in the Yule Ball, as I am without a partner." His lips quirked into a smirk, as he added loftily, "I'm much more interested in what you're up to." His eyes seemed to gleam as he said excitedly, "Have you found it yet?"

Glaring, Harry said flatly, "No. We'll tell you when I do, you already know that."

Malfoy's smirk grew larger, as he approached him in measured steps. "I do, now that you've confirmed it for me."

Harry stiffened, feeling a jolt of fury as he spat accusingly, "You did know what my brother would want from you! You said it, I heard you-"
"What I told you were mere suspicions and speculations," interjected Malfoy in a satisfied drawl. He arched a cool eyebrow at him as he added curtly, "You do realize that I will not bear witness and spread the word without asking something in return, do you not?"

"Of course," said Harry bitterly, shooting him a disgusted look before he huffed and shrugged his shoulders unconcernedly. "You'll have to settle that with my brother when the time comes."

"I certainly will," said Abraxas slowly, looking too pleased with himself. He glanced around curiously. "I expected Alphard to be with you."

Taken aback, Harry froze, staring at him, before he bit out contemptuously, "Black? Why would Black be with me?"

Abraxas shot him a patronizing, amused glance. "Come, come, there's no need to keep up pretenses between us. I've been following you. I know you meet him in the kitchens and that he's your secret little friend-"

"I haven't the foggiest what you're blabbering about," snapped Harry angrily.

Malfoy chuckled under his breath. "Even if I had not been following you, it wasn't that hard to piece together." He smirked at him. "You see, Alphard used to have a Comet 180, the same type of broom you have in your trunk, shrunken, inside a pair of socks-"

"You've gone through my things!" growled Harry furiously, his hands clenching into fists. "You had no right-"

"Of course I did," intoned Abraxas, giving him a pleasant smile. He then shook his head chidingly, as he tsked and clicked his tongue. "You really should cast stronger spells on your trunk, Riddle. But my point is that you have Alphard's broom now and his Scorcru-

"I don't know what Black had or didn't have," retorted Harry hotly. "My muggle parents bought my broom and Ulysses for me!"

"What muggle parents?" said Abraxas acidly, any traces of amusement or mock amiability vanishing from his face. "Let's not play games, Riddle. You're aware that I know that you and your brother are Parselmouths and Slytherin's descendants. His face contorted with disgust as he sneered disdainfully, "Actually, I even know you are lowly orphans, raised in a grimy muggle orphanage in London, at that."

Harry's green eyes narrowed to slits, as he spat poignantly, "Your dear ole grandpa told you that, did he?"

"My grandfather?" intoned Abraxas, suddenly letting out a sharp, low chuckle, before his expression turned grave. "I'm not stupid. I did not ask Grandfather about you two. I tell him nothing. I gleaned that information from Professor Slughorn, who evidently didn't know that you and your brother had been telling people that you have muggle parents."

At first feeling a frisson of annoyance at their loose-tongued Head of House, Harry then frowned, giving the boy a long, considering look, cocking his head to a side as he muttered, "You don't like your granddad much, do you?"

Malfoy's eyes narrowed, before he gave a frosty smile and waved a hand dismissively. "My relationship with my grandfather is of no concern of yours, Riddle. Yet."

"Yet?" echoed Harry, a hard expression on his face as he demanded, "What's that supposed to
"That it will someday," drawled Malfoy pleasantly, giving him a sharped-edged smirk. "Soon, I hope." His eyes then suddenly narrowed, as he said biting, "Though I gather you already know a bit about me and my grandfather, do you not?" He shot him an ugly sneer. "Your little friends, the Prewetts twins, must have told you all about it, big mouthed, bloodtraitor scum that they are-"

"Don't insult them!" hissed out Harry, bristling and furious. "They're worth a dozen of you – at least they are on the right side!"

"Right side?" Abraxas stared at him, before he chuckled loudly. "Albus Dumbledore's side, you mean? And you consider that as the 'right' side, as in the side you'd want to be on?" He shook his head and tutted mockingly, looking as if he was immensely enjoying himself. "Oh, Riddle, Riddle... You have no idea what's coming to you, do you? The fact that you and your brother are orphans will only make it all the easier for them."

"Make what easier for who?" snapped Harry heatedly, glowering at the boy.

Abraxas quirked an eyebrow at him, shooting him a taunting smirk. "Well, if you're so dimwitted that you haven't figured it out already, I'm not going to bother to enlighten you. I did tell you that I would be spending my next holidays in Germany with my betrothed, did I not?"

"Right," said Harry, scowling and feeling thoroughly fed up with Malfoy's pointless mind games. "You can sod off now, Malfoy, I have things to do."

"Indeed?" said Abraxas, glancing around their surroundings with an intrigued look. "What exactly, pray tell, if you're not looking for the Chamber of Secrets?"

Glaring, Harry squared his shoulders and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not telling and I'm not moving until you're gone."

"Is that how it is?" drawled Abraxas in his lilting voice, abruptly looking amused and weirdly thrilled at the challenge, as he widely smiled at him.

Suddenly, as the boy stepped closer, something strange seemed to shift and change and Harry's green eyes widened, turning dazed as his breathing hitched.

Malfoy seemed to be glowing in a beautiful faint light, the boy's eyes looking like molten, swirling silver, mesmerizing and entrancing, his lips tilting upwards into a smug smirk that was a wonder to behold.

Harry didn't think he had ever seen someone so gorgeous and breath-taking in his life, the boy's hair looking so soft and enticing, like spun rays of sun and moonlight, golden, silver, and shiny, that he wanted to bring his hands up and card his fingers through it, to know if it felt as soft and silky as it looked. The features were a canvas of perfection of high cheeks, straight nose, and strong, sharp jawline, the skin so pale, immaculate, and smooth that he felt the urge to feel it, caress it.

The boy before him was like a wondrous, ethereal dream, so astonishingly perfect that it had to be declared, hailed, and celebrated for the magnificence that it was. Surely there were sonnets about such handsomeness. There had to be.

Harry scowled at himself, vexed. How come he didn't know any? Poems were for that, weren't they? But he didn't know any with which to impress the other boy, and he fervently didn't want to make a fool of himself.
But he had to say something to Malfoy! Something grand that would make him sound very intelligent and interesting because he needed Malfoy to keep looking at him that way, as he was now, pinning him with his gaze, widely smiling with satisfaction. He was making him happy and it had to go on!

"Tell me, Riddle," said the wonder, in that amazing, melodious tilting voice that sounded like a beautiful song, "what are you doing here? Where are you going?"

"I have to see her," breathed out Harry instantly, gazing at him dazedly, feeling amazed and ecstatic that the boy was actually speaking to him. "I've been looking for her and she came to me. Said she would talk to me. Finally!" He grinned happily at Malfoy, feeling so supremely proud of himself that he puffed his chest out, as he declared, "I'll succeed in my task!"

"A task, indeed?" the boy said softly, as his silvery eyes seemed to become even more astonishingly beautiful and mesmerizing. "What task is that?"

"To speak with the Lady!" gushed out Harry, smiling widely, feeling so deliriously and feverishly besotted by the sight before him that his knees suddenly turned weak and started to give way.

The boy swiftly caught him in time, as if he had been prepared, and if he had known beforehand, clearly because he was so amazingly smart and perfect! Indeed, the boy gently grabbed him as Harry clambered to find his balance again.

"I'm sorry!" cried out Harry, mortified and thoroughly ashamed of himself as he ducked his head and hung it low, his cheeks flushing and his eyes starting to water.

He wanted to sob because of his stupid clumsiness. The boy had to think he was a bumbling, blundering idiot!

"I'm sorry!" he repeated, distraught and wretched, peering up at the wondrous beauty that had taken him into his arms. It felt so right and amazing! The boy was hugging him!

"Hush," said the boy, giving him a soft, breathtaking smile as he patted Harry's cheek. "It's alright, Riddle… Harry… Tell me more about this 'task' you've mentioned. With which witch do you have to speak to? And why?"

The bedazzling smile grew larger, it looked warm and affectionate, and the boy knew Harry's name!

Harry beamed a joyous smile at him. Malfoy knew his name!

Something odd niggled at the back of his mind, making Harry blink in confusion. Of course Malfoy knew his name… they were housemates, and the boy had been stalking him…

Harry frowned, suddenly feeling disoriented and dizzy, and he shook his head repeatedly, like a dog shaking water from its ears. Something wasn't right…

Abruptly, he gasped as piercing pain exploded in his scar, and he clutched his forehead, moaning as he bent over, feeling sick and ill. Tom was furious, his brother had to be looking for him, and he was in…. Where was he? What was he doing?

"Harry? Riddle, look at me," said a lilting voice sharply, sounding angered.

Harry instantly snapped his head up, blinking with stupefaction as the pain in his scar was overridden by the sudden surge of sheer rage that encompassed him.
"You did something to me!" Harry choked out as he gritted his teeth and straightened up, so spitting mad that he could barely find his words. "You used your Veela allure thing on me!"

Abraxas Malfoy frowned and scowled at that, looking irritated and vastly disappointed, before he smirked widely and drawled condescendingly, "Of course I did. My abilities are getting stronger and I've been learning from books-"

"Confringo!" roared Harry, before he even knew he had ripped his wand from his pocket and cast the Blasting Curse.

With wide eyes, Malfoy ducked just in time before the spell hit the wall behind, causing a small explosion that had chunks of stone crashing to the floor.

"You're using Dark Arts, you fool!" bellowed Malfoy, looking both disbelieving and panicked, glancing around as if he expected the whole staff to suddenly appear to expel them.

But Harry was deaf to the boy's words, his own fury at what Malfoy had done to him compounded and fueled by the pain of Tom's anger at him, since giving his unrelenting, throbbing scar it was clear that Tom wasn't happy with Harry's absence from the Yule Ball. It all served to make him feel all the more infuriated.

"Sectum!" he spat as he slashed his wand in the air as he had so often practiced with his brother.

A cut ripped through Malfoy's pants and leg, causing a hallow wound to start spurting blood and the boy seemed to get the gist that Harry wasn't kidding around, quickly wielding his wand to frantically cast spells back at him.

It all seemed to merge in a blur of swift motion and beams of light. Half the time, Harry didn't know what spells were careening towards him; he reacted with the reflexes and instincts borne from his mock duels with his brother, veering, swirling around, erecting shields and flinging back curses and hexes.

Though it was quite different, because with Tom, they had always needed to restrain themselves since they couldn't end up in the Infirmary given that Miss Nightingale would ask them too many questions.

With Malfoy, Harry didn't have the constraint. He was free to harm the bastard – a bit.

"You're mad! You could've killed me!" yelled Malfoy frenziedly as he dived away from a Severing Curse.

They were both panting hard, their muscles aching, though while Malfoy's silvery eyes were wild, Harry felt exultant and giddy as he instantly took advantage of the boy's split second of a pause.

"Conjunctivitus! Expelliarmus!"

Malfoy cried out in pain as he was blasted against a wall, the boy's wand instantly flying towards Harry, which he effortlessly snatched out of mid air.

Feeling supremely triumphant and self-satisfied, Harry twirled Malfoy's wand in his hand as he watched the boy rolling on the floor, howling and shrieking at the top of his lungs as he desperately scratched at his eyes.

"The Conjunctivitus Curse isn't very pleasant, is it?" Harry asked coolly. "Very painful from what Tom and I have read." He approached the boy and caught a glimpse of the bloodshot eyes and the
pus and fluids leaking from them. He grinned nastily, as he added in a lofty tone of voice, "And very ugly. You're not so incredibly handsome anymore, are you, Malfoy? Not as you made me believe when I was under your thrall."

Harry shuddered at his own words, grimacing in remembrance. He still felt horrified, extremely disquieted, awkward, and appalled by the experience. He had been utterly besotted with Malfoy, in awe of his 'beauty', hungering for it, wanting to make the boy blissfully happy, to please him in every way that Malfoy could have wanted.

Merlin, he would have even kept cheerfully answering all of Malfoy's questions if he hadn't started to gather his wits back, or perhaps even if he hadn't felt the pain of Tom's anger.

"Take it off!" choked out Malfoy in a hoarse, distressed voice, sounding agonizing and frantic as he kept pressing trembling hands against his eyes. "Please!"

Harry narrowed his eyes, before he pursed his lips and flicked his wand at the boy, lifting the curse.

Malfoy immediately released a sigh of deep relief, his body turning limp with exhaustion as he laid spread on the floor, panting hard. Though the moment he made a motion of an effort to move, Harry quickly pounced on him, sitting on Malfoy's chest as he pressed his wand into the boy's neck.

Malfoy groaned at the weight, his injured leg jerking with a spasm, though Harry paid it no mind as he poked his wand's tip harder into the boy's throat and hissed out enraged, "You listen to me, you piece of shit. What you did to me was no better than the Imperius Curse. I'm not your plaything or test subject. You'll never use your Veela allure on me again." His green eyes narrowed to slits, as he added, seething, "If you ever do, I'll beat you to a pulp and I'll break your wand in two and shove the pieces so far up your arse you won't be walking straight in years. Got it?"

Apparently, that 'lowly vulgar muggle expression' was indeed understood by Abraxas Malfoy and made an impact, since the boy's silvery eyes grew wide and his mouth hung open, speechless out of scandalized sensibilities or perhaps because the boy did understand the crux of the threat.

