On the Way to Greatness

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Summary

As per the Hat's decision, Harry gets Sorted into Slytherin upon his arrival in Hogwarts—and suddenly, the future isn't what it used to be.
Year One

Chapter Notes

Everything before Harry's Sorting unfolds exactly as in canon—so by now Harry has rejected Malfoy's friendship, struck up a camaraderie with Ron and learnt that Gryffindor is the bee's knees. This is the first part of a project that spans all seven books; I'm now reposting the existing chapters to AO3. The plan is to have the number of chapters correspond to the year, i.e. one chapter for first year, two for second, three for third, etc. Credit for that idea goes to karinms.

What little romance occurs in this fic is very much peripheral to the plot. There is no main ship.

My beta agdsolarwhisk is the real hero of this tale, for the record. She has my deepest gratitude for being so very, very awesome and so patient with me. She also gets the credit for most, if not all, Latin incantations that you don't recognize from canon.

"You could be great, you know, it's all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness…"

(The Sorting Hat, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone)

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Slytherin. He was a bloody Slytherin. Head bowed, eyes fixed on an empty plate, Harry tried to comprehend the enormity of the Hat's decision. Hagrid had said that all wizards who go to Slytherin end up bad, hadn't he? Well, what did it mean for Harry—surely he wasn't bad already?

("Always spoil everything… ungrateful… freakish… strange… abnormal…")

He wasn't.

He was angry, now, and not a little frustrated. Why did the bloody Hat have to put him in bloody Slytherin with bloody Draco Malfoy and away from—all kids who seemed nice? Even the bushy-haired know-it-all didn't seem so bad now, nor the hapless boy with the toad. They were a little annoying, yes, but at least they weren't Slytherins.

"Weasley, Ronald!"

Oh god, what would Ron think of Harry now? All hopes that Ron would go to Slytherin too were dashed with the Hat's decisive "GRYFFINDOR!" Harry clenched his fists and tried to calm his breathing. Nothing for it. He raised his eyes.

Ron was staring at him with the expression of utter betrayal.

("I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin.")
Well. That answered *that* question. Harry didn't dare look at Hagrid; one disappointed gaze was all he could take in an evening.

Zabini, Blaise was Sorted into Slytherin, and he seated himself next to Harry. The Sorting was finally over and Dumbledore got up to speak some nonsense, after which food appeared out of nowhere on the table. Harry nearly jumped.

"It's called magic, Potter," Malfoy said acerbically. Two huge boys next to him—Crabb and Grabb? —guffawed.

Harry fixed Malfoy with a glare and felt the weight of many looks on him—some suspicious, some malevolent, some blatantly curious. He was familiar with the way kids worked: now that the ball was set rolling, questions would start. He steeled himself and stifled the despair that was creeping up his throat. It was not the time to show weakness. Bullies would pounce on that at once, Harry knew.

And he hated knowing that things would be the same here as they were in his old school.

He had probably been foolish to hope for anything different.

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And yet it *was* different and Harry was grateful for small favours. There were rules to living in Slytherin, unspoken little rules that Harry picked up as he went along; invisible ties connecting certain members of his House; dark secrets and closets full of skeletons, but Harry knew quite a bit about secrets and he was certainly an expert on closets.

The most obvious principle ruling Slytherin was power. If you had power, you were fine; if you had no power, you tried to gain it; and if you had no power and no idea how to gain it, the least you could do was mask your ignorance and hope that nobody saw through your façade.

Ignorance was weakness; knowledge was power.

There was a reason, after all, why Harry Potter started going to the library in his second week of school.

To be honest, Harry didn't want power. He didn't want to be a bully like Malfoy or Marcus Flint, but he wanted to be safe from the Malfoys and Marcus Flints of Hogwarts, and, unlike with Dudley, there was an actual way of achieving that goal. So he kept his head down, tried to slip under everyone's radar and spent a lot of his time in the library, where bullying was unlikely to happen anyway.

He had loads to learn. He was terribly unaware of wizarding customs, wizarding ways of doing things, wizarding history and his own place in that intricate world of connections and alliances. He knew next to nothing about his parents. He knew next to nothing about Voldemort. He knew next to nothing about Hogwarts.

If he was to carve out a place for himself in the wizarding world, this had to change.

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Potions became his least favourite class and Professor Snape his least favourite teacher on the very first evening, when the man had cornered Harry and given him a very threatening speech.

("Misbehaviour—pampered prince—prancing around—expelled faster that you can say Potions—flaunting your fame—keeping an eye on you, boy.")
Harry had been half-furious, half-terrified, so he couldn't recall later what the Professor had said, but he'd grasped that his Head of House hated him and would enjoy punishing him for the mildest infraction.

So it was a in a foul mood that Harry arrived to the Potions classroom door, but the morning was about to get only worse.

"So, Weasel, I'm surprised to see you at Hogwarts… I wouldn't have thought your family could afford to send so many of you here."

Harry had apparently arrived just in time to witness Malfoy picking on Ron. It really wasn't Ron's fault that Malfoy was born a jerk.

"Shut up, Malfoy," he hissed quietly into Draco's ear. He'd rather snap at the boy for everyone to hear, but one of the Slytherin rules was to present a united front to other Houses at all times. "He hasn't done anything—"

"Aha, and your friend Potter is here too," Ron said. Harry flinched away from Malfoy. Did Ron think..?

And right there, staring amid dead silence at a boy whom he would have called his friend not five minutes ago, Harry felt something inside him freeze. Clearly, by getting Sorted into Slytherin, he had committed some cardinal sin. Ron didn't see him as a friend, not anymore; the hurt, betrayed expression on his face communicated that much.

("There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin.")

Suddenly seeing himself from aside, Harry realised that he was standing on the Slytherin side in a crowd of Slytherins and Gryffindors. Ron thought that Harry and Malfoy were friends, because Harry was in Slytherin too, as if that would change anything. Did that change anything? Hate it or not, he was one of them now. He couldn't go back; he couldn't undo the Sorting, un-convince the Hat.

("You could be great, you know...")

It wasn't his fault. Worse, it wasn't as if these kids were monsters. Malfoy was a twit, Nott was annoying, Crabbe and Goyle were scary and Zabini was distant, but they weren't—evil. Harry hadn't made friends in Slytherin, no, but he'd thought he was friends with a Gryffindor—and how quickly did that change?

It hurt to think, so Harry opened his mouth to talk instead.

"Well, seeing the kind of friends Gryffindors are, I'll take my chances with Slytherin, thanks."

There. He'd stood up for Slytherin. The world was slowly tilting off its axis.

He felt the cautious, assessing gazes of his classmates. With a sinking feeling, he realized that Malfoy approved.

"Yes, Weasley, why don't you go and crawl back to that hole you came out of..." Draco interjected.

Harry didn't know which one of them he wanted to punch more.

Ron glared at Malfoy. "Shut up, you stupid—"
"Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley," Professor Snape said, appearing soundlessly out of the classroom.

Harry ignored Ron's sputtering and Malfoy's smirk and marched into the classroom ahead of everybody else, still steaming with anger. During the Potions master's introductory speech, Harry did not listen to the words but tried to calm down instead.

By the end of the lesson, his and Bulstrode's boil-curing potion actually resembled the desired result. Obviously, nothing could compare to Malfoy's concoction, not according to Professor Snape anyway, but Harry felt satisfied with his efforts.

And during the Potions class he did, for the first time in the past week, feel extremely grateful not to have become a Gryffindor. The way his Head of House tore into poor toad boy, decimated the bossy know-it-all and humiliated Ron left Harry rather glad he could escape the carnage with the rest of the Slytherins.

After all, it didn't matter that the Professor hated him; Slytherins were united in public.

Thankfully.

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"Excuse me, is it okay if I sit here?"

Harry raised his head from One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi to see the bushy-haired Gryffindor from before. She looked quite anxious, balancing three heavy tomes, her rucksack, quills and parchment in her arms.

"Sure," he nodded.

He wasn't convinced it was a bright move; he was a Slytherin and she was a Gryffindor and he would get a lot of grief for being seen with her. The same thoughts seemed to be flying through her head, as she threw a nervous glance at the green crest on his robes, but her entire being screamed determination. Looking around, Harry realized that there was nowhere else she could possibly sit.

They worked in silence for an hour and then Harry got up and left.

The next day he was back and so was she.

The day after Harry learnt that her name was Hermione Granger. She'd told him that back when they met on the train, but he'd forgotten since. She, of course, had read all about him in Modern Magical History and The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts and Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century. Harry wasn't sure he liked the girl, but she was really intelligent and eager to help and he could benefit from that.

Explaining it to his fellow Slytherins took some effort.

"Potter, what do you think you are doing, getting all friendly with that Granger creature?" Nott asked, lip curled in disgust.

Harry glanced up from his homework to find that Malfoy, his goons and Parkinson were hovering by as well. He sighed.

"She's smart. I'm using it to my advantage and being very sneaky and Slytherin that way."
For a moment everyone stared at him and he almost hoped his explanation would work.

"Potter, she's a Mudblood," Malfoy said slowly, as if addressing a two-year-old.

"I know," Harry answered with the same air of exaggerated patience. "Strangely, that doesn't make her any less clever and therefore useful."

"Are you that desperate for friends, Potter?" Parkinson sneered.

Harry rolled his eyes, looking a lot braver than he felt. He'd known that socializing with Gryffindors was a bad idea. The thing with Longbottom was proof enough.

Having established that Longbottom was atrocious at Potions by the third week of class, Professor Snape decided to punish Harry for existing by making him Longbottom's permanent partner. Harry had been doing okay in Potions up until that point; he and Millicent Bulstrode coexisted in the state of cool civility which suited Harry just fine. Longbottom, however, seemed to explode everything he touched. A potion that was meant to be, for all intents and purposes, non-toxic managed to go berserk and eat through a desk under Longbottom's care. In other words, Harry stood no chance.

He thought it was unfair, but of course he didn't say anything.

What the situation did mean, however, was that Harry had to study extra hard at Potions in order to anticipate Neville's mistakes and prevent explosions. His research into wizarding history took a backseat to the urgent need to improve his knowledge of Potions. He wanted to get at least a pass for this class, even if he would never get a good grade with such a partner. Cue Granger, whose help he needed to stay afloat in Potions.

And all of it would have been just peachy, but he didn't particularly want to antagonize his House too much. They did not, of course, get to dictate whom he befriended, but they knew where he slept and Harry had still not perfected the charms to booby-trap his bed.

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"Um, Potter?" Longbottom asked uncertainly.

Harry sighed and refrained from rolling his eyes only through a supreme effort of will.

"Yes?"

Honestly, he was nearing the end of his patience. Today's potion was—well, he wasn't sure what to call it, but certainly not what it was meant to be. The disgusting goo they'd concocted was still sitting in their cauldron and it didn't look like it would ever be scraped out again. Snape had delighted in stopping by and berating them loudly in front of the entire class. Longbottom had borne the brunt of the snide questioning—

("Do you have eyes, Longbottom? Yes? In that case, why did you not bother to read the instructions?")

—and the ensuing lecture.

("Class, please note the depths of incompetence to which a student might sink."

Yet, Harry had not missed the way the charcoal-black eyes bore into him. He had not been foolish enough to raise his head and challenge his Head of House, but it had grated on his nerves incredibly to just stand there and listen to the foul diatribe without complaint. He hated feeling helpless.
And really, Snape knew this was not his fault — Longbottom had messed up the potion, as always, and Harry needed eight eyes and three hands at the very least to keep up with the dratted Gryffindor. And ever since Granger had been attacked by the Troll on Halloween she’d become very skittish and withdrew into books even more, so not only had he missed a few weeks of her coaching while she’d been recuperating — now it was rare that she tutored him at all. And Harry did have other classes apart from Potions that needed his attention too, so sometimes he thought the easiest option would be just to throttle Longbottom and eliminate the problem altogether.

So now, he was really not in the mood for Longbottom’s usual end-of-class apology.

The other boy, in the meanwhile, seemed to be gathering the famed Gryffindor courage to speak.

"Look, Longbottom, just don’t bother," Harry hissed. "Your ‘sorry’ doesn’t raise my grade."

Longbottom went pale.

"Uh, I’m sorry, but—" Harry’s expression must have been thunderous, for he went on hastily: "I tried! I tried and tried! But I really don’t get it, I just can’t do it when P-p-professor Sn-nape is looking at me and I just forget everything and—"

Harry closed his bag forcefully and threw it over his shoulder. Seeing that he was about to leave, Longbottom hurried after him.

"Can I make it up to you? I mean, you know I’m sorry but—I can—I can do Herbology! I can help you in Herbology if… if you would like that."

Harry stopped in the corridor to look at the other boy incredulously.

"You're good at Herbology? Then why do you mess up Potions so bad?"

"I don't know!" Longbottom wailed in a distressed fashion. Harry wrinkled his nose.

"Okay. How about… you ask Granger for help?"

"Hermione?" Longbottom asked, confused.

"Yes." This time Harry did roll his eyes. "You know, lots of hair, smart, in your House? I’ve been working with her, but it’s hard for us to meet up, so it would make more sense for you to go straight to her for help. Just… ask her."

Longbottom looked worried.

"But why would she help me?"

Because she’s a loner, Harry wanted to say. Because I don’t know about you, but I haven’t seen her talk in a friendly way to anybody in your House. In fact, her best friends appear to be those dusty tomes she is so fond of carrying around. She’ll love having someone to talk to. It’d make sense for the two of you to team up because you seem to be an outsider too, toad-boy.

Just like me, he thought wryly.

"She will," he uttered with confidence, instead.

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Harry was one of the three Slytherins staying for the Christmas holidays: with him were third year
Adrian Pucey and a rather stressed sixth year girl.

("Solstice, Potter, it's the winter solstice we're celebrating, did you think we cared for Santa Bloody Claus? You're such a Mudblood sometimes...")

Harry enjoyed waking up with nobody else in the dormitory—it was a really nice change from looking over his shoulder all of the time, now that he could compare the two. Back at the Dursleys he always needed to be on guard as well, so this Christmas vacation was a rare treat. Hagrid had invited him to visit during the holidays and Harry did, unsure of his reception now that he had been a Slytherin for half a year already. But Hagrid was cheerful as ever.

"Good ter see yeh, Harry, come on in," he said, beaming.

He gave Harry tea and rock-hard scones and asked him about life and everything went well—except Harry couldn't shake the feeling that Hagrid was holding back a little. It was an odd visit; Harry didn't have a bad time, exactly, but he couldn't help feeling that things would have been different between himself and the amiable giant had Harry been a Gryffindor.

("Good man, yer dad—a Gryffindor through an' through—not tha'... yeh know... Slytherin's not... they wouldn' have minded, yeh parents...")

Well. At least Hagrid didn't hate him.

On Christmas morning Harry stretched and yawned leisurely and then sat up in his four-poster. Then, however, he was in for a huge surprise: there were actual gifts on his bed. Who would send him presents? He'd never received any; Dudley got lots and Harry got none, that was the way things worked in the Dursley household. To think that someone would think highly enough of Harry to get him presents—Harry felt himself smiling in pure joy.

His presents were amazing, too. Longbottom gave him Chocolate Frogs and Hagrid got him a flute, which delighted Harry even though he had no intention to ever play it, and Bulstrode gave him a singing Christmas card and even Granger sent him a card and there was a mysterious package on his bed, too.

This Christmas holiday was the most wonderful thing ever.

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Harry scowled at himself. That had been close: twin footfalls of the Potions master and Filch the caretaker walked past his hiding place not a minute after he'd sequestered himself in an unfamiliar room. This is what happened when he gave in to stupid Gryffindorish impulses and threw caution to the wind! How dumb had he been to go exploring the castle with the Invisibility Cloak when he knew Professor Snape would take delight in catching him? And if he absolutely had to go, he should have at least learnt Silencing Charms first so that people wouldn't hear him walk around.

And anyway, where was he? Harry turned around, not taking the cloak off. Apparently, he'd ended up in an unused classroom: desks and chairs were lined up by the walls, like in other similar classrooms Harry had come across in his search of a quiet place to practice spells without Slytherins breathing down his neck. However, one peculiarity attracted his attention at once: there was a huge ornate mirror standing in the middle of the room.

Curious, Harry slowly approached and soon he was standing in front of the reflective surface. Oddly enough, he could see nothing there. Harry blinked and then realized that he was still wearing the cloak. With a furtive glance to all sides, Harry took the cloak off and stuffed it in his pocket. Then he
looked up.

And froze.

Reflected next to him were at least ten other people.

Harry took a step backward; his reflection did, too. He closed his eyes; when he opened them, the crowd was still there. He whirled around, searching frantically for a sign that there were people in the room with him, when he'd been so sure there was nobody—invisible, maybe, were they invisible? He turned back to the mirror and watched his reflection carefully as he extended a hand until it should have come into contact with a woman standing next to him; but he felt only air. There was nobody there. And yet—was he seeing things? Who were these people, even?

He stepped closer and examined them. The woman he'd tried to touch had auburn hair, kind smile and her eyes… they were bright green. Exactly like Harry's.

Frowning, now, Harry shifted his gaze to look at the man standing on his other side. He had messy black hair, bespectacled hazel eyes and—and god, he looked precisely like Harry expected himself to look once he grew up. He had the same nose, the same cheekbones, the same chin, and his hair stood up at the back of his head the exact same way and—what was this? What was —

Harry, wide-eyed and breathless, gaped at the rest of the crowd and spotted similar atrocious hair, knobbly knees, eyes of comparable green… He swallowed, painfully, and tried to take in everybody's faces at once, all of them smiling at him encouragingly, all of them accepting… And, most importantly, the man and woman right next to him. They were his mother and father, he understood it now—they could not be anybody else, they were his parents—

"Mom?" The redhead nodded, tears in her eyes. Harry felt his own prickling too. "Dad?"

The man just smiled sadly and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. Reflective Harry's shoulder, because Harry didn't feel anything, but he could almost convince himself that he did. He stood, transfixed, in front of them, hungrily memorizing their faces. He hadn't known he looked quite that much as his dad—and that his mom had been quite so beautiful. They were a dream come true. In this cold, abandoned classroom Harry had found something that proved, once and for all, that he didn't just spring into existence out of nowhere. He had parents—or had had parents, once, and they were wonderful. And he could finally see them and spend some time with them and with his entire family.

He wasn't leaving anytime soon.

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He'd had to depart from the room in order to catch some sleep and turn up at meals, so that nobody would wonder where he'd gone, but he spent as much time with the mirror as was possible. Yet, he must not have been cunning enough, for Dumbledore found him on the third evening since the initial discovery of the mirror.

"So—back again, Harry?"

Harry flinched away from the reflection and turned around only to see the Headmaster sitting on one of the unused desks.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said automatically, trying to calculate just how much trouble he was in.

"Not to worry, my boy. Wizards older and wiser than you have been lured by the delights of the Mirror of Erised; many have gone insane before it, forgetting to eat and sleep in their determination
to catch a glimpse of what it shows them…”

Harry listened politely. He would love to ask just what it showed them, but wasn't sure that such boldness would be allowed. Dumbledore peered at him and Harry got a distinct impression that he'd just been x-rayed.

"The happiest man on earth standing before this mirror would see himself and only himself reflected in it, just as he is. Can you guess what it does, Harry?"

Harry blinked. The fact that the happiest man on earth would see just himself and Harry saw a whole bunch of people showed, if nothing else, that Harry was not as happy, but he didn't need the mirror to tell him that. Well. The Headmaster expected an answer.

"Um, I see my family…” he said, hoping that it would distract Dumbledore from the riddle.

"Yes, and somebody else would see themselves receiving the Order of Merlin, First Class." The Headmaster nodded congenially.

Harry frowned.

"It shows us something we cannot have, but really want?"

Dumbledore smiled.

"Yes and no. The Mirror of Erised shows us nothing more and nothing less than the deepest and most desperate desire of our hearts, Harry. That desire does not necessarily have to be unattainable, although in your case, it unfortunately is."

Harry swallowed painfully. It had been wonderful to see his parents. To almost believe he had them again. To know that he'd just been gazing at his most desperate desire—it somehow didn't diminish the allure of the mirror or make the desire any less desperate.

"The mirror gives us neither knowledge, nor truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad by its promises. It will be moved to a new location tomorrow, Harry, and I must ask you not to go looking for it again."

There was a sterner look to Dumbledore's eyes, now, and Harry found himself nodding.

"I understand, sir," he said quietly.

"Very good. Now, off you trot, Harry; it's almost curfew. I shall take no points for finding the mirror; and you will be prepared if you are ever faced with it again. Good night, my boy."

"Good night, sir," Harry replied and, with one heart-wrenching glance towards the traitorous mirror, left the room.

He had no idea where, according to Dumbledore, he might encounter the mirror again.

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Harry tried to get back into the swing of things after that. He and Adrian Pucey teamed up against the Weasley twins in a snowball fight; the Weasleys won, psychic as they were, but Harry got a few good laughs and a bonding session with Pucey out of it. This marked the first occasion when a fellow Slytherin, an upper-year at that, had condescended to speak to Harry in a friendly way. Pucey was apparently crazy about Quidditch; he was a Chaser of the Slytherin team and he chattered on
delightedly about the win against Gryffindor the previous term.

The Gryffindor team had a really appalling Seeker, which in Harry's opinion had helped the Slytherins, but it was hard not to be drawn in to a feeling of at least some patriotism for the Slytherin team when Pucey waxed poetic about it. He bemoaned the fact that Terrence Higgs, the Slytherin Seeker, was graduating next year. During his Flying Lessons Harry had discovered that he did love to fly. Maybe...

"I might try out, then," Harry said, thinking aloud. "If there is a position opening…"

Pucey squinted at him, a calculating look appearing in his eyes.

"Well, you're a Potter; your father was supposed to be really good, so you might as well try. Just make sure to tell Flint it was I who recruited you, if you get in."

Harry nodded distractedly. His dad had been good at Quidditch! What else didn't he know?

His thoughts kept straying back to the Mirror of Erised whatever he tried to do in the next few days, and he found himself actually looking forward to classes starting again. At least then he'd have homework to complete, people to dodge and classes to attend—and wouldn't have the time to brood over the unfairness of only ever seeing his parents in an insanity-inducing mirror.

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It was a good thing indeed that, growing up with the Dursleys, Harry became fast and agile. Otherwise, he would probably have got on the wrong side of Crabbe's or Goyle's fists more than once by now, the way Malfoy kept setting them on Harry. Harry snorted quietly, slipping into an unused classroom. There. Crabbe and Goyle would not be intelligent enough to consider that Harry might have hidden somewhere instead of continuing to run in straight lines. He was relatively safe now; perhaps he could practice the Body-Bind Curse, it sounded pretty useful...

"A-ha! Now, who's come to pay us a visit?"

Whipping his head around and berating himself for letting his attention wander, Harry turned, wand at the ready, only to see redheaded twins grin him in their crazy identical way. He relaxed, but only marginally; although he and these particular Weasleys were on non-belligerent terms, he never quite knew what to expect of them.

"Oh," he said, for lack of anything better. "I didn't realize there was anyone here. I'll just go then—"

"Go?" One of the twins—he thought it was Fred—raised his eyebrows. "But you only just got here!"

"And what Slytherin sneakiness brings you to this humble retreat?" the other one, probably George, added.

Their brown eyes were smiling mischievously; despite the twins' vaguely threatening tone, and the fact that there were two of them and one of him, Harry wasn't overly worried. They'd never hurt him before—for some reason, his Sorting did not offend them the way it did Ron. They just shrugged it off and kept on cordial terms with him—not that their interactions often exceeded simply waving at each other in the corridors.

He'd asked them, once, why they hadn't turned on him if he was in Ron's black books. Both of them had looked at him as if he was the batty one and said that they would never lay into someone who managed to get not one, but two of their brothers riled up until steam was coming out of their ears.
Apparently, Percy was having near-apoplectic fits each time Ron got into trouble because of his feud with Harry. Since driving Percy bonkers was one of the twins' goals in life, they had no problem with Harry fighting with their brother.

Privately, Harry thought that would change immediately should he actually harm Ron; the Weasleys' family loyalty was legendary, after all.

("Blood-traitors, the lot of them. Father says they are disgrace to all Purebloods. Poor as dirt and about as powerful—disgusting, really...")

Harry shook his head. The whole family might be dressed in shabby hand-me-downs, but so had Harry been for most of his life. And Ron might be a pillock, and Percy a bore, but the twins were okay. Harry was sure they'd get along fine had they been in the same House—and not necessarily Gryffindor; he thought they had quite the sneaky Slytherin streak themselves.

"I'm just exploring the castle," he answered in the meanwhile. "I'm sure you know what I mean."

The terrible twins beamed at him.

"There's a good lad!"

"So what were you doing here?" he asked.

"Oh, same as you." Fred waved a careless hand.

"Not plotting any pranks, then," Harry said, slyly.

"Oh no, no pranks, we wouldn't ever," George protested.

"Honestly, Harry, who do you take us for?" Fred was all offended innocence.

Harry observed them critically.

"Right," he said. "I don't want to know. But in case you were having a pranker's block, I should tell you that Malfoy is majorly scared of mice."

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"I heard Hagrid's hut caught on fire yesterday," Neville confided, pruning the branches of their plant with sure hands.

Harry blinked at the non sequitur.

"How come?" he asked, nonplussed. He hadn't been to see Hagrid in quite a while, caught up in his studies as he was, but maybe it was time to pay another visit to the friendly groundskeeper.

"Oh, I don't know." Neville shrugged. "Someone was saying it was a dragon, but how likely is that? No, Harry, careful with that thorn—you'll sneeze non-stop if it grazes you."

Harry carefully extracted his hand from the vines.

"That's… interesting," he muttered, in the end. He recalled Hagrid telling him that he would dearly want a dragon, but what was the likelihood of Hagrid actually getting one?

Hopefully, zero.
"That oaf might just be stupid enough to try and raise a dragon in that wooden hovel of his," Malfoy sneered. He was working at the next table and it was obviously too much to expect that he'd keep his mouth shut.

Harry sighed.

"Yes, thank you Malfoy. Your opinion is priceless and has been duly noted," he said blandly.

Malfoy glared at him but didn't say anything since Harry hadn't actually been rude. Neville smiled timidly. He was rather scared of Draco, but probably felt that Harry provided some sort of protection from the blond Slytherin.

A ridiculous notion, really; Harry and Malfoy might be at each other's throats a lot of the time, but Harry was very aware that Malfoy had power on his side and Harry didn't. He was probably suicidal to keep up his feud with Malfoy, but they'd lived this way for almost a year and, although Harry walked on eggshells around his House, he had yet to be beaten into a pulp. A few impromptu duels here and there, sure, but those were good Defence practice, as far as he was concerned.

He and Neville had become tentative friends in the months since their confrontation in Potions. Neville had both taken Harry's advice about speaking to Granger and insisted that they partner for Herbology. Harry had been sceptical at first, but it turned out that Neville really did have a flair for the subject, so Harry felt this evened things out a little. Neville improved Harry's grade in Herbology and Harry kept them from crashing and burning in Potions. With them being on better terms now, part of the additional tension was gone and Harry could take his efforts from explosion prevention to actual potion brewing.

He got perfect marks in Herbology and a sort-of friend out of the deal, so he was not complaining about additional Potions work.

The Slytherins—especially Malfoy, Nott and Parkinson—had tried to give him grief about the budding friendship with Neville, but thankfully the Longbottoms were an old Pureblood family, so Harry got out of that one relatively easily. And if the Gryffindors, particularly Ron Weasley, were pestering Neville about befriending a slimy Slytherin, Neville never said anything on the matter.

***

"Potter?"

"Yeah?"

He squinted at Blaise Zabini. Blaise Zabini squinted at him.

"I'll help your revise for History of Magic if you give me a hand with Potions."

Harry did his best not to stare. Staring was very uncool and therefore unSlytherin.

"You're asking me for help with Potions? Why?"

Zabini's expression remained stony.

"Anyone who can survive a year of Longbottom and get passable grades is going to breeze through the exam."

When Zabini put it that way, Harry thought he had a point. After all, he had devoted a crazy amount of time to studying Potions this year. As to the offer… Harry cocked his head to the side. Zabini was
one of the quiet ones. He picked no conflicts and chose no sides; like Bulstrode, he did not interfere in Harry's conflicts with Malfoy. Greengrass and Davis stayed out of the way too, but they stuck together and seemed to try and avoid being noticed, period. Harry had the impression that, if push came to shove, they might bandwagon with Malfoy. Zabini and Bulstrode, on the other hand, were relatively independent and had never actively tried to harm Harry.


Who knew; he might do okay in more exams than he'd thought. Especially since Nott had heard about the arrangement and wanted to benefit from Harry's Potions knowledge, too. Harry would have told him where he could stick his ideas, but Nott was good at Transfiguration and Harry was not, so he shrugged and played along. After all, he didn't have to like Nott in order to work with him.

Malfoy said that Harry was a fraud at Potions. Harry said he was wounded. Draco told him not to be sarcastic to his betters. Harry promised to not be sarcastic to the next better he came across. Malfoy threw the first hex. Harry retaliated. Nott and Zabini just leaned back and watched the sparks fly.

***

When they walked into the Great Hall for the Leaving Feast, the place was decked out in Slytherin colours: green and silver banners hung from the ceiling and the Slytherin emblem was displayed behind the High Table. Harry seated himself between Nott and Zabini and eagerly waited for the feast to start.

"Another year gone!" Dumbledore announced cheerfully, standing up from his centre seat at the High Table. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious feast."

Harry looked at the teachers, wondering…

"Where is Quirrell?" he asked Nott in a whisper.

"Do I look like I know?" Nott sneered, but there was no malice in it.

"I heard he's had an accident of some sort," Malfoy informed them.

Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Rumour has it that he's snuffed it," Draco continued.

Theodore didn't look impressed.

"What, tripped over his own feet and fell to death?"

Malfoy shrugged, somehow managing to imply that he knew the details, but wasn't going to share them. The ploy only worked on Grabbe, Goyle and Parkinson; the rest knew Malfoy too well to fall for his charade.

"…Ravenclaw have four hundred and twenty-six and Slytherin, four hundred and seventy-two," Harry heard Dumbledore say and joined in cheering for Slytherin with the rest of the House. "The points standings mean that Slytherin wins the House Cup for the seventh year running. Congratulations, Slytherin!"

A loud cheer rose up from the Slytherin table, while the Gryffindors groaned, and the other two Houses clapped politely. Professor Snape looked as smug as his sour disposition allowed, while
Dumbledore was absolutely inscrutable.

Sitting with the Slytherins and revelling in the shared victory, Harry felt, for the first time, that maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to belong here, too.

-End of year one-
Harry was having an awful birthday all around. First he'd had to withstand Dudley's taunting for receiving no presents, then he'd worked in the garden without getting any food, and now he had to pretend not to exist because the Masons were coming over.

"Remember, boy—one sound from upstairs and you'll regret you'd ever been born," Vernon Dursley snarled as Harry trudged up to his room.

"Yes, Uncle Vernon," he said dully.

It was so like his uncle to come up with these little inspirational statements that made you feel all warm and fuzzy on your special day. With a sigh, Harry slipped into his room and was fully prepared to collapse on the bed after working hard all afternoon, but, to his astonishment, there was already someone sitting there.

Huge tennis-ball eyes, floppy ears, pillowcase for clothing.

Harry had become familiar enough with the wizarding world over the last year to know that this was a house-elf, but what was a house-elf doing in his bedroom? The Dursleys certainly had none, with the exception of Harry whom they used for the same purpose.

The elf bounced from the bed and lowered his back in a deep bow.

"Harry Potter! Dobby is so honoured to meet Harry Potter sir—" The creature would have gone on, but Harry shushed it forcefully.

"Be quiet," he snapped, frowning. "What are you doing here?"

The house-elf's ears drooped a little at the admonishment, but the enthusiasm in its eyes did not diminish.

"Dobby has come to warn Harry Potter sir! Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts!"

Harry stared at the house-elf. Did he just say?..

"Who sent you?" he asked, frowning.

House-elves acted on the bidding of their masters; Dobby had to be there on an errand.

The question plunged Dobby into unexpected frenzy.

"No-no-nobody sent Dobby! Dobby disobeyed his family! Dobby is a bad elf!" With that, the creature jumped a foot in the air, grabbed Harry's bedside lamp and started hitting itself on the head.

Harry thought he heard the conversation quieten downstairs. He remembered his uncle's threats well; suddenly afraid, he lunged at the elf and took his weapon away.

"Stop right now!" he hissed furiously. "If you make that much noise again, I will find out the name of your master and tell him that you'd come to see me."

Dobby's eyes widened and the elf clamped a bony hand over his mouth. The next time he spoke, it was in a stage whisper that was still not as quiet as Harry would have liked, but better than the incessant squealing from before.
"Harry Potter must not come back to Hogwarts," the creature repeated. "There is a plot—a plot to make terrible things happen in the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry this year. Harry Potter will be in great danger. Harry Potter is too important for us to—"

"I see," Harry interrupted. He figured that this was a ploy by one of this Slytherin classmates. They were certainly rich enough to own house-elves and eager enough to keep him from returning to Hogwarts. "So you've come here to tell me that I should not go back to Hogwarts. Is that all?"

The elf nodded with so much enthusiasm that his ears flopped madly against his head.

"Yes! Harry Potter must promise Dobby that he will not go back to Hogwarts!"

"And then you will leave," Harry ascertained.

"Yes, then Dobby will leave, Dobby will know Harry Potter is safe!"

Harry scrutinized the creature for a moment.

"Okay," he said.

Dobby blinked. Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Okay, I will not go back to Hogwarts. You can leave now."

Dobby continued looking amazed, as if he had expected the mission to be much more difficult. He eyed Harry with a certain amount of suspicion.

"Harry Potter promises he will not go back to Hogwarts?"

"Yes, I promise," Harry confirmed, crossing fingers in his pocket.

The elf shuffled from foot to foot and finally gave a tentative smile.

"Thank you, Harry Potter sir. Harry Potter will see that it is for the best. Dobby will go now. And… Dobby is sorry, but here is Harry Potter's post."

The elf produced a small pack of envelopes and parcels from somewhere inside his ragged pillowcase. Harry felt his breath catch. Is that why nobody had written to him all summer? Was this creature the reason why Harry had to wonder sometimes whether the entire wizarding world was only a dream of his?

Harry must have looked murderous, because the elf took a fearful step back.

"D-Dobby thought that if Harry Potter had no mail he would think that his friends had abandoned him…" he started, wide-eyed, but quickly realised that Harry did not need to hear this right now. "Um, here are Harry Potter's letters, sir, and Dobby will be going!"

With a ringing pop, the wretched creature was gone from Harry's bedroom.

Harry stood glued to the spot, clenching his fists in impotent anger. Whose commands was the elf following? Which one of Harry's classmates was dumb enough to think that Harry would fall for their scheme? Grave danger, his foot! Whoever sent Dobby clearly had no idea about Harry's home life, because as things stood right now, he'd rather face grave danger at Hogwarts than spend a whole year at Privet Drive.

Idiots. Bloody—wankers.
Harry marched towards the bed and took the top letter with shaking fingers. He'd thought he hadn't made friends good enough to write him over the summer. Certainly none of the Slytherins were close with him. Harry had half-hoped that Neville would not forget him, but he was not overly surprised when Neville stayed silent, too. Now it seemed that people had not forgotten his birthday. There were letters and parcels on his bed, right here…

Harry took a deep breath and dug in. Neville had written once during the summer, apparently, but received no reply from Harry and decided not to bother him again. However, the timid boy did send Harry a box of Chocolate Frogs for his birthday. Zabini, Bulstrode and Granger sent birthday cards, and Hagrid managed to owl him a whole photo album. Harry was smiling widely by the time he was done opening his cards and presents.

He was so happy he almost forgot to resent the elf. Almost.

***

A month later, Harry stared at the barrier before Platform 9¾ in disbelief. He'd just tried to get through, like last year—and the bloody wall had stayed solid! Or turned solid, whichever, point was—Harry couldn't pass. And the Hogwarts Express was about to leave, because of course Harry's relatives didn't give a damn that he arrived at the station so late. And—Harry glanced at the station clock desperately. It was one minute to eleven. He tried again, more discreetly, aware that a boy with a trunk, a broom and a hooting owl in a cage attracted unwanted attention. The wall wouldn't budge. The barrier stayed closed.

Harry watched in astonishment as the clock hands turned to signify that it was officially eleven o'clock now and the train was gone. Harry glared at the barrier some more, but it was of no help. He was not getting onto the platform; he needed to think of a new plan.

He retreated towards a bench, parked the trolley next to it and sat down. What on earth was he going to do? He had to get to Hogwarts; there was no way he was going back to the Dursleys. How could the barrier have done this?

Harry frowned. He knew that someone wanted to prevent him from returning to school this year; was it the insane elf meddling again, with or without permission from his masters? Furious, Harry snapped his gaze up, looking around the station as if in the hopes of catching the culprit, but then he was hit by the ridiculousness of his actions.

Yes, it was probably the blasted house-elf who'd done this, but Harry could do nothing about it right now. Right now, he needed to focus on reaching Hogwarts. He had no idea where the school was and he could definitely not get there on his own. Therefore, he needed help. Harry wrinkled his nose. He didn't like needing help.

In order to ask for assistance, he had to contact someone; the only way to contact someone was by owl. The wizards he knew were at he school. There, the solution wasn't too difficult: he just needed to send an owl to someone at Hogwarts, and hopefully someone would come and pick him up.

Harry dug up some parchment, but didn't dare write with a quill in plain sight, so a ballpoint pen it was.

"Dear Professor Dumbledore…"

Harry felt it was the safest writing to the Headmaster. He had spoken to the old man once and he hadn't seemed too bad; and Harry didn't properly know any other teachers except Professor Snape. And if anybody believed Harry would ever write to Snape, they had to think again.
Harry looked over his letter. Hmph. It would do. Looking around surreptitiously, just in case anyone was watching, Harry unlatched the lock on Hedwig's cage and tied the letter to her leg.

"There you go, girl. Could you take it to Headmaster Dumbledore at Hogwarts? Maybe it'll make up for all that time you had to spend locked up in the summer?"

Hedwig hooted reproachfully, as if rejecting the claim that anything so meagre as a flight to Hogwarts could possibly compensate for her miserable summer. Harry shrugged, smiled wryly and let her go. A few people noticed that there was an owl flying above their heads, and a couple of young kids squealed, but thankfully nobody realized that it was Harry's doing. He tried to hide behind his luggage trolley and seem inconspicuous. After all, it was likely that he would be here for a while.

Very quickly, he got bored. He could not practice magic, he could not read since his books were magical and he even lacked the comfort of talking to Hedwig. And it had all been going so swimmingly, too, Harry reflected. He'd got rid of the elf and enjoyed his presents. His school list for next year had thankfully been delivered when he was alone in his room and he started planning for his trip to Diagon Alley at once. It had taken a lot of sneakiness, diplomatic skill and subtle threats to convince his relatives to take him to London and drop him off at the Leaky Cauldron. The Dursleys had been dead set against going, of course.

("We'd promised to stamp this unnatural nonsense out of you! I'm not helping a—freak—to become even more—freakish!")

However, since Harry had managed to behave himself during the Masons' visit and Uncle Vernon got his very important deal signed, the Dursleys were in a better mood than normal in the ensuing weeks. Aunt Petunia took to leafing through property magazines in search of that perfect house in Majorca, Dudley was happy that he would get a new VCR and Uncle Vernon was bursting with pride at his own ingenuity. In such a setting, the family found itself more prepared to tolerate Harry and his abnormality, especially since Harry took extra care to be polite and not rise to any of Dudley's baits. The final argument to convince the Dursleys to take him to the Leaky Cauldron and then to King's Cross was that, surely, they wanted to get Harry out of their hair for another school year.

A while into Harry's wait at the station, a matronly lady stopped by to inquire why he was sitting there all alone. Harry managed to convince her that he was just waiting for someone, and dearly hoped that someone would actually turn up soon. He'd be shipped to an orphanage at this rate, otherwise.

"Potter!"

Harry jumped. There was no mistaking that voice or those malevolent tones.

"Professor Snape," Harry acknowledged, resigned, and stood up.

***

Even though the school year got off to an rocky start, what with Professor Snape holding a grudge for the detour to King's Cross and Professor Lockhart making Harry believe that it was possible to die of embarrassment, Harry's prestige in Slytherin rose slightly ever since he'd become the new Seeker. People knew that both he and the Malfoy scion had tried out for the position; the amount of raw talent he had to possess in order to beat Draco and his father's influence commanded respect. Malfoy did not, of course, go down without a fight: he was now one of Slytherin's Chasers.
Interestingly, Malfoy's father happened to donate a generous amount of money for buying the Slytherin team a set of Nimbus 2001 brooms. Everyone knew that the donation had something to do with Marcus Flint's decision to kick another Chaser off the team in Malfoy's favour, but nobody was saying anything. After all, it had been only prudent on Flint's part.

Harry wasn’t sure what he felt about flying on a broom Mr. Malfoy had purchased, but he just shrugged and let it go. Some things were just not worth fighting over.

Others, however, were, and Harry had wasted no time in telling one Colin Creevey that, should he try to accost him for autographs again, Harry would tell the Slytherin Quidditch team that Colin was trying to sabotage him. He'd like to see Colin walk away alive and breathing from that. The mousy Gryffindor had stared, wide-eyed, gulped audibly and sped off, shouting that he was sorry all the way. He almost made Harry feel bad about being so blunt, but the idea of walking around the school with an adoring shadow for everyone to laugh at was more than Harry could bear. Malfoy would not have let Harry live it down, especially not since Harry beat him at Seeker tryouts.

Gilderoy Lockhart, in the meanwhile, was a problem on a whole different level.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," the Professor would say and throw an arm about Harry's shoulders as if they were the best of chums. "Do not start giving out signed photos too early in your career: it might make you appear too eager for spotlight."

Or:

"When you get to the level of nationwide popularity I'm at, Harry, you'll learn that fame is a burden you have to bear with dignity."

Harry felt he bore his current burden with great dignity, but he was reaching the end of his tether. He had researched the Notice-Me-Not charm and started applying it on himself in Lockhart's immediate vicinity; he wasn't sure how legal that was, but hopefully nobody would find out. He just knew that there was no way he was getting called upon to do another impersonation of the Wagga Wagga Werewolf in class. Not if he could help it.

***

"Lockhart has no clue what he's talking about," Nott uttered with confidence. "He's even worse than Quirrell."

"And that's saying something," Harry agreed.

They were about to exit the Great Hall after the Halloween Feast. It had been rather fantastic: huge pumpkins and scarily real decorations and—it just made Harry happy he was a wizard, all over again.

"This school is going to the dogs," Malfoy scoffed. "Dumbledore keeps hiring idiots."

"Urgh," Crabbe grunted in what Harry assumed was agreement.

Parkinson giggled as if Malfoy had said something witty. Harry kept wisely quiet. He, too, felt that Defence teachers were seriously lacking, but he wouldn't go as far as to badmouth Dumbledore who'd only been nice to him.

"Mind you, Potter, Lockhart does bring out the dramatic actor in you," Malfoy sneered. "Pity that he's stopped calling on you to act out scenes from his books. I think the role of the Banshee suited you most."
Crabbe and Goyle bellowed with laughter.

Ignore Malfoy. He had to ignore Malfoy.

"The Yeti was good too," Nott added. "Must be the beastly Muggle nature in you shining through, Potter."

"You know full well my mother was a witch, Nott—" Harry started, throwing caution to the wind, but suddenly second year Slytherins ran into the backs of other students who’d come to an abrupt halt.

"What's happening?" Parkinson demanded in a shrill voice. Harry winced; that had been uncomfortably close to his ear.

Through a gap between two people in front of him, Harry could discern the second floor corridor, flooded for some reason. There was a message on one of the walls, written in something that resembled blood:

THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED.

ENEMIES OF THE HEIR, BEWARE.

Harry blinked, re-read the message and didn't like it upon the second reading any more than on the first. Then he spotted something hanging from a torch bracket under the crimson words. He couldn't make out what it was, but his concentration was soon broken anyway, because Malfoy said loudly from next to Harry:

"Enemies of the Heir, beware! You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

What followed was complete pandemonium. Argus Filch burst onto the scene and accused the student body as a whole of murdering his precious cat; everyone started talking and shouting; amid the chaos, Professor Dumbledore arrived to take control of the situation. He examined the stiff cat, conferred with the teachers and sent the students on their way.

Malfoy, Harry noted with disgust, seemed to have a bounce in his step as they were walking towards the Slytherin dungeons.

"Have you seen it?" he was asking gleefully. "Have you seen it? The Chamber of Secrets has been opened!"

"Yes, Draco, we've seen it," Nott said, rolling his eyes in exasperation.

"But have you seen it? It said, right there, that the Chamber has been opened! The Slytherin's Heir has come to the school!"

"Anytime you feel like pointing out the obvious, Malfoy, please feel free," Harry said pleasantly.

Malfoy went red in the face and glared at Harry.

"Bet you're scared, aren't you, Potter? With your blood tainted as it is?"

"I'm terrified, Malfoy," Harry deadpanned. "Trembling already. Oh woe is me."

Even Nott couldn't restrain a snicker. Zabini and Bulstrode were smirking. Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis tried to melt into the crowd and pretend they were giggling about something else.
Malfy fumed and stomped all the way to the Slytherin common room in silence.

***

A week later, Harry was eating breakfast before his first ever Quidditch match. He tried to maintain a cool façade, but he had to admit he was really nervous. The atmosphere in the school for the past week had not been conducive to a calm frame of mind. Rumours were flying about; speculation about the Heir's identity ran rampant, especially in Slytherin.

Malfy liked to pretend that he knew more than he was letting on, but he didn't impress anyone except the usual band of sycophants. One useful thing Harry found out from him was that the Chamber had been opened fifty years ago and a Muggleborn had died then, but that did not at all help to shed light on the legend he'd read about in *Hogwarts, A History*. If the Chamber had been opened fifty years ago, it followed that the Heir had been at school then and was possibly alive today. Yet, this yielded nothing in the way of what the mysterious beast in the Chamber was.

Harry shook his head and tried to concentrate on the match, but in some ways, it was better not to think about the match, because if he failed to catch the Snitch after Flint had appointed him Seeker over Malfy… Well, he'd better die trying. His chances of surviving the day were nil anyway.

"Stop looking so green, Potter, you're putting me off food," Millicent Bulstrode said, wrinkling her nose. "Your match will be fine."

"Unless you fall from your broom and die," Blaise Zabini interjected with a pleasant smile. "Which might be somewhat unfortunate."

Zabini and Bulstrode had become Harry's tentative allies ever since Harry's tutoring in Potions had helped them pass the exam at the end of their first year. Harry wasn't sure he could call them friends yet, but he appreciated having someone in his House to talk to, for a change.

"Good to know you care, Zabini," Harry muttered, staring at his toast in disgust.

"I'd attend your funeral," Blaise said in all seriousness. "And bring, you know, flowers."

"Thanks. So much."

Millicent rolled her eyes.

"Don't pay attention to Zabini, Potter. This sort of a morbid streak comes to you naturally if your mother's husbands keep dying like flies around your house," she said, smirking at Blaise.

He actually went red in the face.

"What are you suggesting, Bulstrode?"

"Oh, nothing," she said airily. "Why, have I touched a nerve?"

Harry's pre-game jitters were forgotten as he watched the exchange. It was always great to observe power plays, especially if they did not involve you.

***

The game was on. Harry circled above the pitch on a lookout for the golden ball. The Gryffindor Seeker, a dark-skinned boy called Dean Thomas, tried to tail Harry. Harry figured that Thomas wanted to keep an eye out for Harry and for the Snitch at the same time.
Suddenly, a Bludger came whooshing by Harry's head. He'd barely managed to swerve out of the way in time. Turning around, he saw Beater Derrick speed towards it and hit it in the direction of Gryffindor Chaser Angelina Johnson. Harry thought that was the end of that, but inexplicably, the Bludger changed direction and came back to attack Harry again. He dove out of the way, nearly knocking Thomas off his broom in the haste to get away.

"What the hell!" Derrick cried and smacked the odd Bludger with his bat again, this time aiming it towards Katie Bell, another Gryffindor Chaser.

The difference in target didn't seem to impress the Bludger. It had clearly taken a liking for Harry as it veered back to charge at him again.

"What's going on?" Harry cried, bewildered, dodging the rogue ball once more.

"I don't know!" Derrick shouted in response. "I've never seen it do this before—ahh!"

He hit the ball again. The Bludger flew a couple of feet towards Alicia Spinnet and curved back towards Harry with resolve worthy of better pursuits.

It was starting to rain. Harry decided to try a different tactic and went into a dive, hoping to shake the Bludger off. The damn thing was persistent: it came after Harry wherever he went. Up, down, speeding across the field—he'd caught Derrick gesture at him to Flint, once, but had to swerve away to avoid being hit by the Bludger, so he didn't know what the captain said back. It didn't matter. The one and only remaining goal of Harry's life became catching that damn Snitch, ending the game and getting rid of the Bludger once and for all. So, when he saw the Snitch flutter by the Gryffindor goal posts, not even the appearance of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse would have stopped him mid-flight.

Harry's fingers closed around the Snitch.

And then a Bludger rammed into his left shoulder.

Half-blinded with pain, Harry didn't even hear the cheers following the announcement of Slytherin's victory. He careened towards the ground, feeling dizziness assault his head. He was about to faint, he really was, and he didn't fancy doing it from forty feet in the air. The ground was coming up fast. With a splash, Harry hit the mud on the pitch and got off his broom, trying to jolt his injured shoulder as little as possible. Black spots were dancing in front of his eyes and his glasses were all muddy, so he couldn't really see anything anyway.

"Well done, Potter," said a gruff voice from beside him and Harry recognized it vaguely as belonging to Marcus Flint.

He found himself unable to formulate an answer. Someone's hands helped him stand up and held him upright.

"Just let me come through and I'll fix him in no time!" Lockhart was saying somewhere nearby. "Now, Mr. Potter, let me just have a look—"

"No—" Harry said weakly.

"I'm taking my Seeker to the hospital wing, Professor," Flint said firmly.

"It is no trouble! I have seen this exact kind of fracture and I have—"

"I'm sure, sir, but I'm taking my Seeker to the hospital wing," Flint repeated with dull stubbornness.
and led Harry away.

Harry'd never thought that he would one day feel grateful to his bullying sod of a Quidditch captain.

"Thanks, Flint," he wheezed out.

"No-one tells me what to do with my players," Flint grunted in reply. "Now, don't you dare fucking faint on me, Potter, you hear?"

"Uhm," Harry answered intelligently.

Only the mortification he would feel if Flint was forced to carry him into the infirmary kept Harry on his feet.

***

Harry had been given a sleeping potion so that he would be unconscious for most of the time while his bones were mending. Apparently, having a Bludger slam into his shoulder at full speed was a bad idea and Madam Pomfrey would prefer he shatter some more easily fixed part of his body next time. Harry had to agree, except he was glad it wasn't worse. Good thing that the Slytherin Quidditch team was the first and only love of Flint's life, which meant that Harry fell under his protection too. Sort of.

Harry rubbed his eyes, wondering what woke him up. It was still quite dark, after all; maybe the sleeping potion had stopped working? He squinted at his surroundings.

"Dobby!"

The house-elf's eyes were huge with fright. Harry sat up abruptly, wincing at the pain in his shoulder.

"Oh, Dobby did not want to wake Harry Potter sir! Dobby is so sorry!"

"Dobby, just—"

"Why has Harry Potter sir come back to Hogwarts?" the elf cried in sudden agitation. "Dobby tried to warn him but Harry Potter didn't listen! Dobby closed the barrier so that Harry Potter would miss the train, but—"

"So that was you, after all." Harry clenched his fists.

"Yes, but Harry Potter must not be angry! Dobby only tried for the best, for Harry Potter must not remain at Hogwarts! Dobby thought that his Bludger would—"

"Dobby, if you value your life, don't tell me that it was you who'd charmed that Bludger."

"Dobby is used to death threats, sir! He gets them every day from his family."

And that was very sad but didn't excuse the elf's abominable behaviour towards Harry. He felt suddenly tired.

"Look, Dobby. I get it that you want to help—" unless it's your master trying to kill me. "—but you're really going about it the wrong way. I could have died today. So far, I have been in more danger because of you than because of whatever terrible things are meant to be happening."

"Oh, but they are happening, Harry Potter sir! The Chamber of Secrets has been opened once more
"And you knew all along that it would be?" Harry asked incredulously. "Why warn me? Why not Dumbledore?"

"Harry Potter doesn't understand, he—"

And then Dobby went quiet. Footsteps were nearing the hospital wing. With one last sad look at Harry, the elf disappeared.

And in came the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall, carrying the Petrified form of Colin Creevey.

***

"Three—two—one—go!" Lockhart commanded.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Harry fired, hoping it would strike Malfoy.

However, the other boy managed to jump out of the way just as he was sending his own hex. In the meanwhile, the results of Malfoy's *Serpensortia* materialized: a long black snake lay on the floor, turned towards Harry and poised to strike.

Shit. Harry thought furiously, trying to come up with something.

"Don't move, Potter," Snape said airily, probably enjoying the scene. "I'll get rid of it."

"Allow me!" Lockhart butted in and, before anyone could stop him, brandished his wand in an aimless fashion.

The snake, instead of disappearing whence it came, flew up in the air, did a somersault and dropped back on the ground, now even angrier than it had been before. Harry watched as it slithered towards a student Harry vaguely knew by sight and raised its fangs…

"Stop!" he commanded in the vain hope that it would work. He fully expected the snake to disregard him, but to his amazement it backed off from its target and turned towards Harry. "Leave the students alone."

The snake, miraculously, continued to obey. It folded down on the floor and projected what to Harry seemed an image of utmost docility. Harry raised his eyes, suddenly aware of the silence around him, and realized that everyone was staring. Harry's heart plummeted. What had he done now?

Automatically, he glanced at Malfoy—his face was white—and then at his Head of House. Professor Snape was also looking at him with an expression Harry hadn't ever seen aimed at him before: intense and calculating. Harry did his best to appear calm.

Professor Snape banished the snake with a wave of his wand and said something to Malfoy. The other boy nodded and headed towards Harry; Harry had a feeling he really wouldn't like what was coming. As Malfoy approached, Harry realized that other second year Slytherins had closed ranks around him. Blaise and Millicent appeared unusually stern.

"Come on," Malfoy muttered. "Let's go to the dorms."

And he looked at Harry differently too, as if something had changed about him greatly between now and the beginning of their duel.
"What—" he tried to ask, but found himself herded by Crabbe and Goyle towards the exit.

"Later, Potter," Nott said tersely. "Merlin, you just had to pick this time to reveal this, didn't you?"

"Reveal what?"

"Nott, wait till the dorms," Malfoy ordered with a frown.

Harry didn't think he'd ever seen Malfoy frown seriously before.

They talked no more until they arrived at the dungeons. The boys propelled Harry towards their dormitory and closed the door. They all sat down on different beds, while Harry remained standing, unsure of what was going on.

"Potter," Malfoy said, and it seemed like he was trying and failing to regain his usual equilibrium, "why on earth did you pick tonight to announce that you're a Parselmouth?"

"I don't know what you mean," Harry answered with perfect honesty. He was a what?

"Why, Potter? Why in front of the entire school? And why didn't you tell us first?"

Harry drew his eyebrows. Notably, they all appeared to know what Malfoy was on about, even Blaise Zabini. The dark haired boy was watching him carefully.

"Malfoy. Let's go over what happened. You conjured a snake. I told it to retreat…"

"Precisely! When were you planning to tell us that you are a Parselmouth?"

"That you can talk to snakes, like Salazar Slytherin," Nott added slyly.

Malfoy flashed him a glare.

"Don't be ridiculous, Theo. Potter's not the Heir of Slytherin. There's no way."

"Isn't there?" Nott asked lightly. "He could talk to snakes the last time I checked. You know the whole school will think he's the Heir."

"The whole school is stupid then, have you seen Potter creeping about opening hidden chambers?"

Harry's head was spinning. He leaned against a bedpost and stared unseeing at the two arguing boys. He had known he could talk to snakes since a long time ago, but he never thought it was something bad. He tried to think of his readings—surely, at some point he would have come across something that indicated that speaking to snakes was a special ability! However, all he could remember was a passage in *Hogwarts, A History* about Salazar Slytherin's great affinity for snakes. It sounded like he bred them, not talked to them!

His thoughts were dashing in all kinds of directions. Was this why he was Sorted into Slytherin, because he had its founder's special talent? And how deep of a hole had he dug for himself—Nott was right, the whole school would think he was the Heir, he fit the bill so well—a Slytherin and a Parselmouth to boot, what other proof would people need? And was he actually the Heir of Slytherin? Was he related to the Hogwarts founder? Could he be opening the Chamber and Petrifying people without knowing it?

"Potter!"

Harry shook his head slightly, filing his thoughts away for later consideration.
"Yes?" he asked cautiously.

"Were you ever planning to tell us you were a Parselmouth?" Nott inquired.

"No," Harry said truthfully.

"Then why," Malfoy hissed, "did you go and pull that stunt tonight?"

"I didn't mean for it to happen," Harry replied. He was saying too much truth, probably, but he still felt too shell-shocked to come up with lies. "The snake was about to strike. I had to stop it. I didn't want a corpse on my conscience."

There, he'd almost managed to make it sound as if he'd actually known he was a Parselmouth. Damn it! He should have spent more time on wizarding culture than on Potions last year and more time on research than on Quidditch this year and maybe he would not have been in this situation right now.

The boys were gazing at him calculatingly. Harry didn't know what they were looking for.

"Are you the Heir of Slytherin?" Vincent Crabbe asked.

"Crabbe, don't be dumb, he's not," Malfoy snapped.

"Why are you so sure?" Harry asked in curiosity.

After all, he wasn't sure; how could Malfoy be?

The blond rolled his eyes.

"The Potters didn't have a drop of Slytherin blood in them."

"But he's a Parselmouth," Gregory Goyle pointed out.

This was probably the first instance when Harry saw Malfoy's two minions disagree with their leader.

"Yes," Malfoy acknowledged reluctantly. "He is. That doesn't prove anything."

"The ability to speak to snakes was hereditary in the Slytherin line," Blaise Zabini said, as if reciting from somewhere. "You don't just… learn it."

"But look at him!" Malfoy exploded. "Does Potter look like someone who goes around setting beasts on Mudbloods? He's a half-blood himself!"

"Okay," Blaise allowed. "Maybe he's not the Heir of Slytherin, but an heir…"

"He is standing right here," Harry said firmly.

The other boys jumped at the interruption and stared at him again.

"This isn't going to be easy," Nott remarked, eyeing him with resignation. "The entire school is going to think you're the Heir, even if you're not. Which you still have to prove, by the way, because appearances can be deceiving and I don't think you're friends with a single Mudblood."

"They're going to blame it all on you, Potter," Malfoy said with gusto. "They'll say you Petrified the stupid cat and attacked that Mudblood. It won't matter that you're the Boy-Who-Lived, now."
"It'll probably make things worse," Nott observed clinically. "They'll think you're superpowerful or something. Which, if you are, please note I'm not disputing."

"Nott, don't be stupid," Malfoy hissed. "Potter isn't the Heir."

"But he might be an heir and Nott's not alienating him," Zabini said shrewdly.

Harry was beginning to find this fascinating. A few Parseltongue phrases seemed to transform power relations in his dorm. He wondered about the rest of Slytherin. Yes, the school probably hated him, but at least in his House it would be hypocritical to despise him for the ability to talk to snakes. Did Neville fear him now? Were the Potters really related to Salazar Slytherin? And would the rule of united Slytherin once again work in his favour?
The worst part of being widely believed to be the Heir of Slytherin was that, suddenly, Harry became the most interesting person in Hogwarts. People would crane their necks to see him, give him frightened glances, gossip about him, follow his every move with suspicious eyes… After the Petrified body of Justin Finch-Fletchley and the frozen form of the Gryffindor ghost were found in an upstairs corridor, the school went from nervous to panicked in a flash—and the Gryffindors felt it was a mark of bravery to try and trip Harry up or hit him with a spell in the corridors.

There were times when Harry seriously contemplated hiding under the Invisibility Cloak until the horrid gossip abated. Even the Slytherins were treading softly around him, and they knew where Harry was most of the time, seeing as they'd taken up a habit of shadowing him to and from classes.

"It's not like you had to be there personally to do it," Blaise explained helpfully, dark eyes glinting in amusement. "You could just tell your pet monster to go for Finch-Fletchley, right?"

Harry supposed it was possible.

("Rip... tear... kill... I smell blood!")

He shuddered. Maybe it was possible. Maybe he was hearing some sort of a monster move through the walls of the Hogwarts castle, deadly and invisible to all…

…Mind you, it was mightily unlikely that a deadly monster of any sort would be living inside walls and calling out to Harry in particular. It was, however, highly plausible that Peeves was playing a joke, or that some ghost was whining about its life—or lack thereof. Harry could definitely imagine the Bloody Baron, for example, confessing to the desire to kill and pillage as he swooped through the castle in all his menacing glory.

Still, that mysterious voice gave Harry the creeps.

***

Harry wouldn't admit it to himself, but he was actually quite nervous about Neville's reaction. School-wide panic annoyed more than hurt him most of the time; they were idiots to think that a second year would be capable of finding a chamber Dumbledore himself had failed to locate. It was infuriating to be on the receiving end of baleful glares for something he had not done, but he was used to being an outcast. In Slytherin, the belief in his culpability had actually improved his social standing. Neville, however, was a friend—tentative, but a friend nonetheless, and it would hurt if he rejected Harry like the rest of the school had. The majority of the students didn't know Harry; Neville did, a little bit. Harry wasn't sure he'd stand it if Neville pulled a Ron Weasley on him.

However, Neville went to their usual table during the next Herbology lesson.

"Hullo, Harry," he said. There was a little awkwardness in his manner, but overall he seemed the same as normal.

"Hi, Neville." Harry bit his lip.

He wasn't really sure what to say. Should he try to reassure Neville that he wasn't dangerous? Or should he pretend that nothing had changed and that a roomful of Gryffindors wasn't glaring at him like he was the foulest creature of the underworld?
Neville gave him a shy smile.

"Don't worry," he said softly. "I don't think you are the Heir of Slytherin."

"You don't?" Harry repeated hopefully. "Why not?"

"Well..." Neville shrugged and absently tickled a stem in front of him. Harry could have sworn he heard the plant purr. "I don't think you want to kill all Muggleborns, your mother was one. Besides, Hermione's been trying to do research the Slytherin line and the Potters aren't turning up anywhere yet..."

He shifted from foot to foot and looked up at Harry, blinking.

"I'm... You just don't seem the type."

Harry felt himself smile—a genuine, relieved smile—for the first time in days.

"Thanks, Neville," he said, heart immeasurably lighter. "So, to re-pot this shrub, do we tweak its leaves, sing *La Marseillaise* to it, or what?"

***

Harry was glad when the Christmas holidays commenced. Christmas meant that most of the whispering, gossiping mass of students was going home, leaving Harry in relative peace. Of course, Malfoy just had to remain behind to spoil Harry's fun, but Harry figured he would get a lot more time for himself than during the last week of class. Time to—say, research the Potter family line, something he should have done ages ago.

Not that staying in dorms with Malfoy and his pet gorillas would be the best experience of his life.

"Potty?"

"We're not in kindergarten, Malfoy."

"I just like calling you names."

"I've noticed."

Pause.

"Do wizards even have kindergartens?"

"Well, the Malfoys have never attended them. None of the good families do."

"No kindergartens for inbred kiddie wizards?"

"Funny, Potter. Your father was one of us, you know."

That silenced Harry. Indeed, his research into the family line showed that the Potters were a very old Pureblood family, intermarried with the Longbottoms and the Weasleys and the Parkinsons and the Selwyns and the Malfoys and—everybody, really, so if not for Harry's Muggle-born mother, Harry would have been just as inbred as Malfoy. What's worse, the blond git turned out to be wrong: Harry had traced the genealogical line to someone called Ignotus Peverell—and that Peverell's father was, apparently, a descendant of the Slytherin line. Granted, the connection was distant and very tenuous, but the fact was that Harry did have Slytherin blood in him, even if it was only a drop.
Harry's heart had clenched when he'd got to the blasted Peverells—lived in the bloody fourteenth century and still managed to mess up his life—but then, rather quickly, he realized that, really, lots of other people were descended from that family. Most of the Purebloods, in fact—or so they all liked to claim. Harry had rather brightened at that, because either pretty much everyone qualified as an Heir of Slytherin to the same extent as Harry, or else everyone simply wanted to make themselves appear important by citing the Peverells among their ancestors—and the Potter family might have been no different. Maybe they had invented the connection so as not to be outdone by their Pureblood rivals.

For the Potters, shockingly, seemed to have cared about class issues for most of their history. Indeed, they could not possibly have stayed Pureblood well into the twentieth century by accident: the constant interbreeding with other Pureblood families must have been deliberate. They had also possessed all the qualities Harry despised in Malfoy—belief in their own prominence, pride in family history, and wealth taken completely for granted. Still, they tended to produce decent people—very few Potters had joined any dark wizards or succumbed to the lure of power. So, overall, they seemed to be a good sort.

("The ability to speak to snakes was hereditary in the Slytherin line… You don't just… learn it.")

That is, a good sort unless you counted that whole Peverell business, because, surely, Harry must have inherited his Parseltongue abilities from somewhere.

"And let's not forget your darling godfather from the House of Black, rotting in Azkaban as we speak…"

"… with your aunt, Malfoy."

"… Shut up."

***

Harry could honestly say he had not anticipated the attack. One minute, he was walking down an empty hallway; the next, someone suddenly pounced upon him. A fist hit him squarely on the face, knocking off his glasses, another caught him in the solar plexus, and he was vividly reminded of Dudley and angry that he'd been caught off guard and he wanted to get his wand out. Someone was already hitting him with a spell, though, and boils broke out all over his face and hands and he stifled a yell of pain, but tried to fight back—he always did, didn't he? Hands were grabbing him, though, holding his arms, and he really didn't know where it would have led—

("Been fighting again, have you, boy? No, I will not give you aspirin, you hooligan, you don't deserve any for such ghastly behaviour!")

—well, he didn’t know how far they would have gone, but suddenly, a voice cut through the haze of pain:

"What's going on here? What—you —Smith! Stebbins! Stop it, are you insane?"

The blows ceased falling, but the hands holding him in place did not relax their grip. Harry squinted at the source of the voice myopically, feeling rather disoriented.

"Come off it, Diggory, you know what he's done to Justin."

"Just teaching the His Slytherin Highness a life lesson, yeah? Don't mess with Hufflepuffs, you get yours."
"You'll get yours, Stebbins, if you don't unhand him right now."

The fury in that voice was unmistakeable; Stebbins must have recognized it, for he let Harry's arms go after all. Harry stepped away hastily and scowled in the boy's general direction. He wished he had his glasses on so that he'd be able to memorize that face—and Smith's, too.

"Diggory, don't be such an—"

"You're not even a Prefect—"

"Clear off, both of you, and I'll be reporting this to Professor Sprout. I can't take points, but you won't like what she'll do to you."

"Fuck you, Diggory."

With that highly intellectual parting shot, the two boys retreated, leaving Harry with the unknown Diggory. He sounded decent enough, but Harry didn't like anyone's company at all when he was beaten up, half-blind, and sporting furuncles in very visible places.

"Er—"

"Finite Incantatem. Merlin's grizzly beard, the nerve of—here are your glasses, Potter."

Gratefully, Harry put them on and looked at his hands: the boils were gone now. The non-magically inflicted injuries, of course, remained. Harry steeled himself and raised his eyes: the Diggory boy turned out to be tall and good-looking, and he was gazing at Harry with a great deal of concern. His robes indicated that he was a Hufflepuff, just like Harry's assailants.

"I'm Cedric," he said, smiling apologetically. "Cedric Diggory, I'm sorry for those idiots. They really took the Heir nonsense to heart, and when Justin…"

Harry attempted a casual shrug, but barely concealed a wince of pain as he tried to move.

"Not your fault. Thanks for the help."

Diggory would never know how much it cost Harry to say that.

"Come on, let's get you to the hospital wing."

Professional help at the cost of the whole school finding out? No, thanks. He'd healed from worse on his own before.

"No! I mean," he went on, because Diggory was looking at him incredulously, "I'm fine, really."

"No, you're not," Diggory said firmly, with the same kind of authority that had made Harry's attackers stop.

"Look, Diggory, I can deal with it—"

"I'm taking you to the hospital wing."

Harry was losing patience along with strength.

"Why d'you even bother, how d'you know I'm not the Heir, maybe they were right?"

Diggory didn't budge.
"If you were the Heir Petrifying students, I doubt you'd let a pair of kids beat you up."

"I'm not weak!"

He regretted the words the second they were out of his mouth.

There was a pause. Then—

"I never said you were. Look, Madam Pomfrey's really good about these things, okay? She doesn't ask questions and doesn't tell. And you can't possibly think you'll hide this from your Housemates? 'Cause that shiner on your face is pretty distinctive, let me tell you."

Harry scowled.

"Come on." Diggory nudged him carefully on the shoulder. "We'll take the shortcut."

***

In the event, Diggory was wrong in that Harry didn't manage to keep the attack from the Slytherins even despite having been healed, but admittedly he was able to face the music in full health, at least.

Someone had seen Harry as he was leaving the infirmary. His insistence that he had just wandered in there randomly did not convince anyone.

"I'll bury them," Marcus Flint said, a feral smile lighting up his dull face. "Trying to do my Seeker in, the little bastards—"

"No," Harry objected. "Everyone hates Slytherin enough as it is, it's no good to start attacking people—"

"And it's okay to attack a Slytherin, then?" Millicent asked, her considerable size making her quite intimidating as she advanced at Harry. "Is that what you're saying?"

"Well, no, but—"

"No buts, Harry." Blaise smirked and got up to be level with Harry, removing Millie's cat from his lap. "Let me introduce you to the fine Slytherin concept of revenge…"

The one thing that the students of Hogwarts learned in the first week of April was that it was best not to mess with Harry Potter—or at least wait until he got off the Slytherin Quidditch Team to do it. Harry did, however, convince Flint to leave Cedric Diggory alone, since the bloke had only been nice. Harry thought he would have really liked Cedric had the older boy not seen him at his weakest.

Notably, the Weasley twins had joined in the fun and pranked a few particularly loud proponents of Harry-as-Heir and therefore Harry-to-be-exterminated theory. Cormac McLaggen, for instance, recited the *Ode to Oldbert the Odious* in Gobbledegook the entire Tuesday.

Professor McGonagall was not impressed.

***

The school had begun to recover from the attacks, taking the lull to mean that the storm had passed—so, when the next Petrification came during the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match, it shook everyone anew.
Neville, in particular, was devastated: this time, the victim was Hermione.

In response to the attack, the Minister for Magic turned up and arrested Hagrid. What sense that could ever make, Harry didn't understand, but the bad news didn't end there: Dumbledore was kicked out of the castle. Clearly, depriving students of the protection of Britain's most powerful wizard was a wise move.

The next day after Hermione's Petrification and Hagrid's arrest, Harry dragged Neville out for a stroll by the lake, hoping it would clear both their heads. Neither was in a mood for seeing other people, though, and eventually they just sat down by a tree that didn't have a view on the castle.

Neville stared gloomily at the ground.

"I just hate it, you know?" he said, smoothing his hand over grass. "I can't do anything to help Hermione at all. She's just lying there, in the hospital wing, Petrified, and I know she'd figured something out before she ran to the library and got attacked by that—whatever it is—and I feel that if I understood what she was doing I'd be able to help her."

A bird sang somewhere up in the tree, not realizing the gravity of the situation.

"It's stupid," Neville pronounced with finality.

"No," Harry protested. He didn't really know what to say, though, because he'd never comforted anyone before.

"I shouldn't have let her go to the library alone," Neville said darkly.

"You couldn't have known. We've all let our guard down, there haven't been any attacks for a while…"

"Yeah." Neville sounded frustrated.

"Tell me more, though," Harry prompted, hoping to distract him. "How was her research going?"

Neville shrugged.

"Not much to tell," he muttered. "She was looking into the Slytherin line—I was helping her, too, and we got as far as the Gaunt family." He wrinkled his nose. "The last members were supposedly insane and by now they're dead anyway." Neville hugged his knees. "All their names began with an M, it'll be in Her-Hermione's notes." He swallowed painfully.

"Maybe the son or the daughter had children?" Harry suggested, feeling awkward.

"Maybe."

There was silence. Harry unconsciously mirrored Neville's pose.

"Everyone thinks it's Hagrid," he said in a hushed voice.

It was something he really didn't like contemplating, even less than Granger's Petrification.

"What do you think?" For the first time, Neville showed some interest in the conversation. Harry was rapidly losing his.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't think it's him. I mean, they made Dumbledore leave—what good will that do? I don't think they took people really responsible…"
"Just wanted to be seen doing something." Neville nodded. "That sounds like the Ministry, alright."

The Giant Squid moved, disturbing the stillness of the lake's waters and sending ripples across the surface. Harry watched them with detached fascination.

Neville slammed his fist onto the ground.

"I wish there was something I could do."

Harry thought of Hagrid's kind smile and of the Dementors of Azkaban and felt helpless anger bubbling up within him, once again.

"So do I, Neville. So do I."

***

Malfoy was, of course, ecstatic. It was his father along with the Minister for Magic who'd arrested Hagrid and forced Dumbledore out; Malfoy clearly felt the entire deed was his personal achievement. He strutted around the school, projecting such arrogance that even the Slytherins were getting tired of his act.

"Yes, Malfoy, we know you're the saviour of this school, now will you fucking shut it, so that we can study?" a fourth year Quidditch Chaser, Warrington, snarled in the common room.

Harry observed in interest as Malfoy turned an impressive shade of red.

"Well, who are you to—"

Harry thought Malfoy just might spontaneously combust.

"What're you looking at, Potter?" the blond hissed.

"I'd always thought you were more of a who than a what, but if you insist…"

"Rictusempra!"

"Locomotor Mortis!"

"No fighting in the common room!"

Both spells had gone awry, but Harry was smirking as Malfoy stormed away in a towering fury, unable to find expression for his temper.

"Now, if you're quite done picking on Malfoy," Millicent said in a very cold voice, "we can return to our revision."

"Sorry," Harry said, trying to sound repentant.

"Of course you are," Blaise snorted.

"We were on the Hair-Raising Potion," Millicent continued, not one to be sidetracked.

"Yes." Harry expelled the vision of a helplessly furious Malfoy from his head and focused back on work. "Actually, in that class Neville added a bit of fluxweed into our cauldron by mistake—and you know, it gave him really nice long curls when the potion exploded and landed on his hair. So that's a slightly useful bit of knowledge."
"Was the failed grade worth it?" Blaise asked with a straight face.

"No."

"Professor Snape does seem to dislike you," Millicent noted composedly, scribbling Harry's observations down.

"You don't say."

"You're still okay, though, you heard what he said to Weasley last time?"

"Before or after Goyle threw the valerian root into his potion?"

Harry frowned.

"He shouldn't have done that."

"Going all Gryffindor on us, are you?" Millicent gave him a glare.

"Whatever."

"Anyway, it was after."

"Yes, that was brilliant..."

Harry sighed.

***

Three weeks after the latest attack, Neville and Harry arranged to meet by a suit of armour on the second floor before their regular visit to Hermione in the infirmary. They'd just said their hellos and prepared to leave for the stairs when someone called out:

"Harry Potter?"

"Yes?"

Harry turned warily, and heard Neville grunt in surprise next to him, but he only registered young girl bright hair red eyes before the world went dark.

He had absolutely no clue where he was when he awoke. He was lying on cold stone floor in a huge place that had a high ceiling and green torches giving off light from their brackets on the walls. Sitting up, Harry noticed with fear that his wand seemed to be gone; also, there was something on the floor a little distance away. Harry climbed to his feet, looking around cautiously, and approached a little nearer; he was startled to realize that he was looking at the prone form of the same ginger-haired girl who'd accosted him in the corridor. There was a book next to her. This was all very bizarre and confusing, but Harry didn't get a chance to think about it, because in the next moment, he heard a voice from behind him and whirled around.

"So you are awake at last."

There stood a translucent being: a handsome boy of about sixteen, with jet-black hair, a twisted smile and a Hogwarts crest on his robes. In his hands, he was twirling a wand Harry recognized as his at the first glance.

Harry tried to keep calm. He was sure there wasn't any explanation to this that he would like, but
there had to be a way out.

"Who are you?"

"How odd that I should know so much about you, and you so little about me."

The boy's voice was level, but there was an undertone of mockery to it. Harry frowned and kept silent, so the boy spoke again:

"My name is Tom Riddle, Harry. Let me welcome you to the Chamber of Secrets."

Harry's heart skipped a beat. He was in the Chamber of Secrets? Did that mean that the mythical Slytherin monster was lurking in this general vicinity too?

Well, shit.

"How do you know about me?" he asked, trying to seem composed.

"Oh, little Ginny Weasley told me all she could." Tom raised an eyebrow. "She concocted a tale worthy of Romeo and Juliet about herself and you, did you know? She's been in love with you since before she could walk, but then you got Sorted into Slytherin, which was most ungallant. Still, she cast the two of you as lovers who are meant to be, separated by cruel fate and the disdain of their families—tragic, indeed."

Harry was stunned. He'd had absolutely no idea—the twins' sister? Ron's sister?

"But the puerile babble of a love-sick girl was not what interested me, of course," the boy continued with a predatory smile. "You are rather fascinating, aren't you?"

A red gleam appeared in Tom Riddle's eyes; he was staring at Harry intently, as if trying to solve an intricate puzzle.

Harry kept quiet and looked around surreptitiously. He could see ornate double doors in the distance and presumed them to be the exit, but it was really quite a way away. Harry would need to turn his back to Riddle in order to get there—and he really didn't think it was a good idea.

"Are you a ghost?" he asked, stalling for time. He didn't know what he would use the time for, but he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

"No. I am a memory," Tom said with a casual shrug. "A memory, preserved in a diary for fifty years. The foolish Weasley girl had found me somehow and poured her soul out to me... she didn't realize, of course, that the more she confided in me, the stronger I got. Towards the end, though, even she started suspecting that maybe something was not right—that maybe it was she who was opening the Chamber of Secrets all along..."

The boy sneered, his face twisted into a mask of cruelty. Harry was shaking—whether out of fear or fury, he was not sure.

"That's just sick, you—what's she ever done to you? How could—"

Tom Riddle waved a hand dismissively.

"It was her own fault for writing in my diary."

"So you are the Heir of Slytherin?" Harry demanded, barely coherent from anger.
Tom made a small bow, smirking.

"Indeed, I am. However, this is not what I have brought you here to discuss. For a while now, I had much less interest in ridding this school of Mudbloods than I had in you…"

Harry opened his mouth to retort, but Tom Riddle continued talking, his eyes acquiring a crimson gleam again.

"As an infant, you defeated the greatest wizard of all times, Lord Voldemort," Tom pronounced, narrowing his eyes and coming a step closer to Harry. Harry made himself stay in place. "How did you do it, Harry Potter?" Another step. "How can a helpless child vanquish a fully grown wizard with unimaginable power?"

Harry's anger receded, replaced by fear, and that cleared his head a little. There was something extremely eerie in Tom Riddle's focused gaze, in his interest in Harry and in the lengths he'd gone to ask this question.

It seemed logical to stall, in that case. If Tom wanted an answer, presumably he needed Harry alive.

"Why do you want to know?" Harry asked. "Wasn't Voldemort after your time?"

"Voldemort is my past, my present, and my future."

With that pronouncement, Tom spelled Tom Marvolo Riddle in fiery letters in the air and then rearranged them into I am Lord Voldemort.

Harry's mouth fell open in amazement.

"Voldemort's—Voldemort's name was Tom? Tom Riddle? Just as—simple and common as that?"

Clearly, it was the wrong thing to say: the semi-opaque form of Tom Riddle nearly quivered in rage.

"How dare you laugh!" he bellowed.

"But Riddle isn't a Pureblood name," Harry pointed out.

Apparently, he had a talent for getting on Voldemort's nerves.

"I am the rightful Heir of Salazar Slytherin! My blood has remained pure for generations, until my darling Pureblood mother ran off with a good-for-nothing Muggle!"

Harry had a flash of inspiration.

"Was your mother's family name Gaunt?"

Young Voldemort's eyes narrowed.

"How did you know?"

Harry reflected morbidly that, should he miraculously get out of here alive, Neville would be pleased to hear that the enigma of the Heir's ancestry had been solved.

"My, Harry Potter, you are full of surprises," Tom Riddle was saying in the meantime. "It seems you have taken some interest in me after all. In that case, you must have noticed certain similarities between us."
"Excuse me?" Harry gritted his teeth.

So far, he was quite proud of his composure, but he felt himself starting to crack around the edges.

"Well, we are both orphans. Both half-bloods. Both raised by Muggles, far from the world where we belonged. Both Sorted into Slytherin. You and I must be the only Parselmouths to have attended Hogwarts in recent memory. We even look something alike."

("It is curious, Mr. Potter, that you should be destined for this wand, when its brother gave you that scar.")

Harry flinched; he couldn't help it.

"I'm not like you at all," he said out loud, raising his chin high.

"Oh?"

*I'm* not going to grow up a raging psychopath."

"I am the most powerful wizard who's ever lived!"

"No, you're not!"

Tom Riddle sneered.

"Do enlighten me, Potter, whom you consider to be stronger than Lord Voldemort."

"Dumbledore!" Harry fired off without thinking. "Dumbledore's tons stronger than you—he's the only wizard you were always afraid of!"

"Lies! Dumbledore's been driven out of the castle by the mere *memory* of me!"

"At least he's not transparent! And he doesn't need to use little girls to open creepy chambers for them! And he hadn't tried to murder babies and end up being defeated by them instead!"

Riddle was pointing Harry's wand at Harry now. He seemed absolutely livid.

"Yes, Potter," he hissed, "you still haven't explained to me your miraculous escape eleven years into your past and forty into my future…"

An unearthly, beautiful song interrupted his speech. Harry had never heard anything like it before, but it made his heart feel inexplicably lighter and his thoughts calmer. Tom Riddle, on the other hand, appeared to be displeased. Then, all of a sudden, a burst of flame came from out of nowhere, and a red bird with bright plumage flashed into existence. In its talons, it was holding—to Harry's shock—the Sorting Hat. The bird turned out to be the source of the otherworldly song; it ceased singing as it landed on Harry's shoulder.

Harry blinked in surprise. Voldemort sneered.

"So this is what Dumbledore sends his valiant defender. A phoenix bird and a tattered hat. Pathetic. I would almost pity you, Potter."

Harry was inclined to pity himself, actually, not that he was going to show it. He was suddenly more preoccupied with the fact that Tom Riddle appeared to be more solid now than he had been at the beginning of their conversation. Glancing down at Ginny Weasley, Harry was troubled to notice that she was getting, conversely, more see-through as time went by. Clearly, Tom was somehow leeching
Ginny’s life energy.

("The foolish Weasley girl... poured her soul out to me... the more she confided in me, the stronger I got...")

This needed to end—as quickly as possible. Stalling for time was getting him nowhere. Harry had to stop Tom Riddle somehow, but what could he do, without a wand and armed only with a hat and a phoenix? Because he was sure phoenixes were wonderful, but combat creatures they were not.

"So, Harry Potter, tell me. How did you, as a mere infant, defeat Lord Voldemort at the zenith of his power?"

Harry just—snapped.

"No idea. I must have been simply better than you in every possible way."

Voldemort's eyes lit up with an unholy gleam, which suggested that his patience had run out entirely. Harry, too, was eager for some sort of a confrontation to take place before Ginny's spirit fled her body, but he didn't feel at all prepared.

He told himself that his hands were only shaking from the cold.

"Very well. Let us see how you and the best weapons Dumbledore can provide fare against the Heir of Slytherin!"

Tom turned towards an enormous ceiling-high statue of a wizard in long flowing robes.

"Speak to me, Slytherin, the greatest of the Hogwarts four!"

Harry gulped as he saw the statue's mouth open. Something rather huge and snake-looking began slithering down.

I'm done for, was all Harry had had a chance to think before the phoenix rose up in the air, dropped the Sorting Hat onto Harry's head, and flew over to attack the Slytherin monster.

***

Harry trudged up the Headmaster's office stairs behind the phoenix. He was exhausted, mentally scarred, covered in dust and grime and he'd very nearly died, so he'd much rather go take a shower, or something, but the blasted bird had insisted, so here he was. Ginny Weasley was walking a little behind him. The girl had been through quite an ordeal, too; upon waking up, she had immediately burst into tears and apologized over and over again.

Harry stared at Dumbledore's door, resigned, and adjusted the sword in his hand. No, he really didn't want to go in and explain himself, but he had a feeling they would find him in Slytherin dormitories, if need be.

He knocked.

"Ah! Do come in."

The muffled sounds of crying got louder when Harry opened the door. There was a whole assembly of people in the Headmaster's office: the entire Weasley family seemed to be present, along with Professors McGonagall and Snape and, of course, the Headmaster. The phoenix crooned, butted Harry's shoulder and flew off to Dumbledore's desk, where it dropped the Sorting Hat and snatched
up a sweet in a most self-satisfied fashion. Harry figured the phoenix had the right idea, so he put the sword onto the desk, too. The sound of Dumbledore's surprised chuckle brought an end to the standstill.

"Ginny!" shouted a few voices at once.

"Oh, thank Merlin!"

Snape and Dumbledore seemed the only people who had eyes for Harry first and foremost. Snape approached him, expression boding nothing good, but thankfully he didn't have the time to say anything, because Harry found himself suffocating in a tight hug.

"Oh, Harry Potter, thank you, thank you so much for our Ginny!"

"Uh…"

"You're strangling him, Mom!"

Harry was very grateful to step away from the Weasley matriarch, but the twins pounced on him next. They were smiling, but their hands were trembling and their eyes were just a little too bright.

"Thanks, mate," Fred said, attempting nonchalance.

"We knew you had it in you," George added, clapping Harry on the back.

Harry tried to grin at them, but he was just so tired. He didn't want to be among this crowd of people thanking him for his achievements, he just wanted to lie down and forget about the whole thing. Not even the sight of Ron Weasley, who was standing there, mortified and barely able to raise his eyes to Harry's, gladdened Harry's heart at that moment.

"Harry Potter," the father-Weasley was saying, "it's an honour to meet you. I cannot express my gratitude…"

"Let us all sit down," Dumbledore suggested mildly. "I will only ask a few questions—it should not take long—and then the children can retire to the infirmary. If this is alright with you?"

"Why, yes, we would of course want to know what happened—" The mother-Weasley had to stop in the middle of her sentence because her daughter's hysterics resumed abruptly. "Oh Ginny dear, it'll be fine…"

"Nothing will be fine, because it's all my fault!" the girl wailed in distress.

Harry winced at the volume as he lowered himself into a chair.

"Hush, dear, of course it isn't your fault that the Heir of Slytherin—"

"But I was the Heir of Slytherin! It was me who opened the Chamber and killed those roo-ooo-oosters…" She hiccupped. "I threw the diary awaa-ay but took it back… I was so afra-a-aid… I Petrified all the stu-udents…"

The Weasleys had gone chalk-white during her speech.

"Ginny, what are you saying?" Percy asked with a touch of panic in his voice.

The girl just dissolved into more tears. Harry sighed.
"Headmaster?"

"Yes, my boy?"

Harry extracted Tom Riddle's diary from the pocket of his robe and put it onto Dumbledore's desk right next to the sword and the Sorting Hat. He noticed the way Dumbledore's eyes widened for a moment; the Headmaster then took a while to peruse the mutilated book. Professors Snape and McGonagall were looking rather impatient by the time Dumbledore's examination was over, but the Weasleys had been consumed by consoling their sobbing girl.

Harry wondered detachedly what it would feel like to be fussed over like that.

Finally, Dumbledore gave a sigh.

"I am sure there is a fascinating story behind this notebook, my boy," he said, returning a gentle gaze to Harry. "If you wouldn't mind explaining it to us? I fear your companion is currently a little overwrought."

Harry nodded. On the way from the girls' toilet on the second floor (where Salazar Slytherin apparently had, for some bizarre reason, placed the entrance to his hidden lair), Harry had tried to figure out a way to describe the events to the teachers. He had not counted on having to reveal Ginny's culpability in front of her entire family; yet, there was no time for concocting a strategy now.

So he talked. And talked. He made the conversation between himself and Tom Riddle sound shorter than it had been in reality, giving the impression that they'd only exchanged a couple of insults before launching into battle. He placed most credit with the phoenix who'd pecked the snake's eyes out, mentioned that the sword had fallen out of the Sorting Hat, and concluded with stabbing the diary with a poisonous fang. He omitted the fact that Tom Riddle had identified the snake as a basilisk after it died, and left out the bit where the same basilisk fang had nearly killed Harry. He was also reluctant to reveal that Tom Riddle and Voldemort were the same person.

All in all, Harry's tale implied that there had been a psychopathic descendant of Salazar Slytherin living in the diary into which Ginny had unwittingly poured out her soul, and the madman had wanted to get rid of Harry simply because he was the Boy-Who-Lived.

Judging by Dumbledore's shrewd scrutiny, the ancient wizard realized that Harry had left something out of his story. Snape, too, did not look entirely convinced, but the Weasleys had bought it all. Professor McGonagall was staring at Harry with wide eyes; it seemed that she, too, had believed his tale.

"That was very brave of you, Mister Potter," she said with a little hitch to her voice. "Brave and noble and…"

"…foolish," Snape supplied with a sneer. "Challenging the Heir of Slytherin on his own soil…"

"He was saving the life of a fellow student!" McGonagall charged at Snape immediately, the fire of righteousness burning in her eyes.

Of course. She was the Head of Gryffindor; Harry's actions must have spoken right to her heart. Harry sighed, leaned back and tuned out the teachers' squabble, letting McGonagall fight Harry's battles just for now. He was so exhausted he didn't think he'd manage to utter a single word more.

He saw that Dumbledore was still looking at him. The moment their eyes met, Dumbledore let out a smile.
"Well done, my boy," he said. "I am very proud of you. Now—" The Headmaster turned to the flock of Weasleys. "—of course, I will not hold Miss Weasley at all responsible for the events and ask only that she be more careful with magical objects in the future."

Father-Weasley muttered something about trusting things and seeing their brains. Mother-Weasley let out a relieved sigh.

"Now, I believe the matter is settled," Dumbledore went on. "Arthur, Molly, please feel free to take Ginevra to the hospital wing. Minerva, Severus, I'd just like another word with Harry."

Harry closed his eyes in frustration. He just wanted to leave. He heard the shuffle of feet, the rustle of clothing, Ginny's sniffles and the Weasleys' mutters as people were leaving the room. When he thought he was alone with the Headmaster, he opened his eyes—but found that Professor Snape was still in the office.

The Potions master was frowning.

"I'm Potter's Head of House," he said firmly. "I have a right to be here."

Dumbledore surveyed Snape over his half-moon glasses. There was silence for a while.

A portrait sneezed.

"If you must, Severus," the Headmaster said calmly. Harry had the inkling that the ancient wizard was not particularly pleased. "Now, Harry. Is there anything else you wish to tell me?"

Dumbledore's eyes bored into Harry's with so great an intensity that Harry lowered his eyes to the cluttered desk in front of him.

"No, sir."

Another pause descended.

"Sir—that sword—"

Dumbledore pointed to the hilt.

"This sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor. It is meant to come to the disposal, at times of need, to those who show great bravery and courage." The Headmaster's eyes gleamed proudly. "You must have done something worthy of the truest Gryffindor down in the Chamber for it to come to you, Harry."

He seemed extremely pleased by that fact. Snape, judging by his frightful sneer, did not share that attitude.

"I understand, sir."

Dumbledore observed him for a moment.

"Very well, then, if you have no further questions or comments," the Headmaster said amiably. "Severus, if you could be so kind as to take Harry to the infirmary."

***

Afterwards, naturally, rumours flew wild around the school. Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter had disappeared for several hours, only to be found in the hospital wing later, and Ginny ended up going
home. At the celebratory feast the following evening, Dumbledore stood up and explained that the culprit for opening the Chamber had been identified, Professor Lockhart was gone from the school and exams had been cancelled. Since Ginny Weasley was not there to elucidate anything, Harry was beleaguered by continuous demands from all sides to tell what on earth had happened.

He gave them a heavily edited version of the story, careful to portray Ginny's part as insignificant and his own escape as a fluke. Blaise and Millie helped fend off the enthusiastic admirers who crowded Harry now in place of ill-wishing assailants. It seemed that Dumbledore's speech had indeed cleared Harry's name; people rushed to apologize to him for their earlier suspicions, suddenly remembering again he was their Boy-Who-Lived. Harry was glad that he was no longer an enemy of the people, but the attention made him uncomfortable nonetheless. He'd much preferred the obscurity of his first year.

On a brighter note, Hagrid had been released from prison and he rushed into the castle to thank Harry profusely with tears in his eyes, all over and over and over again.

("Yeh saved me life, Harry—yeh did—yeh're a great man, Harry, I'll nev'r forget it...")

Ironically, Malfoy was the only one to realize that Harry's story didn't quite add up.

"You're lying," the blond had said, eyes narrowed. "There's no way someone named Tom Riddle would be the Heir of Slytherin—you're hiding something."

Malfoy's accusations were correct for the first time—Harry was lying to everybody—but it so happened that there was no-one beyond a couple of cronies willing to believe Malfoy's words. Harry found that it felt great to be the one with power on his side, for a change.

***

Neville was overjoyed at Hermione's return to the land of the living and relieved by Harry's escape. Together, Harry and Hermione reconstructed Voldemort's entire story, complete with the Slytherin heir-ness and the blasted Peverells and Merope Gaunt and the Muggle upbringing.

"Wow," Neville commented, rubbing his brow. "So You-Know-Who was a half-blood, huh?"

Granger bristled immediately.

"Why does his blood matter?"

Neville blinked at the attack.

"It doesn't," he hastened to deny. "I don't care about any of that blood nonsense, you know that, Hermione! It's just—weird, isn't it, that the Dark Lord who fought for Pureblood superiority was a half-blood himself?"

"Yes, I suppose it is strange," the bushy-haired girl conceded.

"You've been quiet, Harry," Neville noted.

Harry shrugged, not taking his eyes away from the lake. The surface was smooth today, the Giant Squid resting deep in its waters, and the sight was soothing, relaxing. Much better than the hustle and bustle of the school and the students who wanted a piece of Harry.

"I've had things on my mind," he muttered.
"Well, look on the good side," Neville said brightly. "The attacks have stopped, the Chamber won't ever be opened again, and we've got no exams. It's the summer—things are looking up. Maybe you guys can even visit me at some point over the holidays, what do you think?"

Harry smiled, cheered despite himself by Neville's optimism.

"Thanks, Nev. That'd be great."

***

Harry stood in the Trophy Room, staring at two awards displayed side by side. Both were for Special Services to the School; one to Tom Marvolo Riddle, another to Harry James Potter. Effectively, one was for opening the Chamber of Secrets, the other for closing it. Harry could feel it, dimly—the shape of something significant forming out of the interweaving fates of these two awards.

("We are both orphans... half-bloods... raised by Muggles... Sorted into Slytherin... the only Parselmouths to have attended Hogwarts in recent memory... even look something alike...")

I'm not him, Harry thought firmly. I'm not even anything like him and never will be.

And yet, there was evidence. Why were there so many similarities between him and the man who'd killed his parents? Was Harry, really, along with Voldemort, descended from the Peverells and therefore from Salazar Slytherin? Yet then, why was he a Parselmouth, if nobody else in the Potter family had been? Maybe he should have asked Dumbledore, then, in his office, when the old man had held Harry's gaze and given him the chance—but Harry felt insecure enough without divulging his fears and so he'd stifled his unease, buried it in the deep recesses of his mind, but it refused to abate.

While the school celebrated, Harry brooded.

He and Voldemort; they seemed to be connected by more than an attempted murder on that awful October night eleven years ago. Harry could not say that he had honestly believed Voldemort to be gone, not after Hagrid had said that he was just weak and biding his time; but up until now, the threat had been shadowy and unreal, a backdrop to his life, a rifle hanging on the wall possibly to fire in some far-off, indiscernible future. Now, Voldemort was real. Voldemort was in the crimson eyes of a handsome boy in Hogwarts uniform; in the doubt coiling in Harry's stomach as he gazed upon the trophies; in the grief lurking behind the fake smiles of the Weasley brothers. Harry could not fully grasp it, or explain it yet, but he heard the distant roar of thunder in his ears and saw the smoke of battles not yet fought before his eyes as he stared at his and Voldemort's names displayed heedlessly side by side. He felt as if he was on the brink of an abyss, caught before something larger than him, propelled towards a future he might not have chosen for himself, but someone else—Voldemort—seemed to have determined in his stead.

And Harry knew fear. And he knew, with certain, overwhelming clarity that his entire existence had been redefined by the events there, in the Chamber; and that things would never be quite the same for him again.

-End of year two-
Year Three, part 1

The TV was on in the living room when Harry came in; Dudley lounged in an armchair, while Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon sat on the sofa, watching the news.

"...the public is warned that Black is armed and extremely dangerous. A special hotline has been set up, and any sighting of Black should be reported at once."

Harry's heart fluttered nervously inside his chest and his palms felt sweaty as he stared at the grim image of the escaped convict. He'd been waiting for this, hoping that it would happen this way, but now came the really delicate stage when he could botch everything up...

Uncle Vernon, however, proceeded to give him the perfect opening.

"Hang on!" he shouted, the walrus moustache quivering in rage. "You didn't tell us where that maniac has ran away from!"

"Right you are, Vernon, these people—"

Harry willed his face to remain calm as he interjected with an air of nonchalance:

"Oh, Sirius Black? He's broken out of Azkaban, the wizard prison."

For a moment, there was deathly silence. Aunt Petunia went an alarming shade of white, while Uncle Vernon's face, conversely, flushed a deep red colour.

"You!" he snarled. "How dare you mention this unnaturalness under our roof—"

Harry hoped desperately that the plan would work. Otherwise, he was sure Uncle Vernon would take great delight in punishing him for bringing up magic when he'd been expressly forbidden to do so.

"Well," Harry said, "I figured you might want to know, seeing as this maniac had escaped from prison in order to kill me. So don't be surprised if you see him somewhere in this area... he probably has a wand, so try not to anger him, he has killed a dozen Muggles with one spell..."

Dudley whimpered and tried to curl into a ball in his armchair.

Uncle Vernon looked, for a moment, as if he would suffer a stroke. But then—

"There's a lunatic after you who endangers my family and you're just—just—I refuse to tolerate this—this—madness! My sister is meant to be coming soon, you—how dare you put us all at such great risk, you worthless—out! Out! I want you out of this house and, Petunia, we're leaving! Marge can visit some other time, we're leaving now!"

Harry could only stare in amazement, vividly reminded of that time two years ago, when Uncle Vernon had insisted they all leave Privet Drive in an attempt to escape Hogwarts letters. The chaos and panic were very similar, except for the lack of yellow parchment cluttering the place. Uncle Vernon was sputtering and stomping around, pulling suitcases out of the cupboard under the stairs; Aunt Petunia was dashing about, trying to pack but refusing to let go of the still terrified Dudley.

"Don't just stand around, boy, I told you to get out!"

Harry nodded obediently and, grabbing his own trunk, raced up to his room. Things were going a
bit too well; he'd calculated that he'd have a couple of days before everyone left the house, so that he could warn Neville to pick him up. Now, though, there was no time. Harry would have to catch the Knight Bus Blaise had told him about. Good thing that he'd considered a plan B at all, or he'd have much more of a problem…

Harry snorted. He'd have even more of a problem had Blaise and Millicent not informed him that his godfather had escaped from Azkaban with the goal to kill him. He'd received no official notification whatsoever. Were the wizarding authorities trying to keep him in the dark on purpose? If not for his friends and their parents' Ministry connections, Harry would not even have known he was in danger.

Hedwig hooted her incomprehension from her perch at the windowsill, snapping him out of his reverie.

"Yes," Harry agreed.

He fumbled for stationery and penned a quick note to Neville to let him know he was coming pretty much straightaway. Harry hoped it wouldn't seem too rude; he was quite apprehensive about that grandmother of Neville's, truth be told.

Hedwig pecked Harry's fingers gently as he fastened the letter to her leg. Harry smiled.

"Take it to Neville, okay? As fast as possible, if you don't mind. And stay there, I don't think I'll be coming back here this summer. Thankfully."

Hedwig seemed to agree with Harry's assessment. She, too, quite disliked being at the Dursleys' — she ended up locked in her cage far too much of the time.

Harry sighed, watching her fly off.

"Now, what am I forgetting?"

He looked over his mail from last night, sorting what to take with him and what to leave behind. *The Monster Book of Monsters* was, unfortunately, coming with him. Harry looked at it sceptically and double-checked the belt holding its jaws together. He wouldn't put it past the horrid tome to come free of its bindings and eat the contents of his trunk. What next, then… Ah!

"Uncle Vernon?"

"What now, boy?"

"You just need to sign this form before I leave, saying you're letting me go, you know?"

"Hurry up, give it here, and leave already before I toss you out on your ear!"

Harry could barely contain his glee as he watched his uncle put his signature on the Hogsmeade form without reading the document properly. He heard Dudley arguing with Aunt Petunia:

"But, Diddynkins—"

"I want to take my TV, I want to! What is there to do in stupid Majorca, I want my computer, I want my video games, I want—"

"Sweetums, this isn't the time—"

He was finally getting out of here. Harry tried very hard not to smile as he thanked his uncle and ran upstairs to put the signed form in his trunk.
Giving a final glance to the room, he picked up the suitcase. Now for the final leg of the plan: getting to Neville's without being killed by Sirius Black on the way.

***

If Harry’s sudden arrival inconvenienced Neville, neither he nor his grandmother uttered a word about it. Harry was promptly assigned a spacious bedroom, shown around the house and then taken for a stroll around the gardens by a shyly enthusiastic Neville.

Hermione had, apparently, been unable to visit this summer as she was travelling through France with her parents. And Harry understood—more from what Neville didn’t say than from his actual words—that there weren’t many kids around his age in the area, and so he was used to having no-one but elderly relatives for company. A visit from a friend was, for him, a rare treat.

Neville and Harry spent their days exploring the manor, playing games and occasionally studying, on the direction of Neville’s grandmother. Right now, they were stretched out on a lawn in front of the house, taking in the sun and exchanging lazy conversation.

"And that is the window which Great Uncle Algie threw me out of to see whether I had magic in me —"

"That's terrifying, Neville."

"Well, I bounced back up!"

"Still terrifying. I bet you have, like, tons of traumas from that."

"Umm. Maybe. Oh no, we're going to be late for lunch!"

"Race you to the dining hall!"

They both ran, laughing, across the lawn towards the steps of the Longbottom Manor, only to skid to a halt outside the dining hall doors. Neither one of them would dare to just burst in there, knowing that Augusta Longbottom was probably waiting on the other side. They hastily smoothed down their hair—Harry's attempt predictably futile—and straightened their clothes before entering the room at last.

"Ah, here you are!" Neville's grandmother nodded sharply. "Come, the lunch is waiting. Where have you been?" Then, without waiting for an answer: "Well, no matter. Potter, do you mind explaining to me why I've got a letter from Albus Dumbledore, asking me to warn him should I invite you to visit in the future?"

Harry froze in the act of lifting a spoon to his mouth.

"I'm sorry—what? Ma'am?"

"A letter, boy. From Dumbledore. Are you deaf?"

Harry put the spoon back down in the soup.

"No, ma'am. I just—I don't know why Dumbledore is writing to you."

Augusta Longbottom seemed to find his answer lacking, if the expression on her face was anything to go by.

"Does this concern me or you, Potter? There, listen: it has come to my attention that Harry Potter is
visiting the Longbottom Manor as of July 31st... I would be greatly indebted to you if you could agree on such visits with me prior to inviting young Harry into your home—and why should I, Potter, can you tell me that? How is it any of his business who visits my grandson?"

Harry was scowling.

"It isn't any of his business. How does he even know I'm here?"

Mrs. Longbottom sent him a piercing stare.

"So Dumbledore is keeping an eye on the Boy-Who-Lived. Understandable, considering his and your position, but I resent it when conniving headmasters try to interfere in my affairs, do you hear, Potter? I am no student and my home is not a school."

"I apologize for the inconvenience, ma'am," Harry answered, inwardly seething and probably doing a poor job of hiding it.

"Angry, are you?" The elderly woman smiled unpleasantly. "I am not surprised. I will be writing to Dumbledore to tell him that he has to try harder to convince me that I want to keep him informed. However, he is not the kind of man to give up easily. You are the Boy-Who-Lived, after all," she said with relish.

"That doesn't give him any right to keep tabs on me! He's not my legal guardian or anything—"

Harry was aware that his fists were clenched and that he was glaring into his abandoned meal, but he could do little to quell his fury. Not only had nobody from Hogwarts informed Harry officially about Sirius Black and the danger he posed, but Dumbledore was actually spying on him behind his back, making it his business where Harry went and whom he interacted with... He'd thought well of the ancient wizard before, though, so maybe there was a rational explanation for the ill-chosen course of action here? Maybe Dumbledore wasn't spying on Harry while keeping him in the dark, but... doing... well... something else?

"Potter! Quit sulking." Augusta Longbottom drew her eyebrows threateningly, changing the subject. "And eat up! You're skin and bones, boy, do those Muggle relatives of yours feed you at all?"

Harry flushed and looked back down into his soup. Really, had Neville not assured him that his grandmother seemed to like him, he'd think that the woman completely detested him. Maybe Neville was delusional. That was perfectly feasible. After all, his Uncle Algie had dropped him on his head back in childhood...

***

The month spent at Neville’s had felt like real holiday to Harry, but he was still glad to board the Hogwarts Express. It felt good to know he’d be back at the castle soon. He and Neville separated on the train, Neville going off to search for Hermione and Harry joining Blaise and Millicent in their compartment.

They greeted him amicably enough, and asked about his stay in “the den of Gryffindors”. Harry snorted and tried to evade their questioning—he wasn’t sure how much Neville wanted them to know about his home.

Millicent gave him an unimpressed eye. Clearly, his tactics didn’t fool her.

“You and your notions, Potter,” she said flatly, but did introduce a new subject: “So have you seen Sirius Black anywhere?”
"Millie, if I had, I wouldn't be alive to talk to you today."

Blaise nodded in agreement, looking uncharacteristically solemn.

"Yes, Black's not the kind of guy you want to—why are we slowing down? It's not yet time for us to arrive."

Suddenly, all lights went out. It was really quite unnerving, sitting in a dark compartment while god-knew-what was happening out there.

"I really don't like this," Millicent said with affected calm, just as her cat mewed worriedly.

Harry peered out the window, hoping for some glimpse of—

"Wait, I think someone's boarding the train!"

"Who is it?" Blaise asked uneasily. Clearly, Harry wasn't the only one thinking of Black at that moment.

Distant yells were heard from somewhere beyond their compartment; next came the sound of feet running, someone swearing—and then, slowly, the door handle started to turn. Harry gazed at it, seized by horror for some reason he could not account for. He pressed himself into the wall near the window as the silhouette of a hooded figure came into view. The temperature seemed to drop by several degrees; then, the figure emitted a breathy noise, as if sucking on air, and Harry could only think a Dementor before he felt himself sliding off his seat, his vision oddly clouded. He felt so cold, as if submerged icy water, and someone was screaming—far away, and Harry couldn't quite hear, but he was sure it was a woman…

"Harry!"

Hands were shaking him. He groaned.

"Harry, wake up, I'm warning you!"

He felt his cheek sting from a slap; wincing, he finally opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor; the lights were back on, the Dementor was gone and the train was moving again. The worried faces of Blaise and Millie loomed over him.

"Don't do that again." Millie scowled fiercely. "Dropping like that... Let's get you up."

For once, Harry didn't reject help as Blaise and Millicent tugged him back into his seat.

"Who screamed?"

Blaise looked pale.

"No one screamed, Harry. You fainted, you must have heard it in your head—"

Harry was going to reply—not that he had any idea what to say after he'd so shamefully fainted in front of his classmates—when the compartment door slid open once again. Harry tensed, but the intruder was human this time—a haggard-looking man with light-brown hair. His robes were shabby and he looked exhausted, but the wand was firm in his hand.

"Are you alright? I saw a Dementor being chased away from this compartment…"

The man trailed off as his eyes landed on Harry. Harry was not in the mood for being gawked at by
fans of the Boy-Who-Lived, so he chose to keep silent and wait for the stranger to snap out of it. The man's eyes widened as he took in Harry's appearance; he stared at the Slytherin crest on Harry's robes for a bit, then shook his head and withdrew a chocolate bar from his pocket.

"Here," he said, his voice calm, and handed pieces of chocolate to the three Slytherins. "This should make you feel better. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He nodded and, with a parting glance at Harry, took his leave.

Silence reined as Harry, Blaise and Millie nibbled on their chocolate. Harry found that it really did make him feel immediately better.

"That was weird," Blaise commented, not specifying whether he meant the Dementor, Harry's collapse or the odd man's scrutiny. Millie's black cat jumped onto her favourite perch on Blaise's lap, demanding to be petted, and Blaise absently obliged.

"Why do you think they'd let Dementors on the train?" Millicent asked darkly.

"Because they're idiots?" Harry grumbled.

"Because a soulless Harry Potter is a lot easier to protect from Sirius Black?" Blaise suggested.

Harry grimaced and inquired in a falsely sweet tone:

"Have I ever told you, Blaise, that you're horribly morbid?"

***

Harry watched as his classmates came up to hippogriffs one by one, bowing cautiously or, in Neville's case, backing away in fear. He was still trying to catch his breath after that highly uncomfortable ride on Buckbeak. Honestly, if he didn't like Hagrid so much… He glanced around, looking for Malfoy. Harry had seen him talking to Crabbe and Goyle before, completely disregarding Hagrid's instructions—and it would be so like Malfoy to disrupt the lesson out of sheer spite.

The blond boy was patting Buckbeak condescendingly.

"This is very easy," he said, giving a disdainful sniff. "I knew it would be, of course, if Potter could do it… You're not dangerous at all, are you, you ugly great brute?"

Harry reacted on instinct; he saw out of the corner of his eye as the hippogriff reared on its hind legs and prepared to strike, so he dove towards Malfoy and shoved him out of the way. Then, he felt pain pain pain and his vision went blurry from shock. He heard screams from other students and Malfoy high-pitched right next to his ear—

"You—you're bleeding on me, stop bleeding on me, you—look what you've done, you sorry excuse of a teacher, your beast has murdered Harry Potter—"

And then Harry felt himself being picked up and the fog in his head cleared enough for him to understand that he was lying in Hagrid's arms and Hagrid was running towards the castle, chanting a litany of I'm sorry's seemingly without being aware of it. Harry tried to say it was okay and not Hagrid's fault at all, but his arm got jostled slightly, which sent a spike of sharp pain all through his body. He bit his lip in an attempt to not cry out.

Thankfully, they arrived in the hospital wing quite soon and Harry was lowered onto a bed. Madam Pomfrey fusses over him and administered a healing spell and a potion to him immediately,
somehow managing to question Hagrid at the same time.

("Buckbeak—well, a hippogriff—fer Merlin's sake, he's not dangerous, he's tame as a baby!")

The matron's ministrations took a short while to work, but then the pain in Harry's arm subsided and he felt more or less okay, if a little weak from blood loss. Once Madam Pomfrey left his bedside in order to jot something down on an official-looking slip of paper, Harry got his first chance to address Hagrid's guilt.

"It's not your fault at all!" he assured the teary giant. "Madam Pomfrey's fixed me up and I'm good as new, see? If anyone's to blame, it's Malfoy."

Hagrid's grief transformed into fury in a matter of seconds.

"That little brat," he growled. "Insultin' Buckbeak—well, a hippogriff ain't gonna like that, is he? I'll give him detention until the end o' year fer that!"

"No, Hagrid," Harry interrupted, quite alarmed. "Please don't. Malfoy will complain to his daddy and then it will all go to hell in a hand basket."

"To a where?"

"Never mind, just—leave Malfoy be. He's a moron for doing what he did, but it'd be way worse if he was here, because then he'd set his father on you and he's really influential—only… be careful with the next creatures you show us, okay? So that, you know, they're not so easily provoked by twits like Malfoy…"

If Harry had known his plea would result in them studying flobberworms for long weeks afterwards, he wouldn't have said anything. As it was, though, he managed to calm Hagrid enough for him to go and relate the incident to Dumbledore. Harry could tell that Hagrid was worried about his teaching career—it did not look good if the Boy-Who-Lived was injured in your very first lesson—but hopefully he would be okay.

Once Hagrid departed, however, the place at Harry's bedside was taken by Blaise, Millicent and Neville. Harry's three friends had never been in each other's company this way before and unease between them was palpable. Blaise and Millie kept glancing at Neville with suspicion, while he wisely chose to sit on a different side of Harry's bed from them. Up until now, Harry had managed to keep his Gryffindor and Slytherin friends separate, and he really wasn't sure that the time to bring them together was now, when he was weakened by hippogriff assault, but he would just have to roll with it.

"How are you, Harry?" Neville asked. "I didn't really see what happened—"

"Malfoy should really learn to keep his gob shut," Millie said coldly. "What possessed you to take the blow for him?"

"A subconscious death wish?" Blaise raised his eyebrows.

"Piss off, Zabini," Harry muttered. "I didn't think far enough to realize the hippogriff would get me instead of Malfoy."

"Didn't think," Millicent deadpanned. "A bit Gryffindor of you, wasn't it?"

Neville squirmed.
"I'm not sure Malfoy's worth risking your life for, Harry," he chose to say.

Judging by Millie's look, Neville had just failed some sort of a test.

"Malfoy was so scared he was green, too bad you couldn't have seen his face," Blaise noted airily, but with gleeful malice in his voice. "I have to agree with Longbottom here, though—try to refrain from jumping into the path of danger for his sake in the future, will you?"

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Sheesh, guys, one might think you're worried over me or something."

He knew he'd scored a point when both Millie and Blaise looked uncomfortable. Neville, however, only opened his eyes widely.

"Of course we're worried, Harry, there was blood everywhere and—"

"Speak for yourself, Longbottom," Millicent interjected frostily.

Neville looked lost.

"Oh Millie, you wound me," Harry droned, trying not to smirk.

"And you, Potter, are treading on thin ice," she snapped. "I'm done here. Coming, Blaise?"

"Hey, will you let me copy today's notes from you?" Harry asked.

Millie narrowed her eyes. Harry made his resemble those of a kicked puppy.

"Oh, fine," Mille huffed and stalked out.

Blaise cracked up.

"Get better, Harry, alright? Common room banter will be so dull without you." He briefly glanced at Neville and inclined his head. "Longbottom."

"See you later, Blaise," Harry nodded. "Give hell to Malfoy for me."

Blaise's smirk was positively malevolent as he left the room.

Neville looked slightly shell-shocked at the Slytherin interactions. Harry found himself pitying the Gryffindor a little, so his smile was somewhat softer than normal as he uttered:

"Thanks for worrying, Nev. What happened after I got, you know, stabbed?"

"Oh, nothing much. Hagrid told us to go back to the castle and that was all." Neville shrugged. "Hermione wanted to visit you too, but Madam Pomfrey allowed only three visitors, so…"

Harry let out a noncommittal noise. He wasn't sure he wanted to deal with Granger right now anyway. She remained more Neville's friend to him than his own, somehow.

"How is she? I haven't seen much of her lately," he felt compelled to ask.

Neville smiled.

"Oh, you know Hermione, buried in work," he said, lightening up. "She's taking every single class on offer this year, even Muggle Studies, you know?"
"What?" Harry blinked. "How's that even possible? Muggle Studies, of all things." He rolled his eyes. "So how are your classes so far? You're taking Divination, right?"

"Yeah." Neville shuddered. "That was creepy. The professor predicted I'd break a cup and I did, and then she told Ron Weasley that he was going to lose a trusted friend this year. Hermione thinks it's all rubbish, but she's also miffed because the professor told her she doesn't have a very good aura for the subject." Neville snickered.

Harry stared at him.

"Hermione was in your morning Divination class?"

"Yes," Neville confirmed. "Why?"

"She was in my morning Arithmancy class, too," Harry answered succinctly.

They gazed at each other in incomprehension.

"First period today."

"Yes."

"Hermione was there."

"Yes."

They stared at each other some more.

"Does she have a Time-Turner or something?" Neville muttered.

"Yeah, right, like they'd trust a thirteen-year-old with one," Harry snorted.

However they discussed the issue, they could not find a single solution to how Hermione could be in two places at the same time. Harry had valiantly tried to convince Neville that Hermione must have magically cloned herself, but Neville collapsed in a fit of laughter and was subsequently ejected from the infirmary by an irate Madam Pomfrey.

Harry's stay in the hospital wing was really boring after that.

***

A couple of weeks later, Malfoy was holding court with his sycophants as he sat on a snake-ornamented couch in front of the fire in the Slytherin common room. Harry gritted his teeth and tried not to listen, but it was getting increasingly unbearable by the second.

"So yes, knowing that, I just can't believe Potter isn't trying to hunt Black down by himself. I mean, I would, had I been in that position…"

Harry threw his quill down. Millicent frowned at him.

"Are you actually going to fall for his—"

Harry didn't respond as he stood up and stormed over to Malfoy's side.

"Enjoy talking about me behind my back, Malfoy?" he snarled.
"Oh, I would say the same to your face," Malfoy assured him serenely. "I mean, look at you, just sitting in the castle like a good boy, when the murderer of your parents is on the loose—"

Harry felt suddenly light-headed.

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" he demanded.

Malfoy's eyes widened.

"Oh, you mean you don't know?" he asked, tone delighted. "You mean nobody's told you that your darling godfather betrayed your family?"

"I—what? You're lying!"

"Oh no, it's the absolute truth. Everyone knows it, of course—or, well, everyone important at the Ministry does, but they thought you didn't need to know, huh? Well, I'll do you a favour, Potter, since you ask so nicely."

Harry's hands were balled into fists.

"Malfoy—"

"This tragic story starts way back in the day, when your father, James Potter, befriended your godfather, Sirius Black," Malfoy said in a dramatic manner. "He was best man at your parents' wedding and all. And then they went into hiding, because of the war, and performed the Fidelius Charm…"

Harry was aware that they'd attracted the attention of most people in the common room by that point, but he was only focused on Malfoy.

"So?"

"Do you even know what that is?" Malfoy's lip curled in disgust. "The Fidelius Charm is one where the secret of someone's location is hidden inside the soul of another person. If that person tells no-one, the secret is safe." Malfoy smiled maliciously. Harry was beginning to see where this was going. "Sirius Black was your parents' Secret Keeper, Potter. As soon as they performed the charm, he went to the Dark Lord and spilled the beans. Then— whoops—your parents are dead. Very tragic. Don't you find, Potter?"

The common room was deathly quiet.

"You're full of shit, Malfoy."

"Oh, no, this is the truth." Malfoy shrugged. "My father told me this summer. He's a friend of the Minister, you know? And the Minister was there when they arrested your godfather. He'd just killed thirteen Muggles and a wizard—"

"Shut up!"

"And you know what the best part was? He was laughing. Laughing, Potter. He was happy he'd betrayed your parents. Your own godfather, Potter, how does that feel—"

"I think I've told you to shut up," Harry snarled in a voice he didn't even recognize as his own.

He didn't remember the last time he'd ever felt so angry—like he'd burst, like he wanted to lash out and hurt someone the way he'd been hurt—there was lava boiling in his veins—
Malfy looked somewhat alarmed, but continued on to say:

"Aw, Potter, don't take it so hard. Aren't you going to thank me for letting you know?"

And then Harry lost it. He didn't know what possessed him to start hissing in Parseltongue, but it seemed to be the best way to express his fury, and then there were snakes crawling all over Malfoy, upholstery snakes from the couch were slithering up his arms and chest and Malfoy was screaming and trying to fight them, but they were holding him down and getting at his throat—and—

"Stop it, Potter!"

Someone grabbed his arms and was shaking him. Harry tried to jerk away, but couldn't, and gradually he focused his gaze and saw two Chasers from the Quidditch team, Pucey and Warrington, trying to catch his attention. They looked terrified, he noticed. Glancing towards Malfoy, he saw that the blond was grey with horror; as soon as Harry snapped out of his trance and the snakes stopped moving, Malfoy jumped up and away from the couch and ran for the dorm, Parkinson hot on his heels.

Everyone was staring at Harry again, like they'd done after the Duelling Club incident, and Harry felt pinned by their gazes, aware that he'd been so close to doing something completely unforgivable—and, seeing the wariness on Blaise's and Millie's faces, he broke away from Pucey and Warrington and marched towards the exit. The crowd parted before him without protest; a small first year squeaked in terror as he dashed out of Harry's path.

Harry left, slamming the common room door behind him.

He was vaguely aware that he was trembling and that he had no clue where he was going; his mind was awhirl, not capable of focusing in a single thing for more than an instant—Malfoy's face, gloating, and then the same face, contorted in fear; Sirius Black from the wanted posters; Harry's parents in the Mirror of Erised. He thought, *I'll kill him* and then felt horrified by what he'd nearly done to Malfoy; did he have it in him to murder someone in cold blood, if he was so disgusted with himself now—could he avenge his parents after all, hunt Black down and kill him rip him apart—oh god, he felt nauseous, and—did this make him weak or did this make him strong, that he wanted so badly to destroy something and felt so sick when he did it?

"I hate it all, Hedwig, I really do," Harry muttered, reaching a hand out to his owl, and suddenly realized that his feet had taken him to the owlery, judging by the fact that he was here and had no recollection of anything that had happened on the way.

He thought of what he must have looked like, walking through the halls—zombie-faced, empty-eyed, oblivious to the world, a mask of hatred on his features—and shuddered.

"I hate it," he repeated.

"Hate what, Harrykins?"

Harry spun around to see the Weasley twins standing behind him.

"How do you always sneak up on me?" He scowled.

"It's a skill passed down through twins in the Weasley family for generations," Fred said with a straight face.

"Anyway, so what do you hate, our Slytherin friend?" George inquired, leaning against the wall and looking as if he had no intention of leaving anytime soon.
"My life," Harry snapped.

Fred's eyebrows rose.

"Is that teen angst I detect in your dulcet voice?"