Alas, the shock of the words didn't last long, as Abraxas' expression turned hard, with two pink spots of relishing vindictiveness appearing on his cheeks as he sneered acidly, "You're going to get expelled for this, Riddle! You used the Dark Arts. The professors will be here in any second!"

"Is that what you think?" Harry said, as he sat back on the boy's waist, shaking his head in mock sadness. "Oh no, Malfoy. Did you believe that the wards of Hogwarts are encrypted in Ancient Runes with a long list of curses and spells the Ministry considers illegal?" He scoffed, and shot him a nasty, toothy grin. "They aren't, Malfoy, so I'm quite safe."

"What are you rambling about, Riddle!" spat Abraxas, glaring at him venomously. "Everyone knows that the wards detect the Darks Arts!"

"Well, then the general beliefs are mistaken," said Harry, widely smirking at him. "You see, I did use Dark Arts curses or borderline ones, but it's intent and consequences that the wards detect. And I didn't pour the necessary hatred into my curses or wishes of pain and death, nor did I maim you permanently-"

"You cannot know that!" snarled Abraxas, shifting under Harry's weight as if ready to buck him off, which he swiftly halted when Harry waringly poked his wand's tip's deeper against his throat. The boy glowered at him hatefully, as he spat out snidely, "Hogwarts' wards are invisible, you
"imbecile! You can't know if-"

"It doesn't matter how I know," interjected Harry sharply, narrowing his eyes at the boy. "The point is that I do and that I'm right."

Indeed, he hadn't spent months reading books upon books about Ancient Runes and going around the school gazing at the wards he saw for nothing. He had managed to at least understand the essentials of how they functioned.

He had still plenty of work ahead of him, but he was slowly getting better at understanding Ancient Runes and their different meanings and significance in the way they were linked or chained together when forming sets of instructions.

He shot Malfoy a stern look, as he added with finality, "The wards haven't detected our duel because I didn't gravely injure you-"

"You have!" roared Abraxas furiously with a pale, ashen face. "You have crippled me, I'm bleeding to death!"

At that, Harry shot him a baffled look.

"My leg, you fool!" spat Abraxas, to then let out a very dramatic and loud groan of what was supposedly agonizing pain, as he pointedly shifted his leg to catch Harry's attention.

Turning his head around to stare at the blood-soaked limb, Harry snorted. "That's only a flesh wound!" He shot the boy a disgusted look. "You're such a wimp, Malfoy."

"It's killing me!" moaned Abraxas in a high-pitch, before he pointedly dropped his playacting and hissed out viciously, "I'll go to the Infirmary and tell the halfblood how you attacked me, unprovoked, with a Slashing Curse."

Harry gave him a nonchalant glance, before he aimed his wand and cast coolly, "Episkey! Ferula!"

As he observed how the skin knitted itself back, closing the wound as bandages wrapped it and a splint secured the leg in place, Harry picked himself off Malfoy and said calmly, "Go ahead and pay a visit to Miss Nightingale. Let's see how you'll explain that I healed you. Unprovoked, with a Slashing Curse."

Abraxas clutched his leg, glaring at the bandages and splint, before he pierced Harry with narrowed, silvery eyes, as he spat in a chilly, icy tone, "You'll pay for attacking me, Riddle!"

"I'm sure I will," said Harry undaunted, as he shrugged and tossed the boy's wand at him. "But I've given you fair warning. Don't ever use the Veela thing on me. In fact, don't mess with me again in any way."

He didn't stick around as Malfoy spat some more threats at him as the boy ungainly tried to work around the splint of his leg to get up from the floor.
Part I: Chapter 37

By the time Harry finally reached the seventh floor, all the previous excitement he had felt for being approached by the ghost had fairly dwindled, now feeling simply tired.

"I've been waiting for you for over an hour," snapped the Grey Lady ill temperedly as soon as she caught sight of him, as she floated before the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and his tutu-wearing Trolls.

"I'm sorry," said Harry with a heavy sigh. "I was… sidetracked."

The ghost was certainly utterly uninterested in his exploits, since she merely waved a hand impatiently, as she turned around and demanded sharply, "What do you see?"

Harry glanced at the expanse of wall she was floating before, and replied in a toneless voice, "Blue and bronze magic."

The Grey Lady snapped her head around to pierce him with a scowl, as she said with poignant
sarcasm, "Oh, and it's just such an ordinary sight that you stand there, seeing it and acting as if it was nothing significant?"

Having lost all lingering traces of patience after his confrontation with Malfoy, Harry glared at her and snapped acidly, "Yes, it is a common sight for me. I see the Founders' magic all over the bloody castle!"

The ghost narrowed her eyes at him, and said sharply, "This is different, silly boy. Or don't you recall?"

"I remember what Santi called it the first time we all met," interjected Harry with frustration, carding a hand through his messy hair. "He called it the Room of Requirements." He then pointed an accusing finger at the expanse of wall covered by the lattice of magic. "But there is no bloody door, is there? So there's no room there!"

The Grey Lady shot him a snide look. "Children nowadays, you don't have an ounce of intelligence."

"Look, I should be in the stupid Yule Ball right now. Or better yet, in my bed, sleeping," groused out Harry, bristling and exasperated. "So just tell me whatever it is that Santi thinks is so important, and let's get it over with!"

The ghost let out an incisive, brittle bark of laughter. "Oh no, boy. It won't be as easy for you as that. I might have come to terms with the fact that Santi won't aid you in giving me salvation unless I disclose my secrets to you. But I won't give you all that information in exchange for nothing."

She paused for a split second, skewering him with her greyish, translucent eyes, before she said dourly, "And it seems that you'll not be bringing my salvation soon. You're not ready yet, according to Santi." Her lips twisted at that, before her voice hardened as she added, "Hence, I demand something else in return, for the time being. And in repayment, as a gesture of good will, I'll reveal to you the secrets of this Room."

Harry glanced at the lattice of colorful magic and then frowned at her, as he demanded curtly, "What do you want from me?"

"You'll know shortly," said the Grey Lady dismissively, before she gestured at the expanse of wall before them. "This is what Santi said. My mother created it."

"Your mother?" Harry stared at her, boggled. "But the magic I see is blue and bronze – it is Rowena Ravenclaw's."

"And who do you think I am, foolish boy!" she bellowed at him. "You know my name is Helena – Helena Ravenclaw, child!"

Harry blinked at her, utterly dumbfounded, before he trailed his gaze up and down over her and shot the ghost a very dubious look. "Are you sure? I've never heard that Ravenclaw had a daughter-"

"Of course I'm sure!" The Grey Lady gave him a dark, seething glower at that. "You want more proof of the truth of my words? Very well, stand aside!"

Harry was quick to do so, very wary of her clearly unbalanced temper. And he stared, frowning and mystified, as she floated up and down before the wall, as she had being doing the first time he had seen her.
Though instead of desperately mumbling 'I need redemption', she was now repeating thrice, "I need a place to speak to him, a beautiful place. I need a place to speak to him, a beautiful place. I need a place to speak to him, a beautiful place."

Harry gaped when a large, ornate door suddenly appeared on the wall, glowing even more powerfully and beautifully with Rowena Ravenclaw's magic than the wall had been.

The loony ghost – Ravenclaw's daughter, if she was to be believed– sank through the door immediately, leaving Harry to stare at the doorknob, shifting uneasily on his feet.

However, he was too intrigued and curious to give it another thought, and swiftly yanked the door open and trotted inside.

He instantly skidded to a halt, letting out a hitched and stunned exhalation of breath, as he was utterly awestruck by what he encountered.

He was in a meadow of a forest, filled with vibrant green grass under his feet and towering trees, with a spring and meandering creek a few feet away, its water indolently rolling by, the sound and rhythm lulling and soothing as it was accompanied by the chirps of birds, from somewhere above.

Furthermore, everything was doused in Rowena Ravenclaw's magic: thin strands of blue and bronze, like sparkling threads of dew, weaved through the grass, the water, the tree leaves - even to the sky, Harry saw, as he glanced upwards, gobsmacked.

It was strange, he realized. There was no ceiling but no sky and clouds either, just sunlight that seemed to cover everything. Glancing around, he also glimpsed, in the far away distance, how the grass and trees merged into faint, fade walls.

The Grey Lady was floating about the grass, not looking entranced and filled with awe and wonder as Harry was by the beauty of their surroundings and its mere existence inside a 'room'. Instead, she was glaring, her expression profoundly bitter, as if the Room had constantly failed her, unforgivably.

"My mother was very proud of this creation of hers," the ghost muttered quietly as she floated before the brook and stared down at its clear, rumbling water. "Its magic does as its name tells. One has to walk, thrice, before the wall outside, saying or thinking about something that is needed, 'required', and the Room will provide."

She abruptly turned away from the stream to pierce him with angered eyes, as she snarled with rage, "It has its limitation of course! The Room cannot create food, cannot conjure books that haven't been written, or provide knowledge that hasn't been discovered, it cannot give you salvation, it can't dispel a Curse within you!" Her expression morphed into one of hatred and despise, as she spat out, "My mother wasn't all-knowing, perfect, and all-powerful as she liked to believe. Indeed she wasn't! In her quest for knowledge she made many mistakes. She did things she shouldn't have, she created a terrible thing, didn't she? Yes, Santi wants me to tell you about it, but not yet. Not without a price, as I've said."

Harry stared at her with wide eyes, startled and unsettled by the ghost's evident loathing of her mother, and one as famed and exalted as Ravenclaw, at that.

The Grey Lady gestured upwards as she hissed out scathingly, "That which looks like sunlight is magical, artificial – it's not the same as the true thing."

Her expression abruptly turned wretched, as she clamped her arms around herself, shuddering as
she closed her eyes and breathed out fervently, "I remember, I still do, how the sunrays felt when they touched my skin, the feeling of prickling grass under my bare feet, the soft rumbling of a nearby stream, the sound of birds singing in a forest. I want to feel all those things again, the real thing, not an imitation that pales in comparison - what this room provides."

With her eyes still closed, she carried on in a distraught, embittered tone of voice, "Not even my mother's Room can pander to the needs of a ghost. I cannot touch what this room can conjure up. I cannot run through the meadow, or swim in the water, or even have grass feeling solid to my touch."

She went silent, and Harry felt a surge of pity as he gazed at her, before he frowned in puzzlement and shook his head. "I don't understand. What are you asking of me?"

The Gray Lady snapped her eyes open, her expression looking feverish as cried out impassionedly, "To help me in having my senses filled with sensations and feelings! To know the taste of food again, to be able to sleep and know its peacefulness, to have dreams once more, and feel the warm, gentle touch of another!"

Harry merely had the time to blink before the ghost was upon him, clutching his shoulders in a painful grip, as she said desperately, "I already told you who I am and showed you how to summon the Room. I'll tell you everything I know, even beyond what Santi wants, if you help me now in return. I'm not asking for much, just to let me feel, to let me live again! I only ask for one day of every month, during a year, until the next Yuletide."

"You're not making any sense," groused out Harry, shaking his head. "How do you expect me to help you with 'living again'? You're dead!"

The Grey Lady's eyes seemed to brighten and gleam manically, as she breathed out, "Let me show you."

If her expression had instantly made Harry feel very wary and apprehensive, what happened next made him jump several steps backwards, in fearful astonishment.

The ghost had suddenly shrunken, so fast that he wasn't even sure what had happened when there was merely a ball of white light floating before him in her place.

Before he even had the chance to gather his wits back, the ball shot towards him, striking him and sinking into his chest, disappearing from sight.

"What's happened?" Harry cried out frantically, glancing down at himself, frenetically clutching the dress robes on his chest. "Where are you – what have you done!"

_Do not fight me. Calm down, child! You're going to expel me, if not!_

"What?" croaked out Harry faintly, his face losing all its color, as he unseeingly stared forward with wide eyes. "Where are you!"

_Relax, boy! You're not making this easy for me. Stop fighting me!_

With his heart stuck in his throat with horror, Harry frenziedly glanced around, though he knew it was pointless. There was no one else in the Room of Requirements now, and he had a fairly good idea of where she was.

He didn't think he had ever felt so ill in his life. He felt as if he was unbearably filled to the brim, about to break from his seams, with his stomach churning sickly, his head pounding, dizziness and
disorientation sweeping through him as his breathing turned haggard and wild.

Stop panicking!, the voice in his mind said sharply. This takes a great deal of concentration, will power, and energy-

"I'm not panicking!" roared Harry furiously, feeling thoroughly insulted and indignant. "I'm feeling sick, I feel about to throw up!"

He suddenly bent over, pressing a hand over his mouth as he gagged convulsively and panted, "Please get out! It's horrible!"

Give me a chance, I beg-

"Get out!" yelled Harry hoarsely, feeling so faint he was certain he was going to lose consciousness soon.

You have to relax. You have to clear your mind!

"How can I clear my bloody mind when you're speaking to me in it!" snapped Harry hotly as his wobbling legs abruptly gave way and he haphazardly fell to the grass in a bout of sickly dizziness.

Yes! Lay on the ground, breathe slowly, and calm down-

"I don't want to calm down," said Harry woozily, feeling as if his head was swirling vertiginously. "Get out from me."

Please! I beg of you, I implore you!