"Shut it, Fred," Harry warned.

The boy raised his hands in surrender, but his eyes were still alight with mirth.

"As you wish, Your Slytherinness." Fred bowed.

"However, what brought on this bout of contemplation?" George continued smoothly.

Harry looked at them.

"I've almost killed Malfoy," he confessed blandly.

Fred and George exchanged glances.

"Since you say 'almost', should we assume that the slimy little git is still befoiling Hogwarts with his presence?"

"Not that it would be a great loss should he stop existing—"

"It's not funny and I'm not joking!" Harry shouted.

Fred sighed. George looked heavenwards, as if praying for patience.

"Well, do you regret trying to kill him or not succeeding?"

Harry stared at them.

"Because, you see, if you regret that you tried to kill him, it means that there is a hope of making an upstanding citizen of you yet," Fred explained.

"Whereas if you regret not succeeding, there's always the next time," George concluded.

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

"You're both insane," he said instead.

"And planning to make a career of it," Fred agreed.

Maybe that's what friends were for: despite not having solved any of his problems, Harry felt better for having talked to the crazy duo anyway.

And, although he'd been dreading the return to the common room, nobody said anything on the subject of his breakdown—that night or ever. The only indication that the incident had taken place, apart from Malfoy avoiding him, was that nobody dared sit on that couch again. It became Harry's own, informally, and only he and his friends ever occupied it—at least until after he'd left Hogwarts. The upholstery snakes seemed to have taken a liking to Harry, besides; they would slither around and hiss at people who dared approach. Blaise thought it was great; Millie never offered her opinion; and Harry felt half-disgusted, half-amused as the couch he sat on swore floridly in Parseltongue.
Neville was getting closer and closer to a nervous breakdown as he and Harry walked together towards the Potions classroom.

"Oh no," Neville was murmuring in a daze. "Oh no. I'll fail. He'll destroy me—oh no…"

Harry looked on sympathetically.

"I know he's heard about the Boggart!" Neville exclaimed.

Harry winced. If the rumours were true—well, he wasn't surprised that Neville feared Professor Snape's reaction. The Potions master had never given the impression that he liked to laugh at himself.

"Well," Harry said, "you have to admit it was pretty brave of you. A little too brave, even."

Neville nodded glumly.

"Wasn't my fault, though," he said. "I mean, I can't help it that my Boggart is Professor Snape, but it was Professor Lupin who came up with the whole 'dress him as my Gran' thing—I wouldn't have…"

"I don't think Professor Snape likes Lupin, either," Harry murmured. "So he might think you're in cahoots with him, or something. On the bright side, you were everyone's hero for a while," he offered with a crooked smile.

Neville sighed.

"Apparently, being a hero comes at a price," he uttered.

"Welcome to my world, Nev," Harry replied sardonically.

He'd been wondering, actually, whether it was because he was the Boy-Who-Lived that Lupin hadn't let him face a Boggart when he'd had that class. Almost everyone had had a go, but Lupin had pretty much stopped the lesson abruptly when Harry's turn came. Did the Defence professor believe that Harry was too weak to face a Boggart? He'd dealt with a bloody basilisk last year! He was perfectly capable of taking on a measly shape-shifter! But no. No Boggarts for precious Harry Potter. He might twist his ankle as he runs away in fear.

Seriously—Harry was picking up heavier spells from the guys on his Quidditch team.

"Don't bother going to your normal seat, Longbottom," Professor Snape said once they entered the classroom, giving Neville the most terrifying smile Harry had ever seen. "I believe we should get a true measure of your inability to brew. Potter, move to Mr. Nott's desk. I want to see, Longbottom, how you do on your own, without Potter whispering instructions in your ear…"

Neville gulped and looked at his cauldron with great trepidation—he couldn't brew even under normal circumstances, but today Snape was bound to be particularly vicious. Giving Neville a small nod of encouragement, Harry moved over to the Slytherin part of the classroom for the first time in two years. Well. Nott wasn't so bad, considering that Snape could have set Harry with Crabbe or Goyle; it seemed that Neville's fall from grace allowed for Harry's upward mobility in the Potions classroom. Nott frowned and made space on his worktop so that Harry could put down his supplies, while Blaise grinned at Harry from his and Millie's station a couple of desks away.
"Today, you will be making a simple Pepperup potion," Snape was saying. "Even the most dimwitted of you should be able to brew it correctly, although there is no accounting for Longbottom, of course…"

Harry watched in resignation as Ron Weasley made a derogatory comment about Snape in a misguided attempt to stand up for Neville, and Snape, being in no mood to tolerate even the slightest of indiscretions, swooped down upon him in a fury.

"For your cheek, Weasley, your little duet with Finnigan will break up for this lesson… Miss Parkinson, if you could take the place next to Finnigan? Weasley, move to Mr. Malfoy's desk."

Neville brewing on his own, an irate Pansy given a Gryffindor to torture, and eternal antagonists Ron Weasley and Draco Malfoy working together right behind Harry's station. This was going to be a Potions lesson from hell; they'd be lucky to escape alive.

"If you dare mess up my potion, Weasley, I'll make you wish you'd never been born," Harry heard Malfoy say. "Here, chop the Echinacea root."

Weasley could not, of course, let it slide.

"Chop it yourself, you twat!"

"I said chop it, not throw it at me!"

"I'm not your servant!"

"Well, your family could stand to earn some money, so maybe I'll let you become one, if you ask nicely."

"Fuck you, Malfoy," Ron Weasley hissed so that Snape wouldn't hear. "Like I'd ever ask anything from your Death-Eating scum of a family."

Harry sighed inwardly. He'd noticed that the Gryffindors seemed to think that the words Death Eater constituted an insult, when they were a simple statement of fact. It was an open secret in Slytherin that the parents of many kids had been Death Eaters in the last war. Those parents might or might not have been acquitted; they might or might not still believe in Voldemort's cause; they might or might not resent Harry Potter for being the Boy-Who-Lived. You did not speak of it, one way or another. Even if you knew for certain that someone's father had been an ardent supporter of the Dark Lord and escaped prosecution only by pleading Imperius, you did not bring it up, for it was a tricky, dangerous subject.

The ex-Death Eater could neither repudiate the Dark Lord, for that would affect their standing among other ex-Death Eaters, nor could they publicly admit to having been Voldemort's willing follower, for that would land them in Azkaban. Silence on certain issues was the best way forward, even if you weren't implicated in Death Eater affairs. By the same token, if you harboured a passionate love for Muggles, it was best to keep it quiet in Slytherin—admitting to it spelled social suicide. Among Harry's friends, Blaise was quite open about his disdain for those of non-wizarding background, Millicent didn't volunteer her opinion, and the most Harry ever did was defend Muggleborns. Only someone with no appreciation for the complexities of Slytherin politics could make sweeping accusations on matters better left alone.

Ladies and gentlemen, here comes Ronald Weasley.

"Look, Weasley," Malfoy said icily, "either you start chopping, or I tell Professor Snape that you are trying to sabotage my potion, and he'll give you detention. Which one do you choose?"
In the end, Ron chose to sulkily follow Malfoy's directions, but not before noting:

"You know, Malfoy, you'd make a much better rodent than a human. Wanna meet my pet rat? You could compare notes on freeloading and stuff."

Neville's cauldron exploded not twenty minutes later, sending half the class to the hospital wing and thereby preventing the squabble between Weasley and Malfoy from degenerating into a full-out duel.

***

Harry's Quidditch practices intensified in the weeks before the game against Gryffindor. Flint was determined to crush the enemy team, and that meant aggressive tactics and daring manoeuvres.

“We can outfly them, no problem,” Flint said, glaring at his players. “But I won’t have you relying on speed. Malfoy, Pucey, in formation!”

Chaser Adrian Pucey and Keeper Miles Bletchley exchanged long-suffering glances, but Pucey put up no argument. He and Malfoy took off, and the captain directed the Beaters to follow.

“Don’t just stand around, Potter,” Flint barked, rounding on Harry next. “You’d better know your position by now!”

Harry hastened to obey the command. It seemed that Flint was in a thundering mood—for a change—and Harry didn’t feel like pushing his luck. Unlike Pucey, he didn’t have mates on the team who’d stand up for him.

The other boys on the team had never hurt him—quite the contrary, they’d defended him on some memorable occasions—but he’d always known that their indifference towards him bordered on dislike, at least for some.

He and Malfoy were the youngest people on the team, but Malfoy had the fortune of being, well, a Malfoy, and having a father who’d provided the players with first-rate brooms. Draco’s appearance on the team had been met with friendly slaps on the shoulder and words of encouragement; Harry, who’d got the Seeker position over Malfoy, had been succinctly told: “Don’t fuck up.”

So he did his best not to. Over the past year, the older boys’ scepticism had morphed into tolerance as Harry had caught the Snitch in every game they’d played. Harry cherished no illusions about being accepted in their circle, as such; but the other players were not hostile, either.

Well, except Malfoy. But Malfoy had taken to avoiding Harry since the incident with the Parseltongue-activated couch—which was still not something Harry liked thinking about.

Harry circled the pitch on his broom, then came to a rest in the centre of the field, above all the other players. Seeing that the Chasers were still sorting themselves out, he made another loop.

“Bored, Potter?” Bletchley called out to him, lounging next to a goal post.

“Never,” Harry said drily.

“Just as well. Flint would have your hide if you were,” Bletchley said.

“Or if I dared to show it,” Harry said, and got a smirk for the cheek.

Noticing that Flint had finished sorting out the Chasers, Harry sped to his position above the field, and the practice began in earnest.
Afterwards, six wrung-out lemons and their wrathful captain retired to the changing rooms.

“If you lot don’t pick up your game, we’ll lose to Gryffindor, and then I’ll tear you apart with my bare hands,” Flint promised.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” said Edward Montague, whose proportions were not far behind Flint’s.

“Is that a challenge?” Flint growled, narrowing his eyes.

“No, an invitation to chill the fuck out,” Montague said.

“Whoa, old boy,” said Pucey, “you are talking to our mighty captain.”

“No, an invitation to chill the fuck out,” Montague asked, lips curling in a smile.

“To hell with that,” Pucey said cheerfully.

Flint glared at them and stalked past them to the showers.

Warrington clenched his jaw, Bletchley and Pucey exchanged level glances, and Malfoy wore a look of studied unconcern.

Harry sighed. This was, somehow, his life. He just hoped that he’d be able to forever avoid getting dragged into the middle of his teammates’ power plays.

***

Harry sat on his usual couch in the Slytherin common room with Blaise and Millie, relaxing after the huge Halloween feast in the Great Hall. The upholstery snakes seemed to be dozing, oddly enough; perhaps they’d had a wild Halloween party with the other serpent-decorated furniture and were now sleeping it off.

"A good day," Blaise said languidly. "I have to agree, Hogsmeade is worth all the hype."

"You were so high on sugar, you thought you saw the Grim," Millie told him acerbically.

"I'll have you know the Grim is perfectly real," Blaise huffed. "I'll soon die a tragic death and then you'll be sorry."

"Really not, though," Harry said. "I think we'll survive fine without you."

Still, Blaise was right—it really had been a fun day, and a visit to an all-magical village had been absolutely fascinating. Harry had been there once, very briefly—last year, when Professor Snape Side-Along Apparated him from Kings Cross to an Apparition point in Hogsmeade, they'd had to walk through the village to get to Hogwarts. Ever since then, Harry had been looking forward to exploring the place properly, and today didn't disappoint. Harry noticed, however, that the professors weren't all that keen to let him go; good thing that he had a signed permission slip from the Dursleys. Harry was pretty sure that, had he not managed to get Uncle Vernon's signature onto the Hogsmeade form, he'd be stuck inside all day—the teachers would jump at the chance to make him stay in the safety of the castle.

One could not, after all, forget about the threat of Sirius Black.

Harry grimaced. After he'd cooled down from his initial blind rage, he tried to deal with the issue more rationally. Nonetheless, there was nothing rational about the murderer of his parents roaming about free—and these days, Harry almost hoped that Black would find him, because then Harry
would have his chance to confront the man, destroy him like he had Harry's life, take out on him all
the anger and frustration of growing up with shit for guardians and no real memory of his parents.
They would approve, Harry was sure—they'd want to be avenged, they'd want to see their traitorous
friend get his just deserts... Harry wouldn't go looking for Black, no; he could recognize the rashness
and stupidity of that idea. However, it didn't stop him from fantasizing about the day they would
meet.

"Well, next time we should definitely go to the Shrieking Shack, because they say the spirits that
haunt it make the Bloody Baron seem like a sweet little firstie—"

Blaise's prattle was interrupted when the common room door opened and Professor Snape stepped
in, looking even more thunderous than normal. All over the room, students quieted—their Head of
House did not visit often, but when he did, he usually had something to say. And you did not want to
annoy him by ignoring his presence.

"Silence!" Professor Snape demanded, glaring at the students. "Now, pay close attention. Sirius
Black has broken into the castle and attacked the portrait guarding the Gryffindor dormitories. The
search for the criminal is being conducted as we speak. In the meanwhile, you are all to line up and
march in an orderly fashion towards the Great Hall. Immediately," he snapped when nobody moved.
"Stay together at all times."

Students scrambled to obey. Harry felt people's gazes on him as he moved towards the exit; his
thoughts were sluggish. Sirius Black was here, in the castle—should Harry go look for him? He
glanced around and noticed that Blaise and Millie had taken places on both sides of Harry, and
people in front and behind them were making it impossible to slink away covertly. Harry wondered
briefly whether they'd done it on purpose—had he been so obvious in his desire for revenge? The
idea of Blaise and Millie protecting him was a laughable one, but it was true that they did not, for all
their seeming unconcern, like to see him hurt.

The Slytherins got to the Great Hall at about the same time as the Ravenclaws; Harry absently
nodded at his acquaintances in that House and proceeded to hunt down Neville, ignoring the buzz of
excited murmurs around the hall. Neville was a Gryffindor—he'd be able to fill Harry in with more
details. Clearly thinking along the same lines, Blaise and Millie stayed by Harry's side as he
approached the Gryffindors.

"It's awful," Neville said. "Our portrait—er, I won't tell you where and who it is, or anything, but
she's been attacked, all slashed up, you know? Black really wanted to get into Gryffindor."

"Too bad Harry isn't there," Blaise noted cheerfully.

"It's almost odd that Sirius Black doesn't know that," Hermione answered, frowning. "Harry is a
celebrity, after all—"

"Well, here's to hoping that Black will kill Filch before the night is over," Blaise continued, giving
no indication that he'd heard Hermione.

It was his usual approach with her—since he could not stop the Muggleborn from being in his
presence, he chose to ignore her completely at all times. Predictably, that drove Hermione up the
wall.

Hermione flushed. Neville looked about to interject, but she talked over his attempt at contributing to
the conversation:

"Don't you think it's childish to pretend that I don't exist out of foolish, misbegotten idea of
Pureblood superiority that—"

"Or at least Black can eat Mrs. Norris, I imagine it's not easy living his life as a fugitive…" Blaise contemplated serenely.

Harry paid no real attention to their exchange of monologues as he dwelled on the presence of Sirius Black within the halls of Hogwarts. Had he come to kill Harry? What would have happened if they'd met? Harry gripped his wand unconsciously, thinking of the possibilities.

"Everyone quiet down!" The stern voice of Percy Weasley cut into Harry's musings. "Lights out in ten minutes!"

"C'mon," Harry muttered to Blaise and Millie. "Let's get back to the Slytherin common… floor space."

"Hey!" Blaise said excitedly, as they walked, manoeuvring between purple sleeping bags. "Remember about the Grim? I told you it was true! We could all have died tonight, and one portrait nearly did, so there!"

"Go cry about it to Trelawney and don't waste our time," Millie snapped.

Blaise sulked.

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Just over a week later, Harry dropped his head onto a book spread on the library desk in front of him. The past few days had been trying, to say the least. The much-anticipated Quidditch match against Gryffindor had never taken place as Flint had decided against playing in bad weather, and used Harry's once-injured arm as an excuse. This turned out to be a better move than anyone could have predicted, because Harry had gone and fainted again when Dementors appeared near the pitch. Blaise and Millie had saved him from tumbling off his seat, but this whole fainting thing was becoming rather dire indeed. Hence the library.

Harry's eyes were really tired after hours of research on top of his homework, but he didn't really have a choice. He had to fix his Dementor problem, and not only because Flint had ordered it in no uncertain terms. It was becoming a life hazard. What if Flint hadn't got them out of playing? Harry would have been up there, high in the air, when he fainted—he'd be dead on impact, even if Dementors hadn't managed to Kiss him in his unconscious state. It had been terrifying, that repeated sensation of his vision tunnelling and his mind fogging and being submerged in that memory of a woman, screaming—

("Not Harry, no, please, not Harry, have mercy, kill me instead——")

Of his mother screaming, and it was sick that he longed to hear more, almost. Because she was being killed in that memory, all due to bloody Voldemort and bloody Sirius Black.

Harry's research, at least, had yielded results: the very difficult Patronus Charm, which he was unlikely to master on his own. It was supposed to be really advanced magic, beyond OWLs even, if not beyond NEWTs. Harry was determined to learn it anyway.

Although he might need help.

Harry scowled, still not raising his head from the book. There weren't many people he could ask, though. Professor Dumbledore? A big, firm no. Harry's faith in that old man was beginning to waver, what with the secrecy and the spying and the grandfatherly attitude. Professor Snape? Harry'd
be lucky if he didn’t get used as an ingredient in a particularly vile potion. This left Lupin, whose job it kind of was anyway. Lupin, though, wasn't on Harry's favourite people list either, because the man seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time looking at Harry sideways—and besides, the Boggart insult was still not forgotten. The man was ostensibly kind, though, if a little strict, and generally fair to all Houses, so that left him the least worst candidate.

Harry sat up reluctantly.

Right. Onwards to Lupin's office, then, hoping for the best. At least, the man was not sick any longer—yesterday's Defence class had been taught by him and not Snape. Lupin had looked even more haggard than normal, but he'd still offered smiles to the class and cancelled the essay on werewolves that Professor Snape had set for them.

Harry hesitated before Lupin's office door in a last-minute bout of uncertainty. Then, he knocked on the door.

"Harry? Oh yes, come in, of course. Would you like a cup of tea?"

It had always been *Harry* with Lupin, from the very beginning; not once had the man called him *Potter*. Yet another odd thing on the list of odd things that Lupin did. Using Harry's given name implied a familiarity they did not share, and none of the other teachers, bar Dumbledore, ever addressed him simply as *Harry*, so where could the man have got the idea?

"No, thank you," Harry responded to the offer of tea. "I am sorry to disturb you, Professor, but I was wondering… I actually came here to ask whether you would agree to teach me the charm to repel Dementors."

Lupin looked somewhat uncertain once he heard Harry's carefully worded request.

"I do not claim to be an expert on Dementors, Harry," he said.

"You are still the Defence teacher, sir," Harry countered politely. "You are more likely to know how to deal with them than anybody else in the school."

Lupin smiled.

"I am sure that the Headmaster is much more learned than I in that regard also. I do, however see you point."

"Then you will teach me?"

"Harry, it is quite a difficult subject matter, and while I understand your dislike for Dementors—"

Harry held Lupin's gaze.

"I lose consciousness when Dementors are near," he said coolly, displeased at being forced to admit his weakness. "Last Saturday, Slytherin was supposed to be playing Gryffindor. I am the Slytherin Seeker. Had I played that day, I would have fallen to my death when Dementors came onto the pitch."

Lupin paled.

"I see. Forgive me, Harry, I did not understand the seriousness of your situation. I… Well, in that case, I can hardly refuse to teach you."
Of course he couldn't.

"We will not, naturally, be able to practise on a real Dementor, but I am certain I can think of an alternative…"

Harry thought for a moment and made a quick decision. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"A Boggart," he suggested.

Lupin looked startled.

"I'm sorry?"

"My Boggart," Harry clarified. "It will most likely turn into a Dementor."

"Will it?" the professor asked slowly, giving Harry a long inscrutable glance. "I assumed that your Boggart would take on the form of Lord Voldemort, which is why, as I'm sure you've realized, I did not allow you to face one in class."

Harry's eyebrows rose. That explanation had not occurred to him before and it soothed his offended pride a little. He was also quite impressed by Lupin for saying the Dark Lord's name, which very few people did.

"Well." He shrugged. "It's not Voldemort."

What did Voldemort even look like? Harry only knew him as the young Tom Riddle from the Chamber of Secrets.

"Yes, it seems to be another assumption I made about you." Lupin smiled wryly. "I really ought to stop doing that…"

There seemed to be a deeper meaning behind the man's words, but Harry could not discern it.

"Either way," the professor said, "I am afraid the lessons will have to wait until next semester, because I find myself with much to do until the holidays. I will, however, try to find a Boggart for us to practise on, so that we can get right to it when we start."

"Thank you, Professor."

Too bad that they couldn't begin, like, right now, but Harry supposed that the promise of eventual lessons was better than nothing. He could practise the Patronus Charm on his own in the meanwhile, without a fake Dementor—maybe it would count for something once the tutoring commenced.

***

"I think it's time to go inside and get a butterbeer," Padma Patil said with authority.

Harry nodded, shivering, and saw others do the same out of the corner of his eye. Terry Boot, Anthony Goldstein and Lisa Turpin looked as frozen as he felt.

It was odd company to be going for a butterbeer in, maybe, but Harry had parted ways with his Slytherin friends and Neville a while ago. Neville went off to Honeydukes, blushing and murmuring about buying chocolate for someone; Millie and Blaise were last seen in Zonko's, but it had been so crowded that Harry had just wanted to leave. It was then that he'd bumped into his Arithmancy classmates from Ravenclaw. Harry wouldn't call them friends, but they had a very nice working relationship and collaborated on their assignments, so it wasn't weird, exactly, to hang out with them.
Besides, Padma was quite pretty. Not that it mattered, of course.

Finally sitting down with a butterbeer, Harry all but purred in pleasure as the warm liquid poured down his throat. Freezing temperatures ought to be abolished. Once he became the world's Prime Minister, he'd make sure of that.

"So, Harry," Padma said, her dark eyes wide with expectation, "can you tell us what really happened with you, Ginny Weasley and the Chamber of Secrets last year?"

Harry wrinkled his nose. If there was a reason to dislike Padma, it was because she was quite nosy and giggly. It was beyond Harry how she managed to get constant E's and O's when she spent so much time gossiping.

Not that Terry, Lisa or Anthony were any less interested in his answer, if their expressions were anything to go by.

"Nothing very mysterious," Harry answered. "We were both kidnapped into it by a crazy maniac, but made it out."

Terry looked at him dubiously.

"And the maniac decided to just give up on Petrifying Muggleborns with his evil beast-o'-doom?"

"That is odd, isn't it?" Harry agreed. "It's all really quite fuzzy in my head and chunks of my memory are missing. I just remember Ginny Weasley crying. A lot."

Padma huffed.

"Well, I'd cry too if I had hair that colour—"

Anthony was sceptical.

"So what, did the Heir Obliviate you? How come you don't know what happened?"

"I think it was so traumatic that my subconscious blocked the memories," Harry told them seriously. "I don't mind, really. I'd rather not remember."

That part, at least, was true.

The Ravenclaws looked only half-convinced. Harry sighed inwardly; the partial amnesia excuse was the best he could come up with, considering that the truth would make Ginny Weasley an outcast in the school. He still thought the people who'd been Petrified deserved to know what had happened to them—maybe not now, but eventually. Currently, though, it was best for the matter to remain hushed up; the rumours Ginny had to deal with were bad as it was. And he wasn't keen to publicize his own role in the events, either—he got credibility in Slytherin for being considered an heir of the House's founder. Telling them he'd fought a teenage Voldemort would not be a very bright move considering the number of ex-Death Eaters' kids in the House.

Lisa seemed to sense Harry's dislike for the subject: although Ravenclaw curiosity was still clear in her eyes, she had enough tact to divert Padma's attention.

"So, have you looked at homework Professor Vector set for us last time? That chart is giving me some problems…"

Within minutes, they were having a heated discussion on whether or not Pythagoras had relevance to
their assignment. Oddly enough, Harry realized once they were done and about to leave, it had been refreshing, debating with them like this. The Ravenclaws did not allow him to space out, which meant that he had to concentrate on the subject and not wallow in his own thoughts. Besides, there was of course the added benefit of getting ahead on his homework—even if he currently felt that he could think no more.

"We should do this again sometime," Padma said decisively.

Everyone nodded and Anthony went on to say:

"We'd better arrange to have our notes with us, because then I'd be able to prove to you that Pythagoras—"

"—is completely useless here," Terry insisted.

"Oh please, no," Harry muttered, because his brain was actually starting to break a little.

He wove between tables after Padma and Lisa, trying to tune out the ongoing debate between Terry and Anthony. Salvation came from an unexpected source.

"Hey, Harry!" Cedric Diggory was grinning at him from one of the booths they were walking by.

Harry smiled politely back.

"I'm looking forward to our Quidditch match," Diggory said cheerfully.

Harry resigned himself to stopping for a chat; Terry and Anthony paused too and quieted down. Finally.

"Slytherin will have to defeat Ravenclaw first," Harry answered, smirking at the Ravenclaw boys.

Anthony raised an eyebrow.

"You wish, Potter."

"Quite exciting, isn't it, all of our teams having good Seekers?" Cedric beamed. "Our team has improved a lot, and Ravenclaw has Cho Chang, and Slytherin has you—"

"Gryffindor's isn't stellar," Terry noted.

"Dean Thomas," Anthony agreed. "He'd be a better Chaser. Gryffindor hasn't won the House Cup ever since Charlie Weasley graduated."

"I know." Harry rolled his eyes. "I've heard all about it from the twins. I think they might de-age their brother just to win the Cup, they're that desperate."

Cedric looked at him in interest.

"You're friends with the twins?"

"Well—"

"Quite an interesting Slytherin, aren't you?" The older boy laughed.

Harry didn't know what to say, but he was rescued by Padma's displeased:
"Where are you, aren't we leaving?"

Harry kept his gaze determinedly off the wanted poster displaying Sirius Black's deranged face as he walked out on the street.
The week after the Christmas holidays, Professor Lupin invited Harry for his first Patronus lesson. Harry turned up a little early but waited barely five minutes before Lupin arrived, carrying a large packing case.

"Good evening, Harry," the man said pleasantly. "I've brought a Boggart—found it in Mr. Filch's filing cabinet. If it does turn into a Dementor upon seeing you, our job will become significantly easier."

"I understand, Professor."

"So..." Lupin nodded, seeing that Harry already had his wand out. "The spell I am going to try and teach you is highly advanced magic—well beyond the OWL requirements. It's called the Patronus Charm."

"I know, sir," Harry said. When the professor's eyebrows rose, he elaborated: "I've researched it. Before I went to see you last time."

Lupin appeared to be surprised.

"You have? Oh. That's very diligent of you. I trust that you don't need basic explanations, then?"

"No, Professor."

The man was considering Harry as if he was trying and failing to fit him into a formula of some sort.

"Have you maybe even practised the charm?" Lupin inquired cautiously.

"Yes, Professor."

"Well." The teacher stepped away and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "Would you mind demonstrating for me, then? Without a Dementor?"

Harry inhaled deeply. This always took quite a bit of effort from him, but, unless he was mistaken, Lupin was about to be impressed.

"Expecto Patronum!"

A silver stag erupted from Harry's wand. Harry bit his lip, trying to maintain concentration, but had to give up after a couple of seconds.

"I can't keep it going for very long, but—"

The expression on Lupin's face was priceless. He seemed to have turned into a stone statue and was staring at the place the stag had vanished from with eyes round from shock.

"Um, Professor?"

"That was—amazing, Harry. That you're capable of—it's very advanced magic, I'm—"

"Well, I have been practicing all the time for the last two months," Harry pointed out. "Besides, I don't know what I'll be able to do against a Dementor. Maybe this is useless."
"Oh no!" Lupin came to life abruptly. He looked almost proud as he gazed at Harry. "It's not useless! It's fantastic that you have that sort of focus and concentration—it means you've already mastered that part. It's going to be very different with a Dementor, but I'm convinced you can do it with time, Harry. Just don't get upset if it doesn't happen on the first try."

Harry nodded obediently—and yet, he was very upset when it really did not happen on the first try. He'd hoped, irrationally, that his Patronus would work against a Dementor, but there was only a wisp of white smoke and please not Harry and chocolate once Lupin had helped him get up.

"Really, Harry, don't worry about it," the teacher reassured him. "Half of your job is done—you just need to work at it and eventually you'll get it."

Harry smiled politely and agreed, but he still insisted on practising until Lupin had to pretty much bodily remove him from the Defence classroom.

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"Maybe we should post it somewhere that you're a Slytherin," Neville said darkly. He was still trembling a little from his gran's Howler about forgetting passwords and endangering classmates. "So that Sirius Black would just stop trying to get into Gryffindor."

Harry shot him an incredulous glance.

"And lay siege to the Slytherin dorms instead? Thanks, Nev."

"Personally, I find it quite hilarious," Blaise said, catching up to them in the corridor. "All the Gryffindor blood spilled for nothing…"

Neville blanched.

"There has been no blood." Harry sighed impatiently.

"But Sirius Black did nearly stab Ron Weasley to death—right in our dorm!" Neville protested.

Harry silenced Blaise with a look. He'd learnt that one from Millie. It was a speak-and-you-die-a-painful-death sort of a look, which Harry thought he pulled off rather well.

"Ron is really annoying now, though." Neville continued. "He won't stop talking about the attack and how brave he's been. And he is on Hermione's case for her cat eating his rat—not like it's Hermione's fault. And everyone is angry with me for losing the passwords…" he trailed off miserably.

It sounded like life in Gryffindor was not fun for Neville or Hermione right now.

"Well, at least I should have some time over the weekend to help you with Potions," Harry said, changing the topic drastically.

"Oh good." Neville brightened. "I really can't keep on failing miserably, seeing as it's February already… I don't understand how you can be so good at it."

Harry chose not to mention that he got so good at Potions because of Neville.

"Then again, Professor Snape is not as mean to you as he is to me," Neville added gloomily.

"Well, that's probably because I keep a low profile both in and out of class." Harry shrugged. "Not much to be mean to me for, is there?"
Harry must have jinxed his luck right then, because Snape made him stay back after the Potions lesson, for the first time in his Hogwarts career, the very next day. Apparently, the professor had found out about the private training Harry was getting from Lupin—and he was positively furious.

"First you pull that stunt with Gryffindor's Sword, now you ingratiate yourself with Lupin—some Slytherin you are, Potter!"

Harry, unwisely, tried to argue.

"Sir, I didn't realize it was wrong to come to a teacher with a problem—"

"But of course, you had to choose that teacher, didn't you?" There were twin spots of colour on Snape's sallow cheeks and his black eyes were narrowed in anger. "Out of all the teachers in this school, you turn to that inhuman creature—"

Harry felt that his Head of House was being quite unreasonable.

"With all due respect, sir, he's the Defence professor and I've noticed nothing inhuman about him."

Snape raised an eyebrow. How he managed to make the gesture so malicious Harry didn't know, but he had to contain the urge to step back.

"Well, that's odd, isn't it, Potter? Considering that Lupin is a werewolf." And then, seeing the incredulity on Harry's face: "What, didn't noble Lupin confide in you? How clumsy of me. I seem to have exposed his secret."

Harry was staring at Snape.

"Professor Lupin's—he's not—"

"Don't you try to tell me what he is and what he is not," the Potions master hissed, and this time Harry did actually back away a little. "Haven't you noticed the way Lupin tends to fall conveniently ill during full moon? No? I take it you did not complete the essay on werewolves I'd assigned, Potter? Lupin was in a hurry to cancel that piece of homework, was he not?"

Well, yes, but…

Professor Lupin was so mild-mannered, soft-spoken… a werewolf? Harry would be looking into those lunar charts to see whether they matched Lupin's absences, because he sure as hell wasn't taking Snape at his word.

At the same time—would he really lie about something that was not very hard to check?

Well. If it was true, it might explain why Harry always felt that Lupin was hiding something. What was Dumbledore thinking, if he had indeed hired a werewolf? How did they control him? Who would be answerable if Lupin bit someone despite, Harry was sure, the best of intentions?

"The Headmaster—?"

"Tends to believe in the goodness of humans. Even of those who are not, exactly, human."

Snape's eyes were shadowed as he said that.

Harry felt lost. He wasn't sure he'd be comfortable going back to Lupin's classroom if the teacher actually did turn out to be a werewolf, liable to eat him when the moon turned round, but he was not going to let the lessons stop. Lupin did not seem dangerous, and Harry was getting better and better
at producing a real Patronus with the Boggart Dementor. It had taken him a long while—he’d heard the deaths of his parents from the moment Voldemort had stepped through their door numerous times—and he wasn’t giving up now, after putting himself through that.

"I'm sorry, sir, but my meetings with Professor Lupin are important, even if he might be a..." Harry shook his head.

Werewolf. His Defence professor. Assuming it was true, what was Lupin going to do—give the class a lecture on the best way to kill their teacher?

The Slytherin Head of House observed Harry for a long moment, face obscured by a curtain of greasy hair. Harry tried not to squirm under his heavy gaze.

"Do you, Potter, also share the Gryffindor trust in all and sundry? Do you believe that people are inherently good and nobody can possibly harm you?"

"Of course not, sir."

"Do you agree that Lupin is dangerous?"

Appearances aside...

"He—could be, sir."

"And yet, you are planning to persist in this foolishness," Snape gave an ugly sneer. "Does Lupin feed you cakes, Potter? Does he pat you on the head and listen to your woes? Does he promise to rescue you from evil Slytherins?"

Harry bristled.

"I don't think that Slytherins are evil," he said, gritting his teeth.

And no adult had ever fed him cakes, or patted him on the head, or listened to his woes. So Snape could cut the patronizing act.

"Slytherins are also not witless, which you unfortunately are, Potter. Get out of my sight. You are working with Longbottom again next week."

All in all, Harry was left deeply unsettled by the whole discussion, and not just because he'd found out that his Defence teacher and Patronus tutor was allegedly a werewolf. But this was also the longest conversation Harry had ever had with his Head of House. It provided Harry with a lot to think about—and he decided that it would be prudent to give Professor Snape a wide berth for a while.

The professor had always been annoyingly condescending, antagonistic, and unjust, but that was all right as long as he didn't actively try to harm Harry. Harry was, however, getting the distinct impression that he'd been treading on a knife's edge with the man ever since getting Sorted into Slytherin—and he did not want to lose his balance.

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Hermione was fidgeting. It wasn't in her nature to fidget; when Hermione was in the library, she might mutter under her breath, or scribble something frantically, or sit engrossed in a book—but such a level of distraction was unusual.
Harry sighed and looked around to check that no one was listening. Madam Pince seemed to be preoccupied with sorting several incunabula; no students were in sight.

"Hermione? We're okay, right?"

Hermione gave him an uncertain smile.

"Of course."

They'd had a bit of a falling out last week, when Harry and Neville finally confirmed once and for all that Hermione was using a Time-Turner to get to all her classes. They'd been watching her in Arithmancy and Divination, both of which Hermione attended at the exact same time. In such a situation, it would be easiest for her to slip up. They'd noticed that she occasionally fiddled with something on her neck after one of the classes—but never after both. From there, it was part research, part badgering Hermione, but Neville turned out to have been right all along: Hermione was in possession of a Time-Turner.

("Professor McGonagall got a special permission for me to use one—but it's supposed to be a secret, so don't tell anyone you've figured it out, or I will get in trouble!")

And Harry hadn't meant to have an argument with her about it; it was her business, after all. However, he failed to see what entitled Hermione, out of all the students at Hogwarts, to a Time-Turner—because taking Muggle Studies did not seem like a valid enough reason to be granted one. And his incomprehension was, of course, his own problem and he'd get over it, but then Hermione gave him the I deserved it on my own merits spiel, which did annoy him. Because, yes, Hermione was clever, but she wasn't the only clever student in Hogwarts, and it seemed pretty obvious to Harry that she got the Time-Turner for being a teacher's pet and McGonagall's personal project. Not that there was anything wrong with that; Harry would have agreed to a Time-Turner too, in her place. Hermione, on the other hand, kept insisting that it was already mid-March and she hadn't caused a time paradox yet, which meant that she had to be worthy.

And Harry could not explain to her that causing a time paradox figured very little into why he was peeved, so he left the matter alone.

Things had been strained for a week. Now, when Neville wasn't around to act as a buffer, the elephant in the room was getting increasingly harder to ignore.

"Look, it's not that I'm angry at you for using the Time-Turner. Not at all, really—"

"No, I think I understand," Hermione said, interrupting him. "It's just… I don't like it when you compare me to them."

Harry blinked.

"Them?" he repeated.

"Yes, them. Those Purebloods. It's enough for Malfoy to say his name and he's suddenly somebody without having to do anything to deserve it. I'm not like them, Harry. I work hard for every grade I receive. I don't have a flashy surname—everything I've achieved, I've done it through my own effort."

"Of course," Harry agreed. "Er, but it's not like the Purebloods get good grades just for existing—look at Neville in Potions…"

Hermione waved an impatient hand.
"I don't mean grades, but... the wizarding world is so insular. All the Purebloods know each other, or at least of each other, and if you're not in that circle, you don't mean anything to them. And if you work hard to be acknowledged, like I have, they just scoff at you and tell you you're a know-it-all with mud for blood—I mean, even your friend Zabini can't stand me."

"Blaise doesn't like Muggles or Muggleborns." Harry shrugged. "And I don't think he's right, but you don't seem to like Purebloods, which isn't fair either."

Hermione deflated a little.

"It's not that I don't like Purebloods," she said. "It's foolish, attaching a label like that. Neville is not like Malfoy. At the same time, though—I don't understand them. They seem to speak in code half of the time; it's as if their whole world is an inside joke. Family names are one of those things—even to Neville, even to Ron Weasley, you can say, I don't know, Bulstrode and they will tell you, oh yes, one of those. And if you belong, then you know which those it is, and if you don't, you don't. And everyone knows that you don't know and they treat you as a foreigner of some sort. I mean—do you see what I'm talking about?"

"Yes."

Oh, Harry saw. Maybe it was by virtue of being in Slytherin, but he'd realized this a very long time ago and had learnt to act accordingly.

"Then—" Hermione's eyes were wide, eager. "How do you cope? I mean, if you don't know their secret code either, then how do you blend in so well?"

Harry scrunched up his nose. This was really awkward, but—

"Hermione, they usually forget that I don't know the code." When Hermione didn't seem to catch his meaning, he went on: "I'm the Boy-Who-Lived and a Potter. They take it for granted, a lot of the time, that I would know what they do."

Hermione frowned.

"So really, having a flashy name is the only way to get past the velvet ropes."

"Well, the Purebloods might not accept you into their circle, but being accepted there is not the only way to become a part of this world—"

"I hate it that some people will always see me as a second-class citizen," Hermione said flatly. "But I'm not going to let them intimidate me. I have as much right to be here as they do."

Maybe Harry had been surrounded by Purebloods for much too long, but he could hear Blaise's voice running a counter-argument in his head: excuse me, but we have infinitely more right to be here, since this is our world; take your whining somewhere else if you don't like it. He figured this wasn't the time or the place to play devil's advocate, however.

He wondered, also, whether it wasn't the determination to always stand up for her beliefs that had landed Hermione in Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw. He could definitely see her starting up some sort of a commission for the rights of Muggle-born children one day.

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"Oh, and b'fore yeh go, Harry – look what I've found in me house!"
Harry didn't bother to hide his incomprehension.

"A rat?"

That was special—or hygienic—in what way?

"Not just any rat, Harry, Ron Weasley's rat." Hagrid smiled. "He lost it, yeh see, an' thought yer friend Hermione's cat ate it back in February, an' it's already June—but here it is. You don' mind takin' it back ter him fer me, do yeh?"

Harry did mind, actually—although Ron Weasley had undergone some attitude adjustment in the wake of his sister's trip to the Chamber of Secrets, he and Harry were still not on speaking terms. Or nodding terms, or waving, or greeting-exchanging terms, really.

Hagrid was looking at him expectantly.

"Oh, fine," Harry acquiesced.

"Good of yeh, Harry! Now, off yeh go—it's gettin' close ter curfew!" Hagrid admonished, opening the cabin door. "And thank yeh fer comin' ter see me!"

Harry smiled at Hagrid absentmindedly, trying to keep hold of the squirming rat.

"Bye, Hagrid—do you even want to be taken to your master, you ugly creature?"

The rat squeaked and squirmed some more.

"If you don't quit it, I'll feed you to a snake and say you've run way," Harry told it conversationally. "I'm a Parselmouth. I can call lots of hungry snakes here. I don't really care whether or not Weasley gets you back, you know."

Amazingly enough, that threat actually worked. The rat gave one last terrified squeal and subsided. Harry halted his steps to stare at the rodent. Did he speak some other animal language, like the rat equivalent of Parseltongue? Because this was kind of disturbing.

And then, all of a sudden, Harry felt movement behind him, and something slammed into him, hard.

Harry hit the ground, squeezing the rat tightly in one hand and trying to draw his wand with the other.

What was—?

He turned to see a gigantic black dog looming over him, fangs bared, breath foul—

"Petri—"

The dog jumped out of the way and "—ficus totalus" missed it completely. But while Harry was finishing the incantation, the dog had morphed into a man with a long, gaunt face and filthy hair.

Harry's mouth went dry with fear. This was Sirius Black right next to him, and he aimed his wand—

"Don't look at me like that!" Black demanded, stepping closer still. "I deserve your anger, but Harry, you've got to give Peter to me—you fucking traitor—just give him to me, Harry!" Black snarled, reaching out to Harry.

Harry could hardly understand him, blindsided as he was—
("He was laughing. Laughing, Potter. He was happy he'd betrayed your parents. Your own godfather, Potter, how does that feel—")

Harry's shock was abruptly replaced by fury.

He focused on it, basked in it, channelled it into his wand when he fired the next hex. He was going to kill the bastard—

But Black dodged, again, and he seemed a little impatient now:

"Harry, I won't harm you, you don't believe I'll harm you, just give me fucking Peter!"

And the rat was squirming and the murderer was raving and Harry was shouting:

"I'll kill you, you fucker, Av—"

But Black's own wand was already in his hand. He barked an *Expelliarmus*, sending Harry sprawling again and ripping the wand from his grasp.

"Give me the rat, Harry."

Black's voice sounded oddly sane all of a sudden. Harry looked down dumbly at the rat he was squeezing to death in his left hand.

"You—this rat?"

"Yes, Harry, I want this rat, now give him to me!"

The crazed murderer was aiming Harry's own wand at him. For a moment, Harry just wanted to leap and claw at his face and bite and kick—

("As soon as they performed the Charm, he went to the Dark Lord and spilled the beans. Then—whoops—your parents are dead. Very tragic. Don't you find, Potter?")

"One day, I'll hunt you down and kill you," he snarled, flinging the rat at Black.

The man caught the rodent with a half-giddy, half-vicious expression on his face.

"Fine, kill me, but I get to kill him first," he said, and transformed back into a dog.

Harry's wand fell on the grass, unheeded. Harry dove for it, hoping to fire a spell at the dog's back, but it had already bounded away with its prey between its teeth and disappeared from view behind a large tree.

Harry was left sitting on the ground alone, feeling strangely empty for being so furious still.

He felt like he'd lived a lifetime since Black had attacked him. But he knew that, really, hardly five minutes had gone by. But these five minutes—

Harry clenched his jaw.

He'd dreamt about this moment. He'd fantasized about facing Black and destroying him, incapacitating him and then delivering a speech on how he'd make him suffer and how he hated hated hated loathed him. He'd known Black was a murderer and a Dark wizard from the House of Black, but Harry had defeated a basilisk, managed to scare even some older Slytherins, perfected a corporeal Patronus—something that was beyond many wizards. He'd thought himself capable. He'd
thought that, when the time came, he'd be able to exact revenge, to hold his own, to win, damn it, but it all came to—nothing.

To sitting on the grass with a wooden stick in his hand and listening to the sound of his illusions shattering. None of his lessons had prepared him for this, for looking the murderer of his parents in the eye and realizing that he couldn't do a thing.

"I meant what I said," he whispered brokenly. "I hope you fucking die. And I hope I'll be the one who kills you."

And yet, the words rang hollow. Harry had failed to back them up just a short while ago; instead of a glorious confrontation, there had been a humiliating defeat.

Why, why did it have to be that way?

Because I was a fucking idiot, Harry thought harshly. Gritting his teeth, he swore that he'd never, ever, make the mistake of overestimating himself like that again. He was clearly not good enough to fight Black now, but... Damn it, he would train, and he would prepare, and he would get strong. And then he'd become someone his enemies would fear.

For now, though...

Harry sighed and got up, wincing at his bruises.

He was still alive after a run-in with Sirius Black; that was good. Life did not end here. He'd just have to—face it, like always, suck it up and keep going. No matter how much he wanted to just curl into a ball and pretend none of this had ever happened.

He'd have to tell someone about it, though. He'd report the bloody sighting of Sirius Black; maybe that would help with getting him thrown back into jail. Chances were, it wouldn't, of course.

The school was so awesomely protected that a deranged maniac could get in through all the wards and an army of Dementors. He'd done it several times, in fact. All without getting caught.

Harry stalked towards the castle entrance, fuming afresh.

There were not many people in the Hogwarts halls at this time—it was almost curfew after all—and Harry's legs took him to Lupin's office quite independently of his brain. He stared at the office door for a while and then knocked.

"Harry?"

Professor Lupin looked rather pale and ill, but Harry paid no heed.

"Sirius Black is here," he said without preamble and watched Lupin's face blanch. "He's just attacked me."

"But you are—"

"He's insane," Harry bit out. "He only wanted a rat and then he escaped. He's an Animagus, by the way."

"Come in, Harry—"

"No."

Harry found it very hard to stay within the limits of common politeness. "I just came to tell you that Sirius Black is on Hogwarts grounds. Aren't you going to—"
"Wait, Harry, did you say he wanted a rat?"

Harry scowled.

"Yes."

"Did he say anything about it?"

"Not sure. He kept ranting about some Peter."

Lupin's face went, impossibly, even paler. He seemed to take a couple of moments to compose himself.

"… and tonight of all nights. Holy mother of... Forgive me, Harry, I'm a little out of sorts. Are you sure he said Peter?"

"Yes."

"Well, he might be delusional. It's best to inform Dumbledore in any case. I'll—oh Circe, my potion. I nearly went off—"

Lupin leaned against the doorframe, appearing completely overwhelmed. Harry found that he cared very little for the drama unfolding inside his professor's head.

"I'll go, then."

He left without waiting for permission.

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The rest of the evening passed in a blur for Harry. He avoided other people’s company, dimly feeling it was much better to practise hexes and curses on furniture in an abandoned classroom. He lost track of time but didn’t care; compared to his humiliating defeat at Black’s hands, a detention for breaking curfew was nothing.

Harry didn’t get caught, though. He snuck back to his dormitory when everyone was fast asleep, and tried to calm his racing thoughts. He fell into slumber still concocting plans on how to get better and stronger and better and stronger and—

The next day, Lupin summoned him to his office. Harry went, not knowing what to expect.

Lupin looked exhausted—even worse than last night, which was saying something. He smiled weakly when Harry presented himself at his office.

“Do come in, Harry,” he said, waving towards a chair before his desk. “I’m sure that, after yesterday evening… well, you must have questions. And, it seems, I owe you some answers.”

Feeling somewhat blank, Harry sat and accepted a cup of tea, which smelled of some herbs.

“Answers, Professor?”

Anger and confusion warred within Harry when he recalled last night, but it hadn’t yet occurred to him that Lupin might have an explanation that would make him feel better.

Then again, Lupin didn’t look like a man bursting with good news, so perhaps making Harry feel better was not on the agenda.
“Yes, Harry. I’m afraid I’ve… not been entirely forthright you, not through any ill intentions, I assure you, but…” The teacher sat heavily on his chair behind the desk. “I don’t suppose it matters now. But, after yesterday, there is no more question of shielding you from the unpleasant truth.”

Perhaps this was about making Lupin feel better, then, because so far he was the only one getting anything out of this discussion.

“The first and the most important thing I must say is this: Harry, it seems that we have all been awfully, dreadfully wrong. Sirius Black did not betray your parents.”

A ringing silence followed that statement. Harry stared at Lupin’s face, trying to contain rising hysteria by focusing on which question to ask first.

“Then who did?” he forced out.

“Peter Pettigrew,” Lupin said deliberately, like it was supposed to convey a great meaning.

Harry felt something inside him give.

“What is he? Another relative? My fairy godmother?” he asked, gripping his cup tightly with both hands. “And why do you know about all this anyway? I mean, with all due respect and everything.”

Lupin gave him another sad smile, sighed and launched into a tale that was as warped as anything Harry had ever heard.

Turns out, Lupin had been Harry’s father's best friend, or one of, among Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew. They’d had a grand merry time of it in Gryffindor all together, but something had gone very wrong for them somewhere as Pettigrew had sided with Voldemort and sold them all out. So James Potter had died, Sirius Black had gone to prison for Pettigrew’s crimes, and the traitor had spent a dozen years masquerading as the Weasleys’ rat.

“And where were you, sir, while all of this was happening?” Harry couldn’t help asking.

“Sadly, I was as deceived as everyone else. Deceived—and shattered by the deaths of two of my friends, and the betrayal of another…” Lupin sighed. “I had never—even in my darkest moments—expected such a scenario.”

“But now—”

“Now, everything has changed,” Lupin said. “Sirius—he took no part in the murder of your parents, Harry, but he has now stained his soul with another crime. He escaped from Azkaban with the sole desire to kill Peter—and, Harry, he succeeded, yesterday, after he met you…”

“So Pettigrew is dead?” Harry asked, numb.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Harry asked, eyes narrowed, and Lupin shook his head.

“Sirius succeeded in revenging himself on Peter—but by killing him, he severely damaged his chances of proving his innocence.”

Lupin went on to explain that Dumbledore had shown Pettigrew’s corpse to the Minister, which had only resulted in the Ministry deciding to hush everything up. The charges against Black stood, because Pettigrew’s corpse proved nothing except that he’d been alive for longer than everyone had
thought. Black, having killed him, had escaped into the night, leaving only a note to the effect of *I killed him, but not James and Lily*. Lupin was now planning to search for him.

“What for?” Harry asked.

“Harry,” Lupin said, and his voice seemed to hitch a little. “Please… I know it's going to be difficult after seeing his face all over the newspapers, and it's come as a shock for me too, but Sirius really is innocent of betraying your parents. If he'd only trusted me… if I had only believed in him… I owe him an apology, and he deserves better than the life of a fugitive.”

Did he? Maybe so. But just being told that the man was innocent, and that another was to blame—being told in this abstracted fashion, on top of all the other revelations—it did nothing to soothe Harry’s anger.

Black might have been innocent of the crime he'd been chucked in prison for, but Harry remembered Black's crazed eyes and his own suffocating hatred. The name *Sirius Black* still sent a shiver of loathing down his spine. He knew nothing of Peter Pettigrew; he'd never seen him, never heard of him before today. He had no face to attach to the name—no features to hate. But he’d seen Black, and the man had seen Harry at his weakest; had reduced Harry to his weakest.

No. No matter what Lupin said, Harry could not forgive Sirius Black. He wasn't even sure he wanted to try.

“He’s your godfather, you know, Harry,” Lupin said.

“Yes,” Harry said. “I do know that.”

Not that he saw how that was relevant. Black hadn’t escaped from Azkaban out of godfatherly feelings, after all. It was all to kill Pettigrew, apparently—Harry must have been less than an afterthought to him.

Lupin drew his eyebrows.

“You are angry,” he observed calmly.

Oh yeah, Harry was angry. He was angry with Black, and with Lupin, and with Pettigrew, and with himself, and with James Potter, who’d had such a shit taste in friends. A werewolf, a murderer and a traitor. And now Lupin was sitting here, staring at Harry with those understanding eyes, as if he had any right to counsel Harry in anything. He'd given that up when he'd decided to spend the year hiding his friendship with James Potter.

Harry didn’t need adults, or trusted authority figures, or anything. He was fine. But it stung nonetheless that Lupin hadn’t even made a token effort to get to know him, or to tell him anything about his dad. Not even during their Patronus lessons every week. Lupin had been the only one of James Potter's former friends still alive, and free; and he’d never as much as contacted Harry. He’d never cared, whatever he might be indicating now. So—no. Harry wasn’t buying this brand of kindness.

And none of Lupin’s subsequent words managed to convinced him otherwise.

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"Parvati and I are definitely going to the World Cup this summer. I mean, how often is it held in Britain?" Padma said, sitting down in their compartment on the Hogwarts Express. "Not that I care that much about Quidditch, but…"
"Indeed. Not a very intellectual sport, is it?" Blaise raised an eyebrow.

"The fact I'm very clever doesn't mean I don't have fun," Padma huffed and eyed Hermione. "Unlike some people, of course."

Hermione raised her chin high.

"I'll have you know I've passed every single class on offer this year with top marks and balanced it well with my social life."

"Does helping Longbottom with homework really count as social life?" Millie asked.

"Oh, lay off Longbottom, Millie," Blaise drawled. "He can't help being stuck in Gryffindor. I'm sure we'd make a decent human being out of him in Slytherin."

"No Longbottoms have been in Slytherin for centuries," Neville said mildly.

Harry was only half-listening to his friends' banter. His mind was still on the conversation with Lupin, and on everything that had not been said. Coming clean with him was all well and good, but firstly, Harry wasn't sure there weren't more secrets hiding behind Lupin's amber eyes—the man had not, after all, seen fit to mention the fact that he was a werewolf—and secondly, Harry felt that this openness had come much too late. Lupin's story was the first time any adult had officially told Harry of the whole deal with the Fidelius and the Secret Keepers and the like. Who'd thought it was a good idea to keep him in the dark? Lupin? Dumbledore? Who?

And it had grated on him to hear Lupin talk of how everyone had doted on Harry when he was little, and how glad he was to see Harry again. And Harry hadn't necessarily wanted to hear about how different he apparently was from his dad.

("I'd never expected you to be—you are so unlike James. Not just because you're a Slytherin, but you're more serious than he ever was and—")

Of course, Lupin had said that Harry's dad would be proud of him. Of his determination, maturity, success with the Patronus Charm… But what did all this mean, in the end?

"Harry, seriously, wake up!"

Harry shook his head and saw that his friends were staring at him in amusement.

"I—sorry, guys. Spaced out for a bit. You were saying?"

"I was saying that we should try to meet up over the summer," Padma said, rolling her eyes. "And—oh, the food cart should be here soon! I'm craving chocolate!"

"I'm not paying for you again," Harry said firmly.

"Why not?" Padma asked, batting her eyelashes.

Hermione looked at that display with disapproval.

"Your love for chocolate could drive the House of Potter into destitution," Harry told Padma.

"Yep, the goblins will kick you out of Gringotts and laugh at your misery." Blaise nodded happily. "And then the Meliflua family will prevail in their feud against the Potters."

"You know the Melifluas have died out, Blaise," Harry countered. "Even in poverty, the Potters
shall triumph."

"Why does this sound familiar?" Neville wondered, wrinkling his forehead.

"That would be because Harfang Longbottom killed the last Meliflua in battle." Blaise rolled his eyes.

"How do you know?" Neville asked, surprised.

"Zabini here is an aspiring historian," Millie said drily.

"Hey, history is interesting!" Blaise protested.

Everyone stared at him; even Hermione looked sceptical.

"Well, not the way Binns tells it, but it really is. You're just a bunch of illiterate morons."

Hermione made an indignant noise, but it drowned in the cacophony of arguments. Neville was saying something about his gran and interest in Herbology, Padma was claiming a long string of very literate Ravenclaws in her ancestry, and Millie was explaining why Blaise would die alone and eaten by werewolves.

Harry sat back, smiled and felt, for a fleeting moment, at peace.

-End of year three-
Harry sat on the cold tile floor of the Dursleys' bathroom and contemplated his life. Well, maybe not his entire life, but he did wonder whether he should embrace the toilet bowl again and attempt to expel the remains of his most recent nightmare by forcing them up his throat. Harry had had his share of freaky dreams—it tended to happen if you came into contact with basilisks, murderers and Dementors—but this one, this one took the fucking cake.

("Let the innocent blood flow... let life be exchanged for life... let the sacrifice take true hold...")

Harry heard distant chanting and his vision cleared only gradually; when it had, he found that he was looking at the world from a really strange perspective: he seemed to be small and held reverently in someone's arms. Harry knew this man. He'd done everything right; he'd done the ritual right, for Harry was here now, breathing in a corporeal body once again. He felt his body was disproportionate; the head was too large and the arms and legs were much too small, and his skin was blackened and shrivelled, and he was probably hideous. Harry gave a cold smile. Physical beauty was something that had ceased to matter to him a long time ago; power, on the other hand, was everything.

("You have done well, my faithful... Show me. Did you have to hold her under the Imperius?")

Harry was turned around in the arms of the man who was holding him, so that he could observe his surroundings. A little distance away, in a circle of rune-marked stones, lay a woman. Harry knew who she was, too; she had been foolish enough to venture too close to where he had dwelled—she had been unable to guard her secrets. And secrets she had held, some beautiful, powerful secrets. She could not have been allowed to keep them; Harry'd had to know everything. Her mind was left broken, of course, but he had only needed her body. A broken mind was vulnerable to possession... She was still there somewhere, inside that thick skull of hers. How far she had come from the nosy, infuriating female she had once been! Lying there, naked, in a pool of blood, her own and sacrificial, her face locked into an expression of utmost agony.

("No, my faithful, I forbid you to kill her... She is not entirely useless. Bertha will serve me yet... someone has to tend to me while you are away on your mission...")

Harry preferred her like this, an empty-minded marionette. No doubt, if she could, she would have struggled against being a host to Harry as he'd travelled to the land where he'd once failed. She was but a vessel; Harry was not interested in her little tantrums. She had served her purpose: her womb and the seed within had been used in the darkest of magics. Unborn children had no minds to speak of; possessing, warping, twisting, owning—all a matter of a brief, nigh inexistent struggle and then death; for one that dies, another one shall live, for the one with the power to survive, to crush another's soul shall triumph. Harry would triumph; Harry would always triumph, for his power was unparalleled...

... All in all, it was not surprising that the first thing Harry did upon waking up was stagger into the bathroom and throw up. Afterwards, he collapsed on the cool tile floor and tried to catch his breath. He was covered in sweat and his scar was on fire, and he really, really wanted to forget his fucked-up nightmare and pretend that his subconscious had not come up with a bloodbath and a sacrificial altar and a horribly abused woman and the enjoyment that he'd felt from it all. When he was awake, Harry found absolutely no pleasure in the thought of other people's pain; he was not a sadist. And the idea of himself as spirit possessing a woman's womb, being born again as a hideous talking infant and tearing the woman's insides apart in the process made him want to hurl again.
Harry would not be going back to sleep that night; in fact, he'd rather not venture too far away from the bathroom.

***

A month later, Harry and Neville sat at the breakfast table in the Longbottom Manor and tried to digest the news of the violence at the Quidditch World Cup. Neville's hand trembled as he put the Daily Prophet down and Harry sighed, feeling deeply unsettled too. Over the past few years, he had got so used to viewing the wizarding daily as a highly dubious source, that when it reported a Death Eater march at the World Cup, he'd at first thought it a mistake. Or a hoax. Or a delusion—there had to be a lot of deluded people in the government for the likes of Malfoy's dad to have them wrapped around his finger.

And yet, Harry had the odd gut feeling of something sinister stirring in the shadows; as if there was a puzzle being laid out and he was failing to decipher its design.

"Bet you're glad now that you're not at the Cup, though," Neville said in a transparent attempt at lightening the atmosphere.

Harry snorted. It did not sound particularly dignified—Nott's comments about decorum and purging your inner Muggle came to mind—but Harry didn't care. As a matter of fact, even if Dumbledore’s fears did appear to be justified, he still resented the old man's interference.

He'd been really looking forward to the World Cup, and to hanging out with Blaise and Millie and Padma and the others. Except Dumbledore had sent him a letter, ever so politely urging him to decline such offers for reasons of safety. Which probably meant that Dumbledore didn’t want him going about unsupervised, again.

Harry could probably have gone anyway, except then he’d have had to deal with Dumbledore’s displeasure, and, well. If the confrontation with Sirius Black had taught him anything, it was to prepare for battle before you jumped into one.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

Neville waved his hand at the newspaper.

"I have a really bad feeling about this."

"I'm sure everyone has a bad feeling about this," Harry pointed out reasonably. "Well, except for the Death Eaters."

Neville frowned at him.

"You could be a little less flippant, you know. It's serious. If the Death Eaters are regrouping—"

"—they might start doing evil shit, yeah. Seems like they've begun already—juggling Muggles in the air? That's sick."

"Yes, it is," Neville agreed. "And just... please don't talk about Death Eaters lightly. It's not something you can joke about."
"Sorry." Harry sighed.

He supposed he and Neville had different coping mechanisms. Any mention of the Death Eaters or the war would plunge Neville into a solemn mood—which was not a surprise, considering that his parents were confined to St. Mungo's as a result of some permanent injury inflicted by Voldemort's servants. Harry was not clear on the details, but he knew that Neville went to see his parents sometimes and that their situation pained him greatly. Harry... well, he'd learnt that being open about your emotions would not necessarily bring you sympathy. Admitting to a sensitive topic in Slytherin amounted to inviting people to hit you where it hurt.

("Sirius Black was your parents' Secret Keeper, Potter. As soon as they performed the Charm, he went to the Dark Lord and spilled the beans. Then—whoops—your parents are dead. Very tragic. Don't you find?")

Of course, it helped if you could have the offender conveniently silenced by Parseltongue-activated furniture: even though the Slytherins were aware that Sirius Black was a painful subject for Harry, the man had gone unmentioned ever since that incident with Malfoy. However, Harry was still uncomfortable just thinking back to that day because, hello, he'd nearly strangled a classmate—he'd really rather never have a repeat of that. Controlling his emotions and not letting them rule him was something Harry had resolved to work on ever since his disastrous confrontation with Sirius Black. He winced just thinking of that encounter.

("One day, I'll hunt you down and kill you.")

God, just how melodramatic could he make himself sound? No wonder Sirius Black hadn't been impressed.

Either way, Harry's revengeful statements couldn't amount to much, since the man was innocent of the crimes he'd been accused of. Not that Harry felt Black was innocent. He knew it, intellectually—in retrospect, Black's behaviour all throughout the year made much more sense if he'd been trying to kill Ron Weasley's rat and not Harry. Besides, there had been Peter Pettigrew's corpse to prove Black's claims. All the same, Harry now wished he'd have requested to see that blasted corpse, because he had no image in his head to attach to the real murderer and instead only Sirius Black's deranged expression kept popping up, even three months later.

And it was a highly unpleasant memory. Harry didn't know whom he was angrier with, Black or himself, but he'd still not made his peace with the defeat at the man's hands.

And... yeah, he was probably being immature about this, but he had yet to tell any of his friends about Black's innocence. He should, really. And he would. Soon. However, telling them about it would involve bringing up Harry's inability to defend himself when confronted by Black, and he wasn't ready to talk about it until he'd worked through it in his own mind. He could already imagine Hermione going, Didn't I tell you to study more, and Blaise making fun of his failure, and Millie's disdain.

Fine, it would all be well deserved. Knowing it didn't mean he wanted to hear it from others in the immediate future.

And at least he was striving to do better now; instead of sulking, as he might have done last year, he channelled his frustration into the spells he practised in solitude for most of the day. It was great to be in a magical household: the Ministry could not detect who was performing magic, adult wizards or underage kids with the Trace on them. Harry took full advantage of that loophole to go through the book of rather nasty hexes that Blaise had sent him for his birthday. Harry had recognized straight from leafing through the book that Neville was not going to like the content—most spells seemed to
be... questionable and certainly not in the Hogwarts curriculum. Therefore, he had decided that what Neville didn't know couldn't hurt him and disguised the cover as a monograph on the depiction of Animagi in Pushkin's *Tale of Tsar Saltan*. He'd spotted that book in the library at the Longbottom Manor and figured that, while Neville might find it strange that Harry was interested in such a title, at least he'd hardly open the book himself—so Harry's studies would fly under the radar.

Neville, in the meantime, retreated to the greenhouses. By silent agreement, they both decided to give each other some space to digest the morning's news, as to avoid taking out their moods on one another.

***

Hogwarts welcomed Harry back with the usual start-of-term bustle, the surprise announcement of the Triwizard Tournament, and the introduction of a new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Two weeks later, most Slytherins still fervently wished that the post had been filled by someone, anyone else than Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody.

"Who wants to go first? You, Malfoy. We'll start with you. Your father's told you all about what it's like, hasn't he?" Moody gave a really unpleasant smile and watched with keen eyes, both normal and magical, for his target's reaction.

Malfoy was pale and almost shaking from anger; Nott wasn't in a much better state; Crabbe and Goyle were unperturbed only because they lacked the basic brain capacity to process most of Moody's insinuations. In their first Defence class with Moody two weeks ago, Harry had been amazed as he watched Moody tear into the kids with suspected Death Eater ties. Perhaps it should have been expected—Moody's reputation for hating Dark wizards was legendary and his arrival had caused quite a stir in Slytherin—but Harry had still not believed it would be quite this bad. And now, Moody was going to cast the Imperius Curse on all of them in turn, with Dumbledore's approval, and Harry was sure he wouldn't make it easy. Moody quite revelled in seeing Malfoy, in particular, taken down a peg.

This was like—being a Gryffindor in Snape's class, or something.

"Now, stand up, boy. Imperio!"

Harry cringed inwardly, watching Malfoy impersonate a ferret. This behaviour looked even worse when juxtaposed with Malfoy's perfectly groomed hair and neatly pressed robes. Pansy was biting her lip in frustration as she watched; when her turn came, she was overcome by the urge to clean. For someone who had probably never dusted once in her life, she did a mean job cleaning the blackboard with her silken handkerchief. Blaise shot an extremely alarmed look at Harry when Moody called for Zabini and then, eyes vacant, proceeded to dance a spirited jig. Tracey Davis followed right after with an attempt to fly, using her book bag as a magic carpet. Theodore Nott did cartwheels, while Daphne Greengrass recited some wizarding nursery rhymes.

Well, at least everyone got to look like idiots together.

"Potter! Let's see how fare. Imperio!"

Immediately, Harry was filled with a nice floating feeling. All his worries seemed to sink into the background; there was no need to trouble himself with thinking. Now, if he only listened to the friendly voice in his head that told him to sing the Hogwarts school song, everything would be absolutely perfect. Harry had already opened his mouth, ready to start, when he was stopped by a
vague feeling that he did not, actually, want to sing right now. The voice got more insistent: *sing,* it demanded. But the more Harry considered it, the less he felt like complying. The happy, careless feeling was dissipating, too; he was getting the impression that not everything was entirely right with that voice. Suddenly, the pressure increased, and the voice's commands got uncompromising; unable in equal parts to obey and to resist, Harry ended up opening his mouth and croaking against his will about hoggy warty Hogwarts for a few moments.

Then the spell lifted. The fog cleared immediately; Harry was left faintly disoriented and somewhat embarrassed.

"That's more like it!" Moody said, looking almost intrigued. "Potter fought the curse! Let's try again, then, laddie."

Moody kept casting the Imperius on Harry until Harry had finally managed to throw it off. It had *not* been a pleasant experience and he had a couple of bruises to prove it—aborting a movement mid-leap was never a good idea. Harry had also discovered that it was more difficult to resist the curse if it did not demand anything too outrageous from him. He'd had more trouble, for example, defying the command to simply sit down at his desk, than one to come up to Daphne Greengrass and declare his undying love for her. His subconscious knew full well that he didn't love Daphne Greengrass and did not want to confess to her; sitting down, on the other hand, didn't sound like a bad idea.

Being able to throw off the Imperius Curse was pretty damn neat, though.

Once the class ended, everyone filed out, a little subdued. Blaise and Millie exited with Harry, probing him for tips on resisting the Imperius. Daphne and Tracy smiled at Harry as they passed by; Malfoy, on the other hand, was still fuming. He walked next to Parkinson and Nott, conversing with them in hushed tones. Malfoy and Nott seemed to experience greater mutual understanding after Moody's classes then ever; normally, Nott, just like Greengrass and Davis, held back from joining either Harry or Malfoy's groups.

"Watch where you're going, Weasley!"

Harry turned from his conversation with Millie to see Malfoy snarling at Ron Weasley, who seemed nonplussed by the sudden attack. It figured—Malfoy would be looking for someone to take his anger out on, and who better than a conveniently available Weasley?

"I didn't even do anything, you sleazeball!" Ron cried, affronted.

"You exist, Weasley, that's more than enough."

They were blocking the hallway. Well, Crabbe and Goyle were doing most of the blocking; Malfoy just sort of tried to loom over Ron Weasley. Of course, none of Harry's classmates were going to intervene: Parkinson and Nott approved, Tracey and Daphne wouldn't dare try to take Malfoy's favourite chew toy away, and Blaise and Millie were clearly planning to let Harry handle it. Harry sighed.

"Does this have to happen here and now?" he interjected, coming to a stop near Malfoy. "Don't take it wrong, Weasley, I'm charmed to see you—"

"Yeah, well, I'd just rather you went and stuck your head in the toilet," Ron replied, making a disgusted face.

"Too bad no one cares what you want, Weasley," Malfoy sneered.
"Besides, you're blocking the hallway, so I can't exactly go anywhere," Harry said. "So how about everyone gets moving?"

"I didn't even start this!" Weasley sputtered indignantly. "Tell your friend Malfoy to stop being a jerk!"

With effort, Harry held back from snorting at the ridiculous suggestion that he and Malfoy were friends. They had Slytherin public unity to blame for that misconception of Weasley's part, but Harry hadn't even explained the intricacies of Slytherin politics to Neville and Hermione, so he definitely wasn't going to start reassuring Weasley. Apart from which, anyone with two eyes should have been able to see by now that Harry and Malfoy hung out with different groups of people, which was not exactly how best friends acted.

"—waste of my time," Malfoy concluded. Harry hadn't caught the beginning, but figured he wasn't missing much. "Vince, Greg, let's go."

Now that Malfoy had told his pet Neanderthals to stand down, traffic in the corridor resumed; Harry waved to Neville and Hermione as he walked past, hurrying to the next class.

"I'm so looking forward to seeing the Skrewts again, aren't you?" Blaise said brightly.

"Oh yes," Harry agreed. "They make my days worth living."

"Do you think Warrington will actually try to enter the Triwizard Tournament?" Millie asked, changing the topic.

Harry shrugged.

"He said he might. I don't speak to him much outside of Quidditch, and there's none of that this year."

"I'd rather support Warrington than Diggory," Millicent said, scowling.

"Cedric isn't bad."

"He's a Hufflepuff."

"Millie, Harry's made us hang out with a Mudblood," Blaise uttered dramatically. "What makes you think he'll draw the line at Hufflepuffs?"

What, indeed.

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Harry was looking at the freshly arrived Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students in interest, wondering where they would sit. The Durmstrang lot seemed better adjusted to Scottish weather than the Beauxbatons students in their silk uniforms—but then again, the Durmstrang ones were wearing fur. That had to be pretty damn warm. Harry's gaze kept wandering to a really tall and beautiful Beauxbatons girl with long blonde hair—he was quite sure he'd never seen anyone so attractive. She didn't seem too thrilled to be at Hogwarts, though; while the Durmstrang lot appeared impressed by the enchanted ceiling and golden dishes, the girl kept gossiping with her friends and wrinkling her nose in distaste.
Lost in his contemplation of the beautiful French girl, Harry almost missed it when the Durmstrang students approached the Slytherin table, choosing to sit there.

"Hello, I am Draco Malfoy," Malfoy said, leaning over from his seat to extend a hand to Viktor Krum. The blond looked positively delighted to have the Durmstrang people at their table. "I hope you enjoy your stay at Hogwarts."

Harry observed in interest. From what he'd heard about Krum, he was an exceptional Seeker. He'd caught the Snitch at the Quidditch World Cup finals, too; had Harry gone, he would have seen Krum in action. Up close, the guy did not look handsome enough to justify the way girls all over the hall were sighing over him—he had a large nose, thick eyebrows and a rather awkward manner to move for someone reportedly fluid in the air.

"Hello," Krum replied, shaking Malfoy's hand. "I am Viktor Krum. It is very good to be at Hogwarts." He turned to look at Harry. "And you are Harry Potter?"

"Yes." Harry smiled at the expression on Malfoy's face—impotent fury mixed with jealousy. "It's nice to meet you too. I didn't realize you were still at school, to be honest."

Krum nodded.

"Many people do not," he answered. Everything he said came out in a rather serious, gravelly voice, but Harry was pretty sure the accent was to blame for that. "I miss a lot of classes. At Durmstrang, they make special agreement for me."

The conversation then turned to how the Durmstrang students were going to keep studying while away from school, what they thought of Hogwarts and how they expected the Tournament to go. Overall, they seemed like a somewhat reserved lot, and Krum gave the impression of being a sensible guy. The way he remained utterly unimpressed with Malfoy's fawning earned him major bonus points with Harry—and besides, much like Harry himself, he did not seem to enjoy flaunting his fame.

Once everyone had eaten, Dumbledore got up and unveiled the impartial judge that would select the future Triwizard champions—the Goblet of Fire.

"Those students who wish to enter the Tournament should write their name on a slip of paper and put it into the Goblet, which will be active from now on and until tomorrow evening." Dumbledore made a pause as excited murmurs swept through the hall. "I implore you, however, to be very sure that you wish to enter, for there can be no chance for reconsideration once your name is selected. Furthermore, I shall draw an Age Line around the Goblet, so as to prevent anyone under the age of seventeen from circumventing the age restriction."

Dumbledore seemed to be looking at the Weasley twins as he said that; Harry could see them conversing urgently at the Gryffindor table, probably thinking up ways to hoodwink the Age Line. At the Slytherin table, too, conversation became more agitated—the Durmstrang students talked to each other in a language Harry couldn't identify, while the discussion in English centred on who would put their names in and who could possibly become the Hogwarts champion. Malfoy, predictably, boasted that he could easily enter the Tournament if he wished to do so, only to be reminded of his place by Charles Warrington's supporters and Lavinia Yaxley's group of seventh years. Blaise went against popular opinion and called the Tournament an assisted suicide.

Harry wondered how on earth the Goblet would be able to determine, knowing only a person's name, whether they were good enough—never mind what it would read the names with. Magic worked in odd, odd ways, as the wizarding world never tired of reminding him.
Anyway, by this time tomorrow, the speculation would end—they'd know the names of all three champions.

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The fourth slip of paper flew out of the Goblet amid dead silence.

"Harry Potter," Dumbledore read out, frowning—and the Hall hushed, and everyone stared at Harry, and Harry felt his smile for Cedric's success freeze on his face.

"Harry, go," Millicent hissed in his ear.

So he went. Up between the tables of gossiping students, under the scrutiny of kids, teachers and guests. Even Hagrid wasn't smiling at him. Harry walked out of the Great Hall and into the small adjacent room completely on autopilot. He knew he had to keep moving; he knew he couldn't look weak; but damn if he wasn't feeling numb with shock. How could he possibly be another champion? There were meant to be three, as in Triwizard Tournament, not—Quatriwizard or whatever. And it was dangerous—only seventeen-year-olds were allowed to enter, what chances would Harry have?

And now he stood at the entrance to the champions' room, staring at Cedric Diggory, Fleur Delacour and Viktor Krum—the true champions. The ones who had volunteered for this shit.

"Harry?" Cedric asked, concerned, and Harry shook himself inwardly. He needed to keep it together, here, if he wanted to get out of this somehow.

"Hey," Harry said, trying out his voice for the first time since Dumbledore's announcement.

"What is it?" Fleur Delacour asked, flipping her hair back. For once, her beauty did not distract Harry. "Do zey want us back in ze 'All?"

"It's a bit more complicated," Harry forced out.

"Vat—" Krum started, but he was interrupted by one of the Tournament officials bursting into the room.

"Extraordinary!" the tall heavyset man cried in evident excitement, grabbing Harry's arm. "Absolutely extraordinary!"

"Not extraordinary as much as illegal," Harry hissed, freeing himself.

"Illegal?" The man's eyes widened.

"I'm fourteen, in case you didn't know—this Tournament is for those over seventeen, so I can't possibly compete!"

"Compete?" the French girl repeated, frowning.

"Harry, what's going on?" Cedric asked, in his usual conciliatory manner, although he too sounded unnerved.

"What's going on is that my name came out of the bloody Goblet," Harry snapped, eyes trained on the Tournament official who'd begun looking somewhat uncomfortable under Harry's glare. "Will you maybe explain to me how that happened, Mr... whoever you are?"
"Ludo Bagman." The man went with answering the easier question. "Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

At that moment, the door from the Great Hall opened again to let in a new group of people: Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Durmstrang's Headmaster Karkaroff, Beauxbatons' Headmistress Madame Maxime, and a zombie-looking Ministry official. A shouting match between the adults ensued which would have been entertaining under other circumstances. Harry's input was only required once—to state that he had not put his name in the Goblet—but even that was perfunctory: none of these adults had really expected him to say yes. While Madame Maxime and Karkaroff were ranting at a serene Dumbledore, Harry exchanged glances with Cedric.

"I'd say I'm sorry about this, except that I'm mostly mad," Harry said quietly.

"I take it you didn't put your name in the Goblet?" The older boy frowned.

Harry shot him a dirty look.

"Why the hell would I want to?"

"Because being a Triwizard champion is about the hottest thing you can be this year?"

Point.

"Hate to remind you, but I'm the Boy-Who-Lived. I don't need to look for ways to make myself even more exciting. Seriously—do I look like someone who wants to compete in this stupid Tournament?"

Cedric considered Harry carefully. He seemed to be genuinely trying to figure out whether Harry had put his name in the Goblet, which made Harry feel a little sick—if Cedric, who'd known him a while, was not sure he could trust him, what would the rest of the school think?

"This is going to be the Heir of Slytherin all over again, isn't it," Harry muttered, resigned.

Cedric gave him a tight smile.

"We'll figure something out. And we'll certainly not let it get that far."

Harry glanced at Cedric—did that mean that Cedric believed him?—but their attention was diverted by Karkaroff finally posing a relevant question:

"Mr. Crouch, Mr. Bagman, as our—er—objective judges, you can tell us—surely, letting a fourth champion compete goes most grievously against the Tournament rules?"

Bagman wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and looked to the other man, Mr. Crouch, for assistance.

"The rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the Tournament," Crouch intoned.

Harry's heart plummeted.

"I didn't sign up for this," he said firmly and loudly, attracting everyone's notice for the first time. "There's no way you can force me to compete."

"Mr. Potter—"
"Look, it's not fair to me, it's not fair to Cedric, and it's not fair to Durmstrang and Beauxbatons! Everyone will be better off if you don't include me in this—"

"Ze boy is right," Madame Maxime acknowledged from her impressive height.

"I demand that the Goblet is taken out again and my students are allowed to re-submit their names," Karkaroff insisted. "If the Potter boy gets to participate, my school should get two champions as well—"

"I've just said I'm not going to compete!"

"I'm afraid you must, Harry." Dumbledore said solemnly. "From the moment your name came out of the Goblet of Fire, you have entered into a magically binding contract—"

"Oh really? Thanks, that's hugely reassuring—"

"Potter!" Snape growled. "Enough of your cheek."

Harry rolled his eyes. Dumbledore sent him a reproachful glance—but, really, what had he been expecting?

"This is ridiculous," Karkaroff hissed. "I have half a mind to leave now!"

"Empty threat, Karkaroff," Moody's voice said from the doorway.

Harry noticed the way the Durmstrang Headmaster tensed up at once. Snape, too, seemed quite uncomfortable in Moody's presence.

Moody then proceeded to unveil his accusation that someone was trying to endanger Harry by forcing him to participate in the Tournament. It was all a bit too much to process at the moment, but Harry filed the idea away for later consideration.

"Well, I say we give the champions their instructions for the first task!" Ludo Bagman cried jovially, rubbing his palms together. It was as if this situation didn't faze the guy at all. "Barty, want to do the honours?"

Harry listened as the aloof Ministry official, Barty Crouch, related the rules for the first task. Fighting the unknown didn't seem like a good idea to Harry, so he resolved to find out as much as possible about the challenge in advance. People started leaving soon after Crouch was done; Fleur Delacour departed with Madame Maxime and Krum with Karkaroff, all of them looking highly dissatisfied still. Dumbledore had only had time to say: "Harry, Cedric, I suggest that you go up to bed," before Professor Snape interrupted him:

"Actually, I want Potter to come with me."

Snape looked well and truly furious. His dark eyes glittered with anger and his lips were opened in a half-snarl, revealing an uneven row of yellowing teeth; all in all, he looked rather frightening, in a rabid-beast-out-of-control sort of way.

"Of course, Severus," Dumbledore replied. "Good night, Harry."

Harry threw a dark glance at Dumbledore—who had the nerve to smile at him in a grandfatherly fashion—and nodded to Cedric in farewell.

_Bye, Cedric. It was nice knowing you. Too bad my Head of House is about to kill me dead._
Professor Snape had, however, waited until his office to start on Harry.

"Now, Potter. Do enlighten me: what on earth possessed you to put your name in the Goblet of Fire?"

Harry frowned, refusing to flinch away from the professor's heavy glare.

"I didn't put it in."

Snape's eyes bore into Harry's relentlessly, as if the man expected to dig the truth out of Harry's skull that way.

"I didn't put my name in the Goblet."

More of that accusing, penetrating stare.

"I honestly didn't! Why would I want to, I don't know enough to compete, I'm just beginning my fourth year, I know I can't do this—"

He was not having a breakdown in front of Snape. He was not doing this right now. Not here.

Harry averted his eyes and took a few deep breaths. The disgusting-looking something in jars on the shelves of Snape's office did not make him feel at all better.

When he glanced back at his Head of House, the man was surveying him with a frown.

"Very well, Potter. Perhaps you did not put your name in the Goblet."

Harry didn't think he was successful in concealing his amazement, but at least he'd managed not to gape. Did Snape, the man who'd always really disliked him, just say that he believed Harry?

"However—" And here the Potions master's look turned menacing once again. "—this means that somebody else submitted your name, probably under a fourth school, making sure that you would be selected. Now, this might be a case of hero-worship for the Boy-Who-Lived—" Snape's lip curled in a sneer. "—or that paranoid maniac Moody might be right. It is possible that someone entered your name in full awareness that you cannot be expected to compete based on your current skills. Does that bode well for you, Potter?"

Harry's mouth was dry.

"No, sir."

"Indeed. The Triwizard Tournament is not as dangerous as it used to be in the bygone days, but accidents can still happen. Especially since none of the tasks are to be conducted in a particularly controlled environment. Do you understand what I'm telling you, Potter?"

_That I'm toast._

"I have to be careful, sir."

"You have to be more than careful, you imbecile. Someone in this school possibly wishes you enough harm to guarantee that you risk your life thrice before the school year is over. Be on guard at all times, Potter—or else be prepared to suffer the consequences."

Harry nodded, dully gazing at the stone floor of Snape's office. If Snape of all people was warning him, the situation had to be pretty dire indeed.
When Harry returned to the Slytherin common room, a jubilant atmosphere greeted him. A great many students were milling about, gossiping excitedly and drinking butterbeer; a large poster of a roaring snake swallowing a cup labelled as *Triwizard* adorned one of the walls. The mood and the décor left no doubt as to the fact that most of the House was quite enthusiastic about one of their own participating in the Tournament. The younger kids appeared to be particularly thrilled, while some of the older students sulked around the corners of the room, watching the celebration disapprovingly. Malfoy was, predictably, one of them, but he and Warrington were the only members of Quidditch team who did not come up to Harry once he'd entered.

("Didn't know you had it in you, Potter—good job, so how did you get past the Age Line?")

Harry tried to protest that he hadn't put his name into the Goblet, but all he got in return were winks and meaningful looks. They accepted his denial as a perfunctory attempt to maintain his innocence and avoid getting in trouble; in this regard, they hadn't really expected him to confess. Still, the Slytherins did not seem to entertain, even for a moment, the idea that Harry had not entered himself into the Tournament. Most seemed to approve; some did not. Charles Warrington was nursing his injured pride—a measly fourth year had managed to get into the Tournament where he'd failed. Popular seventh year girl Lavinia Yaxley sneered and said that Harry was bound to get crushed in the Tournament and bring disgrace to Slytherin. Malfoy sided with her, insofar as she let him, but mostly just vented his anger at anyone who would listen. On the other hand, influential sixth years Miles Bletchley, Edward Montague and a few of their friends—both from the Quidditch team and beyond—had chosen to support Harry and offered their help in making sure that he'd do well in the Tournament.

("Cause you might have been able to get yourself into the Tournament, but there's no way you're good enough for those tasks, so don't get a big head.")

Harry could not put into words how far he was from getting a big head about this. The offer of help surprised him greatly; fair enough, the Quidditch guys had sometimes taught him a spell or two here and there, but they'd never taken a real interest in him. He'd be almost touched if he didn't know that they were only offering to make sure that the Slytherin champion wouldn't suffer a humiliating loss. Whatever their motivations, though, Harry wasn't going to refuse. Well, his initial reflex had been to say *no, thanks*, because he'd always tried to deal with his problems by himself—but doing so would be really stupid, here. Harry knew he wasn't skilled enough yet and hadn't he decided, last year, that he'd try his best to get better? Here was the perfect opportunity; if not for the Triwizard Tournament, the older Slytherins would never have deigned to share their knowledge with him. With their help, he might not only survive the Tournament, but also go a long way to becoming stronger.

There was the silver lining he'd been looking for.

It took Harry a while to get through the throng of curious students and make his way to his couch, where Blaise and Millie were waiting.

"And he returns!" Blaise cried, feigning a fainting fit. "The sun is shining so brightly out of your arse, I can hardly look at your brilliant self!"

"Then don't," Harry advised, wondering what this greeting meant, exactly.

It was always hard to tell with Blaise when he was genuinely angry; he had perfected passive aggression into an art form.
"Mind explaining yourself?" Millie snapped, narrowing her eyes. "I didn't think you wanted to participate in the Tournament."

"I don't," Harry said, ire rising again. "I have no idea how my name ended up in that stupid Goblet."

"Shhh," the upholstery snakes hissed comfortably as he sat down on the couch.

"Of course you don't want to compete," Blaise agreed. "You've never seemed suicidal to me."

Harry frowned at him; he was too wound up for word games.

"Does this mean you believe that I didn't put my name in the Goblet?" he asked bluntly.

"I'll believe anything you say, Harry," Blaise said, putting a hand over his heart.

Millie whacked Blaise on the head with a pillow, disregarding indignant hisses from the snakes. Then again, she didn't know what they were calling her, exactly.

"Stop being such a clown," she demanded. "This is a serious situation. Harry, do you have to compete even if you don't want to?"

"Dumbledore said it's a magically binding contract." Harry scowled. "Whatever that means." A thought suddenly occurred to him. "Wait a second, I'll be right back."

Harry walked swiftly back to the group of sixth year boys, who were now laughing together about something.

"Pucey?" he asked. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Adrian Pucey raised his eyebrows questioningly, but assented and stepped away from the others to speak with Harry.

"What do you want, Potter?"

"Your father works in law, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Do you happen to know anything about binding magical contracts?"

"Getting cold feet about the Tournament already, Potter?" Pucey asked with a smirk.

"So you know it's a binding contract," Harry pressed, ignoring the gibe.

Finding out more about magical law was his primary concern right now. Maybe there was a way to get out of the Tournament or get disqualified or something? He'd research it, of course, but it would be good to get at least basic information on it as soon as possible.

Pucey shrugged.

"Magical contracts are pretty straightforward, actually. What do you already know?"

Harry shook his head, indicating his utter lack of expertise on the subject. He'd never needed to worry about magical contracts before.

"Right." Pucey sighed and sat down on an armrest of the couch they were convening by. "Long
story short: there are two types of contracts. One you can choose to break, the other you can't. The toughest example of the one you can break is the Unbreakable Vow—"

"Er, isn't it called—"

"Unbreakable, yeah, but the name's ironic, because you can fail to fulfil the requirement and then you're dead. See what I mean? There are minor contracts like this—you promise to return five Galleons, or if not, you'll get warts. That sort of thing. So you have a threat hanging over you, but you can choose to back out and suffer the consequences. With me so far?"

"Yeah," Harry said.

"Now, the contracts you can't break actually influence your actions. You will not break them because it's impossible. Singing the Scroll of Secrecy, putting your name in the Goblet of Fire, stuff like that—these contracts won't let you break them and that's that."

"Not let me—how?" Harry asked. He didn't think it sounded very good at all.

Pucey waved an impatient hand.

"I don't know how it works, but their magic—the magic of the Goblet—will make you participate."

"Like the Imperius?" Harry ascertained, because it sounded a lot like mind-control to him.

"No," Pucey replied, looking scandalized. "Of course not. It's just a restriction on your actions and, remember, it's assumed that you agree to this when you put your name in the Goblet. You decide to participate—the Goblet only makes sure you don't chicken out when things get rough."

"In that case, why do I feel like not participating right now?" Harry challenged. "I don't want to compete at all—"

"Didn't you just make plans to train up for the Tournament?" Pucey asked rhetorically. "You won't get out of this, Potter—deal with it. You should have asked these questions before you put your name in the Goblet."

Harry clenched his fists angrily; for the millionth time, he did not choose this!

"Wait a second," he said, suddenly wondering. "How is a magical contract formed? I mean, imagine for a moment that I did not put my name in the Goblet—"

"You have to have written your name," Pucey stated firmly. "Your name written by your own hand is in a lot of contracts. Names are important, you know."

Harry was thinking furiously. If he hadn't written his name, and nobody else but him could have done it—

"Did my name have to be written for putting it into the Goblet?" he asked. "I mean, could it have been my name torn from a piece of homework or something?"

Pucey looked at him in interest.

"That's actually a good question," he mused. "I mean, normally, if a contract requires signing, you know what you are signing and why. With the Goblet, you're just throwing random pieces of paper with your name in… I'd have to ask my dad, but it sounds doable."

"Can you ask him, please?" Harry said. "I'd really appreciate it."
With a nod, Pucey got up and then regarded him seriously for a moment.

"I still think that you're digging for information so that you'd have an alibi, but—if someone did actually submit your name for you, then it's a pretty shitty situation you're in, Potter."

No, really? And here Harry was wondering where this strange sinking feeling was coming from.

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Over the next couple of days, Harry had to face the fact that not everyone would be convinced that he didn't want to participate in the Tournament. A significant part of the school had turned against him—people threw insults at him in the corridors, openly expressed the hope that he would fail ignominiously, and a couple of particularly irate Gryffindors had even tried to hex him. Harry wouldn't have found it so annoying if he'd actually entered the Tournament willingly, but as it was, the unfairness rankled. However, after a couple of days of seething with rage and having had a conversation with Millicent about being so cute for expecting everyone to be fair, Harry chose to try and control open outbreaks of his anger. Oh, he was still pissed off as hell, but Millie was right at least in one thing—he was making himself an easier target by showing how people's comments got to him. He needed to cultivate a calm, unruffled facade in the face of adversity.

Well. This would be good practice for that temper control he'd been planning to exercise—although the decision to learn to control his emotions had been much easier to make when he hadn't had this shit to deal with.

Honestly, though, the situation was not as bad as he'd expected it to be. At least now, only a part of the school had turned against him, unlike the way he'd become persona non grata for most people back in second year. Seeing the way he and Cedric remained friendly, a lot of people accepted the idea of two champions rather peacefully. A good many Hufflepuffs, of course, felt resentful that Harry was stealing the glory their House so rarely received, but Cedric had enough influence—especially now—to keep the most avid Harry-haters from going on an all-out crusade. Harry had been worried about the twins' reaction, but they took it pretty much for granted that if they couldn't get into the tournament, then Harry certainly wouldn't have the skills. Besides, they seemed preoccupied with something else these days.

And currently, Harry sat at a table in the library, having just finished telling everything to the rest of his friends, and waited for their response. Neville and Padma had accepted him at his word without hesitation—he could see it written on their faces. Hermione, Terry and Anthony seemed to be mulling over his explanation still.

"Well," Hermione said, speaking in a tone that was suitably quiet for the library, "if you didn't put your name in the Goblet, who did?"

"And why?" Terry added, not bothering to keep his voice down, since Madam Pince was not there to frown at them.

"That's the question." Harry nodded darkly. He'd spent a lot of time wondering what fucked-up bastard had put his name in the Goblet. "I've looked it up. I can't get out of participating in the Tournament—" Anthony nodded at this; he must have researched it too. "—but I want to find whoever is responsible for sticking me into this position. And do something to them that will involve great amounts of pain."

"I'll help you," Neville volunteered. "I'm not sure about the pain part, but I think we should find out
"Yes," Hermione said pensively, "I agree that we should try to find out who put Harry's life at such risk."

"It's going to be great!" Padma clapped her hands, beaming. "Just like our own murder mystery. I love those."

"I'd prefer if you enjoyed them at someone else's expense," Harry muttered.

"Schadenfreude," Anthony said.

"Bless you."

"Never mind." Anthony sighed. "So who could have done it?"

"Or had the motive?" Terry added.

The six of them spent the next hour going through all possible suspects in the crime. The only fact they knew for certain was that the culprit was over seventeen years of age. There were also minor requirements—being strong enough to Confund the Goblet and having access to Harry's homework—but these were really difficult to measure. Who knew how strong any average student was? And homework could be easily stolen—it's not like Harry could account for the whereabouts of each and every one of his submitted assignments. Some he retained, others he'd trashed, or lost… As it was, all teachers, all Beauxbatons and Durmstrang students present, all seventh years, some sixth years and two Ministry officials fit the culprit's profile.

"I'm glad we've narrowed it down so much," Harry said.

An exhausting debate ensued. Hermione maintained that, even apart from the fact that suspecting professors was ludicrous, they had all taught Harry for years and had had numerous opportunities to depose of him in a less convoluted way. Padma countered that it could hardly be someone from Durmstrang or Beauxbatons, because why would they give Hogwarts two champions? Anthony interrupted their squabble with the statement that the culprit could technically be absolutely anyone with a grudge against Harry—or a desire to see the Boy-Who-Lived among Hogwarts champions.

"So there are two major motives," Terry concluded, sitting up straighter in his chair. "We can see which motive fits whom."

All Hogwarts teachers and most students might have wanted Harry to be the second champion. Anyone at all might have wished to do Harry in for their personal reasons. In the end, there remained five people who seemed to have less of a motive than everyone else: Igor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor Moody, Ludo Bagman and Mr. Crouch. The latter two were impartial observers, making no profit whatsoever from Hogwarts having an extra champion—if anything, the situation had caused an international scandal for the Ministry. Moody had once mentioned that he was at Hogwarts this year as a personal favour to Dumbledore, to keep an eye on things, and Harry being put in danger ran counter to his goals. Karkaroff and Madame Maxime were negatively affected by Harry becoming an extra Hogwarts champion.

"Wonderful!" Padma said, writing their names down. "We have our suspects."

Hermione stared at her, aghast.

"We've just decided that they have no reason to put Harry's name in the Goblet!"
"Precisely," Padma agreed. "It means they must be involved."

"How is this logical?" Hermione demanded. "Life is not a murder mystery novel! The one who is least suspicious is not necessarily the one guilty—"

Harry exchanged glances with Terry and Anthony. Last time Anthony had braved breaking up their argument; who would be the next courageous soul? Terry shook his head frantically. Harry sighed.

"Well," he said loudly, "there is no harm in trying to research these people. It gives us a nice place to start, since there's only five of them."

"And six of us," Terry continued supportively.

"I'll tell the others, too," Harry said, thinking of Blaise, Millie and the twins.

By the end of the conversation, Harry was somehow more optimistic about his prospects. This was something he could do. With the help of his friends, he would find the bastard who had put his name in the Goblet and discover why they had done it. This and the training he'd arranged for with the sixth year Slytherins made Harry feel that he had wrenched some control over his life back from the thrice-damned Goblet of Fire—and that was a highly welcome development.
Harry shelved the heavy book he'd been perusing and winced as the careless move resonated with pain in his left side. He'd already spent an hour in the Restricted Section of the library tonight—and wasn't it freaky with various books moaning in the dark and the castle's uncharacteristic silence pressing down upon Harry from all sides—and he was getting ready to leave back to the dorms. He'd found a few useful things, after all: the spell that had hurt him today was, apparently, known as the Bludgeoning Curse, which would explain why it felt as if Harry had had a Bludger ram into his ribs at full speed. Reputedly, it was more effective if fired several times in rapid sequence—Harry was thankful that Bletchley and Montague hadn't tried that. Next time, perhaps.

("Be more observant! Why did you dodge there? Didn't you see the curse coming? There's two of us, Potter, you'll get hit until you learn to fucking watch the duel properly!")

Two weeks in, and Harry's training with sixth year Slytherins was turning out to be quite different from what he had expected. He'd thought they'd teach him like Defence professors normally did: show him a spell, make him practise, give advice. In retrospect, he should have known it wouldn't be so easy. They didn't say: I shall now cast Vexo on you, which will toss you violently to the ground. Instead, they simply cast it and Harry blocked, or dodged, or ended up hurt. The sixth year Slytherins had no compunction about landing him in the hospital wing if that made him learn his lesson—the dislocated shoulder Madam Pomfrey had mended last weekend was testament to that. Later, Harry would trudge to the library and look up the curses they had thrown at him, going by the incantations he remembered. Occasionally, he happened across other interesting spells in the books he was checking, which he would later try out on his tutors—like Morsus apis, which produced an illusion of an attack by invisible bees.

The training, while not conventional, was effective in its own way—it forced Harry to spend a lot of time studying for fear of serious physical injury.

He just really, really hoped that all of this would somehow help him pass the first task, because he still had no idea what it would be, and it was making him quite nervous. Some people said that any practice of magic would serve to make one better at magic in general; Harry hoped that it was true, because otherwise he was well and truly fucked.

This was Harry's first nighttime outing to the Restricted Section—it was taking academic zeal a bit far, perhaps, and he felt hugely uncool sneaking out after curfew for going to the library, but apparently Bletchely and Montague were fond of curses from a riskier repertoire. Besides, Harry was plagued by nightmares, in all of which he failed at the first task horribly, and research distracted him from miserable thoughts.

Harry would not have dared go, anyway, if not for his Invisibility Cloak and the nifty little map the Weasley twins had given him a couple of days ago. At first he'd been confused as to why Fred and George seemed to think that a blank piece of parchment would somehow help him investigate who'd put his name in the Goblet. He was quick to retract that opinion, however, once he'd seen what the parchment could do: show the names and locations of everyone at Hogwarts and passwords for secret passageways besides. A lot of the twins' past deeds suddenly seemed more feasible.

("It is with great anguish that we entrust you with our most valuable weapon—but your need is greater than ours. Smite your enemies, Harrykins. Do us proud.")

The Weasley twins had found him by the lake after the Daily Prophet photoshoot and said that, since it was Harry's investigation, he'd better have the map and monitor it himself—and further volunteered
to look into Ludo Bagman with eagerness that was somewhat puzzling, though not unwelcome. The investigation needed all the resources it could get, because, so far, it wasn't really getting anywhere. Two weeks had passed since the meeting at the library, but they were still at square one. During the Weighing of the Wands, Harry had tried to discover through Fleur and Krum what their heads of school were thinking, but ended up dragged into an argument on whether or not Hogwarts had cheated. On that same occasion, he managed to get on the wrong side of a blonde reporter woman by refusing to give her an interview. That had been a purely automatic defensive reaction on Harry's part, but the blonde woman in eye-gougingly bright robes seemed to take it personally.

("My name, Mr. Potter, is Rita Skeeter. And I expect you will come to fear it, in time.")

Harry was pretty sure he'd be seeing something highly uncomplimentary about himself in the next edition of the Prophet.

Until then, though, he needed to make it back to the dorms in one piece tonight and not get caught by anyone on the way. Harry opened up the Marauder's Map and scanned the corridors. Nobody was patrolling the upper floors right now; Snape was stalking through the dungeons, which might become a problem once Harry got there, and Filch was by the trophy room. Harry was already about to sigh in relief when an odd name caught his attention: Bartemius Crouch.

Bartemius Crouch was climbing up a staircase Harry normally chose when walking from the dungeons—and Bartemius Crouch had absolutely no business creeping about the castle at night. Mr. Crouch was supposed to have left after the Weighing of the Wands. What was he doing here now?

Harry donned his Invisibility Cloak, heart beating fast in excitement. It was time to do some sleuthing.

He exited the library and stole along the hallway, trying to make as little noise as possible. The portraits in the dark corridor snoozed quietly in their frames. Somewhere outside, an owl gave a long, piercing hoot.

"Shit," Harry hissed as his foot tripped over something and he stumbled, catching his balance at the last moment. It had sounded as if a young elephant had just taken a stroll around here; miraculously, though, the portraits remained asleep.

Right. Less excitement, more caution. Harry shook his head at his own rashness as he applied the Silencing Charm to his shoes, and glanced behind him. Apparently, the object he'd tripped over was the foot of Boris the Bewildered; Boris, being a statue, did not seem to mind.

Harry continued onward, paying more attention to his surroundings now.

He reached the staircase without further incident and checked the map. Bartemius Crouch was still climbing up, seemingly aiming for the seventh floor. Harry rushed after him, taking two steps at a time.

Hogwarts was eerily quiet; only the soft creaking of stones against each other disturbed the silence of the night. It was as if the castle was sighing in its sleep.

Harry reached the seventh floor and checked again; apparently, Crouch was still walking along the corridor. Harry would catch up to him soon.

He got off the stairs and was about to turn the corner, when—

"BOOOOOOOO!"
Peeves, bright clothes visible even in the dark, whooshed towards Harry. Harry dove out of the way, escaping collision by a hair's breadth, and took cover behind a statue of a tall wizard in knightly attire. The portrait of an old lady woke up with a startled shriek, which elicited bright, malicious laughter from Peeves as he sped past Harry's hideout and down under the arch of the stairway.

Harry remained motionless, listening for footsteps; would Crouch be coming back to check on the disturbance?

Moments passed; Harry's breath evened; however, the only sounds he heard were the portrait's annoyed grumblings about inconsiderate poltergeists and disrespect for old age. He deemed it safe to continue.

Harry walked swiftly in the direction where, according to the map, the dot labelled Bartemius Crouch had slowed its stride. Afraid to miss Crouch reaching his destination, whatever it might be, Harry broke into a run. In a few moments, he came to a halt at a corner behind which, in the next stretch of the hallway, stood Mr. Crouch.

Harry peeked around the corner cautiously.

He could not actually see much, but that wasn't important since he knew that the dark silhouette in black robes belonged to Mr. Crouch. The shadowy figure stopped before a blank wall. Then, it started pacing; Harry had counted the man walking before the wall three times when, suddenly, a door materialized where solid stones had been.

Crouch entered the doorway and disappeared from sight. Moments before that, Harry had caught a glimpse of a sack the man was holding in his hand.

Harry leaned against the wall, chewing at his lip. This was all really quite bizarre. Why would a senior Ministry official secretly open odd passageways at Hogwarts at night?

Harry waited for a bit to see whether Crouch would re-emerge, but he stayed wherever he had gone. Harry decided to venture closer.

The door had, in the meanwhile, disappeared again.

Harry touched the wall cautiously; it seemed to be just the same as any ordinary castle wall, but then, magic was great at disguising means of getting around: Portkeys were masked as Muggle rubbish, the Knight Bus was invisible to Muggles, the Diagon Alley entrance was only available to those in the know…

Harry looked around for anything that would distinguish this spot and make it easier to find again in the future; right now, it was too dangerous to hang around here, but he would definitely return at a later date. The tapestry on the opposite wall caught his attention; it depicted a wizard and several trolls in frilly tutus. Harry stared, taken aback by the display, and glanced at the name given on the plaque: Barnabas the Barmy. Well, that was memorable, at least.

Hopefully, if he could enter that room, he'd be able to figure out what Mr. Crouch was doing there and why he found it necessary to sneak into Hogwarts in the middle of the night to do it.

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"Okay, so—we have to walk past this wall three times and a door will appear?" Neville asked dubiously.

"That's the idea," Harry said.
They were standing in the seventh floor corridor, opposite the tapestry with ballet-dancing trolls. The hallway was quite empty, since it was dinnertime now; Neville had agreed to miss the meal with Harry in favour of trying to find the secret room Crouch had used yesterday. Harry was sure Padma, too, would have jumped at a chance to have an adventure, but he hadn't seen her yet—he'd had no classes with Ravenclaws today. Blaise had shown only mild interest in the matter, while Millie had been sceptical of the endeavour—or, rather, of its timing. 

("Are you sure you aren't missing dinner because you're afraid of showing up in public after Skeeter's article?")

Harry grimaced. Well, yeah, he wasn't at all averse to waiting until things blew over a bit—but, honestly, it was all in the name of not provoking his temper too much. He had been faced with hostility before Rita Skeeter's article, but it sure got worse since she published her gothic tale of bullshit today, and even Cedric's influence could do little to curb it. Harry had been painted as a secretive Slytherin, a shameless attention-seeker, a Parselmouth who had likely hoodwinked the Goblet through Dark magic… Skeeter had even managed to ask for Lockhart's opinion—and the man obliged her by assuring the Daily Prophet that he'd always found Harry much too eager for fame. And now Harry was sorely tempted to curse the living lights out of any and all students who insulted him—but he'd just be playing into Rita's hands and souring his own reputation if he did that.

No. It was best to avoid unnecessary contact with the rest of humanity tonight.

"Right." Harry started pacing in front of the wall, the way Crouch had done yesterday. "I hope this works…"

However, despite the fact that Harry had walked past the wall three times, it remained unresponsive.

"What am I doing wrong?" he inquired.

The stones stayed silent. Neville's attempt wasn't any more successful.

"Maybe there's a special stone we need to step on," Harry suggested, changing places with Neville again.

Barnabas the Barmy and his trolls had abandoned attempts at ballet and now watched Harry and Neville in interest. The trolls sniggered at their continued failure. Harry glared.

"You need to think of a place, dear boy," Barnabas the Barmy said in a wheezing voice.

"What place?" Harry asked, frowning.

"The one where you want to go, naturally," the wizard answered, but that was the end of their conversation, because the trolls got bored again and resumed their attempts to hit Barnabas with their clubs.

Harry and Neville exchanged glances. Neville shrugged.

"It's worth a shot."

Harry paced again, concentrating on his desire to see the room Mr. Crouch had summoned yesterday.

"Maybe it needs to be a particular place," Neville suggested when it became clear that no door would be forthcoming. "Like, maybe you need to know exactly what you want to see. Let me try."
Neville wandered to and fro before the wall, face scrunched up in concentration, and then, suddenly—

"Hey, I think you've done it!" Harry exclaimed.

Indeed, a door materialized where a blank wall had been. Congratulating each other profusely, Harry and Neville rushed to open it, to see—

"Your greenhouse?" Harry asked, nonplussed.

"Er, it was the first place I thought of," Neville said. He beamed again. "It worked, though! It looks exactly like my greenhouse—look, even my honking daffodils are here! And my flitterbloom! Wait—how is this possible?"

"I don't know," Harry said, intrigued. "Is it really identical to your greenhouse?"

Neville nodded vigorously.

"Yep. Do you think this place can become absolutely anything? Hey, how about you show me the Slytherin common room?"

They stepped out of the room and waited for the door to disappear again; then it was Harry's turn to pace. He focused on the image of the common room.

"Look!" Neville cried. "It's there, it worked! Let's check. Is it the same?"

Harry stared around the room in amazement. It was as if the Slytherin common room had moved to the seventh floor; even details Harry wouldn't have consciously remembered were present, like the intricacies of decoration.

"Yeah," he said, still stunned. "It's the same."

"Er, not the most cheerful place, is it?" Neville ventured, looking around warily. "Quite… dark, and all."

"Don't know. I like it." Harry shrugged.

"Me too," said a serene voice from behind them. Harry whirled around to see a blonde girl with long hair and odd, protuberant blue eyes; there was a Ravenclaw crest on her robes.

"I like it that it's so green, you know," the girl went on to explain. "If you don't mind me looking?"

Visibly perplexed, Neville moved aside and let her pass through the doorway.

"Wait a second," Harry said, closing the door. "What are you doing here? Were you spying on us?"

The girl's large eyes opened even wider.

"Oh, no, I was simply passing by. But it is very interesting that you made a room appear out of nowhere. Do you do it often? It must be very useful."

"Sorry," Neville said, "but who are you?"

"I'm Luna." She absently fingered her pinecone necklace, peering further into the room. "Luna
Lovegood.

"Nice to meet you," Neville replied, clearly on autopilot. "I'm Neville Longbottom and that's—"

"Harry Potter, yes." Luna nodded gravely. "The Quibbler did a feature on you last month. Is it true that you used to sing in Beijing opera until you were nine?"

"I—what?" Harry choked on his next breath and stared at the girl.

Neville snorted a laugh.

"Acting is an honourable profession," Luna said approvingly. "Don't be afraid to confess to it. And you can make doors appear, that is very good—"

"Luna, I've never even been to Beijing opera and I don't make doors appear, okay?" Harry cut in, exasperated. "So please don't go around telling people these things." There were enough rumours circulating about Harry as it was. "And this place is supposed to be a secret."

Luna turned to look at him in interest.

"Really? From whom?"

"From everyone," Harry said.

"Why?"

"Because we're secretly investigating—" Neville began.

"That's a secret, too, Nev!" Harry reminded him hurriedly.

"Oh… right," Neville murmured, biting his lip.

"Don't worry," Luna said seriously. "I will not turn you in. I don't believe the bad things people say about you."

"Because he used to sing in Beijing opera?" Neville inquired, grinning.

"I have never sung in Beijing opera!"

"No, but people say bad things about me too," Luna said calmly. She completely shattered the fleeting semblance of normality, however, as she continued: "Besides, it is obvious to anyone that the Goblet ceremony was the initiation of the Rotfang conspiracy."

Harry stared.

"That's… good," he said, at last. This Luna girl was barmier than Barnabas, but, hopefully, one could negotiate with her. "How about we make a deal? We tell you about this room and you don't tell anyone about it."

Luna appeared to think it over.

"So it will be our secret?"

"Exactly," Harry agreed. "It will be our secret."

Luna beamed and clapped her hands.
"Wonderful! I've always wanted to have a secret with somebody. It's almost like having friends!"

"Er—right." What did one say to that? Harry glanced at Neville, but the other boy remained silent; he seemed less amused now and his smile had turned sympathetic.

The ensuing discussion revealed that Luna had actually come across this room once before; it had looked very different then and in it, Luna had found things her classmates had hidden from her. Harry did not like the sound of that—it seemed that not only was Luna odd enough to not have made many friends, but some people were actually bullying her. Harry had always held great distaste for bullying—it came with having been bullied for years on end—and he knew that Neville felt the same. Even though Harry still thought that Luna was completely crazy, she did not deserve to be picked on for being different; Harry resolved to talk to his Ravenclaw friends about this.

Besides, the girl was quite harmless—and, on second thoughts, rather entertaining with her wild, off-the-wall notions. For a while there, Harry had almost forgotten to worry about the looming first task.

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"Hello, Draco," Harry said in a fake-cheerful voice several days later, settling across from the blond at his study table in the common room. "However are you on this sunny day?"

Malfoy narrowed his eyes.

"What do you want, Potter?"

Other Slytherins turned to them in mild interest: although not obvious to the rest of the school, the Potter–Malfoy feud was legendary in the Slytherin House. The two had been at each other's throats for the entirety of their first two years at Hogwarts. Then, in their third, Harry had nearly killed Malfoy in a fit of rage, which led to them ignoring one another's existence for the longest time afterwards. Presumably, Malfoy had wanted to avoid a repeat assault on his life; Harry just didn't like to be reminded of the incident. Things evened out a little by this year—and it was odd that Harry felt almost relieved to go back to trading barbs with Malfoy, but maybe he and Malfoy needed to be in a state of conflict to maintain cosmic balance, or something. Either way, prefer as Harry did the current state of affairs, he was not at all impressed by Malfoy's latest endeavour.

"Well, Malfoy, I was reading the news this morning and imagine my surprise when I came across an article about myself that you had been interviewed for," Harry related in that same faux-friendly tone. "You know, the one about me being out of control and a danger to others."

"So?" Malfoy projected an air of regal boredom as he looked down his nose at Harry. "The world needs to be warned about you, Potter. I'm just serving the interests of truth, justice and universal happiness."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, you do strike me as someone who constantly strives to improve the lives of others."

Malfoy rolled his eyes.

"Your point, Potter. Make it before I waste more of my study time—I couldn't possibly learn anything with your ugly face staring right at me."

"Fine, then. I'd like you to explain to me in what way badmouthing me to the entire wizarding world does not contradict the principle of House unity and keeping our conflicts to ourselves." That last was delivered with a slight edge to his voice that he did not care to conceal.
The rule of Slytherins standing united in public was one of the cornerstones of Slytherin politics. Slytherins, better than anybody else, knew how easy it was to fall, once divided; Harry and Malfoy, despite their conflicts, had abided by this principle until now.

"As if you could ever be a true Slytherin." Malfoy sneered. "You're an embarrassment to our House, Potter. The sooner others realise it, the better."

"It's been years, Malfoy," Harry forced out through gritted teeth. "You've lived with it until now. What tipped the scales? Why exactly—"

"Because nobody else will do it!" Malfoy hissed venomously, suddenly leaning towards Harry across the table. "They're just overjoyed to have a Triwizard champion in our House, nevermind that it's you. They're spending all this time on you, training you, like you're worth something. Only I seem to remember how fucking upset you were to get Sorted here—"

"People change, Malfoy!" Harry answered, trying hard not to shout. "I've changed—they've changed—only you are stuck the hell back in first year or maybe in the fucking Middle Ages—"

They remained still for a few heartbeats, standing nose to nose, and Harry didn't even know when they'd jumped to their feet. Shaking his head, Harry flopped back onto his chair. Malfoy sat down, too.

"You think people have changed?" the blond said, an unpleasant smile on his lips. "You think people like you now? You're in for a rough awakening, Potter. You're popular because you've weaselled into the Tournament. But you can never become one of us."

"Can't I?" Harry muttered. "We'll see."

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A week later, Harry, Blaise, Hermione and Padma sat in the Hidden Room, as they'd termed the place Harry and Neville had discovered. It proved to be infinitely more convenient for holding secret meetings than the library, where they were always in danger of being overheard—and the Hidden Room had the added advantage of providing really comfortable seating arrangements. Apparently, it could also produce places that did not exist in reality—Padma had simply requested a good place for holding a meeting, and the room had obligingly presented them with nice beige couches, a few low tables to put their notes on, and even a window, which had to be fake, but was nice to have anyway. They theorized that the room had refused to show Harry the place Mr. Crouch had chosen because Harry didn't have the faintest clue as to what it might have been—and the room required at least some mental image to work from.

Currently, Harry was doodling on a piece of parchment as he listened to his friends give updates on the suspects in their investigation. It had been a long day in a week of long days. Harry was making progress in his training with the Slytherins, but it wasn't fast enough, he wasn't fast enough, and the first task was approaching and most questions were still unanswered and—sometimes, Harry just got so tired of it all.

"Madame Maxime seems to be in the clear," Padma was saying. "I mean, no criminal record, no scandals, no juicy details. The only thing that might be of interest is that she is way too tall for a normal woman, so she might be part-giant." Padma gave a quick one-shouldered shrug and smiled, eyes sparkling mischievously. "I don't think it matters though. Nobody with that sense of style could possibly be a bloodthirsty monster. I mean, have you seen that pelerine? I want one!"

"Get your parents to buy it for you," Blaise advised lazily from his sprawl on a different couch.
"Aha, and then Parvati will demand the same and I won't be unique anymore! Do you have any idea how hard it is to become a fashion icon when you have a twin sister?"

"No, but could we please get back on topic?" Hermione interrupted icily.

Padma rolled her eyes and leaned back against the sofa. Her long dark hair caught light fetchingly as she moved, giving Harry an odd urge to touch it and check whether it was as silky as it appeared. Instead, he doodled some more. The stick figure he'd drawn did not resemble Padma in any way.

"Professor Moody seems to be fine too," Hermione stated, shuffling through her notes. "He was an Auror for a very long time before retiring and caught a lot of Dark wizards. He's got all kinds of distinctions for service to the government. He was apparently really big in the war… I couldn't find anything at all incriminating on him. Really, Dark wizards should be making him a target."

"So you're pretty sure it's not Moody," Harry said, looking up.

"Well, it's not like we can say for certain, can we? It's all conjecture, really—once retired, Professor Moody may have turned into a Harry Potter-hating fanatic, but I doubt it, and I think Dumbledore would have noticed his change in attitude," Hermione pointed out. "What is more interesting, however, is that Igor Karkaroff is apparently among the Death Eaters Moody has arrested."

"Moody caught Karkaroff?" Harry's eyebrows rose. "Now that's an interesting twist."

Karkaroff had, for the last week, been one of the two most solid suspects—from a hint here and a cautious word there among older Slytherins, Harry had surmised that the man had been a Death Eater. That, of course, gave Karkaroff a great motive to want Harry dead; Death Eaters and Boys-Who-Lived did not mix well. At the same time, this revelation did not mean that the investigation was over. Harry had spent over three years in Slytherin, where a lot of kids with Death Eater ties resided, and he knew that, after Voldemort's fall, the general Death Eater trend had been to pretend that they'd never supported the Dark Lord. They might still harbour old allegiances, but they would not confess to it out loud—much less do something that would incriminate them. Neville and Hermione, in particular, had trouble seeing it, but Harry, Blaise and Millie were in agreement: Karkaroff either had to be exceptionally brave to try and get at Harry in plain view of the whole world, or he had to have some very serious backing, which was a worry on a whole new level.

"Karkaroff gave up some names and was released. Moody must have been angry," Hermione said. "He seems to really hate him still, you know."

Him and everyone else in any way associated with the Death Eaters; Hermione should try attending Defence with Malfoy. Still, that rather proved Hermione's point; Moody's behaviour did seem to indicate that he was one of the least likely people to try and kill the Boy-Who-Lived. Moody had also never been mean to Harry, personally—brusque, maybe, but not nasty.

"And Terry says he's got nothing on Bagman," Padma informed them.

"The Weasley twins are looking into him too, so they might find something." Harry said. "They seem like they want to, anyway. I want to know what Crouch is up to, though, more than anything."

"Is he still sneaking around?" Padma asked in interest.

"Yeah." Harry frowned. "I've seen him in Moody's office and in Dumbledore's, too; they must have known he was there, because they were both with him. Still, why the sneaking around at night? I just don't know. The whole thing seems weird."

"It is," Hermione agreed. "So, Headmaster Karkaroff and Mr. Crouch remain our biggest suspects"
thus far. Karkaroff's past speaks against him, while Mr. Crouch is actually more suspicious, which is rather odd…"

Harry wished he'd have more time to watch the Marauder's Map, but he had to attend classes, do homework, go through brutal training with sixth year Slytherins, research spells in the library, keep up with the investigation and try to find out what the first task was. On the bright side, this level of busyness meant that Harry had very little time to panic over the task itself. Still, his nagging anxiety was beginning to turn into a state of controlled panic, since he was no closer to discovering what might be demanded of him in just a few days. He knew he couldn't go into the task blind; other champions might have enough talent to do so, but Harry needed to prepare, and duelling with the older students might very well not be enough. The only 'transferrable skill' he'd acquired (Hermione's phrasing, not his) was that, these days, he picked up new spells faster. Fuck knew if that would help any.

According to Anthony, the tasks had varied greatly throughout history—and they might have changed in modern times, since the Tournament had not been held in so long. The point of the first task was usually to obtain a certain object. Sometimes, the champions would have to fight a dangerous creature for it—in 1714, three werewolves escaped and wreaked havoc, killing and turning numerous people. Sometimes, the champions would have to get through most trying obstacles, like Fiendfyre, for example (two champions had, apparently, burnt alive during that task; the final one had won by default, even though he'd been disfigured for life). Sometimes, the tasks were plain disturbing, like the ones with champions having to get through narrow spaces swarming with small and seemingly non-dangerous creatures, such as spiders, cockroaches or rats, which from their sheer number could make the contestant panic and fail to reach his goal.

None of that sounded good to Harry.

"The biggest flaw in our beautiful schemes is that we've still no idea what Harry is going to face," Blaise noted, voicing what was on everyone's minds. "The books don't know, parents and known Ministry people are keeping mum, teachers are merrily waiting for Harry to go to his doom. Have you written that will yet, Harry?"

A cushion sailed past Harry and hit Blaise squarely on the head.

"That's for upsetting our champion," Padma said primly. "Don't listen to him, Harry. I'm sure you'll do fine."

Yeah, right. If he was to have any hope of survival, he needed to learn exactly what the first task entailed.

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"Dragons? Are you joking?"

Cedric was looking at Harry with wide eyes.

"I wish I was." Harry grimaced and adjusted his bag on one shoulder. "It's definitely dragons. I think we've got to get past them, but——"

"How do you know?"

Harry shrugged. He wasn't going to blab on Hagrid.

"I just do, okay? Never mind how. There are four dragons in the Forbidden Forest, one for each of us——"
Cedric swore so creatively that Harry was impressed.

"So what you're planning to do?" Cedric asked.

"As much research and practice as I—"

Then, he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. He swallowed the rest of his phrase and made a shushing gesture at Cedric, but it was too late; Professor Moody emerged out of a hidden alcove.

"Potter. Diggory," he said gruffly.

"Good day, sir," Cedric murmured.

Harry tried to maintain an impassive face, but he was pretty sure the ex-Auror had overheard their little discussion, which was quite illegal under the Tournament's rules.

"Potter, you come with me," Moody ordered, confirming Harry's thoughts.

Damn. He really needed to learn some silencing wards in the nearest future.

Harry nodded goodbye to Cedric and followed the professor to his office. Once there, he was surprised by the number of odd instruments and contraptions cluttering it up.

"Foe-Glass," Moody said, pointing at a large mirror-like surface which reflected a few shadows lurking about in a vaguely threatening manner. "Lets you see whether your enemies are near."

"You take yours everywhere you go, then, sir?" Harry asked, not specifying whether he meant the enemies or the Foe-Glass.

Judging by the way Moody's magical eye swivelled to him, he picked up on that. Oh well.

"Constant vigilance, Potter. I've made a lot of enemies in my time."

"Of course, Professor."

Moody peered at Harry, limped up to his desk and took a swig out of his flask.

"Sit down, Potter." He waved at a nearby chair. "And stop looking so tense, I'm not about to turn you in for cheating at the first task. Merlin knows, everyone does, and it's not like it could disqualify you anyway. Not that you'd mind, huh?"

Harry nodded, keeping his expression bland. Moody was all but eliminated from the list of suspects and hadn't ever done anything to Harry, but Harry was still somewhat wary. He didn't really understand this particular Defence professor; the man seemed loud and outspoken, but Harry found that it was actually quite hard to tell what he was thinking. Didn't wear his heart on his sleeve, this Mad-Eye Moody.

There was silence for a while.

"So do you know what you're doing tomorrow?"

"Not quite, sir."

He'd done some research last night after Hagrid had shown him the dragons, and Hermione and Anthony were in the library at this very moment. Harry's mind kept turning to the last time he'd had to battle a magical creature—the basilisk in second year. Both dragons and basilisks were huge scaly
beasts; the basilisk's weak points were those not protected by its hide, such as eyes and mouth. Harry couldn't help hoping that there were some parallels here he could exploit.

"Hah! Well, if I were to give you any advice, it would be to play to your strengths. Because all other champions will, and their strength is significantly greater than yours, Potter. Diggory is a stellar student, Delacour is not all looks and Krum is not all brawn. There's a reason why they were picked as champions."

Harry remained quiet. He could think of a few sarcastic remarks he could make, but he really didn't think it was wise to do so while he was alone in an office with a trigger-happy ex-Auror.

"Play to your strengths, Potter," Moody repeated, taking another hearty swig from the flask. "That's the best advice anyone can give you at this point."

Well—

"Are dragons related to snakes?"

The professor stared at him.

"You were thinking of trying to speak to them in Parseltongue?"

So Moody had read Rita Skeeter's tales of Harry's horribleness, if he could connect the dots so easily. Rita took great pleasure in pointing out that Harry was a Parselmouth in addition to being a shady Slytherin.

"I was just wondering, sir."

Moody chuckled.

"Well, talk of novel approaches. No, lad, I'm afraid it wouldn't work, but I was thinking of your more… ordinary talents. What are you good at?"

"Potions," Harry said dryly. "Defence Against the Dark Arts. Quidditch—"

"Now, think on that."

It was Harry's turn to stare. And not only because the Professor was coming too close to telling him how to deal with the dragon, but also—

"You think I should try to outfly it? Sir?"

"They tell me you're pretty good on a broom, lad."

Harry considered it. He was quite talented at flying; Slytherin's star Seeker, he'd never lost a match to date. Could he outfly a dragon? Maybe. When talking to Hagrid, Charlie Weasley had said that they'd need to get past the dragon, not to fight it—and that dovetailed with the other first tasks Anthony had told Harry about. Chances were, he needed to get past the beast to find a certain object. While it did not sound any more pleasant than trying to get through Fiendfyre, at least the dragon might have points of vulnerability—if Harry's theory on similarity with basilisks stood, that is.

Harry felt a wave of relief: perhaps, with Moody suggestion and his own half-baked ideas, he'd be able to come up with at least a semblance of a viable plan for tomorrow.

"It's very kind of you to counsel me, sir."
Except that I don't understand why you're doing it.

It remained unsaid, but Moody must have understood the sentiment behind Harry's words, because his face twisted into an ugly grimace.

"Dumbledore brought me in this year so that I could help to protect his students, and tomorrow you're going up against a full-grown dragon because someone's put your name in the Goblet. Doesn't sound too safe to me, lad, and I don't think the Ministry's stuck-up rules are worth risking your life over."

Harry could drink to that.

"I see, Professor."

"Well." Moody gave a cough. "Best of luck then, Potter."

"Thank you, sir."

Luck he would certainly need, but relying entirely upon chance was not Harry's preferred modus operandi; hopefully, he'd learn at least something useful with his friends' help until tomorrow.

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Harry walked out of the tent, wand at the ready, head high in the air, eyes alert on the dragon. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't terrified out of his mind, but thankfully, no one was asking. The people in the audience were staring at him and shouting something, but Harry couldn't really see or hear them in the state he was in. He was almost dizzy with adrenaline.

("The Tournament is not as dangerous as it used to be, but accidents can still happen… none of the tasks are to be conducted in a particularly controlled environment.")

Like hell was he going to let this kill him.

"Accio Nimbus 2001!"

The dragon finally noticed him and took a swipe with her spiked tail; Harry dove to the side, running for cover. He needed to get a good spot now, so that he could put phase two of the plan into action—Harry dodged again, slipping on the rock. He hit his knee hard, but felt no pain. He hid behind a large boulder, and the Hungarian Horntail seemed to lose sight of him momentarily.

Harry aimed his wand and concentrated.

"Conjunctivitis inrogo!"

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen, and Harry's heart sunk. He'd be fried like a fucking marshmallow here—

With a soft whooshing sound, his Nimbus appeared before him. Harry threw a leg over the broom and shot up in the air.

Rising on its hind legs, the dragon lunged straight for Harry.

Harry swerved, narrowly avoided a jet of flames, then another, and careened sideways, away from the dragon. Judging by the beast's movements, the Conjunctivitis Curse had taken only partially. The dragon could not see Harry well, but still well enough to pursue him. Okay, plan not working, what
now?

Recklessly, Harry dove for the eggs, singling out the golden one he was meant to snatch away. But another wide swipe of the dragon’s tail nearly threw him off his broom. Fuck this aimless flying. Time for some drastic action.

Pushing his broom to the limit, Harry sped upwards, flying right at the dragon's head; like the basilisk, he thought disjointedly, I can do this... It was difficult to aim while swerving around on his broom in a mad dance with the dragon's flames, but Harry was persistent.

"Morsus apis!" The spell hit the dragon on the right eye. Hurriedly, Harry shot another, this one at the left, and dashed to the side.

Eyes were a dragon's vulnerable spot, just like the basilisk's; if the Conjunctivitis Curse wasn't working for Harry, he could try injuring the dragon in a different way—an illusion that a swarm of bees was biting it in the eyes had to hurt quite a lot.

The dragon stopped moving. It stood, motionless, for two very long moments, and Harry waited with bated breath, ready to spring into action again if the dragon attacked—but then, the beast gave a slow blink.

And roared.

Harry dropped, avoiding a jet of fire; the dragon was shaking its head frantically, as if trying to fend off the bees, and Harry knew the illusion was working—

The beast lunged again, moving further away from its nest in an attempt to catch Harry, or maybe run away from the bees, Harry didn't know which. The horrible screeching yowl of pain was nearly deafening him, but he didn't care.

He raced downward, wind rushing in his ears, heart thumping madly in his chest —the eggs were left vulnerable, the dragon was too distressed to notice them now—close, so close, almost there —yes.

Harry's hand closed on the golden egg. He tucked it under his arm and felt a wave of heat engulf him from behind; glancing back, he saw that his broom was on fire. Harry swore, mind blank for a moment, but then it felt as if his robe was catching the flames, too—and, on reflex, he let go and jumped for the ground.

Harry crashed into the dirt and rolled, hoping to extinguish the flames. He was still clutching the egg; he wasn't letting go of something so hard-won. Thankfully, he'd been flying pretty low, so the fall didn't hurt him too badly. As soon as he felt his clothes stop burning, Harry shot to his feet and ran.

And suddenly, the task seemed to be over.

Wizards poured onto the arena; Ludo Bagman was shouting something from the commentator booth —complimentary, no doubt, but Harry didn't give a damn. He was alive, he’d finished the first task, he got the egg—he knew this much, even though he still couldn't process everything that had happened.

He was alive. He got the egg. He was done.

The first task was over.

Harry was still grinning manically as the dragon-handlers led him away towards the first aid tent.
It was rare for Harry to be glaringly, unequivocally happy, but he'd persisted in this state of high cheer for the last two weeks straight. Everything was going well. He was still alive, with his limbs intact, following the first task—and he hadn't made an idiot out of himself in front of the whole world, either, which was a definite bonus. In fact, he was an absolute hero in Slytherin, and generally restored to the good graces of the school. Seeing him face a huge fire-breathing creature had apparently put little grudges into perspective for most of the students. And Padma had somehow fought her way into the champion's tent in the aftermath and pounced on him, squealing about how dashing he'd been. Having a pretty girl admire your heroic deeds was rather sweet, too.

Harry did count a loss—his trusty Nimbus 2001, courtesy of Malfoy père, had been completely ruined by dragon flames—but he decided to celebrate his continued survival by buying himself a nice shiny Firebolt. He'd also purchased a lot of chocolate for Hermione and Anthony, for helping him with the Conjunctivitis Curse—it had not worked properly, but Harry appreciated the effort. The failure with the curse and the damage to the broom made Harry lose points in the task, but the judges had apparently been impressed by his 'creativity'; Cedric was currently in the lead as far as points went, but Harry was second, which was a long way from the miserable failure he'd been dreading.

First hurdle overcome, popularity restored, holidays in sight. Really, life was good.

It would be even better, though, if Harry'd made any progress on his investigation. He was actually ashamed to admit that, basking in post-task euphoria, he had completely forgotten about the investigation for a while, until reminded of it by his friends.

("Making good use of our map, Your Esteemed Slytheriness? Old Bartemius still sneaking about, then?")

So right now, Harry was on the way to an experiment. He had only ever checked the map during his free time; he'd never made note of what Crouch did during classes and meals. He was in the castle at any time Harry had looked, which suggested that he had to be doing something with himself when everyone else was busy. Of course, it would be very difficult to watch the map in class, so Harry decided to try during dinner tonight. The main problem was concealing the map from nosy students like Malfoy, who'd been sulkier than ever since Harry had failed to die in the first task. However, Harry thought he'd found a way around that.

He was quite eager to get to dinner. Neville, on the other hand, was not looking too cheerful as they walked from Potions together.

"So, Harry, who are you asking to the Yule Ball?" Neville inquired, a distinct lack of enthusiasm in his voice.

Harry told himself that he wasn't nervous about the dance. At all.

"Oh, Padma, I think," he said, trying to be offhand. He also hoped he wasn't blushing.

"Ah."

"Well," Harry said slyly, eager to divert attention from himself, "I know who you're going to ask…"

If anything, Neville's dark expression became even more miserable.

"It's not me Ginny likes."

Harry felt like hitting himself. How could he have forgotten even for a moment—Neville's
infatuation with Ginny seemed as hopeless as Ginny's own crush on Harry. It was awkward at the best of times, but when Harry went and put his foot in his mouth…

"So, why the long faces?" Blaise exclaimed, catching up to them together with Millicent by the Great Hall. "What crawled up your arse and died, Longbottom, if you excuse me for asking?"

Neville threw the other boy an unexpectedly venomous look.

"Piss off, Zabini," he snapped and stormed away towards the Gryffindor table.

Harry, Blaise and Millicent stopped walking and stared at his retreating back. Blaise let out an appreciative whistle.

"Hey, Harry, I think your pet Gryffindor's growing fangs!"

"It's about time," Millie deadpanned. "Mind you, any sane person would have to shut you up after a while, Zabini, however spineless they might be."

"Neville's not spineless, Millie, and you know it," Harry said firmly. "If he doesn't spend most of his time biting your head off—"

"Oooh, but our Millie likes her men strong and gruff." Blaise grinned, throwing an arm about the girl's wide shoulders. "She likes 'em wild, she does. That's why she'll be asking one of those Crabbe-n-Goyles to the dance—"

Millie stomped on his foot. Hard. Harry laughed as Blaise wailed in pain, and counted himself lucky to have friends who provided a constant source of entertainment.

"Now, focus," he said to them in an undertone as the approached the Slytherin table. "You're serving as my cover tonight, remember?"

Luna waved at him from the Ravenclaw table when he passed by; he smiled at her and shook his head at Padma's eye-roll.

About halfway through the meal, Harry elbowed Blaise and Millie in warning.

"Do you still have my book?" Millie asked, as agreed.

"What book?"

"The one you promised you'd return to me at dinner," Millie said in such a chilly voice that Harry nearly fell for the ruse himself.


He heaved his bag onto his lap and peered inside, looking at the map. He had it opened at the Great Hall; most of the school's population was here right now. A lot of dots were cluttering up the small space on the map, but it was probably pointless to look, since Crouch couldn't… be here… except that he was.

Harry stared at the dot. Then he raised his head and looked around, wondering what was faulty—his eyes or the Map, because he could certainly not see Crouch in the Great Hall, but the map insisted he was here, along with about three hundred other dots. Harry frowned, trying to figure out where in the Hall the map believed Crouch to be, but with so many dots present, they were all more or less on top of each other, it was impossible to tell who was where…
"Potter! Are you planning to return my book to me or not?" Millie asked threateningly.

Harry jumped. He probably looked weird gazing into his bag, but this was a really bizarre situation.

"You know what? You look," he said, giving the bag to Millie. Two heads better than one and everything.

"Just confess you don't have it," Blaise advised. "Spare yourself a lot of pain later."

Speaking of pain later… Harry glanced at Miles Bletchley, Edward Montague and Adrian Pucey, who were sitting further up the table. His training sessions had been temporarily suspended by silent agreement, and Harry wasn't sure whether they would start up again over the Christmas holidays. Most of the school was staying to attend the Yule Ball, after all… Besides, there was also the question whether or not Harry should get them Christmas presents. He'd already done most of his Christmas shopping, but he probably should get the sixth year Slytherins some thank-you gifts. Something that showed his appreciation but implied no familiarity. Something not too cheap, but not too expensive. Something appropriate. Harry grimaced. Maybe he'd ask Padma or Hermione; girls were often good with being sensitive about things.

And he still needed to ask Padma to the ball, damn it. Would it be weird? They were friends, after all. What if she didn't like him that way? What if she said no and their friendship was ruined?

Millie distracted Harry from that thought as she thrust the bag back at him.

"So?" Blaise asked, when it seemed that Millie would offer no comment.

"So I'll be having a talk with Potter about this later," Millie said darkly. "When he's behaving less barmy."

Harry nodded. Having a meeting in the Hidden Room sounded like a good idea to him, too.

Harry spent the rest of the meal trying to sort out the situation with Crouch in his head. What did he know? He'd seen Crouch sneak around the castle at night; the man had been doing something in the Hidden Room—which could have turned into anything, from a Potions laboratory to a nuclear power station, though he doubted it was the latter. He'd also seen Crouch in Dumbledore's office with Dumbledore and in Moody's office with Moody. That suggested that they, at least, were aware of his presence. Then there was the fact of Crouch's invisible presence at dinner… invisible! Wait a moment. Maybe Crouch had an Invisibility Cloak, just like Harry! That would explain why Harry couldn't find him, but the map could.

Harry gazed unseeingly into his dessert, thinking furiously.

If Crouch operated under an Invisibility Cloak, there were two main options. Either he was hiding from everyone, including Dumbledore and Moody—in which case he might be spying on them for the Ministry, or something. Or else he was there with their approval and sanction, maybe conducting an investigation in secret, too—hell, he could be doing the same thing as Harry and covertly trying to discover who had put Harry's name in the Goblet! There were a lot of possibilities there.

Harry thought back to Mr. Crouch and frowned. He's seen the man twice—once at the initial Goblet ceremony and again after the first task. Harry couldn't say that Crouch came across as the kind of man likely to sneak around under Invisibility Cloaks, tempting adventure.

Still, the evidence was there; respected, boring-looking Ministry official or not, Crouch was covertly operating at Hogwarts. Harry just needed to find out why.
Great Hall doors opened slowly, revealing the crowd congregated inside. Harry stepped in with Padma on his arm, trying to ignore the stares. Such was the Yule Ball tradition: the champions made a grand entrance into the ballroom once everyone else was already waiting. Viktor and Hermione were walking in front of Harry and Padma; Viktor was used to spotlight, but Hermione was terrified of tripping on her dress or ruining her hairstyle, Harry could tell. Padma, Fleur and Cho, on the other hand, revelled in the attention.

"Relax, Harry," Padma said out of the corner of her mouth, which was fixed in a bright smile. "It's much more likely that you'll make an idiot out of yourself if you're nervous."

"Thanks, that makes me feel loads more confident," Harry sniped back, but bantering with her did make him feel more at ease.

Thankfully, the long walk to the high table ended and they took their seats; the Triwizard judges and the champions were all present, except for Mr. Crouch—his place was for some reason taken by Percy Weasley.

"Mr. Crouch entrusted me with standing in for him," Percy explained pompously, once they had ordered their meals.

"You work for him, then?" Harry asked, thinking through possible lines of questioning.

"I am his personal assistant," Percy answered in a tone that suggested he was the most trusted pupil of Merlin.

"I see," Harry said, trying to appear impressed. "And—"

"What's it like, working at the Ministry just after you finish Hogwarts?" Cedric asked. "My dad kind of expects me to join him, after I graduate."

"Indeed?" Percy said. "What department do you plan to work in?"

"Well, my dad's in Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, but there's no way I'm doing that," Cedric stated resolutely. "If I had doubts, dragons and Skrewts have cleared them up for me."

Harry snorted. Percy cleared his throat.

"Well, it very much depends on what department you join. I was lucky with my boss, but I have heard tales from the less fortunate…"

Harry sighed. It seemed that Cedric had hijacked Percy for the time being. Harry turned his attention to his date, but Cho and Padma were engrossed in a hushed conversation about Hermione's makeover, her dress and Krum. Both girls were apparently shocked at the fact that Hermione and Krum as much as knew each other, although they counted quite a few instances when both had been seen in the library at the same time.

"How very typical of Granger to find a date in the library, isn't it?" Padma noted. "So tragically clichéd."

"I don't know her at all," Cho confessed. "She seems a bit—"

"Uptight?" Padma suggested. "If not for Longbottom, she'd have bored herself to death a long time ago. Mind you, I think it's quite unfortunate of Longbottom to take Ginny Weasley to the ball—he's
a sweet boy, but he seriously needs to get over her, because it's getting old."

Harry happened to disagree in that he was really glad to see Neville happy. He positively glowed as he sat next to Ginny Weasley; the only problem was that Ginny did not seem to enjoy herself nearly as much as Neville, unless distance was playing tricks on Harry's sight.

And Harry really hoped that, one day, Padma and Hermione would get over their dislike of each other, because that was getting really old too.

Right now, Hermione was teaching Krum how to pronounce her name.

"Herm-own-na," Krum recited obediently.

"No, it's Her-my-oh-nee," she corrected.

"Hermy-oh-ninny," Krum repeated.

It was probably the least intellectual conversation Harry had ever heard Hermione engaged in, but she seemed to be enjoying herself.

"… in the end, it's really important to do what you actually enjoy," Percy was saying. "And it depends on what you wish to achieve in life."

"I was thinking of maybe Magical Accidents and Catastrophes," Cedric answered. "I mean, it sounds like they do a lot of interesting stuff, from what I hear."

Harry tuned their conversation out again.

Dumbledore, Madame Maxime and Karkaroff seemed to be exchanging highly sophisticated barbs disguised as compliments. Well, Dumbledore was mostly reflecting gibes aimed at him, but then again, it was bad form for a host to insult his guests.

"I hope the dancing starts soon," Padma said, turning to Harry. "You do remember the steps I taught you, right?"

"Er, vaguely."

Padma smiled, slightly exasperated.

"Remind me again, why did I agree to go out with you?"

"Because I'm a dashing hero?" Harry suggested, not too sure himself.

"Fame isn't everything, Mr. Potter," Padma said and then added dramatically, after a moment's thought: "You cannot buy my affections!"

"That's right I can't," Harry agreed. "The amount of sweets and jewellery you require could clear the debt off a small Third World country."

Cho snickered.

"The concept of romance is completely lost on him," Padma explained to her. "Besides, he's really very rich, so I don't know what he's complaining about. It's not like the bracelet I asked for was that expensive. And I did reconsider that necklace."

Harry could distantly hear Fleur relating to Roger Davies the particular ways in which Beauxbatons
was superior to Hogwarts; Davies was lapping it up with a vacantly adoring expression on his face. Fleur, on the other hand, seemed to be getting progressively more irritated with his monosyllabic replies.

"We 'ave foie gras and champagne for breakfast," Fleur snapped in a voice that clearly called for Roger Davies to grow a brain and contradict her. "Ze statues at Beauxbatons 'ave been made by Benvenuto Cellini. Ah, what would you know of art… Marie, Queen of Scots—she graduated from Beauxbatons!"

"Yeah," Davies agreed, eyes glazed with lust.

The way Fleur gripped her steak knife made Harry mildly concerned for Roger Davies's health.

Percy and Cedric were still talking. Harry tried diverting the subject, but it was a vain attempt that only distracted them for a few moments. Percy seemed eager to talk about his boss, though; Harry could catch him later during the night and grill him in a more informal setting.

When the time came for the champions to open the dance, Harry was very nervous—and he probably stepped on Padma's feet at least twice, but he tried his best to remember the simple steps she had taught him. Thankfully, once the rest of the public joined in the dance, the champions' blunders became much less obvious, so Harry could relax and enjoy the evening. Apart from talking to Percy, it was all fun and frolics from there—needling Blaise who was crushing on Fleur, laughing at Ron Weasley who had no date, and finding a moment alone with Padma, who was her usual charming, impossible self.
The arrival of January brought an end to Harry's reprieve.

All at once, he was thrown into a whirlwind of events. Classes resumed, as did Harry's training with the Slytherins; and Rita Skeeter published an article about Hagrid a few days into the new year.

Harry sighed as he trudged back to the castle. Comforting Hagrid was no easy feat when the man was determined to wallow in misery. Sure, he had good reasons for being upset—having been on the receiving end on Rita Skeeter's acid remarks, Harry could commiserate—but still. Surely Hagrid's half-giant status couldn't have come as a surprise for most people? Hagrid did, after all, stand out, being twice as tall as any normal man and everything.

“Harry?”

He stopped when a familiar voice called out to him in the Entrance Hall.

“Yeah?”

“Listen,” Cedric said, looking serious. “I’d like a word.” He glanced around. “Somewhere more private.”

Harry rubbed his forehead tiredly. He'd rather postpone this meeting, but this secrecy was most unlike Cedric. He probably had something important to say.

“Oh.” Harry nodded. “I know of an unused classroom near here.”

Cedric went as far as to cast a few warding spells around the room before he started to talk.

“Right, so I’ve got the egg clue,” he began, as if continuing an earlier conversation. “And seeing that I owe you majorly for the dragon tip—”

Harry looked up, hardly able to believe his luck. All of his attempts at dealing with the egg had resulted in failure and he was starting to get really quite nervous, despite the fact that he still had over a month to prepare.

“You’ll tell me?” he asked, and some incredulity must have shone through in his voice, because Cedric frowned.

“Of course I’ll tell you, did you think I’d let you go in blind?” He shook his head. “The faith, it’s really too flattering, Harry.”

Harry smiled sheepishly.

“Well, I am sort of stealing your thunder, so I wouldn’t blame you if you—”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Cedric interrupted in such a no-nonsense voice that Harry didn’t even protest against being called an idiot. “So, that clue: apparently what we have to do is listen to it underwater. Then the crazy noise becomes normal words and you can actually understand the instructions.”

“Which are?”

“As far as I understand, something that matters a lot to us will be taken away by the merpeople who live in the lake—”
“There are merpeople in the lake?”

“—and we have to retrieve whatever it is within an hour, which we have to spend underwater.”

Harry stared at him.

“All in a day’s work, huh?”

Cedric gave a crooked grin.

“Don’t take my word for it, though—bring your egg to the Prefects’ bathroom, it’s really nice, and listen to it yourself. The password is ‘pine fresh’.”

“Thanks a lot, Cedric,” Harry said with feeling. “And I mean, really.”

“Hey, I’d be one fried Hufflepuff by now if you hadn’t told me about the dragons, so it’s only fair.” The other boy smiled. “Besides, I’ve had some help on this, too. Good luck preparing, ‘cause working out the clue is just the beginning, you know?”

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The conversation with Cedric marked the start of three weeks of frantic research on Harry’s part. He now knew what to prepare for, but not how to actually stay alive underwater for an hour. This question preoccupied Harry in most of his waking hours and even invaded his sleep. Thankfully, his friends were helping—even though it couldn't be much fun for them, whatever Anthony said about intellectually challenging tasks.

Harry shook his head, bringing himself back to the present. He'd decided to clear his head and take a stroll by the lake—where he'd bumped into Luna. She, apparently, also figured that a lovely winter afternoon called for a walk, despite the cold temperatures. Their conversation had been rather stilted at the beginning, but there was artlessness about Luna that made Harry relax his guard.

“How come you’re wearing mismatched shoes?” he wondered, looking at Luna’s feet.

“My shoes seem to have gone somewhere,” Luna said, turning her face to the sun and closing her eyes. “I’m sure they’ll return soon.”

Harry frowned. He might be Muggle-raised, but he knew that even wizarding shoes didn’t tend to walk off on their own.

“Did someone take your things and hide them again?” he asked.

Luna shook her head.

“It’s all in good fun,” she said, and then glanced at him with a smile. "It's nice of you to worry, but you don't have to, you know. I don't need a rescue. But I would like you as a friend."

Harry huffed out a breath, startled anew by her candour.

"I didn't mean to interfere, or anything," he said. "And of course we can be friends."

"Can we?" Luna asked, brightening. "That's good. We can start now, I think. I'm not sure how this is usually done."

Neither was Harry. He'd never become friends with anyone by mutual agreement. And he wasn't even sure what a friendship with Luna would entail; but she, at the moment, seemed keen to tell him
This outing of his came up in a conversation with Padma the next day. Fourth year Slytherins had Herbology with Ravenclaws, and Harry usually paired up with his—dare he say it— *girlfriend* for the lesson. It usually worked out quite well, because both were good students, and both enjoyed the favour of Professor Sprout.

“He’s like, one of the least cool people in the school.”

“Yeah, because *I* have always been Mr. Popular,” Harry said, irked. “And her name is Luna.”

Padma shook her head.

“You’re not good at this at all.”

But she likely wasn’t too upset with Harry for his lack of gossiping skills, because, after the lesson, she steered him away from the greenhouse by the hand.

“So, you’ve been so busy lately, I’ve hardly seen you—except in class, of course…”

But they hadn’t even made two steps towards the castle when an excited Neville flew up to them, clutching a thick book.

“Harry, I think I’ve got it!” he said, completely heedless of the moment he was interrupting. “I think I’ve got it! What you need is gillyweed!”

***

After that, time abandoned all pretence of decency and whooshed past with breakneck speed. Just yesterday, Harry had been ordering gillyweed from Italy with the help of Blaise’s uncle, but now was for some reason already two weeks later, and he stood with the other champions and listened to Ludo Bagman explain the particulars of the second task.

Quite an incredible and unwelcome development, that.

It was a gloomy, windy February morning—not the kind when a lot of people fancied a stroll outside, normally, but today most students from Hogwarts and both visiting schools gathered by the lakeshore. The champions displayed a blatant lack of enthusiasm, and Harry believed that they had a damn good reason for that. All this time, while he’d been researching and preparing, he had not realized that "what he’d sorely miss" would be an actual person, trapped with merpeople in the lake until he got around to saving them. He’d thought it would be another object he’d have to retrieve, but a human being? What if a champion failed at the task?

No use dwelling on that, though. Harry knew what he was going to do, praise be to Neville and his
love for Herbology. He would just have to do his best—he was as prepared as he was ever going to get.

"Now, if the champions are ready…" Bagman said, rubbing his hands in glee. Percy Weasley, who was replacing Crouch again, looked faintly embarrassed by Bagman's exuberance. "Three, two, one, go!"

Harry put gillyweed into his mouth and started chewing; it tasted awful and had slimy texture that made him think of jellyfish. While Harry struggled to swallow the bits and pieces of the magical plant, he watched other champions disappear underwater. That half-shark transfiguration was really brave of Viktor; Cedric's and Fleur's Bubblehead Charms were much less interesting.

Harry, at this very moment, was developing gills.

Feeling himself begin to struggle for breath, Harry plunged into the lake. It was bizarre to have a different organ than his nose to breathe with, but he didn't have time to contemplate that. Looking around the underwater world in interest—everything was very green and blue here, and surreal in its fluidity of movement—Harry dove deeper. He swam between odd, large-leaved water plants, which felt almost like wading through a forest; a school of fish darted past him faster than he could figure out what they were. He was just about to cast the Point Me spell when he felt something grab his ankle.

A Grindylow was holding on to Harry's leg with brittle fingers, smiling toothily and trying to drag Harry down.

"Relashio!"

Harry's words came out garbled, but that didn't matter, because the Grindylow whined in pain anyway: its hands appeared to be scalded.

"Stupefy!"

More water demons were coming; Harry swam quickly away. As far as he remembered, Grindylows dwelled among weeds. Time to get out of the weedy area.

The scenery changed as Harry moved forward. Now, he was in what seemed to be an underwater valley—and, judging by the darkness, not any closer to the surface than before. Something rather large loomed in the distance—a merpeople colony, perhaps? Harry swam closer, cautiously, but still couldn't quite make out what he was seeing.

It appeared to be an overturned column lying on the lake bed—no, wait, several stacked columns—but they seemed to be pretty bendy…

Oh hell.

Harry stopped in his tracks and began inching backwards. There, lounging in front of him and beginning to uncoil its tentacles, was the Giant Squid.

Harry was not dealing with this.

He backed away slowly at first, so as not to disturb the water too much and alert the Squid to his presence. Having withdrawn somewhat, he swam as fast as possible to get away from there. Paying no attention to his surroundings, he made a goal out of putting enough distance between himself and the huge mollusc.
After a while, Harry's ears discerned strange sounds reaching from somewhere to his left; they reminded him distinctly of the voices he'd heard in the golden egg. He advanced in that direction, clutching his wand and remaining on guard just in case—he'd been fooled once already. However, this time he seemed to have stumbled onto the real thing.

The words of the song got clearer as Harry swam through the merpeople village, trying to ignore the suspicious gazes of the inhabitants. It was strange, seeing this sort of life—rough stone houses, domesticated Grindylows, and merpeople themselves, so different from their idealized fairy-tale version Harry had grown up with. With their green hair, scaly skin and yellowed teeth, they resembled Grindylows' human-sized cousins.

Three hostages were tied to a merperson monument in the middle of the town square, all of them in deep sleep. With a start, Harry saw Neville and Hermione; there was also a little girl with the same blonde flowing hair Fleur flaunted. Right now, of course, the hair was more green than blonde, which only deepened the pallor of the girl's face.

Relieved to have finally made it, Harry approached Neville. He hesitated between him and Hermione for a moment, but then remembered that she and Krum were dating, sort of. Neville, on the other hand, could not be any other champion's hostage.

The merpeople floated around, pointing and glaring threateningly, but they made no move to hinder Harry in any way as he fiddled with Neville's ropes. The sleeping boy was a dead weight on Harry, once released; Harry tugged him upwards, determined to get out of there once and for bloody all.

This underwater adventure had been sort of fun at the very beginning, but now it was getting creepy and exhausting—and Harry was starting to feel distinctly short of breath.

"And the second champion returns!" Ludo Bagman's voice greeted Harry as he surfaced from the lake, sputtering. "And it's Harry Potter! He's made it back with his hostage in second place—let's have a round of applause!"

Once ashore, Harry was directed to Madam Pomfrey; she gave him a blanket and fed him a Pepperup Potion, muttering about reckless adventures and dangers to children's health. Harry smiled and waved at Cedric, who sat next to Cho Chang a little distance away; Viktor had still not made it back, and Fleur seemed to be crying. Harry frowned—did she mess up the task?

"Huh—where—what happened?"

It took a little while to fill Neville in. The Gryffindor seemed to be flabbergasted to have taken part in the task and at the same time flattered that he turned out to be the person Harry would miss most. Harry was sort of surprised to know that too, actually. He wondered who determined these things for the purposes of the task.

Which he was, by the way, done with. As in, finished. No more second task, ever.

"Merlin's beard-d, it's c-c-cold," Neville gasped.

Harry didn't really mind. If feeling chilled to the bone was tangible proof that he was done with two thirds of this Tournament, he could definitely cope with this.

"You know what's funny?" he said. "You've really saved yourself, here. If you hadn't told me about gillyweed, both of us would have been fish food by now."

Neville grinned.
"Champions these days. Can't leave anything to them—got to think of your own rescue plans."

"Well, there's always better things to do than go around rescuing random Gryffindors," Harry drawled. "Seriously, though, that was really some spectacular thinking, Nev."

Neville actually blushed.

"It's no big deal," he said, fidgeting under the blanket. "I didn't actually think of it all by myself. I only remembered because I'd read about it recently. It's a really interesting book, I got it from Professor Moody—"

"You what?" Harry asked, focusing sharply on Neville.

"Got it from Professor Moody?" Neville tried.

"And you didn't think to mention it until now?"

Neville blinked in confusion.

"Well, I—should I have?"

"Harry!"

Harry turned around, still absorbed in the conversation with Neville.

"Hey, Padma," he said absently.

The girl put her hands on her hips.

"Honestly, Harry, you've just passed a devilishly tricky task, risking life and limb, and all you can say is hey, Padma? I'm not going to hug you, you're all wet, but—well, I'm glad you're all right, and I think you might be getting a high score—they're just taking their time getting the Beauxbatons girl's sister out, she didn't make it apparently." Padma rolled her eyes. "So yes, can you explain to me why I wasn't the person you'd miss above all others?"

And suddenly, just like that, a pretty girl transformed into a frightening harpy. Harry's eyes widened.

"Um—I don't know?" he ventured. "I mean, I wasn't the one who made the choice—"

"Cedric and Viktor had to rescue Cho and Hermione," Padma flipped her hair back in an exasperated fashion. "For what reason didn't your girlfriend deserve the same attention?"

Harry cast around for something to say. He glanced at Neville only to see him snigger at Harry's expense.

"Well, Fleur's hostage was her sister!" Harry seized on that fact gleefully. "So see, I'm not the only one—"

"Oh, so it's Fleur now, is it?" Padma narrowed her eyes.

"Listen—"

"No, you listen!" Padma cried dramatically. "I've noticed you ogle her in that swimsuit!"

"It's an, um, interesting swimsuit—"
"The only reason why I'm even considering forgiving you is that you've just been through a traumatizing experience," Padma said in clipped notes and stormed off—probably to complain to Mandy Brocklehurst about Harry's behaviour.

Harry became aware of uproarious laughter; the twins weren't even trying to be discreet.

"When did you get here?" he asked sulkily.

"Oh, a bit ago." George snickered.

"And, Harry, our friend, this is no way to treat a lady." Fred shook his head.

"Go to hell," Harry advised and then complained, gazing after Padma: "She used to be a lot nicer to me when we were just friends."

More laughter from his considerate, supportive companions served as his only answer.

***

Once the excitement of the second task had worn off a bit, all hostages were returned and the scores counted, Harry tracked down Percy Weasley and asked, putting on a suitably concerned expression:

"Your boss is still feeling under the weather, then?"

After all, Percy was again here instead of Crouch. At the Yule Ball, Percy had admitted to not having seen Crouch for quite a while, which confirmed Harry's belief about him skulking around Hogwarts under an invisibility cloak.

"Mr. Crouch trusts me to be capable of representing him," Percy said.

This did not answer Harry's question.

"So you still haven't seen him?"

"I receive my instructions by owl and am perfectly satisfied with such an arrangement," Percy pronounced, the tips of his ears reddening slightly. "If you have some concern to bring up with Mr. Crouch, I can forward your request to him, and—oh, hello, sir."

Moody was limping up to them; both his eyes, magical and normal, were fixed on Harry.

"Inquiring after old Barty, eh, Potter?"

"Not really, sir," Harry said. "It's just that he's one of the judges and hasn't been around for a while."

More like, hasn't been in the open for a while; according to the map, the man was spending all his time in Hogwarts.

"I expect Barty thinks he's got better things to do than putting in an appearance here." Moody snorted. "Off making important decisions. Always was a pompous arse, that one."

Percy looked scandalized.

"With all due respect, sir—"

"Oh, don't bother, Weasley," Moody interrupted, waving him off. "Barty knows what I think of him, and that's that. Congratulations on completing the task, by the way, Potter."
And that was just peachy, but it was Moody's book that had enabled him to succeed in the first place. Harry somehow didn't think it was a coincidence that Moody just happened to give Neville the one book that contained the answer to the second task; this, in conjunction with Moody's help on the first task, was making Harry's warning bells go off. He glanced at Moody, wondering whether it was a good idea to bring it up.

Moody frowned at him.

"Run along then, lad. Your friends want to see you, going by the way they're waving."

In the end, Harry figured that it would be imprudent to tell Moody anything, but he did discuss the matter with his friends at the next earliest opportunity. Millie looked like she was going to strangle Neville for neglecting to mention where he got the gillyweed information. Hermione, on the other hand, rushed to his defence.

"Neville didn't think it was important because, in case you're forgetting, by that point we had decided that Professor Moody was innocent!"

"Not as innocent as we'd thought, apparently," Harry noted.

"All he's done is nudge you in the right direction," Hermione said reasonably. "And it's unfair of him to help you over Cedric, but you are the younger champion."

"Maybe he's helping Harry for ideological reasons," Terry suggested. "He's famous for fighting Dark wizards, right—well, maybe he's gone batty in old age and secretly worships Harry for getting rid of the darkest of them all."

"Does he have anything to gain?" Anthony questioned. "His actions are suspicious if he derives any profit from helping Harry, but he's only been making sure that Harry can pass the tasks safely—"

"Free cheese is only found in the mousetrap," Blaise said lightly, with the air of one quoting from somewhere. "You're not really falling for this show of altruism, are you?"

Terry raised an eyebrow and answered with his own question:

"Has it occurred to you, perhaps, that all of you Slytherins are simply paranoid?"

It had, actually, but Harry was not one to believe in random kindness. No adult—bar Snape, on those few occasions when duty forced him to—had ever gone out of their way to assure Harry's well-being, and he didn't see why Moody would do so now. Couch was definitely not the only one who bore watching.

***

Mindful of the long break before the next task—it was only the end of February now, and the third task wasn't until late June—Harry threw himself into the investigation. He watched the map carefully, on the lookout for Moody as well as Crouch, and soon noticed an oddity that, with time, acquired an eerie feel. Quite simply, Moody never left his office. Harry could not, of course, monitor the map constantly, and he had never checked it in Moody's presence—the risk of exposure to Moody's all-seeing eye was too high—but the map seemed convinced that Moody remained perpetually in his quarters. Crouch, conversely, was still wandering around—although Harry paid less attention to his comings and goings, consumed as he was with trying to catch Moody out of his office.
To that end, he came up with a project that would circumvent Moody's magical eye. It would require a lot of time and effort, but it would be worth it in the end, Harry was sure.

While Harry had been busy monitoring Crouch and Moody, his friends unearthed other secrets—some of which threw Harry for a loop.

"Bagman?" he repeated, staring at the twins in disbelief. "A Death Eater?"

"Well, no," Fred said with obvious regret. "But pretty close—an informant, of sorts."

"He didn't know the people he'd been passing information to were Death Eaters, see," George explained. "He was cleared by the Wizengamot on grounds of ignorance, general stupidity and being a Quidditch star, if old newspapers are anything to go by."


" Seriously, what has he done to you?" Harry inquired. "I mean, I'm grateful for the information, but you've been a little too eager about this from the start."

The twins sighed, shrugged, exchanged glances and launched into a tale of the Quidditch World Cup, gambling and leprechaun gold, which really did not sound pretty. Harry could not help much with that, but he was proud of teaching the twins the daunting—and completely impractical as far as duelling went—curse with the incantation of Donarent mendaces tui muscas conluviei tibi in dextri nari, which roughly translated to May your lie make flies of the muckheap infect your right nostril. It was meagre revenge, perhaps, but revenge nonetheless, and the twins' estimation of Harry clearly went up at that bit of creative curse knowledge.

Harry didn't confess to the unglamorous truth that he'd obtained that knowledge by spending half his waking hours in the library, trying to save his skin from bloodthirsty sixth-year Slytherins.

The next portion of explosive information came from Hermione as Harry sat in that said library, poring over books on magical illusions and deceptions for his "fooling Moody's eye" project. Hermione stormed over to his desk and grimly laid out old issues of the Daily Prophet, having apparently taken a page out of the twins' book.

"Read," she said, in a horrible voice. "Just—read it."

So Harry did, and soon he understood the reason for the sickened expression on Hermione's face. Crouch had apparently also had connections with the Death Eaters, in his day. He had not done anything himself, but his son had been convicted and thrown into Azkaban, where he'd died soon afterwards. The papers might have yellowed with age, but the magical photographs on them were still moving—and the image of Crouch Jr. being led away by Dementors as his father looked coldly on would stay with Harry for quite a while.

"Well," Blaise noted flippantly when he'd heard about it, "Crouch is not what you'd call a family man, is he?"

Harry was pretty sure that, if Hermione and Blaise hadn't been on non-speaking terms as it was, Hermione would have severed all ties with Blaise right then and there.

"An awful, awful man," she said. "I think you should go to a teacher with what you know, Harry."

Terry, Anthony and Neville seconded that motion, but Harry was still reluctant. There weren't many people he could go to, because he was sure that Blaise and Millie were right—pretty much any
teacher would run to Dumbledore first thing. McGonagall certainly seemed to be in his pocket, and, whatever Terry said, Harry was having a hard time imagining Flitwick solving any important issues without involving the ultimate authority in the school. Blaise and Millie had predictably advocated Snape's candidacy—

("If he doesn't kill you, he'll do something to help you…")

—but Harry didn't even want to open that can of worms, because a search through the old newspapers (deemed necessary once they proved themselves so useful twice), revealed that Snape, of all people, had Death Eater ties too.

Snape was the final straw. Harry had long known that his Head of House had a murky past, but who didn't? As far as he could tell, the war hadn't been kind to anyone. Both sides of the war committed atrocities and ruined lives, while those who chose no sides stood idly by and let it all happen; finally, as Blaise was fond of reminding him, history was written by the victors. However, the knowledge that Snape had been a Death Eater still came as a blow, because—what the fuck had the man been doing warning Harry about werewolves and other dangers when he had that on his resume?

According to old newspaper issues, Snape had actually been a spy for Dumbledore; the Headmaster, at Snape's trial, had supported this view and got the Potions master released. Dragging any information out of Harry's fellow Slytherins proved to be about as useful as banging his head against a brick wall.

("He was acquitted, Potter, completely acquitted of everything and Dumbledore vouched for him, so mind your own business if you know what's good for you.")

Of course, Snape's post-war record had to be squeaky-clean, because his Death Eater involvement was public knowledge; he would not be allowed anywhere near children if there remained grounds for suspecting him. Still, Harry really didn't want his Head of House to be a Death Eater, however redeemed—but nobody was asking for his opinion.

With all those revelations, plus the normal class workload and his training on top, it was unsurprising that Harry didn't devote nearly as much attention to Padma as he perhaps ought to have done. He did try to be thoughtful and bought her tons of chocolate to make up for his constant busyness, but he heard of his mistreatment of her with increasing frequency all through the month.

("I can't be the only one who's trying to make this relationship work!")

It wasn't entirely his fault, though, and he wasn't sorry for failing to notice Padma's new shoes, either, because who the hell cared, and not for blowing himself up on her minefield of wrong answers, because she left him no right ones. Padma was still very pretty and smelled enticingly of vanilla, but it just wasn't worth it anymore, and Padma seemed to agree, but for reasons of her own and completely different from his. Fleur's swimsuit figured into them somehow.

The situation was bound to explode, sooner or later, and Harry was faintly surprised they'd lasted till the end of March, when nothing had really gone right with them ever since the second task, if not before that.

"Harry, I'm tired of waiting for you to recall that you have a girlfriend! The way you just forgot Valentine's Day—"

"Well, I was a little preoccupied by the second task at that point—"

"That's not an excuse for everything, Harry! Being a champion doesn't mean it's okay for you to ignore my feelings—"
"Yes, but it does mean that I'm trying to keep myself alive here."

"Oh, so you are saying you have no time for me? Well, then—I wish you'd never asked me to the ball at all!"

"Look, I—"

"Honestly… imagining our relationship was a lot better than dating you turned out to be."

Yeah, well, that about summed it up for him, too.

They managed to stay on speaking terms, just; Harry wasn't sure whether things would ever return to the way they used to be, before this fiasco of a relationship, but he hoped that it was possible. Padma had been fun when they were friends. Dating her only screwed everything up, even though there had been fun sides to their relationship, too… Ah well. It was all over now.

Freed of the burden of trying to be a good boyfriend, Harry concentrated on his project: working to disguise the Marauder's Map to look like a page of his Defence textbook. Inwardly, he feared the moment the general school population would find out about his breakup with Padma, because, with him being such a public figure, he was sure that some rather serious shit would hit the fan then.

***

Harry sat in the Defence classroom with the rest of his classmates, textbook in hand, pretending to do last-minute revision for the lesson. Blaise and Millie were beside him, chatting between themselves. They threw occasional looks at Harry but did not disturb him. It was fortunate, because Harry was engaged in something much more important than revision.

His eyes were glued to the map.

He'd finally succeeded to make it look as an innocuous page in his textbook; not an easy bit of spellwork by any means—it had been more complicated than disguising his book cover back at Neville's during the summer—but he was proud of the result. Unless someone knew specifically what to look for, they would not recognize the disguised map. That was especially important when Harry wanted to fool someone in possession of a crazy magical eye.

Harry scanned the map, trying to sort through hundreds of dots cluttering the hallways. The *Harry Potter* dot was surrounded by dots labelled with his Slytherin classmates' names; there was nobody else in the Defence classroom yet. Harry moved his gaze upward to the second floor, where the Defence Professor's office was located.

The dot labelled *Alastor Moody* was right there.

Curiouser and curioser. Harry waited patiently, not taking his eyes from Moody's dot, as the time for the Defence lesson drew nearer; one way or another, he was solving the mystery today.

He jumped when he heard Moody's voice boom from nearby:

"Pay attention, you brats, when the lesson is starting! Now, where's that blasted class roll…"

Incredulous, Harry raised his eyes. Mad-Eye Moody stood at the front of the classroom, having just walked in through the door—wooden leg, scowling face, magical eye and all.

Harry dropped his gaze to the map again, seeking out the Defence classroom this time—and there it was. In plain sight. Black on white, all the rest of it—*Bartemius Crouch*. Crouch was the only
person, apart from Harry and his classmates, in the Defence room, and Harry didn't know what he'd been expecting to see, but it wasn't this.

"Potter! I've called your name once already, what are you waiting for?" Moody barked.

Except that this wasn't Moody, this was Crouch, and that fact seemed completely outrageous when Harry was staring into Moody's face.

"Um, sorry, I'm present, sir," Harry muttered automatically, trying to find a way to somehow make any of this make sense.

Moody's—Crouch's—eyes met his and, for a terrifying second, it seemed to Harry that he knew. But then Harry blinked, Moody coughed, someone's chair creaked, and Harry felt silly for being so paranoid.

"Pass your essays up front!" Moody demanded. "Anyone who hasn't mentioned the Impediment Jinx is going to have a detention with Filch, for sheer damn stupidity."

Harry passed his essay on, without paying attention to Moody's words. Fourth year Defence was quite easy, most of the time. The sixth-year Slytherins had started throwing nonverbal spells at Harry lately—that was something to worry about, not a measly Impediment Jinx, and certainly not under circumstances such as these.

Moody, who was teaching Defence, was not Moody, but Crouch. What the hell?

Harry stared at the desktop, thinking furiously. The only logical conclusion was that Crouch was pretending to be Moody. However, Harry had seen them both at the same time as recently as the first task. Both Moody and Crouch had been in the audience then. He'd noticed Crouch sneaking about before that. Wait—Crouch had stopped coming to work at about that time, according to Percy Weasley, hadn't he? Okay. Possibly, Crouch had simply been creeping about Hogwarts before the first task, looking for ways to impersonate Moody. Or preparing for it, somehow. After the first task, Crouch had stopped coming to work, confined Moody to his office and started wearing his face instead.

What for?

Never mind. For some nefarious purpose, no doubt.

Harry glanced at Blaise and Millie, wishing they could communicate telepathically—maybe then, they wouldn't just sit there with such carefree expressions, unaware that something momentous had transpired.

"Now, pair up," Moody snapped, attracting Harry's attention again. "We'll be reviewing the Shield Charm today."

Of course they would be.

Was it just Harry's imagination, or Moody was looking at him more often than normally?

Harry's concentration was shot, but the Shield Charm was something he could cast in his sleep, and the remaining part of the class was devoted to a lecture on a curse Harry already knew. He could afford some distraction. He tried not to trail fake Moody with his eyes, looking for signs that this was actually Crouch, and doodled on his parchment instead. He just wanted the lesson to end. Not only did he fear giving himself away, but it was just plain creepy, and someone had to be notified as soon as possible.
"What did you say to Millie?" Harry muttered to Blaise, eyeing her retreating back as they packed books and parchment into their bags after class. Now was really not the time for them to quarrel. "There's something—"

"Potter!" Moody's voice called from behind them, and Harry's heart skipped a beat. "Stay behind, will you?"

Harry turned around, plastering an apologetic smile onto his face.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I've got to run," he said, inching backwards. Crouch wouldn't dare do anything in public, would he? "I've got detention with Professor Snape right now, so—"

He could feel Blaise's surprise radiating off him; Blaise knew perfectly well that Harry didn't have a detention—Harry never got detentions.

"Detention, you say?" Crouch muttered.

"Yes, sir." Harry nodded and made several steps backwards. Soon, there will be nobody in the classroom but him, Crouch and Blaise; it did not bode well. "Professor Snape will kill me if I'm late."

"Well, Snape can bring it up with me if he likes," Crouch snapped. "Zabini, out. I've got to have a word with Potter, here."

Blaise threw a sideways look at Harry; Harry shook his head subtly.

"But, sir, Harry really does have detention, and Professor Snape is very strict—"

Harry's instincts alerted him to what was coming before anything else did; he cast *Protego* at the exact same moment as a jet of red light hit Blaise and he collapsed on the floor, a mildly surprised expression on his face.

Crouch's other Stunner bounced off of Harry's shield and smashed into the blackboard; Harry darted towards the exit, but Crouch's nonverbal spell got there first, warding the door.

"*Mulco!*" Harry fired, turning around quickly, but he didn't expect one Bludgeoning Curse to penetrate Crouch's shield, not really. Maybe a barrage of them would. "*Mulco maximus! Protego!*"

He dove behind a desk, putting a physical boundary between himself and his attacker.

The volley of Bludgeoning Curses made a clear impact against Crouch's shield, but he laughed as he deflected them and sent another nonverbal spell at Harry; a Stunner, from what Harry could tell, he'd had a lot of those aimed at him in recent past—

"*Ango!*"

The Choking Curse had no more success than the Bludgeoning ones, but Moody's voice was savagely amused as Crouch said:

"You always *were* a precocious student, Potter—but you must know you can't win this fight."

He punctuated that statement with a series of rapid-fire spells, the last one of which cracked the desk Harry was hiding behind. Harry didn't know what the fuck Crouch was casting, but that wasn't any different from his training, except that his time it was very much *for real*.

He needed something—fast, distracting, incapacitating.
With a quick Banishing Charm, he sent the remains of the desk flying at Crouch and threw a *Vexo* at the momentarily distracted man.

The curse actually hit its mark—Crouch was thrown violently into the teacher's desk behind him, hitting it with a sickly *crunch*—but he rolled out of the way of Harry's opportunistic *Expelliarmus* and fired another curse Harry dodged.

"*Protego,*" Harry muttered. "*Aspergo flamma!*

Crouch's robes caught gratifyingly on fire, but the man chose against battling the flames, as Harry had hoped. Instead, he roared:

"Very well, Potter, if you want to fight like adults do, you'll get your wish!"

And that was it, Harry's one warning that the kid gloves were coming off. And while it was great that he had proved himself to be a tougher adversary than Crouch had envisaged, the prospect of an all-out duel sent him into a cold sweat.

"What the hell do you want with me?" he asked, hoping to maybe distract the man with conversation. "*Segrego!*

Crouch swerved out of the way of the curse that could have dislocated his arm with agility surprising for a man on a wooden leg and fired a spell at Harry that *sizzled* as it went past his ear. At some point while Harry had been dodging, Crouch extinguished the flames on his person, but the smell of burning clothes still hung in the air.

"Don't pretend you don't know, Potter, I've seen it in your mind," Crouch panted and aimed his wand again.

Harry dove behind another stack of desks, dragging Blaise's body with him, because fuck knew what might hit Blaise while he lay there incapacitated.

"*Serpensortia,*" Harry whispered. And then, in Parseltongue to the resultant snake: "Go bite that man. Now!"

Together with the snake, he sent another couple of desks and chairs flying at Moody—but Moody dispelled them with a broad swipe of his wand in the air, deflecting them back at Harry. Harry experienced a moment of blind panic and fired an automatic *Protego*, hoping to stop the barrage of flying furniture from pummelling him and Blaise to death. The desks and chairs sailed past them and collapsed with a thundering noise. Harry's shield faltered for a second, and Moody had curses flying at him—Harry dove to one side, but inadvertently strayed into the path of another.

*Fuck,* he thought, collapsing on the floor, his whole body bound together by writhing, coiling ropes. He tried to move, but the restraints only wound tighter. Now he was done for, fuck knew what would—

"Argh!" came Crouch's cry from a little distance away. Harry could not see what was happening from his prone position on the floor, but he got his suspicions confirmed when Crouch continued: "No matter. I've got anti-venin in my chambers, and your little snake tricks won't slow me down. *Evanesco.* Now..."

Moody's face came into view, looming over Harry with a grin.

"Irritating little shit, aren't you?" he asked conversationally. "No respect for your elders... although Master will teach you better manners, of course..."
The man gave a little laugh. Harry kept silent.

"Do you have any idea, Potter, how tempting it is to let my wand slip, my mind wander..." Crouch's wand hovered just above Harry's chest. "And perform an Unforgivable or two? I'm partial to the Cruciat... although I hide it well." He giggled, which was eerily at odds with Moody's serious, battered face. "Bella didn't hide it well, and she's in Azkaban now. And I'm free... and helping my Master... but he does not want me to kill you."

That last was said in an almost petulant tone. Harry's brain was refusing to process everything, almost, because—"Master"? Crouch was—

"Master needs you whole and healthy on the summer solstice," Crouch said, pouting. "I offered to kill you for him, but he has better plans... and then he will kill you," Crouch promised. "And I will be rewarded... but now, I must stay hidden. I have not yet completed my mission... my missions... and you know something, I know you have found me out, I have seen it in your mind, the knowledge—Legilimens!"

Suddenly, it felt as if Harry's head was breaking in two; images flashed before his eyes, images of recent past—he was talking to Millie in the Great Hall, he was with his friends in the Hidden Room, he was kissing Padma, he was examining the map, he was doing research, he was casting spells, he was standing by the classroom, he was staring at the map—

And then it stopped, except that the pain didn't; dark spots were dancing before Harry's eyes and he felt like throwing up.

"Oh, but you are a most tiresome child, Potter," Crouch's voice said and Harry opened his eyes, only then realizing they had been closed.

"What—"

"Now you deign to converse with me?" Crouch asked, a sneer in his tone. "It's too late—I already know all I need to."

Through immense effort, Harry raised his head to check what Crouch was doing; the restraints dug further into his arms, but he paid no heed. He saw Crouch holding the spelled Defence textbook in his hands and smiling giddily.

"You won't need this infernal map anymore, Potter." Crouch opened the book and stared at Harry's handiwork. Then, he raised his wand and started muttering spells, probably trying to disengage the map from the book.

"Are you working for Voldemort?" Harry asked, unable to contain the question.

It was the only thing that made sense, except that it didn't make any sense, because Voldemort was—okay, maybe not dead, but certainly not alive—

"Don't say the name!" Crouch raised his head and flicked his wand at Harry, scowling. "Don't you dare say the name, you filthy half-blood. Saviour, they call you—soon, soon there will be nobody to save you."

Well, didn't that sound ominous.

Harry opened his mouth to ask about the real Moody, but found that he couldn't talk. Fucking Crouch and his nonverbal spells.
"Finally!" Crouch cried in triumph.

Harry heard him move and, in a moment, Crouch came into view, towering over Harry. In his hand, he held the Marauder's Map.

"I'll find a good use for that," Crouch said, smiling. The magical eye whirled to look at, or maybe through, the classroom wall. "And you and your little friend need to get going, or people will start to wonder…" Crouch's wand, once again, hovered over Harry's chest, then moved up to touch his forehead. "You, Potter, are too curious for your own good. It is too early for you to see my Master's grand design."

Harry sensed what was coming; desperately, he tried to make his limbs move, to roll out of the way, to hide from the spell—but it was all for naught.

"Obliviate. Prodo deceptiones."

***

"Well, Harry, you know I've been telling you to go to a teacher for a while," Hermione said approvingly at the next impromptu meeting in the Hidden Room. "I'm glad you've finally done it, because I really think we were getting in over our heads here. I'm sure Professor Moody will know what to do."

"I'm a little surprised that Zabini went along with it," Anthony put in. "He wasn't for the idea, before."

"Yeah, well, Millie still thinks I shouldn't have done it." Harry shrugged and suppressed a wince at the motion. Honestly, the sixth year Slytherins must have been more brutal during the last practice than he'd thought, because he was bruised all over. "Blaise agrees, though, and he was there when I told Professor Moody. I mean, there was no sense in hiding stuff from him, not after the map cleared him."

Neville shook his head.

"It seems a little too easy, somehow," he said, smiling ruefully. "It was such a big deal, with us suspecting Professor Moody all of a sudden—"

"Yeah, um, sorry about that, the thing with the gillyweed book, I mean—"

"No, you were right," Neville hastened to interrupt. "I should have told you where I got it from, but I'm glad that Moody was only trying to help you, in the end. I would have felt awful if he'd been trying to kill you through me, or something."

"Ah, shucks, it's gonna be weird to see you without your nose in that map all the time, Harry," Terry said, smiling.

Oh yes, Harry felt quite bereft without the map. Grimacing, he thought that he'd refrain from telling the twins about his decision to give it to Moody—he had a feeling they wouldn't approve in the slightest. He was already beginning to regret it himself.

"Professor Moody will have much better use for the map," Hermione asserted. "He said he'd show it to Professor Dumbledore, didn't he? They'll figure out something about Crouch very soon, you'll see."

Hermione's prediction came true in the sense that something did happen on the Crouch front, and
something rather radical. A mere week after Harry gave Moody the map, the *Daily Prophet* reported that Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, had been found hanged in his own home, all clues pointing to suicide.

"Figured we were investigating him and got cold feet, I expect," Moody said to Harry's tentative questions. "You don't think I hung him up, do you, laddie?"

"Of course not, sir," Harry replied, but he was not so sure.

He had the nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right about this whole picture, but he couldn't put his finger on what was bothering him, exactly.

Crouch's suicide didn't stay on the front page for a long time, however, because juicier news replaced it: like Harry had feared, his breakup with Padma turned out to be highly entertaining material for the wizarding public. Rita Skeeter gleefully cast Harry in the role of a violent spurned lover; a couple of other journalists went the other way and made him out to be the victim. Padma was bemused by the coverage in the beginning, but the further it got, the angrier she became. Terry whispered fearfully of hysterical outbursts in the Ravenclaw common room. By the end of the first week, it could be gathered from the press that Harry was heartbroken, and had brutally dumped Padma, and her twin sister had been involved too, and now he was taking out his temper on younger students, and he cried every night, and Padma was afraid of him, or maybe it was Parvati (their names were treated as interchangeable synonyms). The *Daily Prophet* soon beat *The Quibbler* as far as inanity of their articles went.

("Don't worry, it's only a Wrackspurt that's got your brain. It will go away eventually.")

Harry had not complained to Luna—they weren't nearly close enough for him to let her in on his feelings. However, Harry found her serenity appealing as of late, because even his other friends weren't immune to the furore around him and Padma. And, honestly, Neville's sympathy, mingled with pity, was in no way better than the twins' teasing. Harry got enough discussions on his life from the newspapers and other students; he understood why most his friends treated him with the caution of handling a time-delayed bomb, but it didn't make him feel calmer. Luna didn't seem to be aware of the rumours at all; she blabbered on about the nargle infestation at the Yule Ball and the mysterious properties of something called the Aged Solar Whisk without a care to anything closer to home. And sometimes it was good to have a break from Blaise's pointed barbs, witty though they could be, and let Luna's nonsensical monologues wash over him.

Flying was another reprieve.

Harry had bumped into Cedric a few times on the Quidditch pitch, when he'd gone flying to clear his head. The strain of the year had left its marks on Cedric, too; the Hufflepuff had lost some of his usual cheer and his smiles were obviously painted on for consumer benefit. Incongruously, he offered one of those automatic and painfully fake grins to Harry the first time they saw each other on the Quidditch field; it took Cedric a while to snap out of it while Harry stared at him in silence. Then, the grin slid off Cedric's face, leaving behind a tired, slightly haunted expression.

("When I volunteered for this, I thought it would be more about the tasks and the glory, but we're up on a freak show without off time. I don't even know how you deal.")

They didn't have a Snitch to chase and made do with walnuts and golf balls for a couple of weeks until Krum came along, surly-looking as always, with his own Snitch and his own Firebolt. Cedric was hopelessly outclassed on his Nimbus, so they switched brooms around to even the odds. Fleur was the only champion absent, but they never commented on it, like they never commented on the Tournament anymore. Because this was not about the Tournament, or even about Quidditch. Just a
Snitch, a sky, and a dash for freedom. The things none of them said would have been rendered empty by words, anyway. Words could only express so much, and there was certainly no vocabulary for the resentful sort of kinship they felt on account of the Tournament.

Too soon, Viktor's fan club followed after him, and suddenly their next pick-up game wasn't fun, but a three-way match covered by the *Daily Prophet*.

("Famously, Harry Potter passed the First Task by flying. One has to wonder to what extent Krum's jealousy prompted him to participate in the supposedly friendly match on Hogwarts grounds today...")

They never flew together after that again.

Besides, the third task inched inevitably closer; the Quidditch pitch was soon closed off. In the last week of May, Bagman showed the maze to Harry, Cedric, Viktor and Fleur, wand constantly by his nose to ward off flies of the muckheap nesting in his right nostril. The twins' curse was apparently still working—or maybe they were renewing it regularly. Harry was sure they had a lot of frustration to channel, especially with their brother Percy currently being under investigation in the Crouch suicide case.

In the month leading up to the task, Harry had trained with unrelenting diligence—but, when the day came, he did not feel at all prepared, even if he tried to look his most confident as he walked into the maze after Cedric.

***

Harry and Cedric stood before the Triwizard Cup, staring at the trophy. It had taken them a long while to get there and both sported numerous injuries—Harry's worst and most recent came from their fight with the spider, but Cedric had been subjected to Viktor's Crucius for a few seconds, which was a whole different level of disturbing. Harry was glad for taking his Invisibility Cloak into the maze with him, rules be damned. He hadn't wanted to catch the eye of a murderous Krum, so he'd Stunned the guy from where he'd stood a little way off, invisible, helped Cedric up and shot red sparks for someone to come and collect the unhinged Bulgarian. And now, after what felt like hours of wandering the maze and encountering weird shit, he and Cedric stood side by side and looked at the gleaming trophy which promised glory and worldwide recognition to the one who'd take it back.

Harry tried to put his weight on the injured leg and winced as it throbbed in pain.

"Go on, then," he said, trying not to sound bitter. "Take the Cup."

"No, you take it," Cedric countered. "I wouldn't have got past that Acromantula if not for you—"

"Cedric, there's no bloody way I'd beat you to the Cup if we both ran towards it, so just go on and take it. You've won it fair and square."

"It's not at all fair," Cedric said firmly. "You got injured while helping me. You could have just left me."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Fine. How about we do it the Slytherin way, then—duel for it."

"And that's fair—how? You're fourteen—"

"Don't write me off so quickly," Harry warned. "Upper year Slytherins have been training me up all
year, and I've learnt a thing or two."

Cedric raised a sceptical eyebrow.

"Can you even duel with that leg?"

"Hold on a sec. Medeor!"

Sharp pain shot up his leg from the wound; Harry bit his lip as to avoid crying out.

"Harry!" Cedric reached out to steady him as he wobbled. "What are you doing?"

"Temporarily healing it," Harry forced through a wave of pain. "Hurts like hell, but I'll be mobile, though no marathon runner…"

"Aren't such spells a little…" Cedric cast around for a word.

"They're not Dark," Harry protested. "They're just—um, unconventional? Nothing bad, anyway, and dead useful."

Cedric shook his head, not looking particularly convinced. Harry tried putting his weight on his leg, again, and sighed in relief as it didn't hurt all that much.

"All good," he said. "Shall we, then?"

They settled into duelling stances a few feet away from each other—and boy, wasn't it weird to face Cedric that way and know that this wasn't a practice duel. Something actually depended on the outcome. They were competitors, now; not that Harry had ever seriously planned on winning the Cup, but if there was a chance he could win it in a fight, instead of just have it granted to him, he'd totally take it. After all, he might not need more fame, but winning the Triwizard Tournament would be fame of a rather different kind that just being the Boy-Who-Lived. It would prove that he was actually worth something, quite apart from the scar on his forehead.

"Expelliarmus," Cedric fired, opening the duel.

Harry's shield was already up; the spell ricocheted off.

"Furunculus. Mulco. Stupefy!" he cast in quick succession, hoping that at least one of the spells would hit. "Protego!" he added hastily, as Cedric's own Stunner sailed at him.

There weren't any physical objects Harry could take cover behind; they were in an open clearing. This could prove… unfortunate.

"Katalambano," Harry cast, hoping to catch Cedric in magical restraints.

Cedric jumped out of the way, eyes a little wide.

"Commuto in tela," he incanted hurriedly. "Pello!"

His spells transfigured twigs on the ground into darts and Banished them at Harry. Harry's shield deflected them, but he didn't have time to fire another spell before Cedric sent a curse flying at him, this time nonverbally. Harry maintained his shield, but he didn't like this, didn't like being forced on the defensive—

He opted to dodge the next spell, so that he'd have a chance to fire a curse, and Cedric seemed to be transfiguring something else when Harry threw a *Confringo* and forced him to roll out of the way,
abandoning whatever transfiguration he'd been cooking up.

Harry weighed the odds as his shield deflected the next curse. He was injured and beginning to tire, and Cedric was good, really good actually; Harry would probably not win if this went on for a long time. However, Harry could tell—could have told even before the duel had started—that Cedric was one of those quintessential nice guys, who wouldn't expect any tricks and wouldn't pull any himself.

Harry didn't even have to think about it.

Jumping out of the way of the next curse, he wobbled intentionally, pretended to stumble on his wounded leg and give a sharp cry of pain.

And being a nice, noble, wholesome guy no matter what was at stake, Cedric hesitated.

It was only a fraction of a second, but Harry had been waiting for it—and he shot a Stunner before Cedric had had the time to react.

Cedric fell, frozen, onto the ground.

Harry straightened, relief mingling with guilt in his chest. Pulling a trick on Cedric, who'd always been so kind to him, felt like betrayal, but—fuck it, all was fair in a fight. If you weren't mentally ready, you were screwed.

Harry walked over to Cedric and revived him.

"Constant vigilance," he said dryly.

The other boy only stared at Harry in silence, though, as if seeing a stranger.

"Look, I'm not sorry," Harry insisted. "You let your guard down during a duel, and it might have been a shitty thing of me to do, but you can't show weakness if you don't want it exploited—"

"Merlin, Harry, was the Cup so important to you?" Cedric asked, and sounded genuinely hurt.

Harry refused to back down.

"I would have done the same in any duel if I knew I couldn't defeat my opponent in a fair fight. You're too good for me, what did you expect me to do, sit back and admit defeat?"

"I don't know, but cheating is really not what I expected you to do."

"I didn't cheat," Harry stated, raising his chin. "I tricked you. If I pulled this stunt on Professor Moody, he would have taken that moment to disarm me, but you hesitated—"

"Whatever." Cedric shook his head. "Just take the Cup and let's get out of here. No," he stressed, seeing Harry's indecision, "we're not having that discussion again. Whether you put your name in the Goblet or not, you're going to win this Tournament, Harry. Congratulations. Now take the fucking Cup so that we can leave."

Harry turned towards the trophy. This, right here, would be the end of his friendship with Cedric, whom he'd grown to like, damn it. Still, Harry didn't think he would have behaved differently if he had to duel Cedric again. He felt that he was right, that Cedric shouldn't have left himself so open to be messed with, that maybe it was underhanded of him, but all that duelling honour crap was a luxury, it didn't have place in a serious fight…

Throwing one final glance at the other boy, Harry reached with his hand and touched the Triwizard
Cup. The last thing he saw before disappearing in a whirl of colour and sound was the shocked look on Cedric's face.

***

"Bertha, you have served the Master well, but we need you no longer… Master will have better servants soon. Avada Kedavra!"

Harry watched in panic as a jet of bright green light hit an empty-eyed woman who'd been stoking the fire under a large cauldron. She remained motionless on her knees for long moment and then fell sideways, like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Harry knew this woman: he had seen her in a dream, once, a horrifying nightmare he'd had last summer. Only then she had been lying in a pool of blood, but now she was here, and alive, but already dead, and her killer was standing over her with a look of glee on his face—on Professor Moody's face. And Moody's face was suddenly shifting, morphing, twisting into that of the man Harry had seen in that same dream—younger, less lined, with two perfectly healthy eyes. The magical eye popped out of its socket to roll onto the ground, and the wooden leg fell, unheeded, as a natural one grew in its place. Harry didn't understand—

"Bone of the father, unknowingly given… Flesh of the servant, willingly given… Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken…"

Harry didn't even feel the pain of the gash on his arm, not really, consumed as he was by the horror of what he was seeing. A shrivelled baby-like body in a cauldron, a man cutting off his own hand with a blissful expression on his face, and ohholyfuck this was Voldemort trying to come back—

And Harry had seen this baby before. He remembered this blackened, flaking skin, he'd been this baby in a dream once and just what the fuck was—

A tall, gaunt figure was rising out of the cauldron now, and Harry's scar erupted with pain greater than what he'd ever felt.

"Harry Potter! We meet at last…” Voldemort said. "I hope you appreciate the honour of being one of the first to learn of my return."

Harry was terrified out of his mind; his thoughts were racing and at the same time he didn't seem capable of thought at all, escape being his only and hopeless wish. And he couldn't help but cry out when Voldemort pressed a long pale finger to the curse scar—it had been aching like hell ever since he got to the graveyard, but this, now, was agony—

"My faithful Death Eaters… Some of you have been, of course, more faithful than others."

Harry felt sick as he learned, along with nine hooded figures who'd Apparated into the graveyard, how Voldemort had encountered a nosy journalist in Albania, possessed her only to find that she held some invaluable information, and travelled back to England in her body. He learned how Voldemort had gone to free Barty Crouch Jr., Crouch's son, from the Imperius he'd been held under in his own home for years. He learned how Crouch Jr. had helped Voldemort to acquire a rudimentary body—in the most sick and perverted way, as Harry knew from the nightmare that he was now sure had shown reality. He learned how Crouch Jr. had Polyjuiced into Mad-Eye Moody and put Harry's name in the Goblet. He learned how the Imperiused and brain-damaged Bertha Jorkins had become their puppet, taking care of Voldemort's weak body. He learned how Crouch had been deliberately helping Harry through the Tournament. He learned, finally, how the Portkey wards over Hogwarts would be lifted for the Triwizard winner, whom the Cup would transport to the audience—and how Crouch had used that fact to subvert the Portkey, just so that this moment
could happen.

"Summer solstice, the day of power and miraculous healing… There is nothing miraculous about my return; I have gone further than any other man to achieve immortality…"

Voldemort had planned, slowly and meticulously; he'd been patient. He'd known that this ritual of rebirth needed to happen on the day of the summer solstice, so he'd waited. He'd known that, in the aftermath of the failed attack on Godric's Hollow, Dumbledore had retrieved Voldemort's wand; the Dark Lord had therefore sent his most trusted servant to Hogwarts—not only to sabotage the Tournament, but also to steal the wand from the Headmaster's office and bring it back. The plan had taken a whole year to unfold, but it had succeeded—and Voldemort did not appear to be a reckless man. He smiled coldly and spoke of immortality in the voice of a man assured of having an eternity ahead of him. A year did not matter on the grand scheme of things; he was here now, and he had Harry at his mercy now, and Harry really, really didn't want to die—

"Untie him, Bartemius, and give him his wand. Let us grant to the last Potter a chance to die fighting…"

And fuck, he couldn't hope to trick Voldemort into losing.

"We should bow to each other, Harry… I said, bow…"

"Protego!" Harry muttered, without thinking; the shield deflected whatever spell Voldemort had been aiming at him, no doubt to humiliate him further somehow.

"Crucio!" came Voldemort's enraged hiss, and Harry tried to dodge out of the way, knowing there was no blocking this curse, but it was too late and he fell, consumed by unbearable pain.

All his nerves caught on fire. It felt as if he was burning, and being cut, and his head would burst from agony, he could hardly think, he was surely, surely dying—

"Now, that was just a taste," Voldemort said pleasantly from somewhere above Harry.

The pain ended, but its aftershocks still coursed through Harry's body; Harry lay on the ground, panting and trying to collect himself.

"You don't want me to torture you again, do you, Harry? Would you like me to just kill you with the next curse?"

Harry got up, slowly, gripping a gravestone to drag himself up. He tried to tune out Voldemort's taunting and come up with any sort of a viable escape plan, if such a thing was at all possible, which it probably wasn't—

"Answer me, Potter! Imperio!"

The pain from Harry's injuries retreated; he was left with a nice, comfortable floating feeling. Everything was all right, or would be soon, if he only listened to the voice in his head.

_Beg for your life,_ the voice urged silkily._Beg prettily, beg nicely, and maybe he will let you go._

The voice sounded very trustworthy, but Harry doubted it still, somehow.

_Just say please,_ the voice spoke, more firmly._Say please, please no…_

No, Harry thought, discomfited, there was something not right here—what was he supposed to be
saying please about?

Just say it!

"No!" Harry cried out, and suddenly reality slammed back into him—he was at the graveyard again, wracked with pain, and the voice in his mind was gone, and everything was clear now—

Voldemort's face was livid.

"No?" he asked, softly.

The Death Eaters, who had been jeering before, now fell almost fearfully silent.

"You dare defy me again, Harry?"

But Harry wasn't interested in listening to him. He knew it wouldn't be long now before Voldemort fired the third and final Unforgivable, and he wasn't about to let it happen.

With a burst of strength, he darted behind the tomb he'd been tied to. He'd suddenly remembered: he still had his Invisibility Cloak with him, and if there was ever a need to use it, it was now.

A curse chipped the tombstone just above Harry's head. Hastily, Harry took the cloak from out of his pocket and put it on.

He couldn't Apparate, and didn't have a broom, but at least they wouldn't see him now—the Invisibility Cloak covered him completely, and he'd silenced his steps with a whispered spell—

"Are you going to hide from me, Harry? Are you going to play the coward?"

The Death Eaters laughed; Harry gritted his teeth.

Cautiously, and almost forgetting to breathe from nervousness, Harry started creeping away. There were houses looming in the distance, some buildings, probably a village—a church was closest to the graveyard, so Harry figured he could maybe hide in it, or behind it, or something.

"This is getting tedious, Harry. Come out from behind the tomb. I thought you would want to die in battle, with your head held high, not slaughtered like a snivelling child."

You thought wrong, Harry snarled mentally. I don't want to die at all.

He was a good way away from Voldemort already, and nearing the fence separating the graveyard from the church, when he heard a noise that stilled his heart.

"Massster… he issses esssscaping, he isss invissible…"

Of course. The snake.

Harry made a few more cautious steps, looking around—he was in an open space, now, away from the tall tombstones.

"Your little charade is up, Potter," Voldemort said, his voice very, very cold, and Harry somehow knew that Voldemort could now tell where he was.

He turned around, still under the cloak, gripping his wand, but afraid to give himself away with a spell if Voldemort didn't yet know.
Voldemort remained where he had been, but he was facing Harry now and looking right at the spot where Harry stood, invisible. Pain burst forth from Harry's scar the moment his and Voldemort's eyes met.

"Avada Kedavra," Harry whispered, feeling numb, wand aimed at those gleaming red eyes, and Voldemort laughed, his voice echoing eerily around the graveyard, as he stepped out of the way of pale green light.

Voldemort's own Killing Curse sped towards Harry. Harry dodged, rolled out of the way of another, still under the cloak, clenching his teeth against the pain in his leg and his scar—and right there, with his cheek against young grass and dry soil, he realized, suddenly, without a trace of doubt, that he was going to die.

He was going to die, even though he was only fourteen, and had so much life yet to live and was not at all ready.

The Death Eaters and their taunts, the graveyard, the pain—all of it melted into the background, now. It was not important. The world became condensed to the rapid beating of Harry's heart, the smell of fresh night air and the magnetic pull of Voldemort's crimson eyes. He forced himself up.

Harry was standing upright, still uselessly clutching the Invisibility Cloak over himself with frozen fingers, when the Dark Lord's Killing Curse hit him squarely in the chest.

He saw bright green light, heard the soft rush of death.

Then, nothing.
Awareness returned gradually.

First came the knowledge that he *was*; he did not know where or who he was, but he knew he existed.

He looked around in vague curiosity. There was an endless sea of white on all sides of him, but it seemed to be changing form the longer he looked at it, swirling clouds solidifying into shapes.

Just as a glimmer of understanding began to dawn—these archways, this domed ceiling, these columns, they were somehow familiar—he heard a voice calling out from behind him.

"Harry."

Knowledge rammed into him before he'd finished turning; a little dizzy, he stared at two figures emerging from the mist.

"Mum?" They came closer still. "Dad?"

They smiled at him, the way they'd done a long time ago in the Mirror of Erised, and Harry swallowed past an obstruction in his throat.

"I'm dead," he stated, more to himself than to them.

Harry's father—tall, with messy hair, and slightly foggy glasses—reached him in two steps; Harry found himself engulfed in an embrace, his face pressed to his dad's robes.

"Not quite," James Potter said softly. "Not yet."

Once he released Harry, Harry's mum stepped forward; She handed it to James with a stern look, and he took it, grimacing.

"Oh Harry," Lily said as she swept him into a hug. "I love you," she whispered into his ear, and her hair—a deep, warm red—tickled Harry's nose.

She smelled like something long forgotten, like fresh dough and safety.

Harry nodded wordlessly into her shoulder, trying to rein in the tears gathered in his eyes.

"Let's sit," Harry's mum said, wiping the dampness off her own cheeks, and drew Harry towards a row of benches he had not noticed before.

She turned to James as they walked.

"Let me take it back," she said, and withdrew the bundle from her husband's awkward hold.

"What is it?" Harry inquired.

Lily and James Potter exchanged glances. Then, without speaking, Lily lowered her arms.

Harry reeled back in shock and bumped into his dad, who steadied him by the shoulder.

"This is—"
It was the horrible misshapen baby with flaky pigmented skin that Harry had seen Voldemort be before the rebirth ritual. Except that now, the baby was sleeping, a pained expression on its scrunched-up face.

Harry swallowed against his nausea.

"Why are you holding it?" he asked his mother, and was proud of the way his voice lacked hysterical notes.

"It's only a baby," she replied sadly. "I could not listen to it cry."

They sat down on a bench, Harry's parents on either side of him. Harry kept stealing glances at the baby in his mother's arms; it unnerved him to see it so close to her.

"You didn't tell me what it was," he said hesitantly. "Why is it here?"

James sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"I think it's best if we start at the beginning," he uttered.

"And when is that?"

There was a pause.

"The night we died," Lily said softly, not looking at Harry.

"No," James countered. "The night Trelawney gave the prophecy."

Harry listened, with mounting anxiety, as his parents narrated the tale of their own deaths and the events leading up to it: the batty Divination professor—then only a candidate for the post—giving a prophecy that would seal Harry's future; the attack on Halloween; the protective power of Lily's sacrifice. Harry had known, from memories unearthed by the Dementors, what happened that night; he'd heard his mother's screams, his father's last words, Voldemort's high-pitched laugh—but he'd never thought, never imagined even in his darkest nightmares that he was the cause of it all.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, staring unseeingly into the distance. "He came for me. If not for me, you'd still be——"

"Don't say that," Lily implored, touching the back of Harry's hand to make him look at her. "Please don't say that. If I had that choice, today—I'd have done it again. I'd have taken the curse for you, today just as then. It is not your fault. Only Voldemort is to blame. I would always make the same choice."

"As would I," James added firmly.

"Yes, but if not for me——"

"If not for Voldemort," James corrected. "And if not for Voldemort, things would have been different altogether."

Harry closed his eyes for several long moments, trying to calm his breathing. Neither Lily nor James spoke, evidently giving him time.

When Harry opened his eyes, it was to check that his parents were still there.

"What did the prophecy say?" he asked finally.
Lily was the one to recite the words. They came out almost soothing, like a lullaby, only a twisted one, one promising death and pain before a hope of peaceful sleep. The power to vanquish, the Dark Lord as equal, and either must die, and neither can live…

"I've just died," Harry said. "The prophecy is fulfilled."

James and Lily remained silent. Harry bit his lip.

"Isn't it?"

"It got complicated," James pronounced, brown eyes serious, "because of Lily's sacrifice."

"I don't understand," Harry said.

The bundle in his mother's arms gave a soft mewl; Harry jumped and threw it a disgusted look. James frowned.

"Do you want me to take it?" he asked Lily.

"It's just a baby," she repeated. "It's okay."

James shook his head, as if to jiggle his thoughts into a coherent arrangement.

"Look, Harry… this is not the sort of magic you're used to. Not the sort of swish-flick-whoosh, instant effect, established procedure stuff. It's… deeper magic, soul magic, where things get murky and nobody can really predict anything. It's… difficult to understand."

"But you do," Harry said.

"I'm dead," James explained. "That helps."

Lily hit James on the arm, reaching from behind Harry.

"Concentrate," she said. "We don't have much time."

"We don't?" Harry asked, alarmed.

"Depends which way you look at it," James said. "In earthly terms, we have no time at all. Now… when Lily died the way she did, she invoked deep, ancient magic. She gave you protection the likes of which nothing measures up to."

"And this is why Voldemort could not kill me?" Harry ascertained.

"That… is debatable," Lily said, tucking a strand of auburn hair behind her ear. "There is also the prophecy to think of, which promised that he would mark you as his equal. There were many forces at work here. And…"

Lily threw a glance at James. James looked at his shoes.

"Harry, this may be difficult to hear," he told them. "None of this is something anyone chose to let happen, but…"

"When Voldemort tried to kill you that night," Lily continued, forcing the last few words through with visible effort, "when the Killing Curse rebounded on him, a piece of his soul—it broke off. It sought the nearest living being to occupy and..." Lily clasped her hands and finished in a hushed voice: "It happened to be you."
Harry experienced a brief feeling of vertigo, like he was falling down very far and very fast. He looked from his mum to his dad, hoping to see that he'd misunderstood something, that his mother hadn't just said what he thought she'd said—but they were both solemn, unsmiling. Serious.

"All this time... I've lived with Voldemort's soul inside mine?" he asked, very calmly.

"Not inside," James hurried to explain, seeing the look on Harry's face. "They did not mesh. It was in you, but it interacted with your own soul very little. Your Parseltongue abilities—"

"Came from Voldemort's soul in me?"

James winced.

"Well, yes."

And to think that Harry used to like his ability to talk to snakes, thought it useful, special...

"Lily's sacrifice was also the reason why your soul and Voldemort's stayed separate," James said. "It kept a barrier between them, of sorts. After tonight, it would have started breaking down, but even then it would take years for your soul and Voldemort's to meld into one."

"Why would it start breaking down?" Harry asked. "Why after tonight? Because of the Killing Curse?"

"No," Lily said, and for the first time anger flashed in her bright green eyes. "Because Voldemort took your blood."

"Your blood carries the protection," James said, resting a hand on Lily's arm. "Now, it flows in Voldemort's veins. Your blood in his veins, his soul in your body... you see how complicated this is getting."

"Yes," Harry said hoarsely. "Are we—going to become the same person, or something, share minds, I don't know—how on earth am I supposed to defeat him if we're getting more and more the same?"

"Shh," Lily said. She wrapped an arm around Harry and kissed his temple, the hideous baby balanced gently on her knee. "No, you're never going to become the same person, of course not."

"You might have shared minds, though, in a way," James noted. "You had a link between you—the curse scar. You have received a glimpse into Voldemort's mind through it, I believe."

Harry thought of his summer nightmare and shuddered.

"Voldemort's fragment of soul inside you was reaching out to Voldemort. For the same reason, your scar hurt next to him."

"All right," Harry said, although nothing was all right. "But what about—now? I mean, I'm here, and this is—" He gestured at the shrivelled baby in his mother's arms.

"And here is where it becomes even more complicated." James nodded. "For many reasons. One of them being that, while you served as a sort of a... tether to life for Voldemort, carrying a piece of his soul in you, he is the same for you, now, because he took your blood."

"Wait," Harry begged, holding up a hand. "I don't understand. The prophecy says, *neither can live while the other survives*, and now it seems that neither can die—"

"Well, death is the other side of life," James said, pragmatically. "Your life *and* death are tied to
Voldemort through the prophecy."

Harry didn't like the sound of that.

"So—my blood in Voldemort's veins is keeping me alive?"

"There are also two souls in you that could die," James added. "Yours and Voldemort's own, of which he has no idea."

"And it's his curse that tried to kill you," Lily said darkly. "Him killing his own soul—well, it resulted in a bit of a loop, especially with your blood and my protection mixed in."

Harry's head was starting to hurt.

"That is still keeping it relatively simple." Lily sighed. "There is also the fact that you were under the Invisibility Cloak when you died."

Harry raised his eyebrows.

"So what, Death couldn't see me?"

"That's right," James said, in all seriousness. "Death couldn't see you."

Harry stared.

"It's a very old legend," Lily informed him. "And the cloak is a very old artefact. It has been passed down through James's family for generations, supposedly originating with its creator, Ignotus Peverell."

"Yeah, heard of him," Harry muttered.

"According to the legend, Ignotus hid from Death under this cloak, and Death could not find him," Lily said. "He only died when he took the cloak off and surrendered willingly. Now, it's probably half-myth, and I'm sure nobody has yet used the cloak for surviving the Killing Curse—"

"But you're my son, and therefore special." James beamed. "The impact with the curse, and the magics interwoven there, have probably destroyed the cloak, though." James shrugged. "A worthy cause."

"Right," Harry said.

He thought of the times he'd sneaked around Hogwarts with the cloak, safe under its protection. He thought of hiding under it tonight, of clutching it over himself as the last line of defence against Voldemort.

"And it's midsummer," James continued in the meanwhile. "Summer solstice. A very powerful day. There is a reason why Voldemort had chosen it to come back, because his ritual was not foolproof, either."

"So—this is why I'm still alive," Harry concluded, although it sounded more like a question. "All these—things—and I'm not dead."

"Yes." Lily's smile radiated warmth. "Yes, and you could go back to life. More than that, you would be whole now. Voldemort's soul…" She looked down at the bundle in her arms. "It would stay. You would be free of it."
"I wouldn't be able to speak Parseltongue anymore," Harry said, not sure how he meant it—as a good thing or a bad thing. It came out flat.

"You wouldn't," James agreed. "You would have no more visions, either, because the connection would be severed."

"So… I go back," Harry said, not letting these details distract him, "whole, without Voldemort's soul in me this time, and live on."

"Yes."

His parents were nodding encouragingly.

"Or else I could stay here."

James's expression turned wary as he said:

"Yes."

"With you."

"Harry," Lily said, eyes brimming with sadness. "Please don't."

Harry looked at his dad.

"We…" James ran a hand through his hair. "Kid, we're not ready to have you die, not any more than you were before you got here. It's… better that way."

"But—if I stayed, I'd be here. With you."

"Yes, but that's all you would ever be."

Harry looked at his hands, clasped in his lap.

It was tempting to imagine the perfect life he would lead here—something that he would never have back in reality, because the two people it centred around were dead.

But, if he stayed, knowing he could go back, the action would reek strongly of suicide.

But his parents were here. And he could stay with them.

But his dad was right, that was all he would ever be: here. This, here, was not life; his life would stop, it would end, and he'd have—this, instead.

But—

"I'd be going back to the prophecy," Harry said, swallowing hard. "I'd be going back to Voldemort, and to the prophecy, and to having been killed."

"Yes," Lily whispered, drawing him into her shoulder. "Yes, sweetheart, it's going to be difficult."

Harry looked around the open space they were at, which had finally solidified into what Harry recognized as the Kings Cross station.

"You're going to get on a train," he said, suddenly certain.

"Yes."
"And I... have to leave."

Even quieter, now: "Yes."

"How... I mean, Voldemort is there. How could I get away? Wouldn't I just—die again?"

"The Triwizard Cup is a Portkey," Lily said urgently, looking into Harry's eyes. "It's a Portkey that's charmed both ways—"

"Both—?"

"Crouch subverted the Portkey to bring you away," James explained. "The Cup was supposed to be one—from the maze to the audience. He probably saw no need to remove that, since it was easier to just tweak the Portkey instead of creating a new one."

"Yeah... okay," Harry said, dazed.

It seemed to him that everything sped up a little; the white mist stopped twirling, the scene before him was becoming more vague, and he heard the distinct whistle of a train...

"It's ending, isn't it?" he asked, looking between his parents. "I have to go, don't I?"

They stood up. Lily put the bundle from her arms down onto the bench and turned to face Harry, her brilliant eyes shining with tears—and something else, was it pride?

"Harry," she said, taking his hand in hers, "whatever happens from now on... whatever happened in the past..." Her hand squeezed Harry's, then flew up to smooth his fringe away from his forehead, to touch his cheek. Her quick caresses were feather-soft, soothing. "Just never doubt that we love you. I wish we could have been there for you, all these years, when Petunia..."

Lily swept a tear off her cheek, angrily, and then Harry found himself enveloped in her arms—and he hugged her back—maybe if he could just wish hard enough, she would stay forever—James's hand landed on his shoulder, and Harry looked up into his eyes.

"The prophecy—this is not why we want you to go back," James said, expression solemn. "You didn't ask to be named in the prophecy, to save the world—and I don't care what anyone says, nobody can expect you to. If you do... it's your choice. I want you to go back because you have a chance to live. Live for yourself, not for some prophecy. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded, though he understood only that the scene was fading, that his time here was running out, and that he was about to lose his parents, all over again, and this time it would be by his own choice.

For a moment, he wanted to scream for it all to stop, to change his mind, to grasp at the fleeting images of a future that would never come to pass—

But he was slipping, and the world was blurring, and his parents were waving—

And it was already too late.

***

Harry came to with his body sprawled on the ground, face pressed to hard soil. Its smell assaulted his nose as his lungs took a deep breath; over the thunderous beating of his heart, he heard a rustle of cloaks in the distance, hushed exclamations exchanged between several people.
"Move away, Avery, let me help our Lord—"

"You can't tell me what to do, Crouch—"

Harry swallowed, then opened his eyes.

He was alive.

He was alive, and his only chance to continue living was in reaching the Triwizard Cup that lay a long way away somewhere.

Raising his head slightly, Harry saw Death Eaters crowded around the prone body of the Dark Lord. Odd. It seemed as if he, too, had fallen when the curse hit Harry.

Voldemort was getting up, now, and there was no time to waste.

"Accio Cup," Harry whispered, fingers tense around his wand. Then, he aimed it at the Death Eaters: "Fulmen!"

He shut his eyes against the blinding flash of light as Death Eaters screamed obscenities; he knew he got them. However, now they also knew—

"He's alive!"

It was impossible to mistake the honest incredulity, horror and almost awe in that cry.

Harry opened his eyes to see Death Eaters looking around blindly, trying to spot him.

Voldemort, though… he hadn't been caught by the charm, but he seemed momentarily frozen by the shock of seeing Harry alive, though his face reflected nothing. Then, he sent a spell fizzling towards Harry, and Harry rolled out of the way and lunged for the Cup that was sailing towards him in the air, swerving closer—

Voldemort fired a spell at the Cup, now, probably guessing Harry's intent, but Harry's frantic Protego had enough power behind it to block the spell before it hit, and then it didn't matter any longer.

Harry's hand closed on the Cup.

He clutched it, trying to stave off nausea, as the Portkey whirled him back to Hogwarts—or at least he hoped he'd be going to Hogwarts, that his parents were right—

His parents—

He slammed into solid ground, disoriented, and there were screams from all sides, shouting his name and the news of his return.

Looking up, Harry saw Quidditch stands, redressed for the third task, people's worried faces, all blurring into one large blob, and the castle looming in the distance.

He was definitely at Hogwarts.

It was as if his body had been waiting just for that final confirmation to give out. Suddenly, he felt very weak and very tired, like his bones weighed too much for him to carry. The Triwizard Cup dropped from his unfeeling fingers.
"Harry, my boy," a familiar voice said from beside him, "I cannot express how glad we all are to see you in good health."

Harry stifled a hysterical laugh. In good health? Is that what they called it these days, you were in good health if you'd managed to die—

"Voldemort," he rasped. "Voldemort—he's back. I saw him."

Dumbledore seemed grim, but not surprised.

"Then it is as we feared," he said. "Are you seriously injured, Harry? I see a wound on your arm. Do you think you can walk?"

"I—think so."

Dumbledore helped Harry up. Harry saw a cordon of Aurors closing off the area. Briefly, he glimpsed Cedric trying to get through and being denied access. On the other hand, Cornelius Fudge, or someone who looked very much like him, was approaching Harry and Dumbledore.

"Now, see here—what do we have? Potter, what are you—"

"Cornelius," Dumbledore interrupted smoothly, "if you could continue your admirable handling of the situation here? I will question young Harry on tonight's events and speak to you as soon as possible. In half an hour, perhaps? I am afraid the matters are most urgent."

"I—yes, but, very well—"

The Minister seemed no more certain what to do than the rest of the people around them, but he drew himself up and marched off, shouting orders at the Aurors.

"I want to go to the hospital wing," Harry said bluntly as Dumbledore led him towards the castle.

Surely, he couldn't be expected to deal with any more shit tonight.

"The hospital wing is indeed our destination," Dumbledore said. "However, it is imperative that I hear the story of what occurred tonight in order to begin marshalling our defences against it, as I'm sure you realize."

Time seemed to be playing tricks on Harry; they had only just got through the crowd of onlookers out on the pitch, but now he was already stumbling over the castle's stairs.

"I've told you all that was important," Harry forced out, trying to summon anger through the haze of his exhaustion. Anger was good. If he was angry, he wouldn't let himself go and shatter into a thousand pieces right here, in the Entrance Hall. "Voldemort is back, what else is there? Aren't you going to do something about it, tell the Minister, alert the press?"

"All in good time, Harry," Dumbledore promised. "For now, I must find out the manner in which tonight's events occurred, or else I shall remain uncertain as to the best course of action."

The infirmary doors opened without prompting before Harry and Dumbledore; the nurse came out to meet them.

"Mr. Potter!" Her eyes widened at the sight of him. "What have you been doing to yourself? Oh my —the Headmaster! What can I—"

"We will require a quarter of an hour, Poppy," Dumbledore said, inclining his head politely. "After
"The boy needs immediate medical attention!" Madam Pomfrey insisted, but wilted under the force of Dumbledore's gaze. "Oh, very well. A quarter of an hour, and not a moment longer! I don't care what earth-shattering matters are being discussed!"

She retreated, huffing, into the room at the back of the infirmary. Harry sat gingerly at one of the hospital beds; they were pristine white and he was covered in blood, sweat and dirt, and he had the absurd thought that Aunt Petunia would have a fit. And yet thinking of his aunt made him recall his parents, and he needed to move on from that thought before the lump in his throat made it impossible to speak.

Dumbledore seated himself on the bed opposite Harry's.

"Dear boy, I understand that this is a very trying time for you, but I really must ask—where did Barty Crouch's Portkey take you?"

"To a graveyard…" Harry began automatically, but then his mind caught up with the words. He hadn't even mentioned Crouch yet. "Wait, how do you—?"

"Alastor finally broke through the Imperius tonight, at about the same time when young Diggory shot up red sparks," Dumbledore related somberly. "Alastor informed us of Crouch's plan. You see, Crouch escaped Hogwarts earlier today and left real Alastor in his place—Professor Moody had to be present at the task, lest I grew suspicious. Crouch's attention must have wavered during the course of tonight, so Alastor broke the Imperius and told us of the plan. Cedric Diggory confirmed that you had indeed been taken somewhere by the Cup…"

"To a graveyard," Harry repeated, filling in the pause. He spoke fast, doing his best not to listen to the words coming out of his mouth. "It took me to some graveyard, and Voldemort was there, and so was Crouch, and then there was this ceremony, with blood of the enemy and bone of the father, and he cut off his own hand and he was happy about it, and then Voldemort was alive, and Death Eaters arrived, and he told the story and then we duelled—"

"You did?" Dumbledore asked, leaning forward.

"Not really. He killed me."

The Headmaster went still, eyes alert on Harry.

"And yet you seem perfectly alive, my boy," he said at length.

"That would be because I am," Harry retorted, tenuous hold on his temper slipping. "For a lot of reasons, and my cloak is totally wrecked now, but you know what? I've found out a lot of things that you haven't told me, sir, and if you really want to talk to me instead of letting me get fixed up, you can tell me why you've kept silent about things that I know you knew."

Somewhere in the distant part of his mind, he couldn't believe he was talking to the man like that, but at the same time, what could Dumbledore really do? He wouldn't kill the Boy-Who-Lived, and Harry had already died once tonight, anyway.

Besides, it was either this, or flying into outright hysteria.

"It is true that I have kept some information from you, Harry," Dumbledore said. "However, please believe me when I say that everything I have done, I have done with your benefit in mind."
"Because me facing Voldemort while unaware of the prophecy or his soul fragment inside me was really great," Harry snarled. "Thanks—so much."

He thought dimly, through his rage, that he'd managed to surprise Dumbledore again; the man's face went blank for an instant, before the earnest expression returned.

"Rest assured, Harry, that you and I will discuss my decisions and the reasoning behind them at a later date. This conversation is too lengthy and important for us to have in a hurry, and I'm afraid the fine Madam Pomfrey will evict me from her domain in very near future," Dumbledore said with a smile.

Harry did not appreciate the attempt at lightening the atmosphere; he continued glaring at Dumbledore stonily. Dumbledore sighed.

"There are a few more questions I must ask about tonight's events," he said. "Those of immediate importance. Please do not think that I disregard your other concerns, but the information you can provide now might save lives."

He let that sink in for a moment before continuing:

"Do you know the identities of any Death Eaters present at the graveyard? Could you tell me in greater detail what Voldemort said to them? And it might seem intrusive to you, but I must know—exactly how did your confrontation with Voldemort unfold?"

And Dumbledore stood firm, and looked into Harry's eyes as if scanning him with an x-ray machine, and Harry was too damn tired and incoherent and incapable of evading Dumbledore's verbal traps right now. He hated to tell Dumbledore about the meeting with his parents, but in the end it proved necessary, because it was apparently a big deal whether or not Voldemort knew the full prophecy and whether or not he was aware of his soul fragment inside Harry. Harry still reduced the meeting to a few bare facts—parents, soul fragment, prophecy—but by the end he felt like he'd physically assault Dumbledore if the man asked a single question more.

When Dumbledore finally left, Harry remained sitting on the hospital bed, completely wrung out.

"Mr. Potter!" Madam Pomfrey cried, bustling back into the room. "At last!"

She did a scan of his injuries and gasped when the full extent of the damage showed up; the Killing Curse, in particular, left a new scar on Harry's chest that the matron had blatantly no idea what to do with. She muttered to herself in frustration about the dangers the students were being exposed to as she applied salves and healing spells to Harry's wounds.

"Your friends wish to see you, but I absolutely forbid it," she told him in a voice that clearly disapproved of friends in general. "You are in no fit state to be receiving visitors—drink this." She handed him a potion. "Now, go to sleep and give your body a chance to recover."

Harry complied, only too ready to say goodbye to reality and fall into a slumber. Perhaps then he could forget for a while that he had actually died tonight, that Voldemort was back and that everything would be different now, forever.

***

Harry was looking out of the infirmary window. He watched the play of sun and shadow on the leaves of a tree nearby; if he opened the window and extended a hand, he'd be able to touch those leaves, which were sometimes a dark, forest green, sometimes golden in the light, and if the sun shone just so, the leaves were an impossible shade of emerald…
There were things Harry could compare that colour to, but didn't, because that would just stir up the ghosts he was trying to put to rest.

In that regard, his forced confinement to the hospital wing was a blessing; Harry wasn't ready to go out and meet the school, the press, the Ministry without knowing what he thought about anything. There were decisions to be made, and conclusions to be drawn, and dice... well, never mind that; the die had already been cast, although Harry's hand had been forced there, somewhat. Certain things had been taken out of his hands before he was even born, but others he could still determine for himself.

He'd chosen, back at the ephemeral Kings Cross station, to have a future.

He'd always just... lived, before. He'd taken his being alive for granted and just lived, without thinking too much of the future or inquiring too deeply about the past. He now knew it had been a mistake; he'd let others determine what he knew of his past, and his past was hiding things that dictated his future. Blaming Dumbledore for that was as tempting as it was impossible: Dumbledore had not told Harry anything, but Harry had never asked, either. In a similar vein, Voldemort had made it his goal to kill Harry, but the continuation of their struggle would be just as much Harry's doing, because Harry had chosen to come back—at the urging of his parents, yes, but he'd chosen to return in full awareness of what he would be facing.

Voldemort was a part of the future Harry had chosen to face.

He and Voldemort were inextricably linked—Harry had known this, instinctively, for a long time. Ever since second year, he'd felt delicate threads of destiny connecting himself and Tom Riddle; the prophecy explained a lot but changed nothing. Righteous rage or thirst for revenge were far from Harry's mind as he looked into his future. Instead, he was filled with the cold certainty that he would have to fight Voldemort—sooner or later, in one form or another, it would inevitably happen. Harry would not be free to live his life until he cut Voldemort out of existence, until their lives and deaths stopped revolving around each other, until he was unencumbered by prophetic bonds.

He didn't want to die again. Lying awake in the early hours of next morning, before the sun rose and the sky was still the dull grey colour of unwashed linen, Harry promised to himself that Voldemort would be the one dying the next time.

***

"Merlin, Harry, I'm so sorry," were Cedric's first words.

Incidentally, Cedric was also Harry's first visitor the next day. Perhaps Harry should not have been so surprised to see him, considering that he did vaguely recall seeing Cedric, ashen-faced and desperate, when he'd returned from the graveyard that night.

"What are you sorry for?" Harry asked cautiously.

"For the Cup! I basically made you take it and then you disappeared for an hour and then you looked half-dead and all bloody—"

"I'm sorry, too," Harry said, "for the way I ended up taking it. But it's not your fault that I took it."

Cedric shook his head and sat down next to Harry's bed.

"Where did it Portkey you to?" he asked quietly.

And Harry had to decide, here, whether he wanted to tell his friends the truth. Because he really
didn't want to talk about it—ever again—but it wasn't the kind of news he could keep to himself. His friends needed to know. The world needed to know. This was beyond Harry's sensitivities; Dumbledore was right, this could save lives.

"Voldemort," he said in the end, after what felt like an eternity of gazing at the white sheets on his bed. "It took me to Voldemort."

He gave Cedric a brief summary of what had happened, already imagining the way he'd have to repeat it time and time again, to all his friends and then maybe to some strangers. He skipped the whole meeting with his parents, as well as the information revealed therein; he was not yet ready to confess to the prophecy, or to having served as a vessel to Voldemort's soul fragment. He related his story without glancing at Cedric once, afraid to see disbelief written on his face—or rejection, like that night.

("Cheating is not what I expected you to do…")

There was silence after he'd finished. Then Cedric said, in a strangled whisper:

"It could have been either one of us…"

And Harry started, because that had not occurred to him before. Because, despite however traumatizing the experience had been, Harry could see the logic of Voldemort choosing him for use in this particular ritual. Harry Potter had been Voldemort's downfall—well, he'd be his resurrection, too.

What if Cedric had won that duel, as he should have?

Voldemort might have taken Cedric's blood, but then Cedric would die, Harry's mind supplied. Voldemort would probably not have given Cedric back his wand. And there was no prophecy, no soul fragments and no blood protection between Cedric and Voldemort; Cedric would have been dead by that Killing Curse, irreversibly, and his corpse would have stayed to rot next to the grave of Tom Riddle, Sr.

Harry shuddered, and it was sick to even consider it, but maybe it had to be Harry there, at that graveyard, in the end.

On a more educational note, Cedric filled Harry in on what had taken place while he'd been gone. As soon as Harry had disappeared, Cedric had sent up red sparks; everyone had been expecting Harry to appear in front of the crowds, because the Cup was meant to be a Portkey. Minutes had passed; Harry had failed to show. Then, Mad-Eye Moody had gone into convulsions and started spouting really strange things, and Cedric might have panicked a little bit, because his memories weren't very clear, but he did remember Fred Weasley clocking him in the face with the question of what he'd done to Harry. There had been a general commotion when it had become obvious that something had gone dreadfully wrong with the task; Viktor Krum came out from under the Imperius, Fleur Delacour suffered the after-effects of the Cruciatus, and Aurors had been called onto the scene.

"And what are people saying now?" Harry inquired cautiously.

Cedric shrugged.

"They're speculating, but there's been no official explanation of anything," he said. "There was a small article in the Prophet about a disturbance at the Tournament. The Ministry's keeping mum. Dumbledore's made no announcement. Karkaroff is gone, nobody explains that, either. Everyone gets it that something huge has happened, but the lack of information is setting people on edge."
"Karkaroff is gone?" Harry repeated.

"Running from Voldemort, judging by what you said." Cedric nodded. "Viktor looks like he'll kill the next person who asks him a question, Fleur hasn't been seen."

"And what about you? Aren't people asking you questions?"

Cedric buried his face in his hands with a groan.

"Don't remind me. I didn't even know what to say, because up until now I only knew that you'd disappeared. Do you…" He raised his eyes. "Do you want me to tell others about You-Know-Who and all?"

Harry sighed.

"Yeah, just don't go into the details," he said. "They need to know, especially if nobody else is telling them anything…"

"I've spoken to my dad," Cedric said. "It seems that he's been under some pressure to keep me quiet about what I've seen. He's having none of it, of course, but I think the Ministry might want to hush things up."

Harry frowned.

"Great. I guess there's only that much the Ministry can hush up, though," he mused. "I mean, if everyone knew things went wrong, and Aurors were called, and the champions gave their evidence…"

"Yeah, and foreign newspapers are writing about it," Cedric said. "So we'll see what happens. I'll spread the word, anyway."

Harry's prediction about having to tell the story many times came true, of course—all his friends poured into the infirmary to visit him, each worried and wishing to know what on earth had happened. Neville had been wide-eyed and pale, Terry and Anthony serious, Hermione openly sympathetic. The twins tried for nonchalance; Luna did a better impression of it seemingly without trying, except that her hands shook visibly. The first time Harry was asked about Sirius Black's presence among the Death Eaters, he didn't know what they were talking about.

"What? No, Sirius Black is innocent. He's never been a Death Eater. He killed the man really responsible for betraying my parents and escaped from Britain. I don't know where he is, but he has nothing to do with this."

And everyone stared at him in amazement, but Harry only shrugged it off. His anger at Sirius Black seemed distant and inconsequential now; in the light of recent events, he couldn't recall why it was supposed to be a big deal.

Hagrid showed up and nearly crushed Harry's ribs in a hug. Padma came, too, and was uncharacteristically solemn as she listened. She seemed to be evaluating everything, weighing Harry's story, and her dark eyes were observant as she took in the briefest flashes of emotion on Harry's face. She surprised Harry by saying quietly:

"This changes everything, doesn't it? You're going to need as many people on your side as you can have." And then, with a hint of her usual fickleness: "Good thing I'm so charming, I'll bring lots of converts."
In the end, Harry learned most from the way Blaise and Millie treated him. They were watchful and quietly supportive, careful not to say too much, and their cautious attitude told Harry volumes about the mood in Slytherin. Incidentally, all of Harry's non-Slytherin friends warned him against returning to 'that pit of snakes'—after all, Slytherin was widely associated with Death Eater connections. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Harry would be in danger there; Terry suggested a re-Sorting in a joking tone, but his eyes betrayed his seriousness.

"I'm a Slytherin, too," Harry answered to all such claims. "I won't be scared away from my own House. They'll just have to deal with it."

***

And yet, he wasn't all that sure of himself when he opened the door and stepped into the Slytherin common room.

There was an instant hush; the moment he walked in, conversations died down and people turned to stare. Before Harry'd managed to take a few steps towards his usual seat, a solid wall of students materialized in front of him, blocking his way and holding him in a semi-circle. Harry glanced around and saw Malfoy's gleeful face, Bletchley's frown, and the inscrutable expressions of Blaise and Millicent. They did not rush forward to defend him; they stayed there, with the group, waiting for him to prove himself—or else sink. They weren't on his ship unless they knew for sure it would weather the first serious storm.

Well. He'd been expecting something like this; bring it on, then.

Harry raised his chin defiantly, leaned back against the wall and smiled with aplomb he did not feel.

"So, Potter, care to tell us what happened during the third task?"

Montague threw the first question. Perhaps he'd been appointed as the spokesman; perhaps he was just more impatient than others.

"Odd that you should ask," Harry said. "As a matter of fact, Voldemort and I had a little chat. I suppose some of you—" A pointed glance at Malfoy. "—already know this from your parents."

"Bullshit!" someone shouted.

A ripple of angry mutters went through the crowd.

"Your story is bullshit," declared a seventh-year Harry vaguely knew by sight. "If you'd met the Dark Lord, you wouldn't still be alive."

People were nodding in agreement. Harry gathered his mental focus to stay impassive through the next bit.

"What made you think he wanted to kill me?"

Naturally, a general outcry followed.

"Of course he'd want to kill you!"

"You're the Boy-Who-Bloody-Lived!"

"You wouldn't stand a chance!"

"Yes, I'm the Boy-Who-Lived," Harry asserted, once the shouts had quieted down a bit. "I'm special,
aren't I? Voldemort knows this better than anyone. How can you be sure—"

"That's wrong!" Crabbe was shaking his head in bewilderment. "My father said the Dark Lord killed you and—"

"Vince", Malfoy hissed in warning, but it was too late—and made worse by Goyle's supportive:

"Yeah, and you didn't die!"

The crowd of Slytherins erupted in murmurs: suddenly, Harry's story was confirmed by an unexpected source.

"Wait, so you mean You-Know-Who is actually back?"

"Potter is making it all up," Malfoy insisted, but the cat was out of the bag, now.

"Was it supposed to be a secret?" Goyle wondered loudly.

"I thought we were happy that the Dark Lord is back!" Crabbe agreed.

"No, you morons, we are meant to be sneaky about it!" Nott snarled, furious.

Harry welcomed the pandemonium that ensued; he had a few moments to sigh in relief and compose himself again. Saying those words, claiming that he had Voldemort's favour, left a foul taste in his mouth. He had been hoping that someone would contradict him—he'd actually thought it'd be Malfoy, but the blond was apparently smarter than he appeared. Harry didn't quite know where he'd have taken his charade had the plan flopped. He just knew that he had to fight for influence in Slytherin, all over again, and that it'd be pretty damn hard to do with Death Eaters' children rising in power.

The crowd was no longer blocking Harry's way in a neat semi-circle; people were milling about and chattering anxiously, so Harry could, if he wanted, make his way through. However, that was not how he needed this to happen.

He wouldn't sneak around unnoticed. He had to show that he had the right to walk with the rest of them.

"How did you escape, Potter, if You-Know-Who was really there?" someone shouted.

"They're saying you survived the Killing Curse again!"

"Is it true that You-Know-Who killed you and you didn't die?"

This was such a circus. And Harry was walking the fucking tightrope.

He braced himself for his next act.

He waited until most of the noise had died down and people turned towards him, eager to hear him answer those questions. Harry raised his head high, stepped forward and spread his arms in affected guilelessness.

"How did I survive? Well, that's for me to know and for you to find out. But hey, I've told you, haven't I? I'm special."

He cocked his head to the side and smirked.
It kind of felt like the smirk could fall off his face any second, like a physical mask, but he hoped the glue would hold for a while longer. Losing his cool now would mean throwing himself to the sharks. If he managed to hold it, though—he might still count a victory here.

"You are so full of shit, Potter," Bletchley said, and it came out a little awed.

Like Bletchley was trying to mentally encompass just how full of it Harry was, but couldn't put his audacity into words.

"Whatever you say, Miles." Harry was pretty sure the worst was over, now; the crowd was too divided to lynch him and he knew his performance had impressed some people. "And you—" He rounded on some unfortunate second-years. "—are standing in my way. So do me a favour and get lost."

The kids had clearly not expected the force of an angry Harry Potter to be unleashed on them; they scrambled out of his way, wide-eyed, and Harry proceeded calmly to his couch by the fire. The upholstery snakes seemed to sense his agitation; they slithered towards him and hissed, not that Harry could understand what they were saying. Thank fuck they hadn't turned on him now that he'd lost the ability to speak Parseltongue; he'd completely forgotten to worry about that.

Millie and Blaise came up to Harry, then. It was safe now, wasn't it? He'd fought for his place under the sun and won himself a spot, so now they could join him.

"Hey, Harry," Blaise said, flopping down on the couch.

No matter how relaxed he tried to seem, his unease was palpable, and the same could be said of Millie.

Huh. Harry could play with that.

"Buddies again now, are we?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Thanks for the help, by the way."

"You wouldn't be worth much if you needed our help," Millie said coolly.

"That so?" Harry was almost interested to hear this, now.

Blaise was looking between Harry and Millie in mild alarm.

"This is your war to fight, Potter," Millicent snapped. "I won't be backing the wrong side. If you can't take on a bunch of kids…"

"Huh. That even makes sense, in a twisted kind of way," Harry shrugged. "But what if I need a break sometimes?"

"Then go and hug a Hufflepuff."

Harry snorted.

"Fine then. Tough love, I get it. Just don't go expecting roses for next Valentine's."

And yet, by openly coming up to him now, Blaise and Millie had thrown their lot in with him; their actions had sent a clear message to everyone in the common room. Considering to whom some eyes and ears here would be reporting, it was a pretty bold statement indeed.
"Ah, Harry, do come in. I dare say I am relieved to see you recovered from your recent ordeal."

Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk and smiling benevolently. His phoenix dozed on a perch next to the window; portraits of former headmasters pretended to snooze, but Harry could see quite a few of them taking an interested peek at him.

"Please sit down." Dumbledore gestured at a chintz chair.

Harry complied, feeling somewhat off-balance. He couldn't help remembering that, the last time they'd talked, he'd shouted his head off at Dumbledore instead of behaving like a civilized human being, mitigating factors notwithstanding.

"Tea?"

"No, thank you, sir. What did you want to talk to me about?"

Dumbledore took a sweet from a bowl by his elbow. His bright blue eyes seemed to be carefully cataloguing Harry's appearance.

"I believe I have promised to have an honest discussion with you, Harry," the Headmaster said. At Harry's nod, he continued: "You charged me with concealing information from you. I give you my word, Harry—the only reason why I had not informed you of the prophecy was because I did not wish to burden you with it. You were so young…"

"I would have preferred to know," Harry said firmly.

Dumbledore shook his head.

"Perhaps I should have told you, but I did not wish to add to your worries," he said. "I looked at you, as a first-year, struggling to make a life for yourself in Slytherin, and thought that, surely, it was not essential for you to know of the prophecy yet. The following year, I had the perfect opportunity to tell you. You were in my office, the conversation could easily turn to Voldemort… but again, I hesitated. You were exhausted, you were scarred, you had just battled a deadly creature and emerged victorious. What good would it do to trouble you with that knowledge?"

Harry remembered his self-doubt after the trip to the Chamber of Secrets, his worries and fears. If he had discovered then that there was a prophecy connecting him and the Dark Lord… well, perhaps he would have breathed easier for knowing there was a reason, however twisted, for the numerous similarities between himself and Tom Riddle. Not to mention—

"The fragment of Voldemort's soul inside me—you knew about it," Harry accused.

Dumbledore sighed.

"I merely suspected," he said. "I could not know, but I suspected that you and Voldemort might be connected more deeply than anybody understood. You possessed a most curious scar, the aura of which… I had my suspicions. I had no proof, however. I chose not to distress you with my speculations."

"Was it really your place to choose for me? It's my life, I should have known what to expect, I should not have been walking into Voldemort's trap blind—"

Dumbledore inclined his head.

"You are right in that I have, perhaps, delayed telling you for too long. I admit, I could not stand to
burden you with this responsibility earlier than was absolutely necessary."

Harry frowned. It was true that he'd been happier not knowing, but ignoring the problem would not make it go away. Still, if he'd been in Dumbledore's place—would he have told himself?

"I do understand," he said quietly. "But—Professor, please stop withholding information from me from now on. I would rather know the truth, whatever it is."

"I shall endeavour to do my best in that regard." Dumbledore smiled—and, with a sinking heart, Harry saw in his expression that it would not end here.

Dumbledore would keep hiding things, was still hiding things, and he would not part with the information until he deemed it appropriate.

Harry clenched his jaws in anger. He wasn't asking for secrets that didn't concern him! He wasn't asking out of idle curiosity, but the war did concern him, anything to do with Voldemort concerned him, and god help Dumbledore if he was still hiding something about Harry personally. He'd done enough stumbling around in the dark already!

"I imagine you have questions, Harry," Dumbledore said, changing the subject. "You have not asked about the prophecy."

Harry had had plenty of time to consider the prophecy and its various meanings while he'd stayed in the infirmary, alone with his thoughts. The one thing that really made him wonder was—

"It says I have a power the Dark Lord knows not?"

That, at least, was good news. Over the last few days, Harry had tried to imagine all kinds of great powers he might possess, even though none manifested.

Dumbledore seemed to be actually pleased by the question.

"And this power has already let you survive Voldemort's attacks twice," he said. "Your have parents told you of Lily's sacrifice, I believe…"

"Yes," Harry muttered.

"Then you know that your mother's willing sacrifice created a shield of love that made the Killing Curse rebound off you. Her sacrifice outlasted that night; the wards on your house at Privet Drive are powered by her love and maintained by the presence of her blood relative, your aunt."

Harry blinked. So this was why he stayed with the Dursleys; he'd wondered. Still—

"I'm sorry, sir, but how does this relate to the power the Dark Lord knows not?"

"Unlike Lord Voldemort, Harry, you possess the ability to love."

Harry waited. When no elaboration was forthcoming, he ventured:

"Sir, you believe that the power the Dark Lord knows not is love?"

"Yes, Harry." Dumbledore nodded, as if happy that Harry had caught on so quickly.

Harry stared.

"Love," he repeated, just to make sure. "What will win us this war, my ultimate weapon… love?"
"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Professor, but did you defeat Grindelwald with the power of love, too?"

Oddly, Dumbledore went a little pale at that. However, he overcame the weakness quickly and, in the next moment, was already smiling at Harry in his usual genial way.

"That's a tale for another time, Harry. For now, I would like to warn you against taking the power of love too lightly. You, whose entire existence is sustained by it, must know of the power love holds. Voldemort, who neither understands nor values love, has been thwarted twice by it. It is your greatest asset, Harry."

"If you say so, Professor," Harry said dubiously. "But shouldn't I get some sort of training? Now that Voldemort is back and he will want to kill me—"

"It is not your duelling skills that will defeat Voldemort," Dumbledore said firmly, "but the strength of your whole, pure soul against his."

And Dumbledore seemed really convinced of this, that love was the only possible answer. In a roundabout, gentle fashion he told Harry that it was unrealistic to expect the prophesied saviour to become Voldemort's equal in skill and power quickly enough; Voldemort had decades of experience on Harry, and they could hardly wait for Harry to catch up—the world would be doomed in the meanwhile. No, Harry's true might and the world's hope apparently lay in his ability to love, in the purity of his spirit and the strength of his soul.

Except that Harry couldn't help thinking that Dumbledore knew him very little if he considered him to be a loving, kind-hearted, noble-spirited individual.

Harry walked out of Dumbledore's office secure in the belief that he couldn't afford to rely on anyone, entirely. Then again, he hadn't been planning to. The conversation with Dumbledore had been disappointing, but Harry would be foolish to make an enemy out of the man; Dumbledore had, after all, defeated a Dark Lord in his time, played a significant part in the war against Voldemort and was an immensely powerful wizard besides. Harry could not hope to rush into battle at fourteen and expect Voldemort to fall defeated; determination alone was not enough—Harry needed knowledge, and experience, and support. He'd take it where he could get it. Following anyone blindly, on the other hand, was definitely not on his agenda.

"Potter! A word, if you don't mind."

Harry turned around warily; there, a few feet away from him in the hallway, stood Mad-Eye Moody. Last time Harry had seen Moody, his face had been morphing into that of Barty Crouch Jr. It did not evoke pleasant memories.

"Professor?"

Moody snorted.

"I've never been your professor, lad. Haven't taught a day in this school—but you know all about it, don't you?"

Now that Harry was looking closer, he saw that Moody's magical eye did not seem to be magical at all; it was a static glass prosthetic. Moody must have noticed Harry's stare, because he said:

"Crouch buggered off with my eye, and they still haven't got a replacement ready for me. Tricky things to make, these magical eyes. The leg, that's easy. They fixed it right up while I stayed at St.
"Mungo's."

"Right," Harry said.

"Don't trust me worth damn, do you?" Moody gave a mirthless laugh. "I'm not blaming you, Potter—it's actually what I wanted to talk to you about."

Moody put one hand in a pocket and extracted a piece of parchment that was achingly familiar to Harry. Harry's eyes widened.

"Thought you'd recognize it," Moody said. "Here. I'm leaving, so I've no use for it. You might as well have it back."

Harry walked over and took the Marauder's Map into his hands, barely able to believe what was happening.

"Why do you have it, sir? I thought that Crouch—"

"Crouch needed it to escape Hogwarts before the third task," Moody interrupted. "He needed to get to the graveyard ahead of time, so he had me lead him out with the map in hand, and then I used to map to return to my quarters without anyone seeing me. All under the Imperius, of course." Moody grimaced.

"Thank you for returning it to me, sir," Harry said.