At the despair and wretchedness of her voice, Harry tightly closed his eyes, biting his lip.

"Alright," he mumbled with a heavy sigh, and he let himself collapse backwards unto the ground, feeling utterly expended, not thinking he even had the energy to move a finger.

"What did you do?" he then said weakly as he tiredly laid spread on the grass.

It's called possession.

"What?" choked out Harry, his eyes flying open in dismay, anxiety, and alarm.

It doesn't hurt you!, quickly said the Grey Lady's voice in his mind. I won't harm you in any way, child. You felt ill because you were battling me, but now you're feeling better, are you not?

"Maybe," croaked out Harry uncertainly. "But I feel drained."

It's to be expected, the first time it happens, said the Grey Lady coolly. It will pass.

Harry scowled, as he retorted crossly, "While you sound quite well. Jolly good for you, I suppose!"

You are my only resort, she said pleadingly. I dare only do this with you, because we can strike a deal. Hogwarts' ghosts are forbidden from attempting possession on the living. If any of the teachers found out, I would be banished from the Castle, and I would forever drift in a limbo. In the nothingness between the living and the dead.

Harry frowned at that, perturbed and shaken by the picture she was giving him, though still unconvinced of yielding to her wishes.
When I became a ghost, she added grimly, I appeared in Hogwarts. I am forever bound to it. Her voice turned despondent, as she added in a murmur, I cannot leave its walls. I can only gaze from the windows, and see suns setting, moons dwindling, and I can only look from afar, as life passes by all around me and I'm trapped in my cage, in isolation.

Sighing, Harry absentmindedly rubbed his prickling scar, as he muttered quietly, "Fine. We'll give it a shot, all right? But I make no promises if I can't bear it again."

I understand. I thank you for the chance.

Harry nodded, feeling quite stupid at doing it at someone he couldn't see, or actually speaking out loud to empty space, but at least his stomach had settled and his strength was returning to him.

Well... this is a...

...surprise...

"What is?" said Harry, frowning at her hesitant, disturbed, and wary tone of voice.

Suddenly he felt very weird, as if something was shifting inside him, as if she was carefully prodding and poking about.

"What are you doing?" he said as he felt a strange surge of agitation and a rush of blazing rage that wasn't his own, his head beginning to pound again as his scar began to prickle even more painfully.

I didn't expect to have company in here, she said, still sounding unnerved and unsettled. You're much more than you seem, Harry Riddle.

"What?" Harry blinked, thoroughly confused. "What company? What are you talking about?"

It's Dark.... Oh yes, very much so. Is it a-?

She went silent, before she spoke again, her tone highly disturbed and fearful, A despicable, dangerous evil thing it is, but...

Abruptly, Harry felt as if something within was gripping him tenaciously, not painfully, but suffusing him with cajoling warmth, holding onto him resolutely and possessively.

"What are you doing!" demanded Harry frenziedly, feeling strange at the bizarre sensation that felt tingling and pleasant yet also so very odd.

It's not me! said the Grey Lady in an astonished tone of voice. It likes you. Indeed, it seems to be contently ensconced and coiled up with your own. Even merged, I dare say.

"What the bloody hell are you blabbering about!"

Nothing, boy! she snapped, though she still sounded stunned and flustered. There's nothing to be done about this. I don't think it will hurt or bother me, if I leave it alone.

"I want to know what you're talking about!" roared Harry at the end of his rope, jerking upwards to sit up straight on the grass.

You have a peculiar soul, said the Grey Lady coolly, that is all.

"A peculiar soul?" he echoed, perplexed, before he bit out churlishly, "What's that supposed to mean? What was moving in there!"
A component of your own soul, she retorted flatly. There's no danger to you. Nor me, I believe, if I'm careful. Thus, now that we've regained our strength, let me concentrate on the task-at-hand!

And then Harry moved.

It was the strangest, most uncomfortable sensation he had ever felt, as his limbs moved with a volition of their own, jerkily and awkwardly, his body clumsily clambering upwards to his feet.

"How can you – don't do that!" gasped out Harry, thoroughly rattled and shaken. "Don't take control over my body!"

That was the deal, snapped the Grey Lady impatiently, as she moved Harry's feet, one after the other in the direction of the door. One day a month, I'll live through you!

"I didn't agree to hand my body over to you!" hissed out Harry furiously. "I thought you'd only be along for the ride!"

That's not good enough, she said sharply.

"Well, that's all you'll get," snarled Harry infuriated as he dug his heels in, managing to abruptly halt his feet.

In the next moment, though, he tripped and stumbled as he battled against a force that wasn't his own, his muscles aching and struggling as they attempted to obey two opposing wills.

"Stop it!"

 Abruptly, a loud, shrieking, piercing cry of pain boomed in his mind, making Harry clutch his head, wincing and moaning.

"Helena?" he croaked, cringing. "Helena, stop screaming - stop whatever you're doing!"

I'm not doing, she gasped out in a pain-ridden voice, sounding weak, frail, and terrified, I didn't... I won't take control over your body again!

Harry blinked, as he was suddenly encompassed by a mantle of viciously triumphant satisfaction, abruptly being suffused with chilly calmness.

You have a very nasty, said the Grey Lady stiffly, possessive, and merciless protector in your soul.

Harry frowned at that, before he shook his head and gritted out, incensed by what she had attempted, "Right. I think I've had enough. You've had your fun for the day. Now get out, I'm going to bed!"

I don't think so, she said sharply, her tone hard. We struck a bargain. We still have some hours left.

"To do what?" said Harry incredulously. "It's nighttime, and after the stunt you tried to pull-"

I've said I won't take control again, she interjected acerbically. And I prefer it's night for what I wish to do. We'll go to the Forbidden Forest.

Harry gaped, before he said disbelievingly, "It's filled with dangerous creatures – I'm not going in there!"

I can help with anything we might encounter, she said nonchalantly, if you willingly subject yourself to my control. I don't think your… soul would hurt me if I had your consent. I can wield
your wand for you, and use your magic and voice to cast spells-

"Absolutely not," bit out Harry, scowling darkly, before he grumbled crabbily under his breath, "I'll manage."

_Can't you do anything about your jingling bits!_

Harry's ears turned red for the umpteenth time. "My family jewels don't jingle – they aren't bloody bells!"

_They bother me. How can you walk with those dangling things constantly getting in the way-

Turning scarlet, Harry hissed out with supreme aggravation, "You're welcome to posses a girl, then!"

_I would certainly prefer it_, muttered the Grey Lady glumly. _But you know why I can't._

"Exactly," Harry griped sourly. "We're stuck with each other, Helena. So for both our sakes, stop talking about my private parts!" He scowled as he added sharply, "And don't call them wiggly, dangly bits or jingly, bitty pieces or anything else!"

_What should I call your 'unmentionables', then?_ she demanded flatly.

"Don't call them anything at all!" cried out Harry with exasperation. "You shouldn't be even thinking about them!"

He shook his head, feeling he must be in some bizarre nightmare, arguing with a female ghost about his private parts because they annoyed her. Honestly, it was the height of wackiness. He didn't think he could feel more discomfited or weirded out.

"You're Ravenclaw's daughter, right?" he said finally, trying to put a closed lid on the subject once and for all. "I hardly think witches of your times spoke about such things!"

_You'd be surprised_, said the Grey Lady dryly.

Harry groaned, rubbing his face with a hand, now not even wanting to think what girls got around together to gossip about.

Catering to the Grey Lady's wishes was proving to be more trouble than it was worth. Harry had half a mind to swirl around, stomp into Professor Slughorn's office, and demand an exorcism.

In the beginning, their incursion into the Forbidden Forest had gone fairly well. Harry had been alert and cautious at first, gripping his wand and shooting wary glances at shadows.

But it had become pleasant, as the Grey Lady asked him to stop in that bush or other, to smell at this or that flower that bloomed at night, or to caress a tree leaf, or to walk without shoes so that she could revel in the feeling of cold, soft snow and crushed old leaves under the soles of his feet. Or to stand, staring at the moon to bask in its beauty, to take a deep breath of fresh air and slowly let it out, taking pleasure in such simple things which she found so marvelous.

It had been peaceful and enjoyable, even for Harry, since through her he felt the wonder and awe caused by ordinary experiences he had taken for granted and never paused to consider or take pleasure in.

However, she became more and more demanding, increasingly finding fault in everything about
him because it wasn't the same for her as when she had been alive: Harry didn't walk properly —you shuffle and lumber too much!- he wasn't fluid and elegant in motion, or as willowy and lithe as would have been preferable to her tastes.

In short, his boy's body and ways marred things for her, clearly crushing whatever idealized notions she had envisioned about the experience beforehand.

Harry had the inkling that, in life, Helena Ravenclaw must have been a very supercilious, spoiled, and demanding witch; clearly too perfectionist, haughty, and filled with lofty, high expectations that must have been impossible to meet by others, or even by her life or herself, at that.

It was certain that her demands and complains soon fed him up, added to his tiredness and to the surge of blazing pain he once felt in his scar. The latter giving him a clear indication that the Yule Ball had to be over and his brother must have gone back to their dorm, finding that he wasn't there either.

Indeed, Harry was fairly sure that Tom must have been in a towering rage, and he didn't have the foggiest idea of how he would explain his absence. He couldn't even come up with a remotely convincing lie to tell.

"Well," said Harry with faked cheerfulness. "This was nice, wasn't it? I think we're done-"

I'm not tired, said the Grey Lady curtly, her tone then turning fervid, I want to see more, feel more!

"Of course you do," grumbled Harry under his breath, lifting his lit wand again as he wearily dragged his feet forward.

Only once a month, he reminded himself hopefully.

For a year.

Harry groaned.

Whatever mysterious, crucial secrets she possessed, they had better be bloody fantastic or he would string up Santi to the highest goal hoop in the Quidditch Pitch and invite Alphard over to shoot some Quaffles.

He sighed as he cast on himself another Warming Charm, to then glance around pensively.

"Well, if you want to keep on going," he said musingly, "we could pay a visit to a friend of mine that lives somewhere in here."

He might as well kill to birds with one stone. He had been meeting Nagini every Saturday night at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, as they had agreed, but the snake had always only lingered for enough time to tell him she was well before giddily and excitedly rushing back into the forest.

And last Saturday, Harry had waited for hours but she hadn't turned up.

"You're like a mother hen with a bad case of empty nest syndrome!" Alphard had cried out in between amused snickers and chortles, when Harry had expressed his anxiousness. "All worried for your little darling who has spread her wings and gone into the big bad world! What - Tom was the dad and you the mom?"

The boy had guffawed even harder at his own quip. Harry hadn't been amused.
Tom hadn't been of much help either.

"She's always been quite self-sufficient," his brother had hissed out irritably, "there's no cause for concern. She's fine, I'm sure."

And Tom had waved a hand dismissively to return to his studies of German, which was quite rich since the boy hadn't bothered, once, to go see Nagini.

At present, Harry glanced around the dark forest with a frown on his face, as he lifted his lit wand, trying to discern where she could be. "Helena, do you know where snakes go-"

Suddenly, he jumped in the air and instinctively ducked as a whooshing thing zoomed a hair-split away from his head, twanging loudly as it pierced bark.

Harry stared, utterly startled and perplexed, at the arrow embedded on the tree trunk behind him, which would have speared his head if he hadn't moved out of the way out of sheer reflexes.

*Don't use magic!* cried out the Grey Lady anxiously. *And lower your wand – NOW!*

Harry obeyed instantly, though he gaped at the small figure that appeared through the trees and galloped towards him.

It had to be younger than him, with a face and torso of a little boy, and the body of a colt, carrying a bow in hands, already stringed with another arrow as he aimed at Harry again.

"You're trespassing, human!" spat the little centaur, in a high-pitched, squeaky voice like that of a toddler, which didn't serve much to sound threatening, no matter the bow and the harsh expression and hate-filled glare.

"We do not attack children, Bane," said a low, deep voice reprovingly.

And Harry suddenly found himself surrounded by more centaurs that had sprung from behind trees: all of them very young except the one who had spoken, who seemed ancient, with long white hair, a strong torso marred with old scars, and a greyish pelt on his horse-like body.

"He's a wizard, Elder Muno!" snarled the little centaur, who was cantering up and down before Harry, menacingly striking his hooves on the snowed ground as he kept his bow aimed at him. "He's invading our territory!"

"He is but a child, Bane," interjected the old centaur, trotting forward to pierce Harry with a slow, considering, and pondering look. "And he's not alone."

"He's the one foretold!" piped in another little centaur that came cantering up towards them, looking smaller and younger than the rest, with a coltish palomino body and blue eyes that gazed at Harry with wonder, fascination, and excitement. "The companion of The Fates, isn't he?"

"The what?" said Harry baffled, blinking at them.

*They're speaking of Santi,* said the Grey Lady dourly. *The Fates is what Centaurs believe him to be, when they see the signs of his existence in the Stars.*

At that, Harry felt even more bewildered than before, while the old centaur gave the little one a proud and fond look, patting him on a shoulder. "Perhaps he is, Firenze." He shot Harry a grave look. "But we've been known to make mistakes when reading the movements of planets."
"But it is certain that his presence has brought changes in the Heavens," chirped Firenze, looking thrilled and intrigued as he gave Harry another glance over.

"Changes that should not have occurred," interjected the Elder Muno, as he shot Harry a piercing, narrowed-eyed look.