He'd thought the map, just like the Invisibility Cloak, irretrievably lost.

"That's not quite all," Moody said, when Harry was turning to leave. "There's something that you don't know—but you should."

Moody looked around to check that nobody was there, but he needn't have bothered; the castle was almost empty, with everyone enjoying the warm day outside.

"You didn't trust Crouch," Moody said, his voice low. "You didn't give him this map voluntarily."

"I'm sorry?"

"You've been Obliviated," Moody stated bluntly. "I don't know the particulars, because Crouch only told me that much, and that mostly through cursing at you—but you figured him out, Potter. You used this map and figured him out, but he caught you at it. You duelled. He won."

Harry clenched his fists.

"Is there any way for me to recover the memory?"

"Not unless you want your mind broken."

Harry remembered the bruises he'd sported that day, Blaise's strange acceptance of his decision to trust Moody, and his own unease at parting with the map. He felt unclean, knowing that his mind had been tampered with—he hated the thought that someone had removed his memory—he'd make that Crouch bastard pay when he got his hands on him.

"If you're thinking of vengeance, give it up, lad," Moody advised suddenly. "Because Barty Crouch Jr. is mine."

And here Moody gave a truly feral smile that Harry returned with satisfaction.
It was good to know that not everyone on this blasted good side planned to defeat their enemies with the power of love.

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Thankfully, there was only a week between the third task and departure from Hogwarts, and Harry had spent three days of that time in the hospital wing. With everything that had happened, just living, day to day, hadn't been so hard for him ever before. He existed in the state of constant tension, knowing that he could not afford to show weakness; not in front of the press, not in front of the teachers, not in front of the students. It was incredibly taxing to act calm and collected all the time, but Harry was sure, and he revelled in this knowledge, that most of the students he came across saw only his strength, his confidence, his—dare he say it—power.

Harry Potter was, after all, the winner of the Triwizard Tournament. Nobody knew that Harry's success was the work of a Death Eater; they beheld, instead, a fourteen-year-old boy who'd defeated formidable opponents. It was no wonder, people whispered; he was the Boy-Who-Lived. Of course nobody else had stood a chance; after all, Harry Potter was a legend. There had to be a reason why You-Know-Who had failed when he'd tried to kill him. And did you hear? They say You-Know-Who had tried to kill him again and the Killing Curse hadn't worked!

"How many people actually believe that, do you think?" Harry asked, staring at the lake unseeingly.

"More than you imagine," Luna answered.

Her hands worked at making a wreath of some purple flowers. Harry glanced at them and absently picked up a stray petal.

"But I mean, why would they? After a year of Rita's bullshit, I come up with an outrageous story and can't offer any proof..."

Luna looked at him seriously and laid her wreath aside.

"Your friend Hermione Granger has the same problem," she said.

"Huh?"

"Do you remember when you introduced us and she did not believe me about the Blibbering Humdingers?"

"Yeah."

That had been an awkward conversation.

"For Hermione, magic is limited to simple cause and effect," Luna explained. When Harry still didn't understand, she continued: "You have the same, though a little less. Maybe it is because you have lived among Muggles—things work differently there, I think. But magic has its own logic, you know."

Harry frowned.

"Which is?"

"It's quite tricky, really. Magic depends on intent, mood and confidence," Luna said. "You have to feel certain things in order to cast certain spells. You have to believe you can do it. You can't predict how thing will work, every time. Nobody knows the limits of magic."
"Okay, but what has it got to do with people believing me about Voldemort?"

Luna sighed.

"Wizards think differently from Muggles, Harry, because their lives revolve around magic. Their idea of what should be possible and what should not is much more broad than that of Muggles."

Harry chose not to point out that most people's perspectives on magic weren't as all-encompassing as Luna's.

"People fought a long war against You-Know-Who and then, one day, he came across a baby and disappeared." Luna hid her wreath behind her, demonstrating Voldemort's disappearance. "Did people look for him for a long time? No. It might be silly to think that a baby can defeat an evil wizard, but everyone spent the very next day celebrating—" She threw petals into the air. "—because they believed You-Know-Who to be gone."

"So you are saying—"

"I'm saying that belief is very important for wizards. And you, Harry, are a miracle. It's easy to believe in you, if you allow it."

Harry stared at Luna, but she just smiled at him somewhat vacantly, extracted the flowers from behind her back and started working on them again.

That night, all throughout dinner and Dumbledore's announcement of Voldemort's resurrection, Harry dwelled on Luna's words. He wondered how many of those frightened, confused-looking students in the Great Hall believed Dumbledore now; how many could be swayed in the future. Rita Skeeter's articles had probably shaken their faith in Harry; but then, Harry had quite a few friends, as well—friends who, in Padma's words, were willing to bring him converts…

"There is a person I must acknowledge when I talk about Lord Voldemort's return," Dumbledore said. "I am speaking, of course, of Harry Potter."

Excited murmurs swept the Great Hall. Snape was the only one at the high table not to look at least vaguely excited by that opening; instead, the man sent Harry another one of those speculative looks he'd taken to giving Harry as of late. Harry wondered how much he knew.

"Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort that night. He showed the kind of bravery few adult wizards have ever demonstrated when facing Lord Voldemort. For that, I honour him."

Dumbledore raised his goblet to Harry and Harry fought the urge to blush or protest loudly. First of all, he didn't remember showing any bravery, and secondly, he didn't want this attention on him. He'd done nothing heroic, and, whatever Harry's position at the school, Dumbledore wasn't making it better by this display…

("Belief is very important for wizards. And you, Harry, are a miracle. It's easy to believe in you, if you allow it.")

Oh, damn it.

Uncomfortably aware of curious gazes from all sides, Harry made a conscious effort at relaxing, smiling confidently and projecting the image of a true hero unfazed by fame or attention. Facing all of Slytherin had been bad enough; this, bearing the scrutiny of the whole school at once, was positively hellish. Still, it had to be done. Harry would do well to get used to the spotlight.
He needed them to believe in him, after all.

-End of year four-
"The incantation for the Bone-Shattering Curse is Fracta Ossem; naturally, one has to concentrate on the target in order to determine which bone in particular is..."

Harry shook his head, suddenly disoriented, and went back to read the sentence again.

"The incantation for the Bone-Shattering Curse ..."

He blinked. Just a moment ago, the book had been fascinating, but now the spells seemed dull and impossible to master.

"The incantation..."

Harry felt a chill run down his spine. Thoughts crowded his head—heavy, unpleasant thoughts, ones that persistently manifested during his nightmares. What was he doing this for? He was at Privet Drive and couldn't practice magic anyway. Even if he could, what chance did he have against Voldemort, who—

Suddenly, the silence of his room was shattered by a blood-curdling scream.

It was coming from downstairs, and Harry heard noise—shuffling, and shouting, and something crashing. He jumped up from his bed, book falling aside, and grabbed his wand.

He wished he had his Invisibility Cloak to keep him hidden from possible intruders, but he had the sinking feeling that he already knew who the intruders were, although he couldn't quite believe it.

He stepped out onto the landing outside his room, keeping to the shadows, and then, through the open front door, he saw them.

Dementors. Two Dementors right outside the Dursley home. A tall, dark form glided after Dudley on the lawn, and Dudley collapsed mid-run, whimpering and clutching his head. Aunt Petunia was running outside with a scream, Uncle Vernon hot on her heels—

And Harry hadn't noticed how he ended up on the bottom of the stairs, shouting:

"Expecto Patronum!"

Shapeless white mist emerged from Harry's wand as a Dementor glided towards him, completely incongruous with the neat lawn in front of the Dursleys' house. It was almost pitch black outside, too dark for ten o'clock at night, but Harry could dimly see Aunt Petunia tugging Dudley up, and Uncle Vernon trying to land wild blows—

"Excepto... Expecto Patronum!"
More of that wispy vapour. Harry could no longer discern what was happening outside; a Dementor was blocking the doorway. Harry heard screams, but he wasn't sure whether they were coming from the Dursleys or from inside his memories. Images swam before his eyes—Bertha Jorkins falling dead to the ground, Voldemort staring at him in triumphant malice, the Killing Curse speeding towards him…

Harry gripped his wand tightly enough to hurt and made himself think of what happened in that memory next: his mother's beautiful face, his father's smile, their loving words.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

A bright white stag erupted from Harry's wand.

It rammed straight into the Dementor at the threshold, colliding with it in a blur of luminescent greyish-white; with a screech so high-pitched Harry almost thought he'd imagined it, the Dementor floated onto the lawn. The impenetrable haze of misery lifted from over Harry, and the distant screaming in his mind stopped entirely, and he found himself able to draw a deep breath again.

Harry sagged against the doorframe, clutching his wand in a sweaty fist. He saw his Patronus dash after the Dementors and lifted his eyes.

Aunt Petunia was already falling away from a fleeing Dementor's grasp. Dudley was wailing in fear, flesh trembling like a mound of jelly, and Uncle Vernon crawled on the ground and swung blindly with his fists as another Dementor glided past him in retreat. Looking at them from his spot by the door, Harry wondered if this was what he wanted.

For all wrongs done, did the Dursleys really deserve saving?

How often had he dreamed of this, of seeing the Dursleys brought low and punished for their treatment of him? Here they were now, all three of them—broken, powerless. They'd been Harry's tormentors for so long, but Harry held all the power, right now—if he'd wanted, he could have left the Dursleys to the Dementors' mercy, and they wouldn't have been able to do anything. Right now, they had no power over themselves, let alone Harry. They'd needed Harry to protect them, because they were—

Muggles. They were weak and devoid of magic. In a bright flash of revelation, Harry understood why his relatives had always been so scared of wizards.

He told himself that he didn't hate all Muggles, so it wasn't wrong of him to revel in the inferiority of these particular ones.

While he stood, still holding on to the doorframe, his Patronus had been chasing the Dementors further down the street. The foul creatures' departure dispelled the veil of cold and darkness over Privet Drive, and Harry found it easier to breathe, though his heart was still beating erratically.

Dementors on Privet Drive. It boggled the mind.

The Patronus turned to look at Harry from where it'd stopped on a street corner, gave a small deferential nod and then gradually dissipated in the night's air. Harry was left with twilight, tingling nerves and the Dursley family strewn across the lawn.

For a moment, he stood still, gathering his bearings. Then, with slow, measured steps, he approached his relatives.

Uncle Vernon was kneeling in front of Aunt Petunia's prone body, blocking it from Harry's view.
Uncle Vernon's fists were clenching and unclenching, and Harry could not see his face, but he assumed that the man was okay, since he seemed to be moving of his own volition. A bit to the side, Dudley stood on all fours, vomiting and coughing and sputtering, and Harry didn't spare him more than a fleeting glance.

He stepped forward.

Aunt Petunia lay sprawled, limbs at odd angles. She was pale as a wraith, and she didn't move and her eyes were wide and empty—and Harry felt cold wash over him as he gazed down at her.

She looked—

"Aunt Petunia?" he called, swallowing.

No response.

Harry threw a glance at Uncle Vernon, but the man seemed to be frozen in place. Harry lowered himself onto the grass, his first—and irrational—instinct to check his aunt's pulse. It was clear that she was alive, she was blinking, but how did one probe for the presence of a soul inside a body?

"Aunt Petunia, if you hear me, please blink twice," Harry said, feeling completely out of his depth.

No response, once again, just those steady, rhythmic blinks.

Harry clenched his jaw. He didn't have a fucking clue what to do, but it was clear that nobody else present did, either, and something would have to be done.

"Carry her into the house," Harry told Uncle Vernon, voice brooking no argument.

Through clearly not himself at the moment, Uncle Vernon remained capable of following simple orders. Scooping up his wife, he wobbled towards the front door.

Harry turned to Dudley.

"Get inside," he commanded.

Harry entered the house behind Dudley; the boy staggered off to the living room after his father, but Harry took a few moments to do a final check outside and lock the door. Then, he walked into the living room after them both.

Aunt Petunia was on the sofa, face still deathly pale and eyes vacant. Dudley was kneeling on the floor next to her, rivulets of tears running down his fat cheeks, and pleaded with her to wake up. Uncle Vernon stood to the side; his eyes were glued to his wife, as if his entire existence hinged on watching her and waiting for her to rouse.

Aunt Petunia did not comfort her crying son. She did not try to soothe her husband's fear. She just—lay there.

"She's not waking up," Dudley sobbed into the silence. "Why won't she wake up?"

Harry thought, dimly, that he was not reacting to this as he should. He'd spent some of the Dementor attack revelling in the feeling of power over his relatives; he probably ought to feel guilty about it now, but he didn't. He just felt—hollow, numb with shock. His aunt had seemingly lost her soul—and Harry knew, intellectually, that it was horrible, and nauseating, and even potentially traumatizing, but he couldn't feel it. He wasn't taking it in.
As if a void had opened somewhere in his chest, and sucked all feeling away.

"She's awake, but she's not," Dudley was mumbling, rocking back and forth. "Not. Not..."

Just then, Harry saw a blur out of the corner of his eye. He whirled instinctively, wand brought up—but it was only an owl that swooped down towards him and dropped the letter it was carrying by his feet. Not waiting for a reply, the bird flew off again with a low hoot.

It was this sound that startled Uncle Vernon into awareness.

Just as Harry bent down to pick up the letter, noting the Ministry's seal on it, the man spun around.

"You!" he roared, face livid. "It's all your fault! What did you do?"

Uncle Vernon advanced on Harry, fists raised, and Harry fought to keep his face calm as he levelled his wand at him.

"Don't," he advised. "You know I can curse you."

"Going to kill me, boy, like you killed your aunt?" Uncle Vernon shouted, stepping closer still.

"She's not dead," Harry said quietly.

"THEN WHAT IS SHE?"

Another owl flew into the room, soaring over Uncle Vernon's head to drop its letter on Harry, who took it automatically.

"I WILL NOT STAND FOR THIS! I WON'T HAVE IT! I WILL KILL YOU WITH MY BARE HANDS!"

Vernon lunged at Harry, and Harry ducked from under his reach—

"Don't be stupid, this isn't the time!"

But Vernon caught him by his shirt, and swung with his fist—

Harry twisted in his uncle's grasp and kicked the man's knee as hard as he could, dodging the blow aimed at his head.

Vernon collapsed on the floor with a scream, and Harry leaned against the wall, letting out a breath. He raised his eyes to see whether Dudley would pose any danger to him now, but Dudley didn't seem to understand what was happening; he was still trying to wake his mother.

"Why were the Dementors here?" Harry asked out loud, trying to clear the fog in his mind.

He felt that, if he knew this part of the puzzle, he could move on to analyzing the situation, but as it was he couldn't get past Dementors on the Dursleys' front lawn. It just shouldn't be possible.

Besides, why hadn't his guards acted on the threat?

It was all very hush-hush, and Harry only knew about the guards thanks to the twins; he'd been worried that it was Voldemort spying on him, before they'd let him know. His guards had resisted all attempts at communication when Harry had tried to initiate contact earlier in the summer. And he understood the need for secrecy, but this went above and beyond—what was the point of having a secret guard if it did not do anything? Had they somehow missed the Dementors' arrival?
Why in seven hells had the Dementors even turned up in Little Whinging?

"Dudley. Uncle Vernon. Can you tell me anything about where the Dementors came from?" Harry had been upstairs, after all, and missed the start of the attack.

"The—huh?" Dudley looked at Harry blearily.

"The creatures that were here," Harry clarified. "Couldn't you see them?"

"N-no." Dudley hiccuped. "I felt—something followed me. There was something horrible on the street, and I ran home, but it was there and then I was so weak and I saw—" He gulped. "And then mum was there, and then dad ran out, and then—"

"Followed you," Harry repeated.

So Dementors had appeared in Little Whinging out of the blue and followed Dudley to Harry Potter's home? Weren't they meant to be guarding Azkaban somewhere in the North Sea—

"Don't you dare blame this on Dudley!" Vernon snarled, raising his head from the floor.

"I'm not blaming it on Dudley," Harry said curtly. "I'm just trying to think."

"What's there to think about, it's all your fault, if not for you—"

There was a knock on the front door.

"It's Remus Lupin and Alastor Moody," Lupin's voice said from the other side of the door when Harry went to check. "Please let us in."

Harry frowned.

"Prove it."

"I'm sorry?"

"Prove that it's you, or I'm not opening the door."

"Cheeky bugger," Moody grumbled. "Very well, Potter. I saw you after I was released from St. Mungo's and gave you back the Marauder's Map."

"And I told you, at the end of your third year, that your father had been a stag Animagus. And I helped you produce your stag Patronus."

"Anyone could know both these things."

"Harry." Lupin sounded somewhat exasperated. "Don't you have a letter from Dumbledore saying that we would be coming to check up on you?"

Harry looked down at the unopened letters in his hand and unfolded the one without the Ministry seal.

"Fine," he said, after skimming it. "Come in."

Lupin entered with a friendly smile on his face and Moody followed, his magical eye scanning the surroundings—it had evidently been replaced since Harry had last seen him.
"What happened here?" Moody asked brusquely, walking right towards the living room. "Dumbledore says you've cast the Patronus Charm, but you'd better have a good reason, because the Ministry's greedy for anything to charge you with—"

"They can't charge me after the first offence," Harry said. "At least, they shouldn't be able to, by their own laws."

Harry withdrew the Ministry letter and broke the seal.

"And is it your first?" Moody ascertained.

"Yes," Harry said, not looking up from his letter. "Yes, first offence, paragraph C, magic in front of Muggles… My first warning," he said, folding the letter again. "Besides which, there were two Dementors attacking me and my relatives."

Moody harrumphed.

"Dementors, here?" Lupin wondered. "That's—"

He didn't have time to finish the sentence, because Harry's uncle caught sight of them as they stepped into the living room. Vernon had apparently managed to pick himself up from the floor, although he was heavily favouring his uninjured leg as he stood awkwardly by the sofa, glowering at the intruders. Dudley remained where he'd been, only throwing a fearful glance at the new arrivals.

"You!" Vernon snarled, pointing a fat finger at the wizards. "More of you invading my house!"

If Lupin and Moody were fazed by this greeting, they did not show it.

"I'm sorry, but—" Lupin began.

"You'd better be here to take the brat away, because I'm not having him in my house any longer!"

Moody glared at Vernon. Vernon was bigger, but Moody was a hell of a lot more intimidating—and Vernon paled as the ex-Auror barked, rolling his magical eye in its socket:

"Calm down and stop this racket! What seems to be the problem?"

"I think my aunt has been Kissed by a Dementor," Harry said quietly.

Lupin's face drained of colour. Moody's eyes, both normal and magical, focused on Aunt Petunia's body. The wizards walked over to check the veracity of Harry's claim, ignoring Vernon's protests.

"Our condolences," Lupin muttered in the end, stepping aside.

"Fucking hell," Moody said at the same time.

"We have to tell Dumbledore," Lupin added, looking like he agreed with Moody's sentiments. "He should come, or send someone along. The wards—"

"Are they still active?" Harry asked. "Were they even active, if the Dementors got here?"

"Could the Dementors enter the house itself?" Lupin inquired.

Harry thought back to the events earlier that evening.

"No," he said after a moment. "That is, I'm not sure whether the Dementor didn't enter because it
didn't have time, or because it couldn't, but it came pretty close anyway…"

Over the summer, Harry had done some thinking about the blood wards he'd found out about last year, and he figured they were the answer to something that had had him wondering for a while now. There had to be a reason why the Boy-Who-Lived had never had a worshipper come gawk at his house, or an assassin make way to his home, or a politician try to draw him into the wizarding world. He never even got fan mail, which one might have expected with him being so famous, nor any other tokens of his celebrity. Harry's address was known and openly available to Hogwarts and to the Ministry, and yet he'd always been left alone, before and after he'd started studying at Hogwarts.

The wizarding world did not seem able to reach him at Privet Drive, as if the house was under a notice-me-not charm, unless they were expressly reminded to look for Harry there. That crazy house-elf a few years ago and the Dementors today were exceptions in this regard, but they were magical creatures rather than humans; perhaps the wards did not apply to them in the same manner. The Dementor attack also brought up the question of whether Voldemort having Harry's blood in his veins had weakened the protection somehow, reducing the effectiveness of the wards. With Aunt Petunia having been Kissed, Harry couldn't even begin to predict what would happen to the wards now.

"Your aunt is not dead," Lupin said carefully. "So maybe the wards will keep. However, I am not sure of the details—I think it would be best not to risk it. I'll go send Dumbledore a message."

"That's right, leave and take the brat with you!" Vernon shouted as Lupin exited the room. "He's cursed us all! You and your magic—it didn't do much for the brat's parents, and now Petunia is—is—and I don't care if all of you die, but I'M NOT LETTING YOU HARM DUDLEY!"

"Calm the fuck down!" Moody growled, cutting Vernon off. "Nobody's planning to harm your son. Nobody wished your wife any harm, either. Potter won't be able to stay here anyway, I reckon, and we'll take him with us when we go, but if he has to come back, you'll take him back. Get it, Dursley?"

Dudley quivered at Moody's tone and hid himself behind an armchair. Vernon, for his part, flushed puce and looked about to say something unpleasant back, but then caught the expression on Moody's face and paled again.

He gave a terse nod.

"Excellent," Moody said. "Potter, go and collect your stuff."

Harry's packing was rushed; he threw things haphazardly into his suitcase, favouring speed over order. He had to leave several items of clothing behind to fit all his books in, but that was about the only trouble he had. He let Hedwig out, telling her to find him at his destination—and, thanks to the twins, he had a pretty good idea of what it would be.

Over the last month, Harry had corresponded with his friends, Hedwig making tireless rounds all over Britain, but only the twins had proved truly informative. They had sent him coded letters, disguising important information as nonsense. This way, Harry had learnt of Dumbledore's secret organization that was guarding him at Privet Drive this summer. Harry also knew the organization was dedicated to fighting Voldemort; he knew the twins were living at the headquarters; he knew Sirius Black owned the house. It was difficult to glean anything more concrete from Fred and George's letters, however, since they didn't say anything outright.

("Main question: the place for crocodiles, is it really in a restaurant? Capital punishment turns black
Harry felt little desire to reacquaint himself with Black, but he was curious to have a look at the inner workings of Dumbledore's organization. Living at its headquarters could also provide Harry with an opportunity to learn more about what Voldemort was up to.

As of now, he knew next to nothing, as the *Daily Prophet* had been steadily denying Voldemort's return and painting Harry as a delusional attention-seeking delusional attention-seeker in cahoots with Dumbledore. This told Harry zero about Voldemort's movements, though he did gain an understanding of the current political climate.

Cedric had told him that not everyone believed Ministry propaganda, not even in the wizarding government itself.

("Some idiots are of course going to fall for the official word, but the scandal at the third task is too juicy to pass up. Have you read Skeeter's latest? Even she has trouble deciding whom to back...")

These days Rita Skeeter's articles were indeed an exercise in careful balancing. Instead of supporting or openly defying the Ministry line, she went with stirring up the masses by feeding them all kinds of conspiracy theories. Taken together, her writings gave the impression that nobody was completely in the right, Harry or the Ministry, and that Rita alone could uncover the shocking truth. This might not be something Harry could exploit in future, but he would take no drastic steps until he got the lay of the land.

"All packed?" Moody said, once Harry returned to the living room to find Lupin there, too. "Fine then, let's go."

Harry nodded at his relatives.

"Bye," he said, for lack of anything better.

Dudley had still not emerged from behind the armchair; Vernon only muttered something under his breath. Whatever it was, Harry doubted it was complimentary.

Neither Lupin, nor Moody could mistake the scene for a stoic goodbye, but Lupin did not remark on it even though he looked disturbed, and Moody chose to ignore the matter altogether.

Harry avoided looking at Aunt Petunia's prone body on the couch as he walked out of the door.

***

The paper Moody thrust at Harry upon their arrival to a dark square somewhere in London told him that Dumbledore’s secret group was called the Order of the Phoenix and that its headquarters were located at number 12, Grimmauld Place. The latter turned out to be a dingy old house with a hysterical portrait and a staircase decorated with severed house-elf heads; Harry had known the Blacks had been Dark wizards, but the cheerfulness of their dwelling exceeded even his expectations.

A redheaded woman came out of a door further down the dim hallway to greet Harry, Moody and Lupin when they entered the house. She seemed somehow familiar, and, after a moment, Harry recognized her as the Weasley matriarch.

"Oh, good evening," she whispered, making an abortive movement towards Harry. "Harry Potter—well—it's good to see you again, of course, dear—come through to the kitchen. We weren't expecting you; has anything happened, Remus?"
There were only three people in the kitchen: Mr. Weasley, a young man who looked like he was a Weasley too, and—of course—Sirius Black.

He looked much healthier than the last time Harry had seen him. Gone were the deranged expression, the dirty hair, the painful gauntness. Evidently, he'd at least somewhat recovered from his stay in prison.

Good for him.

Everyone stood up when they saw Harry enter, Mr. Weasley giving an exclamation of surprise.

"Harry Potter!" he said unnecessarily. "Well, good evening—what brings you here, is everything all right?"

"Not everything," Moody said, while Harry shook Mr. Weasley's hand. "There's been a bit of a clusterfuck with Potter's relatives."

"Alastor, really!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed.

Moody scowled.

"Potter's aunt has been Kissed by a Dementor."

There were gasps all around.

"What was a Dementor doing there?"

"So the Patronus—"

"Has Dumbledore been notified?"

"What I want to know," Lupin said firmly, "is who was meant to be on guard duty tonight."

Harry very much wanted to know that too, as well as the reason why they had abandoned their post.

"It was Dung Fletcher, I think," the unknown Weasley said. "I remember him mentioning it."

"Dumbledore will rip him a new one," Moody said with relish.

"Er, it's a bit awkward, with us not being introduced," the young Weasley said, turning to Harry. "I'm Bill. Nice to meet you and, blimey, I'm sorry about your aunt. I can't imagine how horrible it must be..."

"Thank you," Harry said. "But I'd rather not talk about it."

Or think about it, if he could help it. The numbness was abating, and instead horrified awareness washed over Harry each time his thoughts strayed to his aunt's slackened face.

("She's awake, but she's not. Not. Not..."

Harry forcibly redirected his thoughts, grappling for any other discussion topic.

"Are Fred and George around?" he asked.

"Oh yes, they're just upstairs," Bill answered, looking relieved at the change of subject. "It was all boring talk down here, nothing was exploding or setting itself on fire, you know—"
"Yeah." Harry nodded.

"Ron's here too," Bill added. "And Ginny. It was nice of Sirius to let us stay while we're figuring out how to add security to the Burrow—our home," he clarified, seeing Harry's incomprehension.

There was still a month until Hogwarts. A whole month in close proximity to Ron Weasley; Harry thought his joy might just suffocate him.

And then, naturally, Lupin drew Harry aside from the group in order to formally introduce him to Sirius Black.

"Nice to meet you." Harry said politely, wishing he could strangle Lupin. Harry was not ready to deal with this right now.

Black gave him a winning grin, but it was belied by the uncertainty in his grey eyes.

"Good to properly meet you too! Finally."

Lupin looked between them, smiling.

"I'll leave you to it, then."

With that, the goddamn werewolf retreated, presumably giving Harry and Black space for a tearful reunion.

There was a moment's silence. Then—

"It's good to see you again, Harry. Last time... Everything went wrong when I saw you last," Black said, lips twisting into a shallow approximation of a smile. "I... well, I'd just spent twelve years in Azkaban. It wasn't a good time for me to be meeting my godsons. So... can we try to start over?"

Black was giving Harry a look that was almost desperate in its intensity, and Harry held back the urge to snap at him to stop. What did the man want? Yeah, no worries, Harry would turn a new leaf just like that, because that's how emotions worked with people. From here on out, they'd be a happy family and do whatever it was that happy families did.

"Sure," Harry said. "We can start over." He wasn't certain how sincere that came out, so he went on: "Thank you for letting me stay at your house."

Sirius Black winced.

"There's no need to thank me. You're my godson, Harry—of course you're welcome to stay."

Because family ties made everything okay, as the Dursleys had amply demonstrated.

"Right," Harry said, forcing the memory of his aunt's vacant eyes out of his mind.

"Actually... if it turns out that you can't go back to your Muggle relatives, you're welcome to stay with me," Black offered. Harry must have glanced at him very strangely, because he gave an awkward shrug. "Well, if you wanted, of course. I mean, during the holidays and stuff. You'll need a place to stay, right?"

"Why would you do that?" Harry asked, incredulous. "I mean, no offence, but you've just met me."

Black shook his head.
"You're—hell, Harry, I haven't just met you! I mean, you don't remember me, but..." Pain flashed in Black's expression, but it was gone as fast as it came; the next moment, he was smiling crookedly. "You've grown up, of course, but you're still my godson and my best friend's son. That hasn't changed."

Just about everything else had, though.

Voldemort was back, which meant that Harry would need all the help he could get to obtain information about his movements. If Black was half as emotionally invested as he pretended to be, he might assist in Harry's quest to discover as much as he could about the looming war while at the Order's headquarters.

Experience with adults told Harry that the Order would not be willing to share information with him; at least, adults' track record so far had been to alert Harry of things he might need to know at the last possible minute. Those hadn't been minor omissions, either. He'd been left in the dark in third year about the whole Sirius Black business until after it was over; Lupin had hidden his friendship with Harry's dad; and Dumbledore beat all by concealing facts about the prophecy. Most recently the Order—or Dumbledore, whichever—chose to keep mum about Harry's guard at Privet Drive, even though, once again, the issue concerned him directly.

All of the above made Harry feel that he could do with an ally on Order territory—someone willing to tell him more than others. Perhaps it was wrong of him to think in those terms, to strategize about his behaviour at the Order's headquarters as if he was on hostile ground, but quite honestly, he did not feel fully comfortable here. There was the fact that he'd had unpleasant experiences with some of the members—namely, Dumbledore, Lupin, Black and the younger Weasleys—but also, he knew that all Order members were Dumbledore's people. While they were on the same anti-Voldemort side, Harry did not count himself as a Dumbledore loyalist.

And Harry didn't give a flying fuck about their opinions on what he should know. He wanted to find out as much as he could, and he would do it, by hook or crook.

Harry swallowed his tiredness and tried to hide the wave of dislike he felt at the mere sight of Black's face.

"Yes," he said. "I'd forgotten that you must have known me when I was really small. You have to tell me about it sometime."

***

Like Harry had expected, the Order was not eager to include him in their affairs, even despite Black's support. Matters came to a head the very second night Harry was at the headquarters; the Order was planning to have a meeting after dinner, and Harry lingered stubbornly behind.

"You're not yet of age, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "Fred and George aren't allowed into the Order, either."

"I'm not asking to join the Order," Harry countered politely. "I just think that, considering past events, I should be given access to some information."

"I agree," Sirius Black said promptly. "Harry is just as involved in this war as we are."

Mrs. Weasley glared at him.

"It is the job of responsible adults to make sure he is not as involved," she said. "He is only fifteen!"
And yet he'd seen more of Voldemort than she ever had; funny how that worked.

"With all due respect, Mrs. Weasley, if my godfather believes I have a right to information, I do not see who else can have a say in the matter."

"Professor Dumbledore—"

"—is not my legal guardian."

"Very true, my boy," Dumbledore's jovial voice said from the kitchen's doorway. "However, I happen to lead this organization, and as such I have authority over potential disclosure of information to outsiders."

Harry turned to face the Headmaster. Several people entered the room together with Dumbledore; among them were Lupin, a young woman with bubblegum-pink hair, a tall dark-skinned man and a man in a ridiculous top hat. All of them stared in interest between Harry and Dumbledore, as did the occupants of the kitchen.

Harry inclined his head.

"Of course, Headmaster. However, I recall you promising that you would not withhold information from me any longer," he said calmly. "Surely you don't mean to break your word now."

They both knew that Dumbledore hadn't truly meant his promise to keep Harry in the loop, but the other people in the room didn't, and Harry would like to see the Headmaster weasel out of this without losing face.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled merrily.

"Ah, the curiosity of youth!" Dumbledore said, evidently deciding to play the age card. "By all means, Harry. I do not mean to deprive you of information altogether, but I must ask you to be realistic in your desires. There are matters of security that cannot be overlooked."

"Just as long as I can trust your judgement, Headmaster." Harry smiled sweetly. "I guess, you stationing a guard around my house without letting me know was the result of some grave miscommunication?"

And so began the meeting that opened the Order's eyes to a few things about the Boy-Who-Lived. Harry quickly realized that, like everyone else, the Order had their ideas of what the Boy-Who-Lived should be like, and Harry was very blatantly not it. He contemplated trying to be it, once he saw how deeply the divide ran, but there were certain things that he could not conceal, and the dynamics of his relationship with Dumbledore were one of them. Harry wasn't going to defer to Dumbledore on everything just because they had an audience, and it couldn't be helped that his and Dumbledore's interactions had shocked quite a few people, the elder Weasleys among them.

Snape's arrival caused yet another stir. The man stormed into the room, all billowing cloak and fearsome scowl, and his appearance took Harry by surprise, although he maintained an impassive face.

"Ah, Severus," Dumbledore said, beaming. "As you see, one of your students has joined us tonight." The slight non sequitur was obviously meant to warn Snape against saying too much in Harry's presence, but then Dumbledore continued, in the spirit of sharing: "You might be wondering, Harry—Professor Snape serves in the very important role of a spy for the Order."

Later, Harry realized that this was the point when he could have improved the Order's earlier
impression of him. He should have bulged his eyes out in amazement, or let out a shriek, or—well, done something to reflect his feelings. However, he merely nodded, pretending not to be fazed by the news as he usually would, and was startled by Black's disbelieving:

"Is that all? That's all the reaction you're going to give?"

Harry looked at him blankly. The man's face reflected a mix between incredulity and indignation.

"Are you going to trust Snape—just like that?" Black continued, ignoring Dumbledore's frown and Snape's withering glare. "Are you—are you even—"

At loss for how to respond, Harry glanced at Professor Snape. The man was surveying Black with great derision.

"You'll do well to disregard Black's drivel, Potter. His stability was questionable before Azkaban, but after—"

"Shut up, you Death Eater, and don't you talk to Harry as if you have a right to tell him what to do —"

"You will find that I do have that right, Black. I'm Potter's Head of House, Slytherin, in case it's slipped your mind—"

Harry took in Black's slight wince, and Snape's scowl, and he felt that there was a long story here that he didn't want to know and certainly didn't want to get dragged into the middle of.

"Gentlemen!" Dumbledore said sharply. "Do compose yourselves."

And so they did, but the matter had certainly not been put to rest. In the following days, Black tried to reassure Harry that he didn't really mind that Harry was a Slytherin. It was just that Harry should't listen to anything Snape had to say, ever, because Snape hated Harry's dad and would probably strangle Harry should they meet in a dark alley with no witnesses. Snape, for his part, informed Harry that Black had been capable of murder at sixteen, and, going by what had happened to Pettigrew, was still capable of it, and Harry should be wary of the man for more reasons than the obvious Azkaban-induced madness.

All in all, both adults exhibited the maturity of house-elves on Firewhisky doping, and Harry didn't even care to know what they were trying to prove.

The incident with Snape and Black had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the Order, either, and Harry caught wisps of conversations—how no fifteen year old should have a face that unreadable, how it was creepy, the way Harry controlled his emotions, and what had been done to this child, anyway, to make him this closed off? Harry resented being called a child, and the implication that something had been done to him, but of course he didn't let his feelings show because—well, whatever they said, he'd learnt that showcasing his emotions would get him nowhere.

On the bright side, some people seemed to find him intriguing.

"You're a lot more interesting than I thought you would be," the pink-haired witch had declared, eyes sparkling mischievously. "Name's Tonks, if you didn't catch it earlier. Pleased to meet you."

Harry had been pleased to meet her, too, since she proved to be one of the more likeable people he'd encounter at the Order headquarters, and worth her weight in entertainment value besides.

More generally, that first Order meeting had set the tone for all to come. The Order, whatever their
feelings towards Harry, started taking him more seriously since he'd firmly set himself apart from the other kids and procured Dumbledore's blessing to attend some meetings. He wasn't allowed in on everything, but what the Order didn't tell him, he could wheedle out of Black—not that anything particularly exciting was happening.

Both Dumbledore and Voldemort were busy trying to recruit allies, their interests clashing as far as humans, werewolves and giants were concerned. The Order was also worried that Voldemort would lure the Dementors onto his side, but that had not yet happened—which meant either that the attack on Harry this summer must have been authorized by someone at the Ministry, or that some rogue Dementors had deserted Azkaban after all.

Harry thought the latter option was actually preferable.

A lot of Voldemort's and Dumbledore's plans revolved around the prophecy. Apparently, after Harry had blithely survived his second Killing Curse, Voldemort got seriously worried about the prophecy, assuming that the second part, one he did not know, explained Harry's strange immunity. Therefore, along with covertly recruiting allies, Voldemort threw significant effort into infiltrating the Department of Mysteries, intending to steal the prophecy and hear it in full.

Thanks to Snape, the Order knew of these plans and used them to further their own main goal: namely, getting the Ministry to accept Voldemort's return. The Order kept a guard around the Department of Mysteries, waiting for the Death Eaters or Voldemort to show up; once they did, the Order would call for backup, stage a great ruckus and the ensuing fight would reveal to the Ministry with incontrovertible proof that Voldemort was indeed back.

"But what if Voldemort just Imperiuses someone to go there and steal it?" Harry inquired at one Order meeting.

"He can't," Bill Weasley said brightly. "A prophecy can only be withdrawn by those it is made about: in this case, you and You-Know-Who. Since you're not going to get it, he'll have to do it himself."

That did make sense, Harry supposed, but the plan would unfold too slowly for his tastes. Besides which—

"If I were Voldemort, I would try to make me, that is, Harry Potter, get the prophecy for me. Then I wouldn't have to go to the Ministry."

Sirius Black nodded, grimacing.

"There is that danger, yes, but you should be safe at Hogwarts."

To date, Harry had been attacked at Hogwarts three times… no, wait, four… or five? Either way, if that counted as safe, Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know the Order's take on high-risk locations.

"And you can resist the Imperius," Tonks added, hair abruptly changing from pink to bright purple. "That's the surest way You-Know-Who could have made you go after the prophecy, so..."

"You-Know-Who could still kidnap the lad in Hogsmeade, torture him into insanity and make him get the prophecy once his mind is broken," Moody barked, startling everyone. "Constant vigilance!"

Tonks argued that Voldemort would hardly do something so rash if the whole point of the stealing the prophecy was to discover why he couldn't curse Harry properly. Kingsley Shacklebolt countered that Voldemort could delegate torturing Harry to the Death Eaters and avoid coming into contact with him. Bill reasoned that chickening out of meeting Harry would lose Voldemort credibility with
his own followers. Mrs. Weasley requested that could they please stop discussing something so morbid as torturing Harry into insanity and move on to more productive matters, like cleaning, perhaps?

Oddly, whenever cleaning was brought up, everyone tended to suddenly recall a thousand things they had to do just now, without delay, and thank you for the tea, but they will be going.

Harry often evaded cleaning duty by sequestering himself in the library of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black. It had taken a while for people to figure out where he was disappearing to—and then he'd had a bit of a falling out with Sirius Black, who was rather vocal in his opinion that the House of Black was evil and whatever books they had collected over centuries of evilness were better off burnt. Harry agreed that the Blacks had been sick bastards, but he was actually quite intrigued by the way they had lived and thought. He'd visited a traditional wizard household before—the Longbottom Manor—but this was his first time in a Dark wizards' home and he was treating it as a fascinating museum trip.

The library, for one, was an absolute treasure trove of information.

It was like Hogwarts' Restricted Section wide open and free for perusal. A lot of the books were rather gruesome and temperamental—one of them had nearly bitten Harry's fingers off when he'd tried opening it without some arcane password—but Harry was learning loads of interesting spells. After all, hearing what the Order was up to in this war was very nice, but the best thing Harry could actually do with himself was to get stronger in preparation for the future. He'd tried to get people to help him train, but the Order had been firm: no magic during the holidays, and never mind that the Ministry could not detect it here. Or maybe it was Dumbledore who'd been firm—Harry wasn't sure, but, after a certain point, he'd stopped arguing. He'd smiled, nodded, promised to be a good boy, and then made sure not to practice where they could see. He was especially careful to keep Dark magic under wraps: it was the norm among the Slytherins to dabble in Dark magic, because it was foolish to ignore the weapons your enemies might use, but the Order didn't seem to uphold the same views.

They were all about keeping things clean and legal—except for the part where they were, y'know, illicit vigilantes opposing the Ministry.

Harry noticed the irony. They did not. That pretty much summed up the differences between them.

***

Harry leaned back in his favourite library armchair and frowned, twirling his wand in his fingers. It was a pity that he could only try spells which caused external physical effects—he'd come across quite a few mind-altering curses he wouldn't mind learning. However, there was really very little point in casting, say, Comprimo, a curse that dampened your opponent's will to fight, on an inanimate object like a table. The table might become greatly depressed and give up all struggle, but Harry would never know.

"Kaio!"

A cushion folded in on itself, as if gradually divested of feathers, and the smell of burning down filled the air; then, the cushion's exterior went up in purple flames. Harry cast an air-freshening charm and smiled. He was getting better at controlling the curse that burned objects from the inside. Cast on a human, this curse would be a lot more difficult to counter than a simple burning spell; pouring water on one's skin would do nothing without the proper counter-curse.

As had been said: the Blacks sure owned interesting books.
Harry was about to get up and test whether his spell had worked when Tonks came through the door and stepped right into the enchanted spot.

"Wotcher, Harry, Molly needs you in the drawing r—what the hell?"

Her right foot was sinking through the floor where Harry had made it turn soft and swampy. Restraining a snicker, Harry undid his work.

"Sorry." He tried to look contrite.

Tonks snorted.

"Don't try those puppy-dog eyes on me, it's not gonna work. You do know that you're not supposed to do magic, right?"

"I'm not?" Harry repeated, feigning shock. "Well, there's my quota of wisdom for the day."

Tonks rolled her eyes.

"I really ought to report you. Next time I will!" She wagged her finger threateningly. "No, really, you've got to—er—well, respect the law and all that rot, and I'm an Auror, so that's my duty…"

Harry arranged his face into an expression of utmost solemnity.

"Ah, screw it," Tonks said, waving a hand. "Now come, Molly wants to see you—and no, I won't pretend that I didn't find you. Honestly, some days I'm not sure who's a bad influence on whom—you on those Weasley twins or they on you…"

It was with great regret that Harry parted with Tonks on the landing and walked into the drawing room. Mrs. Weasley, the twins, Ron and Ginny were already there, busy disinfecting the curtains from Doxies hiding between the folds. Harry ignored Ron, gave a brief nod to Ginny and a fake smile to Mrs. Weasley, and then came up to Fred and George.

After an hour, Mrs. Weasley announced a break for lunch and left the room to make food, taking Ginny with her. Glad for her absence, Harry and the twins approached a cabinet full of curious objects. Ron threw a disgruntled look at them and stomped over to the window; he seemed perpetually peeved that the twins included Harry in their company the way they never did him.

"What do you think it does?" George asked, peering at a silver snuffbox. "Oh shit!"

The snuffbox wriggled in his grasp and bit his hand, making him drop it onto the floor. Fred and Harry looked on in interest as George's hand developed a brown crust, glazing over.

"Most illuminating," Fred declared, carefully taking the snuffbox by his robe and putting it into his pocket. "I think we should see whether it can do anything for our you-know-what…"

He winked at Harry.

Soom after his arrival at the headquarters, Harry had made a deal with Fred and George: he'd give them his Triwizard winnings as start-up capital for their joke shop in return for them giving priority status to his product orders and looking into developing a more serious line in addition to prank material. The twins had refused at first, saying that a thousand Galleons was too great a sum and that they'd do favours for Harry anyway—friends didn't have to pay friends. However, Harry had
pointed out that they could be more useful to him if they had the capital to develop new products. Since their business deal, Fred and George had acquired a spring in their step, obviously enthusiastic about all the ingredients and experiments they could now afford.

"Now, speaking of useful stuff, what do you think of Doxy poison, dear brother?" Fred said, nudging George and pointing to a bucket full of immobilized pests.

As the twins went to harvest some Doxies, Harry turned back to the cabinet. He ignored the vial of something that looked a lot like blood, and avoided a spindly-legged silver instrument of unknown function. His attention was drawn by a golden locket with an ornate letter S on it that seemed vaguely familiar. Harry frowned and took the locket, twirling it between his fingers. It was quite heavy, a solid weight on his palm, and he couldn't help thinking that he'd seen it somewhere before.

"Filthy boys touching family treasures!"

Harry started, looking down. Kreacher the annoying house-elf was glowering at him.

"Kreacher will not let nasty half-blood boy steal from the House of Black—"

"You're a really rude elf, you know that?"

"He does, and I'm sure he enjoys it," Sirius Black said, entering the drawing room. "What have you got there, Harry?"

"Nothing much." Black was watching him expectantly, so Harry showed him the locket. "Just this. Do you know anything about it?"

"Nope, first time I see it." Black looked it over, then tried to open it to no avail. "Merlin knows what my charming relatives could be storing inside. I doubt it's anything we'd want."

With a careless move, Black threw the locket into the trash pile; the locket hadn't even landed when the house-elf gave a crazed screech and leaped after it.

Everyone turned around to watch, stunned, as Kreacher sailed through the air and caught the golden locket. The elf then dashed to the door, clutching the locket to his chest—and, in the doorway, collided right with Severus Snape's legs.

Snape raised an eyebrow as the house-elf wriggled by him and then turned to glare at everyone gathered in the drawing room. In defiance of the lovely summer day, he was as pale and disagreeable looking as ever.

"Potter, a word," he demanded, not bothering with greetings.

"What about?" Black butted in immediately.

Snape was clearly going to say something that would only worsen the situation, so Harry rushed to talk before the man had a chance to respond:

"It's all right, Sirius," he said, plastering on a smile. "I don't mind."

Black and Snape still managed to exchange a couple of insults before Snape and Harry had left the room, but at least they didn't succeed in dragging Harry into that spat. Harry Potter: 1. Immature adults: 0.

Once in the library, Snape whirled around.
"The Headmaster has asked me to inform you of the situation with your relatives," he said without preamble.

Harry nodded, attentive. He'd been wondering about this for a while, but Dumbledore had put off giving him the answer—Harry was sure that the old man was doing all he could to somehow keep the wards over the Dursleys' house intact.

"The wards required your aunt's consent to remain charged," Snape continued. "They relied upon her goodwill to let you stay. Since she is, as of recently, quite stripped of reason—" Snape's lip curled unpleasantly. "—she cannot give her approval. Theoretically, the wards could also rely on the consent of your cousin, since he is a blood relation, but he remains quite unconvinced. I am given to understand that your uncle is the one who negatively affects his decision."

Yeah, Harry could imagine.

"So the wards broke, then."

"This is not a laughing matter, Potter!" Snape hissed. "It should also be clear to you that we cannot let the Ministry discover this, for, with your Muggle relatives refusing to take you in and your magical guardian a convicted criminal on the run, you could become a ward of the Ministry. In the present situation, there are few scenarios less desirable."

"The Dursleys wouldn't stop being my official guardians just because the wards fell," Harry countered, refusing to balk before Snape's glare. "I don't think the Ministry even knew about the wards, sir."

Harry would rather eat his own dress robes than expect Dumbledore to spill such information.

Snape sneered at him.

"Naturally, the Ministry knew nothing. However, now that the wards have fallen, the house is no longer protected from wizards, and the home of the Boy-Who-Lived is an obvious target—"

"So did the wards contain a notice-me-not element? Sir?" Harry asked, curious.

"A wizard-repellent one, as far as I am aware," Snape corrected him. "They contained a unique wizard-repellent element, perhaps because your mother was a Muggleborn, which is why the wards could be maintained by your Muggle aunt."

"Sir, but how much of it was my mother's doing and how much did Dumbledore—"

"I'm not here to answer your idiotic questions until the end of time, Potter," Snape interrupted, scowling at Harry through a curtain of greasy hair. "What you need to know is that the Headmaster has managed to convince your uncle to remain your legal guardian in name only, with the provision that he does not have to see you again."

"Does this mean—"

"Officially, nothing has changed. Your Muggle uncle has custody of you and his home address is listed as yours on Ministry records. Unofficially, you will spend your holidays elsewhere."

Harry nodded.

"The Headmaster has layered new wards onto your relatives' house, to protect them from wizards that can now find them. He has also asked me to inform you that your aunt has been transferred to a
Muggle hospital, where she will be taken care of. Now, if you don't have any more questions—" Snape's look communicated that Harry had better have no questions. "—I shall take my leave."

"Why didn't the Headmaster just Obliviate them?" Harry bit on his lip as soon as the words burst out of him. Suggestions like this were blasphemous at the Order headquarters…

Snape gave Harry a long inscrutable look.

"Obliviating your relatives would have been futile as the wards relied upon sincere emotion. The Headmaster could remove the memory of the Dementor attack, but he would not be able to generate enough goodwill in your relatives for long-term maintenance of the wards."

"I see."

Already by the door, Snape turned around.

"Oh, and Potter? If you have been entertaining dreams of becoming the Slytherin prefect this year, give them up—Mr. Malfoy got the position."

Once Snape departed with a final sneer, Harry did not return to the drawing room to clean. Instead, he lowered himself back into his favourite armchair and took out his wand.

He wasn't taking his irritation out on innocent cushions. It was called spell practice, damn it.

***

The sidelong glances and excited whispers started already at Platform 9¾. Harry had expected it, of course—it was inevitable with the way the previous school year had ended and with all the slander in the Daily Prophet. The student population had to be curious, and curious was better than adamantly antagonistic, so Harry didn't let on that the scrutiny bothered him. He joked with the twins, who then went off to greet Lee Jordan; he withstood a very demonstrably flaunting hug from Padma; he shook hands with Cedric.

"Stop glaring at everyone," Harry muttered to Neville as they boarded the train. "Not all these people are against me."

He hoped.

"Hey, Harry!" Lavender Brown and Parvati chorused when he walked past their compartment.

He smiled at them and ignored Seamus Finnigan's glower. In a compartment a little way ahead, Ernie Macmillan was arguing with Zacharias Smith about whether or not Harry could be trusted. Ernie was saying that, if Cedric confirmed that Harry had been Portkeyed away from the third task, it was probably true, and that they couldn't discount what had happened after the task. Smith insisted that Harry was definitely barmy, and had Ernie forgotten the way Harry the gloryhound had stolen the spotlight from Hufflepuff last year?

Terry and Anthony waved at Harry cheerily when he passed them by, and their friend Michael Corner nodded at him in greeting. A bunch of second year Ravenclaws paled when they saw Harry and shut their compartment door in fright.

"Sorry, Harry," Hermione said, squeezing past him in a rush. "Oh, hi, Neville, I didn't see you on the platform! I'm meant to ride in the prefects' carriage, it's somewhere up ahead—"

"I know, Cedric is already there, I think," Harry said, as Neville stood aside to let Hermione pass.
"You might want to wait up for Tony, he's the Ravenclaw fifth year prefect this year—"

"Really?" Hermione beamed. "It's nice to have a familiar face there, I don't know who the other fifth year Gryffindor prefect is yet."

"It's Dean Thomas," Harry said. "Cedric's Head Boy, he's got the list… You should see Padma there, too."

Hermione didn't seem delighted at that last titbit of information, but instead chose to vent her frustration with the fact that Malfoy and not Harry became the Slytherin prefect this year.

"She's right," Neville said, once they'd sat down in an empty compartment. "You would have been a lot better than Malfoy. I wonder who decides these things."

"Head of House?" Harry suggested. "Headmaster? I've no idea. I'm sure it was a political decision, either way."

"And a sad state of affairs it is when supporting Malfoy is a more politically sound decision than supporting you, Harry," Blaise said, entering together with Millie. "Hello, Longbottom. Can't say I've missed seeing you."

"Likewise, I'm sure," Neville muttered.

Millie frowned at Harry.

"So, Potter. Want to tell us what you've been so secretive about all summer?"

"Yeah, just a moment—Luna! In here," Harry said, getting up and opening the door.

"Hello, Harry," Luna said. Harry had forgotten quite how dreamy Luna's voice was. "I wondered when I'd be seeing you. People are talking about you, you know."

"They're even writing about him in the newspapers," Blaise said seriously. "Quite famous, our Harry is."

Neville moved over to let Luna sit next to him.

"So?" Millicent prodded, undeterred. "What did you do in the summer?"

"Stayed at the headquarters of Dumbledore's underground club," Harry said. "And it wasn't half as grand as it sounds, so there's no need to make that face."

"What was it like, then?" Neville asked.

"And did you learn anything interesting?" Blaise added.

Harry grimaced.

"Not really. Dumbledore is mainly concerned with bringing Voldemort out into the open and recruiting allies, which is, well, pretty common sense."

"Has he got a plan?" Neville inquired.

Harry thought about the prophecy, the guards around the Department of Mysteries, the endless meetings and Snape's spying.
"Nothing to write home about," he said.

Blaise snorted.

"Figures. My mother has always believed that Dumbledore is not half as competent as he pretends to be."

Neville glared at him.

"Dumbledore is the most powerful wizard alive!"

"So what? He's still incompetent," Millie snapped. "Just look at who he's been hiring for Defence teachers. The school's standards are declining every year."

"Not to mention Binns," Blaise said. "It's criminal, how little history we're actually learning. Criminal."

"Well, I think his worst decision was hiring Snape to teach Potions," Neville declared.

"You're just saying that because you're a Gryffindor—"

"And you only like him because he favours Slytherins—"

"Dumbledore's beard is pretty," Luna said, interrupting the budding quarrel. When everyone quieted down to stare at her, she added: "Some things he does are very strange, though. I think he might be infected with Wrackspurts."

"Exactly," Blaise agreed. "Wait, what?"

***

Dumbledore's staff-hiring choices became a subject of discussion once again at dinner, after Dolores Umbridge—a toad thinly disguised as a human—stood up and randomly gave a supremely convoluted and deeply worrying introductory speech.

"Dolores Umbridge," Nott said with a pensive air. "Formerly, the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Should be interesting."

"A bold career move," Harry noted lightly.

Inside, he was far from cheerful. From her speech, it could be deduced that Umbridge had very strong support of the Ministry behind her, and Nott's oddly forthcoming comment shed light on just how powerful the woman was. In the current political atmosphere, with Dumbledore barely hanging on to bargaining power in the Ministry, her appearance at Hogwarts was more than a little sinister.

"Umbridge is a friend of your father's, isn't she?" Nott continued, turning to Malfoy.

Harry's eyebrows rose; it was uncharacteristic for Nott to part with valuable information so easily. Perhaps he and Malfoy had had a falling out.

Malfoy threw Nott a derisive look.

"Of course, my father has friends in the higher echelons of the Ministry."

Yep, they'd definitely had a fight.
"And I'm going to enjoy watching you squirm, Potter," Malfoy said, turning to Harry. "You see, Madam Umbridge absolutely abhors attention-seeking liars."

"I wonder how she's going to deal with you, then," Harry said.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed.

"Think you're funny, do you? Well, we'll see who has the last laugh."

***

In retrospect, it was ironic that Harry had learnt more while locked up in a creepy old house than he had in his actual Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson at Hogwarts. Under Umbridge's vigilant eye, fifth year Slytherins read a mind-numbingly boring book and took notes—with Umbridge promising sweetly that they had nothing to fear in her class, since they would be practising no actual magic. She stalked between student desks, eyes alert for possible miscreants, and exuded an aura of such self-satisfaction that Harry felt the surging desire to throttle her. She took special notice of Harry, too; apart from insinuating, not very subtly, that there was a misguided person in the class who'd been telling them awful lies, she gazed at Harry in a way that suggested that she was waiting for him to slip up and give her an excuse to do something horrible. Harry resolved not to give her the chance and refrained from making disrespectful comments.

Harry had expected that Umbridge would try to discredit him before the school population. Umbridge's refusal to teach them any spells came as an unanticipated blow.

The Slytherin class had been quiet and watchful; they'd gone along with Umbridge's lesson plan without a protest. Harry resolved to ask his friends from other Houses how their Defence lessons had gone—maybe someone else, the brave Gryffindors for example, had actually asked the professor about using magic.

Turned out, Hermione had.

"There won't be a need to practice these spells," she said, mocking Umbridge's condescending tone. "Theoretical understanding will adequately prepare you for your OWL exam. There is nothing dangerous waiting for you in the outside world."

"Yes, and You-Know-Who doesn't count," Neville agreed. "Ron Weasley asked."

Umbridge had fuck awful timing: Harry couldn't afford to waste a whole year of Defence! Voldemort was out there, even if he wasn't yet moving openly, and Harry knew that they would meet again—it wasn't a question of if, but of when. And Harry needed to be better prepared than he'd been the last time, and preparing was the only thing he could do in the war at this point, and he couldn't do even that if he didn't get to learn.

"Yes, but Harry, didn't you train last year anyway?" Padma said, when they went to the library after their Arithmancy class to work on their assignments. "You were always busy, studying for the Tournament." Padma pursed her lips, perhaps remembering their failed romance that took place during that time. "Surely, you could organize something like this again."

Harry snorted.

"A lot of things have changed since last year. The guys who trained me then are more likely to ambush me now."

That was a slight exaggeration. There were indeed numerous Slytherins who would probably try to
strangle Harry in his sleep if Voldemort told them to, but so far, Harry had been met with no violence. Or, well, no more violence than was normal for Slytherin—and, Ministry propaganda or no, not many people dared to really push a Triwizard winner who'd defeated Voldemort as a baby and was immune to the Killing Curse, if rumours were to be believed.

The idea of getting extracurricular training stayed with Harry, though—perhaps because he'd been so used to it from last year, it almost felt like something was missing from his life without those training hours, despite how busy he already was with OWL coursework and Quidditch practices. A couple of weeks into the school year, he brought it up with Cedric, to see how it would fly.

"You want me to train you," Cedric said dubiously. "I—don't think that I'm against it, or anything, but I think it's a little silly, considering that it was you, not me who won the Triwizard Tournament in the end."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"You know how I won—I've told you about Barty Crouch Jr. paving the way for me—"

"That's bullshit, Harry," Cedric said, frowning. "That is—it's true that I probably know more magic than you, considering that I'm two school years ahead, but it would be a lie to say that you weren't at all responsible for your win. Barty Crouch didn't do the first task for you, nor the third, and we've had our disagreements, but you did win in an even duel between us. Uneven, actually, since you were injured."

"Ced—"

"I could agree to us training together, though. Perhaps with a few other people—it's not just you who's falling behind this year, we're all upset about Umbridge."

"You're suggesting—"

"A duelling club of sorts, yes." Cedric nodded. "Would it be such a bad idea?"

Harry took a few days to think about it, but the more he thought, the more he liked it. It wasn't only the opportunity to practice Defence that appealed to him, but also the chance to reach out to a wider school population. He couldn't climb onto the table during dinner and declare himself innocent against all of Umbridge's accusations; he did not dare speak against her publicly at all for fear of retaliation. Once she'd become the High Inquisitor, he also gave up on the idea of contacting Rita Skeeter—while he might sway a part of the public that way, he would also have to suffer severe consequences. His support base was just not wide enough for risky moves such as those. However, an underground effort—

That could work.

That was worth trying.

***

Two weeks after his conversation with Cedric, Harry stood in front of a crowd of twenty-odd people in the Hidden Room, preparing to give his first ever speech. A lot of the people here he knew; some he didn't. Quite a few were older, like Cedric's Hufflepuff friends and the twins' Gryffindor buddies. Ginny Weasley and Colin Creevey were the youngest, though they might soon be beaten by Astoria Greengrass, if she'd follow Daphne in. Harry had a feeling that people would continue trickling in: the idea of Defence practice seemed to be a popular one—or, maybe, it was the allure of defying Umbridge.
Harry had done his best to observe the woman since his dispiriting first lesson with her, and quickly found that her weakest point was her absolute belief that Ministry power could accomplish *everything*. Umbridge envisaged herself to be the most influential being on the planet bar the Minister himself, simply because she enjoyed strong Ministry endorsement. While it was true that Ministry backing made her a very dangerous adversary, Umbridge tended to rely on that power too much and disregard people's feelings.

She alienated teachers without a second thought; she was condescending to students; Filch was the only being in Hogwarts, of those alive or dead, who wholeheartedly approved of her. Even people who openly supported Umbridge's policies could not justify her refusal to teach them Defence; Harry had particularly enjoyed putting Malfoy on the spot for that one. Nobody rebelled openly, of course, but it was early days yet. The school's silence was borne out of caution, not of genuine support for Umbridge.

Harry was doing his best to capitalize on that.

"Good evening to you all," he said, projecting aplomb he did not feel. "Introductions aren't necessary, seeing as we all know why we're here, but I suppose a few inspirational statements won't hurt, so do me a favour and listen up."

Blaise shook his head; Cedric smiled encouragingly from where he stood amid other Hufflepuffs; Hermione looked ready to take notes.

"So—we're all here because we believe that Umbridge is doing a stellar job at bollixing up our Defence classes. Sitting on our arses and reading useless books does not sound like a productive way to go about learning spells to me, and, clearly, to you neither."

"Hear, hear," the Weasley twins chorused.

"Therefore, it's high time we took matters into our own hands and taught ourselves what we are being denied in class," Harry continued. "This is why we are holding the first meeting of the duelling club—"

"Which will hopefully sail better than Lockhart's duelling club did," Fred added.

People around the room snickered. Harry smiled.

"One would hope so, yes," he agreed. "Now, more importantly… I believe we've come here not only because Umbridge is teaching us absolutely nothing and can potentially jeopardize our exam results. We are also angry at the way Umbridge has taken over the school. Umbridge is not here to teach us. She is here to spy on us and sabotage Hogwarts. She will only get as far as we let her. I say, let's amass strength and drive the bitch out."

People were watching him as though spellbound. Even Padma and Parvati had stopped gossiping and were looking at him with wide eyes. Hell, *Blaise* was listening. When Harry made a pause, the crowd suddenly burst into applause, complete with whistles and appreciative comments.

"Thank you," Harry went on, once it died down. "Now, let's just run through a few technical details before we start practicing. The duelling club is not illegal according to Umbridge—*yet,*" he said, looking over the congregated students and willing the next message to sink in. "She's just become the High Inquisitor, so she might very well outlaw practising Defence out of class; I don't know, but I don't want to find out. The bottom line is—*don't get caught,*" Harry said emphatically. "Don't mention this club to people you don't trust, don't talk about it where you might be overheard, and try not to be overt when you're going for a meeting."
Harry seriously hoped that people understood the need for secrecy, because so far, they did not have any security arrangements. Hermione had suggested cursed parchment, but that would only be effective after they'd been betrayed and would do nothing to prevent a leak. Blaise had mentioned that his mother used some sort of a parchment that bound people to silence; he'd promised to look into that.

"You'll be informed of the dates for future meetings through the club's grapevine—all of us here have friends in common. It would, of course, be easier to set aside a certain night every week, but we have to allow for the Quidditch practices of all House teams and prefect meetings for those who have them."

Harry was proud to say that they had collected a decent number of prefects here, actually. Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott from Hufflepuff; Padma and Anthony from Ravenclaw; Dean Thomas and Hermione from Gryffindor. A few sixth-years, too. Not to mention the fact that the Head Boy was in attendance.

It paid to be well connected.

"If you have any additional questions, don't hesitate to ask—and let's finally start on some spells! Can everyone here do a Stunner?"

Harry had discussed the lesson plans with Cedric prior to this meeting. They'd figured they'd better start from simple, but necessary spells, and those who knew how to do them could help those who didn't. Harry expected that he would be quite ahead of his classmates due to having learnt a lot of spells last year and even more in the Black library this summer. Besides, Defence, in addition to Potions, was a subject he'd consistently studied ahead for by virtue of necessity—he'd had to defend himself ever since first year.

Following Harry's orders, people dispersed through the room to practise in pairs, and instructors started walking among them, helping out.

"Wow, Harry," Padma said, coming up to him. "You look quite dashing when you go all authoritative, didn't you know? Now, will anyone tell me how this Stunning Spell actually works? Of course, I know the incantation, but that doesn't mean I can cast it right—"

"I'll show you," Cedric offered.

Cho materialized by Cedric's side and requested to be shown the spell, too. Harry smiled at them and walked over to correct Susan Bones's pronunciation.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, smiling. "I think I'll get it now—Stupefy!"

Harry blocked automatically as a red beam of light flew at him. Susan laughed in glee; when she did, cute dimples formed on her cheeks.

"You're quite welcome," Harry said, blinking.

Maybe it was just him, or the lighting, but suddenly a girl he used to pass by in the corridors without a second glance looked really pretty. Not breathtakingly beautiful like Fleur, or quite as obviously attractive as Padma and Parvati, but there was just something appealing about her. The classical features of her face, combined with the braid she always wore and the pearl earrings, made Harry think of girls on old oil paintings he'd seen around Hogwarts.

How very bizarre.
With a mumbled goodbye, Harry went over to help Terry, Anthony and their friend Michael Corner, and then Neville and Hermione waved him over. He was glad he wasn't the only one who knew how to do the spell, because he couldn't imagine trying to instruct everyone at once.

And it was sort of creepy, the way these kids kept turning to him for advice—as if he wasn't a student, just like them.

"Thanks for giving me a chance to be here," Dean Thomas said awkwardly when Harry stopped by to correct his wand movements.

Harry glanced at him.

"Neville recommended you." He shrugged. "Besides, you seem like a decent bloke, from what I've seen at Quidditch."

And a prefect besides.

Dean nodded. Luna, who was his partner, seemed to lose interest in their conversation and instead turned to watch as Mandy Brocklehurst accused Terry of being a chauvinistic male pig.

"Neville also said that you wouldn't spill things to Weasley and Finnigan at the first opportunity," Harry continued, cocking his head to the side, and he knew that Dean had not missed the warning in his voice.

"Do you think—eventually—"

"I'm not rejecting anyone," Harry said pleasantly. "Weasley just needs to acknowledge that he's been a dick to me for no good reason ever since first year. He should also apologize to me for it. And he needs to get over the Gryffindor jingoism, though that might be asking too much." Harry smiled wryly. "I find it pretty pointless if I teach someone to fight and then they turn against me."

"Yeah… I get it. You're right. He's just…" Dean floundered for an explanation. "Never mind. I'll work on him."

"All right," Harry said. "Just don't be too obvious about the club—and good job on that Stunner, I think you're getting it soon."

Soon as in, like, after a lot of practice. Harry frowned as he approached Tracey and Daphne, who were finding new and exciting ways to butcher the incantation. It was ridiculous that so many fifth-years, and even some of the older kids, were unable to do an elementary Stunning Spell. Maybe starting up the duelling club was an even better idea than Harry had initially thought—such a level of incompetence was untenable with the threat of Voldemort looming above them all.
In addition to my amazing beta agedsolarwhisk, I'd like to thank JustWriter2 for bringing up a point that I might have otherwise overlooked.

"What time are we supposed to meet Hermione at Three Broomsticks, again?" Neville asked, searching distractedly through his pockets.

Harry glanced at his watch.

"In about five minutes, so we should get going," he said. "What are you looking for, anyway?"

"I think I've forgotten them inside," Neville mumbled. "The tweezers for my *Mimbulus Mimbletonia*—you know how touchy it's been since the Weasley twins borrowed it for Stinksap. I should never have let them near it."

"Just go check in the shop," Harry recommended, waving at the door of Dervish & Banges. "I'll wait for you here, all right?"

Neville disappeared inside with a promise to be quick, and Harry leaned against the wall by the door. The first Hogsmeade Saturday happened to fall on a crisp and mercifully dry October day, and it was positively liberating to escape outside the school bounds for a while.

Hogwarts was currently an arena for a high-stake game of hide-and-seek, and everyone was a player. So far, the duelling club had managed to stay off of Umbridge's radar, but the club kept growing, and Harry worried that, sooner or later, there would be a leak. Umbridge had also taken to inspecting Hogwarts teachers' classes, which rattled everyone's nerves. McGonagall walked around with the expression of a cat whose tail had been stepped on, and Harry had heard awful stories about Trelawney's assessment. He could only be happy that Hagrid wasn't around, or else he'd be fired on sight for being a half-giant.

Harry's eyes followed a blonde girl with braided hair. He couldn't quite see from here, but she looked kind of like Susan Bones, and wouldn't it be fortunate if they just happened to bump into each other?

And then, Harry felt a prickling at the back of his neck.

He looked around, alert at once. Everywhere around him, students milled about, chattering between themselves, and Harry couldn't figure out the source of his unease. Everything seemed to be fine, but —

Then he saw it: just a few feet away, a very large blond man in dark robes was heading in his direction. The man wore a pleasant expression on his face and looked for all the world like he was just taking a walk, but something about him gave Harry pause. Something—the way he glanced around surreptitiously, and held his wand close—

Harry felt his heart start beating faster.

*I should get inside,* he thought, and already moved to the door to Dervish & Banges when he
realized that inside a small space with one exit was not where he wanted to be if he was being followed.

He slunk away from the wall and headed off nonchalantly, hoping that his pursuer would not realize he'd noticed him. Just a bored student deciding to walk somewhere else.

To Honeydukes, for example. They had a great cellar. With an excellent passage to Hogwarts.

Harry saw in a shop window reflection as the man craned his neck to find Harry in the crowd and then speed up his steps.

Harry ducked behind a heavyset woman and increased his pace, too.

He wondered whether he was being paranoid—what if this was just the Order following him again? What if it was a well-meaning tail, not a malicious one?

Just then, he saw another man heading towards him from the opposite direction. He was walking straight towards Harry, and the massive blond Harry had already noticed was behind, and their positioning assured Harry that his instincts weren't failing him—the Order wouldn't be herding him like this.

"Contego," Harry muttered, hoping that the Disillusionment Charm would make him more difficult to find.

Harry's mind was awhirl, trying to work through the possibilities. He couldn't see any Order members around, so no help would be coming from that quarter. Would it be better to stay in a crowded area or isolate himself from others? If these were ordinary burglars, Harry would have definitely stayed among other people, but—

("You-Know-Who could kidnap the lad in Hogsmeade, torture him into insanity and make him get the prophecy once his mind is broken!"")

—these could very well be Voldemort's people, and they were unlikely to regret catching innocents in crossfire.

But Voldemort was lying low, so surely he wouldn't want to attract attention to himself by staging an all-out attack in Hogsmeade.

Ministry would hush it up, though, and if Harry knew it, then Voldemort knew it too—

Harry felt a spell whizz past him, and his mind was made up.

He entered Gladrags Wizardwear, then swerved between lines of clothing towards the back door, muttering apologies to customers he narrowly avoided collision with. He exited onto the smaller path that went parallel to the main street behind the buildings and then ran towards Honeydukes.

He was already past the back of Zonko's when the sound of running feet echoed behind him.

"Potter! Stop!"

Harry glanced behind to see the blond from before chasing after him. Harry sent a Stunner flying at his bulky form, followed quickly by a Choking Curse.

"Stop, we only want to talk to you! Stupefy! Impedimenta!"

Harry briefly wondered at the way the Death Eater made the easy curses verbal—almost as if
he wanted Harry to know what he was casting.

"Fracta Ossem!" Harry fired in response.

Judging by the wail that sounded from behind, Harry's Bone-Shattering Curse was a success. He sprinted forward—almost there, he could already see the sign for Honeydukes—when he felt a whole barrage of nonverbal spells hit his shield, and staggered.

He poured all his might into holding his shield up—they were mostly Stunners, from what he saw, and Body-Binds, and other non-lethal curses, but they were all powerful, and precise, and vicious, and he had no time to fire spells of his own. He felt his Disillusionment Charm slip.

Harry turned around fully and saw that there were two Death Eaters behind him, now—and, while Harry had managed to injure one of them, the other was in top form and firing an unrelenting volley of spells at Harry's shield, and Harry felt that he would not be able to hold it up much longer.

"Potter," the second Death Eater said. "There is no need for anyone to get hurt if you only listen to us."

Harry dove from the next incoming curse.

"Kaio," he whispered, and rolled out of the way of the next spell. He dodged again, quickly shielded and fired: "Segrego—"

"We are not here to harm you," the blond man said, batting Harry's curses away. "We are here just to talk to you, and we have no desire to harm you at all."

A stray thought about trying to use Unforgivables—a sure way to disable his attackers—flitted through Harry's mind, but he didn't dare. Not in the middle of Hogsmeade, not when they were punishable by a stay in Azkaban, not with the Ministry's current feelings about Harry.

"Vexo," he muttered. "Mulco—"

"Stop it," the brunet Death Eater commanded, barely sidestepping Harry's last curse. "We swear not to harm you if you cease to attack us—"

Harry dodged the next curse—a Stunner, a nonverbal one this time—and said:

"If you don't want to harm me, you've got a strange way of showing it. Macero!"

"If you would only stop and listen, we would try to subdue you no further," the man said, almost chidingly. "The Dark Lord has decided that he's been too hasty in his initial assessment of you—"

Harry reinforced the shield around himself just in time for it to repel a nonverbal Expelliarmus.

"And therefore he has sent us here with the mission to offer you to disregard past wrongs and start anew."

"Confringo," Harry said automatically, but his mind was reeling with shock. "You—are trying to recruit me?"

"We are presenting a chance at reconciliation," the blond evaded, jumping out of the way of an exploded tree trunk with agility surprising for a man his size.

The Death Eaters hadn't been truly trying to injure Harry, now that he thought back to their spells; they had mostly fired harmless curses aimed at disabling him from fighting. Still, the idea that they
just wanted to *talk* to the Boy-Who-Lived was preposterous.

"You must listen to us," the blond declared, wincing as he jarred his injured arm.

"Talk, then," Harry said curtly. "If that's what you really want to do."

He maintained a shield about himself and held his wand at the ready. Looking closer at his adversaries, he saw that neither of these men had been present at Voldemort's resurrection; he didn't think he'd seen them before, although the dark-haired one did seem somehow familiar.

"Of course it is," the blond affirmed. "We wish nothing more than to convey our Lord's offer."

"His offer," Harry repeated. "What offer?"

"The offer of peace."

Yeah, right.

"You see, Mr. Potter, as it stands, there is no denying some very grave altercations between you and the Dark Lord in the past."

"He's tried to kill me, you mean," Harry said.

"And you have tried to kill him," the brunet retorted sharply. "The world might not be aware of the Killing Curse the Boy-Who-Lived cast at the end of last June, but the Dark Lord remembers."

Was that a threat to expose Harry to the Ministry?

"Please do not take it as an insinuation of any kind," the blond hurried to assure him. "Such desire for self-preservation does you credit. Perhaps Dumbledore would frown upon your actions, but the Dark Lord understands."

He made a pause, presumably to let that statement sink in.

"And this is why he has deemed it possible to talk to you in a rational manner," he continued. "It is natural that you would attempt to kill a man who is trying to kill you. However, if neither of you regards the other as an enemy any longer, there is no need for further conflict. The chance at peaceful life is quite within your grasp."

"In fact, the Dark Lord offers you more than just peace," the other Death Eater added. "He offers you a chance to fulfil your potential away from Dumbledore's stifling restrictions. He offers to teach you in the ways of magic you could never learn by yourself, and guide you on the path to power and knowledge, and become what Dumbledore would never allow you to become."

Funny, Harry thought as he stared at the Death Eaters, that didn't sound too terrible; the learning, and the peace, and the power he could grasp if he only chose. A life not haunted by the spectre of Voldemort, because Voldemort would cease to be the enemy.

Like that could ever fucking happen.

"And what would I have to do in return?" Harry asked, refusing to dwell on the bitterness of that last thought.

Because he'd been given the option to choose peace once already, at the end of last June, and he'd chosen life instead. And he'd known then that he'd have to fight Voldemort till the end, and he had no business hoping for a break now.
The dark-haired man smiled.

"In return, you would have to pledge to never use that knowledge against the Dark Lord."

"Pledge. Take the Dark Mark and join his—your—side."

"You have already been marked by our Lord," the man pointed out, nodding at Harry, and Harry's hand automatically flew to his scar. "And the struggle between you and the Dark Lord has never been a war of ideals, has it?"

"You have no stake in the ideological struggle between our Lord and Dumbledore," the blond Death Eater said. "It is not your place to become the champion of Dumbledore's goals. You have nothing to gain by plunging yourself into a conflict that is much older than you."

"The Dark Lord," the other man said with an air of finality, "expects you neither to support our fight against the Muggle encroachment on our world, nor to pledge your loyalty. The only pledge he requests is one of neutrality."

"Why?" Harry asked. "Why now? Why would he want neutrality?"

"You are not his real enemy, Harry Potter," came the answer. "The Dark Lord has no quarrel with you. He feels that there is no need for you to become his mortal enemy, if it can be easily avoided."

And this was when Harry knew for a fact that they were bullshitting him. Because Voldemort did have a quarrel with Harry—he'd tried to kill Harry as a baby, and then again in the Chamber of Secrets as a mere memory of himself, and Harry was the first guest at Voldemort's resurrection. Harry stood as the symbol of his continued failure and embarrassment, and he was the child of the prophecy, and—

Oh fuck, of course. The prophecy.

Harry couldn't believe he'd forgotten about it even for a moment. Voldemort wanted Harry to get the prophecy. Voldemort couldn't Imperius him, didn't want to fight him until he knew the contents of the prophecy, but he could try to win him over.

And he'd bothered to think of a tempting enough lure. If Harry hadn't been so sure Voldemort was intending to kill him regardless of the truce—

He liked to think that he'd have rejected the offer, anyway. But he hated Voldemort that much more for making him wonder.

Some of Harry's thoughts must have shown on his face, because the blond Death Eater spoke up:

"We will not take an answer now. We are simply here to make the offer, and it still stands, even if you unthinkingly reject it. You have not had the time to—"

Then, Harry heard the sound of running feet, and a voice shouted Harry! and a nonverbal curse went sizzling towards the two Death Eaters.

Harry glanced behind to see Remus Lupin emerging through a gap between two buildings, poised to fight—but the Death Eaters weren't going to wait for his arrival.

"Our conversation must be cut short," the dark-haired one said, giving Harry a meaningful look. "We trust that you will think on our words, Mr. Potter."
With that, both men Disapparated, and Harry remained looking pensively at the spot where they'd just been.

"Harry! We've been looking for you everywhere," Lupin admonished, finally catching up to him. "What were you doing, Harry—talking to them?"

"How did you know that something was wrong?" Harry asked distractedly.

"Mundungus Fletcher was on the lookout, and he warned us." Lupin gave an exasperated sigh. "Instead of helping you, of course."

"Is that the same Fletcher who was supposed to guard me when the Dementors attacked this summer?"

"The very one. Come along."

Still deep in thought, Harry followed.

"What did they want, Harry? What did they say?" Lupin questioned, as they walked out onto the main street.

"Nothing much," Harry began, but then stopped and sighed.

Striding towards him and Lupin down the busy street was Professor Snape, and his expression boded nothing good. He was probably supremely pissed off about having to spend his precious time on searching for the Boy-Who-Lived, and Harry was sure he'd hear all about it in the immediate future.

From prospective Death Eater to errant schoolboy in a wink. Fortune was a fickle bitch.

"I will take it from here, Lupin," Snape said, eyeing Harry closely.

"Of course, Severus," Lupin demurred. "I'll let everyone know Harry is okay. Some of your friends seemed concerned, Harry. Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom in particular—"

Harry started. He'd completely forgotten about their meeting.

"Oh," he said. "Yes, I should see them—"

"I'm sure your fan club can wait, Mr. Potter," Snape said acerbically.

Harry was equally sure Snape's lecture could wait, whatever it was going to be about.

Snape didn't start shouting at Harry immediately, as Harry had expected, and didn't really say much at all. Once they got to Snape's office, the man just tersely asked whether Harry had any injuries, gave him a piercing glance and uttered:

"Judging by your unharmed state, I presume that the Dark Lord has indeed decided to approach you with an offer of conciliation."

"Did you know that this might happen? Sir?" Harry asked at once.

Because if he had known—

"I knew he was considering it," Snape said indifferently. "For your own sake, Potter, I hope you understand the spirit in which the offer was made."
"I'm not entirely brainless, Professor," Harry snapped, and took a deep breath.

He knew better than to rise to Snape's barbs. He knew better than to let Voldemort's offer rattle him. And he definitely knew better than to wish his life wasn't this fucked up endurance test, because—

Sometimes he feared he'd never quite fixed all that got broken last June, and that he'd fall back apart, if he let himself stop and doubt and wish for impossible things.

"I know the Dark Lord isn't to be trusted," Harry told Snape. "I'm not about to fall for his promises of power and glory—"

"See that you don't," Snape said, and something flashed in his eyes, and suddenly Harry realized that Snape knew what Slytherin was and what it made Harry, and that Harry had of course done some Dark Magic where the good guys couldn't see him, and that maybe he wouldn't tell, because Slytherins did stick together, but he'd had to check that Harry knew the limits.

Knew the limits, and remembered who his enemies were, and kept his priorities straight.

It was somehow disturbing to find that Snape had seen in Harry, for a moment, not the Boy-Who-Lived, but just another Slytherin who might be lured by the Dark. If the Boy-Who-Lived couldn't be trusted to stay on the good side, then who the hell could?

***

Harry sat on his couch in the Slytherin common room, reading the Potions textbook and making notes in the margins. He had a test coming up and, although the techniques of making the Calming Draught sounded supremely dull to him, it was now or never—Quidditch practices had doubled ahead of the match against Gryffindor in two weeks, at the start of November, and Harry had had very little time for studying. Besides, there was also the Transfiguration essay… and duelling club lesson plans that he had to put together… he'd heard that sleep was fun, too.

"Harry?" Blaise plopped down next to him, ignoring the upholstery snakes' menacing hisses.

"Prepare to rejoice, for I come bearing good news."

"I am all excitement," Harry muttered. He seriously hoped this wasn't about Blaise's crush on Katie Bell, because then he might have to kill Blaise, and he had no spare time for hiding the body. "Audiri Secus," he intoned, casting sound wards that would disguise their conversation from outsiders.

He laid his Potions book aside and turned to Blaise.

"My mother's finally sent me a Secrecy Scroll," Blaise said smugly. "And I hope you appreciate the effort, because Secrecy Scrolls are not exactly tradable goods in this country."

Harry leaned against the back of the couch and automatically petted the writhing snakes.

"You're right, this really is good news," he admitted.

Finally, security arrangements for the duelling club could fall into place.

The Secrecy Scroll was in effect magical parchment, signing which bound people to silence regarding a certain secret, much in the way the Goblet of Fire forced the champions to compete in the Triwizard Tournament. There was one secret allowed per Scroll, and signing it constituted a binding magical contract. Once a person signed their name, pledging to honour the secret, they could speak of it to no one beyond the circle of people who'd signed the Scroll too.
At least, such was the idea. There were, of course, loopholes and limitations.

Most importantly, a Secrecy Scroll's effectiveness diminished the more people signed it; as it covered more people, its hold grew more tenuous. Also, the solution tended to work better on weaker, younger wizards, because, especially if a Scroll's influence was stretched thin enough, strong wizards could manoeuvre out of its grasp. It was far from the ideal security measure, on the grand scheme of things, but hopefully it would be sufficient for the duelling club.

"We'll introduce the Scroll at the next meeting," Harry said. "A few people shouldn't sign, of course, or else we won't be able to let new members in."

"I hope that by a few people you mean us, your trusted companions."

"Yeah, you, Millie, Cedric, Neville—the usual suspects."

"Ah, it is so wonderful to be among the privileged few," Blaise said dramatically, "who count themselves among your friends. The crème de la crème of the duelling club."

"Very funny." Harry rolled his eyes. "Now, if Hermione also manages to figure out that communication device she was talking about, we're pretty much set."

He took a moment to mull over what a happy state of affairs that would be and returned to his Potions book, only to be interrupted as Millie came into his line of vision and deposited her solid weight on the couch, too.

Harry muttered under his breath, including her in the sound wards.

"Malfoy and Nott are shouting at each other in your dormitory," she announced. "Something about you, Harry."

Harry responded with a non-committal *huh*, noting down the Calming Draught's ingredients.

"Probably about the fight Harry and Malfoy had yesterday," Blaise drawled. "It's not *comme il faut* for those dark and mysterious types anymore, you know—our Harry is the sacred cow, to be treated with appropriate reverence."

Harry shrugged, still not raising his eyes.

Sacred cow was about right. In the wake of the recruitment attempt in Hogsmeade, Death Eaters' kids in Slytherin had started courting him with various degrees of transparency—most likely on Voldemort's request. Clearly, Voldemort wanted to reinforce the message of the worry-free life Harry would lead if he chose to accept the offer. Harry's relationship with radical Purebloods and Voldemort's sympathizers had always varied from strained to outright hostile, but none of them would dare harm Harry now that Voldemort didn't want him alienated, which left Harry in a position of power.

Of course, that position was contingent on Harry not revealing his true intentions of rejecting Voldemort's overtures, but Harry could certainly do ambiguity if it bought him time. And he needed time off from fighting the Death Eater faction which he could devote to building his own power base among students—so that, when the temporary peace went to hell in a hand basket, he'd have a side to call his own, beyond the immediate circle of his friends.

Malfoy wasn't having an easy time of accepting Harry's changed status, but Nott was a different story. He'd been circling Harry since the start of year, offering a helpful comment here, an aloof opinion there, and a witty remark on top—all the while at odds with Malfoy, and evidently this
particular trend was going to continue.

"It can't go on indefinitely, you know," Blaise said, stretching leisurely. "Sooner or later, you're going to have to declare a side."

Harry didn't dignify something so trite with a response. Of course he'd have to declare a side—Voldemort wouldn't wait forever, and things would probably come to a head even before Voldemort ran out of patience, if Harry knew the way rumours travelled at Hogwarts.

So far, Harry had managed to balance the contradictory messages he was giving out, because his anti-Voldemort face was mostly directed at duelling club members, while his ambiguous mask was on while in Slytherin. Outside both these environments, Harry was neutral and perfectly well-behaved, lest Umbridge catch a wisp of his leanings in either direction. However, there were Slytherins in the duelling club, and Death Eater sympathizers in other Houses, and whispers had the tendency to carry.

Thankfully, Harry was too busy to fret about the timing and trajectory of that proverbial other shoe.

"I mean, it might take a while," Blaise continued doggedly. "We Slytherins have never aired our dirty laundry in public, and, for what the rest of the school knows, we've always been a big happy family anyway. Incestuous, from what they say, but happy."

Harry snorted.


A short wrestling match followed, which Harry lost. He glared at Millie, while she clutched the textbook to her chest with a triumphant smirk.

"What?" he snapped.

"I can't decide whether you're being honestly dumb or deliberately obtuse," Millie said. "You're not listening. Yes, we all know that you'll declare a side, and we—and take that to mean Zabini and I—know what side it's going to be. However, the rest of the school isn't like us, and they might not know."

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"The rest of the school might not believe me when I say that the Boy-Who-Lived is really, truly not a Death Eater?"

He had trouble envisaging that—except in Slytherin. In Slytherin, as usual, things were more complicated.

Harry wanted to project himself in Slytherin as an alternate option to joining Voldemort. Most everyone automatically assumed that the Slytherins would become Death Eaters en masse. Harry had heard that accusation thrown around even before Voldemort's return, and hated the stigma. Even he felt that the Order would have preferred the Boy-Who-Lived to have some other House affiliation, and he was possibly the least marginalized Slytherin of them all. Harry wanted to show his housemates that they had a choice, that they didn't have to be defined by negative expectations.

As the result of recent events, however, Harry seemed to be the poster child for young talented Slytherins who had a bright Death Eater future before them, and that was not an image he wanted to cultivate.
"I suddenly wonder—has it even occurred to you why all the bad guys think you'd make such a splendid bad guy along with them?" Blaise inquired.

"Because the Dark Lord told them to," Harry said drily. "I believe second-guessing him isn't in vogue."

"Ah," Blaise said, brushing invisible lint off his robe in a gesture that screamed theatrical nonchalance. "But our hero is deluded."

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"What am I doing wrong?" Harry asked, lowering his wand in frustration. "I'm focused, I'm envisaging the final result, I'm—"

"Chill, Harry." Eddie Carmichael, a sixth-year Ravenclaw, raised an eyebrow at him. "Nonverbal magic is difficult, okay? Getting worked up over it isn't going to help."

"Eddie's right," Cedric said brightly, addressing more than just Harry, now. "The key element to casting nonverbal spells is mental focus. And you can't concentrate on the spell you're trying to perform if a part of you is busy being angry about failing."

Harry and about a dozen sixth and seventh year students were in the Hidden Room, practising separately from the regular duelling club. They were the advanced group, which had formed organically after several duelling club meetings, when it had become obvious that there was a great discrepancy between older kids who were fairly skilled, and fourth years who couldn't do a simple Incarcerous. Naturally, not all older students were great at Defence, which was why the advanced group was so small. The twins, for all their brilliance at Transfiguration, Charms, and Potions, still attended the regular duelling club, and there were other students like them, whose talents lay elsewhere.

Harry was the only fifth year here. He'd initially contemplated inviting Anthony and Hermione along, but he and Cedric had decided against it, because being clever was not the same thing as being skilled, and Hermione and Anthony both had a lot of basics to learn yet. They wouldn't be ready to start on the advanced stuff for a while.

And the stuff Harry was learning now, by mid-November, was definitely advanced. The sixth-years were supposed to have started nonverbal spells this year, and, since Umbridge wasn't teaching them anything, it fell to the seventh-years to instruct them. Harry had to work extra hard to catch up to where they were and study nonverbal casting along with them. Apart from nonverbal spells, they focused on curses, which was something of Harry's area of expertise, and soon were going to start on the Patronus. Despite being the youngest here, Harry was still nominally in charge—and coming up with a training programme for people who knew more stuff than he did was challenging, but Harry's whole life was challenging, so that was nothing new.

"C'mon," Harry said. "Let me try again."

"Sort of… clear your mind before you cast," Eddie advised, moving to stand across from him.

"Clear my mind how?"

"I don't know, you've done it before, haven't you? If you think back, whenever you managed a nonverbal spell, you were never worked up about it."

Harry took a deep breath. He imagined that he would have to face Umbridge, or Dumbledore, or someone else in front of whom he'd have to keep his cool.
Petrificus Totalus, he thought determinedly, pointing his wand at Eddie.

He felt that something was different this time, and then, sure enough—

"A-ha!" The curse bounced off of Eddie's hasty shield. "There you are! Not perfect, of course, but better than your first levitation charm."

Harry cast the Full Body-Bind again and again, trying to do it faster, and more efficiently. He slipped up a few times when he'd let his concentration waver, but Eddie assured him that it was only natural.

"Fine, then," Harry said, in the end. "How about some curse practice?"

They set to working on Katalambano, a spell that created magical restraints on a person, binding them on the spot within an invisible shield. The advantage of this curse was that, unless one knew how to look for it, it was devilishly difficult to remove, since its outward symptoms had a lot in common with a Full Body-Bind. It also happened to be obscure enough for people not to think of it immediately.

"Imagine doing this nonverbally," Eddie said. "That would be super useful."

None of them managed it, though—Harry because his nonverbal casting wasn't yet at that level, and the others also because they were too unfamiliar with the curse.

By the time they left the Hidden Room, Harry was feeling about as energetic as a grated carrot, but he still trudged to the library. He had a couple of hours before curfew, and, while his homework was done, the research was never-ending, and he had to squeeze it into his day while he still had time. Besides which, close to curfew was a good time to be visiting the library—most people tended to crowd it during the day, and at night only a few especially studious ones remained. People were less likely to notice what he was reading then.

"Hello, Madam Pince," Harry said politely, ignoring the librarian's disapproving glare.

Madam Pince took his Restricted Section pass and examined it, checking for forgery, as she did every time Harry came here. His pass was perfectly legitimate, however—signed by Professor Sprout in the belief that Harry would be using it to look up serious texts on plant properties. Since Harry's grades at Herbology had been consistently without reproach for his entire Hogwarts career, and he'd passed every Potions exam with flying colours, Harry hadn't had a hard time convincing Professor Sprout of the sincerity of his intentions.

("Very well, Mr. Potter, I know that you're a responsible student, and Mr. Diggory speaks very highly of you, as does Mr. Longbottom—a very talented boy... I hope you'll put your research to good use...")

Giving Madam Pince a smile, Harry disappeared behind shelves. It was quiet in the library, and books were whispering among themselves, rustling their pages and creaking restlessly. Harry's fingers ghosted over their spines as he walked past. Moste Potente Potions edged forward at his approach, and an oft-read book on the darker aspects of magic nearly purred at him in expectation, but he hadn't come for them, today. He wasn't looking for new spells, either, of any variety—those he could share with the duelling club, or those he only displayed knowledge of when he was in Slytherin.

Today, he was venturing into Blaise's area of interest—history.

Lately, he'd started thinking that Blaise had a point when he said that history was important, because knowing spells was good, but knowing your enemy was good too, and Harry just didn't understand
some crucial things about Voldemort. He'd always accepted that there were some wizards who followed Voldemort and some who didn't, some Purebloods that did and some that didn't—but he'd never looked into why. Why Voldemort had managed to rise up as he did, why people followed him, and how exactly Voldemort had functioned in the past.

Voldemort was clearly keeping tabs on Harry; it seemed to make sense to look into him in return.

Triumphantal Ministry-sanctioned literature, like Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts, was not what Harry was looking for. He wanted facts, yes, but he also wanted a look at the Death Eaters' motivations. He wanted primary sources—any surviving pamphlets of Voldemort's campaign, records of his speeches, if any existed, and anything that might explain what lured allies to his side. He wanted books that were either unbiased, or biased in favour of the Death Eaters, because they were the ones more likely to give Harry a glimpse into their mindset.

Harry was gazing thoughtfully between Mudblood Menace and State, Power and the Politics of Change when he heard a familiar voice from behind him.

"Potter?"

Harry turned around. Edward Montague was approaching him, his hulking form looking quite out of place in the library, and Harry raised an eyebrow at seeing him. Montague's visit wouldn't have been so surprising last year, when he and other former sixth-years had been training Harry up for the Tournament. After the third task, Harry's ties to his tutors had disappeared like they'd never been—they had ceased to interact at all, except for frosty exchanges during Quidditch.

Until the recruitment attempt in Hogsmeade, that is.

"Montague," Harry said, matching the other boy's tone. "Fancy seeing you here."

The Quidditch captain's eyes swept over the bookshelf in front of Harry.

"Interesting titles you're looking at," he said.

"Yes," Harry agreed. "Interesting."

Montague was quiet for a moment, and Harry waited for him to get to the point.

"That was a pretty good catch, in the last game," Montague said finally. "That Weasley twit didn't stand a chance."

Harry nodded. Ginny Weasley had replaced Dean Thomas as Gryffindor Seeker, and she could hardly compete with Harry, considering his years of experience and his Firebolt. However—

"So you said after the match, Ed," Harry told him.

It was late, he was tired, and they both knew they weren't here to discuss Quidditch.

"Yeah, I did," Montague said, and lost some of his awkwardness. "Look, Harry, I'll be frank with you. We got along fine last year, but then shit happened and I had to be careful, you know? We all had to. You know how things have changed."

"And now they've changed again and someone gave you a nudge to reacquaint yourself with me," Harry concluded.

Voldemort was a pretty damn weighty someone.
Montague shook his head.

"That's where you are wrong. I mean, I get that you're wary of us. We're all wary of everyone, but I really do think that we'd benefit from having you with us, and it would be good for you, too."

"It sounds to me," Harry said carefully, "like you're inviting me to join your club, Ed. And forgive me if I find your willingness to do that a little… unlikely."

"Do you?" Montague flashed him a toothy smile. "I think you'd fit right in."

"I'm the Boy-Who-Lived," Harry pointed out.

Because that basically meant that he'd had a side in this war since he was one-year-old and didn't know there was a side to be had, and didn't that count for something?

"Yeah, you are," Montague agreed. "So what?"

They stared at each other.

"Whatever that title is supposed to mean," Montague said slowly, "it doesn't mean shit with you. Nobody in their right mind would believe it does. Nobody—who knows you half as well as I do, and I know you better than most."

Harry shrugged. He wouldn't say so, but then, it was true that Montague, Pucey and Bletchley had seen quite a lot of him last year, and had had the time to form an opinion or two.

"I've seen the kind of books you read. I know that you don't like Dumbledore. And don't think that we haven't all noticed that, except Longbottom's bitch Granger, there isn't a single non-Pureblood in your circle of friends." Montague smirked. "Don't tell me it was an accident."

Well. No. No, of course it wasn't, but not for reasons that Montague was thinking.

In Harry's early years at Hogwarts, befriending exclusively Purebloods had been a safe choice—in Slytherin, blood status mattered more than House affiliation.

He'd wondered whether the blood status of his friends would come back to bite him in the arse. It now seemed that it would.

"I'm not a Pureblood," Harry said, for the sake of argument.

"And when was the last time you were reminded of that?"

Harry blinked. He hadn't actually thought of it, but—in second year. The last time his blood status had come up was in second year, before the whole Heir of Slytherin business. And after—

("Has it even occurred to you why all the bad guys think you'd make such a splendid bad guy along with them?")

With a sudden chill, Harry wondered how aware he really was of the way people viewed him.

"Right," he said, filing the thought away for later.

Much later. To be puzzled out with the help of Firewhisky, perhaps—Goyle still had the stash from their return-to-the-dorms party, and he could be bribed.

"What is more," Montague continued, "with us, you wouldn't have to hide."
"Hide what?"

"Anything."

Harry didn't like Montague's implication that he knew Harry had things to hide, but it was probably a stab in the dark. Montague couldn't have any idea of the secrets Harry kept juggling on a daily basis—from something as life-changing as the prophecy to his forays into Dark Magic, which his non-Slytherin friends were blissfully unaware of.

"Think about it." Montague clapped Harry on the shoulder, interrupting the pregnant silence between them. "I'll be ready to answer questions, if you have them. All right?"


Just spiffing, really.

"Come on, then," Montague said, glancing at his watch. "It's almost curfew."

So much for spending a productive evening in the library. Well, at least Harry had figured out some titles he'd be interested in looking at.

Montague had evidently decided to wait for him, and they walked out of the library together.

"I've been thinking about our game against Hufflepuff," Montague said, smoothly switching topics. "Your mate Diggory has been running the duffers ragged, and I have a feeling he's got a few new tactics lined up. He say anything to you about it?"

"No," Harry said.

"Well, he's up to no good, anyway," Montague declared. "And I'm going to—"

He stopped talking abruptly, but not because he'd thought better of his words. Dolores Umbridge was waddling towards them down the corridor, a bright smile on her face.

"Hello, boys!" she said. "Cutting it close to curfew, are we not?" She tut-tutted, wagging her finger at them.

"We were just heading back to the common room, Professor," Montague said deferentially. "It isn't curfew yet, and we were studying—"

"Were you, Mr. Montague?"

Umbridge assessed first Montague, then Harry, and Harry was suddenly glad for Montague's presence. He wasn't sure he wanted to know what would have happened if he'd bumped into Umbridge alone in the dark castle. If she'd tried anything, he'd have had to retaliate, and it wouldn't have ended well. This way, he at least had a buffer.

He should be more careful in the future, though.

"Very well," Umbridge said with a magnanimous air. "Run along to your common room. I am sure Professor Snape would be most displeased to hear that you've almost broken curfew."

"Thank you, Professor," Montague said, apparently taking all negotiating duties upon himself.

It didn't help, because—
"Oh, and Mr. Potter?" Umbridge turned to face him. "I'd like you to come up to my office for tea on Monday. I feel that you and I should get to know each other better." She gave a cutesy giggle.

"Of course, Professor," Harry said, ignoring the sinking sensation in his stomach. "I'd be delighted."

Umbridge nodded at them in the fashion of a queen dismissing her subjects.

"Delighted, are you?" Montague asked under his breath when they were a safe distance away.

"Sure thing," Harry retorted. "I've always wanted to play 'guess the poison in your tea'."

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"Sit down, Mr. Potter," Umbridge said in such a sweetly welcoming voice that Harry wanted to bolt. Instead, he gave a smile in return, and sat on the chair in front of her desk.

Really, he should have expected something like this. Umbridge and he had spent the last three months playing an exhausting game of cat and mouse. She suspected that Harry was running a secret organization, but couldn't do anything about it, for she had no proof. With lamentable determination, she kept trying to infuriate Harry into losing his composure so that he'd give her an excuse to fulfil the promise of pain that was shining in her eyes. Harry, for his part, was careful to maintain a respectful façade and behave with the decorum of a paparazzi-fearing royal, while scheming behind her back. They both knew that this situation could not continue indefinitely, and something, somewhere, would eventually have to give.

"Now, Mr. Potter," Umbridge began. "I believe that you and I have many issues to discuss."

"I hope you do not find my behaviour in class unsatisfactory, Professor," Harry said.

"Oh no." Umbridge smiled. "In fact, you seem like a reasonable young man. It therefore saddens me all the more to know that you are ruining your future by persisting to spread ridiculous rumours."

Harry put an appropriately concerned expression on his face, trying to ignore the kittens mewling from decorative plates on the walls. Really, did Umbridge have to display her fetishes for all to see?

"Do drink some tea." Umbridge simpered, her eyes hard as flints. "Mr. Potter, I simply must ask: why do you insist on making public statements which you know to be lies?"

Harry pretended to sip from his cup.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but I am not entirely sure what you are referring to."

Umbridge narrowed her eyes, but her tone remained saccharine.

"Surely you remember that you have publicly claimed that the Dark Lord has returned, despite the fact that the Ministry knows it to be otherwise."

Harry carefully put his cup on its saucer and looked up to meet Umbridge's gaze.

"I am quite certain I have not made a public declaration of any sort, Professor. I hold the Ministry in too high a regard to contradict them in such a fashion."

Umbridge leaned forward, planting her bosom upon the desk. Urgh.

"Do you deny, then, that the Dark Lord has returned to life? Do you take your previous claims
"I've just said that I don't recall making any claims, Professor."

"Potter," Umbridge said, her sweet façade crumbling, "do you or do you not believe that the Dark Lord has returned?"

"I do not think it is a matter of belief, Professor," Harry answered seriously.

The woman made a visible effort at reining in her desire to throttle Harry. She gave a very fake laugh.

"Forgive me, Mr. Potter, but isn't the Headmaster's wild tale of the Dark Lord's resurrection based entirely on your account of events?"

"I have not discussed this question with him," Harry answered. "You may have noticed, Professor, that he and I aren't particularly close."

"Yes." Umbridge nodded, looking satisfied. "I have noticed that. Quite prudent of you, Mr. Potter, to stay away from Dumbledore and his machinations. In fact, I would almost approve of you, Mr. Potter, if you did not insist on spreading vicious lies to scare other children."

Thank Merlin she did not approve; the idea of conforming to Umbridge's standards of a human being left Harry more than a little nauseous.

"I defer to your judgement, Professor," he replied.

Umbridge stared at him. He looked back at her. He could do this verbal slalom for a long time. His whole life with the Dursleys and then in Slytherin depended on being able to bullshit his way through.

"I see," Umbridge said at last.

Harry could tell that she did not, in fact, see. She, like many others before her, had expected a different Harry Potter—and the real Harry, who did not seem obvious and straightforward about anything, was giving her a headache when she tried to figure out how to handle him.

Well, good. Harry hoped her brain would combust from thinking too much and she would die in a violent explosion of blood and toad entrails.

And yet…

Harry was frowning as he left her office, because he was beginning to recognize that the situation was really twofold.

Thing was, despite all the trouble and danger, Harry actually profited from Umbridge's presence at Hogwarts this year, because Umbridge had unwittingly provided him with a rallying point—freeing Hogwarts from the yoke of her rule. Had the Ministry sent a more likable person to spread their propaganda, Harry would have had a hell of a lot more trouble defending himself against their accusations. As it was, Harry didn't even have to try hard to win converts, and the duelling club was thriving, with new members continuing to join. Moreover, many people felt that, if Umbridge was wrong about the way she had hijacked the school with her Educational Decrees, then Harry had to be right about Voldemort's return, even though one did not necessarily follow the other.

In that sense, it was almost in Harry's interests to keep Umbridge at Hogwarts instead of driving her
out, as he’d been initially planning.

And then, there was another aspect to this convoluted picture. Forced to look beyond the antagonism against Umbridge, Harry realized that she was not actually his biggest problem. Together with Millie and Blaise, he’d once facetiously contemplated the ways to stage a nice little accident that would take care of Umbridge and not implicate them. Harry had seen then that it would not solve anything in the long run: should they depose of Umbridge, the Ministry would send someone else in her place. Someone, say, more personable and less liable to provoke the students. Someone who might be better than Umbridge at persuading the students that Harry was a nasty attention-seeking liar. Someone compared with whom Harry would not be a noble defender of Hogwarts, but a recalcitrant child.

To resolve the situation at Hogwarts, Harry would need to look higher than Umbridge. Perhaps the Order had the right idea: persuading the Ministry of Voldemort’s return was indeed paramount, because the Ministry, and not Umbridge herself, was the source of Harry’s current problems.

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"Sonorus," Harry muttered, aiming his wand at his throat, and then called for silence in the crowd. "Thank you," he said, more quietly. "Before we begin this session, I have an announcement to make. As you have probably noticed, our duelling club has become quite big—" There were a few scattered laughs at that. "—and we need better ways of communication than passing coded notes to one another in the hallways. I am therefore very pleased to inform you that our own Hermione Granger—" He gestured at the blushing Gryffindor. "—has created the perfect means for us to keep in touch. Hermione, if you would?"

The girl joined Harry on the makeshift stage and began explaining, picking up confidence as she demonstrated the way the fake Galleons worked. Harry was quite content to let her do the talking.

The duelling club had certainly expanded in size since its conception. At the beginning, Harry had envisaged that, at most, there would be forty people participating. Now, at the end of November, the population of the Hidden Room was somewhere closer to eighty. Of course, the influx of people had receded once Blaise had procured the Secrecy Scroll, because not everyone and their mum could invite their friends to join anymore, but there was still a steady trickle of students eager to defy Umbridge and learn Defence.

And that made for a lot of people who depended on Harry to provide that opportunity for them, and were grateful to him for making the effort.

"Harry?"

Hermione had apparently finished explaining her bit.

"Right. Thank you, Hermione. Everybody will be getting a fake Galleon when we leave after tonight's session. Fine then, moving on—" Harry glanced at his notes. "This week we’re back to defensive spells for all, since they’re a large component of OWLs and NEWTs, and generally tend to come in useful. I’d like to ask anyone who’s still having problems with the Shield Charm to stick with practicing that, though, because you just can’t get around without it."

"If the Shield Charm is so wonderful, why do we even need other defensive spells?" Lavender Brown asked, pouting.

After all, learning different counter-curses was a lot more interesting that drilling the same Shield Charm, Harry knew.
"Blocking incoming curses is essential, but sometimes you'll also need to reverse them," he said calmly. "And OWLs examiners will check that you are not completely helpless when faced with a hex that doesn't happily resolve itself with a *Finite.*"

Neville gave Harry a small smile when he had finished giving instructions and got off the podium.

"Afraid I'm one of the people who can't do the shield properly yet."

"That's alright," Harry reassured him. "You'll get it down soon, you're certainly trying hard enough. Sorry, Nev, I'll be right back—"

"I'll see you after the session, right?" Neville inquired.

Since Harry and a lot of his friends were busy with various commitments this year, it was often easiest to find time to see his friends, especially the ones from other Houses, after duelling club meetings. They'd stay after everyone else had left, transform the Hidden Room from a training area to a pleasant sitting room, and catch up with one another. Harry's friends knew that he set this time apart to see them and often made an effort to clear their schedules accordingly, though it didn't always work. Millie and Blaise often skipped, neither particularly enthused about socialising with Harry's other friends and generally spending more time with Harry than anyone else, by virtue of sharing a House.

"Yeah, of course, we'll be meeting as usual," Harry said.

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a nearby group of fourth year Hufflepuffs throw Neville envious glances at that, but he didn't have time to think on it—Cedric was waving him over.

"When do you want to hold the advanced group meeting?" he asked.

"I think everyone agrees on this Thursday," Harry said. "The advanced group has different fake Galleons, so I'll contact you through those if anything changes. Are you staying after?"

"Nope," Cedric murmured, watching as Luna cast the Choking Curse on Neville and Neville attempted to block it. "I've got Head Boy and Girl meeting with Dumbledore. Do you think we'll need to cart anyone off to the infirmary at the end of this?"

"We haven't yet," Harry said optimistically.

The meeting proceeded in the usual state of controlled chaos—Astoria Greengrass turned into a canary thanks to the Weasley twins, Angelina Johnston was, by all appearances, trying to kill Lee Jordan, and Hannah Abbott, Tracey Davis and Lavender Brown exchanged latest gossip right in the midst of spell fire.

Susan Bones looked kind of lonely, Harry decided. It was only gentlemanly to approach her.

"You should do a slight flourish here—not too much, though, just like that…" Harry said, coming up to where Susan was standing.

Susan smiled at him. The cute dimples of doom were back, Harry noticed at once.

"Thanks, Harry. I don't know why I always get it wrong."

Harry smiled back.

"Lots of people do, so no worries. Um. We could meet up to practise, though."
"Aren't you very busy?" Susan asked, twirling her long plait between her fingers. "Would you have time just to help me?"

Harry gathered his confidence.

"Well, there's always the next Hogsmeade weekend."

He hoped that the din of practice would drown out his conversation with Susan, because he really wouldn't like his private life to become a matter of public interest before said private life even materialized.

Susan cocked her head slightly to the side.

"Is that a date, then?" she asked.

There was no real flirtatiousness in her manner—she did not suddenly start blushing and stammering, and neither did she take on coy airs along the lines of Padma's. As usual, she appeared very down-to-earth and not dazzled by Harry's fame.

And, well, pretty. Which made her sort of scary, even though Harry knew she was really nice.

"Yes, it would be a date," he confirmed, hoping he didn't sound as awkward as he felt. "If you would agree, of course."

Susan's cheeks were a little pink as she said:

"Oh, I, well, I'd be glad to."

Harry smiled, breathing easier now that the trickiest part was over.

"I should warn you in advance that I'm terrified of Madam Puddifoot's Teashop," he said. "So, er, if you don't mind Three Broomsticks…"

Susan laughed.

"Don't worry, I will not drag you to Madam Puddifoot's!" she promised.

"So—shall we meet in the Entrance Hall on Saturday?" Harry suggested.

"Yes, let's," Susan agreed and gave him another smile. "I'll look forward to it, Harry. And thank you for showing me the spell!"

Harry would have liked to stay and chat with Susan some more, but the group's training hour was drawing to a close, and he still had rounds to make.

At the end of the meeting, Susan left with Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan, and Harry stayed behind with his friends, as usual. They exited the Hidden Room and re-entered after requesting a comfortable lounge. Luna, Hermione and Padma barely noticed the change in décor, engrossed as they were in arguing about the magical properties of the Hidden Room; Terry and Anthony listened to the discussion in interest, offering comments when they felt particularly brave. Harry sat down on the couch between Fred and George.

"My noble-hearted friends," he said. "I've been thinking."

"And how did that go for you?" Fred inquired politely.
"It was very refreshing, thank you. As it happens, I was wondering—how is your product development going?"

The redhead duo perked up at once.

"Swimmingly!" Fred proclaimed. "We have perfected the Skiving Snackboxes, thanks to young Neville and his *Mimbulus Mimbletonia*, and are currently working on a Portable Swamp, which should be quite a delightful invention."

"And let us not forget the Weasleys' Wild-Fire Whiz-Bangs," George chimed in. "On a more serious note, we're developing something called Decoy Detonators, but they're not quite ready. We've also got a few interesting ingredients from overseas."

"In addition, we feel that there is a certain lonely woman at Hogwarts," Fred said, "who would greatly benefit from some humour in her life. And we do really need test subjects—"

Harry raised a sceptical eyebrow.

"Come on, Harry," George said. "You said it yourself that you wanted to drive her out of Hogwarts. Why not have fun while we're doing it?"

"She's kind of grown on me," Harry confided. "No, really. I don't think I could go a day without seeing her bright pink robes—"

"Right," Fred said, and exchanged a concerned glance with George. "You haven't been taking any strange potions, have you, Harry?"

Harry sighed.

"Look. It's a long story—but basically, Umbridge is annoying is hell, but she's actually been very good for the duelling club's publicity so far."

"So you're thinking of keeping her," George said, unimpressed.

"For a while longer," Harry hedged. "Not forever. As long as she's not doing anything too damaging, and until she outlives her usefulness."

"Being your enemy must be so much fun," Fred mused. "I don't think I could think of mine in such caring terms."

"Well," George said, "for our forbearance, you owe us a little fun at her expense, Harry. Just a wee bit. Perfectly harmless. It's not like she'll run to the Ministry complaining about silly jokes—it's going to make her look like an idiot."

That much was probably true.

"Just be careful, okay? The fact that I want to keep her doesn't make her any less dangerous. She's just less dangerous, politically, than her replacement might be, that's all. So—don't get caught. I mean it."

"Don't worry, Harry," Fred said, blinking innocently. "Don't you trust us?"

"Does your mother?"

Harry's composure cracked at the sight of identical grimaces on both twins' faces.
After his date with Susan, Harry spent a few days feeling unusually well disposed towards the world. Blaise teased him ceaselessly, of course.

("Looking thoughtful there, Harry—not composing a sonnet in honour of Miss Bones' beauty, are you?")

Harry ignored him, because he was cool and mature like that.

He hadn't been planning to advertise his interest in Susan, so he got a bit annoyed when, in a week's time, everyone in the school seemed to know that he and Susan had gone on a date. Still, it wasn't enough to spoil his enjoyment of Susan's company by any means, and it felt like December had generally been going well for him until the day before the end of term.

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said, just as the Transfiguration lesson wrapped up. "Please, stay behind."

Harry shrugged at Blaise and Millie, indicating that he had no idea what this was about, and walked up to the teacher's desk.

"The Headmaster wishes to speak to you after this class," the Gryffindor Head of House explained. "The password to his office is Fizzing Whizbee."

Harry wondered whether the summons had anything to do with the multitude of jokes played on Umbridge recently.

"Should I be worried, Professor?" he asked, giving McGonagall a sheepish smile.

The lines around her eyes softened a little even as she pursed her lips.

McGonagall liked Harry, as did most teachers. Harry was a good student, even if Transfiguration was a subject he struggled with; he was infallibly respectful; and he was the son of Lily and James Potter, who seemed to have charmed most of the teaching staff back in their student days. McGonagall had even expressed the sentiment that Harry should have become the Slytherin prefect this year, "in place of Mr. Malfoy"—said with a drawing of eyebrows, and a slight inflection on the word Malfoy that carried McGonagall's disbelief that he was at all suited for prefect duties.

McGonagall busied herself with papers on her desk.

"You are not in trouble, Mr. Potter," she said.

Someone was, though.

Prepared for bad news, Harry headed to Dumbledore's office and gave the password to the gloomy gargoyle. For the third time in his life, he found himself in a large circular room with a great number of mysterious instruments in it, some whizzing quietly and others puffing out little clouds of smoke.

The Headmaster was seated behind his desk.

"Harry," he said amiably. "Good to see you. Please, sit down."

Harry lowered himself into a chintz chair.

"I trust you are doing well, Harry?"
“Yes, thank you, Headmaster. However, I have Potions after this break, and I would really not want to be late.” He made a slight pause. “There was something you wanted to talk to me about?”

"To business, then, if you insist." Dumbledore's expression changed imperceptibly; suddenly, his mirthful wrinkles folded into lines of sorrow. "A great tragedy has befallen the Weasley family, Harry."

Harry held himself very still.

"What happened?"

"Arthur Weasley… he's no longer with us."

"He's—dead?"

"His body was found at the Ministry last night," Dumbledore said with deep regret.

Harry was silent for a moment or two, trying to get his thoughts in order.

"Was there a fight?"

"We do not know. Arthur was bitten to death by a snake," Dumbledore said. "Whether there were any humans accompanying the reptile, we cannot be sure."

"A snake," Harry repeated. A snake biting people at the Ministry? "Was he on duty for the Order? Was he standing guard near the prophecy when—"

Dumbledore inclined his head.

"I'm afraid so, Harry."

The Sorting Hat sneezed.

"The Weasleys—"

"The Weasley children were sent to your godfather’s home this morning," Dumbledore supplied. "I presume you are not averse to staying here until tomorrow as per the original plan?"

Harry assured him that he didn't mind.

He was not eager to return to Grimmauld Place earlier than needed; he did not want to intrude on the Weasleys' tragedy when it was still so fresh.

He'd rather not return to Grimmauld Place at all, actually, but he couldn't stay at Hogwarts unless he wanted to find himself in a near-empty castle together with Umbridge, and the Longbottom Manor was not safe enough at the moment, considering how much of a risk it was for Harry to appear anywhere.

Fortunately, Susan hadn't noticed the Order bodyguards tailing them last week in Hogsmeade.

By lunchtime, the news was splashed all over the newspapers; Harry hadn't had the time to inform his friends before they'd read the scathing obituaries, so most of them had found out from Rita Skeeter rather than from him. Harry did, however, provide some explanations.

"Arthur Weasley was doing stuff for the Order when he died," he said. "Not that the Order would tell that to the Ministry, and the Ministry will not accept the idea of foul play, anyway. I'm sure they'll
chalk it up to some accident."

"Or drown it in red tape," Cedric said darkly.

Most of Harry's friends were sympathetic towards the Weasleys. Not all of them, of course.

"One Weasley less," Blaise said with a shrug. "There's so many of them, do you think anyone will notice the difference?"

Blaise was, of course, not the only person at Hogwarts to ridicule Mr. Weasley's demise. Malfoy was getting a positive thrill out of the whole affair, and some others muttered ominously about blood traitors and what tended to happen to them. Dolores Umbridge gleefully informed the class that Arthur Weasley must have blown himself up on those Muggle devices he was so fond of.

And Harry would be lying if he said that he'd cared for Mr. Weasley, but he could sympathize with his children, and he found the vultures preying on his corpse unpleasant enough that he was actually glad to leave for Grimmauld Place, despite what was waiting for him there.

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The twins cornered Harry at once. He'd only had the time to put his suitcase down in his bedroom at Grimmauld Place and visit the loo when the twins pounced on him in his room, faces pale and something glittering in their eyes that worried Harry on a visceral level.

("No one will tell us anything. Dad died, and no one will tell us anything, as if the rotten Order matters more than he does—")

And they knew that Harry would know. They advanced at Harry, desperate for an explanation, and Harry wondered for the first time if this was what Dumbledore experienced when Harry pressed him for information.

("We're not stupid, we know dad died doing stuff for the Order, but... snake bites? What was he doing that—")

These were not Harry's secrets to share, exactly—and the one that was, regarding the prophecy, he wasn't going to share, especially not right now. However, the twins deserved to know more then they currently did. They deserved to know that their father hadn't been just taking a stroll through the Ministry, they deserved to know why he'd been there and why he'd died.

So Harry told them.

The twins absorbed the information in uncharacteristic silence. There were other things that Harry needed to say to them, condolences he needed to give, sympathy he needed to express through different means than telling his friends of their father's murder—but something in the twins' expressions checked Harry's tongue, and he didn't know the first thing about giving comfort, anyway.

"I'm sorry," he said at the end of his tale, and that was the extent of it.

Next time he saw Fred and George, they were huddled with Ron and Ginny on a dark staircase that led up from the ground floor, and listening to Bill and Percy shout in the kitchen.

"Was dad running errands for Dumbledore when he died?" Percy demanded, voice tinged with hysteria. "Was he? Was he, Bill?"
"He wasn't running errands, he was—you don't get it, do you, there are some things worth dying for!"

"Then what did he die for?"

Fred looked at Harry over the top of Ginny's head, cradled against his chest. His eyes stood out, dark and feverish, against his pale face, and Harry could read the same question in them.

Death in the line of duty sounded noble, but what did it actually mean?

"Has dad's death changed anything?" Percy continued, after a moment of ringing silence. "This is what I told you about; we will all be ruined by this—"

"But don't you see? You-Know-Who really is back, and he's killed dad, and we were right all along, dad died fighting him and you—"

"I don't care that he's back, I care that dad trusted in Dumbledore's schemes, and now he's dead!"

Ron folded in on himself at that, hiding his face, and George laid a hand on his shoulder, looking just as lost.

Harry might not be able to express it well, or at all, but he did understand.

It was one thing to know rationally what war was. It was another thing completely to have it hit your home and destroy the safe haven you hadn't known to value until you lost it.

Last August, war had come to Harry's home, too, in a swirl of black cloaks and deathly breath; war had come to him, war had looked at him through the shattered hope in Dudley's eyes and he hadn't understood it then, but later, much later, he'd stared the truth in the face.

He'd thought he was safe.

He'd hated Privet Drive all his life, but he'd allowed himself to think that the war wouldn't follow him there, that it would not find him in that insular world of gossipy neighbours and manicured lawns. He'd thought he was ready, firm in his decision to fight Voldemort, but he'd still ran from it all, and had been glad to have a place to run to.

He had no such place any longer.

Right now, in addition to dealing with grief over Mr. Weasley's death, the twins had to acknowledge the same thing—that, in war, there were no safe places, no untouchable people, and that someone was inevitably bound to get a shitty ending.

Harry would have spared his friends that knowledge if he'd had the chance.
It was quiet.

It was always so damn quiet at Grimmauld Place these days.

Harry frowned as he looked out of the library window. Snowflakes twirled in the air, illuminated by street lamps, and the winter scenery seemed deceptively idyllic. Peaceful.

The house was anything but.

The time of rage and mutual accusations had stormed by, culminating in an awful Christmas dinner a week ago, and the silence that had descended upon the house instead had a deafening nails-on-a-chalkboard quality.

The Weasleys were still there, because it was easier for them to stay in London to take care of the formalities regarding Mr. Weasley's death, but they tended to avoid everyone. Once, Harry had built up the courage to knock on the door of the twins' room, despite not knowing what to say. They'd told him to fuck off, but he thought he'd have felt like an awful friend if he hadn't at least tried.

Order members popped in and out occasionally, and Harry didn't know whether they were perpetually so discomfited these days, or the house affected them so, but those visits were rarely cheerful enough to dispel the persistent gloom.

The tense atmosphere was getting to Harry, too. He'd tried to study, like he'd done in the summer, but found himself unable to concentrate—and he didn't have the time for that sort of slacking off, but he didn't seem able to help it.

He'd taken to wandering around the house in the hope to quell this restlessness. Last summer, he'd failed to appreciate the way this house resembled a maze of dark corridors, all leading up to closed doors.

He wished he'd gone to Neville's.

Neville wrote, as did the others, and their letters provided the only breath of fresh air during this Christmas holiday. Blaise's contained useful Ministry gossip between irreverently humorous remarks; Terry's waxed poetic about some theories Harry couldn't even pronounce; and Padma's had provoked Harry's annoyed response. He'd realized only after he'd sent it off that goading him into showing emotion had been Padma's very intention, and had nearly written another letter telling her that, if he didn't shout about what he felt on every corner, it didn't mean that he was having—problems, or anything.

The most unexpected bit of correspondence, however, was one that had grown out of Harry's polite
exchange of notes with Susan. They'd started off with generic Christmas greetings, but then Susan had kept on writing to him, and Harry had continued replying. By now he was beginning to realize that he hadn't actually known anything about Susan when they'd gone on their date, except that she was blonde and pretty and had a nice smile.

In retrospect, it was a startling thing to discover.

God only knew what they'd talked about during their date if Harry hadn't known until this correspondence who Susan's best friends were (Hannah Abbott, Ernie Macmillan and Justin Finch-Fletchley), or what her favourite colour was (yellow), or her favourite class (Charms). He vaguely remembered that they'd done a lot of giggling and awkward hand-bumping, which was really rather embarrassing to think back to.

Harry's fingers tightened on the Susan's latest letter in his pocket. She asked questions that were perfectly innocuous on the surface, but with Harry's life being what it was—

("So where do you live? Is it true that your closest relatives are Muggles? What is it like? What is your house like?")

As of this summer, Harry's living situation was a closely guarded secret, and Susan was trustworthy, but she wasn't this trustworthy. One careless word to her aunt, the mighty Head of DMLE—

Well, Harry would just have to lie. As far as the Ministry knew, he was still living with the Dursleys, and Susan didn't have the security clearance to be told otherwise.

Harry turned sharply away from the window and headed for the library door.

His feet carried him into the same drawing room he'd spent some time cleaning together with the Weasley children in the summer. It was significantly neater now—curtains Doxy-free, cabinets lacking ominous objects, and even the tapestry on the wall looking fresher.

Harry did a round of the room, mechanically stopping to look out of the window—nothing new out there—and then wandered over to the genealogical tree of the House of Black. He'd studied it numerous times before, of course; he'd never acquired the Pureblood ease with remembering people's lineages, but he did try.

Idly, Harry traced the golden threads connecting names together. The Bulstrodes were surprisingly close to the Blacks; the Diggories, on the other hand, were very far down the family line, and the Malfoys were a lot closer to the Blacks than they were to the Potters. Although… Funny, Black had stated repeatedly that it would have been his responsibility to take care of Harry after his parents' death. Was that legally the case? And if so, did it mean that, once Black had ended up in Azkaban, the responsibility to take care of Harry should have passed to Black's family?

No. Surely not. That would leave the Malfoys as Harry's closest magical relatives, and therefore his likeliest guardians, should his case have gone to court.

How likely was that?

And yet—

Harry frowned, stepping away from the tapestry.

"Harry?" Sirius Black's voice spoke up from the doorway. "What are you glaring at?"

"Nothing," Harry murmured, still dwelling on the thought—
Could the Dursleys have actually been the better option?

Black approached Harry with light steps and stopped near.

"Going stir-crazy, are you?" Black asked. "I know exactly how you feel. We're all shut up here, doing nothing—"

Startled by an oddly desperate note in the man's tone, Harry turned to regard him with more than just a cursory glance. He noticed with some surprise that Black looked somehow more haggard now than he had in the summer. Then again, he hadn't been out in the sun for how long now?

"Yeah," Harry said, for once feeling vaguely sympathetic. "There has to be something we could do."

Black nodded, then shrugged.

"Dumbledore visited last night," he said, after a moment's silence. "Informed us that there's going to be a meeting tomorrow, and we'll revise our strategy." Black grimaced. "Whatever the fuck that means. You're allowed to come, I suppose, if you like."

Harry would very much like. This, that the Order was finally going to make new plans, was the best piece of news he'd heard all week—and he let the anticipation buoy him through yet another dinner the Weasley family had failed to attend.

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Harry's excitement did not last twenty minutes into the meeting. That is, truthfully, the plan didn't sound all that bad, but—

"Headmaster?" Lupin asked with a slight frown. "Forgive me for questioning your judgement, but is it truly safe?"

"Don't be daft, Lupin," Moody snapped, hijacking Dumbledore's response. "Potter won't even set foot in the Ministry—all he has to do is sign a form requesting to listen to the prophecy, and that's it, the extent of his involvement. Won't as much as break a nail."

This was not, of course, what Harry was worried about, and Dumbledore probably knew it too, if the perceptive gleam in his eyes was anything to go by.

"On the actual day, it'll be me who goes, Remus," Tonks said. "I'll Metamorph into Harry, and they'll never know the difference until it's too late. The Death Eaters are not going to wait for me to pass the identification test at the Department of Mysteries—they'll be lying there in wait."

"Yes, but what if they do wait for you to pass the test?" Lupin insisted. "Voldemort won't attack unless he's sure that it's Harry."

"Or he might not attack at all," Black countered. "It's worth a shot, anyway—what other chance do we have to draw Voldemort out? If he thinks Harry is going to access the prophecy—if he's not sure the prophecy is still going to be there when Harry leaves—Voldemort wants the prophecy too badly to let this get past him."

"This is a plan that could work," Bill said, breaking his silence for the first time. "It could work, and it could be effective, and if we have to change the plan now, after dad already died because the old one wasn't working—" Bill broke off abruptly, turning away, and Harry thought that shouting matches with Percy affected him more than it appeared.
Mrs. Weasley gave a loud snifflle.

"It is only natural that you feel this way, William," Dumbledore said gravely. "And we shall certainly do all we can to make sure that Arthur's tragic death wasn't in vain."

"We've let You-Know-Who lay down the rules for too long," Moody stated. "We've got to force him to react for once. We're not going to find a better bait than the prophecy, and the threat of Potter removing it."

Harry looked down at his hands, folded on the tabletop. The Order's plan hinged on the assumption that Voldemort would get alarmed should Harry lodge an official request to listen to the prophecy. As the only other person to whom it pertained, and who therefore had the right to access it, Harry was a good decoy—and Voldemort would definitely hear about the official request, the Ministry being the sieve that it was. If Voldemort thought Harry was on the Order's side, and plotting with them to remove the prophecy out of his reach, then he might be provoked into attacking before Harry was due to appear—the date being set by the Department of Mysteries, and likely to become known to him. Or else he could attack on the day itself, so as to take both Harry and the prophecy out in one blow.

Except that Voldemort might not be so easily lured. As far as he knew, Harry wasn't on anyone's side; he was, in fact, waiting for Harry to choose one. And if Harry filed a request to listen to the prophecy, Voldemort might fail to take the bait.

Or else he might regard it as a declaration of war and move on from Harry-courting to Harry-hunting, which was an even greater concern.

It was too early for this. Harry didn't want to declare his intentions so soon. This was much too risky, and—

"Harry?" Kingsley Shacklebolt said. "What do you think?"

*I think that this will severely limit my chances of appealing to the pro-Voldemort crowd,* Harry imagined answering. *Because Voldemort might get, y'know, offended if I scheme behind his back.*

Harry looked at the Order members' expectant faces. Something told him it was not the best time for honesty.

"I'm not sure," he demurred. "It just seems to me that it's a little transparent. Not that I presume to know better than everyone else, I'm just wondering—Voldemort is not stupid. He's going to know that I would never file an open request to listen to the prophecy. If I truly planned to go to the Ministry, I'd avoid shouting about it from the rooftops."

"We will make a convincing show of covering it up," Tonks assured Harry. "We'll pretend that your form is top-secret-classified—"

"—and it's just our luck that dear Lucius has the Minister eating out of his hand, and so is privy to all state secrets," Black said darkly.

"Still," Harry said. "I doubt Voldemort would believe that I'd be this overt—"

"And when would You-Know-Who have had the time to become such a good judge of your character?" Moody asked, both eyes boring into Harry.

"He is not," Harry said calmly. "It's just common sense that—"
"No, let's discuss this," Moody said, a touch of steel in his voice. "Do your doubts have anything to do with the interesting rumours I've been hearing about you and some offers You-Know-Who has been making you?"

Harry's gaze darted to Dumbledore. He'd wondered why the Order had never brought up the recruitment attempt, and now it seemed that Snape had not told them—but Dumbledore surely knew.

"What are you implying, Mad-Eye?" Black asked, beginning to rise from his seat.

"Nothing yet," Moody said. His eyes were still fixed on Harry. "But if Potter doesn't answer—"

"This is not the time for us to fight!" Mrs. Weasley implored, looking frightened. "Alastor!"

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir," Harry said, ignoring her outburst.

"Alastor, you can't be implying that Harry would have anything to do with Voldemort," Lupin said firmly, as the other Order members watched wide-eyed.

Except Dumbledore and Emmeline Vance. It was always hard to say what they were thinking.

"Your paranoia is going too far, Mad-Eye." Black barked out a laugh. "This is Harry Potter you're talking about."

Dumbledore raised a hand in a quelling gesture, cutting off Moody's impending tirade.

"I believe we have strayed from our original topic of discussion," the Headmaster said. "Harry, I take it that you have no objections to the plan?"

All faces turned to Harry, clearly waiting for him to say yes.

Harry considered his choices. He could agree to sign the paperwork required for the Order's plan, and thereby publicly implicate himself in their schemes. Or else he could refuse to sign it, having no justifiable reason to do so, and alienate the Order, who might then investigate his connection to Voldemort, and cause all sorts of trouble.

Rock, hard place. Tough pick.

"It would behoove us to remove any potentially harmful equivocations," Dumbledore spoke up, looking at Harry seriously. "A man can court many only so long before he is mistrusted by all. We all must choose, and for what we fail to do now, the price will become dearer in the future."

Harry frowned, ignoring the Order's confused glances between him and the Headmaster. He had a feeling that he'd heard the same sentiment expressed differently by Blaise and Millie last semester, although he hadn't liked it then any more than now.

("We all know that you'll declare a side, and we—and take that to mean Zabini and I—know what side it's going to be. However, the rest of the school isn't like us, and they might not know.")

Dumbledore was saying that the seeds of mistrust had already been sown; that Harry could only push so far before his reputation became irreparably damaged; and that a lot of people would be against Harry if they thought he was not with them.

Harry looked around the room. Earlier, Black and Lupin had stood up for him against Moody's allegations; others were silent. They were still silent. Were they waiting for Harry to prove his goodwill to them?
Harry couldn't believe it, but Dumbledore was not an idiot, and neither were Blaise and Millicent. And evidence was right here, before his eyes.

He'd known from the start that the stakes were high in the deception game he was playing. He just hadn't counted on failing to notice when he started to lose.

"Fine," he said, somewhat fatalistically. "I'll sign the paperwork. I hope that the plan works out well."

For all its inconvenience, it did sound like it might. Who knew, maybe the Order would indeed manage to lure Voldemort out. Then the Ministry would be forced to accept his return and stop interfering at Hogwarts.

At least one good thing could potentially come out of this mess.

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said, smiling at Harry approvingly. "Everyone else seems to be in agreement?"

Discussions were held, then, and concrete plans laid out, and adjustments made. Mrs. Weasley had to rush out of the room at the very idea that Bill would be going with the Order on a mission that would inevitably involve combat. Tonks was excited about her part, and participated eagerly in discussions on the logistics of switching her and Harry at Grimmauld Place before going to the Ministry. Black was adamant that he would go to the Ministry too. Lupin was equally determined that Black should stay at Grimmauld Place.

Harry watched the proceedings, torn between returning excitement at the idea of the Order finally doing something, and morbid curiosity as to his own prospects.

"Don't think you're in the clear, Potter," Moody said, catching Harry after the meeting. "The others might trust you blindly, but your evasions aren't fooling me any."

"I'm not sure what I've done to deserve your suspicion, sir," Harry said.

He was even somewhat sincere. He and Moody had always seemed to get on well in the past.

Moody eyed him shrewdly.

"You're a clever lad, Potter," he said. "And one of the better ones, except that I've been catching some rotten whiffs off you lately, and you must have heard. I don't like Dark wizards."

"I'm not—"

"I'm not asking you what you are," Moody said. "I'm just giving you a fair warning, 'cause I like you. Check the company you keep, be careful with the spells you learn, stay away from the books in this house—and I won't worry about locking you up in Azkaban one day."

"Really, sir, I appreciate your concern." Harry smiled thinly. "But I don't plan on landing myself in Azkaban."

"That's the thing," Moody answered. "They never do."

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Hogwarts seemed unusually noisy and cheerful after a stay at Grimmauld Place. Back there, the volume of conversation rarely rose above that generally accepted in a mausoleum. Hogwarts, on the
other hand, was a gathering of wild hordes in one enclosed space.

Harry was really glad to be there again.

"What's got you so happy?" Blaise asked from his spot on the couch opposite to Harry's in the Hidden Room. "Judging by the glazed and slightly stupid look on your face during dinner, things between you and Miss Bones are going well?"

"Oh, piss off," Harry recommended, grinning.

Things were going well. And Harry hoped they would stay this way, because, frankly, enough things in his life weren't so simple right now.

While being back at Hogwarts was great, Harry was also feeling the weight of all his responsibilities after a stressful first semester and a Christmas holiday that did not really count for one. The duelling club required his close attention. There was research Harry had to do, both on Voldemort and on spells to learn. Hagrid was being threatened by Umbridge. The twins were being a menace to society. The pro-Voldemort faction in Slytherin was pressuring Harry to pick a side like never before, and he was running out of things to say to them. Mindful of the way he'd supported the Order's plan, Harry was waiting for the repercussions of his acquiescence to hit them all.

Strangely, the teachers also expected Harry to go to class and submit homework. As if this was a school, or something.

"Zabini is just jealous," Millie proclaimed, returning Harry's attention to the present. "Katie Bell got together with Ed Carmichael, you see. From Ravenclaw."

"It's a passing folly," Blaise said dismissively. "She'll come to her senses."

"I hear pigs are learning to fly, too," Millie remarked.

"Well, at least I have love interests—what are you interested in, except for your cat and your murder mysteries?"

Millie's love for murder mysteries was the only manifestation of cultural exchange between her and any of Harry's other friends; Padma had introduced her to the novels while she and Harry had been dating, and Millie had even thawed to Padma for a while in the aftermath.

Millie opened her mouth to deliver what would undoubtedly be a crushing blow to Blaise, but then Padma spoke up:

"Oh seriously, Katie Zabini sounds awful! She'll never marry you."

Blaise bristled.

"I'll have you know that Zabini is a noble and ancient name—"

"—which suits very few girls. Face it: you'll be stuck marrying Astoria Greengrass, because only her name sounds half-decent when combined with yours."

"Yeah, because Padma Finch-Fletchley isn't stupid at all."

Finch-Fletchley: the new boyfriend. Harry wasn't sure he entirely approved of that.

"Stupid or not, we're together, and what did Katie Bell say when she turned you down?"
Millicent smirked. Blaise scowled.

A little off to the side, Luna and Hermione were arguing—or, rather, Hermione was trying to argue with Luna. Luna, for her part, was humming a merry tune and making Neville a necklace of Billywig propellers.

Harry did a swish and flick with his wand; the cushion he'd been aiming at rose in the air. Harry spun it mid-float, concentrating to maintain control; he let it fall and caught it partway, then did a little twirl and guided it down with excruciating slowness. According to the advanced group, he was getting good at nonverbal spells. It seemed that his relentless training in duelling over the last year was paying off; he really did pick up new forms of offensive and defensive magic more easily these days. In an ideal world, this would spill over to subjects like Transfiguration and Arithmancy, but Harry had no such luck. His skills at Charms, though, were getting better…

Looking up, Harry saw Cedric watching him closely.

"Is this really necessary?" Cedric asked. Seeing Harry's raised eyebrow, he added: "You pushing yourself so much, I mean. Not that being diligent is a bad thing, but how long can you do that for? You're already practising with us for the Defence NEWT—"

Harry felt his expression harden.

"I don't need to pass the NEWT—I need to defeat Voldemort."

Cedric looked stricken.

"Eventually, maybe, but you can't expect to fight him now! You're in your fifth year, you're too young to devote your life to training like you'll never get another chance—"

"Cedric, the first time Voldemort tried to kill me, I was one year old. He was also pretty serious when he threw the Killing Curse at me last year. How important do you think my age is?"

Harry gave an aggressive jab with his wand, and the cushion catapulted to the side, narrowly missing Hermione's head. The girl turned around to glare at Harry for a moment.

"I don't think many other students—even those in the duelling club—take everything as seriously as you do," Cedric said as the cushion flew back into Harry's hand.

"Well, I would have to, wouldn't I?" Harry muttered.

Of course, Cedric didn't know about the prophecy, so he couldn't understand how urgent it was for Harry to get strong enough. Harry would tell him, and his other friends, eventually. When the time felt right.

Cedric gave Harry a sharp glance but refrained from saying anything. Not one to pry, Cedric. Harry liked people with tact.

For a while, they listened in silence as verbal sparring between Blaise, Millie and Padma continued. Then, Cedric sighed.

"There was actually something I wanted to talk to you about."

Why did Harry have a feeling it wasn't going to be good?

"The Weasleys," Cedric clarified, confirming Harry's premonition. "I hate Umbridge as much as the
next person, but there are things that, as Head Boy, I just can't condone. Premeditated murder is one
of them."

"It wasn't really a murder attempt," Harry said. "I'm sure the twins didn't realize that imbuing Ton-
Tongue Toffee with a Babbling Beverage—"

"—might be a little dangerous and could result in her near death?" Cedric suggested. "Give me some
credit here. Umbridge escaped through sheer dumb luck."

"It may have been Peeves," Harry said.

"And I may be an Arabian sheikh. But I don't think so."

It was Harry's turn to sigh. At least, the twins hadn't been convicted of the crime; however, Harry
wasn't sure that they'd manage to evade prosecution for long, especially since they didn't show any
willingness to stop their anti-Umbridge crusade.

Last semester, it was all fun and games—Limerick Laxative in Umbridge's tea, her hair dyed pink,
hers office filled with dung. This semester, Umbridge got personal with her insinuations about Arthur
Weasley's death, and the Weasleys weren't known for their excessive patience. How Ron and Ginny
were holding up, Harry wasn't sure, but the twins had upped the ante in their guerrilla war against
Umbridge.

Harry didn't have anything against it, really. Umbridge was rapidly tipping the scales in favour of
chucking her out of Hogwarts after all, especially now that she was threatening Hagrid and
provoking the twins. If the twins let off some steam and drove Umbridge away in one sweep, Harry
wasn't one for complaining.

Clearly, though, something as blatant as a murder attempt was going to alarm even the most tolerant
of observers.

"I've let it all go on for longer than I should have already," Cedric said. "I've turned the other way
last semester, and I've done nothing now even though I know who's behind things. But they're going
too far, and—"

"Their father—"

"Harry, I understand and sympathize, but I have responsibilities towards this school, and I can't in
good conscience ignore them any longer."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said tiredly. "But what do you want me to do, exactly?"

"Talk to the twins," Cedric said. "Try to make them see sense."

Harry snorted.

"Like they would listen to me."

"You used to have a measure of control over them in the past," Cedric said. "I think you might still."
The idea was so ludicrous Harry didn't know where to begin refuting it.

"I'm just saying, Harry—" Cedric shook his head. "—if you don't do anything about the twins, I will
have to, in my official capacity. And I'd really, really rather not."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Thanks for the warning. I'll figure something out."
Because he’d have to, and wasn’t that how things always worked?

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"Look, I do know how you feel," Harry said, manoeuvring between pieces of a shattered chandelier that littered the hallway. "But there’s a line here somewhere and I have a feeling you might soon cross it."

"The line between what and what?" George inquired, sidestepping a pile of broken crystal.

"Between pranking and homicide," Harry said bluntly.

And that chandelier nearly falling on Umbridge’s head? That had been very close to homicide.

"Umbridge could go hang," Harry continued, anticipating the twins’ question. "It's your unconquerable souls I'm worried about, because these kinds of jokes tend to be rewarded by a vacation with Dementors for company, which is not what we're aiming for, here."

"Pretty words." Fred sneered. "But you basically want us to quit. Leave Umbridge alone and behave like good little boys. That's gonna work real well, Harry."

"I want you to stop putting yourselves in danger. You're not stupid enough to think that you'll keep getting away with everything, are you? It's not like people don't know who's behind the pranks."

"They've got no evidence," George said.

"No evidence?" Harry repeated. "You've used products on Umbridge that are recognizably yours. Who else in this school invents shit on the scale that you do?"

"Our products are for sale," Fred said coldly. "Anyone could buy them and use them on Umbridge. Once again: there's no proof."

"But everybody knows," Harry persisted.

Apart from Cedric, he'd already received hints from Snape and Dumbledore that they expected something to be done about the twins. It was an open secret that they were behind the mayhem, and there came a point when hard evidence wasn't needed to convict someone; past history spoke against them.

Like in Harry's second year, with Hagrid. There'd been no direct clues, but Hagrid had been sent to Azkaban based on his behaviour decades before. The twins were notorious pranksters; it did not recommend them now.

"Quit with the dark predictions." Fred shrugged airily. "Nothing's happened yet."

Harry gave him a hard look.

"Don't make me regret sticking up for you all this time."

"Really been putting your neck on the line, have you?" George snapped.

"If you like, I can tell Cedric that you're not listening to me and he's free to take disciplinary action against you," Harry offered. "I can also inform the teachers that they can stop waiting for me to be a good influence on you. I mean, I'm trying to help, but I don't have to take shit from you and for you, you know?"
Harry contemplated letting the twins just crash and burn by themselves, without worrying about their situation. He imagined giving up the responsibility over the duelling club to someone else, and forgetting to worry about Umbridge, and—whatever, screw dealing with Voldemort, he was just a fifteen-year-old kid and what did he know, right?

Right.

That had been a liberating two seconds.

The twins were looking a little uncomfortable. Harry hoped his message had sunk in, but their first words were not what he'd expected.

"Are you okay?"

Harry stared at them.

"I—yeah?"

"Are you asking us or telling us?" Fred inquired, with something that almost looked like a smile.

Harry shrugged.

For a few paces, they walked towards the Great Hall in silence. Then, Fred gave a sigh.

"How the fuck do you do it? I mean, Umbridge's been at you the whole year. Do you just not care, or—"

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Hello," he said pleasantly. "My name is Harry Potter. You may have heard of me—according to the Daily Prophet, I was arrested for illegal possession of a flying carpet two days ago. The Quibbler, on the other hand, brings good news—it seems that my old Chinese opera troupe is accepting me back with open arms. Witch Weekly suggests that I have recently taken up with a harem of Brazilian beauties. I quite like that development in my life."

The twins shared a look of—was it amusement?

"Yeah, okay, we get it," George said. "No need to recount your other illustrious achievements."

"I'm not sure Susan will approve of those Brazilian wenches, though," Fred added. "I'd keep them hushed up if I were you."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Sure thing."

And, for a moment, it almost seemed that things were normal between them.

They parted at the Great Hall doors; the twins went off to the Gryffindor table, and Harry joined his breakfasting housemates, hoping that the twins would bear in mind at least something he'd said to them.

Blaise hardly even raised his head from food at Harry's approach—nothing, up to and including the end of the world, got between Blaise and his breakfast—but Millie gave Harry an amicable nod.

"Any progress?" she inquired, gesturing vaguely towards the Gryffindor table.

"We'll see."
Harry was reaching for pumpkin juice when owls flew into the Great Hall, filling the air with the sound of flapping wings and hoots of greeting.

"Here we go," Millie said, catching the Daily Prophet from her postal bird.

Hedwig arrived a few seconds later, carrying a note from Hagrid in addition to the newspaper. Harry shared some bacon with Hedwig, stroked her pretty wings and penned a quick reply to Hagrid, promising to visit him soon.

In his copious free time, as it were.

By the time Harry reached for the paper, Millie was already deeply engrossed in the front-page article, and scowling at it with alarming ferocity.

Mass breakout from Azkaban, proclaimed the headline. Ministry fears Black is "rallying point" for old Death Eaters.

Black was having a lot less fun than the Ministry thought.

Harry quickly scanned the article, absorbing the most relevant bits. It seemed that the other shoe he'd been waiting for had finally fallen; he'd been on edge for the last couple of weeks, expecting Voldemort to give a reaction to the Order's schemes. Harry had no doubt that Voldemort would have heard about Harry's request to listen to the prophecy within days of it being lodged, and Voldemort's silence had grated on his nerves.

Still, Harry was unsure whether the timing of the Azkaban breakout wasn't coincidental. The breakout would require effort, and it must have been planned in advance. Besides which, Voldemort had said even back at the graveyard last June that he'd release his followers from Azkaban. Of course, he might have moved up his plans after hearing about Harry's request.

Ten of the most dangerous Death Eaters joining Voldemort's ranks.

Shit.

Harry felt the weight of people's looks on him, and glanced up to see Montague, Nott and a few others observing him carefully. Waiting for him to show a reaction. After all, if he was considering joining Voldemort, he was supposed to take this as good news.

Harry checked his expression and hoped that his blank mask hadn't slipped while he'd been reading the article.

He smiled at Montague in greeting.

Montague frowned.

Harry cocked an eyebrow.

Montague shook his head.

The silent conversation could probably have gone on for a while, reaching dizzying intellectual heights, but then Harry saw a commotion at the Gryffindor table out of the corner of his eye. He turned just in time to watch Neville storm out of the Great Hall, Hermione hot on his heels.

"What—"

"This," Millie said, and pointed to the picture of Bellatrix Lestrange in the newspaper.
Harry had not paid attention to the caption until now. Apparently, he really should have.

*Bellatrix Lestrange*, it said next to the portrait of a scowling dark-haired witch. *Convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom.*

"Torture and permanent incapacitation," Harry repeated, despite himself.

He had known that Neville's parents were long-term residents of St. Mungo's, and that Neville got solemn whenever Death Eaters came up, so did that add up to torture until permanent incapacitation?

"What?" Blaise asked, startled enough to abandon his breakfast for a moment. "Did I hear something about torture?"

"Here," Harry said, thrusting the newspaper at Blaise. "See for yourself."

Harry hadn't dealt well when the presumed murderer of his parents had escaped from Azkaban. Neville was a good person, and surely he wouldn't sink to the depths of hatred that Harry had felt. Still—

"I should go after him," Harry said, pushing his plate away.

"Not so fast," Millie said, grabbing his arm. "I think you might want to direct your helpful urges elsewhere. Have a look at your dear girlfriend."

Harry glanced at Susan and saw that she seemed to be wilting under the curious and pitying gazes of her Hufflepuff classmates.

"Leonard Travers," Blaise informed Harry, pointing at his newspaper. "Killed Bones's uncle and his family, it turns out. Oh dear, Harry, whomever of your miserable companions are you going to comfort—the damsel or the Gryffindor?"

"I'd choose the damsel," Millicent said clinically and lowered her voice. "Longbottom's got Granger to get on his nerves right now, and going for Bones looks like it's more about romance than about politics."

"I'm glad I have your blessing," Harry murmured, and got up from the table.

Neville had removed himself from the vicinity, and he did have Hermione right now. Susan, on the other hand, was still here and was clearly uncomfortable. Harry knew how public scrutiny could aggravate a personal crisis, and if there was anything he could do to help—

"Harry?" For the first time since their relationship had started, Susan greeted him with less than a brilliant smile.

She was probably not sure that he could say anything worthwhile, which was fair enough—Harry wasn't either.

"Yeah, I just thought—how about we take a walk?" he suggested, ignoring the suspicious looks of Ernie Macmillan and Hannah Abbott, who seemed ready to pounce on him if he upset Susan any further. "There's still time until class—"

"Yes, let's," Susan said, sounding relieved.

Harry would have preferred to take her outside—he always seemed to find some calm in walking around Hogwarts grounds, or watching the lake—but it was really cold and they didn't have their
outdoor clothes. Instead, they ended up walking slowly to Susan's next class.

Harry didn't know whether he should take Susan's hand, or hug her, or try to ask her about her uncle. Their relationship hadn't yet progressed to the point of poignant discussions, and this would be a damn unfortunate first one to have.

"I didn't know who killed Uncle Edgar, and Aunt Lucy, and my cousins," Susan said suddenly, breaking the silence. "And now that I do, I'm not sure what I should feel. I've never really hated anyone, but it seems that now, maybe I should start."

Harry wondered whether Neville had known about Bellatrix Lestrange before today. Whether he was teaching himself to hate her now.

Right this moment, Harry also felt that he had to say something deep and comforting to Susan, but he was woefully unqualified for such a task.

"You don't have to hate Travers to hate what he's done," he offered, in the end.

Susan nodded pensively and didn't say anything else until they reached the Transfiguration classroom. Then she turned to him.

"Thank you for not asking whether I am all right," she said, looking Harry in the eye.

Harry grimaced. It was a pointless question; of course she wouldn't be all right. However—

"Are you?" He raised an eyebrow, and Susan gave him a small smile.

"I am, actually," she said, and slid her hand into his. "I just need some time to think, but I'll be fine. It's mostly the sympathy from others that—"

She broke off, biting her lip, and Harry squeezed her hand.

"I know. But don't let it bother you, okay?"

She smiled.

"Okay."

The footsteps of approaching students broke the intimacy of their conversation, and, waking up to the lateness of the hour, Susan urged Harry to rush to his class. Harry had to run all the way to History of Magic, and Blaise smirked at him in a really annoying way when Harry finally got there, but he felt it was definitely worth it.

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Neville, of course, was a problem on a whole new level.

Harry watched, frowning, as Neville cast spell after spell with teeth-gritted determination. Hermione was Neville's partner in the duelling club today, but she seemed to be thinking better of the idea fifteen minutes into the session. Hermione was much more skilled, but Neville's single-mindedness was unnerving.

Harry was still not sure that the talk he'd had with Neville would be beneficial in the long run.

Once Harry had found Neville, using the Marauder's Map to find Neville's hideout by the lake, he'd told Harry that Bellatrix Lestrange and her husband had tortured his parents into insanity with the
Cruciatus Curse. Neville had sounded almost detached as he'd related this, while clearly becoming quite consumed by the thought of taking revenge on the Lestranges. Harry had never noticed a malicious streak in Neville before and didn't think it suited him.

("I will meet Bellatrix one day and then she'll be the one crying for mercy... I hate her.")

Neville's attitude reminded Harry so much of himself back in third year, when he'd been hell-bent on confronting Sirius Black, that he'd had to bite his tongue in order to refrain from uttering words of caution. Having been there, Harry knew that Neville didn't need to hear empty platitudes—he needed an outlet for his anger, which Harry could provide for him in the duelling club.

And then, listening to Neville, Harry had made a decision. He'd weighed it carefully as he'd stood next to Neville at the lake's frozen shore. Finally, he'd figured that there would never be a better time, or a better reason.

So he'd told Neville about the prophecy.

He felt that, if he hadn't told, it would almost constitute lying; the prophecy had played a huge part in Neville's life, and determined his childhood no less than it had Harry's, and if anyone deserved to know, it was Neville. He had the right to know why his parents had been sought out that night. Why the Longbottoms had been the Death Eaters' immediate target. What information Alice and Frank Longbottom had been tortured for.

At first, Harry had thought that Neville hadn't heard him, or hadn't understood, so still and silent he'd remained.

Then, Neville had let out a shuddering breath.

("It could have been either one of us, but instead it's going to be both. You might be the one to kill Voldemort, but I'll be there every step of the way. And I'll kill the Lestranges.")

And the thing was—Harry ought to have been happy that Neville was suddenly taking the war seriously. However, it didn't seem right to him that Neville should be so motivated by hatred; Harry could admit to being worried, and he wasn't sure whether it was hypocritical of him to feel this way. He wanted Neville to be serious about the war, but he wanted him to be serious for the right reasons—even though he wasn't sure his own reasons were any better, or that he had any business wanting to shield Neville from the ugliest sides of the war.

Neville. And Susan. And the twins. And—

If Harry tried to protect all his friends, he'd have no one fighting beside him, and it made for an unfortunate vicious circle he'd recently started wondering about.

Closer to the present, one of Neville's over-powered spells went sideways and hit Lisa Turpin; instead of falling into a faint, Lisa grew giant mushrooms on her head. She screamed. Hermione rushed to help. Someone laughed.

Harry rubbed his forehead and asked himself whether he wanted to deal with it right now.

"I'll take care of the mushrooms," Cedric murmured, walking past Harry. "I think you should diffuse the situation with Greengrass, though."

"Good idea," Harry agreed and looked around the Hidden Room in search of that particular situation.
Older students were practising the Blasting Curse, while the younger ones were busy with the Impediment Jinx. Some seemed to be doing more laughing and fooling about than working—evidently regarding the duelling club as the time to freely socialize with other Houses—and others were appropriately diligent. Finally, Harry spotted clear signs of an argument taking place and walked over to where the diminutive Astoria Greengrass was facing off her Hufflepuff year-mate.

"—completely unfair—"

"—shouldn't have tried to trip me up—"

"What seems to be the problem?" Harry cut in smoothly.

"She used some evil curse on me!" the Hufflepuff said at once. "Look!"

Trying to recall the boy's name—Derek something—Harry glanced at the hand the boy'd thrust at him. The fingers had gone all limp; it looked as if all bone and muscle had been removed, but Harry was reasonably sure Astoria could not yet cast such a spell.

No, it looked more like an ordinary Jelly-Fingers Curse, which was, to be fair, not that ordinary. And not something Astoria should have cast unless she wanted trouble. It was knowing spells like these that made Slytherins come off as mean little bullies half the time.

Harry turned to Astoria, and she coloured slightly under his reproachful gaze.

"He tried to trip me up! I'd have fallen really hard if Prissy and Wendy hadn't caught me," the blonde girl protested, gesturing to her friends. "He doesn't like Slytherins, I heard so!"

Harry muttered under his breath, reversing the jinx.

"Let's avoid incidents like this in the future, shall we?" he asked and raised an eyebrow at Astoria.

"Yes," she said, visibly biting down on the sir.

Harry had thought he'd stomped out the younger years' urge to address him formally; he was neither that venerated, nor—surely—that scary. According to Blaise, it didn't help that Astoria and her Slytherin year-mates did not remember Harry as a quiet little firstie; their initial impressions of him had included the near-strangulation of Malfoy with the Parseltongue couch, and that clearly made for lasting impact.

Derek-something smirked at the downcast-looking Astoria.

Harry gave him a pleasant smile.

The boy stopped smirking and looked vaguely alarmed.

"If you have a problem with Slytherins," Harry said, still maintaining the friendly façade, "I'd rather you took it up with me. So that we avoid unnecessary miscommunication. Was there anything you wanted to say?"

For a moment, it looked as if Derek's sense of self-preservation would triumph over pride, and he'd leave the scene. However, the cluster of people around him and Astoria had thickened instead of dispersing, and backing out of the fight would mean losing face.

"Yeah, I—you say you're against You-Know-Who, but there's rumours going around, and how do we really know we can trust you or any other Slytherins?" Derek said, trying to appear brave.
There was a sudden hush, though Harry was glad to see it only extended to the immediate vicinity—most of the duelling club remained unaware.

"I don't see how your trust or lack thereof would relate to our House," Harry said nonchalantly. "Should I maybe start mistrusting Hufflepuffs on sheer principle?"

"Hufflepuffs aren't the ones who are all friendly with the junior Death Eaters," said Morag McDougal, a Ravenclaw in Harry's year. "I've heard some rumours too, if you'd like to know. And if you're really so against You-Know-Who as you say, shouldn't you have more problems with people in your House?"

"Not everyone in Slytherin is planning to become a Death Eater," Harry said, keeping a tight rein on his temper. "And I'd have thought that clever Ravenclaws, at least, would be above oversimplified generalizations." He cocked his head to the side. "Now, if you're quite done disrupting the session—?"

His glare was enough to silence the other protests—for now. Watching the people disperse, Harry was left with the feeling that he'd only delayed the inevitable facedown.

"That was close, wasn't it?" Terry asked from near Harry.

Harry turned around to see him and Anthony standing behind him.

"Close in what sense?"

Just in case, Harry put up a sound ward.

"We're not exactly dumb, Harry," Terry said. "I've heard rumours too. I've kind of been waiting for you to say something about it, but—"

"What rumours?"

"Is it true that You-Know-Who is trying to recruit you?"

"Is that what they're saying?"

The question was purely rhetorical, of course. Harry had known that this would eventually happen—the whispers of his recruitment would spread—but never would have been too soon.

"Yes." Anthony turned to face Harry. "So… is it true?"

"Kind of," Harry hedged. Then, glancing at his friends' expressions: "Well. Yes."

"Well." Terry looked away. "Fuck."

Harry shrugged. It could have been worse. Voldemort could have ordered older Slytherins to kill Harry, and Harry was not at all sure he'd have lived to see today if that had happened.

Still, he figured Terry and Anthony wouldn't see it like that. Most people wouldn't see it like that.

"Do some people actually believe I might join Voldemort?"

"How would we know?" Anthony said, uncharacteristically snappish. "It's all rumour and gossip, but—why didn't you say anything? How long has this been going on?"

Harry shrugged.
"Long enough, but I've been dealing with it fine."

"Using it, you mean," Terry said. "Morag was right—you're using this as leverage in Slytherin, aren't you?"

Harry frowned.

"Just so we get it straight, why the accusing tone?"

"Don't you see that it's—" Terry grimaced, and exchanged glances with Anthony. "Pretending to be one of them, selling out your principles just to keep people off your back—"

"See, this is why I haven't told you," Harry said, interrupting him. "I'm sorry if it offends your sensibilities, but not everything can be solved by charging into an honourable battle."

Terry frowned. Anthony peered at Harry closely.

"You're not sorry at all, are you?"

"No."

"Thought so."

Harry clenched his fists.

"Would you maybe like to get off that high horse for five seconds? You don't know enough to judge."

"Of course we don't know!" Terry cried, suddenly agitated. "Because you're not telling us anything! You're not telling any of us anything, Harry, and how are we supposed to understand what you're doing if we don't even know what you're thinking half the time?"

Harry thought back to the Order and their mistrust, to Padma's admonishments and Blaise's warnings. Had he really been too closed off lately?

Lately—ever since the ordeal last June. Since the second Killing Curse hit him, since he gave up on joining his dead parents, since that cold feeling of purpose settled into his chest. But—

How was he supposed to talk about his feelings with anyone when he spent most of his time trying to avoid feeling altogether?

"Yeah," Harry said, blowing out a long breath. "I don't know. I'm sorry. It's not that I don't trust you. I just—"

"We get it, a lot of things have been happening, and you've been busy," Terry said and ran a hand through his hair. "Hell, you're pretty much single-handedly running this club, and don't think we don't appreciate it. Just sometimes, it seems—we see you, but at the same we really don't."

"It's not that I don't care, really—"

"We know you care," Anthony said firmly. "We can see that you're putting a lot of effort into—this club, into making sure Neville is all right, and the twins, and—you're doing all these things, but it doesn't have to be a one-way thing, with you doing everything. Let us in a bit, and maybe we'll be able to help."

Harry nodded, and tried to ignore the guilty feeling that arose.
There was still no way he was telling them about his forays into Dark Magic, and about how tempting Voldemort’s offer had sounded for a whole of two seconds, and—

Terry and Anthony had condemned even using Voldemort’s offer to gain power in Slytherin. Would they—or many of his other friends—keep trusting Harry if they knew the rest? Harry wasn’t at all sure, but somehow he was in no hurry to find out.

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Sitting on a chintz armchair in Dumbledore’s office, Harry reflected that he was seeing more of Dumbledore this year than in all the previous years combined.

This time, Harry was here because his request from early January had finally been answered a month later: the Ministry had set a date for when Harry would be welcome to come and listen to the prophecy, accompanied by Dumbledore as the adult of his choice.

In other words, the date was set for a confrontation between the Order and the Death Eaters, should Voldemort take the bait and show up at the Ministry.

Some of the document’s details hinted that Voldemort would.

First of all, there was the problem of timing.

"As you see," Dumbledore said, pointing to the invitation that lay on the desk between them, "you will be allowed to listen to the prophecy on the fifteenth of March, at eight o’clock in the evening."

Which basically meant that Harry would be scheduled to arrive after the Ministry's working hours.

"The Department of Mysteries is known for functioning outside general Ministry regulations," Dumbledore informed him. "As the reason for that late hour, they cite considerations of your safety."

Harry was hard-pressed to believe the official document, and Dumbledore clearly shared his scepticism. It was much more likely that Voldemort, who’d heard of the request, had managed to arrange matters so that the Ministry would be nearly empty at the time of the potential confrontation.

After all, the fewer witnesses, the better, and what did Voldemort care that the whole point of this exercise was to out him to the general public?

Of course, it wasn't Harry who'd be going, it was Tonks. However, that brought them to the second problem.

"It says here that Ministry officials will be coming to pick me up," Harry told Dumbledore. Dumbledore already knew this, of course, but Harry felt like bringing up this rather important point. "What Ministry officials? You didn’t mention anything about this in the standard procedure, sir, and this is really going to complicate everything."

"Standard procedure does not seem to apply where you are involved, my dear boy," Dumbledore said. "It is indeed not common at all for a Ministry visitor to be accompanied to the Ministry from their home. However, as I'm sure you can imagine, they cite considerations of—"

"—my safety, yes, which I suppose means making sure that it's really me and not an impostor they're picking up?"

"I'm afraid so," Dumbledore said. "Voldemort must have considered the possibility of deception, and he is eager to make sure that the real Harry Potter arrives to the Ministry on the allotted night."
According to the original plan, Harry would go to Grimmauld Place before leaving for the Ministry; then he'd stay there, and Tonks would continue on in his stead. If Harry were to be picked up, however, the switch could not occur painlessly at Grimmauld, for the Ministry could not be granted the Order's address. In fact—

"Tonks and I are going to have to switch at Hogwarts, aren't we," Harry said, resigned. "And it has to be after classes, because otherwise someone is certain to catch on that it's not me..."

There would be time between his last class of the day and dinner to conduct the switch, although it would still be dangerous. Harry was sure that the pro-Voldemort faction would be warned in advance to watch his every step that day, and slipping under their radar would be very tricky—especially if Harry were to do it in a way that would not arouse suspicion.

What sort of a time frame were they looking at, again?

Harry glanced at the official invitation to listen to the prophecy. 15th of March, 8 o'clock, Ministry officials would be getting to Harry's location in advance to pick him up...

Harry swore inwardly.

In advance could mean anything, but, considering that Harry's appointment was at eight, it likely meant after dinner.

Could Tonks weather a dinner at the Slytherin table while pretending to be Harry to a bunch of people who would be watching like hawks for any abnormality?

He had the sneaking feeling that she might not.

"Sir," Harry spoke up, and raised his eyes to Dumbledore. "We might have a problem."

"We often do," Dumbledore said serenely. "The trick, if I may say so, is knowing how to solve them."

This particular problem Dumbledore suggested solving by conducting the switch before dinner, but letting Harry's friends in on the secret so that they would provide Tonks with enough cover.

"Perhaps we would benefit from a distraction," Dumbledore said, making an emphasis on the word distraction that made Harry listen closely. "With the limited time we are granted, it could be beneficial for us if the student body had something else to focus their attentions on. And I believe that distractions are not a rare occurrence in our school as of late."

Harry had no doubt whatsoever that Dumbledore was talking about the twins.

Directing the twins' destructive urges to a good cause did not seem like a bad idea. In fact, maybe Harry could negotiate a temporary ceasefire in return for a sanctioned strike later. Marching off to see the twins, Harry had a feeling that they might indeed be quite interested in orchestrating Operation Distraction.

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It could be that the date had been set by the Ministry, and so Voldemort had given new orders. It could be that this had always been the amount of time Harry would be given to prevaricate. Or it could just be that they had got tired and bored.

Whatever the reason, the pro-Voldemort faction at Hogwarts had run out of patience to wait for
Harry while he was making up his mind.

"This, Potter, is a Portkey, charmed especially for you," Edward Montague said, cornering Harry in his dormitory.

Harry didn't think it was an accident that Malfoy and Nott were lurking by the door, or that Crabbe and Goyle were waiting for them outside.

Harry took the proffered quill, knowing that it couldn't activate immediately—the Portkey wards over Hogwarts wouldn't let it.

"A Portkey to where?" he inquired, twisting the quill in his hands.

It looked innocuous enough, but what promise did it hold?

"To a place where you can prove your worth," Montague said, smiling unpleasantly. "Or not, if you fail to take it, but that'll be answer enough, won't it?"

A test of loyalty, then.

"Depends where it takes me," Harry said. "I'm not exactly known for risking my life, doesn't matter what for, and I can't guarantee—"

"Don't even try, Potter," Montague said, and he was suddenly looming over Harry. "Don't you try to give me more bullshit about how you're not sure, and how it all depends, and how you have to think. Let me explain this to you. You can take this Portkey and prove that you're with us. Or else you can chicken out of taking this Portkey, and prove that you're against us."

"But—"

"I don't care why," Montague persisted. "I don't care what your reasoning might be. You don't take the Portkey—we know what you're made of. No ifs, no buts, no extenuating circumstances. Black, white, yes, no. Foreign concept to you, I know, but you should be smart enough to grasp it."

Malfoy was smirking. Harry's fists were itching to hit him.

"When am I supposed to take the Portkey?" Harry asked.

"Use your brain, Potter. When could you possibly take it?"

Harry's temper flared.

"I don't know, Ed, you want to sound a little more welcoming here? Because it's you who wants me to go."

For a moment, Montague looked about to lash out, but then—to Malfoy's visible disappointment—he reined the impulse in.

"Valentine's Day," he said. "It's a Hogsmeade weekend, we'll be outside of the castle's wards, and nobody will miss you."

"Except my girlfriend," Harry said mildly.

"I'm sure she can find someone better to satisfy her," Malfoy said.

"And I'm sure you'll look loads better with your nose bashed into your skull, you want to try?"
"Cut it out, both of you," Montague snapped. "Potter, are your instructions clear?"

Harry contemplated saying no, just to fuck with Montague for a bit, because he didn't like being addressed the way he was right now. However, he also liked his face the way it was, thank you very much, and five-to-one odds—three-to-one, even, if you discounted Crabbe and Goyle—were not exactly favourable.

"Crystal clear," he said, instead. "Your oratory skills do you credit."

Montague squinted at him suspiciously, looking for mockery, but Harry kept his face perfectly straight, and Montague decided to let it go. Once he left the room, Nott followed.

"You'll get what's coming to you, Potter," Malfoy said, elated. "You'll be dead meat soon."

"Fuck you and the snake you rode in on," Harry told him. "Excuse me while I go compose my epitaph."

Really, though, Malfoy had hit rather close to the truth. There was no way in seven hells that Harry was taking that Portkey on Valentine's Day, because it would likely take him to Voldemort, and Harry would voluntarily meet with Voldemort only when he knew he could kill the bastard. Seeing as Harry was not taking the Portkey, on the fourteenth of February Voldemort and all his supporters would know for a fact that Harry would not be joining them. Then, Harry would be fair game.

He had about a week of peaceful life remaining. That was nice to know.

Harry considered it. Even if Voldemort did fall into the Order's trap and was revealed to exist on the fifteenth of March, it still left a month for Harry to dodge danger on his own, without the Ministry worrying about his health.

Perhaps warning his friends would be a good idea. And Susan too, of course.

Pity that Voldemort wouldn't buy date-with-girlfriend as a valid excuse for not showing up.

"I can't believe you're not more scared," Padma said, looking anxious.

She even refrained from shooting displeased glances towards Susan, who was included in the Hidden Room meeting for once.

"It does not do to lose nerve at a critical juncture," Blaise said brightly. "Hold on, Harry. We'll have you a beautiful burial yet."

"I've always known it was coming," Harry said, putting a hand on Susan's arm.

He'd never seen her glare at anyone, but the look she was shooting at Blaise could rival Hermione's darkest glower.

"You've always known that you will die tragically young and have a lovely burial?" Luna asked, raising her pale eyebrows.

"I've always known they won't wait indefinitely," Harry clarified. "I've been preparing. It's not quite as bad as it appears."

"Yes, it is," Hermione said. "You're not safe in Slytherin. Half of them will try to kill you in your sleep."

"They will fail," Harry said. "I've had five years to ward my bed."
"What safety measures are you going to take?" Terry asked. "Because this is not a joke. They might actually try to kill you."

"I haven't exactly been wasting time," Harry said. "Voldemort's supporters are many, but there's a lot of duelling club members, too. We've had some disagreements recently—" With people questioning Harry's loyalty; funny how they tended to do that. "—but I should think that people will be reassured once they see junior Death Eaters declaring war on me."

"And then?" Padma prodded.

"If it comes to open confrontations, I'll have a significant proportion of the school on my side," Harry said. "If they try to make my life difficult and sabotage me in class, once again, I have enough people to help. If they try to kill me in secret, with surreptitious attempts on my life—" Harry sighed. "—that's going to suck."

"We'll watch out for poison," Millicent said. "That's one of the most obvious ones."

Neville, who'd been sitting there pale and quiet, finally spoke up:

"Just… whatever you do, please be careful? And tell us how we can help. I want to help, in any way I can."

Harry nodded at him gratefully. Perhaps this latest turn of events would distract Neville from his vendetta against the Lestranges, on which he still seemed disturbingly intent.

"Thanks. I'm sure I'll need your help," Harry said. "We're in for an interesting month."

***

The first altercation happened right after dinner on Valentine's Day. The junior Death Eater contingent had been eerily calm during the meal, evidently reserving their ire for when they'd have the freedom to express it. The retreat to the common rooms gave those of them in Slytherin just such an opportunity.

"You've picked your side, then," Edward Montague said, and Harry experienced a strong sense of déjà vu.

Because this—or something like this—had happened before. He'd already been here, in this very spot, and had the angry faces of the crowd directed at him, and prepared himself to weather their wrath.

Except now it was different. He knew who his friends and enemies were. And the circle around him was not nearly as tight as it had been last June. And the feeling of all against one was decidedly lacking, because Harry had considerable numbers to support him these days, even if very few of his allies came from among upperclassmen.

"For the life of me, I can't figure out why you'd choose to stick together with Mudbloods and Dumbledore," Montague continued, mouth twisting. "But it's your funeral."

Oddly, Harry caught a hint of genuine hurt in Montague's tone. It was as if he really wanted to know why Harry had chosen the way he had.

As if he viewed Harry's choice as a desertion, rather than a given.

"The Dark Lord wants to kill me," Harry said. "He's already tried to kill me twice, and I believe
there will be a third time. The truce he is offering is temporary at best, and he will not hesitate to
attack me again when he decides to. You understand that I can't take his side, considering."

"How long have you thought that?" Miles Bletchley inquired. "Have you said *any* truth to us in the
last few months?"

"Potter was never going to join," Malfoy declared, looking smug. "You didn't believe me before, but
now you see I was right."

"Are you claiming to be smarter than the Dark Lord, Malfoy?" Nott asked sharply.

Aww. Harry was going to miss the junior Death Eater power games.

And it was going to be weird not to be included on that anymore. To still know the inside jokes, but
not be allowed in on the banter. To become, once again, the pariah on his Quidditch team and
generally among the circle of people he got along with reasonably well.

He wondered whether it would be strange for them, too.

"You've made a mistake," Montague told him. "You've chosen wrong. You won't last among
Dumbledore's lackeys."

"But it's too late now," Bletchley said. "The Dark Lord won't forgive." He gave Harry a cold smile.
"And we won't, either."

"Our Lord will show you no mercy when you meet him again," Montague concluded, and Harry
would have taken that for a *pro forma* threat if not for the sudden exchange of glances, and grins
smothered at Montague's declaration.

Harry grew instantly wary. Montague seemed to be referring to something already planned, and it
could very well be the trip Harry was allegedly taking to the Ministry. Could certain persons at
Hogwarts be aware of it already?

Harry was suddenly more anxious than ever to make sure that he would *not* end up going.

Of course, he would have other problems to occupy his time in the meanwhile. At first, Harry had
wondered how the hostile members of his House would express their feelings, considering the rule of
Slytherin public unity. Turned out, plausible deniability was key. Surviving on a daily basis turned
into an exciting challenge—with lovely things like Quidditch practices among people intent on
causing Harry harm. And his potions were being sabotaged regularly, as if dealing with a moody
Neville and an even moodier Snape in that class hadn't been enough. And there was a drastic
increase in attempts to make Harry slip up and incur Umbridge's overt displeasure.

"We must stand united in this trying hour," Ernie Macmillan told him at one duelling club session,
puffing out his chest. "You can count on us, Harry."

Harry counted. Not all club participants were convinced that Harry was an innocent victim in the
recent surge of attacks, but most helped by providing the manpower for a human buffer between
Harry and his assailants. At all times when Harry was out in public, there was usually a witness
nearby that wasn't openly connected to Harry, and would therefore be trusted by the teachers to be
impartial. After several instances of being punished for their attacks on Harry due to those witness
accounts, Harry's ill-wishers learned to tread carefully.

Harry was gladder than ever that he'd made nearly everyone sign the Secrecy Scroll, because now
even those who didn't believe him couldn't betray him.
"It's a good thing that most teachers like you," Susan said during their now-rare moment alone. "Must be the famed Potter charm."

"Worked on you, it seems," Harry murmured, twirling a lock of her hair around his finger. "Personally, I hope it’ll continue working—"

"I'm still here, aren't I?" Susan nudged him, smiling.

In all honesty, though, Susan wasn't taking recent events very well. She put up a brave front, but she hadn't been at ease ever since Harry had told her about the Portkey. They'd even had a bit of a fight about Valentine's Day, because Susan had insisted on staying inside the castle and cancelling the trip to Hogsmeade, obviously worried about Harry's safety.

("Oh, we're still going to celebrate, but I have a new plan—it's going to be more personal. I don't need to leave the castle to be with my boyfriend, do I?")

Susan had had the wisdom to dress her request as a whim that Harry was indulging—to celebrate Valentine's differently from other couples. She had organized a beautiful date in the Hidden Room, procured food from the house-elves and looked terribly hopeful that Harry should like her arrangements. Harry couldn't have done anything but capitulate.

("Of course I like it. You're right, it's much better than Hogsmeade.")

He couldn't fault her for worrying about him without coming off as a jerk, or criticize her for being too nice when she gave up her dream Hogsmeade date for his sake. She probably wouldn't have enjoyed Hogsmeade, anyway, if she had been fearing for their lives every second of the trip. And that was going to be a problem; Harry's life would never be entirely free of danger while Voldemort was around.

Harry had developed a certain degree of fatalism, because otherwise he would lose his mind thinking of ways he could be harmed or trying to plan for all possible contingencies. He was concerned that Susan was doing just that; that their relationship was lately bringing her more stress than happiness. That wasn't what he wanted for her.

"I wish Auntie Amelia could do something," Susan said, frowning. "I'm sure she secretly believes that You-Know-Who is back, but she can't say so, or she'll lose her position, and that'll be even worse."

"While your aunt's support would be great, we seem to be doing fine anyway," Harry said and kissed Susan, hoping to sidetrack her. "Let's talk about something else, hmm? Like, have I mentioned that I really like your new perfume?"

Susan's face turned a fetching shade of pink.

"Today—not yet, no," she answered primly. "However, you may begin singing praises to me now."

Harry laughed and leaned in to kiss her again.

There was no use in worrying. The true test would come on the fifteenth of March, when Voldemort's supporters at Hogwarts would expect Harry to go to the Ministry and withdraw the prophecy. On that day, Harry would have to evade their close scrutiny and avoid going, which he was not expecting to be easy. Thankfully, he and the twins had long ago worked out what Operation Distraction would entail, and it promised to be rather spectacular.
Harry sincerely hoped that it would also prove successful.

***

By the time March 15th arrived, Harry felt like he'd lived another month of the Triwizard Tournament. There was a task he'd been counting down towards, and he'd done his best to prepare for it, but ultimately it was as if he was swimming through a murky lake while at the same time trying to outwit a few dragons, and Voldemort would be waiting at the end of this maze if he failed.

"Everything is going to be fine," Hermione told him after breakfast.

Harry wished her voice didn't quaver.

"Yes, it is," he agreed, and marched off to his classes with a cheerful sense of doom.

He'd been constantly surrounded by students since yesterday morning—clearly, Voldemort wasn't taking any chances. Malfoy did not seem to enjoy the role of Harry's faithful shadow, but he'd nonetheless managed to glue himself to Harry, figuratively speaking, and no taunts or threats on Harry's part could chase him away.

Besides which, in Harry's year and in every class of his there were still Nott, Grabbe, and Goyle. Harry wasn't sure how involved Parkinson was, but she would easily join the campaign just to express her loathing for Harry.

He had such caring housemates.

When the time came for the last lesson of the day—Herbology—Harry's nerves were tingling with anticipation. Tonks was, presumably, already in the castle, or would be soon. The faster he got out of the lesson and somehow dodged Malfoy and company, the safer he would be.

Harry and Terry were putting their gloves away, preparing to dash, when the greenhouse door opened with a dramatic bang.

On the threshold stood a thoroughly demented-looking Professor Umbridge.

"Potter!" she snarled, searching for Harry's face among the students and pointing her wand at everyone in turn. "I know it was you! It is always you!"

Harry cast a nonverbal Shield Charm just in case.

"Really, Dolores," Professor Sprout interjected, sounding scandalized, "I'm sure there is no need to threaten the students—"

"Quiet!" Umbridge demanded, brandishing her wand. "You all, be quiet! Enough!"

She swayed on her feet and leaned heavily against the door.

"I see colours," she said suddenly, in a terrified whisper. "They are coming to get me. You are all coming to get me!"

"Dolores—" Professor Sprout looked truly alarmed.

She made a step towards Umbridge.

"NO!" Umbridge screeched, shielding herself with her hands. "No, don't come near me, don't let them get me, don't —"
"Dolores, dear—"

"I SAID NO!" Umbrige shouted, and there was an ear-splitting explosion.

Several girls screamed and students dove for cover as bits of plants and soil flew at them from flowerbeds next to the door. When the dust cleared, Harry saw Professor Spout lying on the ground motionless and Umbridge cowering in a crouch by the entrance.

An odd shimmering aura surrounded her.

Students watched her in stunned disbelief. Nobody knew what was going on, and nobody had any idea what they needed to do.

Harry knew what was happening, and he exchanged glances with his friends because they knew, too, but knowing didn't help them, because they hadn't expected this, either.

Operation Distraction hadn't been meant to start this way.

Back in February, the twins had come up with the idea and Harry had helped them with perpetrating the deed. He'd thought of involving Astoria Greengrass and had given the Marauder's Map to the twins, but the Gryffindor Quidditch team was to provide the twins' alibis and Astoria was to pull off most of the acting. The plan had been simple. Astoria would go into Umbridge's office, playing the naïve little Ministry supporter and relaying her suspicions that Harry Potter was hatching up wicked schemes. Being a daughter of a conservative Pureblood in no way associated with Dumbledore, she would likely be believed.

In the middle of her visit, however, a huge ruckus would be heard right outside the office—namely, the nearby suit of armour sailing into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, crashing there and eliciting a wail from the ghost. Umbridge, the control freak that she was, would go sort out the disturbance, leaving Astoria alone in her office for a few minutes. And that's when Astoria would change the mints in the bowl on Umbridge's desk for something much more interesting, and later a reverse exchange would occur to cover up the traces.

("We've developed these sweets especially for Umbridge... Between you and us, Harry, we're going to call them the Mindfuck Mints.")

Fred and George had explained about combining scurvy-grass with an Aztec fungus called Teonanácatl, which for the ease of pronunciation they'd termed the magic mushroom. Apparently, it had serious psychedelic effects. The Aztecs had used it for achieving all kinds of higher planes and trance-like states, but the twins had simply wanted to weird the living lights out of Umbridge. Harry and the twins had figured that timing this prank together with Harry's supposed departure to the Ministry would be fortuitous for all, because it would distract Umbridge from spying on Harry and divert student attention, making it easier for Harry to slip away in the ruckus and change places with Tonks.

Clearly, the plan had worked—to an extent.

Umbridge had to be under the effect of the Mindfuck Mints to act the way she was right now. However, her cornering Harry in the greenhouse was never in the original plan, and Harry was rapidly coming to realize that they should have made a provision for taking away Umbridge's wand. They hadn't counted what effects the mushrooms would have when combined with Umbridge's magic, and this shimmering shield around Umbridge? It boded nothing good.

Not to mention poor Professor Sprout.
"We should check on her," Harry murmured, pointing at the prone woman.

Padma nodded.

Harry made a cautious step towards Professor Sprout, keeping an eye on Umbridge. Professor Sprout had collapsed only a few paces away from her, so Harry would need to get reasonably close in order to check on the Hufflepuff Head of House.

Turning around briefly, Harry saw that all students were observing his movements with rapt interest, even Malfoy and his clique. The unfolding events had taken them, like everyone else, completely unawares, and they were right to be wary of surprises today.

Harry made another step. Almost there. Trying to make no sudden movements that might set Umbridge off again, he reached for Professor Sprout, but then the luminescent aura around Umbridge wavered dangerously, folding in on itself, and darkened in colour.

Harry jumped back just in time before the shield lashed out, sizzling towards the spot where Harry had been.

Crabbe and Goyle guffawed, and the sound seemed to rouse Umbridge. She lifted her head, eyes narrowed in malice.

"I know you're here, Potter. I see you, among my enemies, and dear Cornelius—" She waved her hand at Professor Sprout. "See what you did, Potter? You—I've worked so hard, all my life, and you want to destroy everything. But I won't let you destroy me!" Then, she flinched violently. "I hear them," she said, eyes wide. "Cornelius! Cornelius, you must protect me!"

Suddenly, she burst into tears.

Terry looked nauseous, and Padma awfully pale.

After all, they had done this, or someone they knew very well had. And none of them liked Umbridge in the slightest, but to reduce a woman who prided herself on control to this snivelling wreck—

Well, even Harry's nerves were somewhat rattled by this display, although he had bigger problems on his mind right now.

Time was ticking away fast, and he was still locked in the greenhouse.

"Okay," he said. "We need to get out of here. I'm about to experiment a bit, so be ready—"

He sent a Tickling Charm at Umbridge.

The moment the spell collided with Umbridge's shield, there was another explosion—a minor one, this time. Then Umbridge let out a furious yell, turned towards Harry's group and hurled a nonverbal fireball in their direction.

Lisa Turpin screamed.

The fireball hit Harry's shield, which shook at the impact; for a moment, Harry thought it would give, but then the fireball fizzled out of existence.

Then, there was silence.

"Shit," said Terry.
While they had been recovering, Umbridge became quite certain that a potted plant was her mother, and started rambling off a litany of her numerous faults. There was something about filthy half-breeds in the midst of that, but Harry wasn't paying attention.

"What if we all attack at once?" he proposed.

"We can't attack a teacher," Malfoy said sanctimoniously. "That is against school rules."

Throwing a glance at him, Harry saw that Malfoy was enjoying the situation. After all, the pro-Voldemort party had put so much effort into dogging Harry's every step today; it would be ideal for them if they could keep Harry confined to this room until Ministry officials came to collect him.

"Umbridge is not herself," Padma retorted. "We can't stay here until someone finds us. It's not until dinner that people will realize we're all missing."

At hearing her name, Umbridge stirred again.

"Mudbloods and filth, polluting me, polluting all of us—"

"Professor Sprout needs urgent medical help," Harry said loudly. "We need to get out of here and take her to the infirmary."

"I have always done what is necessary!" Umbridge said, raising her voice to match Harry's. "I have never shirked my responsibilities! I have always served my country!"

"Professor Umbridge needs help too," Anthony said. "Clearly."

"And Potter will pay for all he's done!" Umbridge screamed. "And Dumbledore! And you, you, how dare you call yourself my mother—"

She aimed her wand at the potted plant and a jet of fire burst out of her wand, engulfing the plant in flames.

Umbridge cackled.

The plant exploded.

"Not so long till dinner, now," Nott said pointedly. "It will be safer to wait a little instead of risking our and Professor Umbridge's health."

"I'm not sure it's good for our health to be locked here with her," Harry countered. "Umbridge can't be strong enough to repel us all, can she?"

"We should try," Padma said, and took aim.

On the count of three, Harry, his friends and most of the duelling club members present cast simultaneous Stunners at Umbridge. Then, the whole class dove to all sides when a violent explosion rippled through the greenhouse.

"What on earth is it with her?" Morag McDougal asked, peeking at Umbridge from behind the table, now overturned.

"Uncontrolled accidental magic," Anthony said, and there was despair in his voice. "Whatever is wrong with Umbridge, her magic has gone completely haywire, and have you noticed that her shield seems to get stronger after our spells? How the hell is she doing it?"
"Uncontrolled magic," Terry reminded him. "You just said."

Fuck uncontrolled magic. There was less than half an hour until dinner. Just when was Harry supposed to change places with Tonks?

The prank had been meant to debilitate Umbridge and distract the students. It had not been meant to lock Harry in with a class full of observers, hurt Professor Sprout and possibly sabotage the Order's entire plan!

"What about the windows?" Harry asked, addressing his friends. "Can we—"

"Spell-resistant," Anthony said, quashing Harry's hope in the bud.

"Are you sure?" Blaise pressed.

"Yes," Anthony said, annoyed. "But you're welcome to try."

Wasting no time, Millicent turned around and sent a Bludgeoning Curse at the greenhouse window. The curse reflected off the window at an angle and went speeding towards Theodore Nott.

Indifferently, Harry watched him dodge, and then turned back towards his friends.

Anthony looked to be deep in thought, Terry confused, Padma worried, Millicent brooding and Blaise darkly amused.

"What a hoot," Blaise whispered to Harry. "Dumbledore's scheming, Operation Distraction, mighty plans. All goes down the drain because Umbridge found herself a greenhouse."

Unless, of course, someone had noticed her state and directed her to the greenhouse on purpose.

Harry cursed under his breath, thinking furiously. He had no way to send a message—he considered the fake Galleons Hermione'd created, but they only allowed him to set a date and time for the dulling club meetings. Umbridge was blocking the only exit, and the Mindfuck Mints somehow had set her magic wild. Ideally, Harry also needed to escape without making himself appear suspicious.

Then again, perhaps not everything was lost. Ministry officials were supposed to appear later; while it would be a close call, Harry would still have time after dinner to switch places with Tonks.

Accomplishing that was more likely than escaping right now, anyway.

By the time footsteps were heard outside the greenhouse, Umbridge had destroyed several more plants, hallucinated up the appearance of Cornelius Fudge once again, and launched another attack at Harry.

Harry was just trying to catch his breath when the greenhouse door opened to reveal Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and Lucius Malfoy standing on the other side.

"Father!" Draco exclaimed in surprise, while Harry repressed the urge to let out a creative combination of curses.

"Good evening, Draco," Lucius Malfoy drawled.

He raised an eyebrow at the wreckage in the room as Dumbledore and McGonagall laboured to restrain Umbridge.

"Mr. Potter," Malfoy added, once his gaze found Harry. His lips curled in a small smile. "It will be
my pleasure to escort you to the Ministry of Magic after dinner tonight."

Following his classmates out the door under Lucius Malfoy's watchful eye, Harry was sure that somewhere, someone was laughing.
Chapter Notes

Sincere thanks to Mordac, who took time out of his busy schedule to look over a large part of the chapter. Also a great thank-you to Voice of the Nephilim, who's been of immense help. As usual, my amazing beta Gwendolyn was amazing and I am very grateful to her for it.

Harry hardly saw where he was walking, his mind abuzz with schemes and questions. He felt, without being capable of articulating it right this moment, that a lot of things—too many things—weren't adding up. Lucius Malfoy's presence was odd, as was the whole situation with Umbridge, but he didn't have the time to think any of it through. Every step he took brought him closer to danger, so he needed to focus on what was important right now.

Getting himself the fuck out of this fix was important.

He'd already tried walking off on different excuses, but someone had always volunteered to go till the ends of the earth with him. However, he was reaching the boiling point. If anyone accompanied him, he'd just Stun them, Obliviate them, Imperius them—whatever, he didn't care.

He'd already opened his mouth to proclaim his intention to return to the dormitories when Madam Hooch appeared from around the next corner.

"Headmaster!" she said, looking relieved to see Dumbledore. "There are two gentlemen looking for you—"

Two wizards in official Ministry robes were following her. One of the men was dressed in bright scarlet and had a stocky build; the other wore midnight blue robes and was somehow long and sour-looking.

"Auror Dawlish, Mr. Croaker," Dumbledore said, inclining his head.

An interested murmur swept through Harry's classmates, while he gritted his teeth. It seemed that his intentions would be thwarted at every turn today.

"Evening, Dumbledore," said the man addressed as Croaker. "Never meant to barge in like this. Dinner ought to be over, we'd have thought."

"Not to worry," Dumbledore said. "We've had some unforeseen circumstances interrupting our schedule."

"Very well," the Auror—Dawlish—started, but then Lucius Malfoy stepped forward.

"Good evening, Dawlish," he said with a smile.

"Mr. Malfoy!" the Auror exclaimed, eyes widening. "Blimey, sir, good evening!"

"This is a fortunate meeting indeed," Lucius stated. "Draco tells me that Mr. Potter is going to the Ministry today, and I find myself interested in accompanying him. Perhaps I shall go along with
"That's out of order," Croaker declared. "This is official Ministry business. No unauthorized additions allowed."

Judging by Lucius Malfoy's face, he didn't appreciate being called an unauthorized addition.

"Oh, I think that, if you asked the Minister, you would find that he would authorize my presence immediately," Lucius drawled. "What do you think, Dawlish?"

The Auror looked uncertainly between Croaker and Malfoy.

"I'm certain you wouldn't suggest anything that the Minister wouldn't approve of, Mr. Malfoy, sir," he mumbled.

"Indeed." Malfoy inclined his head slightly. "I would not compromise the Minister's trust, I assure you."

"Naturally, naturally," Dumbledore said. "Now, you gentlemen have arrived somewhat early, so I'm quite convinced we would all benefit from some fortification with tea—or perhaps you might consent to stay for dinner?"

"Really, Dumbledore, we should get cracking," Dawlish said. "There's some security arrangements to conduct before we leave, so we'd better start. Could we find a more private area?" he asked, eyeing the congregated students in barely concealed distaste.

Harry glanced at Dumbledore. If there were security checks to be passed, Harry would need to get that done before switching with Tonks, which was fine, but—another delay, and he wasn't sure how many more he could withstand.

"Of course," Dumbledore said. "This way, please."

Anthony and Terry looked worried, Padma was biting her lip, Millicent was frowning, and Blaise just muttered a quiet be careful before Harry set off after the adults. Harry would dearly like to turn back around and curse Malfoy, Nott and Parkinson to all seven hells for smirking in an impossibly superior way, but he had bigger things to worry about.

Like, exactly what this Ministry security would entail. Casting his mind back to Dumbledore's explanations in January, Harry could only recall that identification tests had been mentioned. In fact, the Order had been nervous that Tonks would fail to pass them at the Ministry.

Dumbledore gave Harry an encouraging smile.

Harry was not encouraged.

 ***

After a short walk, they ended up in a small chamber just off the entrance hall.

Croaker immediately withdrew a small pouch from his pocket. He then, incongruously, produced out of it a bunch of scrolls and a mirror about three times the pouch's size.

"Simple procedure," Croaker declared. "Would every one of you, in turn, look into this mirror? Yes, Mr. Malfoy, you as well, if you intend to accompany us."

"What is special about the mirror?" Harry had to ask.
"It is a Monitoring Mirror," Croaker said. "Reveals every deception and disguise. Mr. Malfoy?"

With the air of someone from whom a great sacrifice was being unfairly required, Malfoy walked over and glanced into the mirror. One of the scrolls sprung to life at once, and Malfoy's name appeared on it in neat cursive.

Croaker nodded approvingly.

"You next, Mr. Potter."

Nothing special transpired when Harry looked at his reflection, except for another scroll unfurling and giving up his full name. Harry wondered what the mirror would have done if Tonks had been here in his stead.

Dawlish had apparently been tested before, because the Monitoring Mirror was put away as soon as Dumbledore was finished, and then Croaker demanded that they all sign the parchment with their names on it. As it turned out, this was to signify that they were aware they could not disclose anything seen at the Department of Mysteries. All in all, as far as security arrangements went, Harry felt it could have been a lot worse.

"Very well," Croaker said. "We may leave immediately."

"Oh, but," Harry began, and then didn't know how to continue. "What—right now?"

He threw a frantic glance at Dumbledore, only to find that he was watching Lucius Malfoy, who was watching Harry.

"You requested to go in the first place, didn't you, Mr. Potter?" Dawlish said, and now he looked at the time.

"Yes, but—I'm not feeling so well," Harry said, suddenly seeing what he'd been missing all this time. Too bad he didn't have any Nosebleed Nougat or Puking Pastilles on him. "I think one of Professor Umbridge's spells hit me—oh, you haven't heard, she went a bit strange—anyway. I really don't think I can go right now, so if I could just go lie down for a while—"

Croaker surveyed him in displeasure.

"Mr. Potter, our Portkey leaves in fifteen minutes. Portkey wards over the Department of Mysteries have been lifted especially on your account for a thirty-second window. If you are feeling unwell, you may cancel today's appointment and arrange a time for another day, but you must decide now."

Oh, well, if he must.

"I am feeling rather unwell," Harry began, but then Dumbledore interrupted him by addressing the officials:

"Would you excuse Mr. Potter and myself for one moment?"

Croaker's expression darkened.

"Kindly bear in mind that our Portkey is leaving soon."

Harry allowed Dumbledore to lead him a slight bit away, frowning all the while. From the dampening of noise around them, Harry discerned that the man had put up a nonverbal sound ward.

"Harry," Dumbledore said. "The progress that we could achieve tonight matters more than you
perhaps realize. Things have not been going well for us, I fear. Not well at all. Voldemort has been recruiting allies since June, and he has been more successful than we; if we do not check his progress, the war will be lost because he has been ignored for too long."

Harry was used to motivational speeches. He'd given a fair share himself, so he felt he could withstand Dumbledore's sorrowful gaze without cracking.

"The Ministry, or at the very least the Minister, will not acknowledge Voldemort's return without irrefutable proof," Dumbledore continued, sparing a look at the officials. "While it is beyond doubt that Voldemort will eventually produce it, it would be disastrous to let him announce his return on his own terms, because he will not do so until he is ready and assured of victory. By then, it will be much too late."

"I understand that," Harry said. "But why are you so sure that I have to go? Voldemort knows we'll be there tonight. He's probably lying in wait already. You could just go, without me, and find him there—"

"That cannot be," Dumbledore refuted calmly. "Surely you realize the purpose behind Lucius Malfoy's presence."

"Making sure I don't get lost on the way to the Ministry?"

Dumbledore shook his head.

"You are correct, but not entirely. Voldemort has no plans to expose himself unless he has proof that Harry Potter will in fact appear tonight to withdraw the prophecy. Lucius Malfoy will give him the signal when we are leaving to the Ministry, or perhaps when we are already there. It could even be that Voldemort plans to use the same thirty-second window of opportunity that our Mr. Croaker was so explicit about."

Harry thought he'd have figured out the reason behind Malfoy's presence had he not been so preoccupied with all the other stuff that kept happening.

"We have always known Voldemort would exercise some sort of observation," Dumbledore added. "We envisaged a lookout at the Ministry, to notify him of our arrival, but he has chosen differently."

"Fine," Harry conceded. "I can see that. I still don't see why we can't postpone this meeting. Didn't we originally decide that the plan wouldn't go through if Tonks couldn't replace me? Especially if we can just arrange things for another day, like Croaker said."

"We are reasonably sure of Voldemort's actions tonight," Dumbledore replied. "We know, more or less, how things will proceed. If we miss this chance, we shall be flung again into the realm of unpredictability, and there is no saying that we will be able to plan in advance again."

"But—" Harry lowered his voice, even despite the wards. "Professor Snape—"

"He has received no information regarding tonight's events," Dumbledore said. "It is reasonable to suppose that Voldemort does not yet trust him to any significant degree. Severus is doing his best, but his possibilities are limited."

Harry held in a scowl by sheer effort of will.

"Yes, but it doesn't mean that I have to go. With all due respect, sir, I don't see why I should get involved in something that has nothing to do with me!"
He knew, already as he said it, that the words rang false and wrong and petulant. And he'd almost anticipated Dumbledore's thoughtful—

"Nothing to do with you? I thought that you have been the one insisting that this war has *everything* to do with you."

Because he had. He had been the one insisting, for so long, that he wanted to fight, that he wanted to be included on the information to do with this war because he was entitled to it by virtue of his own involvement. And yet, when things came to a head, he didn't want to get *involved*?

Harry glared at the stone floor under his feet.

He'd been so content in letting the Order handle this plan without him that he hadn't really stopped to think what the plan meant for *his* position in the war. And really? It sounded like he should have given it some prior thought, beyond the immediate need to assure his own safety.

He knew that he'd have to fight Voldemort, which meant that he had a vested interest in checking Voldemort's progress if, and while, he could. If giving up on the plan would really create such a huge setback, on the grand scheme of things—wouldn't it make sense, strategic, political sense for him to go?

Or then not. Or then it could be completely idiotic to go, spelling-his-own-doom level of stupid, because what sane person went into a dangerous situation knowing they were in no way prepared?

"I may have been the one saying I wanted to get involved," Harry said, "but you were the one saying I was too young, sir. What happened to *that*?"

Dumbledore seemed to age several decades before Harry's eyes.

"This unfortunate collision of circumstances perturbs me more than words can describe, and I assure you that I will do everything in my power to keep you safe should you agree to help us in this mission. Please believe me that I regret asking so much from you."

"But you ask anyway," Harry muttered.

Regret or not, the result was the same, and Harry wasn't sure what he felt about that, except the frustration that he felt towards everything right at that moment.

By going, Harry would put himself in danger. This was an irrefutable fact. Harry's self-preservation instinct, honed to perfection, was screaming at him to back out of this and run as fast as he could.

However—and this was a creeping, unpleasant realization that reverberated through Harry's mind in ways that reshuffled plans and hopes and ideas of self—

He wasn't going to get through the war and reach his goal without taking *some* risks.

Harry had thought he was aware of it, but the shock he felt at the idea of actually risking himself told him he'd been wrong. Very glaringly stupidly wrong. He'd thought he could prepare and reach the point when he'd be *ready*. He'd started taking time and freedom to prepare for granted. He'd begun believing that he'd be able to choose his own battles.

This was laughable, in retrospect. Voldemort had never given an indication that he'd wait for Harry to get ready. There was no reason to expect that Harry would even live through his next birthday, never mind long enough to get ready. Sometime, he needed to stop letting things happen and start acting, instead, even if *ready* remained a far-off concept.
Was this the time to start? Fuck only knew. However, a very important plan would fail if Harry didn't go to the Ministry, and that meant—that meant the first real test of what Harry was willing to do for his cause, as opposed to just plan on doing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noticed movement and turned around to see Dawlish stalking purposefully towards him and Dumbledore.

"Please, Headmaster, we are on a tight schedule!" Dawlish exclaimed. "Our Portkey is leaving in eight minutes. If Mr. Potter feels ill enough to cancel the appointment, he must say so. If he wishes to go, we must leave at once."

There was a pause.

"Harry?" Dumbledore prompted.

More than anything, Harry wanted time—time to evaluate everything, time to choose the right way to act, time to take a deep breath. Time that he did not have.

"Can you swear to me that this is as important as you're making it out to be?" he asked Dumbledore, in one last-ditch attempt to determine something, fully aware that it wasn't going to help him at all.

"Yes, and I can swear I shall endeavour to keep you safe," Dumbledore said solemnly. "I shall create you an outward Portkey and call Fawkes—"

Dawlish was going a little purple in the face from seeing but not hearing them interact. Dumbledore lifted the sound wards.

"Then I'd like that Portkey, yes," Harry said to Dawlish, but he was looking at Dumbledore.

He wasn't even half-sure that he'd made the right decision, and he kept deliberating all through being rushed along corridors towards Hogwarts grounds and then out of the gates. Maybe he should have said no, but maybe he should have said yes long ago, and maybe he should have done so many other things differently, and maybe he'd never get the chance now—

Head spinning with the possibilities of all that he should have risked or had not done or was marching off towards, Harry laid his hand on the Portkey that would deposit him and the adults at the Department of Mysteries.

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The Portkey landed Harry and his companions in a black corridor in front of an equally black door, and there were two seconds of perfect silence.

Then, an elevator gave a ping in the distance.

"Right this way," Croaker said, gesturing towards the door. "Follow me."

Harry wasn't sure when he'd taken his wand out, but he became aware of gripping it in his hand.

The door Croaker opened before them led to a circular room, the main feature of which were another eleven identically black doors and branches of candles burning with blue light. Together with the black floor and black ceiling and black everything, this created a surreal environment, which might have been the point.

A glance at Malfoy revealed that he, too, was tense, and he kept looking back at Dumbledore, who
completed their procession. Dawlish and Croaker seemed to be the only ones not aware that they were walking—literally—into a trap. Maybe not behind the next door, and maybe not behind the next one still, but somewhere in this silent department were Death Eaters waiting for them to arrive—or, if they weren't yet, they'd soon be coming from behind.

Croaker pressed his hand against one door and murmured something under his breath. The doors started spinning rapidly with a soft whooshing noise, Croaker's hand still pressed firmly to what was alternatively a wall or a door.

Dumbledore chose that moment to appear by Harry's side.

"Here," he said quietly, pressing a small object into Harry's hand. "Your—"

*Portkey* was likely the next word, but then suddenly several things happened in very close succession.

The doors stopped spinning, and an odd constricting sensation came over Harry. Next, Croaker opened the door in front of him, and—

"*Avada Kedavra!*"

Spells flashed from beyond the door, and Harry couldn't count how many black robes and white masks there were—most of the Death Eaters remained behind cover, but a couple charged ahead.

Shrieks ringing in his ears, Harry dashed instinctively to the side and threw up a shield.

None of the spells were aimed at him. Instead, the Death Eaters let out a volley of Killing Curses at Dumbledore. Harry tried to shout out a warning even though Dumbledore must have seen them.

Then, a curse impacted his shield.

Harry turned to see that Lucius Malfoy, unlike unknown Death Eaters behind that door, wasn't aiming at Dumbledore. He was pointing his wand straight at Harry—and so was, suddenly, inexplicably, Auror Dawlish.

*Vexo,* Harry thought, thrusting his wand at Dawlish, and dodged another curse from Malfoy.

Not an Unforgivable, notably, but—should Harry cast any, at the Ministry?

*Ango,* he added mentally, twisting his wand. *Mulco. Kaio*—

As Lucius batted Harry's curse aside, Harry quickly reached out for the door beside him and pushed it open.

They were at a distinct disadvantage here, he and Dumbledore, in this small rounded space between all the doors—they had no cover, and they were easily surrounded—

Where was the Order?

Harry ran into the room before he'd managed to develop that thought, and was beginning to wonder about Dumbledore when the old man appeared next to him in a flash of flames and a trill of phoenix song.

"This will give us but a moment," Dumbledore said, transfiguring the door into a solid block of granite, "but we need that moment dearly."
Harry focused on him without even looking properly around the room. He just noticed that it was spacious and rectangular, with desks standing in rows, various artefacts upon them.

"The Portkey, sir," Harry said urgently. "How do I activate the Portkey that you gave me?"

He tried to concentrate on that matter and ignore the shouts from the other side of the door.

"You do not," Dumbledore said and didn't blink at Harry's incredulous look. "Getting here has taken too long and the Portkey wards have come back into force again, although you may not have felt it."

"Then—" Harry shook his head. "How do I get out?"

"The Atrium," Dumbledore said. "The Portkey will leave from the Atrium. However—Fawkes?" Dumbledore turned his head to look at the gold and crimson bird perched on his shoulder. "Would you escort Harry back into Hogwarts?"

Harry recalled the time back in this second year, when Fawkes had rescued him from the Chamber of Secrets, and felt his spirits rise. Surely, Fawkes will be able to help him.

But the bird gave a trill and did not move.

Dumbledore frowned, looking at it.

"This is very important," he implored, raising his voice over the sound of spells exploding against the door. "Harry Potter requires your help."

Another stubborn trill, and Harry couldn't believe what he was seeing. The bloody bird was refusing!

"Why?" he asked involuntarily.

Dumbledore transferred his cloudy gaze onto him, now.

"You are no longer innocent," the Headmaster said, and every word sounded heavy, as if it came with effort. "You have touched magics that have rendered you unclean. I cannot fault you for your lack of loyalty to me, but Harry—what have you done?"

Harry's mind was blank. What had he done? Nothing that he could think of—he'd dabbled in questionable magic, yes, but so did everyone in Slytherin, and what was he supposed to learn from Montague and Bletchley and Pucey if not that?

Could that really taint him so badly?

No. No, those things didn't matter. And if the bloody phoenix counted that Unforgivable Harry had cast against Voldemort back in the day, fuck that.

"I haven't done anything—" Harry began, but now was never going to be the time, because then the door finally gave under the sheer brute force of the spells levelled at it.

The sounds of violent fight burst into the room, and Harry saw that Death Eaters weren't the only people waiting on the other side of the door. There was Lupin, and Shacklebolt, and Moody—and Black, whose shoulder gave a sickening crack as it collided with the doorframe. He snarled and retaliated with a curse at his opponent, and that opponent gave a loud, deranged laugh, and her hood fell off as she was propelled into the room by the force of Black's spell.

Bellatrix Lestrange. Well, how fucking nice.
"Crucio!" she yelled, wand pointed at Black, and Black grabbed a cloaked Death Eater and swung him into the path of her curse.

He screamed. Bellatrix laughed. Black did too.

This was complete chaos—bodies colliding with each other, curses flashing, and no place to run, with the door thus blocked. Unless there was another exit?

"Potter!" someone screamed, all triumphant recognition, and Harry was already shielding, but then Dumbledore wove his wand in a complicated arc, and the space around them cleared.

Harry eyed the Death Eaters who’d been scattered, as if by a gust of wind, and looked at Dumbledore.

"You must reach the Atrium," Dumbledore said. "Kingsley!"

Shacklebolt was nearby—his opponent had just collapsed, knocked out. Harry glanced from him to Hestia Jones, who was engaged in a fierce battle.

Judging by her pallor, she was losing. Whoever she was fighting clearly knew and enjoyed what they were doing.

"Kingsley, I must go and find Voldemort," Dumbledore said, not to be distracted. "We cannot allow him to disappear in this ruckus. He will be gone as soon as he hears the prophecy."

Harry saw Hestia Jones fall and the Death Eater standing above her raise his wand again.

"Os amove!" Harry fired.

The Death Eater's suddenly boneless arm flopped down and he swore, looking around for the culprit.

"Good one, Tonks," Kingsley said.

The Death Eater's answering curse bounced off Dumbledore's shield and reflected back, and then the other fighters concealed him from view.

"Kingsley, this is Harry, not Nymphadora," Dumbledore said, drawing their attention again.

Kingsley's eyes widened minutely on his usually impassive face.

"Harry must get to the Atrium as soon as possible, for then he can leave by Portkey," Dumbledore continued.

"Understood," Kingsley said.

"Very well," Dumbledore replied, and disappeared in another flash of flames, the phoenix and all.

It was as if a security blanket had been lifted.

Harry dodged as a curse flew right by him.

"Stay close to me," Kingsley ordered, looking uneasy.

"Fine," Harry said and saw another curse impact the shield around him and Kingsley.

Strangely, nothing lethal was aimed at Harry. Why ever not? Saving him up for Voldemort? Harry
didn't like that idea.

"Come on now, quickly," Kingsley said.

He started dragging Harry through the crowd.

A curse flying at them, and Harry was already saying the counter when Kingsley pushed him out of the way.

"What—"

"Not now," Kingsley muttered, and made to drag Harry out of a spell's way again, but Harry swerved out of his grasp, fired a counter—

And found himself face to face with a dark-haired Death Eater blocking their way.

"Dolohov," Kingsley said. "Incarcerous."

Dolohov waved the curse away with a devil-may-care smile.

"Explodere caputem," Harry cast in a whisper and ignored Kingsley's start.

"Harry Potter," Dolohov said. "The rumours weren't exaggerated."

What, about Harry casting head-exploding curses?

Dolohov's Cruciatius collided with an odd boulder Kingsley had summoned to put between the Death Eater and Harry, and the next with a summoned pyramid, and the next with a globe of the sky.

"I can do that myself, could you maybe attack him or something—" Harry said, incensed, but Kingsley only frowned harder.

"My job is to protect you," he bit out.

"I can protect myself!"

Harry fired a nonverbal Choking Curse to prove it, but the curse collided with the model of Stonehenge Kingsley had summoned next—

All three of them put up shields to defend from the flying debris. Harry swore. Dolohov smiled.

"These people don't think very highly of you, Harry Potter," he said, and proved his own appreciation by firing another Cruciatius in Harry's direction.

Kingsley summoned a vase to protect Harry.

Harry thought it would make more sense for him to defend himself, while Kingsley attacked Dolohov, but—fine.

Deripere viscus, Harry cast.

"Crucio!" Dolohov responded, dodging the Entrails-Expelling Curse.

Kingsley defended Harry with a summoned clock.

Lassesca, Harry added quickly.
"Crucio!"

Another pyramid before Harry.

_Commuto in membrana!_

"Crucio!"

A sundial before Harry—but nothing hit it, because the Cruciatus diverted towards Kingsley at the last second.

Kingsley collapsed with a half-scream, half-gurgle. Harry threw the sundial back at Dolohov, forcing him to break concentration and lift the Unforgivable—but then Dolohov cast another quick torture curse at Harry, and, while he was dodging, pointed his wand at Kingsley.

"Chetvertovat tebja kak na berezakh!"

Kingsley's whole body contracted. Suddenly, it was as if invisible force tore at him, pulling him by his legs and his arms in four directions. It stretched impossibly, trying to tear Kingsley's body apart, while his face contorted in horror—

Harry swallowed against bile rising in his throat.

"Stop it," he found himself saying to Dolohov. "Fuck you, just stop this—_Crucio_, you bastard, _Avada Kedavra_—"

The fear of being caught casting Unforgivables at the Ministry faded before the urgent need to make Kingsley's torture stop.

"Don't worry, little Potter." Dolohov laughed, dodging. "It won't be my pleasure to do the same to you."

Harry noticed that it was quieter now, and looked around the room to see that only Moody and Barty Crouch Jr. were still there, locked in a duel. Bloodstains stood out on the wooden floor, and the smell of sweat and fear hung in the air.

Loud explosions and shouts were coming from somewhere outside of the room.

There was no one here to help, and Kingsley needed medical help, very soon.

"_Avada Kedavra!_" Harry cast desperately.

"You could still beg for forgiveness, you know," Dolohov said, dodging again. "He might forgive you, if say how sorry you are and how good you will be—"

Harry felt the next Cruciatus coming intuitively and lurched to the side not a moment too late.

"Oh, this is not fun at all," Dolohov said. "Let us spice things, yes?"

The wand in Dolohov's hand became the handle of a blazing whip. He swung at Harry. Harry dodged, eyes widening.

He tried to counter with water—but that only made the whip flame harder.

He backed away, further from where Kingsley lay, now unmoving. He summoned things to shield himself, and tried a cutting curse on the whip, and a blasting on Dolohov. He really couldn't aim with
that flaming whip flying about before him and protecting Dolohov in a hazy ever-moving wall of flames—and the main thing weighing on his mind wasn't his own duel, but how Kingsley was doing, and he knew he needed to pull himself together and concentrate.

"Avada Kedavra," Harry whispered again, but Dolohov was already twisting, and already turning, and his spell didn't falter even for a second.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw the bright flash of a curse—and Moody, charging at him and Dolohov.

"Go to Kingsley, he's over there," Harry shouted.

"You need help!" Moody panted out.

Harry dodged another blow of the whip, fired a nonverbal Kaio at Dolohov and turned to Moody.

"Have a look at Kingsley first!"

His attention had been diverted for a fraction of a second, but Dolohov was fast—

Pain.

Pain assaulted Harry's left shoulder as the whip hit him, and Harry gritted his teeth against crying out.

"Just a taste, Potter," Dolohov promised. "Alas, that is all I can give you."

"Step aside, Tonks!" Moody ordered.

Harry felt warm blood well up from the wound but didn't look at it, eyes still glued to Dolohov's every move.

"Look at Kingsley." Harry insisted. "He's much worse than me—Crucio," he whispered, once Moody disappeared from his peripheral vision.

"Tonks?" Dolohov repeated. "The old man thinks you are—no matter."

It was a good thing too that Moody thought Harry was Tonks; he'd never have gone and left him, injured, alone with Dolohov otherwise. Harry normally wouldn't have wanted him to, but Kingsley had looked so horrible—

Moody returned only a few dodges and curses later.

"Step aside now!" he barked, looking grim. "Get lost, I'll take it from here!"

Harry didn't argue further.

Moody had a wooden leg, but boy, he was fast—Harry felt he could finally turn his back on Dolohov and run. He wondered briefly what had befallen Barty Crouch, but if Moody was still standing and he was not—

There was a door.

There were, in fact, two doors from this room leading somewhere, but one of them was closer, and that decided Harry's choice.
Running in, Harry saw combatants dispersed all over a round room which looked like a hurricane had raged through it. Tables overturned, cabinets in shambles, potions in puddles on the floor…

Lucius Malfoy was fighting Emmeline Vance, while Lupin was engaged with some Death Eater Harry didn’t recognize, and then Bill Weasley—Dedalus Diggle—

"Potter! There you are!"

Harry ducked instinctively, letting a curse sail over his head, and whirled around to see Dawlish charging at him. So much for the respite he'd been hoping for—the wound in his shoulder sent a jolt of sharp pain down his arm every time he moved, and now he’d get no time to fix it up.

He fired a quick Choking Curse at Dawlish. Dawlish shielded, and Harry was free for a whole second, so tried to disappear into the crowd again—

It was important to remember that he had to get to the Atrium—

But Dawlish's cry had attracted attention.

Another Death Eater appeared in front of Harry, wand pointed.

"Crucio," he said.

Harry ducked and hurled a chair at Dawlish.

"Imperio!" Dawlish shouted, aiming at Harry, and there was only the Killing Curse missing from the Unforgivables flying at him, and Harry was done.

He spun out of the curse's way, shot a nonverbal Reducto at the unknown Death Eater's feet, and jumped behind a huge cabinet that was standing nearby.

From there, he threw a shattering curse at the row of crystal vials next to the Death Eater, to make him dance around like this was some fucked-up ballet, and then took aim at Dawlish.

"Comprimo," Harry whispered, unsure he could use the mind curse nonverbally.

The curse would create intense psychological pressure on Dawlish that would make him completely lose the will to fight, if it worked right—but oddly, Harry encountered an obstacle as his curse assaulted the man. It was as if something wasn't letting his curse through, or something was giving resistance, something—

Harry rolled out of the way as the cabinet exploded under the force of a spell.

"Crucio!" came another cry.

Dawlish was clutching his head and not reacting to anything, so Harry focused on his other opponent.


He allowed one spell to hit his shield, responded with a spell to induce lung failure, then wove a fast counter-curse to a specific hugely unpleasant curse as he dove to the side. There was a choice—to let the Laceration Curse hit him or else jump into the Cruciatus. Laceration Curse it was, and Harry gritted his teeth as his leg tore open with a small fountain of blood.

Harry's shield was held up by a barely noticeable effort of will. All that he needed was—focus, aim, be alert, and he knew how to do this, he'd trained to do this—even if he hadn't trained for the stench of blood, or for moving through the pain, or for the sickening sound of bones breaking under the assault of his spells.

Harry unconsciously registered another presence nearby, and was already whirling to cast in that direction when he saw that it was Lupin.

"Need help?" Lupin asked. He looked battle-worn but his eyes were bright.

It took Harry a moment to process the question, but then he finally hit his opponent with a nonverbal spell to make skin paper-thin.

From then on, it was child's play—one cutting curse, and the man was on the floor.

Lupin looked torn between approval and disgust.

"It's mostly the smell, for me," he said. "I do hate the smell. It reminds me—never mind."

Harry shrugged. He didn't like it much, either. He didn't cast these spells for the fun of it, it was just—if he wasn't fast enough and efficient enough, it would be him on the floor, instead.

"By the way, I'm not—" Tonks, Harry'd been planning to say, but couldn't.

Because then a huge explosion shook the room.

The entire wall opposite Harry caved in, revealing the adjacent chamber—and there, there was Voldemort.

Voldemort in a long black cloak, now speckled with dust all over.

Harry froze in shock at the sight of the crimson eyes and the white face that had haunted his nightmares. He felt Lupin stiffen next to him, and heard the Death Eaters cheer.

Next thing they saw, however, was Dumbledore appearing from the rubble.

Dumbledore flicked his wand. The stone surface of the floor rose up in a smooth wave and darted towards Voldemort, clearly attempting to encircle him.

A fraction of a second later, a wave of Voldemort's wand shattered the stone into tiny pieces with a thunderous noise. He flung them into the air and sent back at Dumbledore. Dumbledore shielded quickly, but that moment gave Voldemort the time to attack.

He fired a Killing Curse. Dumbledore stepped out of its way and shielded himself with a chair against another immediately. A subtle wave of his wand, and chains sprung from the floor around Voldemort.

Voldemort sent another Killing Curse at Dumbledore, then noticed the chains. His spell tore them from the ground at once and transformed them into spears, which he flung at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore transfigured them on the fly into writhing ropes. They flew back at Voldemort, sailing through the air with a whoosh—

Voldemort turned them into snakes and ordered them to attack—or so Harry guessed.

He was glued to his spot, watching the rapid duel unfold. So were the others. Some people still faced
off, but the focus of everyone's attention was on the fight.

*Dumbledore's not trying to kill him,* Harry thought as he watched Dumbldore vanish the snakes and dodge another Killing Curse. *Voldemort is aiming to kill, but Dumbledore's not. Why?*

Harry had no answer. It was only clear to him that Dumbledore wanted to hold Voldemort up, imprison him—bars of a cage were growing around Voldemort now—or tie him down, but he was not trying to kill. Harry hoped to all that was holy that Dumbledore wasn't doing this because of the prophecy that said *he* had to kill Voldemort.

Watching Dumbledore and Voldemort parry each other's blows with seeming effortlessness, Harry wasn't sure he'd ever reach the point when he'd be able to duel like that. He couldn't even take out Dolohov, and it was painfully clear that both Voldemort and Dumbledore would have wiped the floor with Dolohov in a matter of seconds.

Voldemort deflected a net of stones to the side, through the hole to the next room. The resulting explosion deafened Harry for a second and reverberated in his ears, and for a moment dust covered the room and he couldn't see.

The next thing he did see—and he hardly believed his eyes—was Auror Dawlish, sneaking up behind Voldemort, looking every inch the man knowing he was not going to survive his suicidal assault and not caring anyway.

Dawlish cast something. Harry didn't hear what over the murmur of voices all around the room, but he did see very well what happened next.

Voldemort whipped around and gave a condescending sneer.

"What is this insolence?"

Dumbledore made a motion with his arm, as if to swipe Dawlish away, remove him from harm—but Voldemort was faster.

Among Dawlish's screams of injustice, Imperius and revenge, Voldemort twisted his wand just so—and Dawlish's head tore from his body and rolled on the floor, leaving a thick trail of blood.

The body collapsed, silenced. Blood flowed freely from the neck, and people scattered out of the rolling head's way, and Harry, hardly able to tear his eyes away, suddenly knew with horrifying clarity that he was going to throw up.

He'd tried casting all manner of horrible hexes tonight, many times. He'd cast a head-exploding curse at Dolohov, for fuck's sake. He hadn't expected this, though. He hadn't been prepared for the effect if he'd succeeded.

Fuck.

He stumbled away, backwards, not caring whom he pushed out of his path.

Hands tried to stop him—the call of *Potter, Potter is here* rang through the air—but Harry cast a string of curses and ran.

The Atrium. He needed to get to the Atrium.

He dashed out of the room and found himself in a small alcove, instead. From there led two doors, and Harry tugged on the curtain of one only to discover that it wasn't a door at all, but rather a mirror.
A mirror that he knew and had seen before. The one that showed not his face, but his heart's desire.

Harry ignored it and rushed to tug on the second door, already hearing the heavy footfalls of someone chasing after him.

On the other side, there was silence.

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Harry shut and warded the door on complete autopilot.

The room first seemed brightly lit to him, but then he realized it was actually half-dark, and then he figured the lighting was ambient, and then something changed again and Harry understood the room was just messing with his head.

It seemed both a storage and a research room, upon a second glance. There were shelves lining the entire place, with artefacts on them under protective glass and plaques explaining what they were—

*Mongolian amulet of power, Deathstick prototype 3, Staff of Merlin model 14—

What?

Moving further in, Harry saw charts spread over tables, and books lying open—something in runic script, and *Squibs and Muggleborns: A Comprehensive Analysis*, and who knew what else.

The pounding on the door commenced about when Harry noticed a whole stack of what seemed to be altars with runes and skulls on them.

He stumbled to another door, which opened into a narrow and dark little corridor—another extension of that storage space, except that things on the shelves here seemed broken.

A door loomed at the end of the corridor. Harry attempted to run towards it, but his injuries refused to go ignored any longer. His recently wounded leg gave out under him, and the shoulder sent a spike of pain down his left arm.

His world suddenly constricted to a series of bright flashes of pain, Harry didn't realize that his pursuer had already caught up with him until he felt the *Expelliarmus* hit him.

Then, it was already too late by half.

Harry shook his head to clear it and saw a huge hulking Death Eater standing in his way and smiling in a way that was both menacing and unfathomably idiotic at once.

Crabbe Sr., Harry identified. Or Goyle. It didn't matter, really.

What mattered was that Crabbe, or Goyle, was lumbering towards Harry, having pocketed both wands and clearly planning to take Harry out with bare hands.

Harry lunged aside.

He crashed into the shelves with his right, thankfully uninjured, shoulder, but then Goyle—or Crabbe—was already aiming with his fist again.

"Don't move," he warned. "I'm not here to kill you. Just sit still."

Harry ducked when he saw the huge fist coming at him, and the man hit the glass panel on one of the
shelves. Shards and wooden planks rained on Harry, and he shielded his head with his arms, but it was all worth it as Crabbe-or-Goyle gave a roar of pain.

"You little bastard," he growled, and swung again.

This was not going well—wandless, Harry couldn't pretend to do much—but then he saw what was lying on the floor next to him.

Wands. Several wands lay there. They must have fallen from the shelves—some were broken, but some looked all right. Harry wasn't going to be picky.

"Segrego!" he cast rapidly, aiming with the first wand he'd grabbed.

The effect he couldn't have predicted. Instead of the man's arm coming dislocated, huge gashes exploded over the front of his robes. The man gave a terrified scream and wobbled on his feet—

For a moment, his wide eyes locked with Harry's. Then, he slowly fell forward, toppling right over Harry and the shelf.

Harry slid completely to the floor under the weight of his assailant, feeling the man's warm blood seep through his robes. Nauseated and slightly panicked at the idea of staying pinned by that weight forever, Harry squirmed frantically away. Thankfully, the man seemed to have passed out from the pain, so at least he wasn't groaning anymore.

It took Harry a while to free himself, and it had torn at his wounds and left him breathless—but at least he was reasonably safe now, and again in the possession of his wand, which he'd fished out of Crabbe's—or Goyle's—pocket.

The gash in his leg was bleeding profusely, and the arm was actually starting to go a little numb. In addition to that, Harry was feeling distinctly dizzy and just—

Just not okay.

He tried to calm down and tell himself that it was okay to not feel okay, considering.

It wasn't working.

He looked at Goyle. Or Crabbe. Or whoever the fuck it was lying a hand's reach away, looking—dead.

Harry looked around, hoping to somehow find out what to do. Did he want this Crabbe or Goyle to be dead? He didn't know. He hadn't set out to kill anyone, he—

He was beginning to feel claustrophobic, alone with a body in this narrow little corridor. No sounds infiltrated it, so he felt completely cut off from the world.

Wincing, Harry got up and limped, as fast as he could, towards the door at the end of the corridor, trying not to think so much of Crabbe-or-Goyle and the blood still wet on his robes.

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Opening the door, he found that he was in luck for once.

Black floor, black ceiling, blue torches. Doors everywhere. The circular room, again—and a Death Eater standing guard.
Harry's wand was aimed at that person's back and firing a quiet Stunner before they had even had the
time to react.

Harry stood on the threshold, looking over his options. Kingsley lay injured—hopefully injured, not
defad—in the room with the missing door. One of the other doors led to the room where the duel
between Voldemort and Dumbledore was happening. A third one led to the elevators. The other
eight led god only knew where.

The first door Harry tried didn't even open. The second connected to an odd amphitheatre-like
chamber with an archway at the bottom. The third revealed another place with rows of shelves—
although this one looked like significant fighting had happened here.

Harry could hardly believe it when he finally saw the black floors and black ceiling of the corridor
leading out of the Department of Mysteries.

Finally.

The Atrium had never been nearer, or hope sweeter.

Harry stumbled through the corridor. Soon, he'd get to the hall where the elevator was. Just a few
steps more—

Which was when Harry saw Lucius Malfoy stationed by the elevator.

"Going somewhere, Potter?" Malfoy asked, wand held with deceptive carelessness in his fingers.

He surveyed Harry's appearance haughtily—and Harry could only imagine what he looked like,
covered in blood and dust and looking like he'd been through a grinder.

"I was, but then you're in my way," Harry said, desperation mounting.

He was in no state to fight Lucius Malfoy right now. He really, really wasn't.

"If only the world were to see the Boy-Who-Lived now," Malfoy said. "You don't cut much of a
figure, Potter, if you don't mind me saying."

"Now, Lucius, this is quite enough," a very familiar voice said from behind Harry, and Harry froze
in horror.

It just couldn't be true. It couldn't.

Harry turned around, wand raised, already knowing that it could.

And it was.

Voldemort was standing just a few feet away, between Harry and the door back to the Department of
Mysteries. A mocking smile played on his lips as he observed Harry.

"If you go on, Lucius, you will completely crush his fragile teenage ego," Voldemort continued—but
his eyes were for Harry alone. "We'd want our opponent to have at least a little fighting spirit when
we start on him, would we not?"

Lucius had some way of alerting Voldemort, Harry recalled dully. That had been the whole point of
his visit to Hogwarts.

Funny how such details tended to fall by the wayside when one saw heads being ripped off people
and blood gushing in streams and death and—

Harry wondered whether the same end awaited him.

"Hard to believe, is it not, that this pathetic boy is destined to be my deathly foe," Voldemort said. "I am almost insulted."

Why almost, Harry wondered, and realized that he'd spoken aloud when Voldemort replied:

"Ah, because you do hold a small measure of interest, Harry Potter." His crimson eyes flashed. "All these coincidences, your curious survival—twice already… No matter, no matter. It all ends tonight."

"Are you sure you even dare try another Killing Curse on me?" Harry's mouth said, quite independently of him. "Didn't work for you the first two times. Seeing as I'm still alive, anyway."

"Not for much longer," Voldemort announced menacingly, taking a step forward. "Avada Kedavra!"

Harry stumbled to the side.

There was absolutely no cover—and nowhere to run, either. With nothing to lose, Harry cast a Killing Curse in return.

Voldemort stepped out of its way and sent another Killing Curse at Harry.

Harry ducked, so the curse ricocheted off the gleaming black wall and reflected towards the elevator where Lucius Malfoy was standing.

Malfoy quickly dodged it.

Harry could hardly hear anything over the pounding of blood in his ears, but he saw people emerging from the staircase near the elevator.

He thought he recognized the man leading the crowd, but then that man stepped right into the way of the stray Killing Curse.

He was gaping and wide-eyed as he collapsed, motionless, onto the floor.

Voldemort was already casting another Killing Curse, and so was Harry—

Harry supposed there might have been screams, but he didn't notice, because the two Killing Curses collided in mid-air right then.

They latched onto each other, connecting Harry and Voldemort's wands in a stream of deep gold colour instead of Killing Curse-green. Harry found he couldn't let go of the wand; it was shaking horribly, so he gripped it with both hands, eyes wide, unsure what to do.

Beams of light splintered off the golden connection, forming a golden dome over Harry and Voldemort.

What on earth—

Voldemort, to Harry's relief, didn't look like he knew what was happening either. In fact, he looked—unsettled? Scared, even?

This steadied Harry's resolve; he focused on the golden stream. All had seemed lost just a few moments ago, but now—what did he have to do, how could he use this, what was this?
Harry felt Voldemort trying to break the connection, and concentrated on *not letting* him, because what Voldemort wanted was surely bad for Harry, and if Voldemort was suffering, so much the better.

Harry's breath came in short gasps. Sweat drops ran down his neck and into his robes. He closed his eyes momentarily.

He couldn't keep holding this forever, either. There had to be something—

He had to get control of Voldemort's wand—

Voldemort's wand.

An idea, ever so clear, entered Harry's head, and it seemed so simple and logical that he didn't know what he'd been confused about.

*Expelliarmus,* he whispered, gazing intently into the connection.

His wand gave a huge *lurch* in his hands, and a shock went through it, and then through Harry, and then the connection *hummed* and shivered and grew an angry red and Harry's vision was suddenly going red too and he was no longer sure it had been such a clever idea—

Suddenly, he wasn't standing in his place anymore. Instead, he saw an ashen-faced Harry Potter opposite him, holding a wildly shaking wand with both hands, and he was angry, he was the greatest wizard of his time, he had immense power at his command, and yet this *brat* was creating this somehow, attacking him, *inside his mind*—

Harry slammed into himself. His eyes were watering, and he could hardly think or stand or be anymore.

There was a flash of white-hot pain, a deluge of scalding fire, and then a force knocked into Harry, sending him away, flying—flying—

Flying—

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Harry saw Dumbledore's beard hanging over him at an odd angle, and then there was pain assaulting every inch of his body before he knew why. And then there was the Order and Ministry workers and mediwizards.

And noise. Lots of noise, and cameras flashing, and why couldn't they all just shut up?

"You mean to say—this was *Harry?*" someone was asking from beyond the mediwizards. "The entire night?"

"Who else but Harry Potter could have repelled You-Know-Who?"

"Yes, but—the duels and the spells and the—"

"It was supposed to be Tonks!"

"With all respect to her, that bit at the end, as Dedalus says—"

"But how did he survive, he's a fifteen-year-old kid for Merlin's sake—"
"But I saw him cast—"

"How did he—"

"Nonverbal spells, how does he—"

Harry winced as the bones in his leg moved, directed by a mediwizard's wand, and then connected together with *crack*. His head throbbed something awful, and his entire left arm felt like it would fall off and he wouldn't miss it for all the pain it was causing, and his *leg*, shit—

Images of tonight's fight flashed before his mind's eye, replacing each other with nauseating speed, almost supplanting reality.


A fire?

He was so tired.

"I want to see my godson!" a voice shouted suddenly over the ruckus. "Take me where you like, but I want to see my godson first!"

Squinting through the haze that surrounded him, Harry focused on the source of the noise—and, sure enough, Sirius Black's ragged and bloodied face emerged from the crowd. The man was held at the arms by some Ministry personnel, who looked no less wild than he did.

"Harry!" Black exclaimed, barging through and dragging the officials with him. "You're fine, thank everything—"

"Mr. Black, you are being held on the charges of—"

"I don't care, let me—"

"I'm fine, Sirius," Harry said, his voice emerging as a pitiful rasp. "Really. Are you—what is—"

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Dumbledore said, appearing somehow right between Harry and Black. "I believe we must resolve this misunderstanding."

Harry closed his eyes; his eyelids were getting much too heavy. He wondered dimly whether Black was going straight back to Azkaban. He found himself hoping it wasn't the case.

"Drink this, Mr. Potter," a mediwizard told Harry, pressing a glass vial to his lips.

It felt like only a wink had passed between the horrid taste of the potion hitting Harry's senses and Harry waking up in a hospital bed at the Hogwarts infirmary. However, Madam Pomfrey was already running her scans on him and saying that he'd slept for over 48 hours.

Harry blinked, disoriented.

Last he'd seen and heard and felt was—pain, noise, blood. Now, still and sterile surroundings.

"Your nervous system dearly needed the rest," Madam Pomfrey told him. "The damage you sustained is impossible to describe, for it is beyond the scope of current medical research."

"I'm fine now, though, aren't I?" Harry asked, turning his head this way and that and rolling his
shoulder.

No trace of the remembered pain, but he did still feel sluggish and tired.

"You are healed for the moment, Mr. Potter, but there's no saying what long-term consequences might come of this. Do abstain from doing anything dangerous in the upcoming weeks," Madam Pomfrey ordered.

"I understand," Harry said.

"I hope so," Madam Pomfrey said severely. "Because you have already survived the impact of the Killing Curse twice, and whatever happened at the Ministry put your nervous system through further strain still. We cannot know how much more you can take, because by all rights, you should already be—"

Dead, Harry finished inwardly and looked away from Madam Pomfrey's guilty face. She clearly hadn't intended to put it like that, but it was the truth, and that was fine.

"Your friends came to see you," the matron said after a pause. "And the Headmaster requested to talk to you once you are awake. While I would not yet advise you to leave the hospital wing, I can alert him if you wish."

"Thank you," Harry said. "That would be nice."

Nice wasn't the word for it, exactly, but Dumbledore could potentially shed light on what had happened at the Ministry and thereafter.

Harry had questions. Many of them.

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"Harry," Dumbledore began cheerfully, once Madam Pomfrey left them alone. Then his face fell. "Harry. I'm glad to see you so well recovered, but I also know that I have failed you, and I only hope that you will find it in your heart to forgive me."

Harry looked away from Dumbledore and out the window at the sunny afternoon.

It had not yet occurred to him, in the rush of events, to be angry at Dumbledore for anything, but now he realized that he might perhaps have cause to. Dumbledore had promised to protect him at the Ministry, but the night had ended with Harry standing alone against Voldemort. However, Harry was feeling more resigned than angry about that, besides which—

"Voldemort was exposed, wasn't he," Harry said and was surprised by how detached he sounded. "I remember there were Ministry people there. The mission was successful."

"Yes," Dumbledore answered carefully. "The Ministry has now acknowledged Voldemort's return."

"And this success wouldn't have been possible without my participation," Harry continued. "Because if I had not come along, the mission would not have gone ahead."

"Yes, your participation was invaluable," Dumbledore agreed.

"And if I had left earlier in the evening by Portkey, I would not have delayed Voldemort, and no connection would have trapped him at the Ministry to be seen by people," Harry said.

"Yes, indeed," Dumbledore replied, and he was frowning now.
Harry could then ask the final question that would reveal what he'd been driving at. He could ask, childishly, what Dumbledore's apology meant in that case—knowing the result, did Dumbledore truly regret the way it had come about?

However, Harry already knew the answer.

They'd had this conversation before.

("I regret asking so much from you."

"But you ask anyway.")

This apology wasn't about Dumbledore's failure to protect him, Harry was sure. It was about not regretting the turn of events, whatever they had cost Harry, because they'd been beneficial for the cause in the end.

It was perhaps a mark of the tiredness that Harry still felt—not just physical, but some exhaustion that seemed soul-deep—that he could not summon up any indignation.

"What happened at the Ministry?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject. "And what has been happening since then?"

Dumbledore observed Harry in silence a little before answering, as if he was contemplating a return to the previous topic. In the end, he wisely decided to let the sleeping dogs lie.

"I believe you will find wizarding Britain a much changed place upon your awakening," he said. "The political changes that have occurred are significant. You might remember, of course, that Cornelius Fudge fell victim to one of the stray curses that night."

Harry started. He hadn't remembered, but now he could see it clearly in his mind's eye—the official that had walked into the path of Voldemort's Killing Curse, his panicked face, his wide-open eyes. Harry had been in shock and hadn't recognized him then, but it was obvious in retrospect.

"So he's dead," Harry said.

"Yes," Dumbledore confirmed, looking at Harry closely again. Perhaps discomfited by the lack of emotion in Harry's voice. "As such, he is quite naturally no longer Minister. An emergency election is being held next week."

"What's the Ministry been doing?"

"They have been alerting the world to Voldemort's return," Dumbledore said. "And arranging for national security, as well as reshuffling the ranks along with their ideas."

Harry was about to ask what that meant, exactly, but then figured he'd be better off finding out from his friends. They'd tell him all kinds of colourful Ministry gossip, he was sure.

"What's Voldemort been doing?" he asked. "Or, actually, what happened at the Ministry—did they arrest any Death Eaters, did the Order get into trouble, or Sirius Black, are—how about Kingsley?"

"Kingsley did not survive his first night at the hospital," Dumbledore pronounced solemnly. "His wounds were far too grave. His loss is a blow to us all."

Harry thought back to the fight with Dolohov. He remembered Dolohov's smug smile and wanted to wipe it off his face. He recalled Kingsley's worried air and wondered whether there was anything he
could have done better. Whether he should have just shut up and followed Kingsley's instruction from the start; whether he could have protected Kingsley somehow, even though the very thought was ridiculous. Dolohov was much too strong for Harry to deal with, that had been abundantly clear.

He wished he hadn't been Kingsley's last assignment.

"Hestia Jones is at St. Mungo's," Dumbledore continued. "She's getting expert help, although she will suffer some effects for the rest of her life. Sirius is still in Ministry custody in a holding cell, but I have managed to convince them not to send him to Azkaban. Many others have sustained wounds, but thankfully they did not all need hospitalization."

"What about that Unspeakable, Croaker?" Harry asked.

He was unable to recall what had happened to the man.

Dumbledore smiled.

"Mr. Croaker secluded himself away from the fight very early on and activated the available alarms," he said. "A very rational man, Mr. Croaker."

Harry could just imagine.

"Auror Dawlish, on the other hand, has suffered a gruesome fate," Dumbledore said, and Harry couldn't help his grimace at the memory. "The poor man was placed under Imperius and made a puppet in the Death Eaters' hands, but his last stand was admirable. Alas…" Dumbledore signed.

"Azkaban, meanwhile, has acquired new additions—several Death Eaters were arrested, among them one Lucius Malfoy."

Harry nodded.

"Who else?"

"Jugson, and McNair, and several others. Unfortunately, some rather prominent Death Eaters slipped through—Bellatrix Lestrange and Antonin Dolohov among them. Alastor Moody claims that the young Barty Crouch was quite permanently indisposed by the end of their duel, but his body was not found."

"How about—Crabbe, or Goyle?"

"Of Mr. Crabbe I know nothing, but I believe that Donatus Goyle was found dead in a small corridor close to one of the big rooms," Dumbledore said and gave Harry a piercing look.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling cold.

Donatus. He hadn't known the man's name was Donatus. He hadn't been entirely sure he'd killed the man, either.

This was war. Of course he'd have to kill someone. Eventually.

The exhaustion he felt only intensified with that thought.

Did it maybe get easier?

He wasn't sure he wanted it to get easier. It was already so easy—to kill someone. You might not even know you'd done it, and there it was.
Like magic.

And Voldemort would kill Harry, if Harry didn’t kill him.

"What was it, when our wands connected?” Harry asked, shaking his head to dispel the images. "Mine and Voldemort's, I mean, at the Ministry. There was this golden beam—"

"Ah yes,” Dumbledore said. "A most curious occurrence."

Harry waited.

"You see, Harry, I am not sure that you are aware of this, but your wand and Voldemort's are brothers,” Dumbledore said. "The cores of both your wands are phoenix feathers from the same phoenix. Fawkes, as it happens."

"And this sort of thing happens every time brother wands try to fight each other?"

Dumbledore sighed.

"What you must take into account, Harry, is that your situation is completely unique. Yes, brother wands generally produce unexpected effects when fighting each other. However, the wand also chooses its master, and the masters of these brother wands happen to be so intricately linked…"

Harry reflected that he was getting kind of sick of every strange occurrence around him—of which there were many—being explained away as a side-effect of his and Voldemort's connection. It was as if everything about him was defined by their link.

"I understand,” Harry said. "But what was it? There was this moment when I—I was like in his head, or something, and then there was this explosion, and I just don't understand that."

Dumbledore glanced slowly around the empty ward, then back at Harry.

"I believe that you may have somehow been a catalyst for that,” he said. "I am not entirely certain how, but you seemed to have sent an unexpected burst of power in Voldemort's direction, which took him by surprise and shattered his defences for a few moments—an unprecedented feat, I assure you. Due to the highly charged magics coursing through and around you, you somehow managed to perform unintended Legilimency on Voldemort, which he quickly recognized and purged you from his mind. The explosion—I suppose—was the result of these bursts of power in an already extremely charged environment."

Harry thought on this. It all made sense, except for one thing.

"I performed unintended—what?"

Dumbledore sighed.

"Legilimency,” he said. "Which is a much longer conversation, and I am not sure we should have it at this stage in the proceedings."

"I would really rather know,” Harry insisted. "It was as if I ended up inside his head."

"You did,” Dumbledore allowed. "Unintentionally, of course. Intentionally, it takes great skill and practice, especially since Voldemort himself is a great Legilimens."

"A person who can look into people's minds?” Harry asked, with stirrings of horror.
"Yes," Dumbledore said.

He still looked uncertain that they should be discussing this. Harry was growing more certain by the second.

"There are people who can read minds in the wizarding world?"

"Not read, per se," Dumbledore corrected. "Your initial assessment was correct. Look into people's minds, to see their memories and sense their feelings."

"And Voldemort is one of those people," Harry said.

"Indeed."

"With all due respect, Headmaster, you are only telling me this now?"

Harry abruptly felt like leaving the wizarding world, or drowning himself in the lake. He'd lived here for so long, and he hadn't known… What else didn't he know? Who of his classmates could read minds also, who of people around him, what other fundamentally life-changing magics was he not aware of?

"While a highly skilled Legilimens, Voldemort has not yet acquired the ability to penetrate minds over distance," Dumbledore said calmly. "Since you do not spend extended periods of time in his presence, I felt that this ability posed no particular danger to you."

"And when I do meet him, I can just assume that he can read my every thought!" Harry said, thinking back to the things he had thought in Voldemort's presence before.

It was intensely humiliating, because most those times he'd been scared shitless.

"Is there a way to defend against this?" Harry demanded. "There must be, you said he threw me out of his mind—how?"