"We do not discuss before humans what we learn from the Stars!" snarled the other little centaur, the hostile one, as he glowered at Firenze and the Elder, and brought up his bow again to aim at Harry.

"Yes, that's quite correct," said the old centaur in his low, deep voice, to then turn to the little ones. "Go back to your lessons."

Grudgingly, they all trotted away, not without first shooting Harry looks of dislike or distrust.

"You too, Bane," added the old centaur sharply at the only two who remained, "and take your brother with you."

Bane narrowed his eyes and spat angrily in his high-pitched, squeaky voice, "He should not be allowed passage-

"Go."

At the Elder's sharp command, Bane struck his small hooves on the ground furiously, but then turned around and galloped away, soon followed by the smaller one, Firenze, who gave Harry a parting glance filled with lingering, awed curiosity.

Harry was then left alone, to be confronted by the adult centaur, who stared at him as if seeing through him and beyond.

"I will allow you passage through our territory," said Elder Muno in his gravely tone of voice, laced with a hint of warning, "as long as you are carrying her within."

Harry gaped, while something in him stiffened.

"Her mother was always very respectful to my kind," continued the old centaur, "and it is due that we repay that kindness by granting her daughter access to the forest which was once hers and of the Founders."

*My mother was 'respectful',* snorted acidly the Grey Lady in his mind, *because she wanted to glean from them the knowledge of their Seeing abilities.*

"Beware of my condition," added Elder Muno sharply, narrowing his eyes. "Next time, if you're alone, you'll be forcefully expelled from our lands."

Harry warily nodded his head in understanding, before he said quickly, "I'm only looking for a friend. She's a snake. Do you know where she might be-

"A snake? She'd be where all the snakes go," replied the old centaur dismissively, before he turned and galloped away.

"And where's that!" cried out Harry with exasperation, but the centaur had already vanished into the darkness of the surrounding trees.

*It's a snake you're looking for?* said the Grey Lady impatiently. *Then I know where it must be.*
"You do?" said Harry, frowning. "How-

Just follow my instructions, she said sharply, and we'll get there.

Harry did as she asked, and it wasn't that long until they reached a clearing in the forest – and a very strange one at that.

He hadn't realized for how long they had been in the Forbidden Forest, or all that they had walked, since they had to be at the other end, where the forest ended. He could see Hogsmeade not far away, and the hill filled with caves that he and Alphard had discovered, very close by.

But the strangest thing was the vast clearing itself. There wasn't a tree standing, no snow on the ground, that was blackened, no greenery in sight, as if they were on infertile land, and everything looked ravaged, as if a hurricane had passed through long ago, ripping out everything, leaving only stumps of trees or coils of old roots, all which seemed to have been scorched by fire.

"What is this place?" he breathed out, disconcerted.

A place ruined, wrecked, and laid to waste by magic, replied the Grey Lady flatly. Touch the ground, and you'll understand.

Mystified, Harry complied, crouching down and sinking his fingers into the black earth. It felt wet, as if snow melted as soon as it touched it, which was explained by the fact that the ground was unaccountably very warm.

"It's hot and we're in the middle of winter," muttered Harry, frowning. "I don't understand." He shot his surroundings a bewildered look. "What happened here? You said something about magic?"

Indeed, said the Grey Lady dourly. In their duel, they used such magic and powerful, terrible spells, that they destroyed this land. It still bears the lingering consequences, as you can see.

"A duel?" asked Harry bemused. "Whose?"

The Grey Lady heavily sighed, as she replied quietly, I was fifteen when it happened. My mother and I were in her Astronomy Tower, from there, we saw it. The beams of light coming from the faraway treetops of the Forbidden Forest, the clouds of smoke and blazes of fire, the blinding lights of powerful incantations, the destructive winds that tore... Indeed, such a display of power as none have ever seen since. Godric and Salazar were, after all, the most powerful wizards Wizarding kind has ever known.

"Here? They dueled?" Harry glanced around, flummoxed, and quite astounded at the devastation caused. He shook his head, frowning. "I thought they had only argued. Everyone thinks that – all books say that!"

Of course books tell such, retorted the Grey Lady with an incisive scoff. Helga and my mother didn't want students to know what had truly happened. Didn't want to alarm them. Thus, they were only told that Godric and Salazar had argued, and nothing more.

Harry blinked at that, still crouching and with fingers dug into moist, hot earth. He cocked his head to a side, then, intrigued and curious. "So who won the duel?"

Neither, boy! snapped the Grey Lady waspishly. Salazar didn't come back, did he? And was never seen or heard from again. And Godric returned to the castle, gravely injured. She let out a brittle bark of scathing laughter. Oh, my mother and Helga tried to aid him, to heal him as much as they could, but he only lingered for some months. He eventually succumbed to his injuries and died.
"From Salazar Slytherin's spells?" breathed out Harry with wide eyes, utterly taken aback. "So Godric Gryffindor was basically killed by him and didn't die of old age as books say? And Slytherin left right after the duel so he couldn't have known that he had actually managed to kill Gryffindor?"

Precisely, she replied flatly.

Dazed and perplexed by the revelations, Harry shook his head, before he sighed and stood up.

"Well, I'll just check on my friend and then we'll leave, alright?" he said firmly, as he looked around searchingly.

It made sense that Nagini had to be there, since snakes liked warm places, and the earth was moist and hot. He just wanted to make sure she was well, because he was already dead on his feet, feeling as if it must have been the longest night of his life.

He wanted nothing more than to return to Hogwarts and flop down on his bed. And he had many things to mull over, at that: all the strange things the Grey Lady had said, for starters.

Moreover, after knowing about the Room of Requirements, there were two problems he fully intended to solve with its aid.

"Nagini!" Harry hissed as he glanced around. "Come out, wherever you are!"

You're a Parselmouth! the Grey Lady gasped out, sounding astounded.

"What?" Harry jerked his head to a side, startled, before he scowled. "Of course I am!" He frowned the next second, as he added uncertainly, "Didn't Santi tell you?"

No, he did not! she snapped, sounding extremely aggravated and infuriated.

He hasn't deigned to pay me a visit since the time you and I met!

"Oh," said Harry, then flapping a hand dismissively. "Well, now you know." Then he hissed impatiently, "Nagini, come out, I know you're here!"

It is not possible! bit out the Grey Lady, apparently not in the disposition of doing Harry the favor of not delving into the subject. There hasn't been a Parselmouth in ages, boy! And you cannot possibly be one, since the last of Salazar Slytherin's line died in-

She seemed to clamp shut her figurative mouth, for which Harry was very grateful, before she breathed out slowly, sounding struck, Her baby, and the Caretaker who stole it.

"What?" Harry skidded to a halt, bringing up his perusing gaze to stare forward unseeingly. "You were there? You know about that?"

In the next instant, he nearly slapped a hand on his forehead. Of course she had to know about that – she had been a ghost since the times of the Founders!

He hadn't even though about asking Hogwarts' ghosts about the matter! Granted, he hadn't known until that day who the Grey Lady was. But still, he had wholly focused on plotting on how to get that information from the paintings of the Castle. They had to have been witnesses to a lot of stuff that must have happened in Hogwarts throughout the centuries. Furthermore, there were paintings in the dungeons that could have seen something – like that of a ship struggling in a stormy sea, with the pirates who had wanted to throw Harry overboard.
But if he was understanding things correctly…

Harry's heart started to thunder loudly in his chest, as he breathed out excitedly, "It was you, wasn't it? You were the witness! You heard Sherisse Slytherin's cries for help, and you went there, and saw Morgon Gaunt taking their baby away from her, and you told someone in the school about it and they chased him!"

*How do you know about such things…* the Grey Lady's voice dwindled, before it turned acerbic. *Of course, Santi must have told you.*

"Yes!" said Harry animatedly, widely grinning in triumph. "And he wanted me to find out who had witnessed it!" He paused, frowning deeply. "Though I don't understand why he didn't simply tell me, if it was you-"

*It wasn't me,* said the Grey Lady curtly.

"What do you mean?" Harry demanded hotly, darkly scowling, certain his leg was being pulled. "You just said that-"

*I was, indeed, in the dungeons,* she interrupted in a sharp tone of voice, which turned grim and bitter, *hiding from the Bloody Baron, with futile hopes he would not think of looking for me in his own territory.*

"Right! So you did see-"

*I only saw the Caretaker fleeing from a room with a wailing baby in his arms,* snapped the Grey Lady impatiently. *And Fawkes giving chase, shrieking, before he disappeared in a blaze of fire. He was the one who alerted-"

"Fawkes?" Harry's eyes widened in bewilderment. "As in Albus Dumbledore's phoenix?"

*Dumbledore's?* she bit out snidely. *Did you think that Fawkes hadn't chosen any other wizards before Dumbledore? Fawkes is as bound to Hogwarts as I am, boy! He has always been in the castle, choosing one of the professors to bind himself to, child!* She paused to let out a scathing scoff. *Oh, there's been decades in which none were worthy of him, given his standards, but he's always been around.*

Harry didn't think he could feel any more confused than he already was. Though, slowly, the things Santi had said started to click together and make odd sense.

The 'witness' had answered the 'call for help' of Sherisse Slytherin, and she couldn't have been screaming that loudly, giving she was weak and dying from childbirth. And her rooms had been warded –though Morgon Gaunt had known how to go through them because he had gotten that information from Sherisse the night he had violated her.

It could only mean that Fawkes had heard her and gone through the obstacles of the wards in the same way in which he had when he had helped Harry.

Hadrn't Santi said that phoenixes could hear cries for help and were able to cross barriers of magic when answering those? And that was why Fawkes had been able to fly into the portrait Harry had been in, no matter the magic that didn't allow the living to enter wizarding paintings.

And the 'witness' had tried to help Sherisse, because she had been 'good of heart, even though she was a Slytherin'. And Fawkes could have indeed helped her –Harry knew about the healing properties of phoenix tears ever since Alphard had bought a couple of them, to use for when they
encountered the monster of the Chamber of Secrets, if they were attacked— but she had bled to
death too quickly.

Fawkes saw, tried to help, chased Morgon Gaunt and then went to alert whichever professor he had
been bound to— Santi had said that phoenixes could communicate thoughts to their bounded
wizards through their singing. So that professor must have written down, one day, all that Fawkes
had seen, and ages later, Mortimer Mullhorn must have found those records and written his
unfinished book, copy of which the 'Pink Quill' later found and used to write her article in the
Witch Weekly about Sherisse Slytherin and the 'M.G.' wizard who had taken advantage of her.

So, the witness had been Fawkes all along, who had always been in Hogwarts, apparently, though
not always bounded to someone and not always in sight.

There was something he didn't understand, though.

"Why did Santi want me to know that it had been Fawkes?" Harry said in puzzlement. "Why is that
important?"

How should I know? snapped the Grey Lady irritably. Why does Santiago do anything? Why does
he want what he does!

Ignoring her mood, Harry frowned pensively as he said under his breath, "Unless what's important
isn't that Fawkes was the witness, but rather that he's always been in the castle?" He cocked his
head to a side. "Who was his first owner?"

I don't know, retorted the Grey Lady curtly.

Harry let out a heavy sigh, his excitement dwindling.

Vanishing the subject to a corner of his mind for later perusal, he crossed his arms over his chest,
impatiently tapped his foot on the hot ground, and hissed warningly, "If you don't come out at the
count of three, there'll be consequences to pay, Nagini!"

With narrowed eyes, Harry scoured with his gaze the moonlight surroundings, as he began, "One…
Two…"

"Very well, I'm coming!" spat a put upon hissing voice. "I'm coming!"

Nagini's flat head poked out from underneath a coil of black, scorched tree roots, looking very
irritated as she let out another vibrating, vexed hiss.

Harry scrunched his nose at the sight of her. She was incredibly filthy, her scales filled with dirt, as
if she had dug for herself a cozy, warm little hole in the earth underneath the roots.

"Why didn't you meet me last Saturday?" he demanded angrily, glowering at her.

"I was busy," she hissed coolly, flicking the tip of her tail at him, which made mud splatter on the
hem of his costly dress robes.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her, and said very suspiciously, "With what?"

The little snake opened her maws, baring her sharp tiny teeth, making her look as if she was giving
him a gleeful, sharkish grin, as she declared triumphantly, "I have a mate— many of them!" She
preened and let out a smug hiss, "I am wanted by all!"
A horrified Harry didn't have a chance to say anything as the ruined grounds seemed to come alive, countless of snakes of all sorts suddenly slithering out from behind tree stumps, from roots or the earth, all hissing at the same time as they dashed to Nagini's side and peered up at him.

"This is your pet human?"

"He truly is a Speaker!"

"Doesn't look much."

"This has to be the stupid one."

"Where's the other you say is the smart one, Nagini?"

"He's very scruffy looking – what's that on his head?"

"His hair!"

Harry stared at the snakes chattering and happily criticizing him, squirming and coiling and writhing all around Nagini, who now looked like a supremely haughty, worshiped, and fawned-over Queen with her harem, and he groaned, utterly dismayed.
Part I: Chapter 38

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AN:

Answering some questions:

When the Grey Lady possessed Harry, she spoke to him in his mind, but Harry spoke out loud. She hasn't given any indication of wanting or being able to read his mind so that they could communicate without speaking. Furthermore, given what she found in Harry's soul and how it reacts whenever she tries to stir things inside Harry, I don't think she'll ever try to rummage inside Harry's mind either.

About the Horcrux in Harry, last chapter we saw that it was protective of him, possessive, and 'contently ensconced' in Harry's soul and even partially merged. This is all due to the close proximity between Harry and Tom for years, the Horcrux in Harry being affected by it and sensing his 'vessel's (Harry's) relation to a nearby soul it recognizes (Tom's). So that explains why it acted like it did when the Grey Lady possessed Harry. But while the Horcrux obviously reacts to Tom's soul mood, mainly anger and fury, making Harry feeling it through pain in his scar, there's no reason for Tom to feel anything from Harry, not anything that he could recognize anyway. So Tom will never feel Harry's mood's and etc, in this case, given that Tom has a complete soul, thus, which isn't surging forward trying to grasp something 'missing'. It's a one way channel between them.

About what Tom knows: he doesn't know that Harry has ever spoken or interacted with Abrajas Malfoy since the first day when Tom and Harry where thrown out of the compartment in the Hogwarts Express when Malfoy found out they were muggleborns. Tom thinks that was the only interaction between them. Tom DOES know that Harry and Alphard are secret friends (remember when Harry received his Scorcrup from Alphard as a birthday present?) but has no idea that Harry has told Alphard that they are Parselmouths and Slytherin's descendants, or that Alphard knows about their goal of finding the Chamber of Secrets, much less that the boy is actually helping Harry with that, and certainly doesn't know that Harry told Alphard about the letters and books they had received from Grindelwald.

Usually in my fics, every little thing is important and comes up, having impact in the plot, eventually. Some details, of course, are just for plot-building, to give a sense of the times the characters are living through and such, or just anecdotes. But in last chapter's scenes with the Grey Lady, everything she said falls into the category of 'little things that become important'.

IMPORTANT: I've had many reviewers saying that since I did Slash for Black Heir and Vindico Atrum, they would prefer that this story has HET pairing for Harry. I must say that Het wasn't my original intention, but if most of you prefer Het for this story instead of Slash, I can do that. I wouldn't mind trying my hand at Het for the first time, so please let me know what you prefer! Or maybe both - Bi? Well, let me know soon, please, because that kind of stuff will be coming up and I can't change it later if I've already set more bases for Slash. At this point, I can still turn it either way without making a complete mess.
Part I: Chapter 38

It was late April and much had happened.

Harry had celebrated his thirteenth birthday and New Year's Eve -1940! the date had seemed amazing to him- mostly with Alphard in the kitchens, as they happily gobbled down the delicious feast the friendly house-elves prepared for them and the mouth-watering cake they had baked for Harry - his most absolute favorite, chocolate on top of more chocolate.

Alphard had even given him a marvelous present: a gorgeous Broomstick Servicing Kit, in a brown leather case with golden lettering spelling Harry's name, containing a large jar of Fleetwood's High-Finish Handle Polish, a pair of silver Tail-Twig Clippers, a brass clip-on compass, and a Handbook of Do-It-Yourself Broomcare.

"You must keep the Comet 180 up to par," Alphard had said, grinning as he shot Harry a hopeful glance. "For next year, if you decide to try for the Team."

Tom, who had never been one for celebrations, festivities, or birthday parties, had unsurprisingly spent the day ensconced in the library, surely studying something stuffy and boring that only he found fascinating.

No matter how much Harry had cajoled and wheedled, his brother had refused to take a free day to have some fun, though he had done something unexpected.

"What's this?" said Harry, startled and astonished when his brother thrust a book into his hands.

Gazing at it, Harry saw that its covers were made of a smooth, soft black leather, with his initials in silver thread.

"A diary," replied Tom shortly, as he unpackaged another one, very similar to Harry's, only with T.M.R. inscribed instead.

Harry couldn't have been more surprised or deeply touched by his brother's uncharacteristic thoughtfulness.

They had never traded presents before, because they hadn't had any money of their own, for starters. But now that Tom did have his plentiful pouches of galleons, which kept steadily multiplying in number given the boy's activities, Harry hadn't expected a gift either.

When Harry shot him a warm, beaming smile, Tom stiffened instantly, as if he was being outrageously accused of having any snuggly, cozy feelings.

"Don't make a big deal of this," Tom hissed out in a warning, dangerous low tone of voice. "I ordered a catalogue from Scrivenshaft's in Hogsmeade because I wanted a diary for myself. And I saw I could buy two for one, so I did. There's nothing more to it!"

For a moment vastly tempted to rile his brother up and mercilessly taunt him about the issue, Harry was won over by his curiosity nonetheless, and he cocked his head to a side. "What do you want a diary for?"
"To write in it," retorted Tom with incisive, mocking sarcasm, before he shot him a snide look and went back to studying German, holding the tome so high up that it prevented Harry from seeing his face.

Harry rolled his eyes at that, though from then onwards his curiosity and intrigue only escalated, since Tom carried his diary wherever he went and frequently wrote on it in a feverish, exultant pace, always refusing to show Harry what he was up to the many times he had attempted to sweet-talk him.

Nevertheless, he was soon busy with many other things to further dwell on the matter.

The night Harry had found Nagini in the scorched clearing of the Forbidden Forest, he had marched back to Hogwarts, grilling the Grey Lady for more information regarding the Room of Requirements and the ways it worked.

Given her answers, certain that there was no way Tom and Alphard could cross paths in it since the Room couldn't be used by another if there was already someone inside, he had revealed its existence to both boys, separately of course, using it as an excuse to explain his absence from the Yule Ball.

"You needed to use the loo and a room filled with toilets appeared?" Alphard sniggered in amusement, accepting Harry's words without an ounce of mistrust or any further questions about what he was doing on the seventh floor when he should have been in the Yule Ball in the first place.

Harry had showed his best friend where it was and how to summon and use it, and they had had a blast, making the Room of Requirements turn into all sorts of things: a sandy stretch of beach with tall palm trees and two hammocks in which they had placidly swayed to then engage in a battle of swinging hammocks and thrown, conjured pillows; a room filled with muggle toys like tin soldiers and airplane models or toy trains with a circuit of tracks, and foot balls, and whatnot, Harry having the time of his life as he showed his friend how everything was used; a large, lavish tent with hanging veils and colorful, feathered fans that magically floated and gave them pleasant breezes, as they sat on huge, plush pillows on the floor, snacked on sweets and pastries they had taken from the kitchens, and felt like pampered sultans; a room filled with mirrors, each distorting their image in bizarre and outrageously funny shapes, making them roar with laughter and guffaws until their sides ached and they clutched each other, grinning and panting; and finally, a cozy room stacked with a whole library with books on the Animagus Transformation – the very reason Harry had for showing Alphard the room.

Tom had been another matter altogether.

"What were you doing on the seventh floor?" he demanded, piercing Harry with narrowed eyes.

"I wanted to give it another quick search," said Harry impatiently, "to make sure I hadn't overlooked anything."

"You told me you were done searching for the Chamber of Secrets on that floor," retorted Tom sharply, his eyes narrowing even further, "last year." His expression then turned infuriated. "And why would you go there when you were expected to be in the Yule Ball!"

"Because it was more important than a stupid dance!" snapped Harry hotly.

Tom's dark blue eyes narrowed to slits, filled with suspicion. "You expect me to believe that?" His lips twisted, as he sneered contemptuously, "And you couldn't contain your urge to urinate, like a
"Yes," gritted out Harry as he stood before the expanse of wall covered by blue and bronze magic.

Tom shot him his most scathing look. "What do I want to see a bathroom for?" He gave Harry a disgusted glance. "And what happened to you? Got stuck in a toilet for hours?"

Glowering, Harry snapped, "No, you idiot. I spent hours figuring out how the room worked!"

"How a loo works, really?" jeered Tom acidly. "I knew you were thick, but not that much."

At the end of his rope, Harry said heatedly, "Shut up and observe! Then you'll understand!"

And he proceeded to walk up and down before the wall, stating loudly what he wanted so that his brother realized what it was all about.

The moment a door appeared, he yanked it open and shoved a puzzled and suspicious Tom inside.

His brother did stop asking mocking and incisive questions the instant he saw what was awaiting them, Tom's dark blue eyes marginally widening in understanding, amazement, and gleeful giddiness.

The Room of Requirements conjured exactly what Harry had desired: an exact replica of Slytherin House's Dueling Chamber, with all the types of dummies, the arena, adding shelves with books on the Dark Arts, and even wards, in Rowena Ravenclaw's blue and bronze magic, that shone before Harry's eyes displaying the same sets of Ancient Runes of the real Dueling Chamber, thus making him certain that they could cast any sort of grave and injurious curse and they'd be insulated from detection by the rest of the school's wards.

"And," Harry said smugly, reveling in his brother's marveled expression, as he pointed towards another addition, a shelf filled with books on Legilimency and Occlumency, "I've also solved our other problem. No need to buy those kinds of books from Knockturn Alley anymore."

He wouldn't have showed Tom the Room of Requirements if he had known what the consequences would be.

There wasn't a single second of spare time in which Tom didn't demand that they went to their very own 'Dueling Chamber', to continue learning and practicing from Grindelwald's Durmstrang textbooks, added to all the others in the shelves of the room, to advance in their studies of German, and to begin delving into Legilimency and Occlumency.

Indeed, the following months were all about reading and studying until late hours and dueling against each other until Harry could barely stand on his feet, and proving to Tom how much German he was mastering, and sitting on the floor and trying to 'clear his mind' and 'meditate' for the first steps of learning how to shield his mind.

In particular, Harry hated the latter. Tom didn't seem to have any problems in closing his eyes and instantly concentrating to empty his mind.

However, Harry had never been good at sitting still. Poor Alice would know, from the many times in his childhood, during lessons, when Harry had been unable to focus for two minutes straight without having to do something with himself, squirm on his seat, shoot a longing look at a toy, pull at Amy Benson's pigtails, or daydream about Robert Hutchins' stories of the heroic battles of Achilles and Hector, Ulysses' thrill-filled voyage, the Musketeers' adventures, and whatnot.
Now that he was older, he didn't have the urge to do any of those things, thankfully, but he couldn't stop thinking about all the other things he had on his plate.

To his misery, the first stages in learning the Animagus Transformation also required deep meditation for months, to 'ponder about one's innate personality traits' and mull over and detect their resemblance to 'animal characteristics'.

At least, Alphard was just as bad as Harry was at the whole humming and ruminating and seeing the 'Inner You' crap, both too naturally filled with bubbling energy to be able to cross their legs and 'lose themselves in their inner being' like a wizard Yogi from the wild mountains of India – as the Animagus books reiterated, since the Transformation had apparently been discovered by those sorts of wizards millennia ago, along with the Egyptians and American Indians, and by very similar, accidental means.

"This is rubbish!" exclaimed Alphard one day, hurling one of the books to a wall, fuming. "There has to be another way! If I wanted to be like one of those levitating idiots, I'd go to Nepal!"

"Well, it does say we need to 'discover ourselves'," said Harry grumpily as he flipped the pages of the book on his lap. "And only then, we can do the Egyptian test with animal parts to see which 'calls to our soul'."

"What about the potion?" demanded Alphard, gazing at him with big grey eyes filled with a gleam of hope.

"The one that will make us hallucinate?"

"Yes," said Alphard excitedly, as he leaned forward to take a peek at Harry's book. "The one that will give us daydreams about our Animagus form and all that."

"To brew the potion we need the base ingredient first," interjected Harry with a frown, "this peyote magical cactus from Mexico."

"I can order that from the apothecary in Knockturn Alley," said Alphard, waving a hand dismissively.

Harry nodded, before he heavily sighed. "But the books say we can't drink the potion until we've done all the rest first, or the hallucinations will be about any other thing and can be 'dangerous and terrible' – 'not even the Aztecs dared without previous preparation', and all that."

They both shared a dejected, glum look, and went back to attempting to 'enter deep trance' for two seconds straight.

But it hadn't been all work and no fun for them either. There had been the Quidditch matches, with Harry on the Slytherin stands, roaring and cheering for his housemates, especially Dorea Black and Alphard. It couldn't raise any suspicions, after all, that he was cheering for the Team's new Chaser, and a brilliant one as Alphard proved to be.

Though the competition was tough. The Gryffindor Team had also undergone some changes when some of their players had graduated last year. Felix Prewett had become one of the Beaters, surprisingly fierce and brutal, and Minerva McGonagall, most astonishing of all, was their new Seeker, stunningly skillful and fast.

It was certain that the final Quidditch match would be riveting and amazing, since the Slytherins had beaten the Ravenclaws spectacularly, while the Gryffindors had effortlessly trounced Hufflepuff's Team.
Moreover, a happy, proud, and satisfied Dorea Black had eased a tad the frequency and exhausting brutality of the Team's Quidditch practices, allowing Alphard to have some more spare time to spend with Harry.

They had instantly used it to go looking again for another entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, besides the small pipe Nagini had discovered. With Ulysses perched on top of Harry's head as usual, and The Three Musketeers' Map in hand, they had resumed their exploration of the sixth floor, marking on the map the rooms examined.

Also, at Harry's insistence, they had checked the tunnel-like, immense pipe behind the Mirror of Desires. They spent a whole, long night at that, with Harry hissing at all the torch-holders with decorative figures of snakes, but it had been to no avail. Not one had moved or even shifted an inch.