"There is a technique known as Occlumency," Dumbledore said. "Using it, you can shield your mind against intrusion. However, it is extremely difficult, and not widely known. Also, hardly any people find it worthwhile, considering how few Legilimency practitioners there are."

"Who can do it of people that I know?" Harry asked, and then felt like hitting himself. "Of course. You can, Headmaster, can't you?"

Which ranked right second after Voldemort being a mind-reader, because, while not his sworn enemy, Dumbledore was still not a person Harry wanted to share his every thought with. To think that Dumbledore might have been reading his mind all this time—

"Indeed I can, but I assure you that I never abuse this skill," Dumbledore said.

"Who else can do this—Legilimacy thing?"

"Legilimency," Dumbledore corrected. "Not many Order members at all. Alastor knows the basics, but he is much better at Occlumency," Dumbledore added. "The younger Barty Crouch is, or was, evidently a practitioner as well, which is why I did not see through his disguise in your fourth year, as I am sure you understand. Although I would not be surprised if he were capable of Legilimency also."

"Who else?" Harry insisted, frowning.
"Remus possesses some natural Occlumency skills that come from his lycanthropic affliction, but he is no Legilimens. Sirius had been exposed to both arts in his childhood, I believe—they are obscure and today practiced, for the most part, in very old Pureblood families, such as the Blacks. Sirius does not have the personality for mastering Occlumency or Legilimency, however."

While Dumbledore talked, Harry had been thinking. It soon dawned on him what he should have seen at once.

"Professor Snape," he said, with a growing feeling of doom. "He must know this, mustn't he, if he's a spy?"

The world was officially ending: Harry's horrible Head of House had been reading his mind since first year.

"Professor Snape does indeed practise both of these arts, as they are essential in his line of work," Dumbledore confirmed. "Like me, however, he exercises utmost discretion when it comes to students, or indeed any social interactions."

"Right," Harry said. "Headmaster, I'm quite sure that I need to learn this Occlumency."

"—that, as soon as possible."

"Please believe me when I say that neither myself nor Professor Snape are in the habit of infringing upon your privacy, Harry," Dumbledore said.

He looked upset by this idea, but surely he couldn't expect Harry to live in a world where people could read minds without having defended his own?

"It's not that," Harry said. Or not entirely that. "It's just that—if I know that some enemy might read my mind, then I'd want to prevent that from happening. What if Voldemort finds out something from me, or—you said that Barty Crouch could do this too—it doesn't matter how rare mind-reading is, it's still dangerous."

"In the Order, there are only two people who could teach you, Harry—Professor Snape and myself," Dumbledore said. "If you do seriously wish to learn, I can try to arrange some tutoring for next year. Right now, it is not entirely possible, what with the Ministry upheaval and the Defence position being open again."

"The Defence position?" Harry repeated, deciding not to focus for now on the nightmare that would be opening his mind up to Snape or Dumbledore voluntarily. "Isn't Professor Umbridge—"

Dumbledore looked suddenly grim.

"Professor Umbridge has not yet recovered from the intense psychological ordeal she'd undergone on the day of our Ministry visit. While she has ostensibly suffered a nervous breakdown, there are witnesses who claim they saw the Weasley twins manhandling her in the corridors that same day."

"That's not possible," Harry said.

It wasn't. He'd specifically agreed with the Weasley twins that they'd stay the fuck away from Umbridge that entire day. They were certainly not to manhandle her anywhere.

"And yet the witnesses claim it is true," Dumbledore said. "An official investigation into this matter
might be launched any day now, depending on the Ministry situation. It is extremely unstable at the moment."

Harry needed to talk to the twins as soon as possible, then.

"So what is happening to the Defence position?" he asked, just to fill the silence.

"I plan to invite Emmeline Vance to serve as your Defence instructor for the remainder of the year," Dumbledore said. "She has not yet agreed—and she has declined on a previous occasion when I suggested it, for she did not want to be seen openly associating with me. In those troubled times, it was important for her role in the Order to maintain a seemingly aloof stand and remain in good graces of the Pureblood faction. Now, however, our fortunes are changing, and I am persona non grata in the Ministry no more. I believe she might agree."

This was all too much information for Harry's already overloaded brain. However, he wasn't calling an end to this conference without asking a final desperate question. He wasn't even sure he expected an honest answer, but he had to try.

"Headmaster," Harry said. "Today, I've found out about people in the wizarding world who can read minds. I would have really appreciated knowing about this before. Is there anything—anything else, anything relevant to the war, to my position in it, to me potentially fighting Voldemort—that I still need to, or might need to, know?"

A rather lengthy silence followed this question, but Harry was determined to wait it out. Then, Dumbledore gave a sigh.

"Yes, Harry," he said. "Yes, in all truth, there is still something very important that you should be made aware of. I did not confide in you before, mainly because I was not sure how you would handle this knowledge and the task ahead. However, in the light of your recent adventure at the Ministry, it would be most unseemly of me to deny you this information, for you have proven yourself again and again."

Harry's heart sank. Dumbledore sounded really, really serious, and whatever this unknown thing was, it wasn't going to be good news.

"However," Dumbledore continued emphatically, "it would be equally selfish of me to impart this knowledge when you have just woken up from a traumatic experience and have had to face a lot of other information besides. I will let you rest for now. I swear to you that I will tell you everything when you feel that you are ready. You may come to my office at any later point you wish, and I will either tell you then if I'm not otherwise engaged, or arrange a suitable time with you."

Harry's initial desire was to protest—if there was important stuff to be known, he wanted to hear it now. On the other hand, it was true that his head was already hurting from all the talking and thinking, and he was growing exponentially more tired.

So many things to process. Perhaps he'd leave any remaining apocalyptic revelations till later.

"Thank you for telling me all this," he said.

Dumbledore gave another sigh.

"I fear that you are right, Harry, in that you really do need to know. You are, of course, much too young, but I cannot be pushing you towards battle with one hand and concealing knowledge in the other behind my back. The night at the Ministry showed to me with great clarity that we, the adults, have failed you."
Harry frowned uncomprehendingly. Dumbledore gave him a sad smile.

"Do not mistake me, Harry. I am proud of our achievements. I was very impressed that you could defend yourself so well, and your duelling skills are beyond what we, in the Order—or even as your teachers—could have imagined."

Despite feeling that Dumbledore was not going to continue in this congratulatory manner, Harry allowed himself a moment of satisfaction.

"However, I wish that you had not needed to go to these lengths," Dumbledore said, his voice solemn. "I wish, although it is too late, that you had not known half those spells, and not seen half of what you'd seen. I wish that your soul had remained as bright and pure as it had been when you'd defeated an ancient Basilisk with a sword and a phoenix song—but I cannot fault you for straying from the clear path, because we did not see it happen, and we should have. By Merlin, we should have . . ."

Harry wasn't sure he liked that view of him—that he was some lost soul in need of salvation. He knew this related to the same feeling that Dumbledore had expressed when Fawkes had refused to carry Harry out of the Ministry, and he'd much rather be asked what have you done than what has been done to you.

"Headmaster, I'm not—"

"Please, Harry," Dumbledore said, holding up a hand. "I am afraid that I will call in a privilege of old age and say that you must live to my years to understand fully what I say, even though I know it is annoying for you to hear. Let me just say that I have seen, heard, or could guess at some of the things that you have done at the Ministry." Dumbledore made a meaningful pause. "And I am glad to have seen in you today that, whatever you've had to do, it has not come to you easily. I rejoice in the thought that you might perhaps draw some valuable lessons from this and grow into the person that I know you are meant to be."

Harry didn't know what kind of person he was meant to be. He just wanted to go to sleep and forget that he was the kind of person who was meant to defeat Voldemort.

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Harry gazed at the ripples on the lake as he walked along the shore. The day was chilly and windy, so Hogwarts grounds were mostly free of roaming students, which was good; Harry didn't want to see people. He wanted to think.

It had only been three days since the battle at the Ministry, two of which Harry had spent unconscious. To him, it felt that these three days had lasted a whole lifetime, during which he'd fought in a long and difficult war, the outcome of which was unclear because the losses were still being counted.

The wizarding press trumpeted Harry as the victor in the most significant duel of the decade.

The Boy-Who-Lived saves us all—again! The headlines proclaimed. Or: Boy-Who-Lived not at St. Mungo's, sources say. Or then, Witness accounts of the Ministry duel: "Magic the likes of which I've never seen".

The word of Harry's duel with Voldemort had spread, as had the wild rumours of its outcome. By all reports, Harry had performed some hereto unseen, incredible magic, and the last feat of this magnitude had been achieved by Harry himself, when he'd thwarted Voldemort as a baby. This
combination of facts somehow inevitably led people to believe that Harry was the answer to all questions being asked now that the Ministry had openly acknowledged Voldemort's return.

There would be a war, no doubt about that. Open hostilities hadn't yet begun, but people were already terrified. Already looking for a saviour.

Harry recognized that his fortunes had changed drastically for the better. He knew that he could use the public's desire to see him as their hero, and planned to milk the adoration for all it was worth—especially since it was most likely temporary. In a coldly logical, calculating manner, he was pleased at the turn of events.

Jubilant he was not, and it had not occurred to him that he could be, about any of this, until he'd met with his friends on the day of his release from the hospital.

They seemed excited.

("Don't do things by half-measures, do you? It was only the greatest battle of the last decade that you got involved in.")

They'd been relieved.

("I ask you to be careful, and you go fight You-Know-Who? Don't you ever again— we didn't know how you were for days!")

They approved.

("Good job, Harry, we knew you had it in you.")

Neville had beamed at Harry, Cedric had ruffled his hair, Anthony had shaken his hand, and Millie had punched his arm. They had all seemed inordinately pleased to see him and cheerful about life.

This had thrown Harry for a loop, because it hadn't occurred to him to be happy about the battle.

He'd thought about it, during the long night he'd been forced to spend in the hospital wing. He'd thought about his reasons for going and about the results achieved. He'd wondered whether his reasons would have still stood, even if he'd known what the battle would be like. He'd compared what he'd expected from the battle to the reality of it.

He hadn't known what he'd be facing, despite the duels he'd participated in before.

He'd never before truly seen the curses he'd casually studied put to proper use. It was one thing to read and memorize the wand movements and the incantation for the Entrails-Expelling Curse. It was another thing entirely to see it done, and understand the kind of magic you had been casting.

He'd never before seen Aurors and Death Eaters or Voldemort and Dumbledore engaged in a serious fight. It gave Harry a measure of his own powers, as well as put them into perspective. He could hold his own in a fight with adults, but knowing that he had to defeat Voldemort—he wasn't sure he'd ever measure up.

He'd also never killed anyone before.

Looking at the happy and smiling faces of his friends, Harry had realized with a jolt of something that was a little like wistfulness and a lot like despair that none of them still ever had done any of that, and that Harry hadn't felt like explaining any of it.
He'd have to, though, Harry acknowledged as he looked at the lake. There were only that many things he could withhold from his friends before he became disconnected from them completely. They might not be able to understand everything—and, Harry thought ruefully, he wasn't going to tell them everything—but they had to be told some things.

The prophecy, for instance.

Harry closed his eyes against the sun, motionless for the moment.

It was safe to tell them the prophecy now that Voldemort knew its contents, and they did need to know. Neville knew already, of course, but Neville was different. Neville could have been in Harry's shoes now and Harry in Neville's, if fate—or chance—had not willed otherwise.

Fate…

Harry shivered as a gust of wind blew over him.

He wondered what Voldemort was doing.
In addition to my everlasting gratitude to agedsolarwhisk, I'd also like to thank Voice of the Nephilim for his constructive comments.

"Well, guys," Harry said, voice amplified by Sonorus, "this has been a very eventful week."

He estimated there to be about a hundred people in the Hidden Room, give or take a few. Of course, not everyone in the duelling club was equally loyal to him and not all were particularly skilled, but they were here—and some of them had been here since the very beginning. These people had been willing to believe him about Voldemort's return prior to the official confirmation thereof. Granted, they had also joined out of hatred for Umbridge and desire to learn Defence, but they had still supported Harry over the Ministry. That had to count for something.

"Whatever happens next, I believe that we have a reason to celebrate—as I'm sure all of you have noticed, today's Prophet reported the complete and final revocation of Umbridge's Educational Decrees. Considering where our dear former professor is residing now, we can cheerfully proclaim ourselves free of her dictatorial rule. I think I speak for us all when I say: good riddance!"

A wave of applause swelled in the audience. Quite a few looks were thrown at the Weasley twins; the rumours of their involvement in Umbridge's breakdown and subsequent hospitalization must have spread already, although there had been no formal announcement.

Harry sighed inwardly and addressed the audience again.

"While it is undoubtedly a good thing, the reason for the Ministry's change of heart is much more serious."

He paused amid sudden silence.

"We have known of Voldemort's return for a long time. As of a few days ago, the Ministry has finally acknowledged it as well. They are no longer denying the truth, which is a great improvement on what they were doing before." Despite the optimistic content of Harry's words, the listeners must have caught an underlying but to the whole message; nobody was clapping now. "At the same time, Voldemort has no reason to hide any longer. In a sense, the Ministry's acknowledgement is a declaration of war. We can expect the war to be out in the open from now on—and it's not going to be pleasant."

Cedric and other older students nodded grimly. Some of the younger kids, conversely, seemed almost excited.

"Now, more than ever, we must remain united," Harry pronounced with conviction. "The duelling club has done really well this year. We stood strong against Umbridge, and I'm personally grateful to all of you for the support you gave me when I had to face certain... unpleasantness from a segment of the school. We've all learnt a lot—the older ones of us will be able to pass our exams with good marks and the younger ones are now capable of basic self-defence. Perhaps most importantly," and Harry's voice rang out clearly and firmly as he said these words, "we have forged great bonds of
friendship. Whatever circumstances led to us creating this club, I know that I'm thankful for the opportunity to have got to know you all. I dearly hope that the duelling club will not fade out of existence simply because Umbridge is no longer among us to fight against. I am convinced that, together, we can achieve great things.”

Once again, Harry was subjected to a thunderous ovation. The overwhelming consensus was that obviously the duelling club should last forever and ever, because it was the best thing since pumpkin juice.

And Harry should have known it was coming; he'd got off easy till this point, but of course it was coming.

"Will you tell us about the duel at the Ministry?" someone shouted.

"How did you defeat You-Know-Who?"

"Is it true that you're the only one who can beat him?"

Harry waited for the shouts to die down before answering.

"I have not defeated Voldemort," he said, inserting a cool note into his voice to imply that such a suggestion was ridiculous. "Please make no mistake. It is true that I have set him back once again—to his great annoyance, no doubt." He gave a humourless smile and surveyed the hushed crowd.

There was something absurd in him standing here now and explaining himself before this group of children, when he could still see so clearly in his mind's eye—Voldemort, and the golden dome of ancient magic, and fading green shadows of deadly curses in the air.

Why was he still even allowed to be at school, among these kids, when he was capable of killing people—at times, he honestly didn't know.

("I wish, although it is too late, that you had not known half those spells... I wish that your soul had remained as bright and pure as it was when you'd defeated an ancient Basilisk with a sword and a phoenix song...")

They were still looking at him, and Harry floundered for a moment, unable to recall what they were waiting for. He'd been saying something, but then he'd fallen so deep into thoughts of darker times and other places—

"Voldemort," he began, because he was fairly sure he'd been talking about Voldemort, "is not going to be defeated easily. And I'm going to need all of you with me, if I want to achieve anything at all."

Although there was no celebratory whooping this time, it was very clear that the speech-giving part of the meeting was over. The crowd, at first struck silent, then sighed and murmured and dispersed. There were still looks thrown Harry's way, but no more questions followed, which was just as well; Harry suddenly didn't feel like answering any.

"Are you all right?" Cedric asked, coming up to Harry once he'd jumped off the podium.

"Yeah, sure," Harry said, but Cedric was still frowning. "Something on your mind?"

"Nothing much." Cedric shrugged. "I just can't help thinking that this is not a great year for me to graduate. Nor for the Weasley twins, for that matter. I mean, I'm not sure how much help we've been, but I'd feel better if I wasn't leaving at this juncture."
Harry hadn't thought that far into the future, actually, but it was true that, once Cedric graduated, Harry would lose one of his greatest allies at Hogwarts. Cedric was great help in running the duelling club and, as Head Boy, imbued Harry with authority he might not otherwise have had.

With him and the twins gone, it was going to be quite a different next year.

"Well, you're going to be a very useful spy at the Ministry, in any case," Harry said. "Assuming they accept your application, which I don't see why they wouldn't, with your grades and your dad working for them too."

"I should do fine on the Defence NEWT, at least," Cedric said with a quirk of lips. "As could you, probably. But yes, I'll likely get accepted, for all the good it'll do. The Ministry's on our side now, anyway, or as close as they will get to it."

"Which is not too close," Harry murmured. "Of course, a lot will depend on Scrimgeour."

The freshly elected Minister for Magic sounded like he might be competent, seeing as he'd headed Aurors in the past. Harry would watch his first steps carefully, but he had hopes.

Rather ambitious ones, actually, but hey, he was a Slytherin. He was meant to be like that.

"Anyway," Cedric said. "I suppose you've heard about Ollivander? What do you think?"

"I try not to," Harry replied darkly, grimacing. "I wish we had protected him. Not like it was impossible to predict Voldemort's move."

Frankly, Harry didn't think they'd be seeing the kidnapped wandmaker ever again, and he couldn't believe that nobody had thought of that—that Voldemort would want to check why his wand hadn't worked against Harry's and that Ollivander would be the first person to go to. Everybody had been so busy with the Ministry upheaval and the revelation of Voldemort's return and all—but Dumbledore and Harry, at least, knew about the Priori Incantatem, and should have thought of the implications.

"So you also believe that Voldemort is looking into these unknown magics in your duel, like the newspapers say," Cedric uttered thoughtfully. "You don't sound too worried about what he can learn."

"No," Harry said. "Not worried in those terms, because very likely Voldemort won't learn much more from Ollivander than I have from Dumbledore. But you could say I'm pretty damn worried for Ollivander."

That was the last thing said on the subject, however, because Harry spotted Susan moving towards them in the crowd, Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan in tow.

"Harry!" Ernie said, before Susan could speak a word. "Excellent speech! I wholly agree with the sentiment."

"Thanks, Ernie," Harry answered and smiled at Susan as she put a hand on his arm.

"We'll be off, I think," she said, addressing him only. "I've a lot of homework to do and you're having your after-meeting thing, aren't you?"

As usual, Harry would be seeing his friends in private after a general duelling club gathering. Boyfriend and girlfriends were not included on that; Harry had argued that he could not make an exception for Susan if he didn't also want to see Justin Finch-Fletchley and Cho Chang there. Susan
had accepted his decision with good grace—after all, it wasn't like Harry was privy to all her secrets with Hannah and Ernie.

"All right," Harry murmured, pecking Susan on the lips. "I'll see you later?"

"I do have to study tonight," Susan said, smiling as she looked him in the eyes. "Someone kept me from homework yesterday... and the day before..."

"Must have been a very evil person," Harry said, twirling her braid around his finger.

"It was," Susan agreed. "A dark, mysterious Slytherin—"

"Oh please don't," Hannah said, sounding nauseated. "This sweetness is more than a single girl can bear."

Ernie patted her on the back in consolation. She batted his hand away, huffing. Cedric laughed.

"Fine," Harry said and kissed Susan again. "Good luck studying, okay?"

"And good luck to you plotting world domination," Susan said amicably.

"She knows you so well," Cedric observed in affected wonder.

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The cheerful atmosphere didn't survive long into the private meeting of Harry's friends.

"And either must die at the hand of the other," Harry finished calmly, "for neither can live while the other survives." He regarded his friends. "That leaves us in a bit of a bind."

Notably, even Blaise seemed too thrown by the prophecy to offer cavalier remarks right off the bat. Millicent was the first to recover—and went straight to business before anyone had tried to bemoan the magnitude and tragedy of the situation.

"Have you discovered the power the Dark Lord knows not?" she inquired.

Harry thought back to the ephemeral love that was meant to protect him.

"I seriously hope not," he replied. "I keep waiting for some amazing ability to manifest. Like, any day now would be good."

"Your attempts at humour are entirely misplaced," Blaise informed him. "In case you're forgetting, you are to save the world."

"Very funny."

"Yes, my feelings exactly."

"And you're telling me—us—that You-Know-Who is aware of the prophecy," Anthony said in a tone that communicated both fascination and horror. "He knows he'll only live if you die and vice versa."

"That would explain the whole idea behind purposefully attacking a defenceless baby," Fred said.

"And being defeated by said baby," George added. "I'm not sure whether it makes your legend wane or grow, Harrykins."
Luna looked at them in mild interest.

"I think Harry is still angry with you about Umbridge," she confided with her usual sense of tact. "I don't believe that you are making it better."

Harry didn't look at either twin, but he could feel their fleeting glances on him.

They were not, in fact, making it better.

"Even if we assume that prophecies are real," Hermione said, her voice clearly conveying that she assumed no such thing, "everything supposedly hinges on what Trelawney said. Now, just how rational is it to—"

"There have been prophecies," Padma said. "What? There have. And if you feel that you know more about Divination than Professor Trelawney, that's... well, that's not fine, but either way, it doesn't invalidate a whole branch of magic."

"Even Professor McGonagall thinks that Divination is not a valid subject—"

"Regardless of that," Terry said loudly, "You-Know-Who has tried to kill Harry again and again. I'm gonna guess that he's taking this prophecy seriously. That means Harry's life is in danger whether or not Trelawney is a fraud."

"Are you going to tell Susan about the prophecy?" Neville asked in the silence that followed.

"Not sure," Harry said.

Was he? He didn't truly want to. He treasured the peace and distance from the war that he experienced while with Susan; war was encroaching on their little world as it was, and he wasn't inclined to speed up the process.

"How long have you known about the prophecy?" Padma asked, narrowing her eyes. "It can't be recent, you wouldn't have told us if it was, and I can't believe you just went around bottling it all up—"

"Knowing Harry, it could be years," Blaise said, observing him with clinical detachment.

"And how did you find out?" Hermione asked. "Who told you?"

"It's complicated," Harry said, making a vague hand gesture that was meant to somehow encompass the complications.

He was not going to launch into the story of meeting his dead parents. Not now, and likely not ever.

"Of course it's complicated," Terry said, hitting himself on the forehead. "I mean, how didn't I guess? When have things been simple around here?"

Cedric listened to their conversations in silence that Harry couldn't help but wonder about. When he joined the discussion, he voiced, sure enough, one of those conclusions that Harry could practically hear forming in his head.

"You knew," Cedric said, turning to Neville. "You've heard the prophecy before this, haven't you? He's told you."

All glances in the room were suddenly on Neville.
"It could have been me," Neville said, speaking up for the first time. "My parents have also defied V-voldemort three times and my birthday is at the end of July. V-voldemort was choosing between us, then."

Nobody had expected that; it was very obvious that nobody had expected that. Hermione, Padma, Blaise, Millicent, Cedric, Terry, Anthony, Fred, George — even Luna looked flabbergasted. This pronouncement seemed to shock them still more than the original revelation of the prophecy.

Harry thought he could understand. He always got into trouble; he always ran into threats against his life, and Voldemort, and death-defying adventures. It did not come as a surprise that there was an underlying explanation for this. Like Harry himself, his friends had almost expected the message of the prophecy, if not its form.

Neville, however, stood to be seen in an entirely new light.

Cedric gave a small mirthless laugh.

"And it could have been me back at the graveyard," he said. "Taking the Cup and going to Voldemort's rebirth instead of Harry."


Neville flinched.

"I'll do my share in the war," he snapped. "Don't you even—"

"Look," Harry said, without any idea how he was going to continue. He just knew that the conversation was getting alarmingly out of hand and needed to be redirected now. "Look. In the end, I told you all so that you'd be aware. You've always known what my life is like, I guess, but this is just so that you know—I'm not, like, expecting. Anyone to save me, or you, or anyone, you know? I'm expecting help, and I'm going to try and get help where I can." Harry frowned, willing the explanation to become clearer. "I already have. But—"

"But you can't sit back and be a kid and let someone else take care of it all," Cedric supplied carefully. "Because there will be no-one. Is that it?"

Harry shrugged. That sounded awfully melodramatic.

"There's going to be battles I'm going to have to fight." That was becoming all too clear lately. "I'm not saying I want to do it all alone. It's just—"

"There's Dumbledore," Hermione interrupted. "Supposing for a moment that he won't defeat Voldemort, at the very least he'll help you and protect you while you're at Hogwarts—"

"Just as he's done so far," Millicent snarled.

Hermione ignored her.

"I don't care about the prophecy, I don't even believe—it can't be your responsibility to defeat V-voldemort, or fight, or anything! You had nothing to do with starting this war, you shouldn't be the one everyone just piles things on—"

Harry had to look away from her blazing eyes, because he couldn't start thinking of how unfair this whole thing was. That way lay madness—and danger, of a certain kind.
"The struggle between you and the Dark Lord has never been a war of ideals… It is not your place to become a champion of Dumbledore’s goals. You have nothing to gain by plunging yourself into a conflict that is much older than you…”

There were some truths he could not afford to think too deeply about if he wanted to retain any sense of direction at all.

But he could also look at it in a different way. This wasn’t only about Dumbledore’s ideals or Voldemort’s desire to kill Harry; it was also about Harry’s stubborn determination to live.

"I don’t think that it is my responsibility to defeat anyone, per se,” Harry said. "But, in many ways, fighting is my choice, no less than Dumbledore’s or Voldemort’s. Like I said, I’m not expecting anyone to make it better. And I’d ask you not to, either."

Somehow, that wrapped up the entire meeting; Harry’s friends departed from the Hidden Room, clearly weighed down by the enormity of the revelations. Harry felt a little guilty for inflicting the weight of knowledge on them, but on the other hand it was somewhat overdue already. They had to be made aware.

Everyone filtered out, but the twins remained.

"Look, we know you're mad at us,” George said without preamble. "But you gotta understand. We didn't mean to screw up the plan with Umbridge."

Harry observed him critically.

"Then explain to me what it was that you meant to do."

Harry had not talked to them since their half-arsed confession a week ago; he’d been too furious to listen.

("If it had worked, it would have improved on the plan, more than anything. Except it didn't, of course, so it's a moot point. But you're asking why we tried, and there you are: we were trying to make things better.

Harry had been understanding about the twins going off the rails this semester—god knew they had reason to. He’d made allowances—tons and tons of allowances, some of which weren’t precisely his to make. But he felt oddly inclined to draw the line when their recklessness started endangering his life, as well.

He was sure it’d been said before—something about friendly fire and biting the hand that fed you.

("You have to admit that Umbridge would have gone berserk in the most deliciously public way. There it was, a handsome young Boggart just waiting on the first floor landing—we just needed to take her a few steps down, and can you imagine the effect of a Boggart on Umbridge pumped full of Mindfuck Mints?

As far as their reasons went, it was the usual: more havoc, more destruction, more humiliation to the enemy. Never mind that the change in plan might cause the entire thing to collapse like a house of cards, because whatever, we're the Weasley twins and nobody's caught us yet, right?

There was grief. There was coping with a giant hole in their life where their father had been, and trying to distract themselves with mindless pranks. And then there was self-destruction and taking others down with them.
Harry could no longer condone the latter as he'd realized he'd been doing all along.

"We're not proud of what we've done, in retrospect," Fred said. "Don't get us wrong. We didn't mean for everything to go the way it did."

"Well, that's a relief," Harry said. "And there I was thinking that you gambled with my life just for shits and giggles."

"We didn't gamble with anything," Fred snapped. "You make it sound like we meant to be seen and let that ogre of a prefect to take Umbridge down to the greenhouses. And you know we didn't."

"My problem isn't that you meant for this to happen," Harry said. "My problem is that you didn't consider that it could happen. You didn't think of the consequences, just as you've been ignoring them this whole semester—and the fact that my life was at stake this time made not a shred of a difference to you."

"It wasn't like that," George said, looking shaken. "We just didn't think—"

"But maybe you should have," Harry said. "You could have asked for Marauder's Map back, then you'd know whether or not anyone else was around, whether you were being followed, or—whatever happened, I don't even know, and you know what? I don't care. I'm done with you not thinking. I can't do the thinking for you, and I can't trust you if you don't think."

He did trust them as far as the grand scheme of things went, of course—he trusted them to be on the right side of the war, he trusted their loyalty, he trusted their integrity. He just didn't fully trust their impulse control, anymore.

"Can't trust us?" Fred repeated. "Can't—what are you saying, exactly?"

"I'm saying you need to grow up," Harry said, voice hard. "And sort yourselves out. I know it's been difficult, but you either accept that life can be fucking unfair sometimes and go on with your lives, or else you get stuck at this level. This whole semester you've been a danger to yourselves and others. Is this the way you want to go on being?"

"Yeah, well, easy for you to say," Fred scoffed—but, as he met Harry's eyes, his expression faltered.

"Oh yeah," Harry said, watching the realization sink in. "I've no idea what I'm talking about. For me and everyone around me, life's always been a fairy-tale with a bunch of fairy-tale endings to pick from. I mean, take Neville. His life is a peach, guys."

Fred was opening his mouth to say something defensive, Harry was sure. He spoke before that could happen.

"It's not a competition for who's got the worst deal. I still sympathize with yours, but I somehow didn't think that, all along, all you wanted to prove was your right to be pitied."

Fred flushed a deep crimson and balled up his fists; George flinched.

"That's not what it's been about—"

"Then what has it been about? And has this—this manic crusade been worth it, for you?"

George gave an awkward half-shrug. Harry sighed.

"I hope, for your sakes, that you know what you're doing. Montague was gloating to me about
catching you red-handed and buying you a one-way ticket to Azkaban, and Dumbledore seems to think that this is serious."

"Fuck Montague," Fred said. "He can't prove anything."

"Dumbledore said—" George started.

"Fuck Dumbledore, too," Fred said vehemently. "Fuck them all. We'll get through this, and we'll be fine."

Harry approved of the fighter attitude; he just hoped that it would carry over into the twins finally straightening out their actions, somehow.

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Two weeks into the world after Harry's fateful duel with Voldemort, and the dust was beginning to settle. The students still gazed at Harry in wonder, but the teachers had stopped; some of them, of course, had never started, Snape being a prominent one among those. Wild rumours of Harry's duel still flew about, but life went on as usual, and new, more trivial concerns overshadowed his heroic deeds. Overall, Harry didn't think he'd ever enjoyed such good standing with such a huge proportion of the school. A number of Slytherins did violently hate his guts with good cause, but the times when they could have murdered him and nobody would care were long past.

Harry was a national hero these days, after all. The only thing that baffled him was lack of recognition from the Ministry; he'd expected to hear from them, in regard to his visit to the Department of Mysteries, and yet there was nothing. He was beginning to fear that his calculations were off somewhere… that Scrimgeour was, perhaps, not going to offer as many opportunities to Harry as he hoped…

Well, it was early days yet. Two weeks were certainly not enough to propel Harry into contacting them. If things were to play out as he wanted them to, the Ministry had to come crawling to him.

"How do you mean?" Neville asked, when Harry mentioned something of his expectations.

"I have a feeling," Harry confided, "that the recent triumph over He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has put me in a—shall we say—string-pullable position. We'll see. But I have hopes."

Neville was looking at Harry strangely, but then people did tend to look at him strangely from time to time. They usually got over it.

"Funny how sometimes I forget that you're this Boy-Who-Lived thing," Neville said. "And what it means. You'd think that it's kind of obvious, but I manage to forget, all the same."

And that was precisely why Harry treasured Neville; there weren't many people left these days who could honestly forget what Harry was in the wider world, because to them, it did not matter.

The revelation of the prophecy had produced an odd effect on Harry's entire circle of friends. They had been close to him before, but now they were bound together by a deathly secret; these invisible ties drew them together, isolating them in their knowledge from the rest of the world. They were, in their own way, the few chosen ones, the very few let in on any deeper truth, and they felt aware of their exclusive, almost elevated position. Their ranks closed around Harry, more protectively than before—and even between themselves, they experienced a greater mutual understanding than ever, in Harry's opinion.

Before now, Harry had been the only real point of their intersections. Cedric was Harry's friend, but
not Millicent's; Blaise and Hermione did not talk to one another; the twins had little to say to Anthony, and Padma to Neville. They were all Harry's friends, but nothing else united them; almost all had their own friends outside of Harry's group. Terry and Anthony had Michael Corner; Padma her wide circle of friends and admirers; Lee Jordan was widely considered the third Weasley twin, and Cedric was certainly popular within his own year. Only Neville and Hermione relied solely on one another; Blaise and Millicent, also, had no friends outside of Harry. However, none particularly tried to deepen friendships within the group, with the exception of Luna, who was about the most open-minded person in Harry's acquaintance.

They were all too different; it could hardly go another way, and Harry was used to how it was.

Suddenly, though, things were changing. There was an almost conspiratorial air to the after-duelling club meetings now, no matter what was being discussed—and all of Harry's friends had taken a while to process the prophecy, reacting in their different ways.

Anthony and Hermione had, predictably, gone off to do research in order to gain a measure of control over the unstoppable forces of fate.

Cedric worried, because he was responsible like that. For some reason, hearing about the prophecy made him even less eager to leave Hogwarts—or perhaps it was leave Harry at Hogwarts; Harry wasn't sure he'd understood Cedric when he'd said:

"And the terrifying thing is that nobody will notice anything about you until it's far too late…"

He'd refused to elaborate on that, so Harry had put the cryptic statement out of his mind.

The twins and Harry had not talked since their argument; they didn't attend the meetings, either, and a part of Harry was sad about it, but the greater part of him was still too angry with them. He did still number them among his friends, when it counted; for now, however, they needed a bit of a break to cool off.

Neville had made his peace with the prophecy a long time ago; Padma was trying to decipher its deeper meaning; and Luna was making necklaces of Billywig propellers, most of the time.

Harry, meanwhile, focused on the simple things: his own research into issues that interested him, schoolwork, and dealing with the student population in general and Slytherins in particular.

Of these, the last one was arguably the most challenging bit.

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"Faster, Potter! Come on, are you even trying—"

Harry blew hair out of his eyes, annoyed. Montague knew he was trying, and both of them—and their entire fucking team—knew this wasn't about Harry at all, or at least not about his flying ability. This was about Harry's desertion of Voldemort's cause, which he'd never even fucking supported, but sometimes it felt—

Sometimes, lately, Harry genuinely hated Montague for making him feel as if he had deserted them, nonetheless.

"Crabbe, Goyle, aim those Bludgers, Potter needs to be woken up a bit—if you can't dodge that, Potter, you're—"

"What—off the team? Don't make me laugh, Montague, who are you going to put as Seeker
Malfy drew himself up, and Harry focused on him and Montague, and he was not looking at either Crabbe or Goyle, not if he could help it, not even after three weeks.

Three weeks of Goyle struck by a shell-shocked kind of grief, as if he hadn't known that violent endings were even a possibility. Well, war was like that, if you supported the wrong side maybe your dad could die—

("Has dad's death changed anything? This is what I told you about, we will all be ruined by this—")

Actually, scratch that, whichever side you supported, someone's dad was going to die—

Harry and Goyle both suffered from nightmares, which was ironic in a deeply fucked up way.

"I would make a much better Seeker than Potter," Malfoy was saying, and Harry wrenched his attention back to him. "You know I could, Ed. I wouldn't mind taking over the spot—"

"I'll mind," Adrian Pucey said. "We've got to beat Ravenclaw by enough of a margin that I don't care for chucking Potter midway, thank you."

"Are you implying that I wouldn't be good enough?" Malfoy demanded.

"I think he's referencing the fact that it was me catching the Snitch in every single game Slytherin has played since I joined," Harry interjected. "Me, not you. There's a subtle difference there, I'm sure you'll agree—"

Bletchley turned away, frowning, but Harry knew that there was a reluctant smile lurking behind his expression.

He knew, because he and Bletchley and Pucey used to have a grand old time making fun of Malfoy back in the day—back when Harry had been one of them, and they'd still thought he might join them and Voldemort. Quidditch used to be rather fun, and Montague much more lenient.

They'd actually liked him, then—better than Malfoy, anyway, although that had taken a while to achieve. Back when he and Malfoy had joined the team, they had both been just ickle second-years, but Malfoy enjoyed a higher standing by virtue of being a Malfoy. The Quidditch-less Triwizard year had upset the balance enough that, in their fifth, Harry was definitely the one on better and closer terms with the Quidditch team.

He couldn't honestly say that it was easy adjusting to the backward change. On the other hand, he thought that it wasn't easy for his teammates, either.

"How do you even know that Potter's not going to throw the game?" Malfoy challenged. "He's defied our Lord, he's fought our Lord, he's betrayed all of us—how can you trust the traitor again? How do you know that he won't throw the game, just to spite us all?"

Harry grew still at the incredible accusation; so did the others.

"Are you insane?" Harry asked, finally. "How does this even relate—this isn't war, this is Slytherin we are talking about, why would I even—?"

Montague, Bletchley and Pucey were gazing at him—and, out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Crabbe and Goyle staring also.
"What could you understand of Slytherin loyalty?" Malfoy asked derisively.

"Excuse me?" Harry inquired, feeling anger bubble up in his chest.

He thought this had been dealt with a long time ago, how could this even be coming up again—

"What would you know of Slytherin loyalty?" Malfoy repeated. "Once a traitor, always a traitor, and you've declared your side now."

"A Slytherin does not equal a Death Eater," Harry said coldly. "And I can't believe I have to explain it to you of all people—it's people like you who give Slytherin a bad name, coming up with ridiculous shit that turns the whole school against us—"

"Oh, don't you try to tell me that the whole school is against you—"

"No, it's not," Harry said. "The whole school is against you. I wonder why that is, Malfoy. Maybe the whole thing is not about you being a persecuted Slytherin, because who the fuck are your friends, Malfoy? Not even people on your own side are defending you, are they?"

Montague, Bletchley, Pucey, watching silently—

"Well, at least they're not defending you anymore, because they've seen you for who you are—a filthy traitor, in the end."

"I may have refused to join the Dark Lord," Harry said, narrowing his eyes at Malfoy and—shit, somehow in this whole school there was hardly another person who infuriated him quite so much. "But I would never do anything that jeopardized Slytherin. And I don't care if you and everybody else wants to think that a true Slytherin is always a Death Eater."

"You're only making it worse for yourself," Malfoy snarled. "What do you think everybody is going to say if their golden boy is still playing Quidditch on the side of the evil Slytherins? Do you think they will applaud this great exercise in all of us getting along? Wake the fuck up to facts, Potter. You don't belong here."

"You've been saying that since first year," Harry snapped. "And yet I'm still somehow here, aren't I?"

But he hadn't thought of that, of what everyone would say once they knew that Harry was still somehow getting along with his Quidditch team. It included people with suspected or even known Death Eater ties; Malfoy's father was in prison for fuck's sake, and yet he and Harry were somehow in this together—

This was fucked up, but Harry wasn't leaving.

He wasn't leaving Quidditch, one of the few things he was still doing because he loved it, and he wasn't going to let Malfoy win this fight. Let the world think what it wanted, Harry wasn't budging on this one. He wanted Slytherin to win the Quidditch Cup, and he wanted Slytherin to do well in general, and he wanted to strangle Malfoy for suggesting that he lacked House loyalty.

He turned to Montague, fists clenched, jaw tight.

"So. Are we practicing, or what?"

Montague gave him a heavy, measuring look.
"We were, until you and Malfoy decided to disrupt us. For that, you'll both get broom cleaning duty, and Malfoy—I don't want to hear it. Pick a fight with Potter in your own time and make sure you can beat him when you do, because as for now? You've already wasted half an hour of my life."

Malfoy was white with fury.

"And I suppose you're going to say nothing to Potter, then."

"Just this: Potter, if you are planning to lose us the game, we might temporarily—in a fit of rage, you understand, completely beside ourselves—forget the Dark Lord's orders. And you will die."

"Are you claiming that you can succeed in killing me better than the Dark Lord can?" Harry inquired sharply. "My, what heretical thoughts you are entertaining."

The junior Death Eaters exchanged discomfited glances, and Harry felt a twisted satisfaction at landing a blow on their own field.

It had to be inconvenient for them to have taught their enemy to converse in their language.

"You think you're clever," Montague growled, "but you won't like what's coming to you—"

"Look." Harry held up a hand. "You can kick me off the team, if you like. I'll look Montague in the eyes. "But I swear to you that I don't want to lose Slytherin the game. I've never wanted to lose Slytherin any games, and no political situation can change that. I don't… I wouldn't do shit like that just to spite you, I don't even—"

—want to spite you.

He didn't say it, but it was the truth. They were his enemies in the bigger world outside of Hogwarts and Quidditch, and he knew it rationally, but emotions were slower catching up. And Harry had got to know Montague, Pucey and Bletchley back in fourth year properly, and they'd had fun times this year while he was pretending to maybe buy into Voldemort's appeal, and for some reason he could not start disliking them when he needed to, just for them being on different sides.

Which was fucked up, too.

"Quit standing around," Montague barked. "Potter stays until the next match, and that's final. Potter, up in the motherfucking air! Crabbe, Goyle, in position with the Bludgers! Go!"

Perhaps bloody Malfoy was right in one respect: this whole war might have been easier on Harry if he hadn't been in Slytherin and if lines between his friends and enemies had been more clear-cut.

***

"Miraculously, you all did quite well on the test," Emmeline Vance said in a cool voice. "For this, hardly any credit goes to your previous teacher, so I must commend you for independent study."

The class remained quiet and watchful, but not out of fear, like with Umbridge. There was just something in Emmeline Vance's whole bearing that commanded obedience.

"You will get your results presently," Professor Vance said and, with a wave of her wand, sent the test papers neatly onto each student's desk. "Over the holiday, you will correct your mistakes and analyze your results in conjunction with last week's practical test, in order to identify your weak areas. You will also write an essay detailing your findings and proposing solutions." She silenced the budding groans with a strict look. "There remain six weeks until the OWLs. During this time, you
must fill any and all remaining blanks in your knowledge."

Daphne Greengrass sighed, looking at her paper. She was probably wondering how she would catch up on her defensive spells, which were consistently a difficulty for her in the duelling club. Nott, on the other hand, looked annoyed; Harry wondered how he had kept abreast of the curriculum in the absence of teaching from Umbridge and without access to the duelling club. Perhaps the seventh-years were tutoring him and Malfoy now, as they had done with Harry last year.

The bell rang at the same exact moment as Emmeline Vance pronounced:

"Class dismissed." Then, after a moment, she looked up from her desk and added: "Mr. Potter, please stay behind."

Blaise gave Harry a questioning look, but Harry didn't know what this was about. Since assuming her position as Defence instructor, Emmeline Vance had not once given an indication that she'd met Harry before at the Order headquarters, and never singled him out in any way.

"I'll see you at lunch," Harry said to Blaise and Millie.

They left together with the rest of the all-Slytherin class, and Harry approached the teacher's desk.

"Mr. Potter, as you undoubtedly know, you have not made a single mistake on either of the tests," Emmeline Vance stated as soon as the door closed behind the last student. "This, together with your performance that I witnessed personally at the Ministry of Magic, indicates to me that you have already mastered the OWL study material."

"I'm flattered you think so, Professor," Harry said, wondering where this was going.

Emmeline Vance observed him for a few moments.

"Mr. Potter, do you believe that you will draw any benefit at all from attending my classes?" she asked suddenly. "I do not see an advantage in mincing words. You are clearly ahead of your peers, which could create difficulties for both them and you. I must ask you seriously whether you have learnt anything of use in the last two weeks."

In all truth, Harry hadn't. That is, he thought that Emmeline Vance was a good teacher and she explained theory behind spells in a much more understandable way than dry books ever could, but the problem was that he'd already sloughed through the dry books and squeezed information out of them. However, if he'd managed to sit through Umbridge's classes and not die of boredom, he could definitely deal with Emmeline Vance's explanations.

He wasn't sure how to phrase that last part inoffensively, though.

"I don't want to say that I've mastered the OWL material, because I've mostly learnt through self-study or practice with other students," he chose to say. "I might be missing some crucial parts of the curriculum, because I've never gone over them with a teacher."

"Without any desire to flatter you, Mr. Potter, I believe that you will have no problems with the practical part of the exam at the very least."

"But the theory—"

"Very well." Emmeline Vance nodded. "If you wish to test your theoretical knowledge, I can arrange it so that you would sit a practice theory OWL with questions taken from past exams. This should determine your current level."
"I'm not sure I can ask you to make that effort on my behalf, Professor," Harry said.

"Please do not think that I am doing this solely, or even mainly, for your benefit, Mr. Potter," Professor Vance said. "Put plainly, you are a disruptive element in my class. Your advanced knowledge discourages your peers, who find it difficult not to make the comparison. It is also quite clear that you are not learning, but only making an appearance in my class."

"I'm sorry if I gave you the impression—"

"I take it you are not sorry that you are ahead of your age group," Emmeline Vance said impassively. "It did, after all, most likely save your life."

Harry shrugged.

"And what if I do pass the test OWL?"

"If you pass, you will be tasked with an independent project to be submitted at the end of year," Emmeline Vance said. "An academic essay on a subject to be determined—quite naturally, it should relate to Defence Against the Dark Arts."

Harry inclined his head.

"Thank you, Professor."

"Have a good holiday, Mr. Potter," the teacher said, dismissing him. "And I advise you to think of research topics to explore."

Research topics? Harry had them in droves.

Like Voldemort and his previous rising. Or then the security and military situation of wizarding Britain in general. Or else dark wizards who'd tried to gain power in the past. Or else magic itself—Occlumency, Legilimency, blood magic, wand magic—

(Mongolian amulet of power, Deathstick prototype 3, Staff of Merlin model 14—)

Power increasing magic—

Harry frowned.

Of course, hardly any of this could be explored through legitimate means; nobody at Hogwarts would let him submit an essay on any of those topics, Harry was sure. Besides which, he wasn't convinced that he wanted to display his areas of interest to anyone connected with the Order.

Secret research it would have to be.

There were days when Harry worried about someone finding his illegal book stash. He was usually comforted with the thought that he resided in Slytherin and could therefore always claim that someone had planted the books in his trunk out of spite.

Of course, his ability to procure forbidden literature had decreased sharply since he'd parted ways with the junior Death Eaters. Harry's close ties with them had provided him with an opportunity to get his hands on many an interesting source; he could not very well buy things from Borgin and Burke's using his own name, but Montague had been willing to pull a few strings. These days, Harry was confined to the Hogwarts library until he figured out an alternate means of getting the interesting stuff.
Thankfully, the library had enough resources on Occlumency so far.

Long-standing familiarity with the Restricted Section had helped Harry to locate the appropriate literature sooner than he might have otherwise; the uninitiated might not have realized that information on the mind arts might be lurking behind the title *Elysium of the Enlightened*.

"Looks like an exciting book you've got there," Terry commented once, peeking at the cover. "What's it for?"

"Just an extracurricular project," Harry said. "You know."

"Your life is an extracurricular project," Terry informed him.

"Hey, at least I keep it fun," Harry rejoined, and they moved on to discussing other things.

Harry wouldn't actually say that reading up on Occlumency was *fun*, exactly. The exercises suggested in the book weren't all that exciting, but Harry was ready to do whatever it took to master the subject and avoid having either Snape or Dumbledore as his teachers.

Whoever thought he'd allow either of them into his mind was clearly delusional.

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Meanwhile, his readings about Voldemort's first rise and governance of the wizarding world were producing baffling results. He'd read leaflets and manifestos and proclamations; he'd studied treatises and analyses, but somehow the amount of mess in his head was proportional to the amount of literature consumed. At length, Harry found that he could no longer read alone in silence, and set about to find someone to debate it all with.

His first choice might not have been all that wise, in retrospect.

"Hermione," he said, casting a sound ward around them. "What do you know about Voldemort's ideology?"

Hermione looked up at him in some surprise. That was no wonder; it was not often that Harry sought out her company and hers alone, especially not in the library like this. They normally interacted in a group, with Neville at the very least present also.

"Well," Hermione said, putting a bookmark into her tome and closing it neatly. "I know that, according to that ideology, I am a being best exterminated, as are all Muggles and Muggleborns."

"Yes, but why?" Harry pressed.

"Because Muggle blood is polluting the wizardkind," Hermione answered readily. "The quality of magic dilutes, or something like that. In some way or another, we bring destruction to the wizarding world. The wizard blood will no longer be pure, which is a very bad thing, according to the Pureblood ideology."

Harry was frowning.

"But the Pureblood ideology and Voldemort's agenda are not entirely one and the same," he said. "And doesn't extermination of all Muggleborns sound a little illogical to you? Surely Purebloods cannot keep marrying Purebloods only?"

"Of course it's illogical," Hermione said. "It makes no sense at all."
"But then why do you think so many people bought into it?"

Hermione looked at him keenly.

"Where are you going with all of this?"

"I'm not entirely sure myself," Harry muttered. "Just wanted to hear what you thought. You, I mean, as a Muggleborn."

Hermione pursed her lips.

"A Muggleborn, and nobody will let me forget it! Why ask me as a Muggleborn, why not as a fellow witch?"

"Because you have a completely different perspective," Harry said, taken by surprise. "You have not grown up in the same world as Purebloods or even most half-bloods, so you have a totally different bias."

Hermione's face reflected her incredulity.

"And what world did you grow up in? Weren't you raised by Muggles, just as I was? Why do you need to ask me what Muggle-raised people think?"

Harry blinked in momentary confusion. He hadn't associated himself with anything Muggle in years. It hadn't even occurred to him to think of himself in those terms, and he cast around for a reason why.

"Well, you actually like the Muggle world, don't you?" he said aloud, landing upon that very reason, and immediately wished he hadn't.

There was an awful look in Hermione's eyes.

"You have been friends with Purebloods for too long," she said. "Or else Slytherin has that effect on people. You've no right—you of all people—you have no right to condemn the Muggle world! You know what it's like!"

"And that's why I can condemn it!" Harry said, stung. "I've actually lived there, and maybe it was good for you, but it wasn't any good for me!"

Hermione looked like he'd just slapped her, and he felt a little shocked at the anger he found rolling within himself. He'd thought his miserable years in the Muggle world all forgotten; he cringed to remember himself in those days, and tried not to. None of it mattered anymore. Long gone was the wide-eyed child who'd expected a benevolent adult to turn up one day and deliver him from suffering; Harry had sorted himself out, and he was doing just fine.

Here, in the wizarding world.

Harry closed his eyes and told himself that he didn't actually hate all Muggles. He knew better than that; he knew that, while he hadn't seen any kindness in the Muggle world, perhaps there was some to be found. The entire world could not be as bad as what he had seen. The entire world could not be condemned out of hand like Harry condemned it from his personal experience. The thing was, he couldn't help the way he felt about it.

"Is this why all of your other friends are Purebloods?" Hermione asked, her voice unsteady. "Did you, from the beginning, try to distance yourself as far from the Muggle world as you possibly
could?"

Harry wanted to tell her that this wasn’t the reason—that he had surrounded himself with Purebloods because it would be easier on him in Slytherin—but suddenly, he wasn’t sure.

"I don't know," he said. "But them being Purebloods is not why I value them."

"I never knew," Hermione said. "I never thought you were like this about Muggles."

"I'm not in any way about Muggles," Harry said. "I don't want to kill them all, or anything. It's—never mind."

Hermione slowly collected her books and Harry wondered when was the last time either of them had seen the other so unguarded in their feelings. Perhaps it was back in third year, when they’d had their fight about her time-turner. It always seemed to take a fight.

"Look, I'm sorry—" Harry started, but then Hermione spoke.

"Why did you start this whole conversation?" she asked quietly. "What did you hope to gain?"

"I've been reading about Voldemort," Harry said. "And I've been wondering how other people saw it, that's all. And you're clever," he added, lips quirking up in a smile. "You had to have interesting thoughts."

Hermione's face didn't outwardly change, but Harry could tell that she was no longer angry.

"It seems that I don't," she said. "I think you didn't find out what you hoped to. I'm afraid I haven't—looked into it, much. It was somehow enough that I knew Voldemort to be unquestionably wrong."

"Yes, for me too," Harry muttered. "Up to a point."

"And now what?" she inquired. "You don't think he's so wrong anymore?"

Harry shrugged. He was still sure that Voldemort was wrong. He just wanted someone to explain why.

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Blaise was very much the wrong person to approach about this—Blaise, with his known Pureblood bias, anti-Muggle sentiment and complete lack of morals. Harry knew it, but he ended up talking to Blaise anyway—not that he'd wanted it to happen. It was just, one day by the lake, when Blaise was also present, Padma delved into Harry's school bag and fished out a book she should never have laid her hands upon.

"Oh, what's this?" she asked, glancing at the boring cover. "Why would you read—wow, this looks complicated."

Harry froze when he turned around and saw her with that book, and for the life of him he could not have got it from Padma before Blaise leaned over.

"What's that? Oh," he said, voice suddenly flat. "Give that to me, you insufferable woman—not you know that curiosity killed the cat?"

"And lack of chivalry will kill your dating prospects," Padma rejoined, pouting. "That could have been interesting!"
"No, it couldn't," Blaise said, closing the book. "Here, Harry, catch!"

Padma didn't see the look on Blaise's face right then, but Harry read it loud and clear. He'd never before seen Blaise truly serious.

Blaise had held out with the questions until they were safe and sound-warded in the Slytherin common room.

"What in the world," he said, "are you doing with that in your possession? At Hogwarts, Harry?"

"It's not like I'm prancing around Hogwarts casting Unforgivables," Harry said. "It's only a book. I can get rid of it any time."

"And if you're caught with it? Like you nearly were today?"

"Padma wouldn't have known what it was," Harry said. "I'm not even sure how you do."

Blaise looked at Harry for some time, then gave a shrug.

"Your reading choices surprise me. I applaud you; I am not an easy man to surprise."

"I live to serve," Harry murmured.

"So how much of this manifest of the Dark Lord's path have you read and understood?" Blaise asked, seemingly offhand. "Or perhaps I should ask: just how deep did your Death Eater initiation go? It seems that we all underestimated the influence a Montague could have on a young impressionable mind."

There were two ways to go at this juncture. Harry could shrug Blaise off, or else he could draw him into a real discussion. He knew he had to do the former; he ended up choosing the latter, because, no matter what else he was, in this area at least Blaise would be knowledgeable.

"I thought, initially, that the whole conflict was about the Dark Lord and Dumbledore being at ideological odds," Harry said. "With the Ministry being just sort of by the by. But now it seems to me that the Dark Lord—and certainly the attending Purebloods—were opposing the Ministry and the role it was playing. And Dumbledore was propping the Ministry up. At least, that's the only way I can understand this whole thing: that the whole issue is about what the Ministry should be and do. Because it doesn't add up otherwise—all the Ministry posts that Dumbledore holds, and the influence he has. It—this whole wizarding world—would not be the way it is now, if Dumbledore did not want it to be this way, at least partially."

"Yes," Blaise said. "Yes. This whole conflict is not very obvious on the surface, is it?"

"It's not," Harry said, frowning. "Mostly because, on the surface, it seems to be about Muggleborns. And there is a conflict about Muggleborns. But I don't think it's the main thing, anymore."

"Ah!" Blaise sat up, looking more animated than Harry ever saw him. "You do understand."

"No, I don't. I'm getting confused who thinks what about Muggles and Muggleborns."

"Confused how?" Blaise asked.

"Dumbledore is called a Muggle-lover, but he's not pushing for any adaptation programmes that I can see. He's just for freely admitting Muggleborns into our world. The Ministry doesn't seem to have any legislation on them—positive or negative. On the other hand, I don't believe that the
Purebloods can possibly want to kill all Muggles; that's not practical, and the wizarding world would die out. I know that, when the Dark Lord was rising, Muggleborns looked like they were flooding the wizarding world with their numbers, wanting to change the wizarding world to be more like the Muggle one, and that the Dark Lord played on those fears. I don't see what he suggests as solution."

"These fears are still very real," Blaise said. "The Pureblood families are dying out, that's obvious, but the Mudbloods are coming in, and they know nothing of our culture. They complain about being treated badly, but they do not try to integrate. They want change and equality, but to them it means just what you said—making the wizarding world more like the Muggle one and converting the Ministry into some bullshit populist institution. They've been trying to do this for decades, completely missing the point that this is not what the Ministry is supposed to be about."

"What is it supposed to be about, then?"

"The Ministry was founded upon signing the Statute of Secrecy, for the purpose of concealing magic from Muggles. It was not about governance, not about controlling the population, and for Merlin's sake not even nearly about controlling the magic. They've grown like a parasite and have tried to encroach on about every part of our lives—to the point that even learning is institutionalized. How they're expecting to progress while stifling the life out of us all, I have no idea."

Harry eyed Blaise warily. He'd never heard Blaise speak in such an impassioned tone.

"Of course, the Purebloods have tried to infiltrate the Ministry as much as possible," Blaise said after a few moments, in a more normal voice. "After all, one has to try and keep some control over the Ministry. But it has not been easy. The Dark Lord saw the same damn thing. You can't blame a good chunk of the old guard for agreeing, because it's the perfect truth, and there's no getting away from it. The status quo has had us languishing in stagnation, while the Mudbloods incoming en masse mess it all up even more."

This was not helping. Harry wanted someone to prove to him that Voldemort was wrong, not detail how he made sense. All of this he'd already figured out from his readings, more or less, including the way the Ministry of Magic had expanded over the last three hundred years. Established amid witch-hunts—in fact, the Statute of Secrecy was signed in the year of the Salem witch trials—the Ministry's purpose had been, at the start, to keep magic users from displaying magic to Muggles. But then, slowly, and always with a good excuse, its powers had expanded.

Gradually, it had acquired Aurors to enforce rules, and a judiciary to try offenders, and a prison to put them away. The Ministry had needed a department for controlling magical creatures that could reveal the wizards' existence; they had grown to outlaw keeping some creatures in private homes. They had founded a Department of Games and Sports, in order to keep track of Quidditch lest it be seen by Muggles. Of course there also had to be a department for cooperating internationally with other signatories of the Statute. Obliviators had to be controlled by the Ministry; then, there had remained only a step towards controlling Hogwarts curriculum and demanding that new spells be approved by the Ministry in order to be deemed legal.

It seemed that the wizards had never truly agreed to the existence of the Ministry as a whole; it had just sort of happened, and its very nature precipitated a number of oddities. It seemed very strange to Harry, for example, that the wizarding world had no standing army. He remembered, back from Muggle school, that countries always had armies, but the Ministry only had domestic police forces. However, later he realized that, unless wizards wanted to break the Statute of Secrecy, there could be no wars between nations! It seemed that, back before the separation, wizards would participate in Muggle wars—the Muggles would have the numbers and the wizards the power. But after the
The wizarding world, apart from anything else, did not have enough people to have a true army, but it was a weird society in which every single person was a potential combatant, because every single person over eleven years of age carried a weapon. Harry thought it was similar to the Muggle world a very long time ago, when it had been completely normal for everybody to have swords and pistols and fight duels to their heart's content. In certain ways, before the separation in 1692, the societies must not have been all that different. They had grown apart, of course, since.

Harry did not acquire all that knowledge from listening to Professor Binns' lectures, nor from reading Ministry-sanctioned literature. He wasn't sure just how heretical his views were, according to the Ministry, or what Dumbledore would have said of all of this; inevitably, of course, it made him feel like he understood even less about the war than he had before he'd started reading about it. Hermione's words rang out in his mind: it was easier to be content in the knowledge that Voldemort was simply wrong, no matter why.

"Killing off all Muggles and Muggleborns is not the way to go about fixing anything," Harry said, grasping onto the one thing he was sure of. "It's not that I don't see what you're saying," he added, seeing Blaise's look. "I just can't believe that anyone would seriously consider getting rid of the Muggle element a solution to this problem. You said it yourself—the old Pureblood families are dying out. They die out, and what then?"

"Surely you see that the issue is not in the Muggleborns as such, but in the Statute of Secrecy that prevents them from knowing anything about the wizarding world before they enter it," Blaise said calmly.

"Salazar Slytherin was protesting the Muggleborns' presence at Hogwarts a thousand years ago!" Harry countered, incredulous. "You're not going to make this a recent issue, are you?"

"He was protesting what he saw as a danger then," Blaise said. "If he saw what's going on now, he'd turn in his grave. Do try to use your imagination, Harry—how much of a problem would the Muggleborns be if they knew in advance about the wizarding world, and were aware of its customs? Conversely, how much more different would the wizarding world be, if not so disconnected from the Muggle one?"

"But you can't abolish the Statute of Secrecy," Harry said. "Too much hinges on it. Who knows what will happen if you expose the wizarding world to Muggles! There might be a war, or something like that. I mean, not necessarily, but Muggles don't believe in magic. They'll think we are—aliens, or something!"

"And therein lies the problem," Blaise summed up. "The wizards are tired in living of fear of exposure to Muggles, and living under the Statute of Secrecy is making true development impossible. The Muggleborns try to change the wizarding world in ways they see fit, but that's not true development; that's just blindly copying from what they know. The Ministry is set firmly on maintaining the status quo; and something, somewhere, has to change."

It sounded to Harry as if Blaise believed what he was saying—and what he was saying was believable enough, to be sure.

"So what do you, personally, think?" he asked.

"I agree with what the Dark Lord is saying, on this score," Blaise said promptly. "And fuck you, Harry, if you try to pretend at this stage that you don't."
"He wants to kill me," Harry said, feeling surreal. "I don't agree with that."

"Neither do I," Blaise said calmly. "And isn't that why I'm here?"

For the first time, Harry wasn't sure. Suddenly, he could see himself on the giant chessboard of this war—a figure of the white set, but fully cognizant of the goals of the black pieces and even somewhat sympathetic to them. Did Blaise see the same thing, had he seen it from the start? Had other people?

And if so, what were they expecting of Harry?

***

During the first week of the Easter holidays, at lunchtime, George stopped by the Slytherin table and dropped an envelope onto Harry's plate.

"Here," he said. "Enjoy."

This was the most interaction Harry had had with either of the twins since their argument; he supposed this was progress, nonetheless.

"Thanks," he said to George's retreating back.

"What was that about?" Millicent inquired.

"I have not the foggiest clue, Millie dear," Harry said and dodged her punch. "Let's see."

He took the envelope and cast an unobtrusive nonverbal charm. Apparently, nobody had interfered with the letter since it had been sealed by the sender. How nice.

And the sender, it turned out, was most singular indeed: none other than good old Percy Weasley, whom Harry had seen neither hide nor hair of since Christmas.

Harry, the letter read.

You might be surprised to receive communication from me, especially delivered in such a fashion. However, I fear that these measures are necessary under the circumstances. We have tried to contact you through different means—but I am not sure that you even know that Mr. Scrimgeour has been keen to speak to you ever since he became Minister. At Hogwarts you are as if in an impenetrable fortress and no messages seem to reach you. Mr. Scrimgeour has attempted to arrange with Dumbledore to see you, but you are apparently not to be bothered. And yet, I find it difficult to believe that, if asked directly, you would refuse to meet with the most important man in the wizarding world!

You need not fear any ill treatment on the part of the Minister. The days of suspicion are past; the Ministry understands that it had misjudged you most grievously and wishes nothing more than to seek reconciliation with you. Minister Scrimgeour is sure that you and he would be able to have fruitful conversation, which would be beneficial to you both. Knowing of the close ties between you and my family, he acts through me in order to arrange for a meeting. You are, of course, quite free to refuse; but it would be preferable to hear your refusal from you, with your own reasons, rather than be turned away at the very Hogwarts gates by the Headmaster! Verily, I feel that he takes too much upon himself in this instance; I trust you will agree with me.

Enclosed in this envelope is a message from Minister Scrimgeour himself. Please reply to it as soon as it is convenient for you through the same means as this letter was delivered; it seems to be the
safest way.

Sincerely yours,

Percival Ignatius Weasley

"Interesting," Harry said. "One might almost say—intriguing."

"So, what is it?" Millie repeated.

"I'll tell you in a sec," Harry promised.

He found Scrimgeour's missive to be much more succinct than Percy's epistle. The Minister directly stated his desire to meet Harry; trusting that "the young Weasley will have explained everything to you", he proposed a meeting in Hogsmeade during the holidays, when the students were bound to get their last Hogsmeade weekend of the year.

"Excellent," Harry said.

He then proceeded to charm both letters to look like newspapers clippings about the latest advances in neuromagical dentistry. One wouldn't want to leave sensitive communications lying around unprotected, after all.

That done, he handed the sheets to Blaise and Millie—one to each—and got up.

He'd have some twins to hunt down soon.

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"So," Fred said.

"So," Harry intoned.

He was glad to see they were still on the same wavelength.

"I usually hate tearful reunions," George said, once the pause stretched on for a few moments longer than anyone could stand. "But this is very touching."

The silence that followed was almost as long as the one before it.

"I'm glad we've got so much to say to one another," George continued brightly. "It would be a shame otherwise."

It was a shame that they had degenerated to this; but at least they were still talking. It would be worse yet if they'd severed ties completely.

"Would you mind posting this to Percy for me?" Harry inquired, at last.

Fred looked at the letter in Harry's hand.

"May we know what this is all about? Or can you not trust us with such information?"

"Don't be stupid," Harry said. "Of course you may know. I'm writing to Scrimgeour."

A shocked little pause followed his pronouncement.

"But of course," George said. "That explains everything."
Harry sighed, wishing he'd taken Percy's missive along.

"He requests a meeting. I'm happily obliging."

"I must have missed that announcement about you being best pals with the Minister," George said. "I didn't realize you liked him now. We've forgiven the Ministry for everything, have we?"

"To about the same extent as I've forgiven the students of this school for thinking me the heir of Slytherin," Harry said. "And for turning against me during the Triwizard Tournament. Let's keep things in perspective."

"A true second chances kind of guy, aren't you?" Fred said.

Harry shrugged.

"Will you post it or not?"

"Sure," George said. "No problems."

"Thanks."

The letter exchanged hands. Harry wished this wasn't so excruciatingly awkward.

This emotional crap? He was bad at it.

After a few more moments of silence, Harry was ready to break it and take his leave, but then suddenly Fred spoke.

"We've thought about what you said," he informed Harry offhandedly.

"In between cursing your name, you understand," George added. "Please don't think you got off lightly."

"We've taken all that money from you," Fred continued. "To open the joke shop. But we're kind of not really in a joking mood at the moment. Funny how that happens."

Harry started. He'd honestly forgotten about that money.

If they were planning to give it back, so help him—

"So we were thinking, perhaps we could do other stuff with it," Fred said. "Stuff that might be a bit more useful to the war. We're pretty good at destroying things. We figured, destroying Death Eaters might be more satisfying that destroying school property."

Harry stared at them.

"You're suggesting—weapons?"

"Why, would you not trust us with them?" Fred snapped.

Harry winced.

"Look, forget I said that," he uttered. "That's not how I meant it. I mean, I know you could only take it one way, but that's not what I meant."

"Do you mean you're sorry for saying it?" George asked, eyeing Harry shrewdly.
"Not if it made you look into the future and plan shit," Harry said, but then sobered. "But yeah, I shouldn't have said that. I'm sure I could have found some other way to deliver the same message if I hadn't been so mad at you."

"Hey, don't beat yourself up too hard," George said. "You might crush yourself, and then who's left to vanquish You-Know-Who?"

"You are, clearly," Harry supplied. "With your weapons of choice. Seriously, though, your idea sounds pretty damn cool."

"Doesn't it just?" George agreed.

There was no smiling or joking around—in fact, there was nothing beyond the strained civility that was typical after an argument—and Fred was still not fully looking Harry in the eye, but Harry walked away from this meeting feeling unexpectedly more optimistic about their prospects than he'd been in months.

Now he only needed to exert whatever political pressure he could to make sure that their future careers would not come to a halt in Azkaban, after all.

***

From the first moments of the meeting, Scrimgeour struck Harry as someone both on the lookout for improving the Ministry's reputation and not particularly adept at smooth-talking.

"So, Harry," he said, after a few platitudes regarding the charm and ambience of the private Three Broomsticks parlour they were at, "I must admit, the rumours about you pale in comparison to what you were seen to achieve. Defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named with magics nobody has yet identified, and that at just fifteen! It is only understandable that the public are going wild about you."

He looked a little like a wise and grizzled old lion, contemplating the follies of the world. Harry nodded, all polite attention.

"Of course, it is perfectly reasonable that, in these dark times, the people would turn towards one who appears to be their saviour," Scrimgeour continued. "It is, in all truth, not entirely relevant whether or not you are to save the world from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named; it is the perception, in this instance, that matters."

Harry wasn't sure what expression to plant on his face at this pronouncement, confusion or understanding, so he feared he ended up looking quite stony.

"Of course, to you it would matter a great deal whether or not you will be the one to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named," Scrimgeour hurried to add. "However, the public, for now, just needs somebody to believe in. It is incredible to what extent just the thought of you raises the public morale. If you were to stand alongside the Ministry at this moment, you would do a great service to our entire community."

"I could hardly resist such a call of duty," Harry said seriously. "I would be too modest in saying that I have not noticed the vastly improved press I've been receiving; to think that I can give back to the society that embraces me so warmly—it gives me immense satisfaction."

Scrimgeour grimaced slightly, catching the jibe aimed at the Ministry for their abruptly stopped slander campaign.

"My predecessor seems to have misjudged you completely. For that, you have our sincere
"I'm sure there is no need to remember the past now that we've turned a new leaf," Harry said cheerfully. "I only wonder, exactly what would be needed of me to show my support for the Ministry? I mean, of course I am ready to do my best, but I am not entirely sure I understand—"

"Oh, nothing too onerous," the Minister assured him. "If you were just to pop in or out of the Ministry once in a while, give an interview or two, things like that—it would send exactly the kind of message the public needs."

"I see," Harry said. "That does sound quite doable." He bit his lip. "Only, well…"

"Yes, what is it?" Scrimgeour inquired.

"There are a couple of things that still trouble me, as regards the Ministry's actions, but I'm sure the Ministry will recognize that they also belong in the past, with the old mistakes."

"What actions do you speak of?" Scrimgeour asked, frowning.

"Well, for one thing, someone at the Ministry seems to believe that my friends, Fred and George Weasley, are somehow to blame for the tragic nervous breakdown suffered by Madam Umbridge," Harry said, his very tone projecting his complete incomprehension at such a claim.

"I have yet to hear of this," Scrimgeour said, looking somewhat befuddled.

"This, then, must be a misunderstanding," Harry said. "I shall rest safe in knowing that, should such a complaint come to the Minister's desk, you will reject it as obviously false."

Something in Scrimgeour's body language changed subtly; all of a sudden, he was sitting a bit straighter and peering at Harry a little closer.

"Yes," he murmured, eyes a lot more alert than before. "You may be safe in knowing that the Weasley brothers are safe from prosecution on this score. You had some other… concerns?"

Harry did, actually. For one thing, his godfather, Sirius Black, was currently held in the Ministry cells, awaiting return to Azkaban—but he'd been wrongly imprisoned due to what had to be a tragic misunderstanding. Harry was sure something could be done about that—if nothing else, he'd ask the Minister to request Pensieve memories from Sirius Black as proof and keep an open mind when dealing with that case.

Hopefully, his and Dumbledore's combined pressure would do enough to produce results.

The Minister was clearly displeased with this request, but he couldn't say no outright, if he wanted to keep Harry happy.

And he wanted to keep Harry happy. Or else, who knew—Harry might figure that allying with the Ministry would be too troublesome after all.

"I was also thinking," Harry said, "that it might be in your power to make this arrangement still more beneficial to us both, Minister."

"Oh yes?" Scrimgeour inquired with the appearance of a person developing acute toothache.

Harry wondered whether Scrimgeour had expected how prepared Harry would be for this conversation—and just how easy he'd thought this would be. Harry might be the Boy-Who-Lived,
but he was a fifteen-year-old kid after all—surely he'd quail before the might of the Minister for Magic himself?

Sadly for Scrimgeour, Harry had dealt with bigger fish than him in the past.

"Well, if I'm to be popping in and out of the Ministry, perhaps I could make good use of my time there," Harry suggested. "The opportunities for furthering my studies—"

"Oh, I see," Scrimgeour said, clearly relieved that Harry was not demanding any more pardons for criminals. "You had something specific in mind?"

As it happened, Harry did. Apparition, for instance, would be an incredibly useful skill for him to learn. Harry would be ever so eager to commence this learning process ahead of his peer group—after all, his were exceptional circumstances, and he'd feel much better knowing that he'd have an escape route beyond Portkeys. Not that he was paranoid, but a Dark Lord was after him—

"Of course, my dear boy," Scrimgeour said genially. "Consider it done. A tutor will be arranged for you, for your first visit to the Ministry. Shall we say—in two weeks? There will be a press conference to address some of the public concerns… if you were to make an appearance, that would be most excellent timing…"

With an inward sigh, Harry assented. It seemed that he had two weeks of calm before Dumbledore and the Order found out that he'd chosen to go against their wishes and ally himself publicly with the Ministry; whatever information Dumbledore still had to impart to him, Harry had a feeling he'd better listen to it before the revelation struck.

Scrimgeour seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

"How are you planning to get out of the castle?" he inquired. "I'm sure that, unfortunately, the Headmaster will be against your decision to stand by the Ministry."

"I should have a perfectly plausible reason for going," Harry said. "My Defence professor is planning to arrange for a practice OWL test for me. If that were to fall on the same date—"

Scrimgeour was already nodding.

"I shall try to arrange things accordingly. May I just say—I can already feel it's going to be a pleasure to work with you, Mr. Potter."

Harry could just bet.

They agreed that their correspondence would continue through the Weasleys and that nothing should be done until Harry's first visit could be organized. After that, the cat would be out of the bag; it would be too late for Dumbledore or anyone else to try and dissuade Harry or prohibit him from expressing his views.

Being an intelligent man, Scrimgeour did not ask Harry whether he did actually uphold the views he was going to support. Harry had agreed to improve the Ministry's public image; that was all that mattered for now. The only thing Scrimgeour asked, in the last moments of the meeting—

"Does your decision mean that you are not, perhaps, as close to Dumbledore as he would suggest?"

Harry only shrugged to that. What business was it of Scrimgeour's what it meant?

The Minister harrumphed, watching him closely.
"A bit of a dark horse, aren't you, Harry?" he asked rhetorically. "One didn't know quite what to expect, what with—well, there's not much information about you, and that's contradictory. Our own fault, I suppose, to an extent." He sighed. "But no matter: we shall not make the mistake of underestimating you again."

Why did that, to Harry, sound more ominous than apologetic?

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Profundely aware that he had only two weeks of being in the assuredly good graces of Professor Dumbledore, Harry requested a meeting at Dumbledore's earliest convenience. The Headmaster agreed to meet him the following Thursday.

Only a few days had elapsed since Harry's meeting with Scrimgeour and another few remained until the end of the holidays; Harry had the feeling that events around him were unfolding faster than he could fully process them, that is to say—at their usual pace.

"I'm glad to see you looking so well, Harry," Dumbledore said, once he and Harry were sitting on opposite sides of his desk.

Instruments of unknown function purred tinnily around the office. Harry glanced at Fawkes, but the phoenix seemed to be asleep.

"I understand you have experienced no consequences at all of the duel at the Ministry?" the Headmaster asked. "No dizziness? No odd headaches? Very well… then let us proceed…"

He steepled his fingers and regarded Harry over his glasses.

"Tell me, Harry. Have you ever heard of Horcruxes?"

Was that a trick question?

A moment's hesitation gave Harry away; Dumbledore's face darkened almost imperceptibly.

"So you have."

"I don't know what they are," Harry said. "I've just seen the word before. Judging by the context, they are quite Dark magic, but I've never looked into them."

"As irony would have it, what you have not learnt on your own, I shall have to tell you," Dumbledore said.

Just by confessing to have encountered the word, Harry probably gave Dumbledore a pretty sound idea of what he'd been reading. Oh well. It wasn't like Dumbledore could really do anything about it.

"A Horcrux," Dumbledore continued, "is a fragment of a soul, torn away from the whole through the act of murder and deposited for safekeeping in a separate container. A man who has created a Horcrux cannot die as long as his Horcrux is secure. It is a safeguard against death, for those willing to take such a deeply damaging path."

But Harry was no longer listening.

"Fragment of a soul torn away," he repeated.

"Yes."
"In a separate container."

"Yes."

"So not at all what I was when I had a fragment of Voldemort's soul inside me, then."

Was this what this discussion was going to be about? More repercussions, more random shit that connected Harry to Voldemort?

Dumbledore looked suddenly pained and sympathetic, but Harry didn't want sympathy. He wanted answers. He'd apparently wanted those answers for a year already, ever since the last task of the Triwizard Tournament; he just hadn't known.

"You are correct, of course," Dumbledore said. "In a most technical sense, you could be considered a former Horcrux. However, please understand that the creation of a Horcrux involves much more than what occurred during the relocation of Voldemort's soul fragment into your body. If you were a Horcrux, you were the most accidental and unorthodox one, and Voldemort had no notion of it."

"It's a great comfort to me, I'm sure," Harry said.

"It should be," Dumbledore agreed serenely. "For can you imagine the sort of existence you would face if Voldemort was aware of your immeasurable importance to him? He did not know, when he captured you in your fourth year, that his main priority was to keep you alive; but if he had known…"

Harry wasn't even going to contemplate that scenario.

"Does that mean," he asked instead, "that your main priority until then was to make sure that I'd die?"

"Harry—"

"Well, if I was keeping Voldemort alive as long as I lived, surely at one point you had to make sure I died—but wait, I forgot about the prophecy, how does that even work together?"

Dumbledore sighed.

"Please do not assume that I have always possessed the knowledge I am sharing with you now. For some time, I had suspicions that you might be something of an accidental Horcrux, and they only grew with the discovery of your Parseltongue ability. However, until you told me it was gone, I had not known for a true fact that you had had a fragment of Voldemort's soul inside your body; nor had I planned to act on it."

Harry didn't know whether he believed it or not, but he supposed that entering an argument would be futile.

It made no difference anymore, after all; the soul fragment inside him was gone, so killing him wasn't an issue.

All water under the bridge.

Kind of tinged with red and metallic to the taste, but no matter—

"The expulsion of Voldemort's soul from your body at the end of your fourth year told me that my suspicions had been correct. At the same time, it offered further proof to a theory I had been
entertaining. For Voldemort's soul to break apart in this manner and for Voldemort to be so unaware of it—his soul had to be wholly, awfully unstable."

He made a pause, but Harry couldn't catch the significance.

"I suspected that Voldemort had made multiple Horcruxes prior to attacking you that Halloween," Dumbledore said softly. "More than one, which was all any other wizard had dared to do. I could not be certain of the number, but I was almost sure there were several. I had, after all, already seen one destroyed by then."

"You destroyed one of his Horcruxes?"

"No, you did."

Harry just stared.

"In your second year, when you showed me that diary," Dumbledore said, "I recognized it to be an immensely powerful and extremely Dark object. I had very rarely held anything so steeped in the most awful magic. It was no longer potent, but I could feel the traces—traces that I had felt vaguely once before—on you, just after you were taken from the rubble of your home…"

Harry repressed an involuntary shudder.

"Why was it—so powerful in the diary, but not in me?" he asked. "The soul fragment, I mean. It got to control Ginny Weasley fully, but I've never felt a single thing from that soul—"

Unless he hadn't noticed feeling it, unless he'd mistaken the urgings of a foreign soul for his own desires—

"We may quite never know, but I believe the answer lies in the protection that your mother gave you," Dumbledore replied.

("Lily's sacrifice was also the reason why your soul and Voldemort's stayed separate. It kept a barrier between them, of sorts...")

"Yes," Harry said, shaking off the memory. "I understand. So, the Horcruxes—how many did you say there were, sir?"

"I truly do not know, Harry. There is a person who very well might; I shall do my utmost best to persuade him to come to Hogwarts next year. He steadily avoided me whilst the Ministry was against us, but I hope that he will reconsider. It is also my belief that he would give up that information to you much more readily than he would to me."

"Why would that be, Professor?"

Dumbledore's countenance remained enigmatic.

"In you, he might see a chance to remedy his old mistakes."

Harry couldn't truthfully say that he'd understood that, but that wasn't really the issue right now.

"So, until we know how many Horcruxes exist, can we just assume that there might be a massive number of them?"

In his mind's eye, Harry saw already mounds of Horcruxes spread all over the world, drowning them in the sheer impossibility of the task.
"I believe that Voldemort has made a larger number than anybody else, but there is a certain limit beyond which even the bravest man would not, I imagine, dare to split his soul," Dumbledore responded. "Creating one Horcrux is already a deed of unthinkably dark and perverse a nature; creating more is quite simply no longer safe. In his quest to acquire immortality, Voldemort could obliterate his very self. Indeed, his soul was already so unstable at the time when he attacked you that he did not notice a piece escaping."

Harry cocked his head to the side.

"But wouldn't that mean that he might really have a huge number of Horcruxes? If his soul was really so unstable that it would split with every murder and attach itself all over the place—"

Dumbledore smiled.

"Harry, you have to realize that your situation is very much the exception. The circumstances of your encounter with Voldemort on the night he attacked you are quite unique in history and are unlikely to ever be repeated again. You may be safe in assuming that Voldemort has only the Horcruxes he has deliberately created—apart from you. And it is more telling still that the soul fragment in you was also destroyed by him in his ignorance."

Harry nodded slowly.

"So this is what it would take to defeat him," he said, trying to adjust to the idea. "Once the Horcruxes are gone, he will be mortal again."

"Yes," Dumbledore confirmed. "He will, indeed."

It seemed a little easier said than done, though.

"But how does one find Horcruxes?" Harry asked. "Or destroy them? And how do we even know what they are, never mind their number—they could be anything, anywhere, couldn't they?"

"I do not know precisely what they are, but I have several guesses as to what they might be." Dumbledore held up a hand to forestall Harry's questions. "I do intend to tell you; in fact, I intend to show you—show you what I know, the results of my research over the years, so that you might make your own conclusions. But we shall not do it today. This is a long project, Harry; you and I have many a meeting to come, I assure you."

Harry thought of the impending revelation that he was going to publicly side with the Ministry. Hopefully, Dumbledore's desire to share would not be affected by Harry's choices.

For now, though—

"Are there any books that I could read to find out more about Horcruxes?" Harry asked cautiously. "Just to know what they are like and how to destroy them…"

The expression in Dumbledore's eyes didn't change, but Harry had the distinct feeling that he was being assessed.

"Rest assured, Harry, that I shall give you all the relevant information about Horcruxes," the Headmaster said at length. "These are not the times for concealment; it is indeed important for you to know the details of the task that lies before us."

And yet he chose not to trust Harry with books; the only information he was willing to share would be filtered through him, so that Harry might not learn too much. Clearly, and just as Harry had
expected, Dumbledore was wary of letting Harry close to Dark magic, lest Harry be—tempted or
tainted or some other bullshit like that.

Being right in this instance left Harry with a sense of resentment, rather than vindication, somehow.

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"Witches and wizards," the announcer called out in an excited voice, "let me present to you… Harry
Potter!"

Camera flashes went off, the crowd roared, and Scrimgeour smiled benevolently next to Harry.
Harry inclined his head modestly and waved at the congregated populace. The sea of faces was
blurry before him from the lights and he couldn't hear individual shouts amid the noise, but he didn't
need to.

They loved him at the moment; that he knew for sure.

As he smiled and waved, his thoughts were on the recently concluded press conference. He was
getting used to them, but sometimes he still doubted that he'd said the right thing; it felt good to bring
Lockhart down a peg, but had it been wise? Had Harry been too evasive on the question of his
family? And, damn, had his conversation with Amelia Bones not been overheard, he'd never have
aired his relationship with Susan—

"Well done, dear boy," Scrimgeour said quietly. "You are doing magnificently."

The Ministry was enjoying a great boost of confidence from the wizarding population. Hiring Harry
as their mascot had indeed brought a public relations victory; the wizarding world seemed somehow
more united and less politically apathetic than it had been. Suddenly, everyone was worried for their
common future; everyone felt it was their duty to stand by Harry Potter and the Ministry; everyone
was ready to rise to the defence of their glorious nation against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and
his rule of terror.

Harry was a little baffled that a fifteen-year-old kid with a funky scar could create these results, but
that was the way of the wizarding public.

("Belief is very important for wizards. And you, Harry, are a miracle. It's easy to believe in you, if
you allow it.")

Harry allowed it—despite the criticism it garnered from his own allies.

"I can't believe that you would do this," Bill Weasley told him. "After all the shit this year, that you'd
just roll over and accept them—"

"The crucial detail is in who is rolling over for whom," Harry replied coolly. "Has it occurred to you
that you might be misreading this situation?"

It had not; it was obvious that the Order believed Harry to have fallen for the Ministry's promises,
bitten off more than he could chew, bought into his own myth.

"You're advanced for your age, but don't get carried away playing the hero," Emmeline Vance
advised coldly.

"With James for a father and Sirius for a godfather, it's hard to defy the heritage for recklessness, but
this is not a game, Harry," Lupin cautioned.
"The Ministry will not stand by you forever," Dedalus Diggle tried to explain. "They will betray you again whenever it suits them. It is sad, but true."

Very few people seemed to understand that Harry didn't need any of these condescending warnings. Funnily enough, Snape was one of them.

"Don't let Potter mislead you into believing him to be the injured party," he told the Order, to their great consternation. "A fool he might be, but he'll make greater fools of you if you think for a moment that he had not aimed for this to happen the way it did."

But then, Snape knew much more about Harry than the rest, being his Head of House. He'd seen and heard more of his activities than even Dumbledore; Harry was still unsure how much he reported to the Headmaster, but some things were impossible to hide.

Like the fact that Harry had long been on friendly terms with students who planned to become Death Eaters. And still remained on non-belligerent standing with them, enough to stay on the same Quidditch team.

The Quidditch Cup installed in Snape's office for yet another year bore testament to their continued cooperation.

"Why did you do this?" Tonks asked Harry, being about the only person to do so. "Why ally with the Ministry, don't you understand that they're completely unscrupulous?"

"I still support what the Order is doing," Harry said. I just believe that the Ministry has a much wider reach. It might not always have the right methods, but, as far as uniting the wizarding world against Voldemort goes, the Ministry has a much better shot at it than the Order ever will. No offence."

But they did take offence; almost the entire Order felt affronted by Harry's decision, as if he owed them something. But he'd never promised to do things their way. Or Dumbledore's way.

"You display the spirit of independence very strongly, Harry," Dumbledore said, and only his eyes expressed his ire. "It is most commendable. Although I cannot help but wish that you had contacted one of your elders before making such important decisions."

His displeasure did not carry over into cancelling the sessions of diving into Voldemort's past, but relations between him and Harry had cooled significantly. Like the Order, he seemed to perceive betrayal in Harry's unilateral decision to make a deal with Scrimgeour.

However, in some ways, it was preferable to the other sentiment Harry had noticed in them recently: the slow and somewhat horrified realization on the part of some Order members that Harry had in fact created this situation because it suited his goals, and that they had no fucking clue what those goals were.

In the end, however, it did not matter.

The Order could not withdraw support from him, anyway, because he was the Boy-Who-Lived. The very purpose of their organization involved sticking by him.

The Ministry, on the other hand, could change their minds about Harry at any moment, and Harry wanted to get as much as possible out of the temporary truce. Only the Ministry could make the exceptions for him that he needed.

And he had no scruples about exploiting them to the fullest.
At age fifteen, Harry had doors open before him that most wizards never even glimpsed. He walked through the corridors of the Ministry, popping over after lessons on some days, saying hello to Ministry officials like he belonged there. Without any rank or official position, he had risen to the highest echelons of power; the Minister had personally congratulated him on having completed his OWLs, and he was waltzing in and out of official functions as if he had any business being there.

He had not yet persuaded the Minister to drop the Trace off him—in fact, he was despairing of ever succeeding in this quest—but his Apparition lessons were going swimmingly and he'd managed to gain supervised access to Auror libraries. The Department of Mysteries remained impenetrable, despite the best of Harry's efforts, but he'd received quite a few helpful tips for mastering Occlumency from a couple of Obliviators he'd talked to. He hadn't dared to even whisper the word **Horcrux** anywhere in the Ministry's vicinity, aware that the walls had ears, but he was always on the lookout for known sightings of Founders' objects or information on Voldemort's actions, past and present.

For once, the world of opportunity was Harry's for the taking.

It felt pretty damn good, actually.

-End of year five-
Harry felt glances on him as soon as he stepped into the ballroom, dressed for the evening and a smile plastered on his face.

"Ah, our very own Mr. Potter," Minister for Magic Rufus Scrimgeour said, coming towards Harry with all the appearance of a doting uncle who'd spotted his favourite nephew.

"Minister," Harry acknowledged, shaking hands and accepting a pat on his shoulder. "It is good to see you again, sir. How are you this evening?"

"Excellent, simply capital," Scrimgeour said. "And what of you, Harry? I hear your Apparition lessons are going well."

"Oh yes," Harry said. "I'm very grateful for the opportunity to learn, Minister."

Witnessing their exchange, hardly anyone could have guessed that they had spent the hour leading up to the gala in the Minister's office, working out Harry's next inspirational speech to the populace.

Harry didn't know about the populace, but he was getting progressively less inspired.

"Well, I'm glad you could make it tonight, Harry," Scrimgeour said. "Do enjoy yourself—and go easy on the punch, hmm!"

"Of course, sir," Harry said, and drifted further into the room.

The ballroom, filled to the brim with the rich, the pureblooded and the otherwise distinguished, bathed in the light of twenty brilliant crystal chandeliers. They were doing a bit of a waltz on the ceiling, gliding gently in rhythm with the music. The patterned parquet floors sparkled—spellwork or house-elves, Harry wondered—and fragrant flowers decorated the entire room.

Some couples swirled on the dance floor, their feet in perfect synch for the formal dance, but most people mingled. This was, after all, more about politics and talking with the right people than about fun.

Unless you were the Boy-Who-Lived, and then it was mostly about putting in an appearance.

However, Harry did have another objective in mind tonight, and he glanced around subtly in search of his target as he made his way through the crowd, smiling and shaking hands with the people he knew.

"So nice to see you—"

"Feels like it's been too long—"
"Do pass my greetings—"

Harry gave out yet another smile and turned, snatching a glass of punch from a floating tray.

"Oh hello, Harry, dear chap," Lockhart said, materializing by his elbow.

Harry nearly spilled the alcohol. Lockhart was looking as glamorous as always, his robes in a daring shade of turquoise and his smile still aimed to kill.

He insisted that Harry call him Gilderoy, as he did at their every meeting, and responded readily when Harry asked about his latest heroic adventures.

("I would, of course, challenge You-Know-Who to a duel to the death—but don't worry, Harry, I won't go stealing your thunder!")

All through Lockhart's monologue, Harry had been surreptitiously glancing around the room. Finally, he saw her: Amelia Bones, currently talking to Ludo Bagman.

Harry had only just made his escape from Lockhart when a tall man in dark robes stepped into his path.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," Ezekius Yaxley said in a silky voice. "Such a pleasure to see you again."

Harry stopped, feeling a sort of resignation settle over him.

"Mr. Yaxley," he acknowledged. "Likewise."

Thoughts of the impending conversation with Amelia Bones would have to wait; Harry could not afford to be distracted for this.

"You remember my daughter, of course." Yaxley gestured to a tall young woman on his arm.

Oh, Harry remembered.

He gave a heartfelt smile to the former Slytherin queen bee who had turned her nose up at him for his first four years at Hogwarts.

"Lovely to see you again," he told Lavinia.

"The pleasure is all mine."

Her eyes were pure frost as she looked at him, and Harry wondered detachedly whether she'd followed in daddy's footsteps and joined the Death Eater corps.

She'd certainly always been uptight about blood purity and easy on violence.

Perhaps these days, she was drilling Death Eater basics into Edward Montague, Miles Bletchley and Adrian Pucey—the likely new recruits.

It was that thought, rather than Lavinia's glare, that made Harry turn away.

"I hope you are doing well, Mr. Yaxley," he said politely.

*How's your body count this week? Your organization's latest raid—the one in Hertfordshire—was a little heavy on the Cruciatu, if you don't mind me saying.*
Yaxley gave a satisfied nod.

"Oh yes, I would say things are going very well, wouldn't you, Lavinia? It's a pity you had to turn down the invitation to Lavinia's engagement party, Mr. Potter—it was quite the event, I assure you."

As Yaxley talked, Harry felt a brush of Legilimency against his mind. He hoped he maintained a politely interested expression through the effort it took him to fill his head with meanings musings on the amount of alcohol in the punch. For good measure, he threw in the memories of Lavinia in the Slytherin common room.

"… don't you agree, Mr. Potter?"

Harry felt his heart speed up. He had no clue in hell what Yaxley was talking about.

Occlumency was difficult, damn it. He could hardly focus on not letting Yaxley reach into his deepest secrets and dodge verbal traps at the same time.

"I—Mr. Yaxley," Harry said with determination, "forgive me for changing the topic so abruptly, but I just couldn't help wondering—" Harry willed himself to come up with something, anything. "—does… what do you think of the rumours that werewolves have joined the Dark Lord's side?"

Yaxley's gaze became abruptly sharp. It was a risky gamble, of course, bringing up the war, but then Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived. He could afford to seem curious.

Harry just hoped that Yaxley's attention would be on Harry's insolence in asking the question, rather than the unanswered inquiry of his own. If he were to suspect Harry of trying to employ Occlumency against him—

Well. The entire point of Occlumency was to appear artlessly innocent while not giving up any secrets. Letting people know that you were Occluding and hiding something was kind of contrary to that goal.

Besides, it might make Yaxley try harder.

"There are many rumours, Mr. Potter," Yaxley said, watching Harry closely. "One would be foolish to believe them all."

Again that gentle brush of Legilimency when Harry raised his eyes for a moment, and Harry tightened his hold on the glass of punch.

Once more, he was cluttering his mind with images.

Werewolves—scary werewolves in Harry's textbook—random pages in the Daily Prophet—

"Of course, Mr. Yaxley," Harry forced out meanwhile. "I just wondered what you thought of that rumour."

He broke the brief eye contact to incline his head, as if paying due to Yaxley's superior judgement on rumours.

He really needed to master Occlumency better before he could do this high-stakes shit.

To justify not meeting Yaxley's eyes again, Harry looked into his glass of punch and took a sip. Alcohol on one side, Death Eaters on another—that's how Harry liked to spend his evenings.
"They do say that the Dark Lord is recruiting among creatures," Yaxley noted. "Who knows what progress he's making?"

"Who, indeed?" Harry echoed, looking around the room.

He was startled to see that the very object of his earlier thoughts was on her way towards him and the Yaxleys. Amelia Bones did not look pleased as she took in Harry and his companions.

"Madam Bones," Yaxley acknowledged straight after Harry, inclining his head.

Lavinia, too, murmured a greeting.

"Yaxley," Madam Bones said. Her face reflected her distaste as she added: "I'll borrow Mr. Potter here, if you don't mind?"

"By all means," Yaxley said generously and nodded at Harry. "Enjoy your evening, Mr. Potter."

"You too, Mr. Yaxley, Miss Yaxley," Harry responded.

He and Amelia Bones watched in silence as the pair glided away into the crowd.

"Not a good company for you to keep, Mr. Potter," Madam Bones said briskly, then, turning to face Harry. "Besides everything else, he's dangerous."

Harry rubbed his scar, breathing relief at Yaxley's departure.

"I know, ma'am," Harry said. "He's… deathly."

Amelia Bones threw him a sharp glance.

"Are you sure of that, boy?"

"Yes," Harry said simply.

He'd told Scrimgeour this man was a Death Eater, but Scrimgeour had said he could not arrest Yaxley without conclusive proof. Otherwise there would be stink to the high heavens about infringing upon the rights of upstanding Purebloods.

And what proof did Harry have but his own word and that of Snape—who couldn't even speak out, being a spy and all?

Scrimgeour had agreed to try and curb the power of all the people that Harry had identified as Death Eaters. He'd also consented to keep an eye on them and not trust them. However, very few arrests had been made for lack of evidence.

This arrangement was like the Sirius Black situation all over again. That one had been concluded with no official pardon, but the manhunt called off; a study in compromise and careful balance.

"And his daughter?" Madam Bones inquired, snapping Harry back to the present.

He shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "She's always had… tendencies, but that doesn't mean anything."

Madam Bones turned back to the crowd with a frown, perhaps trying to locate Lavinia.
Harry figured, though, now was the time. He cast a subtle privacy charm and faced the stern-looking
woman.

"Madam Bones," he said. "I know—that you must be aware that I've written to Susan several times,
asking her for a meeting at the Ministry."

Between the two places where they would be reasonably safe, the Ministry and the headquarters, the
Ministry was the only real possibility.

"I also know," Harry continued, looking Amelia Bones straight in the eyes, "that you have been
staunchly opposed to such meetings and so far have not permitted Susan to come. I would just like to
ask—why."

Madam Bones surveyed him without betraying any emotion whatsoever.

"The moment Susan steps foot inside the Ministry, she will be seen in a political light. My niece, Mr.
Potter, is only sixteen, and she has more than enough on her plate as it is. I will not see her drawn
into political games."

"Yes," Harry said. "Of course. I understand that, ma'am. But I was not proposing—a public meeting,
like this, or of any kind. No-one needs to know that she's here."

"And if anything goes wrong?" Madam Bones asked, voice hard. "If anyone gets a whiff of her
presence? Would you see my niece exposed to more scrutiny, Mr. Potter?"

"No, of course not," Harry said at once.

Susan had been a front-page feature on wizarding publications far too many times this summer.

There'd been media articles tearing to shreds Susan's looks, the clothes she wore, and the way she
spoke in interviews. There'd been candid shots of her going shopping, walking her dog, going to
parties with friends. There'd been editorials speculating whether she'd snagged Harry Potter by the
means of a love potion, whether she'd cheated on him with Ernie Macmillan, and whether Harry
would dump her soon.

It was crazy, uncalled for and, what's worse, unstoppable.

Harry had never told her it would be like this, but he'd never thought it could get so bad. He'd
imagined that some public reaction would follow the revelation of who he dated, but that it would
turn into a nationwide sport to spot any blemish on Susan's face and post a photo of it in the *Daily
Prophet*—that he could not have foreseen.

"The thing is, though, Madam Bones," Harry said, "right now, she's got to face all of this completely
on her own, and I'm not even there to help her through it. I've—kind of—caused all of this, and it
can't be helping that we haven't even seen each other in three weeks since school ended. If I could
just—see her—"

He thought the expression on Amelia Bones's face softened a little.

"I understand, Mr. Potter. And you do seem to care for my niece—"

"I do."

"—but I cannot risk causing her more harm. We think things are bad now, when the media is
hounding her. It is bad enough when she is seen as the mere love interest of the Boy-Who-Lived.
Think, Mr. Potter, of how much worse things will be if she were to be seen as taking a stand in any realm outside of romance. When your political enemies become her political enemies."

Amelia Bones threw a pointed glance around—encompassing Ezekius Yaxley and his ilk, the scheming Purebloods, the Ministry functionaries.

"You, Mr. Potter, seem to be handling yourself well, despite your age," she continued, and her tone made it clear that he should not take it for a compliment. "But you cannot expect everyone to be up to the same challenges as you are."

Harry gritted his teeth.

"Has Susan said anything—"

"Susan is not sure what she wants. She never chose this. She chose you," Mrs. Bones acknowledged, "but she was not prepared for this kind of attention. She reviles it. It frightens her. I will not take her here, throw her to the wolves and see how she copes with more threats." There was steel in Amelia Bones's voice as she said this.

Harry wished he could argue the point, but he knew a lot of this to be true. From Susan's letters, Harry did know that she felt that her world had turned upside down and she was still learning to walk. She seemed to feel that events were spinning out of her control, which—well, they were.

Glancing at the floor, Harry wondered whether he was asking too much. Whether he was expecting Susan to rise to a challenge she was completely unprepared for, just because he could do it. Where was the line between believing in her and piling on expectations?

Still, none of this made him want to see her less. Hug her, dry her tears and tell her that everything would be fine, in the end.

"Is there anything I can do to make you change your mind about this, Madam?" Harry asked.

Amelia Bones was looking at Harry the way Professor McGonagall sometimes did—with a hint of compassion underneath the sternness.

"Stop being the Boy-Who-Lived," she said. "But you can't do that, can you?"

"No," Harry said.

"Unfortunately, in addition to being a boyfriend, you're a socio-political phenomenon," Madam Bones went on. "Any girl would have difficulties dealing with that. Susan is holding up well, considering, but she's not made of stone. Media hounding gets to her, you know."

"I know," Harry said tiredly. "I've tried to stop it, but it's bigger than me. Believe me, Madam Bones, if there was anything I could do to make it easier on her—"

"I believe you, Mr. Potter," Amelia Bones said, and the softness in her voice was ten times worse than her earlier brusqueness. "But there just isn't much you can do."

***

A week after the Ministry function, the Order convened for a meeting in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. They gathered around the table, as always, and there was still a gap on Hestia Jones's right where Kingsley Shacklebolt used to sit.
Dumbledore was talking.

"I have reason to believe that Dementors are about to abandon Azkaban prison," he said. "It has not happened yet, but all signs are aligned in that direction."

Harry didn't raise his eyes to look around and see what effect these words had produced, but he noticed his neighbour Tonks lean forward in her chair.

For his part, Harry continued to fold his napkin. He folded one corner, then the other… then turned it around, unfolded again…

This was far from the first conversation on Dementors he'd had this week. What he'd really rather talk about was Horcruxes and any progress Dumbledore might be making with them. However, Dumbledore had been mum on the topic as of late.

"What about Scrimgeour?" Bill Weasley asked, meanwhile. "Can't he do something about the Dementors?"

Moody gave a derisive snort.

"The Minister seems determined to pretend that the danger is not real," Dumbledore answered. "It is as if he is actually unable to envisage the possibility of so great a failure."

"If Dementors abandon Azkaban," Tonks said, her voice betraying fear at the very thought, "they will most likely join V-voldemort. Surely, preventing this catastrophe is more important than—well—"


"I could be mistaken, naturally, in my assessment of the Minister's motivations," Dumbledore allowed.

A short pause descended.

"Mr. Potter?" Dedalus Diggle prodded. "Do you have any insights?"

Harry fought the urge to grimace as all faces turned to him. He put the napkin aside and reluctantly lifted his head.

"I wouldn't say Scrimgeour is ignoring the Dementor problem, exactly," Harry said. "He just doesn't see what he could do."

"What do you mean?" Black asked, frowning.

"He can't release the Dementors, because that would produce the same effect. He doesn't have the manpower to stand guard over them or replace Dementors with Aurors," Harry listed. "Same goes for transporting the prisoners away from Azkaban. There's just not a lot of options." Harry shrugged. "Or that's what he says."

"So he figures, how about I stick my head in the sand and wait for the whole thing to blow over?" Charlie Weasley asked harshly.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Not like I know what he thinks. I just know what he says."
Dumbledore spread his hands in a peaceful gesture.

"Let us not get carried away, gentlemen. While Rufus Scrimgeour might have a wide array of reasons, it all stands to nothing as long as his actions remain the same. Or rather, I should say, his lack of action."

"Can we take it as given, then, that Azkaban will fall to Voldemort?" Lupin asked, pale.

"Without ourselves abandoning all other effort to concentrate on defending that fortress…"
Dumbledore shook his head. "There is naught we can do, especially on our own, without the Ministry's help."

"Can't you talk to him, Harry?" Hestia Jones implored, turning towards Harry. She still looked exhausted from her Ministry battle injuries, her dark hair hanging limp and her skin nearly translucent. "Can't you talk to Scrimgeour, make him see sense?"

"Pinning all hopes on the boy, now?" Moody snapped.

Hestia flushed.

"He's the only one with a real link to the Minister, and he did listen about Sirius—kind of—"

I can talk to Scrimgeour about this until I'm blue in the face, Harry felt like saying. Haven't I just told you that I've already spoken to him?

Instead, he went for a tactful—

"If Professor Dumbledore cannot succeed at this task, I don't think I can."

Dumbledore gave Harry a look over his glasses that seemed to communicate amused appreciation.

"What can actually be done?" Emmeline Vance asked in a cool voice, cutting across the burgeoning swell of murmurs.

"We can endeavour to find out Voldemort's plans, so that we may alert Mr. Scrimgeour if we know that an attack is to take place," Dumbledore said with a glance directed Snape's way.

Snape hadn't yet uttered a word during the entire meeting, beyond the stifled greetings at the very start. He just sat at the table next to McGonagall and looked his usual sour self.

Harry hoped he appeared half as impassive as he lowered his eyes and returned to toying with the napkin.

It was hard to believe that, one year ago, he'd been doing his best to fight his way into these meetings. These days, most everyone took it quite for granted that he would attend—and not only that, but also report his share of information.

Harry never volunteered for the role, but he seemed to have become a sort of a double spy for Scrimgeour and the Order.

Scrimgeour trusted him over Dumbledore. That trust did not extend very far, but meant that the Minister expected Harry to bullshit him less and be less judgemental on matters that related to the war. He wasn't entirely wrong, either.

This made Harry closer to Scrimgeour than Dumbledore was, which meant that the Order turned to him for information on the Minister's frame of mind. This naturally came with a healthy doze of
automatically shooting the messenger, but not nearly as much as Snape got for reporting the goings on in Voldemort's camp.

Harry could deal. Besides, using Harry's connection to the Ministry was probably the Order's way of coping with his perceived defection. Lemons, lemonade. That sort of thing.

The present meeting concluded with nothing decided beyond constant vigilance.

According to Snape, Voldemort was currently abroad, looking for something. However, he could return and mount an attack on Azkaban any day now.

According to Lupin, the werewolves would most likely side with Voldemort after all. A certain Fernir Greyback and his pack were already convinced and, as far as Lupin could tell, entertained themselves by attacking Muggle villages.

According to Emmeline Vance, unease persisted in the Pureblood circles. There was a pervading feeling among them that, this time around, both sides in the war would tolerate a lot fewer fence-sitters.

Harry tried to catch Dumbledore after the meeting to ask about Horcruxes, but Dumbledore disappeared before Harry could utter as much as sir.

"Busy man, Dumbledore," Hagrid said, patting Harry's shoulder in a way that was likely to dislocate it forever. "Don' yeh go worryin' 'bout it, now."

Harry smiled at the half-giant.

"I know. It wasn't really important. How are you, Hagrid?"

He didn't get to see much of the man these days. He hadn't got to see much of anyone for the past month, really, except Grimmauld Place regulars and Ministry personnel. Harry kept up communication with his friends through owl post, of course, but that hardly made up for being apart from them. At least he got to hang out with Cedric, since Cedric worked at the Ministry now.

An excellent career move, at least as Harry's sanity was concerned.

"I'm a dam' sight better now that Umbridge is gone," Hagrid said with feeling. "Hold on, Harry, there's Professor Snape goin'—meant to ask him 'bout some herbs for—oh yeh won' believe what we'll be studyin' next year—"

Hagrid hurried to intercept Snape, who seemed determined to leave, as always, before dinner.

Harry stared after Hagrid in consternation. It suddenly occurred to him that the amiable giant might be expecting him to take Care of Magical Creatures into NEWTs. And Harry was planning to do no such thing.

Blast-Ended Screwts at OWL level had been quite enough.

***

Sitting down at the breakfast table the next morning, Harry caught sight of the Daily Prophet and winced.

Susan was on the front page.

Again.
Wondering what it was this time, Harry absently said good morning to Black and Lupin and pulled the paper over.

His appetite abruptly vanishing, Harry read that Susan had apparently lost all cool when pursued by some reporters, whipped out her wand and attacked them.

The headline *Potter's Princess Snaps at Last* crowned the page, while the photo depicted Susan—sobbing and looking decidedly deranged—in the act of cursing the living lights out of some guy with a camera.

Harry wished he could curse him too.

"I—thanks for the breakfast, I've got to go," he said, getting up from the table.

Lupin sent him a sympathetic look as he departed.

Once upstairs in his room, Harry became conscious of still having the *Daily Prophet* in his hand. He threw it into the rubbish bin and, clenching his jaw, proceeded to torch the publication into ashes, fully aware that this was helping nothing.

Harry let out a long breath, sat at his desk. Grabbed a piece of parchment.

The parchment seemed to stare mockingly at him.

This, this was the part Harry hated the most—that he and Susan had no other contact than cold, unfeeling paper delivered with the speed of an owl's flight.

What could he even say at this point, beyond the deeply inadequate *I'm sorry* and *I love you*? That he hoped she wasn't too upset, even though anyone could tell that she was? That he hoped she wasn't taking this too close to heart, even though that was obviously the case? That he hoped she wasn't going to trash this letter unopened, even though this was nothing but a selfish wish?

Harry dropped his head onto his arms and stared at the surface of the desk up close. This was worse than giving meaningless speeches to the wizarding public, because this was someone who mattered to him on a very personal level and, despite being perfectly sincere, Harry nonetheless felt like he was feeding her bullshit.

Amelia Bones's face swam up in his mind, her eyes stern the way they had been when she recited why this was not good for Susan. She'd never said that the entire relationship wasn't good for Susan. But she'd certainly implied it.

Was she trying to convince Susan of the same thing?

Did Susan need much convincing at this point?

Could Madam Bones's judgement possibly be *true*?

There was a knock on Harry's door.

Startled, he sat up.

"Yes?"

Black looked in, his face pale and drawn as Harry hadn't seen it in weeks.

"Come down," Black said. "Come to the kitchen."
Harry got up at once, worried by Black's expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked as they descended the staircase together.


Harry's hand gripped the banisters a little tighter, and he made an effort to keep walking.

He felt suddenly cold.

"Death Eaters?" he asked, keeping his voice purposefully even.

Black glanced at him.

"Worse."

They didn't say anything else until they reached the kitchen. Quite a few Order members were already assembled there.

Moody's face was grim as he stood in the middle of the room, hands clasped behind his back.

"Killed by Voldemort himself, judging by all the signs," he was saying as Harry and Black came in. "As an example, most likely."

"An example of what?" Charlie Weasley asked, sounding almost belligerent. "Of what would happen to a nice Pureblood if she sided with the wrong people?"

"Something like that." Moody shrugged.

"Where's Dumbledore?" Tonks wondered as Harry glanced down onto the floor.

He hadn't known Emmeline Vance all that well. But she had been his Defence Professor and an Order member, and now—

A corpse, somewhere in the Ministry's mortuary.

The discussion happening over Harry's head determined that Dumbledore was at the Ministry. It was he who had detected the traces of Voldemort's magic in Emmeline Vance's house.

"What about the wards?" Tonks asked, looking at Bill Weasley.

Bill was frowning.

"I don't know. I also don't know—fuck. I guess we'd better evacuate the others?"

"Ron and Ginny," Mrs. Weasley said at once, paling, and it was testament to her worry that she wasted no time reprimanding her eldest on language.

She turned to go, while Bill and Charlie exchanged quick glances.

"I'll come with you," Bill said, and they both hurried out of the kitchen.

"Is that alright with you, Sirius?" Charlie inquired, meanwhile.

Black waved a negligent hand.

"Of course. Make yourselves at home, this house would benefit from being that to someone."
Harry couldn't help thinking that the Weasleys' last stay at Grimmauld Place had not been happy and could bring no pleasant memories.

"I'd better go to the Ministry," Tonks said. "It's time, and besides—I should probably be there."

"I'll come with you," Harry said.

Today of all days he could not bear another long afternoon of staying shut inside Grimmauld Place with his thoughts and his books.

***

"Oh Merlin, Harry, that's awful," Cedric said, when Harry showed up at his office in the Department of Magical Accidents and told him the news.

Cedric squeezed Harry's shoulder and then nodded at his co-worker's empty chair.

"Sit."

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything?" Harry asked.

They usually agreed on a time for a meeting, making sure that the former Ravenclaw student sharing Cedric's office would be absent.

"Our Defence teacher was killed, Harry," Cedric said. "I think that allows for a bit of a break."

Harry conceded the point with a nod, sinking down into an uncomfortable chair opposite Cedric's.

Cedric and his colleague hadn't been working in that office for long—Cedric was only a month in, so there were hardly any personal knick-knacks around. Just typical Ministry-issued furniture, stationery and a fake window on the wall.

"There you go," Cedric said, putting a bottle of Firewhisky and two glasses on his desk.

"In the middle of a working day?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

Cedric shrugged, his face oddly expressionless.

"We always need to drink a sober-up potion after alcohol these days anyway," he said. "So really, it makes no difference."

Harry held up his glass.

"To Emmeline Vance?"

"To Emmeline Vance," Cedric agreed. "Do we have any idea who—"

"Voldemort."

They drank in silence. Harry finished his first glass and then poured himself another. He was halfway done with it when Cedric sighed.

"Are you meeting the Minister after this?"

Harry leaned his head against the wall and raised his eyes, contemplating the ceiling.

"Yes, I probably am. We'll have to tweak my next inspirational address. Something about despite the
"dark threat that strikes mercilessly into our midst…"

"I don't know how you can do it," Cedric said flatly.

"Neither does the Order," Harry muttered.

"Is it still difficult with them?"

"It's fine."

"Is that why you look like such a picture of cheer and sunshine whenever I see you lately?"

At that, Harry brought his gaze back to Cedric.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't insult my intelligence," Cedric informed him, frowning.

Harry lowered his eyes and ran a hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry, but you know what it's like. I've mentioned it before."

"Harry, truly—is there no-one in the Order you can rely on?" Cedric asked. "You can't—I mean, I'm sure you can never relax your guard around anyone, but I can't imagine how exhausting it has to be."

Harry shrugged.

"It can't be that bad," Cedric insisted.

Harry let his head fall back, looking up at the ceiling again. He didn't want to have this argument right now.

"I just wish I didn't have to live with them," he said, opting for partial openness. "How's the flat hunt going, by the way?"

Cedric took a hearty swig of whisky.

"I'm beginning to think that soon I will have to insist that it's I who's going to live in the flat, not my mother, and therefore I should be the one to choose. This will upset my mother very much, but I think my chances of renting my own place will increase exponentially."

"Exponentially," Harry tried. "Huh, I can still say that too."

"Right," Cedric said. "Enough Firewhisky. Our next drink is a sober-up potion."

"Killjoy," Harry murmured.

"I'm older and wiser than you," Cedric uttered with all the dignity of a man balancing on a chair's back legs with a bottle of alcohol in one hand and a glass in the other.

***

The Weasleys moved in two days after Emmeline Vance's death. Like Harry had expected, they had been reluctant to return to the headquarters, but it was the safest place to be.

Black seemed cheered by having more visitors around—Harry thought he was probably glad they were Gryffindors, to boot. Harry did his usual trick of disappearing to the library and rarely crossing paths with the other inhabitants of the house, so it could be said he was adjusting well, too.
Currently, Harry was hiding out in the tapestry room, while Black and the younger Weasleys were re-painting a downstairs parlour. Mrs. Weasley suggested it as a constructive activity for all, but Harry had managed to slip away in time.

It was good to have a peaceful moment to himself.

Harry’s research interests were lately taking him to books he’d never dared touch before, and occasionally he needed a break from them—and from the ideas they awakened in his mind.

The study topic came from Harry’s renowned foray into the Department of Mysteries. He’d seen a whole number of strange things in there, although of course he hadn't been paying attention at the time. Now, looking back—and having revisited the place often enough in his nightmares—he wondered.

(Mongolian amulet of power, Deathstick prototype 3, Staff of Merlin model 14—)

Piecing his memories together and drawing a few conclusions, Harry felt it was likely that the room he’d passed while on the run from Donatus Goyle was dedicated to research on enhancing a wizard’s power and tracking down the sources of it.

And it just so happened that, ever since watching Dumbledore and Voldemort duel at the Ministry, Harry had been greatly interested in any and all ways of increasing his own power.

He’d seen just how wide the gulf between his power and Voldemort's was. It would take years and years of tireless practice for Harry to achieve the same level of competence, even assuming that he had raw talent on par with Voldemort's.

He didn't have years.

If there was something he could do right now—

If there was some shortcut that could be taken—

There could be nothing wrong with finding out what options were available, after all—

Harry frowned, leaning his forehead against the window.

It wasn't so simple, of course. Couldn't be. Harry knew that magic didn't like shortcuts. If an increase in power was at all possible, there was going to be a price to pay.

He had no idea what price; he didn't know what else the whole process would entail. He'd never bothered with that kind of research, because—well, in all honesty, this was going above and beyond reading up on spells.

This was delving deeper than Harry ever had into magic of the darkest and most arcane, and he could confess to some trepidation.

("You are no longer innocent… You have touched magics that rendered you unclean…
Harry—what have you done?")

Apparently, he was in too deep as it was, though, and he couldn't let fear hold him back from learning more.

He needed more, if he wanted to see the end of this and defeat Voldemort one day.

One day—before it was too late, before too many people died, before people close to Harry were
hurt…

Harry closed his eyes. So much for a peaceful moment. The war had a way of dogging his thoughts—although it had been worse recently, with Emmeline Vance’s death bringing back the memories of Kingsley, and Hestia’s wounds, and Voldemort's eyes.

And Susan had still not replied…

"There you are, Potter," Ron Weasley's voice said from the door.

Harry flinched, jarred rudely out of his thoughts. Watching Ron's reflection in the windowpane as he approached, Harry composed himself, readying for a likely confrontation.

Harry could see that Weasley seemed annoyed.

He always seemed annoyed. Or maybe it was Harry's presence that did that to him.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Harry asked, finally turning around to face him.

"I wanted a word with you," Ron said.

"All right."

Ron just stared at him for a while, standing a couple of feet away. The lights in the tapestry room were low, and Harry had his back to the window, which meant that Harry likely had a better view of Ron than the other way around.

"I don't like you," Ron said suddenly.

Surprised by this opening gambit, Harry tilted his head to the side.

"You don't say," he responded. "And here I've spent all these years wondering—"

"Let me finish!" Ron snapped.

Harry wordlessly gestured for him to continue.

"I—I'm not trying to kiss up to you, 'cause I don't like you and I never will," Ron said, frowning. "You walk around like you own the school and act like Malfoy on the best of days—and I really hate your Quidditch team—"

"Anything else?" Harry inquired politely, wondering why on earth Weasley felt this was a conversation worth having.

"My point is," Ron said, ignoring him, "that, despite the fact that I personally don't like you and don't see why Fred and George would, with the way that you—"

"You mentioned having a point in there somewhere?" Harry reminded him.

Ron glared.

"What I'm trying to say is… You might be a Slytherin, but you're with the Order, and you did fight You-Know-Who at the Ministry. With everything that's been going on…" Ron's jaw tightened. "Well, it seems best if you and I just stop that—what we've been having. We can't always not talk if we're on the same side."
Interesting. Harry looked at Ron, assessing.

"True enough," he said at length. "You realize, of course, that I'm not the only Slytherin on this side."

"So?"

Harry spread his arms.

"You've listed the reasons why you don't like me," he said. "Do you know why I don't like you?"

Ron blinked.

"Just cause we've been having this—thing, I guess."

"You guess wrong," Harry said coldly. He looked straight into Ron's eyes. "I dislike you because you treat all Slytherins like scum."

"Only the ones who deserve it!"

"Oh yeah? What exactly changed in me, for example, after the Sorting?"

"You became best buddies with Malfoy!" Ron cried indignantly.

Harry stared at him.

"You can't still believe it, after all this time—"

"I'm not saying you still are pals with him, but you've always taken his side in every fight—"

"All right, fine, it doesn't matter," Harry said. "But putting me and Malfoy aside—what about the rest of the Slytherins?"

Ron looked uncomfortable.

"Look, if you grow up hearing about how bad Slytherins are—about how this bad wizard and that came from Slytherin—they're a fishy lot, is all. You don't trust them just like that. And they hate Gryffindors, too."

"Guess what, Ron," Harry said. "From the other side, it's the Gryffindors who are the fishy ones you can't trust. We might as well start meeting each other halfway somewhere, or else we'll never make it in this war."

"I don't see Malfoy meeting me halfway," Ron muttered.

"Oh for Merlin's sake, to hell with Malfoy," Harry said impatiently. "Using Malfoy as a representative of Slytherin is like—like—using Cormac McLaggen as an example of a typical Gryffindor."

"Oh that's low," Ron exclaimed. "McLaggen is a jerk."

"Believe it or not—so is Malfoy."

How could Malfoy possibly be such a massive influence on anyone? It was mind-boggling.

Then again, Harry did vaguely remember hearing about some feud between the Weasleys and the
Malfoys. Something about someone's daughter that someone had stolen, or maybe it was a husband. Either way, these two families went a long way back.

"Look, Potter—"

"Everything okay, boys?"

Remus Lupin stood in the doorway, glancing between Ron and Harry. He appeared half-worried, half-amused, and Harry wondered how much of their discussion he'd witnessed.

***

Upon Lupin's arrival, Ron Weasley turned a deep shade of red and stomped out of the room, muttering apologies to the werewolf. Harry remained by the window.

"Everything okay, Harry?" Lupin repeated. "It seemed like you were having an argument."

"We always do," Harry said. "Although we'll see where we go from here."

"Burying the hatchet?"

"Maybe."

Lupin studied Harry, then came closer.

"That's good to hear. We could use more cooperation."

Harry agreed.

He expected Lupin to leave now that the conversation topic was exhausted, but instead the man smiled at him and said:

"That was really good work that you did for your Defence project, Harry."

"Thanks," Harry said, taken aback. "How do you know about it?"

"Emmeline felt that, being your former professor, I could be allowed to see it. It was not long before she…"

"Yeah."

Lupin swallowed. Harry looked at the floor.

"Anyway," Lupin said after a moment. "You're really interested in Defence, aren't you?"

"I've never tried to hide that, I think," Harry said cautiously.

Lupin seemed amused.

"Don't get me wrong, I think we've all noticed your… commitment. However, it has always seemed a little… what would be the word… superficial? But you've really thought about this, haven't you?"

This looked like it would evolve into an actual conversation. Harry focused on Lupin a bit closer.

"I haven't been memorizing random spells, if that's what you mean," Harry said.

"That much is obvious, I would say. Your understanding of spell creation is far from perfect, of
course, I'm not sure whose is perfect—but this was a really, really ambitious project. What made you choose this topic?"

Harry wondered whether it was a teacher's curiosity talking in Lupin, or the desire to understand Harry.

Being fair to him, it was probably both.

"Well, it's useful to be able to come up with new things, or new ways of doing things." Harry shrugged. "That's how magic evolves, isn't it?"

"True," Lupin said. "But not every student reaches that far into theory."

"Not every student has to fight Voldemort," Harry said before he could stop himself.

Lupin smiled, and this time his expression was grim.

"Yes. Yes, I think—I think I owe you a bit of a re-evaluation. It's easy to think—remembering ourselves, your father at your age—but you're quite different."

A sudden flashback to Harry's third year, Lupin's tone equally hesitant.

("I'd never expected you to be—you are so unlike James. Not just because you're a Slytherin, but you're more serious than he ever was and—")

"That's all right," Harry said, more than willing to stem the flow of whatever other comparisons were to follow.

However, Lupin's face was set in a determined expression.

"No, it's not," he said. "All that we would ever have done, at your age... It's easy to see in you just the continuation of that same irresponsibility, but you're a completely different person and—by the sound of it, you've done a hell of a lot more good for the school for no particular reason than I ever did while being a Prefect."

Harry blinked. That seemed both impassioned and incomprehensible, but the gist of it was lurking somewhere in past events Harry was not privy to.

Curiosity—an insidious, long-repressed feeling—did nag, though.

"My father was irresponsible?"

Lupin appeared somewhat torn.

"He was responsible towards his friends. His grasp of the real world and its dangers was a bit more slippery."

"How come?" Harry asked, against his better judgement.

He was actually encouraging a conversation with Lupin, of all people. Next he'd be giving hugs to Black. And Snape.

"Privileged background, not a care in the world up to a point," Lupin said with a shrug. "James was the only child of adoring parents. He viewed the world as a game to be won—failure never occurred to him, in anything. Sirius was even worse about limits, but that's understandable, considering."
"Considering what?"

"His family," Lupin said emphatically. "I don't know what set of morals one learns in the House of Black."

Judging by their books, the main moral code went along the lines of "kill them before they get to kill you." Which was as reasonable as anything, on the whole, but perhaps not the most nurturing of ideas for young minds.

"Anyway, we were getting off topic," Lupin said. "I just came to tell you that—if you want help, or if you have questions about your research—I'd be glad to be of assistance, in any way I can. And I know that Sirius would be glad to help out, too."

Harry nodded politely.

"Thank you, Professor."

Who knew; he might even take Lupin up on that offer sometime. He'd been a very good Defence teacher, after all.

Lupin winced.

"Please, Harry, I've told you to call me Remus."

Funnily enough, Harry did always genuinely forget. It was just really, really weird to call the man that.

It almost beat addressing Lockhart as Gilderoy.

***

Academic matters became the talk of the day the following Saturday, when Harry and Ron received their OWL results.

Harry knew his score already, of course; he'd been told through unofficial channels that he'd done well. It was still nice to see it on paper, though Harry wasn't sure what he'd use the results for, beyond getting into NEWT-level classes.

During careers advice last year, he'd said that he wanted to play professional Quidditch after Hogwarts.

Incidentally, that had made Snape look positively murderous, though Harry wasn't sure why. When pressed—

("Have you actually entertained a thought for your future, Potter?")

—Harry had cautiously pointed out that really, with Voldemort and everything else, his career prospects were about the furthest thing from his mind.

Snape had pinched the bridge of his nose with an expression on his face that Harry could not identify, and told Harry that making plans for the future would significantly increase his chances of having one.

Harry admitted it was likely true, but he still hadn't properly thought about what he wanted to do once the war was over.
Either way, the OWL results paved the way for a nice selection of NEWT-level classes. Harry's lowest grades were Es for Transfiguration, Arithmancy and History of Magic. Black, who had requested to see his results in a now-rare godfatherly moment, said that Harry took after his mother in studying too much.

Lupin, reading over Black's shoulder, beamed at Harry and congratulated him, which naturally attracted attention and in effect made Harry's results public knowledge.

"Figures," Ron said with dark emphasis, holding his own letter close to his chest and scowling. Harry thought that this probably added to Ron's impression of Slytherins as evil pillocks.

In the aftermath of the breakfast-time discussions on OWLs—which had involved accounts of the OWL results of every Weasley brother to date—Harry, once again, escaped to the library.

So far, however, instead of doing research he'd only lazed about and thought about Hogwarts and future classes and his friends and Susan. It was really time to get back to work.

He was likely fated not to do any research that day, because, just as he put the OWLs envelope aside and cracked open a book, the library door swung inwards and Dumbledore walked in.

Dumbledore, who Harry had been trying to talk to for the last month or so.

"Headmaster!" Harry said.

He shut his tome, keeping a finger on his page as a bookmark, and stood up.

"Good afternoon, Harry," Dumbledore said, inclining his head in greeting. "You look quite occupied, as always, but I think you might be interested in hearing what I have to say."

Harry allowed his curiosity to show on this face.

"Professor?"

"I trust that I have located a hiding place for one of Voldemort's Horcruxes, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Since you have asked me, multiple times, to let you accompany me should such a situation arise, I thought it fitting to put the option before you."

"Thank you," Harry said, heart beating faster in excitement. "When can we go?"

"I am leaving directly," Dumbledore said. "Albeit with a detour, which you are more than welcome to accompany me on."

"I'd be glad to, Professor," Harry replied.

Finally. Finding and destroying Horcruxes was so paramount to winning the war—and here came a real chance to land a blow against Voldemort.

***

Dumbledore's detour took them to a sleepy provincial town. Dumbledore side-along Apparated Harry there, in between explanations.

"You might remember, perhaps, that I told you some weeks ago about a person who might know more about Voldemort's Horcruxes?"
Harry was unlikely to forget that.

"It is imperative that he returns to Hogwarts this year," Dumbledore said. "As I have mentioned before, you might very well be the key to drawing the information out of him—but we must proceed slowly, you understand."

The house they approached didn't look like anyone inside was awake, since all the lights were out. Once Harry and Dumbledore made it past the unlocked front door, it became doubtful that anyone inside was alive.

The place was absolutely wrecked—furniture in splinters, porcelain bits all over the floor, wallpapers torn and, unless Harry was wrong, splashed with blood.

Harry gripped his wand tighter, brushed a floating feather off his forehead and wondered why he felt that something was missing.

Dumbledore was making a careful exploration of the house as they went from room to room.

"This place," Harry said suddenly, staring at an overturned lamp. "It's a Muggle home, isn't it?"

Dumbledore turned around with surprising swiftness.

"What makes you say that?"

"Don't know," Harry said. "Electricity?" He poked a cable with his foot.

"Some wizards do not entirely give up on Muggle conveniences," Dumbledore pointed out. "However, as it happens, you are correct. This is most certainly a Muggle dwelling and not my friend's permanent address. Nor is that armchair his permanent form."

Dumbledore punctuated that last statement with a jab of his wand at a cushy-looking armchair. Harry's eyebrows rose as the piece of furniture gave a protesting noise and morphed into a man. A portly one, with a walrus moustache and a decidedly familiar look to him.

Harry tilted his head to the side.

"Now, Harry," Dumbledore said once the two wizards were done embracing, "allow me to introduce to you my old friend, Horace Slughorn."

"Professor Slughorn!" Harry said. "Of course. I recognized you from the portrait in our common room. Nice to meet you, sir."

Slughorn shook Harry's hand, eyes wide—and, inevitably, straying to the famous scar.

"In your common room, indeed? Oh yes, I used to be the Head of the Slytherin House in my day, but sadly not during your tenure, Mr. Potter! I knew you at once, of course! The spitting image of your father, but naturally with your mother's eyes!"

At this point, Slughorn abruptly realized that he'd never stopped shaking Harry's hand, so he hurriedly dropped his hands and then, after a moment, put them behind his back.

"You taught my parents, sir?" Harry asked, partly to keep the conversation going and partly—well, genuinely wondering.
"Did I—by Jove, did I ever!" Slughorn exclaimed, clearly stirred. "Your mother was one of my absolute favourites! Lily! Such a charming girl, and even more remarkable for being a Muggleborn! Here, come!"

Slughorn beckoned Harry over to a shelf by the wall. Casting a look around, Harry saw that Dumbledore had conveniently disappeared.

"Here she is," Slughorn said proudly, pointing at a portrait.

There, Harry's mother—aged about fifteen or sixteen, maybe—sat among other people, laughing with them about something.

"Taken after one of our dinners," Slughorn said, looking at the photo with a reminiscent air. "So much fun we had then. You'll definitely have to come when I—if I—" Slughorn visibly deflated.

Harry glanced at him.

"These are dark times, Harry," Slughorn murmured. "Nowhere is safe. I've been on the run this past year, but it's getting more and more difficult—"

"Then let us protect you at Hogwarts, Horace," Dumbledore's voice said from behind them.

Harry gave him full points for theatrical timing.

Slughorn bristled.

"Protect me? After what happened to poor Emmeline? And don't think I haven't been reading the news!"

"We did not realize that Emmeline Vance required protection, or else we would have kept her safe behind the Hogwarts walls," Dumbledore said calmly. "You are quite a different matter. You say so yourself—you are in daily danger, constantly on the run. You can't do it alone, Horace. Let me help you."

Slughorn was twisting the framed photo of Harry's mother in his hands.

"I've said no once, I've said it a thousand times," he uttered. "You won't lure me back, Albus."

"I can't help trying," Dumbledore replied solemnly. "You can't blame me for not wishing to lose a dear friend."

A pause descended. Dumbledore was looking at Slughorn, Slughorn was looking between Dumbledore and Harry, and Harry snuck some peeks at the other photos on the shelf.

There were quite a few, some signed and clearly featuring famous people. Harry tried to do the mental math to figure out who else the former professor might have taught—would he have guided Snape through his early years? What about Arthur and Molly Weasley, what generation did they fall in?

And, come to think of it, if Slughorn knew something about Horcruxes… could that mean he'd taught Voldemort at one time?

Newly interested, Harry turned to look at the man—but just then, Dumbledore somehow determined that it was time to leave Slughorn with his weighty thoughts.

"Very well," he said. "If you are sure, Horace, I shall coax you no longer. Come, Harry. We ought
to go."

"It was nice to meet you, sir," Harry told Slughorn. "I hope we meet again."

"Me too, my boy, me too," Slughorn said, visibly conflicted. "Oh, blast it, Albus. Goodbye."

As Harry and Dumbledore walked out the front door, Harry couldn't decide whether the trip had been a success or not.

"Do you think he will agree, sir?" he chose to ask, in the end.

"I know he will," Dumbledore said calmly. "Even if he himself does not. I just hope he consents soon, for it is truly dangerous for him to remain the way he is—especially knowing what he does."

"He taught Potions, didn't he?"

Harry couldn't recall for sure, but he thought that's what the plaque beneath Slughorn's portrait read.

"Indeed, Harry, he did," Dumbledore confirmed.

"Then—he'd be replacing Professor Snape," Harry hazarded.

"It would seem so," Dumbledore agreed serenely.

Harry cast a sceptical glance Dumbledore's way and saw that any further questions were futile.

Either way, there weren't many conclusions left to draw. Snape could get reshuffled to another post, or else he could go. The latter wasn't too unlikely, considering how many things he was already juggling, what with the extracurricular spying on Voldemort.

In Harry's opinion, that qualified as a full-time job on its own.

Harry and Dumbledore walked several paces down the street in silence and turned behind a corner onto a little cobbled road.

"Your arm, Harry, if you will," Dumbledore said. "The time has come for us to go on to our real adventure."

With those words, they took off again in a whirl of Apparition.

***

Harry's arrival was, as always, ungraceful. One day he'd figure out the whole landing-on-his-feet part of this activity.

Getting up from the ground—wand already firmly in hand—he surveyed his surroundings.

A dirt track, tall trees casting menacing shadows, a little hovel in their depths… Harry's eyes narrowed. He knew this place from Dumbledore's pensieve, from the memory of Voldemort's illustrious ancestors.

The Gaunts' house.

The memory of Bob Ogden's visit to Marvolo, Morfin and Merope Gaunt was one of the first Harry and Dumbledore had watched together. Harry had surprised Dumbledore on that occasion, since he knew of the Gaunts already from the heir of Slytherin research in his second year.
Dumbledore had smiled, then, and noted that things still seemed to boil down to the heir of Slytherin. It seemed that Dumbledore might have had other uses for the Gaunts' dwelling in mind.

"You think—sir—"

"That a Horcrux might very well be hidden here. I do believe so," Dumbledore said. "I implore you, Harry, to be on your guard and remember what I told you. You have to listen to what I say."

"Of course, Professor," Harry replied.

They approached the cottage slowly, Dumbledore walking ahead.

The closer they got to the little house, the weirder Harry was feeling. He couldn't define what it was, but he felt a presence, of sorts.

Dumbledore was muttering incantations under his breath and gliding his wand over the air, as if probing for something. Harry watched him, wondering awkwardly whether he should offer to help or avoid interrupting what might be a delicate process.

"Tricky," Dumbledore pronounced finally, sounding almost pleased. "Please stand back, Harry, and have a shield ready. Dismantling these wards may produce a backlash."

Harry watched, fascinated, as one master unravelled the work of another. This magic was way beyond his level, and he wished he could ask Dumbledore to detail what he was doing, to teach him the steps—but of course, this was neither the time, nor the place.

Dumbledore was, meanwhile, spelling up a storm. Whatever incantations he was calling up clashed against the defences around the Gaunt hovel—Harry could almost feel magic's thumping beats coursing through him.

He could swear he sensed the two different magics battling each other, distinguished Voldemort's spells from Dumbledore's, heard the furious symphony of their collisions—

But it was madness, of course, wasn't it? One didn't feel magic through one's skin, one only saw its effects—

But either way, Harry did know it was coming before it came, the buildup, the zenith, and he couldn't help staggering back and calling out to Dumbledore—

"Careful, Professor!"

—even though he knew that Dumbledore couldn't fail to sense exactly when the spells would reach explosion.

Harry's shield charm went up just in time, and still he felt as the wave of Voldemort's and Dumbledore's combined magic hit his defences, still tangled, still scorching.

Harry shut his eyes against the onslaught.

In that moment, he almost felt like he was high on all the magic in the air.

He'd been submerged in similar sensations, with similar awareness of magic around him, only once before—during his Ministry duel with Voldemort. Then, magic had set his senses alight just the way it was doing today.
When Harry opened his eyes, he saw Dumbledore standing firmly—almost regally—before the house. The ancient wizard seemed not to have moved an inch, and yet he had to have been the eye of that storm. How much magic would he have to withstand?..

"Beautiful, Harry," Dumbledore said, his voice somewhat hushed. "Difficult, I shall not lie—but beautiful, fine magic. It is, at times, delightful to have such a skilled opponent."

Harry gripped his wand tighter, coming to the abrupt realization that, actually, Voldemort was his opponent. And it was far from delightful that Voldemort could produce magics Harry could only marvel at.

"How did you do it, sir?" Harry asked. He found that his voice sounded slightly hoarse.

"I'm sure you understand that I could not relate it to you on the spot, Harry," Dumbledore said, turning to Harry with a smile. "Certain spells, some experimentation, some guesswork, decades of experience and familiarity with his general style—it takes many an ingredient to produce a successful result. But I'm sure Bill Weasley could tell you more about curse-breaking if you asked him."

Making a mental note of that, Harry followed Dumbledore over the threshold.

Inside the house, a thick layer of dust coated the floor and all visible surfaces. The windows were closed, shutters drawn, and the air was stale.

"Hmm," Dumbledore said, and made a sweeping motion with his wand.

The dust rolled up neatly like a carpet and came to a halt by a far-off wall. Harry meanwhile lit up the room, and Dumbledore, thanking him with a nod, proceeded to look around—still not entering any further.

"What would you say, Harry?" he asked, after a few moments.

"There's something here," Harry said. "It's..."

He searched around for the source of the strong feeling he was getting. The hovel was so small and the feeling so great that he found it difficult to pinpoint the exact location it emanated from.

"Interesting," Dumbledore muttered. "Not unexpected, however. Indeed, I agree with you. I think there can be no shadow of doubt beyond this point that a Horcrux is indeed located right here, in this house."

"Are there more traps?" Harry asked.

"Most probably, although the vast majority of wizards would not have made it past the initial defence," Dumbledore replied. "It would be quite unwise for us to relax our guard..."

Dumbledore sent out some sort of a spell, then, that whizzed around the room they were in—one Harry recognized from the pensieve—and then flew over into other parts of the house.

"No snares here, it would seem," Dumbledore said. "Still, Harry, stay vigilant..."

As they moved further in, floorboards creaked and Harry was seized by an irrational fear that one of them would snap open and plunge them into a trap. He berated himself for letting his imagination run wild.

It was just that the place, combined with the vibes of sinister magic, was giving him the creeps.
They proceeded slowly through a narrow corridor with grimy walls, then a room with wallpaper so dirty it was black, and came into a chamber with a collapsed four-poster bed in the middle.

As soon as they'd crossed the threshold, Dumbledore stopped dead.

"Here it is, Harry," he said quietly. "Can you feel it pulsing?"

Harry couldn't. The general heaviness of magic in this hovel was making his head spin.

Dumbledore was looking around the room in consternation.

"The space is too small," he said. "I'm sorry, Harry, but I must ask you to retreat. The risk—I cannot work freely with you so near. Please go back to the chamber we were in last."

"I am here to help if I can, Professor," Harry pointed out.

"In this case, you cannot," Dumbledore stated, raising a hand to forestall Harry's protests. "Please, Harry, this is intricate work. You know what you mean to this war. I cannot expose you to the immense risk of a stray spell. I promise I shall call you as soon as I can."

Harry had to be content with that.

So he withdrew to the black-walled room with moth-eaten curtains—a singularly dreary place—and waited, straining to hear any noise. He caught the murmur of incantations, like before, and sensed new waves of magic.

Then, silence.

After a few moments, the silence became ominous.

And then came the scream.

Harry sprinted back into the bedchamber, heedless of any warnings to stay aside. Entering the doorway, he nearly gagged at the saturation of magic in the air—and froze, momentarily, before an eerie scene.

Dumbledore was on the floor, convulsing and screaming. In his agony he seemed to still be conjuring up some magic that was directed at a fading ghostly form of a young girl. The girl was, in turn, crying and stretching out her arms to Dumbledore—but no sound was coming from her.

The only noises in the room where the howl of magic in Harry’s ears and Dumbledore's anguished screams.

Harry gripped his wand.

_Finite Incantatem_, he cast, knowing already that it wasn't going to make a difference.

Harry had no clue what the fuck was going on, just what magic was at work here—never mind how to counter it.

"Professor!" he shouted. "Professor Dumbledore!"

But Dumbledore seemed to be too far gone; his face was contorted in pain and his eyes were open wide, unseeing, even as magic continued to pour forth from his wand—

"Expelliarmus!"
Dumbledore's wand flew into Harry's hand.

Dumbledore stopped screaming and collapsed, limp.

The current of magic gave a mighty shudder that Harry felt all the way to his bones.

He grit his teeth and braced himself for the backlash.

Out of control, the forces unleashed by Dumbledore—and maybe Voldemort, who the fuck knew at this point—turned against the one who'd disrupted them.

Harry snapped his shield charm into place just in time to cover himself and Dumbledore, but felt immediately that a mere shield charm was no match for the crushing wave of magic about to engulf him.

With the other wand in his hand, he cast a more powerful protective spell.

The flash of light almost blinded him, and the sheer power behind the spell he was casting and the forces he was holding at bay left him breathless.

Harry fell to one knee, feeling sweat roll down the side of his face.

He didn't know how long he could hold it—

"Harry," he heard from beside him, but didn't turn to look at Dumbledore.

There was only one thing he could think of doing.

"Moena! Munite ipsa!" he whispered, banking on his power to hold the protective shield through it all.

On his knees, now, he held himself up by an arm, still pointing the wand up with a shaking hand.

Walls of sizzling, crackling magic rose around Harry and Dumbledore.

Just a little more—the protective dome was nearly done, and it might not hold long, but it would give Harry the few seconds he needed—

The moment the walls of magic had closed above Harry's head, he acted.

He dropped the shielding spell. Whirled around to face Dumbledore.

Grabbed Dumbledore's arm.

Closed his eyes, still gripping both wands.

And Disapparated.

***

Contact with the ground knocked the wind out of Harry's lungs—what was left of them. It felt like they were on fire.

Harry stayed prone for a while, feeling like he'd never be able to move again.

He was so exhausted.
A groan sounded from nearby, and Harry closed his eyes in sheer frustration.

He couldn't, physically couldn't do anything more.

But there was nobody else to do what remained to be done—check on Dumbledore, get help from inside Hogwarts, sort them both out.

Harry lifted his hands to his face, pressed his palms against his eyes.

He'd signed up for this when he'd agreed to go on the Horcrux mission.

*It was probably never meant to go like this,* a voice in his head told him.

Harry was pretty sure that Dumbledore had expected to do all the work, just taking Harry through the paces. Harry was not supposed to be the backup—if Dumbledore had felt the need for backup, he'd have taken somebody much more skilful.

No, this was unplanned.

Something during this mission had gone badly wrong.

Taking a deep breath, which resounded with pain all around his ribcage, Harry sat up and assessed his surroundings.

He'd Apparated himself and Dumbledore—successfully—to just beyond the Hogwarts gates. This was the first place that had popped into his mind at the Gaunt shack. Probably because the infirmary was near, and Dumbledore was very likely to need it.

The man himself was also getting up from the ground, looking worse than Harry had ever seen him. His face was ashen, eyes sunk in, and when Harry took a look at his hand—

Blackened and burned, as if from the inside—and with a strange ring on it, which, come to think of it, Dumbledore hadn't been wearing before…

Harry recoiled and glanced at Dumbledore's face, instead.

"Professor, can you stand or shall I—"

"Severus, Harry," Dumbledore whispered as Harry helped him up. "Call Severus."

"I think you need to go to the hospital wing, Professor," Harry said, swaying a little under Dumbledore's weight.

"Harry, please call Severus."

"How?" Harry asked, giving in.

"Send a Patronus message—tell him to come to my office."

Harry had seen Order members communicate through talking Patroni, but he didn't have any idea how to send one himself. He felt that now was a really bad time to start learning new spells, but—

"What's the incantation?"

"*Expecto nuntium.*"
"Expecto nuntium," Harry repeated dutifully. Then he remembered that he was supposed to find a good thought to call up a Patronus. "Expecto nuntium!" he repeated, somewhat more confidently, and an ethereal stag materialized before him.

"Find Professor Snape," Harry told it. "Tell him… the Headmaster will soon return to his office, injured. He urgently needs Professor Snape's help."

The stag nodded gracefully and galloped out of view. Harry lowered his wand—and then, out of the corner of his eye, noticed Dumbledore’s gaze.

He looked at Dumbledore, then back at the wand.

"Oh, sorry," he said. He hadn't realized that he'd cast the spell with the Headmaster's wand. That was all kinds of wizarding rudeness, but really, considering the circumstances…

"Here is your wand, Professor." Harry handed it back to Dumbledore, who seemed unnaturally stunned by the simple mistake. "I'm sorry, I didn't notice."

Dumbledore took the proffered wand back with a trembling hand. He gave it a long look and seemed to be on the brink of saying something. In the end, however, he just pocketed the wand and remained silent.

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Once in the office, Dumbledore collapsed into his chair and dragged the ring off his finger.

"The sword, Harry," he whispered, unfocused eyes vainly searching around. "The sword, give me the sword…"

The sword?

Harry wiped the sweat off his forehead and glanced about him. On the other hand—whatever.

Accio sword.

The weapon flew straight into Harry's hand, hilt hitting Harry's palm—and, surprised, Harry recognized the Sword of Gryffindor he'd pulled out of the Sorting Hat in his second year.

Oh. That sword. The fuck?

Wordlessly, he handed the weapon to Dumbledore.

The headmaster's eyes lit up with a flicker of awareness as both his hands closed around the hilt. Harry realized what Dumbledore wanted to do seconds before he did it.

CRACK!

The sword hit the ring on Dumbledore’s desk with a deafening noise, and the ring gave a scream that seemed to pierce Harry's brain.

Wincing, Harry clapped his ears shut.

And just as suddenly, it was over.
Dumbledore's eyes rolled into his head as he sagged in the chair.

"Headmaster!" Harry darted towards him, but then the office door flew open.

Snape took in the situation at a glance.

"Move aside, Potter," he barked.

Harry gladly did so. Let Snape take charge of the ailing Dumbledore. Harry continued having no clue whatever the fuck was going on.

Well. Except that he was pretty sure he'd just witnessed the destruction of a Horcrux.

Dumbledore might have mentioned in earlier lessons that what you had to do to destroy them was whack them with the Sword of Gryffindor. Useful information, that. Harry might have liked to know.

"Potter! Take essence of dittany, add nettle leaves and three drops of dragon blood…"

Snape continued rattling off instructions for some potion—or some concoction, it didn't seem to require actual brewing—and Harry scrambled to put it together.

His hands mixed, ground and cut on autopilot, which was fortunate, since Harry needed to devote his entire attention to Snape's relentless dictation.

Notably, Snape didn't once turn around to check that Harry was doing things right.

Snape's one and only acknowledgement of Harry's Potions skills in his entire academic career.

Dumbledore remained unresponsive throughout Snape's ministrations. However, once Snape had finished rubbing Harry's salve into Dumbledore's blackened hand, pouring a gold-coloured potion into the headmaster's throat and muttering incantations, the ancient wizard did slowly open his eyes.

Harry figured it was as good time as any to collapse onto a chair.

"Why," Snape hissed at the Headmaster in the tone of utter fury, "did you put on that ring, when you had to know it was carrying a curse?"

Harry stared at the ring.

"I was a fool," Dumbledore croaked out and closed his eyes again. "Sorely tempted… put Harry in danger…"

Snape turned around to glance at Harry, and then continued interrogating the headmaster.

"Tempted by what?"

The ring, clearly. Somehow. Did the Horcrux bear a curse that made people want to put it on? Harry frowned as he surveyed the artefact.

"The curse is incurable," Snape declared in harsh tones, and now Harry did raise his head.

What?

"The best we can hope for is to contain it. I have bound it to your hand—for now. But it will spread. And it will kill you—"
"How long do I have?" Dumbledore asked, sounding perfectly nonchalant.

Snape looked at Harry, then back at Dumbledore.

Harry figured it was about now that Snape started wondering what Harry was doing there.

"Maybe two years," Snape said reluctantly. "We might be able to stretch it that long with proper care, but anything further…"

"Well, but that is splendid," Dumbledore said, sitting up straighter.

It seemed that Snape knew what he was doing, because Dumbledore looked tons better than before. While he was still unusually pale, his eyes were bright as ever. He observed his charred hand with interest, then smiled at Snape and Harry.

"I am most grateful for your efforts, my boys. An old man's foolishness—but no matter. My mistake will play most excellently into your plans, Severus."

Snape looked incredulous for a moment.

"My—my plans? If you think for a moment that I—"

"Voldemort will expect results of you, Severus," Dumbledore told him seriously. "You cannot fail to provide them lest you fail yourself—and that would be a blow to our side much larger than my death, should this be the outcome."

Harry closed his eyes, feeling that his head would actually explode any moment now.

Unless he was mistaken, Dumbledore and Snape had just come to a conclusion that the only wizard Voldemort had ever feared was going to die in the foreseeable future. Quite possibly, Snape was supposed to have some part in that death.

All business as usual.

Winning this war? What about winning this war? No, there was no talk of that ridiculousness.

"Harry?" Dumbledore called him, after a pause.

Harry opened his eyes and found both wizards looking at him closely.

"How are you feeling, my boy?"

A nerve in Harry's cheek twitched.

"Fine," he said.

Snape got up from his seat next to Dumbledore and reached Harry in two quick strides.

"'m fine," Harry repeated, just as Dumbledore noted:

"Harry has been exposed to some very taxing magic tonight—and he's performed some extraordinary feats himself. His first Apparition, too, I believe."

Snape's hand closed on Harry's chin. Harry tried to jerk away, but Snape tilted his face up to the light and looked into his eyes, frowning.
Occlumency, Harry remembered. Got to do that.

However, he didn't feel any intrusion into his mind; Snape seemed only to examine him. The Potions master then let Harry go and ran a diagnostic spell.

Judging by Snape's face, he saw something he didn't like. Harry noticed him throw a questioning look at Dumbledore.

"Poppy did warn me that Harry would sooner or later be affected by the exceptional magic he has survived in his lifetime," Dumbledore said. "She expected greater sensitivity on his part. I think I have seen signs of that tonight..."

Harry shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Here, Potter, drink this," Snape said, thrusting a vial at him.

Harry drank.

In no time at all, he was feeling better. The tiredness was still there, lurking at the edges of his consciousness, but the unbearable heaviness pressing down on him was gone.

"Thanks," Harry said.

Snape didn't acknowledge Harry in any way, but turned back to Dumbledore instead.

"Does this mean that the boy knows everything?"

"I am afraid now he knows rather more than any of us had bargained for," Dumbledore replied, looking at Harry. "However, I'm sure Harry knows very well the meaning of discretion... isn't that what members of your House are famed for, Severus?.. How are your Occlumency studies progressing, Harry?"

Snape gave a slight start of surprise and glanced at Harry. Harry shrugged.

"Fine. Headmaster, does this mean that you—that you will die?"

"I was never going to live forever," Dumbledore said.

The phoenix crooned sadly on his perch.

Harry glanced at the bird, then back at the Headmaster.

"This plan of Voldemort's," Harry began.

"Headmaster, are you sure it's wise to reveal everything to the boy?" Snape interrupted.

"I do not see how we can avoid it now, Severus," Dumbledore said calmly. "What Harry does not know, he can guess at. Openness would serve us best at this juncture, I believe."

Openness Harry had stopped hoping for, but an explanation for the current madness would be good.

"Lord Voldemort evidently harbours the desire to see me dead," Dumbledore said. "Not unnatural, of course. He has presented Professor Snape with the task of poisoning me... to kill or simply weaken, we cannot be sure. For now, it seems that, knowing the difficulty of taking me on in a duel—forgive my immodesty—he has chosen to ensure my infirmity at a crucial time yet to come. It is quite likely that he intends Severus to kill me..."
"But seeing as Professor Snape will not be actually poisoning you…” Harry prodded. "Or will he?"

"Of course I won't, Potter, you imbecile," Snape snarled.

"It is most fortunate, then, that my hand is in such a condition," Dumbledore continued serenely. "We can conceal it for now and then reveal it gradually, to lend credence to Severus's claims of administering poison…"

"Just to make sure I didn't misunderstand," Harry said. "You believe that Professor Snape's cover as a spy is more important than you are, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled.

"I am only one man, Harry, but Professor Snape is our eyes and ears in Voldemort's camp. Without him, we are blind."

"With all due respect, Headmaster, you are much more than only one man," Snape said.

Dumbledore picked his wand up from the table, observed it for a few moments and flicked it at the curtains, letting them fall shut.

"You will find, Severus, that my powers are already not what they once were," he said with an air of finality.
Harry had waited two months for this. But he'd never wanted it to happen under these circumstances.

"Hello, Harry," Susan said calmly.

She looked pale, and composed, and very pretty in a white summer dress as she sat on top of the kitchen counter in her parents' house. Her hair was tied in a braid, as usual, and she still wore her favourite pearl earrings, and her eyes were their unique beautiful blue.

It was as if Harry was seeing a stranger.

The look in her eyes—

"I've—heard. I'm sorry," he said. "I'm very sorry about your aunt."

The news had hit two days after Harry's trip to the Gaunt hovel: Amelia Bones had been found dead inside her home. There was no doubt whatsoever that this was the work of Death Eaters; the perpetrator may have even been Voldemort himself.

Through his shock, Harry had had a moment of relief that he could now Apparate to Susan's side.

Once here, though, he felt oddly unsure of his footing. While Aurors interviewed Susan's parents in the lounge, she and Harry had removed themselves to this neat kitchen, feeling the weight of all the conversations they had not had. Harry's eyes flitted over the room perfunctorily, interest muted by the need to make sure Susan was okay.

Harry supposed she'd been crying—he knew she'd been close to her aunt—but she seemed to be making a concentrated effort to keep her composure.

"Thank you," she said, voice clipped.

"Susan—" he said, stepping towards her.

"Please don't, Harry," Susan said quietly, a plea unmistakable in her voice.

He stopped.

In the ensuing silence, he drank in the sight of her—so pretty, so alien. He was searching for words of comfort when Susan spoke.

"My parents don't want me to return to Hogwarts."

Breath left Harry, rendering him somewhat lightheaded.

"Is this because of your aunt?"

Susan lowered her eyes, and Harry saw that, even though she sat quite still, her hands were nervously clenching and unclenching.

"Nobody knows why my aunt was attacked, Harry," Susan said, her voice quieter still, almost a whisper now. "Yes," she said, forestalling his protests, "some say that it was because she headed the DMLE. And some say that it's because her niece dated the Boy-Who-Lived."
"And you think it's because of you," Harry said.

"Why did you come here to say you're sorry?"

"Because I knew you loved her."

"Because you feel guilty too?"

Harry reeled back for a moment, then crossed the distance between them in a couple of strides.

"Susan, please," he said, hands on Susan's shoulders. "Your aunt was an extremely important and competent person, very high up. It's—this war—is not all about me, it's not about us. She had a very big part in it, she knew it—"

"So are you saying it was her own fault?" Susan demanded, eyes narrowed. "No. Just—no."

She shook off Harry's hands, and they curled automatically into fists. Harry took a deep breath.

"I didn't come here to have a fight with you," he finally uttered. "I just wanted to—be there, for you, in case you needed me."

It had been stupid of him, of course, in retrospect. He'd never been able to comfort anybody. He didn't know the first thing about emotions, or relationships.

Of course he was going to fuck this up.

"I'm sorry," Susan said. "It's not your fault, I know. I didn't mean to—lash out at you."

"That's okay."

"I'm. I need time, to, to sort myself out."

Harry forced himself to stand still, unclench his fists. Breathe.

"You mean—"

"Not now," Susan said, biting her lip the way she always did when she felt emotional. "We—us—I can't do this now."

He'd expected this, of course he had. Except he hadn't.

"I thought—I thought I could do it, really," Susan said. "But I can't be as strong as you. I don't know if it's partially my fault that Auntie Amelia is dead. I don't know if it'll be my parents' turn next. Or yours. Or mine. This is—"

"Too real?" Harry supplied tonelessly. "Too fast?"

"Can you understand that?" Susan whispered, eyes wide and staring into Harry's.

He dropped his gaze.

Bitterness welled up in him, unbidden. Sure he could understand. Not like this was easy for him, either. Not like he'd be so strong if he didn't have to. Not like he'd chosen for Voldemort to act on the prophecy, kill his parents, mark him with a lightning bolt scar.

Why did it always come down to this?
"I told myself I'd keep a hold of myself," Susan said, angrily wiping away a tear. "Didn't mean to fall to pieces. I wanted you to understand why I'm doing this."

"Please don't cry," Harry said. "Of course I understand."

They were standing close, still, and Susan's face was mere inches away from Harry's. He could just reach out and—

But he couldn't try to keep her on these terms. It wasn't fair.

The entire thing wasn't fair.

"Harry?" Susan asked, touching his hand. "Will you—will you be okay?"

Harry looked into her eyes.

"Will you?"

"One day."

"One day," he agreed.

***

Padma took one look at Harry at the train station and launched into a hug.

"Oh Harry," she said, clutching him tight.

Padma was the only one of his friends he'd told about the breakup. He wasn't quite sure why. Perhaps it was because Padma had always had a knack for drawing out his emotional responses. Or then maybe because telling her would spare him informing the others, as she was sure to let them know.

"It's all right," Harry murmured to her, conscious of people all around them. "I'm fine."

He'd arrived at the platform with Auror escort, but the guards were being unobtrusive, thankfully. Harry would have felt very awkward walking through the crowd with bodyguards at each side.

"She's already aboard," Padma informed him, linking their arms and drawing him towards the train.

So Susan had decided to come after all. Harry didn't know what he felt more of, relief or nervousness over their first meeting. He heard himself ask:

"How was she?"

Padma frowned, looking aside.

"How is she ever? Honestly, Harry. We smiled, said hi, she wore one of her awful cardigans, I felt awkward, so did she. I think she figured that I knew, because it just seemed like that, but I don't know."

Fair enough. Neither did Harry. He wasn't even sure what he was asking.

"Smile, Harry," Padma reminded him under her breath. "It wouldn't do for everyone to see you looking all morose next to a hot girl, you know."
Harry fixed his smile and looked down at her.

"Isn't it too soon after my breakup for me to hang around hot girls?" he asked.

Padma's eyes flashed with steel.

"I'll make you look tougher. Besides, I thought some of this was to call attention off Susan?" She squeezed his arm. "You can't afford to show she was important to you."

Harry wanted to point out that the wider public didn't know about the breakup yet, but Padma was right.

The news would get out soon enough, and then people would spot any sign of weakness.

Harry turned his smile up a notch.

They met Padma's boyfriend, Justin Finch-Fletchley, as soon as they stepped onto the train. He looked inordinately happy for such an overcast day, and Harry made his escape as Padma and Justin began hashing out whose compartment she should travel in.

Harry's friends occupied a compartment halfway down the carriage. Blaise opened the door at Harry's knock.

"What took so long?" he asked, cocking his head to the side. "Padma left to find you about a million years ago."

"Hello to you too," Harry said.

"Hello, Harry," Luna said amiably, looking up from The Quibbler.

Neville gave Harry a small smile and Millicent nodded stiffly. Her cat twitched an ear, but that likely had nothing to do with Harry's arrival.

It took a few moments for Harry to stuff his belongings to the top rack and collapse on a seat next to Neville. Raising his eyes, he found Blaise studying him closely.

Harry lifted an eyebrow.

"You look like shit," Blaise told him.

"Your compliments warm me to the heart," Harry murmured, looking out the window.

Just then, the train started moving. Parents at the platform—and, in Harry's case, his bodyguards—faded from sight as the train picked up speed.

"Harry," Neville said hesitantly. "Padma said… you and Susan…"

"Look, guys," Harry said. "Susan and I broke up. Can we, like, leave it at that?"

A short pause followed.

"So, this whole war thing," Blaise said. "How's it going?"

Neville choked.

Millicent gave him an unimpressed eye.
Harry settled into his seat and felt himself relax marginally despite the subject matter of the impending discussion.

Talk of Voldemort's latest moves occupied them until Hermione and Anthony returned from the prefects' meeting. However, pretty much as soon as the two had sat down, a knock sounded on the door.

"Hello, Harry," said a third-year Ravenclaw from the duelling club. "I hope I'm not disturbing, but you, Blaise and Neville have a message from Professor Slughorn."

***

The new Potions master apparently aimed to become a prominent feature in Harry's life. At the very least, Slughorn wanted Harry's time—along with that of other students with status and connections—and in exchange he was willing to provide food, butterbeer and stories. And, of course, more connections.

He'd invited Harry, Neville and Blaise to a "Slug Club" meeting on the train, along with Cho Chang, Cormac McLaggen and Marcus Belby.

At first, conversations went roughly like this:

"So what famous and powerful people do you know, young student?" Slughorn would ask, not in so many words.

"I go hunting, shooting and partying with the Minister," a weaselly student like Cormac McLaggen would reply, earning Slughorn's favour on the spot.

"I don't know anyone and my very famous uncle hates me," a hapless soul like Belby would say and draw the curtain on his Slug Club career.

Cho had been invited too, though, and didn't seem to know anybody in particular, which indicated that connections weren't the be-all and end-all for Slughorn. But Cho was pretty, and influential, and clever, and she was a Quidditch player and the Head Girl this year.

"I like surrounding myself with the best and the brightest," Slughorn said during their lunch, smiling wryly. "It is a weakness of mine, much like crystallized pineapple—but perhaps more beneficial for everybody!"

Neville staggered out of the meeting looking a little wild, and Harry had to tap him on the shoulder to direct him to their compartment.

"Did you hear that?" Neville repeated. "He said he was sure I'd go far! Why would he say a thing like that?"

"Because you will," Harry said, steering him along.

"Because your family's famous," Blaise corrected, rolling his eyes. "And you're close friends with Harry Potter."

"It's not like all of my friends were there," Harry countered.

"The family point still stands."

Neville deflated a little but, on the bright side, seemed to emerge from his daze.
"He said he'd want to talk more with me," Neville said thoughtfully.

Harry had nearly replied that Slughorn would probably grill all of them in turn, but something in Neville's tone gave him pause. Glancing at his friend, Harry wondered how often he got to hear praise from authority figures. His grandmother wasn't likely to shower him with compliments. Aside from Madam Sprout and Lupin, Harry couldn't remember teachers going out of their way to commend Neville, either.

Well, there'd also been fake Moody, in fourth year. That… hadn't ended well.

Frowning, Harry resolved to make sure Neville got a lot of encouragement in the duelling club. No authority figures there, but it couldn't hurt anyway.

Which reminded him.

"Do you think we should go on being a secret club?" Harry asked the compartment at large, sinking down on his seat. "The duelling club, I mean."

Hermione folded her hands in her lap.

"You'd need to submit registration forms for it to become an official club," she said. "It'll also need more than five members—" At Harry's upraised eyebrow, Hermione gave a little smile. "I know, a criterion well filled."

"Do we also make everyone un-sign the Secrecy Scroll?" Millicent inquired.

Harry bit his lip, wondering.

"Girl has a point," Blaise said. "What happens if the club becomes official and then everyone finds out that the members physically can't talk about it due to class B non-tradable goods?"

"It's not like we've done anything wrong," Hermione said, but her voice was uncertain.

"If we are an official club, we might have to become all-inclusive," Harry said. That's what worried him above all. "Won't we? I don't think one can bar entry to a club that's not limited to teams, like Quidditch."

Hermione seemed to consult some mental encyclopaedia.

"I'm not one hundred percent sure what rules apply in this case, but… I don't think we'd be illegal, per se, if we just went on being an unofficial club. If we were, say, an informal gathering of people that informally agree to meet in some informal, non-designated place to conduct our informal activity."

"On a regular basis," Harry supplied.

"Not regular," Hermione argued. "We've never had an agreed day of the week or a fixed time. We've always adjusted things and let people know through Galleons. That's informal enough, surely?"

"You're asking me?"

Hermione smiled.

"I'll check with the rules and let you know," she promised.
Harry had a sudden vision of a future Hermione building a successful career as a lawyer.

***

Hogwarts had changed. Harry couldn't help thinking that all through the start-of-year feast, and the impression was even stronger down in the Slytherin dungeons.

The war with its murders and disappearances and arrests had hit the student body as well. Some people's relatives—

Like Susan's—

They had died. Others students' parents, friends or kin had landed behind bars, presumably for committing those crimes. Invisible tremors of tension rolled through Hogwarts corridors, sharpened glances, quickened anger. The school would miss Cedric's stabilizing presence this year, Harry thought as he looked around the Great Hall. Hopefully the new Head Boy, Ravenclaw's Eddie Carmichael, would be up to the task.

And in Slytherin... Last year's influential seniors had graduated, leaving a gap in leadership yawning wide. Draco Malfoy and Theodore Nott remained to preside over the rest of the junior Death Eaters, but they were divided among themselves. They couldn't command total authority, especially not over the current seventh years.

Neither could Harry. Still, he thought he understood why Snape had handed the Quidditch captain badge to him over Malfoy, who was the only other real contender.

Snape could say all he liked about Dumbledore pressuring him into it, but Harry knew better: Slytherin's Head of House wanted to balance the scales. He saw how unstable things would be with Malfoy and Nott's squabbling setting the tone for this year, and wanted Harry to offset them.

Harry could work with that.

Admittedly, Snape might have had another motivation for giving him the captaincy: unlike Malfoy, Harry would put the needs of the team before personal grievances. Had he been given the position, Malfoy would have kicked Harry off the team post haste, best Seeker in years or no.

At least, Harry was fairly sure that Malfoy would have done that...

"What's with the staring, Potter?" Malfoy asked from his couch, eyes narrowing. "You don't become a Pureblood just by looking at one, you know."

"What amazing things you do tell me," Harry replied, swiftly covering up his lapse. "Next you'll say that by looking at you I won't learn to be a decent human being. Oh, wait—"

Heads turned as soon as Harry and Malfoy had started to talk. Harry didn't think he was mistaking the way the air around them had suddenly tensed; their fights had always attracted attention, but this was new.

This stillness to the atmosphere, as if a fight could break out at any moment.

"I'm not the one lying to the whole wizarding population," Malfoy said. "We'll defeat the Dark Lord this, we're well on track to do that. The Ministry has done nothing so far, except get you to talk for them."

"Nothing that you know," Harry said smoothly. "But, of course, you're not likely to hear much these
days, are you? Not quite as popular at the Ministry as you used to be?"

Malfoy went pale, and the tension in the room went up another notch. Harry's jab at the fallen fortunes of the Malfoy family, whose head now resided in Azkaban, was oil to the fire.

"If you're talking about my father, Potter—" Malfoy started, actually getting up from his couch.

"Of course I'm talking about your father," Harry snapped, not taking his eyes from Malfoy's. "He's in jail because the Dark Lord didn't bother to save anyone but himself when escaping the Ministry. Big surprise."

"What are you saying, Potter?" Malfoy asked, and by now he was gripping his wand.

Harry kept his voice level.

"I'm saying that your father wouldn't be where he is now if the Dark Lord didn't want him to be."

Harry could feel Blaise relax marginally next to him as seconds passed and Malfoy and Harry failed to curse each other into smithereens. Pansy tugged on Malfoy's arm, he looked down at her, and the standoff was broken.

"Honestly, Harry, you could have warned us," Millicent said in their privacy bubble.

"Why were you staring at Malfoy?" Blaise asked. "There's nothing aesthetically pleasing to be seen there—"

"No kidding," Harry muttered.

He wondered whether his words would have any impact on Malfoy. Probably not; but he hoped they would reach the intended audience, the wavering Purebloods. If the Malfoys' fate was to be seen not as a noble sacrifice, but rather as an ancient family facing disgrace due to Voldemort not giving a shit about his followers… Well, this could be highly beneficial. Besides, it was also true. Voldemort didn't give a shit, Harry was sure.

His forays into Dumbledore's memories of the man had taught him that much.

***

Even though classes had only started earlier that week, homework was already piling up. Most unsettling, the way teachers felt the need to set all those essays. As such, Friday evening found Harry in the library, gathering books for his various research projects.

There was the Transfiguration assignment, and Snape naturally wanted a detailed essay on nonverbal spells, and—

Well, there was Harry's own research, too.

Showing Madam Pince his pass—freshly signed by Slughorn—Harry made his way into the Restricted Section. He'd often heard people say that the place was creepy; even Hermione had ventured that opinion, and she loved books. Harry may have thought the same once, but now… well, for one thing, these books knew him now, and he knew them. And secondly, they were used to being around students, unlike some feral tomes in the library at Grimmauld Place.

"Hello to you too," Harry murmured, touching a few books' spines.

Some of them liked being petted. Others, of course, preferred to bite their way through life…
"I'd like to find information about power-increasing magic," Harry told the books quietly, under a privacy charm.

The books rustled uneasily, and the shelves creaked—and was Harry going loopy if he thought he'd felt disapproval off the tomes?

Of course he was. Still, it didn't stop him clarifying (and he did wonder if it was bad that he needed to clarify):

"I'm not going to do anything evil with it. I just don't have time to learn everything I must by normal means."

Harry frowned at the books. They were normally somewhat more cooperative than this—now they were just silently sitting on shelves like Muggle literature.

"Fine," Harry said. "Be like that."

He could do without their help, because he did know his way around them, and because not all were disapproving. Some positively itched to be read. Problem was, those particular books always wanted to be picked up but never seemed pleasant. In the past, Harry used to comfort himself that, whatever else he'd been reading, at least he'd been staying away from that.

Well. It was probably bound to happen sometime. Might as well be now.

Feeling as if he was crossing an invisible boundary, Harry reached out and took *Magick Most Evile* off the shelf. It was probably not as bad as some of the books at Grimmauld Place.

Probably.

It was one of those awkward moments in life, when you're the Boy-Who-Lived and acutely aware that you ought not be sneaking around with anything resembling evil magic in the title. Of course, it would be then that Harry bumped into Susan on his way out of the library.

"Harry!"

"Oh, hi."

They stopped in the doorway and both took a step back, recoiling like magnets of the same polarity. Susan seemed to steel herself before looking at him, which actually kind of hurt.

"Hello, Harry," she said in a calmer tone. "How… are you?"

"Fine," Harry said, noting the way her lips pursed at the response. "And you?"

She looked well.

"I'm doing okay," Susan said, adjusting her bag on one shoulder. "Lots of homework, but it's nice to be back."

"Does anyone give you trouble over—" Harry made an uncertain gesture in a bid to avoid saying over all the articles about you, and your aunt dying, and our now public breakup.

"I'm handling it," Susan said shortly. Her beautiful eyes had gone a touch colder.

"If you want any help—"
"I'm handling it," she repeated.

"Fine."

"But thanks for worrying," she said in a milder tone. "I don't mean to—let's just not complicate—it's enough as it is. So."

"Okay," Harry said. "I—just—all right, take care."

Walking away from her, Harry realized that not once during the conversation had he seen her smile. She was closed off, distant, like she'd never been before.


Funny, how Harry had spent so much of their relationship essentially hiding information from her because he hadn't wanted to bring the war into it. As Millicent would say, it had been cute of him to think he had a choice.

***

"So when are you holding the Quidditch tryouts?" Astoria Greengrass asked the next evening, approaching Harry as he sat, engrossed in a book, in the common room on his usual couch with Blaise and Millicent.

"In a week, thereabouts," Harry said, looking at the fourth year in interest. "Do I take it that you want to join?"

The Slytherin Quidditch team was conspicuously women-free, but Harry saw no reason why it should stay that way. He wasn't even sure whether its gender uniformity was due to accident or design.

"I thought I might," Astoria said.

She threw a look at her sister Daphne that looked positively defiant to Harry. Judging by Blaise's expression, he'd caught it too.

"You're welcome to try out," Harry said, forestalling Blaise's comments. "We could do with fresh talent now that a lot of the old guard is gone."

Montague, Bletchley, Pucey, presumably out in the big bad world somewhere, possibly killing people or being killed—who knew.

Astoria shuffled from foot to foot.

"Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?" Harry prompted.

"Well, I wondered if the duelling club would meet again soon," she said, flushing.

"As soon as we work out a date that suits all prefects and Quidditch teams," Harry replied.

Astoria smiled sunnily at him.

"I'll look forward to it!"

As soon as the girl rejoined her friends, Millicent shut her book with a snap.
"And this—" She put on a vapid expression, presumably to imitate Astoria. "—is whom we're training up to fight?"

"Sure," Blaise said. "The Greengrasses are too good-looking to just let them die."

Harry frowned.

"We never said anything about fighting."

"Yeah, 'cause we talk a lot of braiding each other's hair instead." Blaise rolled his eyes.

"We're teaching kids to cast offensive and defensive spells," Harry said. "That's not the same as—"

"A fuckload of kids, in case you've missed that," Millicent bit out. "Used to answering to your commands. Requests, if you will. Chanting spells you have taught them."

"First of all, not just me," Harry said. "Secondly, I know what you're implying, but we're not building up an army, or some such. That's just stupid. You said so yourself—they're kids."

"And you're not?" Blaise asked rhetorically. "Who do you think they're gonna take their cues from, hero?"

"Don't make me sound like a role model," Harry warned, shaking his book at Blaise. "Trying to be like me would traumatize everyone forever."

Blaise laughed.

"There was this historical event, you know, called the children's crusade," he said, wriggling his eyebrows. "It ended badly, but we don't have to lose heart from—"

Harry flicked his wand, sending a cushion at Blaise's head. Blaise ducked, a shit-eating grin still plastered to his face.

The cushion fell with a soft thump just behind the couch.

Millicent sighed and went back to her book.

Harry kind of hoped that was the end of that discussion, because the mental image of him herding wide-eyed kids like Astoria to the battlefield was rather disturbing. But, of course, the topic came up at the duelling club meeting not a week later.

***

"Are we going to keep being secret even though Umbridge is gone?" the crowd in the Hidden Room wanted to know.

"What's going on with the war?"

"Are we going to fight?"

"Whoa, guys, one thing at a time, okay?" Harry said, exchanging glances with Eddie Carmichael.

Eddie was co-chairing the meeting, a replacement for Cedric in more ways than one. As a very bright student and someone who'd been in the club's advanced group for ages, he was perfectly placed to help Harry plan the curriculum and nip problems in the bud with the force of his Head Boy authority.
"Now." Harry smiled at the audience. "To answer your first question… Considering the war, I think it's best to continue keeping the duelling club under wraps, just in case." He shrugged. "You never know what will happen and, if something does, it's better for us to be underestimated. All anyone knows is that we've had patchy Defence training all along, presumably wasting the whole of last year. Let them keep thinking that."

Harry's mouth rattled off the rehearsed response while he mulled over what to say to that worryingly enthusiastic question about fighting. In no way did he want to encourage the attitude, and what he'd told Blaise and Millicent still stood, but… but he thought he'd heard a desperate note in that question.

He knew first hand what it was like to feel restless, to want in on the action, to crave giving as good as you got. If, by taking part in the duelling club, these kids felt they were doing something to fight back, who was Harry to take that away?

But how to do that without feeding dangerous delusions?

"I don't mean to make it sound like the fight will inevitably come to us," he said slowly, ignoring a murmur of protest. "But I can't promise that it won't. Those of us who graduate after this year—and those who've already left—may have to fight. Those of us still at Hogwarts, I hope, will be able to learn as much as we can before anything like that happens, if it happens. We won't rush into battle, but we may have to be ready for it…"

Harry cast his eyes over the audience. They seemed disquieted—some nodding thoughtfully to his words, others frowning, others looking a bit frightened… Susan seemed pale as she stood towards the back next to Hannah Abbott and Ernie Macmillan…

Harry sighed.

"Look, let's take it one step at a time, okay? Making sure that all of us have our Shield Charms up to scratch and a Stunner ready will achieve more than talk. And if some of you guys can master the Disillusionment Charm by the end of this meeting, that'd be fantastic. So show me some action here! Pair up! Let's see how much you forgot over the summer!"

Satisfied at students obeying his call, Harry jumped down from the podium.

It was strange to speak in front of these kids again. Lately, Harry had been appearing before much larger audiences, performing in the role of the Boy-Who-Lived. His Ministry-sanctioned stunts were far more impersonal: he just needed to don the expected mask and speak in encouraging accents.

But here, for these students, he was a real human being.

It was kind of nice, actually.

***

Neville had failed to get into NEWT-level Potions, which was a shame; Harry thought he'd have liked the relaxed atmosphere in Slughorn's class. It helped, of course, that Harry's friends formed the majority of the students: Blaise, Hermione, Padma, Terry and Anthony were there, in addition to duelling club members Michael Corner, Ernie Macmillan and Tracey Davis.

The only ones disrupting the harmonious arrangement were Malfoy and Nott, but they were clearly outnumbered—and not favoured by Slughorn.

"Well done, Miss Patil!" the rotund professor said, casting an eye over Padma's potion, and Padma beamed at him.
She and Hermione had already been invited to Slug Club, making that arena, too, overrun by Harry's friends. Cormac McLaggen stuck out like a sore thumb, and Padma had started plotting to get rid of him the moment she'd got in.

"Great work, as always, Harry," Slughorn said, nearing his station. "You've inherited your mother's talent for Potions!"

Harry smiled at the professor.

"Thank you, sir."

"Have you and Miss Granger already tried the Felix Felicis?" asked Slughorn with a wink.

"Not yet, but I'm sure we will soon," Harry said with a glance at Hermione, frizzy-haired and frantically stirring the contents of her cauldron.

They'd won Felix Felicis from Slughorn in the very first Potions class. It was supposed to go to that day's best brewer, but Slughorn had found himself unable to decide which of them had made the better Draught of Living Death, so he'd given it to them both.

So many things they could use it for...

"You won't believe who's coming to our dinner party," Slughorn told him conspiratorially.

"I'm looking forward to it, sir," Harry said.

As Slughorn drifted towards another student, Harry caught Malfoy looking in his direction. Their eyes met and Malfoy turned away with a sneer, but he seemed troubled. Harry thought that Slughorn's rejection still rankled with him. Malfoy'd always been treated like royalty for his surname, but now that his father was in jail, he was an outcast with most of the school. Few would want to publicly consort with the son of a Death Eater.

Which, Harry thought with a frown, was something of a vicious circle. Ron Weasley, for one, had been going on about Malfoy being a Death Eater's son from day one, even before the war had started. The link had always defined Malfoy for a lot of people, as it did a lot of other Slytherins, and tainted the whole House by association.

And yet, Wendy Travers—related to Travers the Death Eater—was in the duelling club, and she showed no signs of wanting to exterminate Muggleborns. Surely it meant that there was more than one road for all of them to take?

Harry stirred his potion, checking with the book that it was indeed the right consistency.

It was just Neville's luck, he supposed, that he was missing out on the nowadays-nice Potions class and instead dealing with Professor Snape in Defence.

Snape did know how to light up every room he was in.

Lately, he'd become more outwardly hostile towards Harry, apparently on account of Harry's very public anti-Voldemort stance. In a private talk after their first Defence lesson, Snape had very nearly said as much.

("You have chosen to propel yourself into the spotlight in the wizarding world; you cannot expect that to pass without consequence in my class.")
It was lucky indeed that Harry was ahead of his peers in Defence, because he was put on the spot all the time. While, on the bright side, the lessons were never boring, his friends had learnt to wish him good luck before class.

This was also the case today.

"Once more unto the breach," Hermione said bracingly on the way to the Defence lesson from Potions. "You'll do fine."

"There's just something about you and Defence teachers, Harry, have you noticed?" Blaise said from Harry's other side.

"Professor Snape had it in for me in Potions, too, for the longest time," Harry pointed out. "Me and Neville both."

"And all other Gryffindors, including me," Hermione said. "The only ones who got away with anything were Slytherins."

"Hem, hem," Harry said. "I'm a Slytherin and I got away with nothing."

"Trust me, you didn't have it half as bad as us."

"Hey—!"

But the banter had to end there, because they'd arrived at the classroom and from here on out it was all serious business.

"Today we will continue practicing nonverbal spells," Snape announced. "As usual, you will divide into pairs and attempt to cast incantations without saying anything out loud." And, when Harry was just turning to Neville: "No, Mr. Potter, I don't think so. You're with Mr. Weasley."

Harry sighed but kept his silence. Ron wasn't so wise and lost Gryffindor five points as a result.

"Why do I have to be paired with you, anyway?" Weasley grumbled, facing Harry.

"Because Professor Snape said so. Do you want to cast first or shall I?"

Harry did cast first, after which it was Ron's turn.

Harry couldn't know what, exactly, Ron was casting, as naturally he wasn't saying anything, only going slowly red in the face from exertion. Attempts to guide Weasley's efforts had been summarily rebuffed. All in all, it didn't leave Harry much to do.

"Mr. Potter," Snape said silkily from nearby. "Am I to understand that this lesson is not challenging enough for you?"

Resigned, Harry looked at his Head of House.

"I meant nothing of the kind, sir," he said.

"Then why are you not taking part in the exercise?" Snape hissed. "I will not tolerate laziness and inattentiveness in my class."

And that was all the warning Harry got before a spell sped towards him.

The jet was blue, and Snape had made this wrist flick—
Going on a hunch—he'd seen this spell in one of their last sessions—Harry fired a nonverbal counter to a migraine-inducing curse.

The next spell whizzed towards him, seeming to cut through the air, and Harry had no clue what the fuck that was—

Harry reinforced his Shield Charm, preparing for impact, and ignored Snape's undertone:

"Pathetic."

The shield—Harry had learnt to make them strong—did lessen the curse's effect, but Harry still had to choke back a grunt of pain when he received a blow in the ribs. Through his momentary disorientation, he could see another curse, but this one he did know—

"Pathetic," Snape said again at the end of their one-sided duel. "No resting on laurels for you yet, Potter. You'll stay and explain your earlier inattention to me after class."

"Yes, sir," Harry responded, slowly straightening his shoulders. Damn it if his ribs didn't hurt like crazy.

Casting a glance around, he saw Pansy Parkinson looking smug, Neville concerned and Blaise carefully blank.

"Best of luck," Neville said sympathetically once the lesson ended.

"Thanks," Harry murmured and waited for the rest of the class to file out.

Snape locked and soundproofed the door in silence. Then, he turned sharply to Harry and pierced him with a look.

"In pain, Potter?"

"I'm fine, Professor."

Snape's expression said your funeral, but he didn't press the matter, only noting:

"Very well. Perhaps you'll concentrate better in my class next time."

Harry held in a retort with a heroic effort of will.

"Now, for the reason you are here. The Headmaster wishes to see you on Friday."

Snape took a note out of his robe pocket and passed it to Harry. Harry read Dumbledore's loping script, wondering about the meeting's agenda.

"Thank you, sir," he said.

"You may go," Snape responded.

Harry made to leave for the door, but hesitated.

"How is the Headmaster? Last time I saw him, the curse… his hand…"

"He lives," Snape said. "For now."

Harry clenched his jaw.
Back in the summer, Snape had said that Dumbledore had a maximum of two years to live. He'd die, and then what? Harry couldn't begin to imagine the impact his death would have on the war, assuming neither side had won by then…

"Go, Potter," Snape said, interrupting his thoughts. "Or you'll miss lunch."

Maybe it was his aching ribs or maybe dark visions of the future, but Harry wasn't all that hungry.

***

On Friday, Dumbledore greeted Harry in his usual friendly manner.

"Tea, Harry? Excuse Fawkes, he's almost at the burning stage—how is your semester so far?"

"Business as usual, sir," Harry said with a light shrug, lowering himself into a chintz chair. He nodded at the portraits of old headmasters, who greeted him back.

Yeah. Last year, he'd visited this office a lot.

Not even the weird instruments all over the place gave him pause anymore, nor the phoenix bent on ignoring him.

"And how are you, sir?" Harry cast a meaningful glance at the Dumbledore's right hand.

The wizard gave a slight smile.

"As you say, Harry, everything is going according to plan," he said. "And, speaking of plans, I trust you have made closer acquaintance with Professor Slughorn."

Harry took a sip from his cup of tea.

"We have spoken a few times, yes," he said cautiously.

"Then perhaps you will know better than to judge him too harshly when I show you the most important memory of all that I have collected…"

Harry couldn't help it; a shiver ran down his spine as he watched the teenage Tom Riddle smoothly work his way around Slughorn. The boy looked curious, intelligent, self-possessed and altogether so human that it was hard to connect him and the snake-like Dark Lord. And yet there was something eerie, some hint of madness in the intensity of his gaze—or maybe it was Harry's knowledge colouring his view…

And that was even before Riddle's damning question about Horcruxes.

Dumbledore seemed troubled as they emerged from the Pensieve, but he quickly banished whatever thought was bothering him.

"This is the final piece of the puzzle, Harry," he said, smiling. "We need to know exactly what Professor Slughorn told Tom Riddle that day."

"Is Professor Slughorn refusing to tell you?" Harry asked, wondering why it was he who had to extract the truth from the Potions master.

Dumbledore sighed.

"Professor Slughorn has carried this knowledge for many years, Harry, and I think he fears that,
whatever he's told Tom Riddle, Voldemort has put to use… He feels ashamed, far too ashamed and fearful to tell me."

Admittedly, if Harry had instructed a Dark Lord how to achieve immortality, he wouldn't be in a hurry to let others know.

Harry forced down a shudder. It was bizarre, to say the least, to think that his jovial Potions master was technically complicit in Voldemort's success. That, partially due to the knowledge Slughorn had given him, Voldemort had not died when the Killing Curse had rebounded on him in Godric's Hollow…

"As far as I am aware, this is our only chance to glean a look at Voldemort's plans regarding his Horcruxes," Dumbledore continued. "I suspect Tom Riddle asked Professor Slughorn something about their potential number. We know, of course, that he has made more than one. We also know that the timing for creating them seems to date his knowledge to his sixth year. From this we can infer—" Dumbledore spread his hands. "—that he came by it in that office."

"Why can't he have learned from books?" Harry asked.

"The books he could have had access to at Hogwarts did not contain instructions for creating multiple Horcruxes," Dumbledore said calmly.

"Hogwarts library is not the only place to get information," Harry pointed out, very carefully Occluding the memories of his own reading as he looked into Dumbledore's eyes.

The Headmaster's face shifted into the neutral expression he always adopted when discrepancies came up between Harry's actions and Dumbledore's idea of what Harry should be doing.

"I have neither seen nor heard of documented accounts of creating several Horcruxes," he said gravely. "Making even one Horcrux is considered to be the most terrible magic. The process requires a murder and splits one's soul, Harry. Wizards generally value life too much to even consider going further than that."

Harry shifted, suddenly uncomfortable under Dumbledore's heavy gaze.

"I do understand," he said. He had the oddest urge to reassure the Headmaster that he was not, in fact, a lunatic who considered murderous rampages and soul-splitting a natural thing.

Instead, he took another sip of tea, looking down into his cup. Dumbledore, too, chose to remain silent for a while.

"So this is what I need to do, then," Harry said. "Get close to Professor Slughorn; convince him to give up the memory. I assume he is an Occlumens?"

"Indeed." Dumbledore inclined his head. "And a most accomplished one at that, I must say. I would also be astonished if he has not carried an antidote to Veritaserum with him ever since I coerced him into giving me this tampered recollection. You have used the right word—you must convince him to let you have the memory. It is the only way."

Mind drifting back to teenage Tom Riddle, Harry thought it was ironic that he had to become the same kind of favourite to Slughorn to make him give up the real memory.

It seemed Slughorn always got played for someone else's greater good.

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With Project Slughorn, Harry's list of responsibilities grew to near last year's workload, with Harry starting to wonder when he should schedule sleep. Things to sort out on top of coursework included the duelling club, Harry's independent research, Hagrid's hurt feelings over Harry ditching his class, and Quidditch.

Several people—non-Slytherins—had approached Harry, wondering why he hadn't kicked Malfoy off the team. And people said he was politically minded. Like he'd get rid of a Chaser who worked that well with Beaters Crabbe and Goyle.

Keeping Goyle had been a far harder choice, but Harry had forced himself to do it, because it wasn't Goyle's fault that Harry had killed his dad.

On the other hand, lately Harry was beginning to wonder if he'd made a mistake in keeping Malfoy. The blond had been drifting around like a thundercloud ever since Harry's captaincy became public.

("Did you have to sleep with the Minister to get the badge, Potter? No wonder Bones has dumped you.")

Harry's wand hand twitched at the memory. Malfoy was such a little shit. One of these days, he'd piss Harry off beyond the point of no return, and then—

"I know you're magical, Harry, but I don't think you can set things on fire with your eyes yet," Blaise told him leisurely, nursing his second cup of breakfast tea.

"Doesn't hurt to try," Harry muttered.

"I'll give you points for maybe curdling the milk, but—"

Loud flapping of owl wings drowned out the rest of Blaise's words. Harry looked up in interest—life updates could be coming from Cedric or the twins—and saw a bird he didn't recognize headed towards him.

The letter was not from any of his friends. Instead, the freshly delivered missive was written in Scrimgeour's hand.

The Minister urged Harry to make a trip to his office as soon as possible—which probably meant that Harry's presence was required to cast some public relations disaster into a softer glow.

Harry frowned. He'd made it clear to Scrimgeour that, once classes commenced, he wouldn't be able to pop in and out of the Ministry. For the Minister to contact Harry not two months later was… well, either it was extremely presumptuous, or it boded ill news. An uncomfortable feeling in Harry's gut suggested the latter.

"What's that?" Millicent asked without glancing away from her Daily Prophet.

"The usual bullshit," Harry said, and this time Millicent did look over.

"Don't know how you're going do that," she said sceptically, having read the letter. "Dumbledore wasn't that keen on letting you go last year, was he?"

"Yeah, well," Harry said. "Maybe he's mellowed out." Maybe Voldemort had taken up ballroom dancing.

Last spring, Harry had managed to manoeuvre his way into going to the Ministry because of his exceptional Defence OWL arrangements and later because he had official Apparition lessons. Now,
with Harry already in possession of the Apparition licence, the educational benefits of going to the Ministry were extremely slim. And Dumbledore had made it very clear during the summer that he would not condone such outings.

Still. This one time, Harry could just Apparate to the Ministry during the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend.

Dumbledore might get mad at him for going, of course, but he'd just have to deal with it. Not like the Headmaster had any real hold over Harry. Expelling him or denying him information would amount to sabotaging the prophesied saviour and by extension the whole anti-Voldemort side. Harry figured he'd only face trouble from the Headmaster if he started endangering other students, which he wasn't doing, so.

Hogsmeade weekend it was.

***

"We feared it was coming," Rufus Scrimgeour said, as soon as he and Harry had exchanged greetings. "The Dementors have abandoned Azkaban."

Harry mentally replaced feared with knew.

He maintained a relaxed posture in his chair by the Minister's desk, mind rapidly working through the repercussions.

There was nobody else in the office—the usual state of affairs for private meetings between Harry and the Minister. The room basked in rays of September sun, looking peaceful even if it did not feel so. The Minster paced restlessly on plush burgundy carpet as a grandfather clock measured out seconds of silence. Harry absently tracked Scrimgeour with his eyes all the way to the door and back.

"I'm assuming the Dementors have joined Voldemort," Harry said, focusing on the most pressing concern. "Does it mean he was there personally when they left?"

"It seems that way," the Minister answered unhappily. He rubbed a stubbled cheek and sat down heavily on his chair.

"So all the Death Eaters captured in June are out now," Harry concluded, jaw clenching.

"Apparently so, yes," Scrimgeour said.

Harry narrowed his eyes.

"Apparently?"

The Death Eaters either roamed free or didn't—Harry didn't think this was time for politician-talk.

Scrimgeour frowned down at the papers on his desk.

"We have not sighted them, but they are no longer in Azkaban. We can surmise, on the basis of the evidence, that they have escaped."

"Was there anyone at all left in Azkaban?" Harry inquired.

"No. The prison stands… empty."
Harry tried to calculate but found he lacked the data.

"So that's how many convicted criminals out there right now?"

He honestly didn't mean to sound like he was interrogating the Minister, but, damn it, if he was to address the nation about this—and why else would he be called in?—he needed to know.

Luckily, Scrimgeour had worked with Harry enough to realize that he was not being purposefully hostile. Or else the guy was too worn out to fight; Harry thought it wasn't unlikely, with the way Scrimgeour looked. It seemed like he hadn't slept or eaten in a week.

"I wish I could tell you, Harry, but the truth is, Azkaban records haven't always been kept up to scratch," Scrimgeour said. "But you can be sure that, in addition to the Death Eaters captured in June, there were also Death Eaters from the first war, as well as some murderers and some thieves, felons, fraudsters... Some, also, who have received the Dementor's Kiss... Some have been there for years, decades..."

Harry swallowed. He remembered how deranged Sirius Black had been fresh out of Azkaban—and the man hadn't even been guilty of the crime he'd been imprisoned for. Go figure, first thing he'd done once free was commit murder, after some breaking-and-entering and vandalism. The graduating class of Azkaban 1996 was likely a really sane and stable bunch.

And they were out there right now. With Voldemort, or without—they were going to be a riot.

"I've got to back up Dumbledore on one thing, Minister," Harry said, rocked by impotent anger. "The consequences of this are down to our crazy justice system. If we inflict insanity as punishment regardless of the crime, we may as well reap what we sow sooner or later."

"Azkaban has never failed before," Scrimgeour said. "Using Dementors to guard prisoners was a practice established centuries ago. It was the optimal solution in the long run."

"Just like giving Goblins the sole control over the financial system, I get it," Harry said. "But—"

"They were content," Scrimgeour said. "There was no way to contain them otherwise, there was always going to be a bargain—"

"Honestly, Minister, I do get it," Harry said, raising placating hands. "I'm sorry. I wasn't being sarcastic. I shouldn't have gone off on an unproductive tangent. It's just frustrating to know we could have avoided this, if things had been different from the start."

Scrimgeour dropped his eyes from Harry's and shuffled a couple of papers on his desk.

"It is a highly regrettable turn of events," he admitted. "I feel it is going to be a huge blow to our side. We have, of course, drawn up some contingency plans, but we have received some worrying reports..."

Sitting in that office and looking at that man, Harry was struck again with the dualism of his position. Just that morning, he'd attended class. Now, staring in the face of the highest wizarding official, Harry felt as if Hogwarts was a world away.

He shook himself, automatically checking his Occlumency protections. That always helped him to focus.
"You said something about worrying reports, Minister?"

"Inferi," Scrimgeour bit out. "Not yet confirmed, but You-Know-Who seems to be using them."

There was a moment of silence.

"And all of this is somehow supposed to sound upbeat to our audience?" Harry asked, incredulity nearly bubbling over into hysterical laughter.

("We'll defeat the Dark Lord this, we're well on track to do that. The Ministry has done nothing so far, except get you to talk for them.")

Harry shook his head.

"Obviously, the public needs to know some of this," Scrimgeour said. "But we need to avoid widespread panic."

Meaning, only a portion of the truth would seep through to the wizarding population.

"We can announce the defection of some Dementors, though there's no need to reveal the scope of the situation," the Minister continued. "In the same vein, we can warn the public about the threat of Inferi. If you put emphasis on the measures the Ministry is taking against these Dark creatures—"

Harry held up a hand.

"I'm sorry, Minister—if I put emphasis?"

"Well, yes, of course. The public will take the news so much better if it comes from you."

Oh, really.

"I can certainly give interviews, as many as you want, saying that I fully believe—together, we can deal with the situation," Harry said silkily. "But I don't think I should actually deliver the news."

Scrimgeour looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"Explain," he ordered.

Harry cocked his head to the side.

"It's one thing if I'm the Boy-Who-Lived who stands by the Ministry because he believes in it," he said. "It's another thing entirely if I act as the Ministry's mouthpiece, lying to the wizarding world on your behalf—"

"Nobody's asking you to lie—"

"Yes. Yes, you are. You're asking me to lie about the magnitude of this disaster. You may be doing this to avoid mass panic, but you're also making sure that people can't prepare for danger, because you're not telling them it's out there."

"Would you rather send the wizarding world into hysteria?" Scrimgeour snarled.

Harry stared at him.

"I'm sorry, but I'm really not sure why you'd leave this decision up to me," he said. "I had no part to play in making the Azkaban breakout happen, and I won't start apologizing for it to the public."
"This calamity was nothing the Ministry could have prevented!"

"I'm not saying it's your fault! I'm willing to publicly stand by you and lend my support through interviews and such. But if I get associated with this disaster, I'm afraid, in the long run, we're all—" Harry tried, and failed, to find a synonym for screwed. "—it won't end well for anybody."

Harry refused to link himself to this latest shitstorm. He'd spoken up for the Ministry after the Department of Mysteries battle, he'd professed his support after high-profile murders of Emmeline Vance and Amelia Bones—but this, actually misleading the public, was just not going to happen. Even from a purely practical point of view, eventually—and maybe sooner rather than later—the news would break out, and there'd be no coming back from that.

"I have tried to accommodate your wishes as much as possible, Harry, but it's your civic duty to reassure the public if it's in your power," Scrimgeour said in a tone that carried a subtle threat.

"I'll swear my confidence in you in interviews, which I'm ready to give," Harry repeated, feeling like a broken record. "But, as I'm not on the Ministry payroll, I can't be requested to do more."

As a matter of fact, Scrimgeour had grown far too comfortable with giving Harry more and more to do. Harry's role had pretty much amounted to interviews and favourable appearances at the beginning of their alliance, but now it was suddenly his civic duty to represent the Ministry?

No way.

As far as he could tell, the Ministry had nothing to threaten him with. Old Umbridge-related accusations against the twins had been stricken from records completely. Sirius Black was safe at Grimmauld Place. And if they went directly for Harry's health or reputation, they'd be shooting themselves in the foot with this war.

"The public has come to rely on you, Harry," Scrimgeour said.

"And that's why I need to not get embroiled in this scandal," Harry replied firmly.

"There is no scandal," the Minister said.

"In that case, I'm all the more convinced that you can handle this without me."

"Very convenient for you, I'm sure."

Harry gritted his teeth.

Arguing with politicians was such a thankless task.

On the flip side, if Harry emerged from this war with his life and sanity intact, he'd be a pro at this whole politics bullshit.

***

"You've got to be kidding," Terry said the next day, when Harry had gathered his friends in the Hidden Room and informed them of the truth.

"I wish I was," Harry said.

The news had broken that morning. The limited version of the news, that is; the fall of Azkaban was hushed up, and only tidings of some Dementors' deflection made it to the papers, together with the Inferi. All according to Scrimgeour's plan.
Harry's interview quotes featured in the *Daily Prophet*, too. He'd pronounced himself shocked but confident the wizarding world would be able to weather the storm.

"It's not that I want to judge," Anthony said, raising his eyes from the paper, "but I don't fully understand how you managed to say with a straight face that you have full trust in the Ministry."

"Well, what else could I have said? That we're all screwed? Sure, that's closer to the truth, but it's about the furthest from productive that we can get," Harry pointed out.

Padma scrunched up her nose.

"I'm just worried that it's going to rebound on you," she said. "If you knew and didn't say anything —"

"Officially, I don't know," Harry explained. "I'll be as shocked as the rest when—if—the truth comes out. Which, I know, is—"

"—not good," Neville supplied seriously. "*Very* not good. I'd even say it's outright bad."

Blaise and Millicent just watched the others react. They'd already heard about this from Harry last night; Millicent had glowered and Blaise had sighed, and then they'd hit Blaise's booze.

Harry had observed the junior Death Eaters closely ever since his return from the Ministry, but they were keeping mum. Interestingly, Malfoy had not looked as elated as he should have…

Hermione was frowning.

"I don't suppose you could have pushed Scrimgeour harder for letting the public know."

"I'm not really an authority with Scrimgeour," Harry said.

"If you tell the truth, people will believe you," Luna said suddenly. She'd been listening quietly all this time, but now she seemed animated. "Daddy would probably agree to print an interview with you in *The Quibbler*, you know."

"If I do that, after Scrimgeour has decided to hush it up, I'll be painting him as the bad guy," Harry said reluctantly. He'd thought about this. "And, at this stage, we need Voldemort to be the bad guy, and the people who're actually fighting him to be the good guys."

"Even if they're using shitty means?" Terry asked.

"Even then, I guess, up to a point. As long as we're on the same side, we should not look too fragmented, or—well, divided we fall."

"But what if they do something unforgivable?" Hermione countered. "And where are you going to draw the line? And why you, anyway?"

Harry shrugged tiredly.

"I don't know, Hermione, I'm just going with what I have and doing what I think is best at this moment. If I find out the Ministry's becoming as bad as Voldemort, sure, I'll drop them like a hot brick, but on the whole… you don't honestly think that any side in this war can be totally *good*, do you?"

Terry stared at him, and Harry could feel the gazes of others on him, as well.
"Some days, I'm so glad I'm not you," Terry said.

Harry grimaced. He didn't feel in the slightest bit qualified to make these huge decisions, either.

He still wasn't sure what was right in this case. Concealing vital information from people was wrong; but then, would it be better to hit their own side in the war by revealing the truth and so provoking shock and panic?

A giant headache.

Harry had made one easy choice in this: upon his return from the Ministry, he'd gone straight to Dumbledore and told him about the entire clusterfuck. He figured Dumbledore might already know, what with Snape's spying, but Dumbledore had heard him out in grave silence and thanked him for the information nonetheless. So maybe Harry had been able to supply some previously missing details.

Dumbledore had, of course, expressed his displeasure at the way Harry had come by the information, and Harry had smiled and nodded and subsequently shrugged it off. All as expected.

Telling his friends was a natural next step, as he'd made a conscious decision to try and keep them in the loop. Harry had told Cedric first, pretty much as soon as he'd got out of the meeting with Scrimgeour. Cedric had raised much the same points as Harry's other friends—the ethical implications of everything, plus some practical disasters sure to follow—but Harry hadn't had anything better to say then. Easy answers weren't forthcoming, and Cedric seemed to understand that, even despite his shock at the news.

He'd left Cedric looking grim, and now all of his friends still at Hogwarts also seemed distraught. Perhaps this was too much responsibility to saddle them with.

Harry felt a twinge of guilt.

("You, Mr. Potter, seem to be handling yourself well, despite your age. But you cannot expect everyone to be up to the same challenges as you are.")

But his friends had indicated that they wanted to be involved. Here it was, in all of its ugly glory. Involvement.

"So what are we going to do?" asked Neville quietly.

"Teach everyone in the duelling club how to cast the Patronus," Harry responded at once. At his friends' surprised looks, he added: "The anti-Dementor spell? If they're on Voldemort's side now, we must be prepared."

"Isn't the Patronus Charm really difficult?" Hermione said. "Do you think everyone in the duelling club can manage it?"

"They do or die," Blaise said pleasantly. "Or, rather, lose their soul. I'm sure it's sufficient motivation to learn."

Sometime in recent past—come to think of it, maybe since Harry had told his friends about the prophecy—Blaise had started acknowledging Hermione's words, no longer pretending she didn't exist. It was progress, even if he still gave no sign of liking her. Harry wasn't sure if it was only because of her Muggle heritage; they also came across as rather incompatible personalities.

"Expecting fourth-years to learn the Patronus is a pretty tall order," Terry said.
"I learnt it in my third year," Harry pointed out.

"Yes, but you're special, darling," Padma told him with a smile.

"Yeah right," Harry said. "I may have the weird prophecy business and a lot of Voldemort baggage, but otherwise I'm a student like any other. No genius prodigy stuff. So if I can do it, so can the others."

"You keep telling yourself that," Blaise told him placatingly.

"Well, we'll just have to see, won't we?"
Harry flew across the pitch, rejoicing in the way chilly November wind rushed against his face and his Firebolt responded to the subtest command.

The Slytherin-Gryffindor match was on. And Harry's team was so going to win.

He cut a sharp angle and pivoted to the left, dropping down and leaving Ginny Weasley behind him.

The Snitch glittered tantalizingly ahead of Harry. He grinned.

Victory was within grasp.

The small golden ball dashed off to the side, and Harry sped after it, narrowly avoiding a Bludger.

Nothing personal against Gryffindor, but—

"Harry Potter catches the Snitch! This is one hundred fifty points to Slytherin, and it's a clincher—Slytherin has won the match!"

A cheer went up from the Slytherin side of the crowds, while the Gryffindors predictably booed. Most students of the other Houses seemed happy enough to applaud the winners.

Still beaming, Harry spiralled down towards the ground, where his team was gathering.

"Well done, everyone," he told them and clapped Arthur Vaisey on the shoulder. "Great work. We had the match in the bag from the start."

"Not bad going yourself, Captain," seventh-year James Urquhart said, mock-saluting Harry.

Astoria gave Harry an elated smile.

"I can't believe we won!" she exclaimed.

"Well, you'd better get used to it," Harry said with a laugh. "We're the best team around."

Even Malfoy's face was flushed with victory. Crabbe and Goyle stood next to him, looking proud.

"C'mon, team," Harry said. "I'm willing to bet there's gonna be one hell of a party in the dorms."

He led them off the pitch, where the rest of their House greeted them. Much back-slapping and hand-shaking ensued, and the jubilant crowd swept them along to the Slytherin common room.

"To beating Gryffindor!" Urquhart shouted, raising a butterbeer.

"To our team!" Pansy Parkinson echoed, a glass in hand.

"To our captain!"

Harry reeled back a little, stunned at the ovation.

The House always basked in greater unity immediately after a Quidditch triumph, but he couldn't have imagined being so lauded by so many.

"Bet you're loving this, Potter," Malfoy hissed from his spot next to Harry.
Harry cocked at eyebrow at him.

"We beat Gryffindor, Malfoy. Of course I'm loving this."

"Guys," Urquhart groaned. "Just this once, can't we all be friends and enjoy ourselves?"

Harry and Malfoy exchanged glances.

"Of course we can," Harry said.

"Well, then!" Urquhart cried. "To victory!"

Smiling, Harry clinked bottles with him—and then paused a little as he realized he was expected to play equally nice with Malfoy.

At least Malfoy looked as disturbed as Harry felt during their brief toast to joint victory.

"See, that's better!" Urquhart cried. "Go team! Party time!"

And he bounded off, brandishing his empty bottle.

"Well, someone's going to end this evening with his head in a bin," Malfoy murmured.

"It's his final year and first Quidditch win," Harry pointed out. "I guess he's entitled to it?"

"Better him than me." Malfoy shrugged and gave Harry a cold look. "So long, Potter."

Harry nodded at him and turned to Blaise and Millie, who'd finally fought his way through to him.

"Not a bad show," Millie said.

"As usual, you flatter me too much," Harry replied with a crooked grin.

"All hail our wondrous captain!" Blaise exclaimed at that moment, throwing an arm around Harry's shoulders.

"Knock it off," Harry said, laughing. "But your adulation is taken as read."

For the first time in a long time, he felt like they were all just kids celebrating a sports victory and not giving a damn about anything that went on beyond the school's walls.

Not a bad feeling at all, as it happened.

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The high from having led his team to victory stayed with Harry for the next week as he dealt with his extracurricular activities, conducted independent research and navigated his classes.

Nonverbal spells were spilling over from Defence into other lessons, which was okay by Harry, but some of his friends found it difficult. Neville and Millicent both struggled with this new form of spell-casting—which made them the most hilarious study partners.

("She keeps glaring at me, Harry. Why does she keep glaring at me?")

Terry and Hermione seemed to be making romantic overtures towards each other, to Padma's great surprise. Blaise was on the snappy side after a recent misadventure involving a mop, a bunch of feathers, and an enraged Hufflepuff. And the Weasley twins were travelling around Asia and
collecting some terrifying fresh ideas, according to their latest letter.

All was going well enough, for the moment, if one ignored things like Voldemort still being around, Dementors and Inferi swarming all over Britain, and Azkaban's former prisoners roaming the country at large.

Harry stuck firmly to his programme of prioritizing the Patronus Charm in the duelling club, but it wasn't smooth sailing.

Three weeks in, the Dementor defence was proving to be a real challenge. For the first time, all age groups—barring last year's advanced students—were having the same trouble mastering a spell.

"This is extremely difficult magic, Harry," Eddie Carmichael said as they watched students try again, and fail again. "If it wasn't for how necessary it is right now—"

"Well, there you have it." Harry shrugged. "If it wasn't so necessary right now, I wouldn't have insisted."

These days everyone, Harry included, emerged from duelling club sessions exhausted, but there was a new sense of purpose within the group. They were doing something tangible that could help them with one of the immediate dangers out there, beyond the walls of Hogwarts.

"Maybe I'll be able to protect my family if I learn this," Colin Creevey said, gripping his wand hard. "They're Muggles, so they wouldn't know the first thing to do. They wouldn't even see the Dementors."

"I know," Harry said, and tore his mind away from the memory of Aunt Petunia.

"My parents are wizards, but that's not a fat lot of help," Terry said darkly. "They can't cast the charm, I've asked them. So if a Dementor comes calling at Christmas, I'm their best shot at survival."

A couple of other kids nodded, and Harry sighed.

"Well. Back to practicing with you, then. Try to think of a really happy memory, okay?"

"Maybe we should specify that I must get this spell or everyone will die does not count as a happy thought," Eddie said to Harry under his breath, surprising Harry into a chuckle.

Tracey Davis seemed to be having trouble. So was Justin Finch-Fletchley. So was Romilda Vane. Harry approached them in turn, helping out with wand movements and ideas for what could constitute a suitable memory.

They were all working so hard, and they didn't even know the full scope of the Azkaban breakout. Harry sincerely hoped that the media shitstorm, if it was coming, wouldn't erupt anytime soon—he didn't want any such distractions to jeopardize his students' sense of purpose.

***

Harry looked at the books spread before him on a secluded library table. Seeing him, anyone might think he was a hermit scholar, with his mind on the higher planes of esoteric study.

Thrice-damned Magick Moste Evile took apparent joy in explaining things through metaphor and allusion. As such, it required a lot of supplemental reading, and Harry thought he'd start beating his head against walls if he had to slog through any more medieval English.
Medieval English, might he add, of the gruesome kind…

But then, he was slowly, slowly getting somewhere.

He'd carefully perused the annoying book and found references to a particular means of increasing power. Unfortunately, it involved a ritual—something Harry had been uncomfortable thinking about since it reminded him far too much of Voldemort's rituals that he had witnessed.

("Bone of the father, unknowingly given… Flesh of the servant, willingly given… Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken…")

Still. This was not the time to get bogged down in sentiments.

Harry was even now hunting for details of the ritual, which wasn't easy to pin down. It was, apparently, big and bad and had to be written in code. The mention of a bodily sacrifice made him fear that he'd have to chop off a hand, but his general familiarity with Dark magic suggested that his blood may be enough.

The soul requirement was more problematic, because Harry wasn't going to start splitting his soul into pieces—that would definitely be crossing way into Voldemort's level…

And he hadn't even begun figuring out the third and final component.

This was where—well. This was where Harry started getting a little bit in over his head, he could admit. Straight-out spell-learning he could do; juggling elaborate theoretical constructs, not so much. It would be good to clear up a few points with a knowledgeable source; someone who would answer questions without asking too many in return.

He could think of only one such person—and, as it happened, he was supposed to be pumping him for information anyway.

Slughorn seemed to favour Harry plenty. This being the case, Harry thought that now might be a good time to capitalize on his gains. He had a tentative plan in place for probing the Potions master about Horcruxes after the next Slug Club meeting.

And if he was successful… well, he couldn't be faulted for pursuing his own lines of inquiry…

Harry started as the privacy charm around him gave a tinkle of alarm.

He sat up straighter and gave a hurried sweep of his wand, sending the books off his table to their proper places on the shelves. Whoever was approaching, it would be no good if they caught him reading anything but—say, Arithmancy.

A textbook, quickly fished out of the bag, completed the picture.

"Harry!" Terry said, appearing from behind a bookshelf. "There you are!"

"So I am," Harry agreed. "You were looking for me?"

"You're asking me? We're supposed to be meeting in the Hidden Room, remember?"

"Oh." Harry glanced at his watch. "Damn it. Sorry. Time flies, you know, when you're having fun."

Terry sized up Harry's ruffled hair and the Arithmancy textbook before him.

"Yeah, I can see you're having fun by the bucketload," he said. "Why did you even take Arithmancy
to NEWTs if you have so much trouble with it?"

"I ask myself the same question every day," Harry said, as they walked out of the library together.

***

The meeting in the Hidden Room quickly devolved into a homework club. Turned out, everyone was pretty swamped with assignments.

"Okay, so I was suicidal with Arithmancy," Harry said, putting his head on the desk. "But why did I also have to take Transfiguration?"

"Because it's going to help you later in life," Anthony said, rolling up his own essay.

"Because you thought you could deal with the workload?" Terry suggested.

Harry raised his head and pointed a finger at Terry.

"That last one," he muttered, "that last one is probably it. Damn it."

"Look, at least you're already done with your essay for Snape," Neville said glumly. "And I still haven't managed a nonverbal Stunner."

"You will soon," Harry said encouragingly.

"Yes, well. Snape took ten points off Gryffindor anyway." Neville shut his book with a disgusted expression on his face.

"Tough luck," Terry sympathized. "He took points from Hannah Abbott, too, and Susan—er, I mean —" He glanced awkwardly at Harry.

Harry rolled his eyes.

"It's okay, you can say her name," he said. "I'm not about to break, or anything."

"Well, I didn't think you were, but—" Terry stopped and turned to the other side of the room with a frown. "Oy! What's with the commotion over there?"

It was true that the noise coming from Hermione, Padma and Luna had been escalating for the past few minutes.

"Nothing!" Padma said loudly, without taking her eyes off Luna. "It's just that Miss Lovegood here has gone off on one of her theories about the Hidden Room—"

"Oh Merlin," Terry said. "That horse is so, so dead, and they're still having at it."

The girls had had occasional discussions about the mechanics of the Hidden Room for over a year now. Each debate started off with a new fact or observation brought forth by someone, and inevitably degenerated into ad hominem arguments.

Harry didn't quite see the fun, but then he'd had enough of magical theory.

"If I left a book in one version of the Room, you could not have seen it in another, because I didn't leave it there!" Padma exclaimed.

"Your book wasn't very difficult to miss, what with that bright crimson colour," Luna replied mildly.
"Personally, I have never been interested in the *Dark Love Blossoms* series."

"That is not the point," Padma protested, a light blush on her cheeks. "The point is—you simply *cannot* have seen it!"

"There were very many other things there, besides your book," Luna noted. "It was a place where people have hidden things for a very long time."

Harry was going to turn to Anthony and ask him about Transfiguration, but the Ravenclaw was looking unexpectedly intrigued by the discussion.

"Luna, could you repeat that? You saw Padma's book in the Hidden Room, but not where Padma had left it?"

"I forgot my book after the duelling club last time," Padma said, hijacking Luna's response. "And *she* claims she later saw it in some storage version of the Room."

"I've been in that hiding place many times before," Luna said. "It's always the same, you know."

"Do you think that's what the Room looks like when there's no-one around?" Terry asked excitedly.

Harry and Neville exchanged looks.

*Ravenclaws*. Now there'd be no redirecting their attention, or Hermione's, for that matter.

"Could it be some storage for house-elves?" Anthony suggested. "If you say there are many things in that room—could it be a kind of local lost-and-found?"

Padma stared at him.

"Lost, but never found?" she said. "Honestly, Tony, how can that *possibly* work? Not that many students know about the Room. Certainly not the whole castle, so if the elves find anything, they probably take it to Filch. Never even mind *how* they could possibly find anything in the Hidden Room, when it's individual for anyone who imagines it. You can only enter and find it the same if you know what the person imagined, and how could they?"

"The house-elves have a lot of magic we don't know about—" Terry began.

"Yes, but come *on.*"

"I wonder, would the rules of entering the Room be quite different for house-elves…" Hermione said, jotting something down on a piece of parchment, and smiled at Terry.

"You could ask them, you know," Luna pointed out. "I'm sure they'd be happy to help you. Very nice creatures, they are."

"Yes, well, while we're on the subject of research," Hermione responded, a glint in her eye. "How about we conduct a little experiment? I'll leave something here before we go, and then tell you what it was. We'll see if you can find it in the storage version of the Room, as you claim."

"It is a very big room," Luna said. "Almost like a cathedral, with a lot of things there."

"Suddenly feeling less sure about what you saw?" Padma asked snidely.

Luna gazed between her and Hermione with a rare air of crossness.
"Not at all," she said. "We can have as many experiments as you wish. Leave something of yours here before we go, and I will try to find it in the storage. I'll do it, you'll see."

"Just as long as the Room doesn't provide it for you just because you wish for it," Padma pointed out.

"It's not good to be so narrow-minded," Luna chided.

From then on, the discussion predictably deteriorated into a comparison of one another's mental and spiritual attributes.

Harry sighed and turned back to his Transfiguration homework, which, funnily enough, had not completed itself in the meantime.

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"So what are you planning to do after school, Miss Chang?" Professor Slughorn asked, falling back in his chair.

"Right now it's between professional Quidditch and the Ministry's experimental charms department, sir," Cho said. "I'm still not sure."

The Slug Club dinner in the Potions master's quarters was winding down; they'd already moved onto dessert. A fire crackled pleasantly in the hearth, the chairs were soft and comfortable, and the food had been delicious. Even Blaise looked content for the moment as he sat next to Padma and listened idly to her conversation with Cormac McLaggen.

Judging by Padma's sweet expression, McLaggen didn't have much longer to live.

Hermione was on McLaggen's other side, and Cho sat directly to Slughorn's left. Harry got the prestigious right-hand spot, and Neville, next to him, completed the circle.

"I hear that you have a special young man at the Ministry, Miss Chang?" Slughorn asked with a smile. "A Triwizard champion, isn't he?"

Cho blushed prettily.

"Yes, I suppose Cedric is rather famous for that. But, of course, Harry won the Cup, and he and Harry shared the victory," she said, gesturing towards Harry with a smile.

"Well, that's just Harry for you!" Slughorn beamed, clapping Harry on the shoulder.

His exclamation was loud enough to attract the others' attention; Blaise rolled his eyes, and McLaggen frowned.

"It's all pretty ancient history by now," Harry said. "What with recent events…" He shrugged.

Slughorn clucked his tongue, shaking his head.

"Dangerous times we live in," he said in disapproving tone. "Nowhere is safe, mark my words. Nowadays, one has to give up on comfort in search of security."

"Is it very much like the first war, Professor?" Hermione asked hesitantly.

"No," Slughorn said, his gaze lingering on the fire. "So far, it is not like the first war at all, but there are, of course, some similarities… Unpleasant business, altogether unpleasant…"
Looking at the teacher, Harry tried to gauge whether his Horcruxes plan was a viable one. A lot would hinge on how much Slughorn actually wanted Voldemort gone.

He had alluded to being on the run; apparently, Voldemort was trying to recruit him, and he really didn't want to have to say no. Dumbledore had implied that Slughorn had good intentions but was ruled by fear...

He carried Voldemort's deadly secret inside of him, so no wonder he was keen to hide out at Hogwarts; but was it only that, or did he genuinely oppose Voldemort?

Under normal circumstances, Slughorn would have been the archetypal non-radicalized Pureblood—the type who wouldn't really suffer no matter who won, and as such one who could afford to theorize about it all without participating…

"A penny for your thoughts, Harry?" Slughorn asked, and Harry started guiltily.

"Just—thinking about the war, sir," Harry said.

Slughorn's jovial expression darkened.

"Yes, I'm sure you must have a lot on your mind, eh, Harry? The Chosen One, they call you…"

"They do," Harry agreed levelly.

The Potions master gave him a shrewd look. Harry smiled and lowered his voice.

"The Minister has once told me it's not the truth that's important, but what people believe…"

Slughorn tugged on his moustache, expression thoughtful.

"That's as it may be, my boy, and yet—"

But the Potions master did not get to finish his sentence. Right at that moment, they were interrupted by an awful scream.

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The high-pitched wail of acute pain came from somewhere nearby Slughorn's office. Harry jumped, as did everyone else, and started for the door.

Neville was the first to burst out the office, with the rest crowding behind him.

A cloud of brownish dust half-obscured a scene of utter destruction. A portion of the ceiling in the corridor before Slughorn's door appeared to have caved in, releasing a crush of rubble onto the floor beneath. From under the mass of stone emanated anguished cries. Some unfortunate soul was apparently trapped under the rubble, most likely injured—

Harry was already casting a nonverbal spell to move the stones, as was Hermione. He heard Padma next to him incant a Vanishing spell.

"Wingardium Leviosa," McLaggen chimed in, flicking his own wand.

The fallen stones didn't budge.

"Help!" came the feeble call from the rubble.
"We're trying!" Cho shouted, and shook her wand in frustration. "Professor, what's going on?"

A frowning Slughorn cast a couple of nonverbal spells in quick succession. Then, after another swish of his wand, the air cleared of dust particles, and the rubble came into focus.

From where Harry stood, it suddenly seemed that—that the stones *continued* falling even as they lay on the floor.

They seemed to be pressing down, deliberately, as if trying to squeeze the life out of the people trapped underneath—

"Professor," Harry said urgently. "I think—"

"Harry," Padma said, grabbing his arm. "Is this—"

"MURDER!" Peeves whooshed onto the scene, hovering above them and cackling madly. "MUUUUUUURDEEEEER IN THE CORRIDORS!"

"Oh shut up," Hermione said, and aimed a spell at the poltergeist, which he dodged.

Harry dimly heard the sound of approaching feet—Peeves's cries had attracted attention. But his mind was fixed on the pile of rubble.

He'd heard of this curse. Montague had taught it to him, one evening, when they'd been hanging out after Quidditch, back in a different life…

But if this was the curse used—if a curse was used—why was a curse used?

"We can't waste any time!"

"Help!"

"What is going on, why can't we move the stones?"

"MURDER!"

Pained screams ringing in his ears, Harry aimed his wand at the rubble and whispered an incantation he was not supposed to know.

He wasn't even sure it would work, but—

The stones shuddered, and another moan came from underneath them.

Harry cast the spell again, concentrating hard, and then—the rubble froze.

There was a momentary pause as Harry drew a breath.

"Let's try now," he said. "To move them."

The stones made no resistance this time as several spells rang out in unison.

The rocks lifted in the air—and then the whole pile flew over to the side.

The stones collapsed with a crash that shook the entire corridor, and in their place two small bloodied figures came into view.

One of the kids was stirring weakly; the other didn't even move.
"Oh Merlin," Slughorn said, dashing towards them. "Abercrombie! Nichols! Miss Granger, essence of dittany from my office, at once! Alert the hospital wing!"

Harry became aware of their audience; a crowd had gathered around them as they'd tried to extricate the unfortunate students from the rubble. Quite a few were now staring at him.

"I know these kids," Cho was saying tearfully, meanwhile. "I told them off just the other night—Gryffindor second-years, such trouble-makers—always sneaking off to the kitchens—"

Blaise came up to Harry, expression about as blank as Harry suspected his own was.
"You'd better have an explanation for how you knew what to do."

They both looked ahead at Slughorn bent over the second year students.

Harry thought of the Dark spell he'd cast, of the kids' pitiful whimpers.
"I couldn't just leave them there."

"No. I suppose you could not."

Harry slanted a glance at Blaise and clenched his teeth.
"Really? I should have let them bleed to death?"

"POTTER MURDERING STUDENTS IN CORRIDORS!" Peeves crooned delightedly.

"Shut up!" Padma shouted. Her spell hit the poltergeist on the head, and he sped away from the scene, spreading the news of murder far and wide.

"I don't suppose this could be an accident," Hermione said, returning from Slughorn's side.

She looked a little wild around the eyes, and her uniform—like everyone else's—was covered in dust.

Harry shook his head.

Just then, they heard a stir from behind them. The crowd of students parted, giving way to the majestic figure of Albus Dumbledore with Madam Pomfrey at his side.

"Everyone will please return to your common rooms," the Headmaster said, predictably. "I shall ask your students here to stay, Horace."

"Certainly, certainly," Slughorn muttered, and moved aside to let the school nurse approach the injured second-years. "I have administered some first-aid charms, as you can see—"

Madam Pomfrey took over, her wand moving confidently over the prone bodies.

"How are they, Poppy?" Dumbledore inquired in a mild tone.

The Headmaster projected the image of a leader calmly in control, but Harry, who'd learnt to watch out for his tells, thought he was worried, maybe even angry…

"They'll live," the nurse said. "But they took some heavy damage."

"Will you require any assistance getting them into the hospital wing?"
"Certainly not."

Dumbledore nodded and turned to the dishevelled Slug Club.

"Horace, if we could perhaps use your office to discuss the events—?"

"By all means," Slughorn said and waved an arm in the direction of his door.

Harry and the others trooped back into the Potions master's office, and the sight of dessert dishes still on the dinner table struck Harry as completely incongruous. But, of course, hardly a quarter of an hour had passed.

He glanced around—Neville appeared badly shaken, Padma grim, Cho upset… In fact, only Blaise's expression—and, he guessed, his own—betrayed no emotion. But then, they never did wear their hearts on their sleeves.

Slughorn collapsed on his chair, looking like a man badly in need of fortification, and Dumbledore took a seat next to him.

"Do make yourselves comfortable," the Headmaster said, looking around at all the students in turn. "Please tell me what happened, Horace."

He listened carefully as the Potions master related the story of the evening's events. Once Slughorn had finished—

"And what would be your theory, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked.

Of course, Harry had anticipated the question. He leaned back in his chair, conscious of all eyes on him.

"I'd say someone staged a deliberate attack."

"On these particular students?" Dumbledore asked quickly.

"I wouldn't know, sir."

"One has to be thankful you knew how to recognize the means of the attack, however."

Dumbledore smiled, but Harry knew that look. He raised his chin a tiny bit and gave a thin smile in return.

"I'm glad to be of help, as always."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed then that the others were observing the conversation between himself and Dumbledore with keen, somewhat surprised attention. It occurred to him belatedly that most people, his friends included, had never seen him and the Headmaster interact.

The Order had, and they still bore the scars…

"We were very lucky that Harry was there," Slughorn said, and Harry thought he sounded defensive. "I must say I did not recognize the curse—but Harry did, rather quickly, and time was of the essence."

"No doubt it was, Horace," Dumbledore agreed. "If you would be so kind to tell us, then, Mr. Potter, about the nature of the curse?" At Harry's momentary frown, he added: "I confess it appears to me a rather novel, if unpleasant, enchantment."
A Dark curse unknown to Dumbledore? This was getting better and better.

"It's a spell that gives inanimate objects a desire to kill," Harry said, trying to keep his voice casual. "Only temporarily, of course, and it can't do anything complex. But if you cast it on a blanket, it will suffocate whoever is under it. If you cast it on a pile of rubble—" He shrugged.

"Is that why normal spells didn't work on the stones?" Cho inquired, a light clearly dawning.

"Yeah. It needed a counter-curse."

"Fascinating," Dumbledore said, steepling his fingers. "How did you know to recognize it?"

"It was a lucky guess," Harry said. "I'd heard of such a curse, that's all."

"Indeed?" Dumbledore inquired. "Very foresighted of you to have memorized the incantation."

Harry met his gaze calmly, not giving an inch.

"I presume this is a curse of recent creation," Dumbledore said. "Though it draws, of course, on old ideas… It is fashionable, would you say, in a certain crowd?"

Harry drew his eyebrows, wondering that himself. He hadn't realized this was a new curse when Montague had boasted about it, but it made sense in retrospect. If so, it could very well be in vogue among junior Death Eaters, and perhaps senior ones too.

"I wouldn't know," he chose to say.

"Wouldn't you?" Cormac McLaggen interjected, sounding something between menacing and hysterical. "You seem to be the only one who knew this Dark spell, Potter! That doesn't strike you as suspicious at all?"

"I'm far from the only one," Harry said coolly. *In a certain crowd.*

"In any case," Slughorn said hurriedly, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, "poor Abercrombie and his friend will be extremely grateful to Harry, I'm sure. I suppose someone must have been in the corridor to cast that spell?"

"It can be time-delayed," Harry said, reluctantly. "Or, well, activated only when it comes into contact with a living being. So, technically, the ceiling could have been charmed in advance."

"In which case, we may also suppose that the cave-in itself had not been accidental," Dumbledore mused.

"Really, Albus," Slughorn said, alarmed. "There's nothing to tell us either way. The mischief may have been done once the stones had already fallen."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore conceded. "Who knew that you were hosting a meeting tonight, Horace?"

Slughorn blinked, looking nonplussed.

"I could not account for that, by any means," he said. "The list would include those my students may have told, I imagine, and those who may have heard me inviting them. But, Albus, surely you don't mean—"

"I do not yet mean anything in particular, Horace," Dumbledore said, smiling. "Do not trouble yourself."
"But," Harry said, frowning, "if it was a timed trap—it can't have been for those two kids, could it?"

"Let us not be too hasty," said Slughorn. "It is entirely possible that the unfortunate attack was perpetrated, so to say, on the spot."

"There was no-one in the corridor but us," Cormac McLaggen said, butting into the conversation again.

"Us and a giant cloud of dust," Padma put in sweetly. "We could have missed any number of people in that haze."

"But," Hermione said, "who would do such a thing? And what for?"

"That, Miss Granger, is a truly excellent question," Dumbledore answered.

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In no time, rumours had spread around Hogwarts. By breakfast next morning, the whole school knew that two Gryffindor second-years had been attacked, that they’d almost died, and that the corridor outside Professor Slughorn's office had been the scene of the crime.

Everyone also knew that Harry Potter had been involved somehow, but no-one seemed sure whether Harry had saved the two Gryffindors or tried to kill them.

"Peeves ought to be exorcised," Harry told Neville as they took a walk by the lake.

It was a chilly day, but not bad for the beginning of December. Twilight had set in, even though it was only past three. In another hour, it would be too dark to be outside.

"I don't think you can do that to a poltergeist," Neville said distractedly. "Harry—how did you know about that curse?"

Harry blew out an annoyed breath. Everyone around him seemed determined to make mountains out of molehills.

Hermione had cornered him yesterday almost as soon as Dumbledore had dismissed them.

("How did you recognize that spell? Wasn't it a Dark curse, Harry?")

Padma hadn't been not far behind.

("It was very dashing of you, Harry, and everything, but where did you pick up such sweet little spells?")

McLaggen had confronted him this morning.

("You were the only one who knew how to get rid of the curse… How do we know you hadn't cast it in the first place?")

Millie had lectured him once they'd told her everything, Anthony and Terry had looked at him intently all through lunch, and Neville had just broached the topic.

Harry thought they were paying far too much attention to trivialities.

"Nev," he said. "Never mind how I know stuff. I study a lot, okay, and you pick things up in Slytherin. All kinds of things. But that's not the point. The point is: what the hell was that attack?"
"We've been talking about in Gryffindor, obviously." Neville bent down to pick up a twig, then tossed it aside after a moment's consideration. "Euan Abercrombie and Roger Nichols are just ordinary kids, you know. They're a bit annoying, and they've lost a few points, but no-one hates them or anything. And we're all quite sure nobody wants to kill them." Neville shivered. "But… Nichols is a Muggle-born, and Abercrombie's his friend. People say it's related to the war, you know."

Harry rubbed an eyebrow.

"Yeah. You think it's not?"

Neville looked at the lake, then back at Harry.

"Well, thing is, if we start talking about the war and the Death Eaters and so on, the first place to look is Slytherin. No offence."

"None taken," Harry muttered.

"You said you learned the curse in Slytherin. Who else may have?" Neville pressed.

"Anyone on the Quidditch team," Harry said readily. "And anyone friendly with the upper years, which is kind of all of the junior Death Eaters. And anyone from other Houses who's leaning the same way, for all I know."

Harry had watched his Housemates closely yesterday, as, truth be told, he was also inclined to suspect someone who could have learnt the curse from Montague. Say, Draco Malfoy, who didn't seem to be having a good year so far, and could very well want to vent his frustration on a couple of Gryffindor kids.

Malfoy had been in the common room when Harry had returned, and Millie said he'd been there the whole time Harry had been gone. But the Malfoy scion did seem out of sorts these days…

The only thing Harry was sure of in the entire mess was that the attack had been deliberate, because such curses did not cast themselves.

"Fair enough," Neville said, once Harry had outlined this to him. "It is confusing. We don't even really know the attack was on Abercrombie and Nichols in particular, do we?"

"No, we don't." Harry sighed. "Have they woken up yet, by the way?"

"Yeah," Neville said, "thankfully, they have. They'll be fine, don't worry. They said they were going to the kitchens, sneaking off as usual, and then—they don't remember anything, and then they were in pain. So that doesn't clear up anything."

Harry rubbed his hands to warm them up.

"Could it have been a prank? Like a joke gone wrong, from one of the older Gryffindors?"

"With a spell that Dark? In Gryffindor?"

"Oh, don't give me that," Harry said. "Gryffindors don't have a monopoly on virtue."

"Yeah, okay," Neville said. "But still, this is clearly a spell that intends to harm. Nobody would use it in a prank. Well," he amended, "not now that Fred and George have graduated, and Umbridge is gone…"
Harry quirked a quick smile at Neville.

"The thing is, if the two kids weren't the targets, if this was a timed attack, why was it staged there and then and who the hell was supposed to get hurt?" Harry said.

"Well," Neville said cautiously, "there was a person in that room who's often in the headlines these days, and whose loss would be a huge blow to our side—"

"Nev—"

"You, Harry. Hasn't it occurred to you that you may have been the target?"

It had, which was another reason why Harry had thought of Malfoy. There was hardly anyone at the school who hated him more.

But then, he didn't know what orders Voldemort had given; previously, the Dark Lord had declared that he wanted to kill Harry personally, which made him off-limits to others.

On the other hand, the attack, so close to the office of a teacher, would have injured Harry more likely than killed him—which made a crucial difference…

"I don't know, Nev," Harry said. "I doubt it. If it was an attack on me, it was so ridiculously convoluted and poorly timed that it seems unlikely."

Neville didn't look convinced, but he nodded and looked out to the lake.

"Either way, it looks bad, you know," he said. "This kind of thing, it's not helping, with things as tense as they are…"

Indeed. The atmosphere at Hogwarts was cheerful enough with the Daily Prophet reporting people's disappearances and Dementor sightings and attacks on Muggle villages. If students thought the school's corridors were also turning into a battlefield, there was no saying what would follow.

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Harry was glad to find that Slughorn had not started thinking any worse of him for having used a bit of Dark magic. Quite the contrary, the teacher had praised Harry for thinking on his feet and for showing initiative.

("It's not every student that would rush so readily to the defence of another! You're truly your mother's son, Harry, so like dear Lily…")

With this in mind, Harry figured there was no sense in putting off his plan to question Slughorn. He didn't get to it last time for obvious reasons, but the next Slug Club meal would present another opportunity.

To this end, Harry hung back after their lunch two weeks later, hovering by Slughorn's office door.

"Actually, Professor, I wanted to ask you a question, if it's all right with you," he said.

"Of course, Harry," Slughorn said, spreading his arms wide. "As they say, fire away!"

Harry stepped further into the room and stopped by the mantelpiece.

"Thank you, Professor. Well, actually, my question has nothing to do with Potions, or with the current school curriculum. But I've heard—from other students—that you are rather knowledgeable
in many areas of magic."

Slughorn nodded uncertainly.

"I wondered if—well." Harry took a deep breath in nervousness that wasn't all feigned. He really wanted to play this right. "You've noticed, I think, that I have been researching some… unusual spells. Due to my history with the Dark Lord, I—well. We've talked about this before, the Chosen One business. I will have to fight him, you see, and I can't… I don't want to be flying blind."

"I quite understand," Slughorn muttered, though he did appear unsettled.

"Professor Dumbledore does not entirely approve of my research," Harry said carefully. "He believes—I don't know what he believes." Harry injected a bit of frustration into his voice. "I don't think he likes it that I'm a Slytherin, and I don't think—I don't want to say anything bad about him, he's a great wizard—but I don't feel I can talk to him or ask him anything. Because he disapproves of me, I think, really."

"Now, Harry, I'm sure it's not so bad," Slughorn said, frowning. "Dumbledore's quite fair-minded, you know—though, of course, he does quite like getting his way… I confess I did notice certain coolness between him and you that night, after that awful tragedy…"

Slughorn gave a delicate shudder, and Harry nodded.

"You see what I mean, then, sir. But I can't not research what I'm up against only to please him, and I wondered—would you agree to maybe—answer some questions, when I have them? I won't bother you all the time, or anything, sir. It's just—a lot of it is so complicated—and I really don't know who to talk to…"

Slughorn was already nodding, and Harry's heart beat faster as he sensed success.

"Of course, my boy, you are in a terrible position." The Potions master's round chest swelled even more with apparent indignation. "I've thought rather often lately that you've been quite ill-used. So many responsibilities, for one so young! It is no wonder you're buckling under the strain!"

A momentary feeling of genuine gratitude towards Slughorn blindsided Harry; he blinked, and berated himself for falling for his own charade.

He was doing just fine. He didn't need any support from understanding adults.

"Dreadful business, this war," Slughorn was saying meanwhile. "Makes the young grow up too fast, and disturbs the peace of the old… But of course, if you think I could help you, I'd be glad to…"

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, expression as relieved as he could make it. "I doubt anyone really knows what he has researched and what rituals he's undergone. I have been gathering as much information as possible, but I am, of course, directly involved. I've discovered terrible things, sir…" At Slughorn's grave nod, Harry continued, seemingly carried away: "I even happen to know he's made several—"
He checked himself, donning a deer-in-the-headlights look. Slughorn stared at him.

"Several what, Harry?"

Harry averted his eyes before glancing hesitantly back at Slughorn.

"Please, sir, I'm really not sure I should tell you… I was just—it's very secret, you see, but finally talking about all of it—please promise you won't tell anybody, sir."

Slughorn appeared torn between his curiosity and the feeling that ignorance was bliss.

"You have my word," he uttered finally, and Harry knew that curiosity had won.

"The Dark Lord has made several Horcruxes," Harry said. At Slughorn's gasp of what seemed like genuine horror, Harry added: "I wouldn't even have known what it was, but I've actually destroyed one."


Harry nodded solemnly.

"And I know there's more of his Horcruxes there. I'm not sure how many altogether, though. I think he must be the first wizard to make more than one."

"Not the first," Slughorn said faintly. "But never before, to my knowledge, has anyone gone further than to make two! By Jove. So he did make them…"

That last remark was clearly involuntary, but Harry seized on it.

"Do you—know anything about it, sir?"

There was a pause, during which Slughorn stood very still. Then he slowly raised his eyes to Harry's.

"I'm sorry, my boy," he said with a pitiful attempt at a smile. "This has all been rather too much to take in. I confess I'm quite bowled over! I could never—this could surely never—I'm sorry, Harry, but I have to say, I am quite fatigued all of a sudden."

Slughorn's obvious shock seemed to point to his forlorn hope that Tom Riddle had never acted on the information about Horcruxes.

As if.

"Professor," Harry said very seriously, holding Slughorn's gaze. "I will leave if you want me to, but if you happen to know anything about this—anything at all—I wish you would tell me. The knowledge of the Dark Lord's Horcruxes is the best weapon against him we have, and this could save hundreds of lives—this could win us the war."

Slughorn made an abortive movement towards Harry, seemingly eager to stop the flow of words.

"Harry, please," he said. "You don't know what you are saying. You don't know what you are asking."

Harry shook his head.
"The Dark Lord taints every life he touches; I know that better than most. Whatever it entails, I'll be grateful for any help you give."

Slughorn's apprehension was visibly rising, and Harry knew without a shadow of doubt he wouldn't get anything else out of him today. The subtle confession would have to be enough—for now.

Harry was already at the door when the Potion master's quiet voice stopped him.

"Harry… has Dumbledore put you up to this?"

"Up to what, Professor?"

Slughorn gazed uncertainly at Harry, and Harry looked him straight in the eye.

"I'm sorry if I've upset you, sir," he said finally. "Please believe I never meant to."

With that, he walked out the door.

***

Staring at the spread of the *Daily Prophet* at breakfast the next morning, Harry wondered whether he'd chosen the best possible time to approach Slughorn, or the worst possible one.

The latter seemed, unfortunately, more likely.

*The entire wizarding world knows who Harry Potter is. But very few could say for certain what he stands for,* Rita Skeeter wrote in a second-page feature.

Under the headline (*The Peculiar Politics of Harry Potter*) was a picture of Harry from the Slytherin-Gryffindor match, taken as he was walking off the pitch. Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle followed at his back. The shot had a very dramatic look, as if Harry was at the forefront of ominous forces rather than a mere Quidditch team.

This was in line with Rita Skeeter's evocative tale.

*After Harry Potter battled You-Know-Who at the Ministry of Magic, we were quick to hail him as our hero—or even our future saviour. But perhaps, in so doing, we hastened too much to ignore his past.*

Moving past the usual tributes to the heroic deeds of Harry's infancy, Skeeter swiftly segued into the meat of the story. She outlined how Harry had remained an unknown quantity for years after starting Hogwarts, and how he'd been rumoured to be the Heir of Slytherin. She spent some time revisiting the reports of his character that came out during the Triwizard Tournament—highlighting his secretive nature, his skills as a Parselmouth, and his apparently unhealthy appetite for fame.

She pointed out how his negative press had fallen by the wayside in the aftermath of his battle with Voldemort—and then, in a move that made Harry's eyebrows climb into the hairline, she went on to cast doubt onto those events.

*The truth of the matter is, nobody knows to this day exactly what happened at the Ministry. From questioning various government employees and witnesses, your reporter has found only two facts we can answer for: Harry Potter and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named engaged in some magical exchange nobody can explain, and the then-Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, died as a result.*

That was one way of describing what had happened, Harry supposed, but Merlin's fucking balls.
Suddenly, he had a feeling that this wasn't just going to be yet another vaguely libellous article about the Boy-Who-Lived. This shit could have consequences.

*But that's not even the worst of this story,* Rita Skeeter promised.

"For fuck's sake," Harry muttered.

Millie, next to him, gave a grunt of what was either assent or an invitation to shut up.

*Dear reader, here's a shocking truth your faithful reporter has uncovered: prior to these events, in the autumn of last year, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had approached Harry Potter with an offer of reconciliation.*

*Indeed, we can say more. It was an offer of recruitment. Yes, several independent sources have confirmed this flabbergasting fact. Perhaps, You-Know-Who was attracted by the same reports of Potter's character that so repulsed the public. Or perhaps he knew something about the teenage hero that we did not. After all, it is hardly a secret that many of his followers hail from Slytherin—the Hogwarts House where Harry Potter shares a dormitory with sons of known Death Eaters.*

*Harry Potter did not refuse the offer.*

*Before you cry out in outrage, dear reader, be reassured: we do not know for a fact that he accepted the proposal. No definitive proof exists, and the young man's arm is still free of the Dark Mark. We know simply that Harry Potter was approached, and he did not say no. Perhaps, due to his situation in Slytherin, he felt he couldn't; perhaps he had friends who persuaded him to give it a thought. Perhaps, after all, an offer of relative safety could not but tempt a troubled teen who had already endured so much. Alas, he would not be the first to seek solace in darkness.*

*After the Battle at the Ministry, Harry Potter professed to have taken a stand against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and we were eager to believe him. We chose to ignore earlier reports of his character, and the odd reality of his continued good standing among those he was allegedly ready to fight. Most recently, we chose to turn a deaf ear to sinister reports that he'd been casting Dark spells in Hogwarts corridors.*

*But now, at this difficult moment, the time has come for us to tear down façades and see the truth. We need to know we can trust the young man we are pinning our hopes upon. The question is: how much is he trusting us?*

Harry stared at the words, his mind blank for the moment.

This was—unexpected. This was worse than unexpected. This was—

He gazed at a photograph that accompanied the body of the article. It was another shot taken after the Quidditch match, and it depicted Harry and Malfoy clinking bottles at the party celebrating Slytherin's win. The caption didn't say anything outright, but implied just enough.

*Of all the fuck-awful timing in the world,* Harry thought, gritting his teeth.

As if he didn't have enough shit to deal with as it was.

"Harry?" Millicent said cautiously.

"Yeah. No. It's fine," Harry said, trying to gather his bearings.

"Spoken like a man who doesn't lose his head in a crisis," Blaise noted, surfacing from his own copy
of the *Prophet*. "I think we can take this as our motto. It's catchy."

Harry ignored Blaise with effort, and took a deep breath.

It wasn't quite the worst article about him that had ever come out.

But there would be questions—again. He'd have to explain himself—again. His reputation was at stake—again.

What was that Skeeter cow *thinking*?