"Maybe it opens from the other side?" Harry proposed, as he eyed the last of the torch-holders with a musing frown. He gestured at their surroundings. "Maybe this pipe is connected to another, and that's the one which leads to the Chamber, but can't be accessed from this side…"

"Maybe," said Alphard dubiously, and sounding exhausted. "But if that's the case, it's of no use, is it? Unless we find the other pipe, if there is one…"

Harry sighed deeply and merely nodded, too tired as well to even care. All the things he was involved in, with his brother and Alphard, added to his own secret ones, left him dead on his feet most days.

Though his dealings with the Grey Lady had improved a bit. She had begun to treat him better, even calling him by his first name instead of 'boy' or 'child' and complaining less, as she started to increasingly enjoy the things Harry did for her.

One day, he had gone to the kitchens, asking the house-elves to prepare all the dishes she went whispering about in his mind, and had slowly tasted every one of them, even the ones which look outright disgusting to him, like stewed snails, the French bouillabaisse with icky, slimy shellfish, a plate of frog entrails and whatnot – all apparently delicacies in her time- to the Grey Lady's deep sighs of marveled appreciation.

On another occasion, Harry had gone through a whole school day with her possessing him, though behaving, while she found pleasure in reminiscing about her own school years as Harry went from class to class.

*The wonder of learning,* she had exclaimed exultantly, *of feeling again knowledge sinking in! In your mind…*

By springtime, one Saturday morning, he had marched to the Black Lake. The Grey Lady had even kindly suppressed her remarks about his 'dangling bits' as Harry discarded all his clothes and took a plunge.

The water had been a bit chilly but still excellent, as he placidly swam and then dove into the depths of the lake for as long as he could, caressing the undulating, aquatic weeds for her, so that she could feel their touch, gazing at the schools of colorful fishes zooming by, and even having a struggle with some Grindylows, which hadn't been intended.

But she had had the time of her life, since swimming had apparently been her favorite pastime when alive. And it seemed that Robert Hutchins had done a fantastic job in teaching him how to swim, since the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw hadn't complained once about his skill in the water.
Another month, he had spent a whole Sunday evening simply asleep, so the Grey Lady could know what it was to rest and dream again.

Though the following morning, as they woke up, she had remarked uneasily before flowing out of him, *You have peculiar… dreams.*

Harry wondered, at the time, to which one she referred.

His ever-recurring nightmare of the red eyes and flash of blinding green?

Or the beautiful and mysterious woman with golden hair and blue eyes that that night had once more been singing Alice's lullaby to him, as she lovingly caressed his hair, murmured with pride and satisfaction what a 'breathtaking, beautiful, powerful little boy' he was, a credit to his 'two exalted bloodlines', and called him by that strange name again: Antares.

But he hadn't bothered asking the Grey Lady what she was speaking about.

He had already tried to glean from her the meaning of the many strange things she had said the first time she had possessed him. Particularly about his 'peculiar soul', with something 'Dark and evil', coiled with his own, merged, a 'nasty, possessive protector'.

It had been to no avail, she always remained tight-lipped: either dismissing his questions loftily or becoming angered with him, snapping that she was in no mood of being pestered with silly, unimportant inquiries.

And last weekend, he had slipped out of the castle with his Comet 180, and had gone to the site where last year Dorea Black had given him his secret Quidditch lessons along with the Team's Keeper, Antonin Dolohov.

In such a perfect place, out of sight from Hogwarts, he had zoomed into the skies, laughing with sheer joy.

He had forgotten just how much he loved flying, the glorious sensations of freedom and carefree ness it gave him, melting all his troubles and concerns away from his mind, and leaving him to simply revel in the feeling of wind against his face, flapping and twisting and pulling at his robes, his body pleasantly aching with the effort expended, the sensation of a magical broom underneath him, to be reined and controlled and mastered with skill and will, and the sheer zest for life it made him feel.

Harry had even executed some midair acrobatics and daring, dangerous, and thrilling twists and dives, so much so that the Grey Lady was left speechless for a moment when he had landed back on the ground.

*I never knew,* she had then breathed out, sounding awe-struck and immensely delighted, *that it could be that way. I wasn't much of a flyer in my day.*

Harry had smiled, satisfied that he had so thoroughly pleased her, for once, and quite content and proud of his own abilities. Though, he had also been left yearning for more, regretting he wasn't actually in his House's Quidditch Team.

"Perhaps next year," he had muttered under his breath hopefully, though given the situation of things, it wasn't likely.

It was late April, but many things had happened outside of Hogwarts in the previous months.
By January, Tom and he had received a letter from Alice, this time written in proper paper and pen, with the news that the refugees had been allowed back to their homes. They were all back in St. Jerome's Orphanage, and well.

That had been the only good news, since in March the Germans had finally bombed Muggle Britain for the first time, killing many in Orkney. And given Alice's letter then, London was once again suffused in fear and panic.

By early April, the war escalated, with the Daily Prophet announcing that Denmark and Norway – which had tried to slither out of trouble by declaring themselves neutral- had been invaded by Grindelwald's wizarding and muggle Nazi forces.

Furthermore, unlike the case with Czechoslovakia and Poland, it wasn't an instant victory for the Dark Lord. The battles dragged on, now that Muggle Britain and France were in open war with Germany and had sent forces to aid the Norwegian and Danish.

It seemed that Grindelwald was being cautious of not using his followers of wizards against the Allied Forces of the muggles, so that the secret of the existence of the Magical World wasn't compromised. Apparently, there was no such thing as a mass-Obliviation. So it was muggles against muggles, and wizards against wizards, in this occasion, which balanced the scales.

The fact that Wizarding France had declared war on the Dark Lord, and sent their vast Corps of Aurors, also seemed to be the reason for Grindelwald's failure at conquering Norway and Denmark in just a matter of days.

"It's thanks to Dumbledore," Felicity had explained that day they met, her tone proud. "He has many ties with important wizards and witches in France-"

"And he's been going there to convince them to oppose Grindelwald directly, and he succeeded," interjected Harry musingly. "Yes, I've noticed that Dumbledore has been missing from meals in the Great Hall during the weekends." Then he scowled angrily at the red-haired twins. "But why hasn't Minister Marchbanks done the same as the French Minister of Magic? Marchbanks appointed Dumbledore the Supreme Mugwump of the Wizengamot, had Unspeakables cast those wards all over Wizarding Britain to protect us from muggle weaponry, has been recruiting more and more Aurors, but still doesn't declare war on Grindelwald?"

The Prewett twins remained in grim silence, and Harry's hands clenched into fists, as he then spat furiously, "What is he waiting for! Even Muggle England has been at war since last year!"

Felix looked angered himself, while Felicity bit her bottom lip fretfully, but none replied.

It was Tom who gave him a useful opinion on events.

"Gravius Marchbanks might have been Dumbledore's advocate and little friend once," his brother sneered, "but he's no fool. He was the Head of Law Enforcement for decades and an Elder of the Wizengamot for some more, he's not going to act stupidly." He shot Harry an irritated look, as he demanded sharply, "Why do you think he's first waiting to see how the tides turn?!"

"Because Wizarding Russia and Hungary are already on Grindelwald's side," said Harry slowly, a frown on his face. "And according to the Prewett twins, their father thinks the Italian Ministry of Magic will soon fold too and declare allegiance to the Dark Lord before he attempts to overtake them. And because you think that the Italian muggle leader is already secret allies with Grindelwald's Nazi puppets."
"Exactly," said Tom curtly, satisfaction lacing his voice. "And what's left of Europe will follow when the Dark Lord takes over the Nordic countries, and it will only be the French against him." His voice turned scathing, as he added, "Do you think the English Ministry of Magic will ally with France against the Dark Lord, given such odds against them?"

"The English muggles did!" bit out Harry incensed.

"And they'll pay the price for it," said Tom coolly, though with a gleeful glint in his dark blue eyes that Harry didn't miss.

A day later, Harry sat glumly in the Great Hall, with his untouched plate of breakfast before him.

Tom had just received the Daily Prophet, with more news about the battles still going on in Norway, because Denmark had already surrendered. The war in Norway, however, had dragged for almost a month, increasingly turning fiercer and more brutal, though much of the country was already occupied.

Harry was startled when a couple of owls swooped in and dropped letters before them.

Frenziedly, he opened his envelope quickly. He hadn't heard from Alice in weeks, and that was strange enough.

He had been fearing that something had happened to them, that perhaps Muggle London had been bombed and the Daily Prophet had failed to give the news – he wouldn't put it past them, filled with idiots as that newspaper seemed to be.

He frowned as his eyes flew over Alice's sentences. 'All was well' was the gist of her letter, but her handwriting was wobbly and shaky, and he could swear that that smudge of ink had been a teardrop.

"What did she write to you?" he said as he turned to look at his brother.

"Nothing relevant, the same old nonsense as always," replied Tom scornfully, sticking his letter into his school robes' pocket.

Harry stared at that. Tom never kept Alice's letters.

In fact, his brother always discharged her missives right away after barely reading them, casting them a snide, irritated look before abandoning them on the table as if they were yesterday's rubbish.

His green eyes narrowed to slits, filled with suspicion, as he demanded sharply, "What did she write? Let me see."

"See what?" drawled Tom indolently, arching an eyebrow at him.

"Her letter!" hissed out Harry impatiently.

"Her letter!" hissed out Harry impatiently.

"What for?" said Tom with dark annoyance, waving a hand dismissively as his voice turned contemptuous, "She wrote to me the same half-brained stupid ramblings she must have written to you."

His brother's refusal only served to make Harry even more certain of the ominous feeling coiling in the pit of his stomach, and his heart began to pump tumultuously as a wave of distress swamped over him.
Without thinking it twice, with something stuck in his throat, Harry whipped out his wand in the
bat of an eyelash, and roared, "Expelliarmus!"

He caught his brother completely unawares and unprepared, and Harry instantly snatched the
incoming wand and then hurled it with all his might to the furthest corner of the Great Hall.

Tom was a force to be reckoned with, and impossible to beat with a wand, but without it, his
brother didn't stand a chance. His brother had never deigned to learn from Robert Hutchins how to
fistfight, after all.

If Harry had managed, when he had been a little boy, to defeat the much older Dennis Bishop, his
brother was a piece of cake.

And before Tom had the time to gather his wits back from his stunned and startled stupefaction at
Harry's actions, he lunged at him.

They went rolling to the floor, as their housemates jumped to their feet and away from their scuffle,
staring in silence and wide eyes, clearly not knowing how to best react to such an appalling public
scene.

"Stop this nonsense!" Dorea Black yelled commandingly as she and other older Slytherins started
to hurry to reach them and put some order.

The students of other Houses in the way, however, made it impossible. Many had risen to their feet,
eager to watch, comment, gasp, bring hands to their mouths, excitedly gossip, stare with
astonishment, or do like the Gryffindors, as Harry and Tom continued to grapple with each other.

"FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!"

Gryffindors were standing up at their table, gleefully cheering and roaring for blood, obviously
thrilled at seeing Slytherin against Slytherin.

"Mr. Riddle!" one of the professors boomed from the Staff Table, as several of them, Headmaster
included, hastily tried to climb down and reach them.

However, Harry was deaf to all, as he struggled with Tom on the floor, his brother snarling
infuriated, such a murderous look in his eyes and with such anger that Harry felt his forehead was
splitting apart. But it didn't stop him from finally rearing a fist backwards and then smashing it into
his brother's face.

A loud crack resounded, and Tom roared in pain and clutched his bleeding, broken nose with his
hands, while Harry, panting wildly, wasted no time in digging his fingers into his brother's pocket
to fish out Alice's letter.

"MR. HARRY RIDDLE!"

Amazingly enough, it was their Head of House who reached them first, panting with effort and
with his protruding belly wobbling. Professor Slughorn looked baffled though aimed his wand
nonetheless, clearly to cast some spell to put an end to the brawl and then dole out grave
detentions.

But with the letter in his possession already, Harry jumped to his feet, away from his brother, and
effortlessly swirled out of the way of the beam of light that shot from Slughorn's wand.

He was pelting out of the Great Hall before anyone had the time to blink, clutching letter against
heaving chest.

Harry didn't stop until he was in his dormitory, where he dropped on his bed, panting loudly to catch his breath, as he snapped Alice's letter open.

Soon, as he read, all color drained from his face, his chest constricted, and his throat turned dry.

Alice had stopped receiving letters from Robert Hutchins and, fearful, she had gone to the War Office, demanding an explanation. She had been told nothing at all, as much as she insisted. Not the name of Hutchins' unit, where they were, why she wasn't receiving letters, or what could have happened to him.

She'd only been dismissively told that his unit had been engaged in some campaign, and he was presumed 'missing', and not to worry, as the War Office didn't get reports of updates on the situation of their soldiers until many days later. 'Missing' meant that he was alive, just unaccounted for: 'war is a disorderly, messy thing, Missus'.

But she didn't sound as if she believed that at all.

She ended by writing in a shaky, tear-stained scrawl: *I thought you had the right to know since Robert has been such a large part of your lives, but I ask you not to tell your brother. I don't want to worry Harry, as I know he would.*

Harry crushed the letter in a trembling hand, his green eyes wide, unseeing, and beginning to tear, such a piercing, unbearable ache in his chest as he had never felt before.

Ignoring the sudden blaze splitting his head in pain, and swallowing a moan, he was on his feet the next second, at first dizzily and unsteadily, wiping his eyes with a sleeve, to then suddenly know what he had to do.
Part I: Chapter 39

Dislaimer: This story is based on characters created and owned by JK Rowling, various publishers including but not limited to Bloomsbury Books, Scholastic Books and Raincoat Books, and Warner Bros., Inc. No money is being made and no copyright or trademark infringement is intended. Any original plots or characters are mine.

AN:

WOW! So many of you have put in your two cents about the Het or Slash issue, I'm so thrilled :) And completely blown away and happy, since from what I've already seen, most had never reviewed before, lol! I thank you all from the bottom of my heart!

I'll be going over all reviews to count the votes as soon as I can. I hope to have the results for the next chapter update.

Oh, and don't worry about me getting influenced by what my readers want instead of writing what I like.

When I ask about things like this, it's always because it helps me a lot to really know what readers prefer. It helps me to write better, give more interesting plots, and even come up with new ideas.

But I would never wreck the story to please some readers when I know that the suggestions just wouldn't go well with the fic. Like, for instance, if I'd been told to put Dorea Black or Charlus Potter with Harry, then I would have said no. Simple as that.

It's also one of the reasons I don't like to use polls for things like this, because in polls you can only choose one of the options given by me and you have no chance to write or express anything else, so I don't learn much from it.

That said, thanks again to all of those who already reviewed and gave their votes! I hope you enjoy this chapter too ^.^

Part I: Chapter 39

After the brawl during breakfast, Harry had to put up with much.

Professor Slughorn, with Dorea Black at his heels, had found him in the common room when he was about to make his escape.

At first, the Slytherin Head of House had tried to cajole from him the reason for his outburst. When Harry remained tight-lipped, Slughorn had sighed and assigned him detention – two full hours helping Miss Nightingale sort bandages in the Infirmary.

Harry's green eyes had gone wide, amazed at his good luck, but had been quick to scowl as if deeply irritated and then hang his head low in gloomy acceptance of his punishment.

Looking satisfied at having so easily sorted out a difficult child, Horace Slughorn had merrily left the room, leaving Harry to be confronted by a seething Dorea Black, so mad that she hadn't even
noticed that her customary Grooming Charm needed a renewal.

Indeed, with a mop of long, wild black hair sticking in every direction, Dorea Black had raged at him for a full hour, at his audacity for giving such a 'disgraceful spectacle of muggle brutishness', dishonoring the whole House with his 'despicable and shameful display of boorish loutishness', and whatnot.

Harry's ears had been left ringing, but he had bore it all with equanimity.

Knowing he couldn't give any cause for suspicion, given what he had in mind, he had gone to all his morning classes and acted as if nothing at all had happened.

Tom didn't speak or look at him, completely and smoothly ignoring his existence, though the frequent stabs of blazing pain in Harry's forehead allowed him to be certain that his brother's unexpressed fury was one of those that were serious and dangerous.

Indeed, Tom wasn't one who ranted and yelled and stormed when he was most enraged.

If Tom snapped, snarled, hissed, and raised his voice, Harry had always known it wasn't that big of a deal and he didn't have much to worry about.

In those cases, more often than not, he always managed to soothe his brother's temper by wheedling and softly telling him how sorry he was, and peering up with wide eyes filled with regret, and such.

The danger was when Tom was most quiet, seething in silence, stoking his rage, compounding and multiplying it, utterly ignoring Harry's existence, to then, always, enact some sort of viciously cruel vengeance when least expected.

Indeed, when his brother was silent, Harry knew to be very wary and guard his back.

Miss Nightingale had perfectly fixed Tom's broken nose in a jiffy, but Harry knew that meant nothing. Tom wouldn't forgive or forget, and it was pointless to apologize.

Furthermore, Harry's housemates gave him a wide berth, as if not wanting to be associated to his lowly, muggle-like barbarity and lack of any civilized manners, which they accentuated by shooting him disgusted sneers or malevolent glares for having so thoroughly besmirched their reputation before the whole school.

The other students peered and gazed and stared at him, as they excitedly gossiped about him between themselves, or snickered.

The only two exceptions were Alphard, of course, who in public pretended as if he didn't know him at all, but didn't go to the extent of imitating their housemates' treatment of him, and Abraxas Malfoy.

Indeed, since their violent confrontation of Yuletide, Malfoy seemed to have gone through several stages.

During the first days, the boy seethed and shot Harry very frosty, chilling looks filled with vengeful intent, and Harry had been alert and on guard, expecting it at any given moment.

Though, the boy then began frowning now and again as he glanced at Harry, the looks turning pensive, calculating, and pondering.
The moment Abraxas Malfoy's glances became intrigued and fascinated, even more than ever before, Harry had groaned under his breath.

Nevertheless, the boy hadn't made any attempts of approaching him, though during that day, as the rest of the Slytherins glared and sneered, Malfoy looked gleeful, with a pleased smirk on his face.

With immense patience, Harry waited till lunchtime, and then, he acted.

Knowing his friends' schedules by heart, he hovered by the entrance of Hogwarts as Gryffindors made their way towards the castle after their Herbology class in the greenhouses.

Harry pounced on the Prewett twins the moment they took their first steps into the castle, and instantly grabbed their arms, pulling them into the nearest broom cupboard.

"What's all this about?" said Felix bewildered, squinting in the darkness, just as Harry pulled on the string dangling from the ceiling.

With a 'click', they were suffused in light, as the stood squashed between mops, buckets, and shelves with bottles of detergents and cleaning sponges.

"Are you well?" said Felicity, eyeing him with deep concern, her voice quiet and hesitant. "What happened with your brother today at breakfast-?"

"I need to ask a huge favor from you," cut in Harry hastily, shooting them a pleading look. "I need to know the whereabouts of a muggle soldier of the British Army. His name is Robert Hutchins, he's in his mid thirties, born in-"

"Hold your hippogriffs!" said Felix holding up a hand as he stared at him, looking baffled. "Who? What?" The boy shook his head. "Go slower. What are you asking of us?"

"Well, your dad is the Head of International Magical Cooperation," said Harry, impatiently carding his fingers through his hair, "so he has access to stuff, right?" He shot them a hopeful look, as he rushed out, "He could find out about my friend in the Muggle War Office. I'm sure there must be information about him somewhere in there! What his unit is, where he was sent, what was the last battle he fought and such!"

"Who is this Robert Hutchins?" said Felicity, staring at him uncomprehendingly. "And what's happened?"

"He's a friend of the family," replied Harry quickly, "and, er... my aunt's betrothed, and we've just learned that he's been declared 'missing'." His jaw clenched as he shot the ginger-haired twins a hard look. "I know what 'missing' means but I won't believe he's dead until I've got proof!" He shook his head violently, his hands clenching into fists as he muttered, "And he can't be dead. I know he must be alive somewhere."

"This is why you fought with your brother?" said Felicity in a soft voice, her expression crumbling with compassion as she gently squeezed his arm. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Harry-"

"There's nothing to be sorry for!" snapped Harry, scowling as he jerked away from her touch. "He's not dead!" He then shot them an anxious look. "Will you help me, please? Will you ask your dad to find out about him?"

Felicity, at first startled by his violent reaction, bit her bottom lip fretfully, while her twin shook his head as he said firmly, "Our father would never do it. He doesn't have access to the Muggle Ministry and its departments." Felix let out a heavy sigh. "The only way he could get that
information for you is by using magic on muggles and steal whatever records they have. And Father would never agree to do something like that even if we asked-

"Oh, but!" breathed out Felicity, making her twin look at her with a frown on his face, which quickly cleared, Felix's eyes widening in some sort of realization.

Indeed, the red-haired twins stared at each other, their mismatched eyes suddenly glinting mischievously as they shared a wicked, conspiring grin.

They glanced at Harry, and shot him identical, roguish grins as they chorused, "Our cousin Ignatius, on the other hand…"

Harry had given the Prewett twins every bit of information regarding Robert Hutchins that could be relevant: the man's full name, age, place of birth and such, even remarking that the muggle had dark hair, blue eyes, and two missing fingers from his left hand.

Felicity had conjured parchment and inked quill and scribbled it all down. The twins then assuring him that their cousin, who worked for their father, would undoubtedly do his best to help and get that information for them.

Furthermore, that late evening, after classes, Harry had served detention in the Infirmary, putting especial attention on where Miss Nightingale kept the key of the supply cupboard.

But the two days that followed were sheer torment. He couldn't focus in class, he was constantly jittery and anxious as hours ticked by and he got no news from the Prewett twins.

Hutchins could be giving his last dying breath while Harry was there, stirring a Minty-Breath Potion, or suffering Professor Binn's droning lectures about Goblin Wars, or enduring explanations from their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher of how to cast Shields he could already perfectly perform in his sleep, or clipping the Amorous Brier's twigs in Herbology so that the bush could feel more pretty and thus give better magical berries.

By Friday evening, as he sat for dinner in the Great Hall, Harry was a mass of nerves, anguish, miserable, and distressed, with dark circles under his eyes, his stomach rolling with constant apprehension and misgivings, and his heart permanently lodged in his throat.

So much so, that he jumped in the air when an owl sudden swooped in to drop a letter in his soup.

Scowling at the bird that instantly took flight again, Harry grumbled under his breath as he cast the letter a Drying Charm.

He then opened it, instantly recognizing the penmanship. As he scanned the brief sentences, he let out the most powerful exhalation of deep relief of his life.

He felt Tom stiffening by his side, even the pressure of his brother's piercing gaze boring into one side of his head, as his scar began to prickle.

Harry didn't look at him, though. Tense silence had reigned between them since their scuffle.

Indeed, Harry simply rose to his feet and calmly left the Great Hall, leaving his untouched supper behind.

He spent the next hours in his bed behind closed curtains, as he heard his roommates chattering and commenting about the following Quidditch matches, then rummaging in trunks, preparing for sleep, and finally giving some snores in their beds.
All the while, Harry absentmindedly petted a sleepy Ulysses while he obsessively reread Felix Prewett's letter over and over, as if it could help make the unbearable hours of waiting pass swifter.

*Midnight. Our common room. Password for Fat Lady: 'Gryffindors are the Champions'.*

Harry had merely rolled his eyes at that, once – the Gryffs weren't letting anyone forget that they had won last year's Quidditch Cup for the umpteenth time in a row, even though Slytherins had gotten the House Cup, mostly due to Tom.

Then he had gone back to anxiously bit his bottom lip, impatiently casting Tempus Charms again and again.

The instant the latest charm's glowing red letters finally displayed '23:50', Harry carefully moved Ulysses unto the pillow, the little Scorcrup cozily snuggling with it and letting out a small yawn without being awoken.

Then he yanked his bed curtain's open and jumped to his feet.

"Lumos!"

Harry froze.

Tom was lounging on his bed, with opened curtains, his lit wand in hand as he pierced Harry with narrowed, dark blue eyes.

Tensing, Harry gazed back at him, and they remained silent, staring at each other.

He waited, his scar pricking painfully, but his brother didn't say a word, not even when Harry tested the waters and took one step in the direction of the door.

He took another slow step and glanced back at Tom.

When his brother did nothing but further narrow his eyes to slits, Harry sprung forward, reached the door, and yanked it open.

"Whatever you're plotting," said a cold, deadly tone of voice, "I won't let you go through with it."

Harry stiffened at the threshold, before he quietly shut the door behind him.

As soon as he climbed through the hole of the Fat Lady, he saw the Prewett twins waiting for him, donned in their nightgowns, standing in the middle of their empty common room.

Felicity rushed to him, taking him by the hand as she led them to the couch in front of the grand hearth that had a fire merrily crackling.

"We received this by owl today," she said, her pretty face enlivened and bathed in the soft, warm light coming from the fireplace, as she placed a package on Harry's knees.

Harry immediately tore the wrappings apart and stared at the thick folder in his hands, heart pounding fast in his chest, his breathing hitching.

"Where is he?" demanded Felix as he stood by the side of their couch, casting impatient looks at the fireplace before glancing with wariness at the stairs that led to his housemates' dormitories. "If anyone comes down fancying a midnight snack, we're done for…"

Barely listening to what the twins were saying, Harry uncoiled the string of the folder and took out
its contents, spilling them on top of the low table in front of him.

With jerky moves of his fingers, he spread the numerous papers, his green gaze wildly jumping from one to the other, searchingly.

Though what instantly caught his attention was a large map, of Norway, with drawn figures of battleships on the depicted coastline of the country, or figures of soldiers or artillery, all with arrows stretching from the drawings to other locations on the map, all over the place.

"Army mobilizations and troop movements," said Harry under his breath in realization, before he frantically pulled out another map, this one with black crosses on top of the names of towns, annotations underneath with the number of dead soldiers in such or such battle lost, with red dots marking 'German Occupied Territory', which spread over the majority of the land.

Another was a lengthy report on strategies and tactics proposed to be employed, with information about the enemy troop's numbers, military capability, resources consumed, water, food, and ammunition levels, all given by persons called 'Foxtrot' or 'Scotch' or 'Charlie' – codenames for British muggle spies, he realized with awe, before feeling utter dismay.

With his jaw clenching at the dismal picture that the reports were presenting, Harry frenziedly shuffled through the papers -discarding report after report with attached large black and white pictures of Norwegian towns left in shambles and mere rubble after German air-raids or tank and artillery attacks- until he suddenly halted, gripping one paper with shaky fingers.

It had a small black and white photo stapled on one corner, with all sorts of information underneath, like weight, height, age, and then the name of the soldier's Battalion, the number of his Unit, and the list of battles he had engaged in.

Harry glanced at the picture again, recognizing Robert Hutchins' face immediately.

"Is that him?" Felicity whispered softly by his side.

"Yes," replied Harry hoarsely, his dry throat constricting as he kept staring at Hutchins' picture.

It had been stamped over with red-inked, bold letters: 'Presumed Dead'.

With his heartbeat shuddering to a halt, his eyes flew to the very bottom of the list of battles of Hutchins' file, and he choked out, "Namsos Campaign… a week ago…"

He felt a hand landing on his shoulder, squeezing in sympathy, as Felix's voice said quietly, "I'm sorry, mate."

"Namsos, you said?" gasped out Felicity as she grasped a stapled sheaf of papers that must have caught her attention, her eyes roving over it, becoming wide and disbelieving. "Harry, look at this!"

Harry instantly moved closer to her, even Felix leaned over the back of their couch, as they all read the document that had 'Top Secret' stamped across its pages.

Reading and reading, flipping page after page, they remained in stunned silence.

"It cannot be," finally said Harry in a coarse voice, his eyes wide and wild, given the shocking, sordid, and repulsive information that had just sunk in his mind.

"The British muggles had planned to invade Norway themselves?" said Felix, shooting them a dumbfounded look.
"Yes," breathed out Felicity, her eyes still incredulously scanning the pages, her expression horrified, "to ensure that Norway's merchant fleet kept transporting goods to Britain at low rates… to take over the country's ports and harbors so that the British Royal Navy could control the North Atlantic… and to form a trade blockade against Germany… to freely mobilize armies across Norway to reach Sweden and destroy their iron ore mines… to lay their own mines in Norwegian waters and ensure resources for British factories…"

She trailed off and shot Harry an appalled, aghast look. "Your friend's Battalion wasn't sent to Namsos to help the Norwegians, he was sent because-

"Because the Germans invaded Norway before Britain did," gritted out Harry, peeling his gaze away from the document, his fisted hands shaking so badly that his arms trembled, as his eyes narrowed to slits in a surge of such rage that he could barely speak. "Because Grindelwald must have spies in every shadow and knew what our muggles were up to, and he beat them to it."

Harry felt sullied, utterly befouled. To think that Tom's cynical notions about politics seemed to be absolutely right. That Britain and France hadn't sent their armies to aid the helpless, severely outnumbered Norwegians out of humane support and assistance, but to attempt to stop the Germans from taking over a country they had coveted too, still striving to take it for themselves.

And Hutchins had been sent, like a disposable little tin soldier, to battle and sacrifice life for national self-interests, for trade routes, mines, and ports, not to 'save lives and protect freedom' as the British Army propaganda spouted.

Harry's chest ached.

"Oh, this is horrid!" cried out Felicity with teary eyes, shoving the document into a file as if it had burned her fingers.

Felix shot them a grim look. "Who knew the muggles were so-"

They all jerked backwards, startled, when the fire before them spiked and spat, before abruptly turning green, a figure appearing in the flames.

"Finally!" exhaled Felix, looking deeply relieved. "What took you so long, Ignatius?"

Harry stared at the head and shoulders of a handsome young man, who had to be the twins' cousin, and appeared to be crouching on his other side of the Floocall.

"It wasn't easy," said Ignatius with a heavy sigh, rustling his curls of hair with a hand. "Had to first convince my mate in Magical Transportation to tweak a bit the Floo connection of my office so that I could call to your common room instead of ending up waking your Headmaster." He pinned the twins with his gaze. "Have you received my-" He halted as his eyes shot to the table covered by papers. "Ah, yes, you have."

"How did you get this?" said Felicity, looking at him admiringly and in awe.

Ignatius' lips twisted wryly. "Wasn't easy either to make copies of that, let me tell you. I'm never Polyjuicing into a muggle again." He shuddered as his expression turned disgruntled. "I spent all yesterday being yelled at. That Winston Churchill muggle curmudgeon certainly has a temper on him, barking orders left and right at me, to get him this or that report or file or glass of scotch and case of cigars – loves those to bits, he does- and of course I didn't know where anything was. I got sacked." He grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, the poor sod I assaulted on his way to work and took a hair from did, anyway. Must have figured that out today, the chap."
"And you," continued the wizard without pausing for a hitch of breath, his eyes swiveling to Harry, "must be my cousins' friend in Slytherin House."

"Um, yes," said Harry, blinking, still a bit dazed by all that the wizard had rattled off.

From the green flames, Ignatius pierced him with a narrowed-eyed, weighing gaze.

Apparently, he found something he liked or approved of during his split-second assessment, since his expression relaxed and he grinned widely. "Glad to finally meet you, I've heard much about you from Felix and Felicity." He shot his cousins a warm, fond look, before he glanced at Harry again, his expression turning somber. "Sorry for your friend – your aunt's betrothed, was he?" He sighed wearily. "Things aren't looking good, not for the muggles or us."

"But he's been listed as 'presumed' dead," said Harry hastily, leaning forward towards the green flames, his tone turning hopeful, "so they really don't know. There's still a chance-"

"Not likely," interjected Ignatius, shooting him a pitying glance. He sighed deeply. "And even if he was still out there, somewhere alive, if he hasn't already been taken prisoner by the Germans, there's no chance that his army is going to look for him."

Harry frowned at him. "Why not? They can't leave him behind if he's just missing."

Ignatius shook his head in the green flames. "The British Muggle Army is retreating from Norway – it's a lost cause already, the Germans are everywhere. The muggles of the War Cabinet spent yesterday making the final evacuation plans. They are heading their armies to France." He shot them a glum look. "They got reports that vast German armies are mobilizing towards there. And here in the Ministry of Magic we also know that Grindelwald will strike the French Ministry soon, once he's done with the north."

Harry shot to his feet, his jaw clenching, as he demanded forcefully, "When is the British Muggle Army leaving Norway?"

"In four days," replied Ignatius, shooting him a startled look, before he heaved a deep breath, a hand appearing in the green flames to gesture at the documents lying on the table. "I suggest that you don't show any of that to your aunt. Let the muggles give her the news. Must go now." He rogishly grinned at them, and winked at the twins. "Your father thinks I'm putting in extra hours at work because I'm so very ambitious, but he won't believe it if I stay after one in the morning. He knows I like going carousing with my mates at nights!"

At that, Felicity pursed her lips reprovingly and Felix gazed with envious longing, just as Ignatius gave them a cheery wave of the hand and disappeared from the green flames -apparently with every intention of going straight to indulge in drinks, dancing, and debauchery with his friends- the fire soon dwindling down back to normal.

Harry didn't waste any time in gathering back all the papers, stuffing them into the folder.

"Harry…" murmured Felicity quietly by his side, tentatively touching his shoulder.

He glanced at her, seeing her cheeks coloring as she continued softly, "I'm sorry about your friend. I had hoped that, well-"

"Yeah, me too," cut in Harry, straightening up with folder against his chest. He took the edge off his expression as he warmly smiled at the twins, and said sincerely, "Thanks for the help, I owe you big." He gestured emphatically at the fireplace. "Give Ignatius my thanks too. I didn't get the chance."
"Sure thing," said Felix, eyeing him worriedly. "You'll be well?"

"Yeah, of course," muttered Harry, "I just wanted to know... to be certain..." He shot the twins a forced, weak, tremulous smile. "I'll be fine."

He gave them a faint wave of the hand in parting as he headed for the portrait hole.

"Harry!"

Felicity rushed to him as he was about to climb in, pinning him with her beautiful mismatched eyes, frowning, as she then stammered anxiously, "You can't still think - you're not going to try-"

"Try what?" interjected Harry, blinking at her in puzzlement.

Felicity eyed him closely, and he blinked at her again.

The next second, she exhaled deeply, looking vastly relieved as she mumbled with a smile, "Nothing."

Harry shot her a baffled look, before he patted her on the shoulder and went through the portrait hole.

The moment he rushed into his dormitory, Harry encountered just what he had expected and hoped for.

Tom was still awake, sitting on his bed, a dark scowl appearing on his face as soon as Harry stepped inside, his dark blue eyes narrowing to slits.

Not wasting any time, Harry plopped himself down on his brother's bed, opened the folder and dropped the sheaf of documents, maps, photos, and reports on Tom's lap. "Read it."

Glancing down, Tom frowned as he bit out harshly, "What's this?"

"What Ignatius Prewett got for me," replied Harry calmly, "from the War Office."

Tom shot him a surprised look, before his eyes narrowed again, though obviously he was too intrigued since he said nothing as he swiftly grabbed the pages and began to read.

Harry patiently waited until his brother was done, not even commenting when Tom perused the 'top secret' document that had so thoroughly shocked and disgusted Harry, regarding Britain's true motivations for sending troops to Norway.

"Churchill isn't that much of an idiot as I had thought," murmured Tom as he read that classified document, his tone laced with approval.

"Well," finally said Tom when he was done, as he laid down Robert Hutchins' file, his tone acid and sneering as he skewered him with an intense gaze, "so now you know he's dead."

"Presumed dead," corrected Harry coolly.

Tom's eyes narrowed to slits. "Meaning?"

"You know what I mean," said Harry, staring back at him. "'Hutchins isn't going to die', remember?"

It had become a motto to him during their Summer Holidays, when they had gone to the orphanage
and been told by the caregiver Magda that Robert was gone, that the man had enlisted in the army, when he had heard Alice wretchedly sobbing in the kitchen, when he had punched Tom for saying snidely that he'd always known that Hutchins would end up dead.

'Hutchins isn't going to die' was what Tom grudgingly ended up saying after their fight, that night when his brother had climbed into his bed.

'Hutchins isn't going to die' was Harry's promise to himself and Robert Hutchins. One that he would fulfill no matter the cost.

"You knew what I would want to do the moment I read Alice's letter," added Harry in a hard voice. "I'm going to find him. I'm going to Norway."

"To Norway?" hissed out Tom in a deadly tone, his fury clear by the way Harry's scar began to throb. "To look for a muggle that has been missing for a week?" He violently waved Hutchins' file in front of Harry's face, and spat, "If he wasn't killed or captured, he wouldn't have survived a week without food or water anyway, you half-brained imbecile!"

"Soldiers always carry supplies in their bags," retorted Harry calmly, before he deeply sighed. "I'm not saying that I know if he's alive or not. What I'm saying is that I'm going to find him either way." He shot his brother a steely look. "Because if there's any chance he's still breathing, then I'm making sure he's coming back home."

Tom let out an incisive, jeering laugh, giving him his most scathing glance. "Oh yes, because going to Norway is just a matter of snapping your fingers, is it? How are you planning on getting there, do tell." He shot him a contemptuous look, as he sneered mockingly, "And how will you find him? With your powers of Divination and mind vibes, will you?"

"I'm not saying it's going to be easy, you idiot!" retorted Harry, bristling and incensed. "But I did nothing when I knew beforehand when Grindelwald was going to attack Czechoslovakia, because I let you convince me that there was nothing I could do!" He glowered at him, as he gritted out, "And I told you that 'next time' I would take action, no matter the cost. Well, this is my next time!"

"It's not the same situation, you fool!" spat Tom in a cold, harsh tone of voice. "You have no chance of finding him-"

"I do," interjected Harry firmly. "I've been planning how to do it for the last few days." He gestured pointedly at the documents spread on Tom's bed. "I just needed information first." He shot him a sharp-edged grin. "And now I have it."

Before he gave his brother the chance to open his mouth again, Harry said quietly, "I'm going to Norway with or without you, but I rather it's with you."

With an infuriated expression on his face, Tom hissed out acidly, "I'm not going into a mad search for a stupid muggle who's already dead!"

Abruptly, Harry clutched him by the shoulders, locking gazes with him, as he said vehemently, "I'm asking for your help, because my chances are better with you coming along." He clenched his teeth. "I'm asking you to help me, just as I've been helping you with things that are important to you, like searching for the Chamber of Secrets. I'm asking you to repay the favor, because Hutchins is what's important to me."

Snarling, Tom jerked backwards, making Harry's hands fall from his shoulders, as he said, seething, "I'm not getting expelled just to help you satisfy your pathetic need of being Hutchins'
"We won't get expelled," interjected Harry hastily. "Today is Friday. Teachers won't notice if we're gone for the weekend. And I already have a plan of how to get out of the castle and to Norway."

When Tom scoffed snidely in utter disbelief, to then shoot him a sneer, Harry sighed, carding a hand through his hair.

He then stood up, gathering back the papers into the folder, before he gave Tom one last glance as he muttered, "I'm asking you, my brother, for help. You have until tomorrow to decide if you want to give it."

"Why till tomorrow?" jeered Tom scornfully.

"Because I'm making the last preparations tomorrow," replied Harry shortly, "and with any luck, I'll be in Norway before nightfall."

And with that, he reached his bed and yanked the curtains shut.

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