Harry momentarily felt like bashing his head against the wall, or throwing the mother of all tantrums, or fleeing the wizarding world and never looking back.

Instead, he sat up straighter and folded the paper neatly in two.

The seconds it took him to do that were not enough to go through even the most rudimentary of Occlumency exercises, but there was no putting off the inevitable.

He raised his eyes and surveyed the Great Hall.

Naturally, quite a few people were surveying him.

Harry affected an unconcerned look and searched for his friends. Terry was pretty pale, while Neville seemed fit to burst with anger. Padma, too, appeared cross, and Hermione upset.

A lot of teachers were sporting frowns, and Hagrid, for one, looked positively thunderous. Snape's face reflected nothing whatsoever. Dumbledore alone seemed his usual self, leafing merrily through the *Prophet*.

Harry lowered his head, closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind.

"So, this is going to be fun," Blaise said, in a voice filled with a biting kind of cheer. "Harry Potter cast as the main villain. Maidens faint, old warlocks shake their grizzly heads. The youth of today is hopeless. The world is headed to the dogs, etcetera. Bring on the Firewhisky."

"Blaise."

"Rumours have an odd ability to validate themselves," Blaise continued, undeterred. "It's a rumour that's gone around Hogwarts before. Hark! The newspapers write the same thing. The plot thickens. There must be something in it, says a suspicious student. Could Harry Potter *actually* be the villain?"

Harry raised his eyes and looked at Blaise.

"What are you saying?"

"This is going to sound worse to those who've heard similar rumours about you before. There's that spell you cast, in Slughorn's corridor. And the recruitment stuff reached some ears last year. You can be sure the junior Darklings will do their best to substantiate it. Flatly denying everything is probably your only option, but—damn it, Harry," Blaise said, and for a moment his mask gave a crack. "We warned you about this. We knew it would come up."

"Yes, but—now?" Harry said, very carefully not balling his hands into fists. "Skeeter had to publish this right now, when things are as bad as they are? By all that is holy, what kind of a strategy is that?"
Blaise's face went oddly blank.

"Well," he said. "It does make sense if you consider for a moment that she may genuinely feel the public needs to be warned about you. If you are actually on the wrong side, at this point, with your high profile, you're more than a little dangerous."

Harry stared at him.

"But—how can she possibly—"

"You seem to think that everyone can see inside your head," Blaise said irritably. "Believe me, everyone has wanted to, for years, but they never could. In many ways, for all anyone knows... you could be planning or thinking anything."

"Let's not exaggerate. I've been pretty straightforward lately."

"Oh, have you?" Blaise murmured, eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth to add something, but visibly held himself back and changed tack. "Don't think you're in the clear just because you've been saying all the appropriate anti-Dark Lord things."

*All the appropriate—*

Harry drew a breath, but then swallowed his response. This was not a conversation to have in public. Much less in the Great Hall.

To regain a semblance of calm, Harry gazed around the Slytherin table. A few students were shooting glances at him, varying from curious to antagonistic. Malfoy looked pale and almost sick—perhaps he keenly felt the way he'd been implicitly singled out as a representative of Death Eaters at Hogwarts. Nott was quite impenetrable. Some duelling club members, including the Greengrass sisters, looked pale and grim.

Hardly anyone was talking, and then only in whispers.

But, well. There wasn't much to say, was there? It was an odd situation which on the one hand directly pitted Harry against the children of Death Eaters, but on the other prevented them from doing anything but showing a united front to the rest of the school.

All Slytherins had been painted with the same brush; the article heavily implied that Harry was evil for being one of them. Or that being one of them made him that much more evil, whatever.

Harry didn't know how the rest of the wizarding world was going to react to the story, but he hoped that Hogwarts students wouldn't go crazy with rumours and suppositions. A significant number of the students were in the duelling club, and so were likely to give Harry the benefit of the doubt.

Probably.

He could hope, anyway.

***

Whispers followed Harry as he walked through Hogwarts corridors after breakfast.

It was nothing new. People often gossiped about him. Harry affected nonchalance as he carried on.

He'd called a duelling club meeting for that evening, figuring that it should be his first move in damage control.
And until then…

Harry quickened his pace.

Until then, he needed time to think.

Even as he walked towards the Hidden Room, thoughts assaulted him—memories, attempts at planning his actions, calculations about the future.

("What do you think everybody is going to say if their golden boy is still playing Quidditch on the side of the evil Slytherins?")

("A man can court many only so long before he is mistrusted by all.")

("Has it even occurred to you why all the bad guys think you'd make such a splendid bad guy along with them?")

The Hidden Room had resolved itself, going on Harry's subconscious wish, into his bedroom at number 12, Grimmauld Place.

Harry sat down on the bed, then lay back across it and stared at the dark grey ceiling.

("You say you're against You-Know-Who, but there's rumours going around, and how do we really know we can trust you or any other Slytherins?")

He'd thought he'd dealt with this last year. He'd figured that, surely, after his confrontation with Voldemort at the Ministry, no doubt about his loyalties could remain in anyone's mind. In a way, maybe he'd been counting far too much on the title of the Boy-Who-Lived.

("Whatever that title is supposed to mean, it doesn't mean shit with you.")

Harry closed his eyes, put an arm over his face.

Maybe he'd miscalculated. It wouldn't be the first time. Blaise was right, he did have a bad track record of recognizing how he was perceived by others.

But he'd been so busy doing other shit, all motherfucking kinds of other shit. He just hadn't had the time to stop and look around and wonder whether he was coming across as too Dark, too mild, too weak, too strong, or—

Harry took another deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut.

He was so tired.

("You've made a mistake. You've chosen wrong. You won't last among Dumbledore's lackeys.")

Bullshit. There was so much bullshit. He just had to ignore it and not let any of it matter. Otherwise he'd lose it completely, and be easy prey for Voldemort.

That was, if his own side didn't lynch him first.

("The entire wizarding world knows who Harry Potter is. But very few could say for certain what he stands for.")

Harry gave himself a mental shake. Nobody in any position of power was going to believe that article. Dumbledore was on his side. So was the Order, even if they didn't approve of everything he
did. So was Scrimgeour.

More or less.

Harry made himself open his eyes.

It was fine. It would be fine. He'd deal with it all, one way or another.

He just needed to do what he always did: put on a calm expression, smile, and face the music as if he welcomed it.

***

Most of the duelling club turned up to the meeting, despite the short notice.

"If you have any questions to ask," Harry said from the podium, "you may as well ask me directly, instead of going around wondering. We can't afford not to trust each other right now."

"Was any of it true?"

"Were you actually recruited by the Death Eaters?"

"Can you prove that you're against You-Know-Who?"

Some of the students looked genuinely concerned—chiefly Slytherins who'd closely observed the dynamics in the House and knew for a fact that Harry had been friendly with Montague and his lot. Others, though, were old doubters, like Zacharias Smith and Morag McDougal. And then some were clearly enjoying the thrill…

Harry felt his patience slipping as he fielded the questions.

"For Merlin's sake, why would I be here today if I was secretly evil? What good on earth would it do me to train all of you guys to be able to, presumably, one day fight me? Why would it occur to me to teach you to repel the Dementors if I was all for unleashing them onto the public?"

"To keep up appearances?" Lisa Turpin suggested uncertainly.

"What appearances?" Harry asked. "Let's face it, this is not something that I have to do. It's something I choose to do. I'm here because I want to be and because I want all of you guys to be able to defend yourselves. If we can't get past this point, we should really think about what we're all doing in this room."

Harry was satisfied to see quite a few students looking chastised. Some were still frowning, but there were also vaguely apologetic glances cast his way…

Padma was whispering something furiously to her sister, while glaring at Terry and Anthony. At the meeting of Harry's friends not an hour ago, it had come out that the Ravenclaw boys had known about the recruitment offer since last year, and hadn't told her.

("I don't know. It was Harry's thing.")

Blaise and Millie were their usual selves, as was Luna. She'd stood up for Harry at the meeting with his friends—supporting Neville's vehement defence of Harry.

("In the end, there's only one question that we need to answer. Do we believe Harry or do we not? I, for one, believe him and always will.")
Hermione, like Padma, was hurt that Harry hadn't told them about the recruitment affair, but Harry was glad that both of them were standing by him regardless.

"Hey, Potter, don't worry about it—it'll blow over," Eddie Carmichael said, coming up to Harry.

Eddie's girlfriend Katie Bell gave Harry an encouraging smile, and he nodded at her gratefully.

To Harry's pleased surprise, some other duelling club members were making a point of coming up to him to express support.

"We have doubted you before, and it's never been justified," said Ernie Macmillan. "I have given up on believing you could ever be evil."

"I'm sorry you had to go through all the fuss," Cho Chang said sympathetically. "Cedric is probably livid. You shouldn't have to deal with all this."

"I can't believe the press are on your case for playing Quidditch for your own House," said Jack Harper, a fourth year Slytherin. "The world has gone mental."

Susan also came up to him, and looked him in the eyes.

"Anyone who'd believe Rita Skeeter is insane. I'm sure nobody will believe her, but all the same—I hope you're holding up okay."

The most unexpected supporter came in the form of Ron Weasley.

"You're all right, Potter," he said. "For a Slytherin wanker, and all." That last was delivered with a bit of a grin.

Harry cocked an amused eyebrow.

"Thanks, Weasley. That's what I call a real compliment."

Harry knew that not everyone was happy with his answers, and some still thought he had explaining to do. But an immediate crisis was averted, and that would have to be good enough for now.

Some peace and quiet, and time to gather his bearings. That was all he was asking for.

***

"Morning, Potter."

"Morning, Nott."

Harry frowned as Theodore Nott paused by his desk in the Transfiguration classroom.

"What did you think of the homework assignment?" Nott asked, seemingly offhand.

As if they were on friendly terms.

Harry sought refuge in being monosyllabic.

"It was all right."

He was conscious on eyes upon them—McGonagall observing them from the teacher's desk, Hermione frowning from the other side of the room, Lavender whispering something urgently to
"Those human transfiguration spells are getting tricky, don't you think?" Nott asked, but Blaise's arrival interrupted whatever else he'd been planning to say.

"Oh hello," Blaise said pleasantly, curving an eyebrow. "You abandoning Malfoy in favour of our distinguished company today, Nott?"

_Don't give him an excuse_, Harry thought, but Nott only shrugged.

"Just making conversation. Either way," he nodded at them and made to leave. "Good luck."

Blaise and Harry watched him go.

"Well," Blaise said under his breath. "You can't blame them for this farce, but damn it, associating with them is ruining the beauty of my complexion."

Rita Skeeter's article, apart from everything else, had prompted an elaborate game of smoke and mirrors on the part of Harry's Voldemort-leaning classmates.

Nott's pleasantness this morning was a fine example. He and Harry had not been on friendly terms for the past few months. And yet, here Nott was, making a point to greet him in public and engage in amiable small talk—making sure everyone saw them get along.

Harry could not exactly rebuff him openly—that would be forsaking the one cardinal rule of Slytherin politics, a rule that had saved him in the past. But at the same time, this was doing nothing to help his damaged reputation.

The debate over Harry's moral purity or lack thereof had spilled all over the wizarding press. Journalists had pounced on Scrimgeour, Harry's ostensible ally; to his credit, the Minister was backing Harry and lambasting the rumours as Death Eater propaganda.

In a private letter to Harry, Scrimgeour had promised him a _good long talk_ when they next met.

Harry couldn't wait.

Gilderoy Lockhart had spoken out, too, reminding everyone that Harry had been an attention-seeker since his tender years. He'd also warned the interviewer of Harry's dangerous charisma.

_There_ was a pick-up line likely to work on the ladies.

Letters from the readers poured in to the _Daily Prophet_, some angry at the slander against the wondrous Boy-Who-Lived and others chipping in with their own suspicions.

At Hogwarts, Slughorn was Harry's main worry. Luckily, the man had not begun treating Harry any worse after the article. But the Potions master had held no more dinners or lunches since their conversation about Horcruxes, either...

Snape was paying Harry closer scrutiny than usual, and so was McGonagall. Harry didn't know whether this had more to do with them being members of the Order or Heads of Houses.

As regards the student population, the backing of duelling club members was giving Harry much-needed help. Tensions had already been running so high than the barest spark was needed to ignite conflict, and Harry—Harry was glad that several dozen of trusting people stood between him and providing that spark. He was glad they were there to smooth out conflicts, to buffer Harry from idiots
who were calling for his blood.

Patience was in shorter than usual supply with him these days, and he—

Thinking about all the people watching his every move, and manoeuvring between all these different audiences increasingly made Harry feel like a Boggart, a shape-shifter who didn't actually know what he looked like when no-one was around. He smiled, he laughed, he looked confident around his friends and classmates; he was deferential to teachers; he was cold to his adversaries.

But some days, he really wanted someone to give him a reason, give him the barest shred of an excuse to press them into a wall, put a wand to their temple, and make them hurt.

***

Harry turned up to Slughorn's Christmas party with Gryffindor seventh-year Victoria Frobisher on his arm. This created quite a stir, as Harry's love-life was apparently still interesting to people.

"I didn't know you and Frobisher were an item," Padma said, visibly annoyed.

"She asked me out," Harry said. "I figured, why the hell not."

Victoria had a svelte figure, a pair of dark eyes gleaming with intelligence, and a sense of humour. Her interests seemed to include Charms, Quidditch and Harry's questionable virtue. A winning combination by all standards.

"Very romantic of you, I'm sure," Padma said. "I know you're still not over Susan, but do you think it's wise to hook up with the first girl who offers?"

"What makes you think she's the first?"

Harry gave Padma a small smile, saluted her with his glass and set off in search of his date.

He didn't get very far as McLaggen waylaid him, eyes bright with the effects of the punch.

"Ah, Potter! Long time no see. Torture any second-years lately?"

"Not in the last couple of days," Harry said, giving him a sharp smile. "More to the point, have you?"

A couple of Slytherin kids had ended up in the hospital wing the preceding week. They couldn't tell what had happened to them, but the popular opinion in Slytherin blamed Gryffindors. After all, the Gryffindors (and quite a few others) widely believed that the attack on Gryffindors Abercrombie and Nichols had been perpetrated by Slytherins, or Death Eaters—which, hey, it's the same thing, after all.

Two kids out the infirmary, two kids in. Harry was sure someone thought it was fair.

"What do you mean?" McLaggen asked belligerently. "I don't play your type of games."

"Good for you," Harry said pleasantly, and looked McLaggen dead in the eye. "Because if I find out that you were involved in that attack, I'll be very unhappy with you. And I can make pretty bad things happen to people I'm unhappy with."

Something in Harry's expression must have told McLaggen that he meant every word, and how deeply he meant them, because McLaggen lost some colour.
"I'm not scared of you," McLaggen said, clutching his glass.

"Yes, you are," Harry said coolly. "But I don't care about you unless you've actually done something to those kids."

"Now, see here, Potter—"

"Getting alone fine, boys?" Slughorn asked jovially, appearing at Harry's elbow.

Harry turned to him with a smile.

"Of course, sir. And enjoying your party."

"You're looking a bit peaky, Cormac," Slughorn said, peering at McLaggen anxiously. "I hope none of the food disagreed with you. Well, Harry, come along, I must introduce you to a rather good friend of mine—he's very keen to meet you—"

Harry allowed Slughorn to herd him away, and chatted with a writer friend of Slughorn's, who apparently wanted to pen Harry's biography. He managed to escape a few minutes later, saying he'd spotted some people he needed to greet.

Hermione had, apparently, brought Terry to the party. She looked quite elegant in her dress, and Terry kept shooting her admiring glances.

"Neville and Luna are here too, but we lost them coming in," Hermione said, reaching up to feel her hair, which was done up in a neat bun. "It's not falling apart, I suppose? Feels like it is."

"Not at all," Harry said. "Good to see you, and you, Terry."

"Looks like a great party," Terry said, looking around in interest.

"Padma's already here, with Justin," Harry informed them. "Haven't seen anyone else we know—and hey, there's my date. Vicky, I suppose you know these two from the duelling club, so introductions are unnecessary. Can I get you a drink?"

"Why not? The night is young, and so are we, reasonably," Victoria said.

"That's the spirit."

Harry whisked her away towards the drinks table, after which they drifted around the room, spotting acquaintances and stopping to chat. Blaise had come to the party with Serena Fawcett, a pretty Ravenclaw who didn't seem quite sure what to make of him. Cho had brought Eddie Carmichael, so the Head Boy and Girl were both in attendance.

"Of course, I'd much rather Cedric was here," Cho told Harry privately. "He's been so busy lately, you know. I hoped he could come, but…"

"Yeah, so did I," Harry said.

"He was held up at the last minute," Cho said mournfully. "There was some awful attack on Muggles, again, and of course his department is always on call…"

"Are you going to see him over the break?" Harry asked, hoping to direct the conversation to more cheerful ground.

"I hope so," Cho said. "We may even spend Christmas together, if my parents allow me…but we'll
see. How about you?"

"Yeah, maybe," Harry said.

Visiting the Ministry was generally easier from Grimmauld Place than from Hogwarts, and he was expected for a chat with Scrimgeour, anyway. Perhaps he and Cedric would have the time to catch up; it was a nice thought.

Something to potentially plan for when he got to the Order headquarters tomorrow.

***

Aurors were patrolling the train station when the Hogwarts Express rolled in.

Harry and the Weasley kids were to be picked up by Order members, but the fact of their association was not advertised. As such, Ron and Ginny went into the family car, a blue Ford Anglia, with their mother and Bill, while Harry received the escort of an unfamiliar Auror.

"It's me, Tonks," the burly man whispered, and changed his nose momentarily into a snout as proof of identity. "We're Apparating together."

"Oh, good," Harry said with relief. "And nice to see you, by the way."

"Not yet," Tonks said. "It'll be nice to see me later, when I no longer look like Auror Robert Proudfoot. Let's go and make it happen."

They left the station, Harry waving goodbyes to his friends, and Tonks insisted on Side-Alonging Harry with her.

"Regulation," she said shortly. "You're underage, you're my charge, etcetera."

Harry submitted without further argument, and soon they were walking into the doorway of number 12, Grimmauld Place.

"Harry!" Sirius Black greeted him almost the moment he entered. "Long time no see!"

"What, don't I merit a hello?" Tonks asked, morphing into her usual purple-haired self. "Some uncle you are."

"I've already seen you today," Black informed Tonks. "And I'm not your uncle, I'm your second cousin-something-or-other. Young people these days…"

Black trailed after Harry as he climbed the stairs. He also helpfully filled Harry in on the latest events at the headquarters.

"I don't know if you've heard, but Dung Fletcher got injured recently… so he's off recovering… the Dementor breakout, that you know about… well, and we've all been quite in an uproar about you, of course."

"Yeah, I figured you might be," Harry said, dumping his suitcase on the floor of his room and removing the feather-light charm. "How bad is it?"

"Moody's been swearing up a storm," Black said, leaning against a doorjamb. "Remus is smoothing ruffled feathers. I tend to rise to your defence."

That last was delivered in a light tone, but something gave Harry pause.
"Thanks," he said, and raised an assessing gaze to his godfather.

Sirius Black was looking at him in a manner that belied his affected nonchalance.

"Not that you make it easy to rise to your defence, or anything," Black said. "I'm always glad to hear about my godson practicing Dark magic in Hogwarts corridors."

"How nice, then, that I'm there to make your day," Harry said.

He kept the smile in place even as he fought to rein in his temper. He'd gain nothing by antagonizing Black. He'd gain nothing by fighting anyone in the Order, period. This was the first day of his holiday. He wanted nothing but a bit of peace and quiet—

"What were you thinking, Harry?" Black asked, stepping into the room. "The papers are full of stories about you—"

"Big fucking surprise," Harry said in clipped tones. "When have they not been full of stories about me? Why you choose to believe them now is the real question—"

"I didn't say I believed them," Black said, raising his hands placatingly. "But there's quite a few people pointing out how things have never really added up—"

"What things?" Harry demanded. "Name one."

"Last year, you denied that you were being recruited by Voldemort," Black said. "Now, there's serious claims you were. You're the Boy-Who-Lived, but we see you playing Quidditch with Lucius Malfoy's son—"

"Not this again," Harry said. "I don't suppose it occurs to anyone that we're kids playing a sport?"

"You and Draco Malfoy? Kids playing a sport?" Black snorted.

"No, of course," Harry muttered, gaze fixed on the window. "We're political tools, we're not real kids. God forbid we're not at each others' throats all the time. It's not enough, I suppose, that we are expected to hate each other; we can't even be civil..."

Black was frowning.

"I didn't say—but, Harry, Malfoy's a Death Eater, or will soon be one. He's not like you."

"Yeah," Harry said. "Funny, that. He's not like me at all. I'm much better at this shit than he is."

"At what?" Black asked, looking lost.

As well he might.

Harry was feeling rather lost himself, truth be told.

***

After that auspicious start, Harry had hoped to spend most of his holiday in the library to avoid further confrontations.

This was, of course, not to be.

"Dark magic is never the answer," Moody told Harry gruffly, cornering him on the third day before
dinner. "It may *seem* like the answer, because it's quicker. It looks like you're taking a shortcut, see—but you lose as much as you gain, and more. The stink never comes off."

"I'm not saying it's the answer," Harry defended himself. "But if the other side uses it, I'd rather know what I'm up against."

"You think you're the first one to think of that?" Moody said. "You think we've never lost good witches and wizards because they were too damn determined to know what the other side was up to? You can't fight fire with fire, kid. As it is, you're staining your soul, and you're doing it fast."

Reaching the end of his endurance, that's what Harry was doing fast. There was a limit to how much he could deal with, and he could see it looming up ahead…

The elder Weasley siblings had already talked to Harry, communicating that he was free to do whatever, as far as they were concerned, but he'd better not be dragging Ron and Ginny into it.

Ron had, of course, only alarmed Bill and Charlie further by sticking up for Harry.

("*You're not at school, you don't see what it's like. Potter is doing a really good thing there…*"

Apparently, membership in the duelling club had made Ron a believer.

After that, Harry had had a—well, not exactly a bust-up with Lupin, because it took quite a lot to rouse him to anger, but Lupin had played the good but stern cop.

("*Sirius is worried about you, and coming from a family like his he knows what he's talking about, trust me…*"

And Harry had been tempted to say, *what is it that you're not trusting me with?* All through their helpful advice, nobody had expressed any concern that Harry might be going over to the wrong side, or betraying the Order, or striking up a friendship with Voldemort. And if that wasn't a problem, what was?

As long as he was doing the Boy-Who-Lived thing and fighting the bad guys, surely it didn't matter what books he chose to read.

Presently, Moody made to say something—undoubtedly filled with wisdom and dire warnings—but then Mrs. Weasley's voice cut through all conversation in the kitchen.

"Dinner is ready!" she announced. "Gather round, gather round!"

"Looks great, Molly," Sirius Black said, casting an admiring glance at the roasted turkey. "If not for you, we'd be eating dust bunnies à la Kreacher."

"Have you still not mended your relationship with the elf, Sirius?" Dumbledore asked mildly, taking his habitual spot at the head of the table.

This was the Order's Christmas meal, and so most Grimmauld Place regulars were in attendance. The Weasley had all turned up, except Percy and the twins. The former was busy at the Ministry, and the latter had been expected, but something held them up in Nanjing.

Tonks sat down by Harry's side with a wink to him, and Hestia Jones claimed a chair next to hers.

Black scowled at Dumbledore.

"I'd gladly throw that blasted elf out of the house if he didn't know so much about us."
"That would, indeed, be most unwise," Dumbledore said. "I imagine your relatives would be quite glad to receive him. Good evening, Remus, how are you?"

Harry snuck a look at the Headmaster's withered hand. Still black, still not showing signs of improvement… Of course, it was never going to, but that didn't make it any less unwelcome of a sight. Harry wondered how many people in the Order knew what the cursed hand meant for their future…

"And how are you enjoying your holiday, Harry?" Dumbledore asked, turning to him.

"It's been going okay," Harry lied. "I'd like to talk to you later, sir, if you have time?"

Dumbledore peered at Harry over his half-moon glasses.

"Certainly, Harry."

The dinner, like all meals at Grimmauld Place these days, was an awkward affair. One did not want to discuss mass murder and zombified corpses over turkey and stuffing, but the political climate made these subjects weigh heavily on everyone's minds. The Order's main activity at the moment was trying to prevent attacks on Muggles and Muggle sympathizers, and they feared that the Death Eaters were planning something extra special for Christmas.

All of that was enough to be going with, but the anniversary of Mr. Weasley's death also hung over them like an invisible cloud, casting a shadow over the festivities.

"Another mince pie, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked, shoving the dish at him.

"No, thank you."

"Just a wee bit more pudding, then?" Another plate made a threatening pass at Harry.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Weasley. Really."

Harry stretched his lips in a polite smile, and Mrs. Weasley beamed at him manically in return. Bill was stirring his coffee with a blank look on his face, Ginny and Charlie were whispering on the other end of the table, and Ron volunteered for more dessert with dogged determination to perpetuate the forced cheer.

Harry wished that the twins were here, or that he was not.

Dumbledore was deep in conversation with Moody when Harry got up from the table. Smiling at everyone perfunctorily, he thanked Mrs. Weasley and fled to the living room.

The party would inevitably move there anyway, and maybe Harry would get at least a couple of moments' peace—

He stopped at the threshold of the living room, taking a deep breath as he surveyed the decorated tree. Its Christmas lights were the only source of illumination in the lounge—that, and the streetlamps outside.

Pushing off the doorway, Harry strode over to the window.

Early winter twilight had set in, and the sky was a heavy dark-grey blanket over London. Harry could see trees bending in the wind, and the pavement looked black with recent rain—or maybe it was sleet. The weather had been unstable, and the wizarding wireless could not promise a white
Christmas…

Harry pressed his forehead against the window and shivered a little at the cool sensation.

It was time to face facts: he was actually beginning to crack, and something had to be done.

He wouldn't withstand two weeks at Grimmauld Place. It was only the third day, and he was already going insane.

Times for desperate measures.

A creak from behind him alerted Harry that he was no longer alone.

"Harry? You wanted to speak with me?"

"Headmaster." Harry turned around and faced the ancient wizard.

Dumbledore looked at him, head tilted ever-so-slightly to the side; an expression of mild curiosity and concern.

"I hope all is well with you, my boy?"

Harry looked to the side.

"Actually, sir, I was just wondering whether it would be okay with you if I went to stay at Neville's for a few days."

This clearly came as a surprise to Dumbledore.

"At Mr. Longbottom's?" he repeated, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Well, while I'm sure his intentions are most hospitable, in these times it's quite imperative that you stay safe."

"The Longbottom Manor is quite well protected," Harry said. Certainly more so than Cedric's flat, which had been his first thought. "I've stayed there before, sir, and nothing happened. And, if necessary, I'm sure I could arrange for an Auror escort—"

"I see," Dumbledore said, once again giving Harry a penetrating look. "Has your time here really been so trying, Harry?"

Harry shrugged.

"Well, be it as it may, I'm sorry to say that I cannot allow you to leave," the Headmaster pronounced. "These are dangerous times, Harry."

"I understand," Harry said with mounting frustration. "But—"

"I cannot, of course, stop you from going on a short visit independently," Dumbledore continued, "any more than I can prevent you from calling on the Minister. But in that case, I hope, you will indeed surround yourself with competent escort, and I ask you to be careful. I know you may think you can defend yourself, but our adversaries are not without skill."

"Certainly, sir," Harry said, spirits lifting.

In his mind, he was already composing a note to Neville.

***
"Thanks for today. Seriously," Harry said, when Neville tried to wave his gratitude away. "I really needed a breather."

"Don't worry about it," Neville said firmly. "What are friends for?"

Neville looked so natural in this habitat, sitting in an old leather armchair in the stately oak-panelled living room. He'd clearly spent many evenings here, reading before the fire, or maybe dozing on the sofa, or maybe just sitting on the wide windowsill and looking out onto the grounds, with its lawns and greenhouses and woody groves…

Harry hadn't been to Neville's home since his visit before fourth year, and it now hit him for the first time that Neville was the master of all this. In a year's time, he'd reach the age of majority, and then—well, there was still the grandmother, of course, but Neville would one day inherit this entire manor.

But then Neville smiled in his usual unassuming way, Harry blinked, and the moment passed.

"It's a pity you can't stay longer. What are your plans for the rest of the holiday?" Neville asked.

Harry shrugged.

"Nothing much. Next week I'm going to have to go to the Ministry… I guess that's easier from the headquarters anyway."

Neville nodded reluctantly, chewing on his lip.

"Have they invited you to join the Order?"

Harry looked up, startled.

"Join—no, but then I'm still technically a minor." Harry gave a crooked grin as Neville snorted. "Honestly, it hasn't even occurred to me… I imagine it hasn't to them, either."

"Do you want to join?" Neville asked.

Harry looked into the fire.

"Not really."

"Because you don't like them?"

"Because I don't see the point? I'm kind of in it, anyway, even if I'm not a member of a cool secret organization, or whatever."

Neville hummed noncommittally, and Harry eyed him, wondering what this was about.

"My parents were in it, you know," Neville said. "In the first war. They were right in the thick of things…"

Harry groped for something to say to that. Before he'd managed to find the right words, Neville spoke again:

"What about the twins, are they in?"

Harry frowned. This was a slightly uncomfortable subject.
"No, they're not."

Neville appeared surprised.

"Really? But most of their family is."

"Well. No. Some of the family is, but—I guess they didn't see the point, either."

Or, more precisely, they said they'd join if Harry particularly wanted them to, but not otherwise. Which was kind of what Bill had predicted would happen.

("He's got them on a leash... I don't think that they'll join the Order unless Harry tells them to...")

That had been a pretty quarrel, last summer—and just one indication of the rift in the Weasley family. Percy on one side, Bill and Charlie on the other, the twins somewhere in between, and Mrs. Weasley worried about them all...

Harry had pondered, at various points in the past, where Ron and Ginny would eventually fall. It was beginning to look like Ron might be inching closer to the twins' point of view.

"Say, Harry, did you just feel that?" Neville asked, sitting up a bit in his armchair.

Harry shook his head, partly to dispel his thoughts and partly to answer in the negative.

"No, what do you mean?"

"Don't know," Neville said, and chewed on his lower lip again. "Maybe it was nothing. You get kind of jumpy these days, you know. I thought I felt—"

The door to the living room flew open with a bang, revealing Augusta Longbottom on the other side. She was not wearing her famous stuffed-vulture hat, and the fox-fur scarf was tied somewhat haphazardly around her throat; she'd clearly got dressed in a hurry.

Her eyes shone with hard determination.

"Still sitting around, boy?" she demanded, looking at Neville. "Get up this instant! And hope to all heavens you've got your wand nearby!"

Neville jumped up, and Harry rose after him, automatically going for his own wand.

"Gran, what's—"

"At least you're still here," Augusta said with a grim little smile, addressing Harry. "Come along, then. I hope half the things they say about your skills are true. We need all able hands."

"Are we being attacked?" Neville asked, eyes wide.

Harry cast a glance out the window. He could see, in the distance, the flashes of spells, and a strange shimmer in the sky—

"Come along," Augusta repeated impatiently. "We haven't time to waste."

Harry and Neville hurried after her as she left the living room and strode swiftly from corridor to corridor. Harry took a moment to send off a message to Dumbledore with his stag Patronus.
Mrs. Longbottom didn't comment beyond giving him an impatient look.

"Sorry," Harry said quickly, "but you have wards, protections, don't you? Outsiders can't get in?"

"So they can't," Augusta said. "Unless someone opens the gate from the inside."

Harry felt himself going cold even as he sped up his pace.

"Has someone done that?"

Augusta's face looked as if it were carved from stone.

"Someone is trying. And we must stop them before they succeed."

*The Aurors,* Harry thought furiously.

Neville must have come to the same conclusion, because he inhaled sharply and said:

"We have to take out three Aurors?"

"Two," Harry said. "It can't have been Hestia Jones, she's in the Order. It had to be one of the other two, or both."

And Hestia had *vouched* for them—

"And the Order has never been betrayed?" Augusta snarled. "You of all people, Potter—"

"Me of all people," Harry muttered. "I've been in a battle with Hestia. She's highly unlikely—"

"We'll see about that," Augusta said, and then they were stepping outside the main doors.

The night's chill hit Harry, making him shiver. From here, the sounds of the fight ahead were quite audible, and curses bright in the darkness—

And suddenly, Harry knew that they were too late.
Chapter Notes

As always, huge thanks to my amazing and endlessly patient beta agedsolarwhisk. Honestly, the whole thing would have been impossible without her. My gratitude goes also to Voice of the Nephilim for his invaluable help with several key scenes.

What felt like an electric charge raced through Harry when the massive wrought-iron gates of the Longbottom Manor swung open.

Neville wobbled for a moment, and Harry steadied him, dimly aware of another shift in the atmosphere. But that wasn’t the important part.

Shadowy figures entered the grounds, lit by spellfire.

Death Eaters, three of them.

“Oh no you don’t,” Augusta Longbottom shrieked and flew down the front steps, beams of light shooting out of her wand.

“Gran!” Neville shouted, charging after her.

The fight spilled outwards from the gates and, for a few moments, Harry couldn’t tell how many bodies collided on the lawn in front of the house.

Harry and Neville barreled into the fray cloaked by Harry’s Shield Charm, which was just as well—a spell immediately bounced off the shield in an arc of light, illuminating a familiar face, a delighted smile.

“Ickle baby Longbottom!” cried Bellatrix Lestrange. “Merry Christmas!”

“YOU!” Neville roared, and Harry’s heart sank. “I WILL KILL YOU!”

Harry fired a nonverbal Os amove before Bellatrix had the time to reply.

“Potter?” Bellatrix exclaimed, blocking. “Rodolphus never said—” Her eyes glittered angrily, but then the smile returned. “Crucio! Crucio!”

Harry rolled out of the way of one curse, tugged Neville away from another, shot a Laceration Curse, then aimed a Confringo at the ground beneath Bellatrix’s feet—

He cast a quick glance around while she dodged, and saw that Hestia Jones locked in a fight with Auror John Rushmore just a few feet away. Closer to the line of trees, Auror Angela Smith fought a cloaked figure, but that was good, that meant she was not on the attackers’ side—

“Crucio!” Bellatrix sang.

“Avada—” Neville began, but his voice wavered, and Harry threw him a quick look.

“Go on, cast the Killing Curse, see if it hurts me!” Bellatrix taunted.
Harry fired a head-exploding curse at Bellatrix, forcing her to block, but she was faster, and he pushed Neville behind him as another barrage of curses sailed at them.

“Don’t stand still,” Harry said, dragging Neville aside, “keep moving—Lassescavi!”

“Crucio!” Bellatrix hissed, eyes narrowed.

“Stupefy! Expelliarmus!” Neville shouted.

The spells bounced off Bellatrix’s shield, and impacted Harry’s. They ricocheted off into the night, towards where Harry could see Hestia Jones still fighting the traitorous Auror.

Something wet landed on Harry’s cheek, and he abruptly realized that it had started snowing—small, almost unobtrusive flakes.

“Crucio! Crucio! Don’t worry, baby Longbottom, we’ll have lots of fun!” Bellatrix sing-songed.

Harry dodged another Unforgivable, and longed to cast one of his own. But here, with the Aurors so near—

Fracta ossem, Harry cast savagely. Torqueo.

“Oh, very good, Harry!” Bellatrix whooped.

Fucking good it did if it didn’t hit her—

“Neville, stay back! It’s you she wants, not me!” Harry cast a particularly vicious burning curse at Bellatrix.

“I’m not leaving you!”

The ground under Bellatrix’s feet sizzled and smoked as she jumped away, laughing in delight. “Don’t sell yourself short, Harry! I like you more and more! Crucio!”

Harry feinted to the left just as, on the other side of the lawn, Augusta Longbottom let out an agonized scream.

“No!” Neville shouted. He dashed towards her and out of Harry’s line of vision.

Ango maximus, Harry fired at Bellatrix, keeping her attention on him and off Neville. Vexo. Facio caecus—

Bellatrix giggled and retaliated with a jet of purple fire. Harry blocked on instinct, but just then a spell whooshed past him from an unexpected direction.

He jerked to the side, skidding slightly on the grass, then ducked to avoid her curse and spun sideways—

And felt himself go cold in ways that had nothing to do with the frigid temperatures.

Rabastan Lestrange was smiling as he aimed his wand at Harry.

There was no way Harry could take on two opponents of that calibre. He needed a plan, he needed to get away—

Fulmen!
A flash of light erupted around Harry, blinding in the darkness. Bellatrix swore, and Harry had less than a second.

He spun, tried to Apparate to the other side of the lawn.

Tried. Failed.


“*Crucio*”, Rabastan hissed, just as Bellatrix crowed:

“The Dark Lord said not to kill, but he never said not to touch!”

Harry dropped to the ground, avoiding the curse just in time.

*Explodere caputem*, he cast rapidly. *Fracta ossem. Aspergo flamma*—

The two Death Eaters were herding him away from the main fight. He could faintly see Hestia Jones shielding Augusta and Neville with her body as Rodolphus Lestrange and the traitor Rushmore pressed upon her. Further away, Auror Smith lay on the ground, and she wasn’t moving—

But he couldn’t help any of them, he could hardly even help *himself* as he tripped over a slippery root and barely kept his footing in yet another dive to the side. The snowfall was intensifying. It meant the night looked brighter now, but it hardly made up for the weather’s disadvantages.

“*Avada Kedavra,*” Harry whispered, backing away towards the trees. “*Avada*—”

“Not bad, Harry!” Bellatrix danced out of the way of the curse, somehow not looking inconvenienced by the moisture-slicked grass. “*Crucio!*”

Harry had been so busy dodging, again, that he’d almost failed to notice tree roots slithering towards him in waves, waiting to snare him.

He cancelled the spell, swerved to avoid Rabastan’s curse, and then—

*Something* grabbed Harry’s arms and slammed him painfully against a tree.

Breath whooshed out of him as branches wound around his arms, spreading them and holding him a vise-like grip. The wooden restraints twisted and pulled, and pain washed Harry’s vision momentarily blank. He choked back a cry.

He was still holding his wand, but now it was pointing the wrong way—

“Well, this is lovely,” Bellatrix said from right in front of him. Up close, her eyes were even more demented, giddy anticipation clearly reflected in them. “Isn’t this lovely, Rabastan?”

Harry looked her square in the eyes, making sure that no fear leaked through his Occlumency barriers.

“Excuse me if I don’t agree,” he said, aiming for a calm tone.

Behind Bellatrix, Harry could see Rabastan retreating back to the main fight—although, at this point, it didn’t look much of a fight at all. Someone had managed to take down Auror Rushmore, but Rodolphus had Neville and Augusta at wandpoint. Hestia was freshly distracted by Rabastan, and she hardly looked capable of standing upright, never mind winning a duel.
Harry swallowed against the first stirrings of panic. How had they been overpowered so quickly? Would anyone make it through the wards to help them?

No matter. He, at least, wasn’t going down like this.

“Defiant to the last,” Bellatrix murmured, brushing hair off Harry’s forehead to uncover the lightning-bolt scar. “But so very foolish. I will hurt you, Harry. I want to hear you scream. Do you think you can do that for me?”

Harry clenched his jaw. He could see even before Bellatrix made her move that the time for talking had run out.

He had to act now.

Bellatrix fired the Cruciatus Curse at Harry at the same time as he said: “Diffindo!”

Ever since his capture, he’d been carefully turning the wand around—so that, instead of aiming at the sky, it would aim at him.

The spell ripped through the wooden restraints on his right arm, and Harry gritted his teeth as his skin tore along with the branches. But now one of his arms was free, and he swung to the left—

Bellatrix let out an enraged cry when her torture curse missed Harry by a hair.

He aimed his wand at his left arm, hoping to cut it loose as well—

But Bellatrix cast another Crucio a fraction of a second later. And this time, it caught Harry straight in the chest.

Pain. Harry’s lungs burned, and his skin was on fire, and he couldn’t breathe—

His left arm felt raw in the restraints when the curse lifted. He must have thrashed around—but he couldn’t remember, couldn’t think. His head was ringing.

It took him a moment to realize that something had changed.

Bellatrix was no longer standing in front of him; in fact, she’d been flung to the snow-powdered ground several feet away, and so had pretty much everyone else. Only Augusta Longbottom stood tall in front of the house, her wand held out in front of her like a sword, as if she was some Nordic goddess of war. Neville kneeled right next to her, looking shell-shocked, but everyone else had clearly been swept away in a violent blast.

The tableau held for a moment. Then, Augusta gave a loud wheeze and collapsed to the ground. This snapped Harry back into action.

His left arm was still in restraints, and Bellatrix would not be down long.

Swaying a little, he tried to edge down and pick up his wand from the ground. He couldn’t quite reach it from where he was, so he nudged it closer with a foot and slid down as far as he could, putting weight on the still-shackled arm. The skin on it tore as he did so, matching the wounds on his right arm, but the pain hardly registered even as fresh drops of blood dribbled down his shirt.

He didn’t know how long he’d spent under the Cruciatus, but everything fucking hurt.

Finally, finally Harry grasped his wand again. He straightened back up freed his left arm with a
He stepped away from the goddamn tree, and meanwhile—

Hestia had risen to her knees, and she shot a curse at Bellatrix. The Death Eater, also up by now, batted the curse away and immediately responded with one of her own.

Hestia had blood running down her side from an earlier fight, and she needed help. But, several feet away, Neville was frantically shaking his grandmother and not realizing that he’d left himself completely open to attack by Rodolphus and Rabastan.

Harry shot a volley of curses at the two Death Eaters and staggered over to Neville’s side, slipping on the snowy grass.

Harry threw a shield up in front of Neville before even reaching him, and then pushed him out of the way of a curse.

“Harry!” Neville said, eyes wide. “Are you—oh Merlin, Harry, I—Gran—”

“I know,” Harry said, immediately casting a nonverbal *Lacero* at Rabastan.

Augusta looked… bad, even in this lighting. Colourless and waxy and unnaturally still. Neville’s hands were shaking, and there was blood on his shirt. The longer he stayed out here, the more danger he was in.

“*Crucio,*” Rodolphus hissed, unimaginatively, and was echoed by his brother.

Harry forced his body to twist out of the way, pushing past the exhaustion. He was Neville’s last line of defence, and everyone else was dead or dying, so by now, really, *fuck everything.*

“*Avada Kedavra,*” Harry whispered, and felt Neville start next to him.

Rodolphus was the one dodging now, and Harry swiftly followed up with another Killing Curse at Rabastan.

Nonverbal casting was much faster, but then—the Killing Curse, which had to be spoken out loud, was also assuredly deadly and much more satisfying.

“Go,” Harry said, without looking at Neville. “Take your grandmother and go, get inside the house.”

The entrance was a few feet behind them, and if Neville could take Augusta to safety—

“No!” Neville looked at him with wide, wounded eyes. “*Expelliarmus!*”

“She’s injured, she can’t take more—” Harry dodged another curse, fired off a nonverbal kneecap-shattering spell.

“Harry—”

Frustration building, Harry darted aside and shoved Neville out of the way of a torture curse, *again.*

He itched to hurl answering Cruciatius Curses at the Lestranges, just to let them know how it felt, but he *couldn’t,* couldn’t possibly justify it, not with Neville right there. He tried to keep a cool head because he knew that he’d make mistakes when angry, but—
“You fight like one of us,” Rodolphus said, sidestepping a curse. “And yet you fight against us.”

“I’m not like one of you,” Harry snarled, and blocked Rabastan’s spleen-rupturing curse.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Neville dodging another Crucio, and sent a quick barrage of spells Rodolphus’s way.

Harry wondered just when Rodolphus and Rabastan would get tired of toying with them and start fighting them for real. And how long Harry and Neville would last against that, especially if Neville was busy protecting Augusta and Harry was busy protecting Neville.

“Neville, just—go, now, get out,” Harry snapped. “I’ll cover you, just—”

“No not so fast,” Rodolphus growled.

And then, a wall of fire sprung out of the ground around Harry, Neville and Augusta.

Harry heard Neville gasp, and squinted momentarily to adjust his vision. The blaze looked completely incongruous in the wintry scenery. Bright reds and oranges obscured the world beyond the small circle, but even so Harry could see Rodolphus and Rabastan looking smug, like they knew they had Harry and Neville now, and—

No. Harry wasn’t letting the bastards win.

“Avada Kedavra,” Harry cast again, through the fire. Explodere caputem, damn it, something—

The flames coalesced into shapes, and they leapt at Harry and Neville and Augusta, as if sentient.

Dodging had become far harder in the restricted space. Harry bit down on a shout as a fire dragon licked his leg, burning through his jeans, and crashed into Neville while sidestepping a lazily cast Cruciatus. Neville fell with an anguished cry.

“Sorry, sorry,” Harry breathed. “You okay?”

“Yeah, my arm—”

They needed to get rid of this wall of fire, but Harry had no fucking idea how, or when he was even meant to do that when he could hardly find the time to cast counter-attacks. He was injured, and the Lestranges were enjoying themselves—

There was nowhere to run, the three of them locked in a small space, roasting slowly inside the furnace of Rodolphus’s making. Neville was panting in pain as he cast a Stunner, Augusta couldn’t even avoid the flames, and yet another torture curse was flying straight at Harry.

And Harry just—couldn’t.

The heat, the pain, the deep, swelling frustration—

The sudden surge of anger rose up within Harry, sweeping everything in its way. He felt as if he were breathing out flames as something, some invisible cord inside him, snapped.

Harry raised his wand, and focused all his power on the fire before him in one mindless, fury-driven push. He let his anger go, let the floodgates open—and, encountering an obstacle, forced his surroundings to bend to his will. It felt like no magic he’d never performed, but it was powerful, and liberating, and—
Like he could do anything. Like there were no limits.

Harry’s heart thundered wildly in his chest as a wave of excitement swept through him.

The flames around him flared higher. They coiled, twisted, and lunged across at the two blurry human shapes, at the land and the trees and the air itself. They spread and grew and danced to Harry’s command.

From somewhere far away, Harry heard screaming, but it drowned in the rush of blood and fire in his ears.

Power thrummed in his veins. He felt alive like never before, and there were no limits.

He’d show them. He’d bloody well—he’d had enough, and it was high time he—

The screams got louder, and the smell a charred flesh filled Harry’s nose. He was the eye of the storm, and satisfaction spread through him at the thought. Let everyone burn. Let them all burn—

He heard someone laughing, a high, deranged sound.

Thoughts slipped away. He floated in the blood-red haze, and he was untouchable.

Then—

A solid shape rammed into Harry, and suddenly he was on the ground, blinking in confusion.

He got one moment of awareness. He saw dark manic eyes, felt locks of long dark hair in his face, heard a hiss of fury.

And the world went black.

***

Harry woke up in an empty hospital ward, and at first he had no idea why he was there.

This was clearly a room in a proper hospital, and not the Hogwarts infirmary. A look around revealed that Harry’s was the only bed in the plain but spacious ward. A window let in slanted beams of winter sunlight; a time charm told Harry that it was nearing midday.

His whole body felt heavy and sluggish, and a dull ache pressed upon his head.

Last night—

Harry squeezed his eyes shut.

He had no recollection of being brought to the hospital, but he remembered fire.

He remembered fire, and screams, and—

He’d killed people. He’d—fuck.

Harry struggled to breathe through a wave of nausea, bit down on the panic of not knowing and forced himself to piece together the vague flashes of recollection.


Rodolphus Lestrange writhing and shouting in horror, eyes bugging out as the flames licked at his
sides, none of his spells having any effect—

Rabastan Lestrange, with half of his body burnt away oh god his insides—

Harry leaned over the side of his bed and threw up. The returning memories seemed seared onto his retinas, and he couldn’t stop seeing it, couldn’t stop replaying it in his head—

Like he was viewing it through someone else’s eyes. Like it wasn’t something he’d done. Like he was in Voldemort’s head and the emotions of the perpetrator didn’t at all match with his own.

(“You fight like one of us…”)

Harry gave a sputtering cough, wiped his mouth and straightened up again, blinking his eyes clear.

He’d been happy. That was the one thing he remembered with perfect certainty. The joy had been a bone-deep, vicious thing, sharp and lethal and cutting him just as much as it had torn into the others.

Which was…

With shaking hands, Harry reached for his wand on the bedside table, and vanished the mess on the floor.

He wasn’t ready to think about what all this meant.

First, he had to—figure out what had happened, screw his head on, get his bearings.

His recollections of last night were too jumbled, a maelstrom of colour and sound. He wasn’t sure what had happened to Hestia, or Mrs Longbottom, or—

Oh god. Neville. He’d been right behind Harry, so he should have been okay, but what if the fire—

Harry staggered off the bed and made for the door. He had to get answers, and he had to get them now.

When Harry wrenched open the door and all but fell out the other side, he saw—

“Tonks?”

Mad-Eye Moody stood just a little ways off, and the expression on his face when he looked at Harry, suddenly sharp and almost concerned—

“Harry, oh thank Merlin.” Tonks bounded towards him and drew him into an unexpected hug. “Oh Harry, we were so worried!”

“What happened?” Harry asked, looking over her shoulder to lock eyes with Moody. “Is everyone—is Neville okay, is—”

His voice came out raspy, and he coughed as he cast a glance around.

“Longbottom’s next door,” Moody said shortly.

The general hospital decor and the signs left Harry in no doubt that he was at St Mungo’s. Which probably meant he’d been brought here last night, after he’d blacked out, for whatever reason.

Bellatrix? Did Bellatrix attack him?
It didn’t take a genius to work out that Moody and Tonks were on bodyguard duty, so clearly the Order had become involved in the battle at some point, but Harry had no idea of what that point might have been.


“Calm down, Potter,” Moody said, voice gruff, and yes, that was definitely worry lacing his words. Moody grabbed Harry’s shoulder. “You’re fine, you did good, Longbottom’s alive. Tonks—”

“I’ll get a nurse,” Tonks said immediately, and made to leave down the corridor.

“I don’t need a nurse, I need information—”

But, of course, they did get him a nurse, and bundled him back in his room, and got several potions into him after a diagnostic charm and a lot of ominous muttering on the nurse’s part.

Either the medication took effect, or Harry’s panic receded on its own, but he found himself more capable of normal human conversation by the time the nurse left again, letting Tonks and Moody into the ward. Quite possibly, it helped that Harry’s head was no longer spinning, which, wow, he hadn’t even realized it had been doing.

“We’ve already called Dumbledore, and he’ll be here as soon as he can,” Tonks said, sitting down at the edge of Harry’s bed even as Moody took the visitors’ chair. She probably thought the news was reassuring. “He’ll be glad to hear that you’re awake so soon. When we found you—” She cut herself off and exchanged glances with Moody.

“Yeah.” Harry leaned back against the pillows. He’d compromised with the nurse by staying on the bed, but not in it. There was no way he’d receive visitors while huddling under the covers, not when he was already feeling so off-balance. “I figure I must have been pretty bad?”

The nurse’s undertone comments had included words like *burns, lacerations* and *prolonged exposure to the Cruciatus Curse.* None of them good things.

Tonks grimaced.

“The mediwizards had to stabilize you before we could even transport you to St Mungo’s.” She paused. “Well. We wanted to get you to Hogwarts, actually, but of course the Minister wouldn’t let Dumbledore take you away.”

Harry nodded, but didn’t let himself get sidetracked. “When did you get there, exactly?”

“We couldn’t Apparate in straight away, but we finally got through right in time to see Bellatrix Lestrange knock you out,” Tonks said.

Right.

“We threw her off, and then she Disapparated before we could stop her,” Tonks continued. “We tried, but we had our hands full with a massive fire which covered like half the grounds, or looked like it. You were right in it, too, though you and Neville and his grandmother suffered less—damage than the others.”

“Neville,” Harry said, tensing again.

“You were worse off than Longbottom,” Moody said. “He’ll be fine. Says you protected him.” A
searching look followed on the heels of that.

Harry shook his head. “I tried.”

“Neville was okay, certainly compared to the rest of you. He was the only one left conscious when we arrived,” Tonks chimed in.

Harry stifled the urge to break out in laughter, because yeah, this was setting a really low bar on okay.

“What happened to all the others?”

“Smith is dead,” Moody said, blandly. “Jones is dead. Augusta Longbottom is in a coma in the nerve damage recovery ward.”

Something of Harry’s horror must have shown on his face, because Tonks hurried to say:

“But they say she’ll wake up. Her brain activity doesn’t look too bad, apparently. But she might, ah. Suffer consequences. They said she took quite a lot of damage, especially for her age.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, voice hoarse. “She was pretty fierce, but the Lestranges…”

“The Lestrange brothers are dead,” Moody said, and Harry couldn’t help his flinch. “As is Rushmore. Longbottom isn’t too sure who killed Rushmore—says he didn’t see—but according to him, it was you who’d killed both Lestranges.”

Harry felt a chill run down his spine as he looked up. “It was self-defence.”

“Of course, Harry, no one blames you,” Tonks said earnestly.

“The Lestranges wanted to get at Neville,” Harry said. “They wanted him more than me, they—”

The full import of the realization hit him suddenly. “They hadn’t even expected to find me there.”

Tonks and Moody exchanged another glance.

“Did they say that?” Tonks asked.

“Bellatrix—she was surprised, she said Rushmore didn’t warn them…” Harry frowned. “But that can’t be right. Rushmore was how they got in, and he was there because of me.”

“As a matter of fact, from what we’ve found out, the raid on the Longbottoms had been planned well in advance,” Moody said. “We knew they were going to hit somewhere at Christmas, and it turns out, Longbottoms were on the list. Unfinished business for the Lestranges, and all that.” His mouth twisted in a scowl.

“Yeah.” Harry rubbed his scar. “Yeah, I think she said that. But how could they not have known if Rushmore did?”

“Well, there’s no saying that the Lestrange brothers were in the same boat as Bellatrix,” Tonks said. “By attacking you, they went directly against You-Know-Who’s orders. Bellatrix is supposed to be his most loyal follower—so maybe they didn’t tell her, knowing she might have put a lid on the whole operation.”

“She did claim she wouldn’t kill me,” Harry said.

It came out flat, because everyone knew what that meant: that Bellatrix would torture him, instead.
“Harry, you do know that we would have got to you sooner if we could have,” Tonks said, emphatic. “But we just couldn’t get through the Anti-Apparition Jinx until it broke on its own. If what Neville says is right, one of the Lestrange brothers must have been maintaining it…” Tonks trailed off, visibly uncomfortable to broach that subject again.

Moody rescued her, speaking up again with, “Either way, you aren’t all why they attacked. They were biding their time until an opportunity to get the Longbottoms came by, and Rushmore was it.”

“Because I was there,” Harry said. “Because Dumbledore told me to take Aurors along.”

Moody looked about to say something to that, but then—

“So I did,” Dumbledore spoke up, appearing in the doorway. “But I think you can understand why I thought it prudent, at the time. I could not have known, any more than you, what consequences would follow.”

Startled, Harry turned to see Dumbledore step into the ward with a swish of midnight-blue robes. Immediately, the room seemed to shrink in size for his presence—as if accommodating for that aura of power that the Headmaster always carried with him.

“Harry. I cannot tell you how gratified I am to see you so recovered,” Dumbledore said, smiling and acknowledging Tonks and Moody with a genial nod. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, Professor,” Harry said, without quite meeting his gaze.

His composure was in tatters, and if the Headmaster would glance into his eyes now, he’d know everything.

Dumbledore conjured up a chintz chair and sat down next to the bed, facing Harry.

For a moment, he was silent, simply studying Harry—or taking stock of his condition, Harry wasn’t sure. He wasn’t exactly in a hurry to get the conversation going, either.

“Each time I hope it is the last time, but here we are, once again,” Dumbledore uttered softly, at last. “Harry, you must be tired of hearing an old man’s repeated apologies, but please believe they are sincere.”

Moody and Tonks glanced between Harry and Dumbledore, clearly not following.

But Harry nodded at the same time as the Headmaster said:

“It pains me to impose on you at such a moment. However, you know what must be done.”

Instead of rehashing last night, Harry would much rather crawl into bed and stay there until he’d sorted through everything in this mind, which sounded like it would take him a year or two. But of course this was necessary.

“What do you want to know?” Harry asked.

At that, Tonks’s expression suddenly went from confused to incredulous, and Moody’s customary scowl became even more pronounced.

“Albus, this had better not be what it looks like,” he said, voice low, and Harry blinked at him because—what the hell?

“You would be making a mistake in thinking that I wish this on Harry,” Dumbledore replied, gently
chiding. “But he is the most reliable witness we have.”

“Oh, is he?” Moody snarled. “So how come Potter is a witness where Longbottom was a victim? And since when do we debrief kids we’ve just carted off the battlefield?”

Dumbledore’s brow clouded infinitesimally.

“Alastor, we shall not revisit this old argument now.”

What old argument?

Harry was too tired to deal with this. It’s not like Moody’s well-intentioned interference would actually get him out of the aforementioned debrief, in the end.

“It’s okay,” he said, aiming it at Moody and Tonks. “I’m used to it.”

“You’re—” Moody stared at him, and then turned to Dumbledore, looking even more thunderous than before. “Is that how it is?”

Dumbledore surveyed him calmly.

“Ah, Alastor. Are you, of all people, going to speak to me about the need to treat Harry like a child?”

Moody visibly started and then set his jaw again.

“So you’re playing your own game, as always,” he said. “You’re not going to let us make a move because you’ve got dice on the board already. And here we were thinking you wanted Potter to beat Voldemort just with phoenix song and Gryffindor courage.”

“Alastor,” Dumbledore said, and now there was an edge in his voice—that extra hint of power. “Do not assume you know my mind in this matter.”

“No, clearly,” Moody said, and seemed not to notice the alarmed glance Tonks shot at him. He focused on Harry again, instead—except that this time, his look was sharp, considering. As if he was seeing Harry in an entirely new light.

Harry didn’t bother staring back. Some day later, he’d think back to this exchange and try to process what it meant, but now it ranked pretty low on his list of priorities.

He took a drink from the glass of water on his bedside table and waited.

“Harry, if you would,” Dumbledore said.

Harry put the glass down.

“I guess Neville’s told you that we were in the lounge,” he began, clearing his throat. “And then his grandmother came in….”

He stumbled over some details, and his voice wavered in a few places. He didn’t go into the particulars of the spells used, because that would just be inviting trouble; he just said he’d relied on curses that required specific blocking or dodging, which was, technically, true.

He hesitated when he got to the end, because—

“The fire,” Dumbledore said gently. “Was it you who had conjured it?”
“I—partially.” Harry fixed his eyes on his hands. “It was Rodolphus Lestrange to begin with, and then I added to it.”

“You duelled with fire spells?” Tonks asked, cutting in for the first time. She sounded impressed.

Moody, on the other hand, looked perfectly blank.

“Something like that.” Harry ran a hand through his hair. “Honestly, at that point I was—exhausted, really. It was all just instinct.” He shook his head and immediately winced at the mild throb.

“You killed two of the most famous Death Eaters on instinct?” Tonks repeated. “I mean, I get that they had taken a beating by then, but still—”

Harry clenched his jaw.

“We were losing,” he said. “They swept in and had us on the defensive from the get-go, and there were too many of them and too few of us. The Lestranges cast the Cruciatus Curse over and over, and they wanted to get at Neville, at his grandmother, at all of us. I couldn’t—I couldn’t let them. I panicked.”

“Very understandable,” Dumbledore murmured. “So you panicked and cast a fire spell. What then?”

“And then—I couldn’t control it.” It was almost, almost the truth. “I—put too much power into it, and then I couldn’t stop it. There was so much fire…”

Harry recognized dimly that this was probably the least coherent that Order members had ever seen him be. Moody and Tonks looked once again as they had at the beginning of the conversation, worry bleeding clearly through their expressions.

“Harry, at your age, in your position—anyone would panic,” Tonks said, leaning forward. “No one blames you, okay? Just, I hadn’t realized that you could… That you had so much…” She waved a hand.

Moody snorted.

“The lad produced a corporeal Patronus at thirteen. Of course he’s got a lot of goddamn power.”

Dumbledore inclined his head, though whether in a thoughtful gesture or in agreement Harry didn’t know. He lowered his eyes again as the Headmaster gave him a long look over his half-moon glasses.

“Indeed, Harry,” he said, “your desire to protect your friends is commendable, and there is little doubt that you were instrumental in preserving their lives.”

Harry blew out a breath.

“But you wish I hadn’t killed people while I was at it,” he supplied, wanting to get over with the inevitable reproof.

Tonks winced and seemed about to interject, but Dumbledore spoke first.

“That is not something you can take lightly,” he said, tone mild. “Every life you take—”

“Fractures my soul,” Harry said. “I know.”

He wondered what Dumbledore and the others would do if they knew he’d laughed as he’d turned
the fire on the Lestranges.

Would they consider him deranged, a danger to others, too volatile to be around children? Would they pull him out of Hogwarts, keep him at Grimmauld Place, arrest him?

(“Be careful with the spells you learn—and I won't worry about locking you up in Azkaban one day.”)

They wouldn’t. There was no more Azkaban, anyway, and he was still the Boy-Who-Lived, they needed him, even if he—

Even if he enjoyed killing people. Sometimes.

Fuck.

“Are we done here?” Harry asked, without looking up at Dumbledore.

“I will leave you to rest,” Dumbledore said, and got up from his chair.

Moody and Tonks followed suit.

“I’m gonna go visit Neville, actually,” Harry said.

“We’ll be here for a few hours more,” Tonks said, hovering by the door. “So holler if you need anything, or—want to talk. Okay?”

“Sure,” Harry said, and pretended that it didn’t hurt to push his body off the bed.

***

“You saved my life,” Neville said, staring straight ahead and avoiding Harry’s eyes.

Harry gripped the back of the visitors’ chair by Neville’s bed, unsure if he should sit down. Neville’s hands were clenched on top of the bed covers, his mouth twisted in an unhappy moue. If he was mad at Harry, then he had every right to be.

Whatever Harry had told Dumbledore, he had, in fact, given Neville cause to fear for his life when he’d unleashed that fire storm. That Neville and his grandmother had escaped unscathed was an accident more than anything else. Harry had endangered them and probably inflicted more damage on Neville’s property than all three Lestranges combined, so—

Yeah. If there was ever a friendship-ending moment between them, this was it.

“Nev,” Harry began, without any idea of what he’d say next.

But Neville interrupted him.

“I never knew,” he said, “that you could be like that. Or that I was so goddamn useless.”

The venomous hiss to that word brought Harry up short.

“What?”

“I had all these grand ideas, of how I’d avenge my parents one day, you know.” Neville’s gaze didn’t waver from some spot on the opposite wall. “And then—it was so easy for them to—to—” He bunched up the blanket in his fists. “I couldn’t do anything.”
Harry looked at him in dismay.

It had not occurred to him, wrapped as he’d been in his own guilt, that Neville might suffer a crisis of confidence in the aftermath of the battle. It had been so natural for Harry that of course Neville couldn’t be expected to fight on the same level, that he hadn’t thought that maybe Neville would resent himself for not having fought better.

“No, that’s not fair,” Harry said. Standing was growing difficult, so he lowered himself gingerly into the chair and leaned towards the bed. “The Lestranges are some of the worst there is. Adult wizards don’t even—I mean—Hestia, and Auror Smith—” Harry shoved the mental images away. “You can’t measure your skill against the Lestranges, that’s mad.”

“But you could fight them,” Neville said. “You and Gran protected me the whole time. You stepped in front of me, and you got hurt. You and Gran both.”

“I—”

“And at the end, Gran was—she was almost dead, and you looked dead, and everyone was dead, and I hadn’t even done anything.” Neville’s eyes were red, and his breath was coming out in sharp pants.

Harry swallowed, understanding hitting him hard.

“Neville,” he said, floundering. Oh god. It should be anyone, anyone but him here, because he was shit at this, and he was far from stable himself. “None of this was your fault. Of course we protected you, or tried to, but that doesn’t mean—”

“Bellatrix wanted me, and you didn’t let me fight her. And I was angry, like a stupid kid. And when I did get to fight, not her, but one of the others? Do you know how long I lasted? Do you know how easy it was for them to break my wand, to—”

“Don’t do this,” Harry said helplessly. “Your worth is not tied to—it’s not all about how well you fight. Nev, you can’t judge yourself on… It’s not fair,” he repeated.

“But it’s fair to expect you to protect me?” Neville asked, meeting Harry’s eyes for the first time.

Harry shook his head. “This isn’t about that.”

“You’re the same age as me, but you fought like one of them,” Neville said, and there was a distinctly bitter edge to his tone. “You shielded me like you weren’t important. Like you knew you could take whatever they threw at you, and you knew I couldn’t.”

Harry ran a hand over his face.

He hadn’t, in fact, been at all confident of his ability to take on the Lestranges. But it was true that stepping in front of Neville hadn’t been a question; Harry would have done it for anyone who needed protecting.

Except that was the problem, wasn’t it? Neville didn’t want to need protecting, and nothing Harry could say here would make him feel better about that.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, trying anyway, “if it came across like—”

“Don’t,” Neville interrupted, and wiped at his eyes. “Whatever you do, just—don’t apologize to me. You’ve saved my life, and maybe Gran’s, too, if she ever—if she wakes up, and—”
“You grandmother will be okay,” Harry said. “Nev. You’ll be okay. We’ve made it, and we’ll be fine.”

If he repeated it enough, maybe it would become true.

***

The conversation left Harry exhausted, so he agreed without too much protest when a kind-faced doctor handed him a potion that would send him into a healing slumber. According to the doctor, Harry’s vitals still looked off, and his nervous system was remarkable by the sheer fact of its continued existence.

When he woke up, it was eight in the morning, and he was starving.

Harry was just polishing off the remainder of his porridge when Rufus Scrimgeour breezed into his ward with a perfunctory knock.

“Minister,” Harry said, resigned, and put his plate away.

Scrimgeour wore the air of a person who hadn’t anytime recently dropped work in favour of such trivial things as sleep or food.

“Harry,” he said, pacing over to the window. “Good to see you looking better.” And then, without any more of a preamble: “I know it’s quite soon, but we can’t exactly afford to wait. I would appreciate it if you told me the details of what happened at Longbottom Manor.”

Well, that was hardly a surprise.

Harry’s report to the Minister turned out quite a bit more coherent than the story he’d told Dumbledore, possibly because Harry was better rested, in less pain, and it was his second time talking about all this. Scrimgeour heard Harry out in silence and proceeded to drop a bunch of newspapers onto his bed.

Harry skimmed the headlines.

5 dead, 3 injured in Longbottom Manor attack

Boy-Who-Lived caught in Longbottom-Lestrange battle

Source: Potter’s presence “an accident that saved the day”

“Your press has been generally positive so far,” Scrimgeour said. “We need to keep it that way.”

He walked to the window and back. Harry watched his progress in silence.

“It should be a clear-cut case—you’ve been a hero and helped to defend a prominent family, at great risk to yourself. But the dearth of witnesses complicates things.” Scrimgeour paused.

“Because you only have my word for what happened,” Harry supplied tonelessly.

“Well. Not only yours. But Mr Longbottom is, of course, a minor, and he could be considered an unreliable witness.” The Minister frowned. “On the other hand, given his tragic history, he would be unlikely to shield the perpetrator, and his word would carry significant weight. Perhaps we can arrange for his statement to us to be… leaked.”

Harry clenched his jaw. “Please, let’s not use Neville’s tragic history as currency in this.”
Scrimgeour shot him a glance. “No journalist has missed the parallel between this attack and the one that debilitating his parents. But I would have you believe that I take no joy in exploiting the fates of Frank and Alice. Both good Aurors, and a loss to the corps.”

The Minister looked like he meant it, too, and Harry remembered that he used to head Aurors in the past. He’d probably known Neville’s parents personally.

“Regardless,” Scrimgeour continued, “it may not come to that. Young Longbottom’s words—and yours—will be substantiated by the reports of Aurors who saw Bellatrix Lestrange attack you. In fact, some of that is already making press rounds.” He paced some more. “And yet this opens another dangerous avenue.”

Harry wasn’t fully sure what Scrimgeour was getting at. Harry being on the side of the good guys was a welcome thing, right?

“The word is spreading that it was you, somehow, who killed the Lestranges,” Scrimgeour said. “And while that does wonders for your reputation in some respects, it also casts you in a… somewhat worrying light.”

Harry grew still.

“Because I’ve killed someone?”

“No, Harry, because you, too, are a minor.” Scrimgeour sighed and glanced aside. “It’s easy to forget, what with everything—but you’re still at school. You shouldn’t be capable of killing two grown, dangerous men.”

Harry laughed, nearly choking on the irony. “So, what, they’re expecting me to get rid of Voldemort, but I’m supposed to walk on rose petals and sunshine until then?”

“People get uneasy when they see a teenager with a body count,” Scrimgeour said grimly. “And don’t get me wrong, Harry, I don’t like it either. I’m not saying it’s wrong what you did, but I don’t think this is a school kid’s job. And people are bound to wonder: if you do this at sixteen, where do you go from here?”

Harry lifted his chin, struggling to stay calm.

“I go on to fight Voldemort.”

Scrimgeour tilted his head to the side.

“And then?”

(“In many ways, for all anyone knows... you could be planning or thinking anything.”)

Harry took a steadying breath.

“This is about Skeeter’s article, isn’t it.”

“The article won’t help,” Scrimgeour acknowledged.

“But I mean—Minister, surely you don’t think that I—” Harry couldn’t even put it into words.

“Oh, no.” Scrimgeour waved a hand. “I don’t believe it for a moment. But our concern is with the public opinion, not with mine.”
Harry blinked at the evidence of Scrimgeour’s easy faith in him. Relief swiftly followed on the heels of surprise, and the Minister clearly picked up on that, because his next look at Harry was somewhat exasperated.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Harry. We’ve had our disagreements, but I’ve yet to see any power-hunger on your part. And you’ve certainly given me enough Death Eaters’ names that you can’t be pursuing You-Know-Who’s agenda, either.”

“Thank you,” Harry said quietly.

Scrimgeour only shook his head and moved on to a new topic.

“Then there is, of course, the unfortunate affair of Rushmore’s betrayal.” He frowned, looking out the window.

“Let me guess,” Harry said. “You want to hush it up about him, too.”

“Allowing people to think that Aurors can’t be trusted would be disastrous,” Scrimgeour said. “We’ll conduct an internal inquiry, of course… discreetly. We need the public to have faith in law enforcement.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair. “But without implicating Rushmore, how do you explain the Death Eaters getting through the wards?”

Scrimgeour was still gazing into the distance.

“Perhaps we don’t need a detailed explanation. Nobody knows the full extent of the defences on Longbottom Manor, and the Lestranges’ skills are infamous… People will believe that sheer brute force got them through.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Rita Skeeter will dig in and not let go until she finds something.”

“Ah.” Scrimgeour gave a singularly unpleasant smile. “Ms Skeeter will not be troubling you anymore in the foreseeable future,” And then, in a vaguely triumphant tone: “You see, a thorough investigation, launched after that latest inflammatory article of hers, revealed that Ms Skeeter is, in fact, an unregistered Animagus. As such, she is currently restricted in a way that puts quite a hold on her career.”

Harry stared, struck speechless.

That Scrimgeour would do this—

Was this what it meant to have the might of the Ministry behind Harry? It felt… disturbingly nice.

“They tell me it’s likely you’ll be discharged in a few hours,” Scrimgeour continued, glancing at his watch. “We can hold the press conference immediately afterwards.”

Harry nodded.

“Proudfoot and Williamson will let me know when you’re released,” Scrimgeour said, referring to the two Aurors on guard. “I’ll get everything prepared for a meeting with the press in the meanwhile.”

“Great,” Harry said. “I can’t wait.”
Harry’s discharge from St Mungo’s and the ensuing press conference went exactly to Scrimgeour’s plan.

Eager to say as little as possible about the battle, Harry stuck to the script and delivered rehearsed responses; his only deviation was when he did his best to credit the fallen Aurors and Mrs Longbottom for their efforts. He was perfectly genuine—without Mrs Longbottom, he would hardly been standing there today—but too many reporters seemed to interpret this as a display of charming modesty. The narrative needed a hero, and, with all the others indisposed and Neville not cutting too impressive a figure, that hero was going to be Harry.

At least, until it would become more interesting to poke at the holes in the official story and cast doubt onto Harry’s role. Harry could foresee this as well as Scrimgeour could, and resigned himself to it in advance.

Tonks was one of the Aurors securing the press conference, and after it wrapped up she sneaked off to Side-Along Harry back to Grimmauld Place.

“I can do this myself, you know,” Harry pointed out.

“Yeah, but that would mean letting you go somewhere without bodyguards, and everyone’s way too paranoid about your safety at the moment,” Tonks said. “Myself included. So bear with us, okay? It’ll wear off soon enough, assuming you don’t get into any more peril for the rest of the holiday.”

Harry was onboard with that plan.

Not unexpectedly, his arrival at Headquarters caused a bit of a ruckus.

“Harry! Oh thank goodness!” Mrs Weasley cried, as soon as Harry set foot in the kitchen at Number 12, Grimmauld Place.

The Order seemed to be in the middle of lunch. The roast smelled delicious, but Harry proved to be a bigger attraction than the food, because most people jumped up and abandoned their plates at once.

“Blimey!” Ron said, throwing a glance over Harry.

“Hey, kid,” Sirius Black said, and engulfed Harry in a sudden embrace. “Good to see you out and about.”

“Harry,” Lupin said warmly. “Come sit down.”

Harry said hello to everyone else—which was Bill and Ginny Weasley—and then joined the Order at the table even as Tonks made her excuses.

“The Ministry’s in an uproar, of course,” she said, eyeing the food wistfully. “I’d love to stay, but—see you all later, folks.”

As soon as everyone had said goodbye to Tonks, the focus shifted back to Harry. Something felt different about this, a strange undercurrent in the air between Harry and the Order members, but Harry didn’t know what to attribute it to. Did this have something to do with Mad-Eye Moody and his odd behaviour back at the hospital, or had they simply been worried about Harry?

With so many dead and injured—*Hestia* dead—the latter option wouldn’t be surprising in the least.
“Tell us everything,” Sirius said, leaning his elbows on the table and looking at Harry in rapt attention.


“All right.” Harry shrugged. “Thank you, Mrs Weasley,” he added, when she passed him a dish of Yorkshire puddings. And then, to Sirius: “I doubt I can give you anything new. I’m guessing Dumbledore’s told you what happened.”

“That he has.” Sirius beamed at him. “Sounds like you’d have made James and Lily proud.”

Harry looked down at his plate.

“What’s been going on otherwise?” he asked, and he doubted anyone missed his blatant bid at misdirection.

“Well—” Sirius bared his teeth in an entirely too-canine smile. “—there’s quite a bit of chaos in Death Eaters’ ranks now, do you know? According to Snape, anyway.” He made a disgusted face.

“Oh yeah?” Harry glanced up, interested.

He wasn’t the only one. Ron and Ginny were drinking up these morsels of information with obvious eagerness—a fact which instantly came to Mrs Weasley’s attention.

“You two! You’re finished eating, so run along!”

“Mom!” Ron protested. “Bill, come on, tell her, we have a right to know—”

Bill held up his hands.

“I’m not getting involved in this.”

“Ron, Ginny, you heard me! Out!” Mrs. Weasley demanded, and the duo trooped out with bad grace.

Harry watched them go.

“You were saying?” he prompted, turning back to Sirius.

“The battle ended up being quite a blow for them,” Sirius said, and he looked very satisfied about that. “Two dead, not counting Rushmore—besides, the papers are calling a victory for you, so it’s a loss on all counts. Voldemort was, apparently, furious at dear Bella.” So much cousinly love in that last word.

“So the attack really was unauthorized, and I wasn’t the target,” Harry said, feeling relieved even though he’d all but known this already.

“It seems so,” Lupin spoke up, amber eyes far too understanding when they met Harry’s.

“Voldemort wasn’t even in the country, and had to come back from abroad after the news hit. Like Sirius says—” Lupin shook his head. “—he wasn’t pleased.”

“He’s gone on another spiel about not approaching you, apparently,” Sirius added. “And guess what? Now he’s saying that it’s for their own good. You’re supposedly this dangerous wizard powered by weird magic, hence your immunity to killing and general arse-kicking proclivities.”

Harry froze with the fork halfway to his mouth.
“What?”

“You’ve embarrassed him and his followers often enough that he had to offer up some sort of explanation,” Lupin said, looking at Harry sympathetically.

Harry shook his head.

“He’ll never convince everyone. Some of the people on his side—” trained me, shit, he couldn’t say that outright. “—were my Housemates, they’ve seen me up close. He won’t make them believe that I’m a freak of magic or whatever.”

Bill snorted.

“Well, it’s not them he has to convince, is it? It’s the higher ranks, the inner circle. They’re terrified of him, for one thing. And for another, they’ll want to believe what he tells them, because otherwise they’re all fuck-ups following a giant loser.”

“Bill!” Mrs Weasley cried, and set down a stack of dirty dishes with a clang. “These people killed your father! You will not dismiss the danger out of hand like that!”

Absolute silence descended for a few moments.

“Sorry,” Bill muttered.

Harry poked at a piece of broccoli and tried to think of something that did not make him want to break things.

“What’s Voldemort doing abroad?” he asked into the awkward quiet.

“Severus has said he’s looking for something.” Lupin said.

“Yeah, I remember,” Harry said. This had come up way back, in the summer sometime. “He’s been at it for a while though. What’s he looking for?”

The adults exchanged glances.

“That’s what we’d all like to know,” Bill said.

“Dumbledore might have some idea,” Sirius said, a scowl on his face, “but he’s not telling.”

Of course not.

Harry sighed and dug into his roast.

***

Another sleepless night, and this was getting stupid.

Harry threw the blanket aside and rose from the bed.

It wasn’t even the nightmares. But the events of the battle kept flashing through his mind, and unanswered questions kept him staring into the blackness outside the window.

Harry didn’t regret killing Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange. But the way he’d done it—

He’d revelled in the smell of their charred flesh, and basked in the sound of their horrified screams.
He’d been high on their pain, and drunk on power. Every dark place within him, all the doors he’d kept closed, every ugly impulse—released and unchained and he’d delighted in it, in—

In finally doing what he’d longed to do for so long.

Which, well.

Incidentally, it was also a thing that bad people liked doing. The whole violence, murderous rage, joy in killing thing—it had evil written all over it, and Harry had never fully understood the urge before, never mind thought he’d actually—

(“Just how deep did your Death Eater initiation go?”)

Yeah. Yeah, good fucking question, because—

Oh, screw it.

Harry pulled on a jumper with clumsy fingers, and bent down to tie his shoes.

His judgement was clearly fucked, and likely had been for a while. He needed someone good to tell him where the ethical north was, and preferably before he lost his mind walking around in endless circles.

Harry crept downstairs under a Disillusionment Charm, careful to avoid squeaking floorboards. The night’s cold air hit him when he stepped out onto the porch, and he realized he’d forgotten his coat. But it didn’t matter.

He spun on the spot and Apparated.

Only standing in front of Cedric’s front door, Harry remembered that it was very late, that Cho might be there, that Cedric might not be at home on a weekend night. But all these considerations didn’t stop him from pressing the buzzer.

When the door swung open, a very dishevelled Cedric appeared on the other side.

“Harry?” he asked, incredulous. Then, frowning at whatever he saw in Harry’s face: “Come on in.”

Cedric threw the door open wider, and Harry stepped through.

“Is this—are you—not busy?” It was an inane question, but Harry had to ask.

Cedric shook his head and ran a hand through his hair, smoothing it down. “No, it’s fine.”

He led Harry from the small hallway into the living room. A wave of his wand lit the lamps, revealing off-white walls, beige couch and armchairs, and a dining table in dark wood.

“Harry.” It wasn’t prodding or impatient, but, yeah, Cedric probably wanted to know why Harry had barged into his flat in the middle of the night.

Harry took a deep breath.

“So I may have gone batshit and killed people.”

He heard a sharp intake of breath from Cedric, but didn’t turn to check his expression.

“There was a duel. Kind of. And I was so angry…” Harry bit his lip, shook his head.
“Harry—”

“They were Death Eaters, and they were attacking us. They were horrible fucking people. They’ve once tortured Neville’s parents to insanity and had a great time doing it. But I kind of did the same to them, and what does that make me?”

“Harry, stop right there, okay?” Cedric took him by the shoulders. “Sit down, tell me the whole thing from the beginning, and then we’ll see what it all means.”

Harry allowed Cedric to steer him to the sofa and watched as Cedric left the room and came back with a bottle of Firewhisky and two tumblers.

“For the record, this is the most terrible way to deal with anything,” Cedric said. “But you look like you could use a drink.”

He poured generous helpings into each glass, leaving the bottle on the coffee table in front of them, and handed one of the tumblers to Harry. Then he joined Harry on the sofa, leaned against an armrest, and fixed him with a keen look.

“All right,” he said, calmly. “Tell me what happened.”

The account of the battle sounded bizarre in Cedric’s tidy lounge. The room’s neutral colours clashed with the description of red blood and flames, and the quiet posed a jarring contrast to shouts of pain and fury.

“The thing is, it’s—I’ve killed someone before that night, okay.” Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Cedric whip his head around to stare at him. “And that time was… pure self-defence. That was an accident, even, more or less. And this—”

Cedric put the tumbler back on the coffee table. “Harry—”

“I know this wasn’t normal, okay, I’m not that far gone.” Harry looked into his glass. “But I don’t know why it happened, and whether it’s going to keep happening now.”

“You—” Cedric turned away abruptly. “Merlin’s balls, Harry, I don’t even know where to start.” He just sat motionless for a moment, apparently trying to come to terms with everything he’d just been told.

Something burned low in Harry’s gut—Firewhisky, or guilt over inflicting this on Cedric, he wasn’t sure.

He took another sip, and this time the burn was definitely from the alcohol.

“That—other person,” Cedric said. “The first you’ve… That was at the Ministry last year, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Right. So you…” Cedric faced him again. “Have you even talked to anyone about this?”

“You, now.” Harry swirled the whisky and watched it lap against the sides of the glass.

“Me, now,” Cedric repeated bleakly. “Half a year after it happened, and a week after you’ve snapped and killed someone else. I—give me a moment.”

He stared at the wall just beyond Harry’s shoulder, expression inscrutable. Then, he expelled a long breath and reached for the bottle again.
“When you came here tonight, I thought you were freaking out because you’ve made your first kill,” he said, voice level. “It’s not an easy thing to deal with, and with what the papers were saying about you and the Lestranges—well, I kind of assumed the worst there. And I was going to tell you that it’s fine, because in a life-or-death situation you’ve got to make that call, and you can’t be too hard on yourself for choosing to live.”

Harry raised his glass to his eyes.

“And now you’ll tell me it’s not fine?” he asked, equally calm.

“And now let’s take all that as read for that actual first kill of yours, whoever that was,” Cedric responded, not looking away from Harry. “But this—seems quite different, doesn’t it? Only, some of the same things apply. It was still a kill-or-be-killed situation, and a bloodbath besides. You were injured. You’d been tortured. There was no way that, given everything, you’d be making balanced, rational choices at that time.”

“I know,” Harry said. “But I wouldn’t exactly define it as making choices.”

“Yeah. That’s where it gets—”

“Yeah.” Harry threw back another mouthful of whisky. It tasted blatantly foul and was exactly what he needed.

“Listen, I’m not going to tell you that what you’ve done is okay, because you know it isn’t. And it’s good that you know that,” Cedric said. “But this thing you’re doing? Making yourself out to be the worst sort of monster out of there? Stop that. You aren’t. You didn’t go in hoping to get a chance to torture and destroy. It just—”


“So focus on making sure it doesn’t,” Cedric said.

They drank in silence for a few moments.

“You say you cast a lot of Unforgivables,” Cedric spoke up, his expression perfectly neutral. “You say they felt satisfying.”

Harry leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Yeah.”

“I’m guessing I don’t need to spell out the problem with that.”

Harry shook his head minutely.

Being able to cast the Unforgivables was one thing. Liking them—that lay, again, in the bad people do this category. Liking them so much that you had to actively resist the urge to use them—that was beyond bad people and straight into serious fucking danger land.

“So maybe you need to ask yourself how you got to that point,” Cedric said.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I was just… angry.”

He lifted his glass to his lips again, listening to the ice cubes clinking together. The combination of alcohol and the late hour fuddled his brain, smoothing out the sharp edges of reality.
Reality was a bitch and didn’t deserve his full attention right now.

“Harry… please don’t think that I’m trying to trivialize what happened, but has it occurred to you that you’ve run yourself into the ground, and that’s part of what set you off?” Cedric asked.

Harry furrowed his eyebrows, looking over at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean—everyone’s got limits, right? You’ve been juggling a—shit ton of concerns and responsibilities, a lot of it being unpleasant war-related stuff. And you’re dealing with it mainly by not dealing with it on any emotional level, as far as I can tell.” Cedric shrugged. “Something’s got to give at some point, yeah?”

Harry rubbed a hand over his face. “Yeah, well. There isn’t a lot I can do about that.”

“You don’t owe it to anyone to be as involved as you are,” Cedric said quietly.

Harry gave a short laugh. “Scrimgeour says it’s my civic duty.”

“To hell with Scrimgeour,” Cedric said, and there were notes of genuine anger in his tone. “You’ve got to start giving yourself breaks, Harry. You can’t keep on like this indefinitely. Get some free time. Take up a bloody hobby that doesn’t have you constantly on edge.”

“On edge.” Harry tipped his head back to look at the ceiling. “Is that the excuse we’re going with, that I’ve been on edge?”

“Hey, don’t discount that,” Cedric said, pointing at Harry with his glass. “You’re a sixteen-year-old kid with way too much on your plate. Someone twice your age would have trouble dealing with all this shit.”

“That’s not as comforting as you probably think it is,” Harry muttered.

Though, in many ways, plenty comforting for four o’clock on a dark January morning.

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“So you’ve had a fairly eventful holiday,” Blaise said, leaning back into his seat opposite Harry.

The Hogwarts Express lurched forward. Harry glanced out the window, eyes sliding over the familiar sight as the train pulled out of the station.

“Just the first few days, really,” he said. “But I’ve already told you about all that.”

Harry’s friends had sent him a veritable mountain of letters by the time he’d got back from the hospital, and he’d given them the same answers as he had Dumbledore, Scrimgeour, everyone at Headquarters. *I’m fine. I panicked and lost control of a curse. It was a bad, bad fight, but we kind of made it, in the end.*

He’d sounded honest enough—especially with the whole admitting the loss of control thing—that it came across as believable. Besides, there was no reason to distrust the story. Once calmed, his friends seemed to view this experience as yet another crazy thing in Harry’s life, made different this time by Neville’s involvement.

“Bet you’re glad to go back to Hogwarts,” Terry said. “It’s always so peaceful and quiet there.”

“Mmm.”
Millicent shot a look Harry’s way and then transferred her attention back to her cat. The cat purred, grudgingly appreciative.

Harry spared a thought for Hedwig, riding in a compartment with the other owls. She was fairly angry with Harry at the moment, since she hated Grimmauld Place and didn’t understand why Harry insisted on going there.

Luna sat engrossed in The Quibbler—the front page promised an exclusive peek at the workings of the Ministry’s army of Heliopaths. According to the cover, they’d been involved in the fire at the Longbottom Manor somehow. Harry honestly didn’t want to know.

“So. Neville,” Terry said, after a pause.

This produced a ripple effect across the whole compartment: Harry tensed, Blaise raised an eyebrow, Millicent raised her head, and Luna rustled her paper, folding it away.

Neville himself wasn’t there. In fact, he wasn’t anywhere on the train; news had come in just that morning that Augusta Longbottom had woken up, and so Neville would be several days late to school.

“From what I hear, his gran is okay,” Harry said cautiously. “Or, well, lucid? That counts as okay. In, you know, Cruciatus victims.” Oh god. “Just—don’t bug him about it when he comes back?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Blaise muttered, and earned himself a frown from Harry, because you never knew, with Blaise.

“Don’t, okay?” Harry said.

“I have written Neville letters,” Luna said, apropos of nothing. “He hasn’t replied to me.”

“He may have been a tad preoccupied,” Millicent replied, in a flat voice.

Harry rubbed his scar.

“He hasn’t been writing to Hermione, either,” Terry said. “I guess, yeah, he’s had enough to worry about.”

Harry had seen Hermione, as well as Padma and Anthony, only very briefly; they’d said hello before rushing off to the prefects’ carriage. Hermione had looked anxious, and Padma had squeezed Harry in a tight, corridor-blocking hug, to be pried off after a while by Justin Finch-Fletchley. Anthony had ended the traffic jam, gently urging Padma and Hermione along and promising that they’d all be back later.

Which probably meant there would be conversations. With Padma, there were always conversations.

Of course, Harry could always sidetrack her by throwing Luna’s Heliopath theory her way. That was guaranteed to be great entertainment for the whole family.

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“Potter.”

“Nott.”

Harry entered the dormitory just as Theodore Nott grabbed his things and swept away to the bathroom, presumably to get ready for sleep.
Harry threw a glance around.

Malfoy was reading a Potions book over in his four-poster and didn’t acknowledge Harry except by drawing his curtains as Harry stepped further into the room. Crabbe and Goyle were snoring, and Harry knew Blaise was out tempting fate for the fleeting joys of a snogging session in the Astronomy Tower.

Harry dumped his bag by the bed and cast a routine spell to check that nobody had tampered with his bed or his belongings. Likely an unnecessary precaution, but automatic, after all these years—for Harry and the others, too. In fact, lately Death Eaters’ kids put more effort into securing their beds than ever before.

It seemed they didn’t feel too safe having Harry Potter sleeping in the same room. How strange.

A month ago, Harry would have taken pleasure in the thought of Malfoy fearing him, Nott worrying silently about what he might do, their goons considering Harry a threat. Now, he was almost grateful. Of all the people in this school, these adversaries of Harry’s came closest to knowing how dangerous he could be. If they strove to protect themselves, to avoid Harry’s wrath, it might make Harry’s attempts at self-control that much easier.

Harry would rather not find out just how easy it would be to provoke him into another murderous rage. If his reputation had his dorm mates giving him a wide berth, Harry could work with that just fine.

He’d take increased distance from the rest of the school, too, if they’d let him have it.

While Harry had left Hogwarts for the Christmas holidays with Rita Skeeter’s article fanning the flames of suspicion, he came back to see confusion and wariness writ large on the faces of his classmates. By now, after this latest battle, they were nearing an information overload—about who Harry was, what he wanted, what he’d done. The same media kept bombarding people with contradictory images of Harry, had done so for years, and even knowing him personally could not untangle that bewildering jumble of messages. Harry couldn’t be everything he was sold as, not at the same time. But separating truth from lies had to be hard for those who hadn’t been with him every step of the way, fighting enemies, negotiating with allies, staring death in the face.

In the end, it would be as it always was. Some people would believe in him, because they wanted, or needed, to believe. Others would doubt him. And some would never be swayed by what he said or did, because they thought their futures had been written for them since their parents had taken the Dark Lord’s mark.

And Harry didn’t have it in him to do any more explaining, right now.

He’d managed to get through the first week of school without making a bigger spectacle of himself than simply walking the corridors rendered him. But in the second week back, he started receiving questioning glances from various duelling club members, and then he couldn’t in good conscience avoid scheduling practice sessions any longer.

The Dementors were still out there. So were the Inferi. So were the Death Eaters.

Bigger things than Harry’s sensibilities were at stake.

When the day came for the first duelling club meeting of the year, Harry would have given a lot to skip straight to spell practice, but of course people had questions.

“What happened?”
“Where is Neville?”

“Is it true that you’ve killed all the Lestranges?”

And it wasn’t that Harry didn’t have answers; he did, they took shape in his mouth with hardly any effort on his part.

But this, again, projecting the illusion of control, donning a mask, holding his head high when the last thing he wanted was to be here—

It was exhausting.

(“Has it occurred to you that you’ve run yourself into the ground?”)

“You seem thoughtful,” Eddie Carmichael said from beside Harry after they’d told the students to pair up for exercises.

“Just wondering,” Harry said. “How do you feel about holding this thing by yourself next time?”

It hadn’t been all that serious a suggestion--Harry had thought of it a mere second ago--but Eddie turned to him with an expression of actual alarm on his face.

“What?” he said. “Why, what’s wrong?”

Harry raised his eyebrows.

“Nothing, just—I thought I might take a break, that’s all.”

“Nah, come on,” Eddie said, bumping Harry’s shoulder. “Where would we be without our fearless leader?”

Harry gave a minute frown; Eddie’s relief seemed a bit too genuine. The idea of chairing the duelling club on his own clearly didn’t sit well with him. And why not? He was the Head Boy, hardly a stranger to responsibility. Or did he think that people wouldn’t listen to him without Harry around? That would be ironic, since Eddie’s clout was exactly the reason why Harry had taken him on as a co-pilot…

Harry watched the students shift into fighting stances and ready their wands.

Given the scarcity of club members conversant with advanced duelling techniques, they probably did need Harry at the moment. But, fearless or not, Harry didn’t feel much like leading anyone anywhere right now. Not before he figured out where he was headed, himself.

***

“More hot chocolate, anybody?” Slughorn beamed around the table at the assembled Slug Club members.

“Please,” Hermione said, in apparent defiance of her dentist parents.

Blaise declined, but Harry took some more and returned Slughorn’s jolly smile.

The rotund professor seemed to have thawed off entirely since their conversation about Horcruxes. Perhaps it was the fact that Harry had never brought them up again, nor sought to speak to him in private; perhaps it was that Slughorn had truly believed Harry when he’d said that Dumbledore had not been behind the discussion.
By the look of them, nobody would guess how much time Harry and Dumbledore spent plotting together. It came in useful, sometimes.

“Mr Longbottom?” Slughorn pushed the ornate teapot at Neville.

“No, thank you,” Neville said quietly.

But Slughorn’s eyes didn’t leave him, and this time Harry wasn’t fast enough to redirect the conversation.

“I trust your grandmother is in better health?” the Potions master asked, head tilted to the side like a curious bird.

Neville pushed his plate away.

“Yes, thank you,” he said.

Harry met Hermione’s gaze across the table.

Neville had returned to Hogwarts two weeks ago, face drawn and words of Mrs Longbottom’s infirmity on his lips.

(“They say she’ll never walk again, and she’s trying to be so brave about it…”)

Neville had taken to avoiding people, which was understandable; spotlight was a hard burden to bear even when you didn’t have enough of your own thoughts and memories pressing you down. This social gathering was the only one Neville had ventured out to since his return, and something told Harry he wouldn’t be keen to repeat the experience.

Slughorn opened his mouth for another question, and Harry and Hermione sprung into action at the same time.

“Professor—” Harry began, hoping that some suitable subject change would come to mind.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Hermione exclaimed, getting up from the table. “Sir, I completely forgot—Neville and I were supposed to see Professor McGonagall tonight about our transfiguration assignment!”

Neville blinked, blindsided, and McLaggen had clearly been about to make a snide comment when Padma corroborated Hermione’s story by needling her about grades.

By the observant look on Slughorn’s face, Harry could tell that they weren’t fooling him any. Hermione had to know that too, because she threw Harry a desperate glance before ushering Neville from his chair and out the door.

But Slughorn only chuckled, a picture of amiability, and said:

“No matter, no matter. Perhaps it’s time we adjourned, anyway. Professor Snape was most displeased when a couple of you nearly missed curfew last time!”

Cho, Blaise and the rest murmured their goodbyes to the Potions master, but Harry hung back. If there was anyone around who could do damage control, it was probably him.

Besides, he needed to reopen private lines of communication with Slughorn for Horcrux reasons.

Slughorn didn’t question Harry’s decision to stay. When the last of the other students had left, the
professor sank back onto his chair with a sigh. “Well, Harry, I will say this. Mr Longbottom has loyal friends.”

Harry met Slughorn’s eyes squarely.

“We’re sorry for—”

“No, Harry, the apology is not necessary. I suppose it was wrong of me to push young Longbottom on the matter,” Slughorn said, smoothing a hand over his moustache. “It is only that…”

That he wanted to know exactly what had happened during and after the fight at the Neville’s house. And he was accustomed to having access to information.

Familiar disgust—at the presumption of anyone who stuck their noses into his or Neville’s life—rose up in Harry, but he tamped down on it, hard. He couldn’t afford to sabotage Slughorn’s tenuous trust.

“The fight was… I don’t think it’s something Neville will want to revisit, any time soon,” Harry said, pitching his voice low.

“I hear it was a bloody battle,” Slughorn said, heaving a gusty sigh. “I’m sure you haven’t had an easy time of it either.”

But he watched Harry closely for clues, keen to find out what Harry might reveal, where the chinks in his armour were.

Harry couldn’t let him think like that. As far as Slughorn knew, Harry had no armour.

Harry nodded and let himself lean against the table, visibly giving in.

He forced himself to sound heartfelt as he spun his tale. It was easier if he thought of it as just another lie bringing Slughorn closer into the net of shared confidences, making him feel that Harry was surrendering secrets.

(“So how come Potter is a witness where Longbottom was a victim?”)

Harry wondered what Moody would’ve had to say if he could see him right now.

***

It had been most inconvenient of Apparition lessons to start taking up Saturday mornings, because that meant no Quidditch practice—and Slytherin’s match against Ravenclaw was coming up in two weeks. Harry got to skip the course by virtue of having his Apparition licence already, but Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were all lost to the cause.

Channelling the spirit of Marcus Flint, Harry rolled up his sleeves and rescheduled the practices to three hours earlier than normal. This made him immediately popular with the team.

“Seven o’clock on a Saturday.” James Urquhart yawned, looking aghast, and shivered in the chilly February wind. “Harry, how could you?”

“Uh,” said Crabbe in agreement, and leaned heavily on his broom so as not to fall over. The broom, impressively, held his weight.

“Less whining, more action,” Harry said, kneeling down to release the Quaffle.
He threw the large red ball to Arthur Vaisey, who caught it with a bit of fumbling.

Malfoy sneered. “I hope you can do better in the actual game, Vaisey.”

Vaisey glanced away. “Worry about yourself, Malfoy.”

This, like everything else these days, seemed to provoke Malfoy’s temper.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, stepping forward.

“Nothing,” Harry cut in, voice firm. It was way, way too early for this shit. “You three—get in formation.” He nodded at Malfoy, Vaisey and Astoria Greengrass, who just blinked at him sleepily for a moment. “Go! Warm up for a few minutes before I release the Bludgers.”

Arthur Vaisey and Astoria soared up in the air obediently, but Malfoy stayed on the ground and stomped over to Harry, grey eyes glittering in anger.

“What crawled up his arse and died?” he asked Crabbe and Goyle, not really expecting a reply.

Sure, Malfoy had been a pain all of last semester, but lately he’d been practically vibrating with tension. He was the only one of the junior Death Eaters who wasn’t avoiding Harry these days, too, but that was less strange and more quintessentially Malfoy. He just had to be contrary.

“Dunno,” Goyle said. “He’s got things.”

“Right.” Harry stifled a sigh and turned back to his task. “Ready for those Bludgers?”

He kept his team running drills for a couple more hours, and then it was time for Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle to go shower and change for Apparition lessons. After that, Harry had a meeting with Eddie Carmichael to sort out the duelling club schedule, and… well.

Technically, Harry had time to go to the library and pick up some of his old research. But something had stayed his hand last time he’d gone to the Restricted Section and reached for *Magick Most Evile*. A feeling he’d been doing his best to ignore for the last few months—a vague unease—floated closer to the surface again.

*(Harry used to comfort himself that, whatever else he’d been reading, at least he’d been staying away from that.)*

It was not that Harry thought he was doing anything wrong, exactly. A bit of reading had never hurt anyone. But…

*(“You say you cast a lot of Unforgivables. You say they felt satisfying.”)*
Most likely, there was no connection between Harry’s recent immersion in Dark magic and that one sadistic urge. Yes, he’d pushed his own boundaries while doing the research, but that didn’t mean he was prepared to do all the things he’d read about. It was just studying, for god’s sake.

*He hadn’t done anything wrong.*

But the other books rustled around him, and once again Harry felt a warning whispered against his skin when he touched the bindings.

In the past, he’d batted away all warnings, ignored all protests. Because he’d known better than everyone else. He’d thought he knew himself, and his limits.

Gazing at the dusty tomes in the Restricted Section, Harry wondered, for the first time, just what those limits were.

***

Harry might have talked to Luna about all of this; Luna with her gentle understanding and her much-undervalued perspicacity. But Luna seemed to be perpetually busy these days, spending all her time around the Hidden Room for the research project she, Padma and Hermione had initiated.

At least, the girls’ troubles were bearing fruit. It had taken a long time—January had given way to February already—but one day as Harry and his friends were meeting after the duelling club, Luna triumphantly produced two objects and put them down on the table in the Hidden Room.

“Here they are,” Luna said, glancing around at everyone present, which was Harry, Hermione and their Ravenclaw friends. “I have found your book in the storage version of the Room, Padma. And your globe, Hermione. Now you can’t deny that they were there.”

If Padma’s stare could inflict physical damage, the book would have acquired a hole right in the middle of its bright pink cover. Hermione touched the globe of the earth, sending it into a slow spin.

They had claimed that Luna was wrong. That an object left in one version of the room could not later surface in another. That Luna must have imagined things.

“Fine,” Hermione said, after a long pause. “Fine! But the Hidden Room does not exist in a different dimension.”

That was Luna’s latest idea; Harry hadn’t bothered commenting the last time he heard it, and he wasn’t about to start now.

“The dimension theory is only one of many,” Luna said. “But—”

“Leaving the crazy postulations aside,” Padma cut in, turning to Hermione, “do you suppose that, when everyone leaves the Room and it goes back to… well, hibernation, it Vanishes all objects to that storage place?”

“No,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “If things left here get Vanished automatically to the storage version of the room, it would have to contain everything we have thought up. And that’s not true. It gave us my whole room—”

“True,” Padma murmured. “I hate to agree with you, but true. Your room wasn’t in the storage. Neither was mine. Okay.” She pursed her mouth in thought.

Terry and Anthony seemed to be regarding the discussion in the manner of a sports match, waiting
with bated breath for the next sally.

Harry wished Neville had not pleaded a Herbology assignment he had to complete, because then Harry would’ve had a fellow sane person here. Also, if Neville had stayed, Harry wouldn’t have had to worry that Neville was avoiding all social interactions save for the duelling club. He hadn’t turned up to anything since that dinner at Slughorn’s…

“So the Room can provide us with anything we want,” Hermione said, jotting something down in on a piece of parchment, “but we can’t conclude that it contains everything it provides, because then it would have to hold everything under the sun.”

“Except for food,” Padma corrected, and a pensive look came over her face. “Apart from living beings, that’s the only exception. The Room can’t provide food.”

Hermione bit her lip as she looked down at her notes.

“From which we can conclude,” she said slowly, “that the objects here aren’t Summoned from anywhere… because you cannot make food out of nothing, but you can Summon it.”

“Let me get this straight,” Terry said, and earned a glare from Anthony for interrupting the girls. “You’re absolutely sure all this isn’t Summoned from anywhere? Because what else can it be? Is there really magic that will create everything we see here from something one of us imagined, picking it out of our heads?”

Hermione opened her mouth to respond—but then, Harry had a sudden moment of recognition.

“Yes, it can,” he said. “I’ve seen something that worked in a similar way before.”

Everyone turned to Harry in surprise. He hadn’t exactly been a major contributor to these discussions in the past.

“What was it?” Anthony asked.

“If you say a Remembrall,” Padma interjected, “I’m going to head you off right here, Harry. They’re a cheap trick.”

Harry shook his head.

“There was this mirror, and it showed you not what was actually there, but what you wanted,” he explained. “And it’s not like you planned what you wanted to see in it. It just worked off your subconscious, or your deepest desires, whatever.”

Terry looked impressed. “Sounds wicked.”

Padma narrowed her eyes. “What mirror was that?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know, but it looked old, and—important? Dumbledore had it, and then I saw it at the Department of Mysteries.”

Hermione shot Harry a glance.

“I imagine it could be quite an eye-opening experience,” she said thoughtfully. “Some literal soul-gazing…”

“Makes you wonder what a Dementor would see in it, huh?” Terry said.
“Could we please get back to the point?” Padma said at the same time as Hermione countered:

“I’m not sure Dementors have souls, as such.”

“Well, do they have minds?”

“Not the point,” Padma stressed, again. “We were talking about the Hidden Room, remember?”

“Yes, all right,” Hermione said. “So Luna has proven that some things we leave in the Room may get transported to storage, but others may go to where they came from, that is, a state of nonexistence —”

“I was wrong,” Luna said suddenly, and so loudly that Harry started at her voice. “The Hidden Room does not exist in a different dimension.”

There was a moment’s pause.

“Congratulations on that magnificent discovery,” Padma said.

“It is much simpler,” Luna continued, still gazing ahead with the expression of deep thought. “The Hidden Room does not exist.”

This time even Anthony couldn’t contain himself.

“I’m sorry, could you say that again?”

“This room,” Luna clarified. “It must be an illusion, I’m sure of it. We think the objects here are real, but they are not. This is why real objects brought in from the outside are stored in a different place.”

Harry blinked.

“Ridiculous,” Padma bit out.

Hermione only rolled her eyes. “But of course. I don’t see why we haven’t thought of that already.”

“It is because your mind is closed to everything but logic,” Luna said in apparent earnestness.

“And you, I suppose, are the greatest scientist of our age,” Hermione snapped, eyes narrowing.

“Whatever,” Padma said, cutting in between with practiced ease. “What I want to do now is check if we can leave food in the storage version of the Room and then try to wish for it here. And the other way around. What will happen, do you think?”

A new light shone in Hermione’s eye. She jumped up, the argument already forgotten.

“Yes! Yes, brilliant, we need to test this at once—”

“Did you just call me brilliant?” Padma preened.

Hermione glared at her.

“Oh don’t you go all diva on me. We have an experiment to conduct! Let’s go to the kitchens!”

Terry trailed after Hermione with hearts in his eyes, Anthony wore an expression of keen interest, Padma flounced out the door and Luna followed at a sedate pace.

Harry knew that look on his friends’ faces. It was their “no one is safe when research happens”
look.

He left them to it and retreated to the Slytherin common room. He had a lot of his own regularly scheduled work to do.

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“Hi, Harry!” Romilda Vane said, passing by him in the corridor. Her friends giggled, and Harry could already hear all the comments about to pour out of Blaise’s mouth.

“Not a word,” Harry said.

Blaise kept silent for about two paces. Then: “You’re being romanced by a fourteen-year-old. This will never not be funny.”

“To you, maybe,” Harry muttered.

“To everyone who knows you,” Blaise said gleefully.

That was, unfortunately, true. Padma, for one, had spent a whole Herbology class planning out Harry and Romilda’s wedding in dramatic whispers.

“I hate you all,” Harry said, and followed Blaise into the Defence classroom.

Just like that, his levity evaporated. If Snape’s sallow visage was not enough to quash extra cheer, there was also the fact that Harry had not been doing too well in Defence lately. His classmates had doubtlessly never noticed, but Snape was another story.

True to his habit of the last few months, Snape swooped down on Harry just as the rest of the class paired up to practice nonverbal cursing. Harry never even bothered partnering up with anyone, because he’d known this was coming.

Snape struck without a word of warning, but Harry had already put up a shield. He dove behind a desk as Snape cast a spell he didn’t know, and heard a minor explosion shake the ground under him.

Harry gave a quiet murmur, and then a doppelganger of his moved out of his hiding place, raised a wand at Snape—

Even as Snape attacked the illusion, the real Harry flung a quick barrage of Stunners from a few paces away. Snape had to spin before he could even block, but he recovered quickly and dispelled Harry’s likeness with a quick wave of his wand.

“Go on, Potter,” he said, eyes narrowed. “Is this all you can do?”

Harry Banished the desk at Snape, buying a couple of moments as he straightened and fired off another string of curses. They were absorbed by Snape’s shield, harmless, and then Harry was on the defensive again.

He blocked a jinx aimed at messing with his balance, sidestepped a rather nasty veins-engorging curse, and reflected a cutting spell back at Snape.

Another dodged curse, and there, there was an opening, and Harry brought up his wand—

An instinctive curse rose to his lips, but this was not real, Snape was not the enemy, he—

Harry had hesitated a split second too long.
Pain erupted on the left side of his head, and when he raised his hand to his temple, his fingers came away covered with blood.

Snape stood glaring at Harry from a few feet away. Around them, the class erupted in whispers at the evidence of Harry’s injury. Pansy laughed, Dean Thomas frowned, and Daphne Greengrass looked like she wanted nothing better but to get Harry immediate first aid.

“Pathetic, as always, Potter,” Snape pronounced, but his eyes remained trained on Harry, assessing. “Stay after class.”

“Yes, sir.”

Head perfectly—carefully—empty of thought, Harry retreated to the back of the room and cast a spell to close the shallow wound.

By the time the rest of the students left, he still hadn’t marshalled up a valid excuse for his lapse during the duel.

“Your performance in my class has been abysmal since the start of the semester, and today you have reached a new low,” Snape hissed, once the door was shut and warded. “Explain.”

Harry looked at the papers strewn over Snape’s desk. He didn’t know what, if anything, Snape had glimpsed in his mind; perhaps his Occlumency defences had held, perhaps not. Harry wasn’t about to start sharing confidences.

“I’m doing my best, sir,” he said blandly.

“Don’t lie to me, Potter,” Snape said, and he sounded disgusted. “You have been relying on predominantly defensive tactics. You have failed to mount a significant attack even when I have given you ample opportunity. You are holding back, and I will know why.”

Harry fought to maintain a blank expression.

“I assure you, sir—”

“Try this on your little friends, but spare me,” Snape said, voice ice cold.

A pause descended. Maybe Snape hadn’t seen anything, but clearly nothing Harry said was going to convince him.

“Very well,” Snape said, and leaned back in his chair with an unpleasant smile. “I shall draw my own conclusions. Dumbledore tells me that, during the last battle, you lost control of a spell and, as a result, killed two people and caused serious damage to Longbottom’s property. Coincidentally, you have avoided going on the offensive with me ever since. You leave me no choice but to assume that you fear losing control again.”

Harry closed his mouth against the counter-argument he’d been about to utter.

He wouldn’t have put it like that. But.

“You insult me, Potter, by presuming that you can inflict any damage from which I am unable to protect myself, you, or the other students under my care,” Snape snapped then, and startled Harry into looking at him.

“Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange—” Harry began, but Snape didn’t let him finish.
“—were inferior to me in skill, I assure you.” Snape’s look was pure Death Eater there for a moment.

“I’m not—this is not about me boasting,” Harry said, a tad frustrated. He didn’t think he could defeat Snape in a classroom duel. But he didn’t know what he could do if he lost his grip on reality again, and keeping a tight control on his responses was paramount.

He could tell it was slowing him down in class, but letting go and fighting to his full potential in a room full of students was too big a risk to face.

“I see,” Snape said.

Harry frowned. He wasn’t at all sure Snape did see.

Snape nodded, as if in thought. And then he said:

“Detention, Potter.”

Harry stared at him.

“Sir?”

“Eight o’clock.” Snape scowled—presumably at the idea of seeing Harry that soon. “Well, Potter? Don’t gape at me like an imbecile. I’d have got it over with immediately, but I have another class in —” He glanced at his watch. “—five minutes, and as such I don’t have time for your teenage histrionics. But this evening, you will come to my office, and you will fight me, and you will not hold back.”

Harry wanted to object, but Snape talked over his attempt to interrupt, face set in uncompromising lines.

“If you do hold back, it’ll be another detention, every night, until you have got it through your thick skull that nothing but spell practice will happen to you in my classroom. You will not hurt other people. You will not hurt yourself. You will most certainly not hurt me. But if I need to beat this fact into you, so be it. Eight o’clock, Potter. Don’t be late.”

Harry left the classroom uncertain whether he’d just received a scolding or the best offer of help that had come his way in recent times.

***

In the event, it had taken four fake detentions—four evenings of Snape attacking and Harry, eventually, responding in kind and not going homicidal while he was at it—for Harry to regain something resembling trust in his control. He’d watched himself carefully for symptoms of impending breakdown, cataloguing any sparks of desire to cause real bodily harm. But, no matter how annoying or insulting Snape was being, Harry failed to fly into bloodthirsty rage.

By the fifth night, he was cautiously optimistic.

“Again, Potter,” Snape barked, readying his wand. “A toddler could have fought off your last attempt. Focus!”

Harry restrained the urge to snort. He and Snape had been duelling for nearly an hour, and, while Harry hadn’t managed to gain the upper hand, he’d certainly not done as badly as Snape claimed.
He flung another curse at Snape, dropped to the side and dissolved the ground under Snape’s feet. Hardly a moment later, Harry needed to perform a series of complicated blocks, because of course Snape wouldn’t let him rely on the Shield Charm, but—

This was almost fun.

Harry hadn’t fought quite like this, not restraining himself and at the same time not fearing for his life, since his junior Death Eater tutors had broken ties with him a year ago.

“Next week, you do the same in class,” Snape commanded as Harry picked himself up from the floor. “I refuse to mollycoddle you any longer.”

Harry nodded, still catching his breath. He’d have to control himself more in a classroom setting, with so many bystanders around, but by now he couldn’t imagine himself flying off the handle and trying to kill everyone for no reason.

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said, pocketing his wand. “Really.”

Snape just lifted a haughty eyebrow at him, as if saying, you’re an idiot, Potter.

Harry hesitated before leaving the room.

It had occurred to him, the last couple of days, that Snape’s actions fit oddly into the picture Harry had got of the Order’s intentions.

(“And here we were thinking you wanted Potter to beat Voldemort just with phoenix song and Gryffindor courage...”)

That had sounded as if some people in the Order wanted to train Harry to fight, and Dumbledore had put the brakes on that. But was this thing with Snape if not training?

Harry had long figured that Snape’s treatment of him in Defence class was a form of teaching, because Harry was actually learning something, albeit in an unorthodox manner. He’d assumed that Dumbledore had arranged for that, but in light of Moody’s words, he’d begun to doubt.

“Sir, does the Headmaster… Were these lessons the Headmaster’s idea?”

Snape stood motionless for a moment.

“That, Potter, is none of your concern,” he said in an even tone.

His face told Harry that this was as clear a no as he would get.

“Go,” Snape said.

Harry went.

The conversation stayed with him, though. Snape’s subterfuge, Moody’s concerns, Dumbledore’s plans…

Determined that he had correctly worked out the Order’s dynamics, Harry had, at some point, stopped looking. And meanwhile, things appeared to be not as clear-cut as he had thought.

Perhaps this was worth bearing in mind for the next time he was at Headquarters.

***
“Well, Harry, I must congratulate you on winning another match for Slytherin!” Slughorn said, leaning back in his chair at the dinner table, and winked at Cho. “No offence to your team, of course, Miss Chang.”

“Maybe I won’t go into professional Quidditch after all,” Cho said wryly.

Slughorn chortled at the joke, while Padma gave a disdainful huff.

“Hey, you’re good,” Harry protested. “Er, your Keeper, though…”

“She’s new,” Cho defended.

The match had been over embarrassingly quickly; Harry had caught the snitch twenty minutes after it began. He might have let it drag out for longer, but Slytherin had been in the lead anyway, Malfoy pulling it together to work his usual seamless cooperation with Crabbe and Goyle.

Cormac McLaggen glowered at Harry.

“Don’t be so smug, Potter. We can still beat you in the Cup. Just need to crush the Puffs hard enough. And the Ravenclaws.” He threw a winning smile at Cho.

She bristled.

“Let me know how that works out for you,” Harry said pleasantly.

Sadly, McLaggen was quite right in one thing: Gryffindor stood a very good chance of flattening Hufflepuff in about two weeks’ time, in mid-March.

“Now, now, boys, don’t fight,” Slughorn said, shaking a reprimanding finger at them. But his walrus moustache trembled with a suppressed smile.

Padma turned to the Potions master then and he engaged her in light conversation both of them were so good at. Blaise watched them lazily, sipping his water.

Hermione, on the other hand, seemed lost in thought next to Harry as she gazed at a conspicuously empty chair that should have belonged to Neville. Harry reached out to touch her arm and she started, glancing at him. She checked that everyone’s attention was otherwise occupied, and said in an undertone:

“Do you think we’re being bad friends?”

“No,” Harry said. The automatic reassurances, poised ready on his tongue, fell away at Hermione’s look. Harry placed his utensils carefully across the plate. “I don’t know,” he amended, more honestly.

Neville had always had something of a low self-esteem, but it seemed to have plummeted even further since the events of the holidays. Harry and Hermione tried to reassure him, but sometimes it seemed like their presence was the opposite of helpful.

(“You’re the same age as me, but you fought like one of them…”)

Such comparisons were stupid, of course, and the idea of measuring oneself up against Hermione was even worse, but explaining this to Neville without sounding patronizing was a tall order. Harry, at least, could claim superior training in the art of duelling; Hermione’s only argument was I’m just naturally smarter than you and everyone else in a ten-mile radius.
Harry entertained a vision of the world in which he and Hermione weren’t Neville’s best friends. Would that have been better for his self-perception?

“He’ll be fine,” Harry said quietly. “We—”

But this was as much of a private conversation as he and Hermione had managed to have. They were interrupted and swept into the general discussion again. Dessert followed the main course, and soon enough it was time to leave.

“Stay a moment, Harry,” Slughorn said as Harry rose from his chair. “I’ve got to thank you for that lovely surprise from your Hogsmeade trip.”

Harry blinked, confused. He couldn’t think of anything he’d done last weekend that might have warranted Slughorn’s gratitude.

As the others trickled out, bidding the Potions master goodnight, Harry obediently lingered, gazing at the bookshelves that lined the room. A lot of these tomes were Potions-related, though an odd title popped up here and there. Knowing Slughorn, most of these belonged in the Restricted Section.

All these books, and Slughorn’s undeniable knowledge…

Here it was again, a twinge of genuine desire to seek advice from the man. A monumentally foolish idea, of course. Harry wasn’t in the habit of giving so much of himself away, and Dark magic was a thorny subject at the best of times.

“Something on your mind, my boy?” Slughorn asked once they were alone. He walked towards the fireplace and settled comfortably into an armchair, waving a hand at the seat opposite. “Be my guest, as it were.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry sat down and looked away from the inviting expression of Slughorn’s face.

He was so tempted to just ask.

He didn’t have to give Slughorn any incriminating details. He didn’t have to tell him the truth about what had prompted the inquiry. But—

Damn it if he didn’t understand Tom Riddle’s urge to seek answers were they seemed so easy to be had.

Who else could he talk to about this? Should he have debated the finer points of Dark magic with Theodore Nott? Gone to Dumbledore for a bracing lecture?

“That night, at Neville’s house… there was a lot of Dark magic in the fight,” Harry said, taking the plunge before he could think better of it. “Some of it I recognized. Some I didn’t. And if I didn’t know a lot of those things… I’d be dead, or tortured within an inch of my life. But these are the things that are wrong for me to know.”

“Oh, Harry,” Slughorn said sadly. “Necessary knowledge is never a bad thing.”

“Sometimes it seems like it is,” Harry said, studying the stone floor.

Among the good guys, that was. Among those who refused to fight with illegal spells even when nobility of purpose got them killed—like Hestia, like Auror Smith, like Kingsley.

Harry sighed. “Dumbledore…”
“Dumbledore has great wisdom,” Slughorn said. “But he has always had the liberty of power. He is no poet of the underprivileged.”

Harry observed the way the flagstones fit together, only thin gaps breaking the continuity of the smooth floor.

Slughorn was hardly underprivileged, with his pure blood and his connections and his creature comforts. But chances were he’d simply meant that Dumbledore had never had to be the victim.

“One occasion, we are forced to make terrible choices,” Slughorn said. “Dark magic is another such choice. Would it be better if we could afford not to know it? Yes, certainly. But you cannot blame yourself for gaining knowledge that has saved your life.”

“Dumbledore believes that Dark magic harms the soul,” Harry told the stones.

“Yes.” Slughorn nodded solemnly. “And is it not awful when we have to choose between the integrity of our souls and our very life?”

Harry raised his head to stare at Slughorn.

“All that about damage to the soul—you agree with that? Sir?”

“Why, of course.” Slughorn frowned. “Is that not what we are discussing? That sometimes, desperate circumstances push us into adopting ill-advised practices?”

“But…” Harry felt thoroughly thrown off course.

Desperate circumstances hadn’t pushed him. He’d learnt his first Dark spells alongside his Slytherin classmates; it was something everybody did and nobody took seriously.

(“Dark magic is never the answer… you lose as much as you gain, and more.”)

Well, nobody who was reasonable about it.

“Dark magic isn’t sanctioned by the Ministry,” Harry said cautiously, “but—”

“Harry, Harry!” Slughorn shook his head. “Surely, you must know better than this revolutionary propaganda! If you have investigated Dark magic, you have to be aware of its effects.”

“It’s destructive,” Harry said. “It causes damage to the target.”

It was, in fact, the best way Harry knew to hurt people.

“Never mind the target, my boy!” Slughorn said, sitting forward in his armchair. “The caster! The caster is the one who bears the brunt of the damage, surely you know that!”

Harry frowned.

“But is it not the target that—”

“Oh, what does the target matter?” Slughorn waved a hand. “A fire spell is a fire spell, Dark or not. The target will burn either way, and the results might even look identical. But do you mean to set something on fire, or do you mean to burn it? That’s the crucial difference!” He slapped a pudgy hand down on his knee. “Do you want to cause damage, or do you want to create flames?”

Yes, well, fair enough, but—
“And that’s it, that’s the danger?” Harry asked.

Slughorn stared at Harry, aghast, and rose to his feet in evident agitation.

“Harry, take care!” he cried. “You make it sound like a trifle, when countless wizards have bowed under the toll it takes. Trust an old man who has seen—who has felt…” Slughorn visibly held himself back and shook his head. “The more time you spend immersed in dark thoughts and intentions, the less room they leave for anything else in your mind. You start, unwittingly, seeing the world through a prism of darkness—and, since you’ve spent so long nursing a well of anger, you’ll find it spills over far too easily…and then…”

Slughorn wiped sweat off his forehead, and Harry reeled back at sight of naked emotion on his face.

“You have to control yourself…yes, you have to exercise great control not to let yourself slip,” the Potions master said in a hushed voice. His eyes appeared suddenly sunken as he gazed at Harry. “Dark magic is dangerous business, Harry…dangerous and altogether unpleasant if you will practice it, and not be content with just knowing. The things you can learn, the things you can feel…” His voice sounded wistful for a moment. “But the risk…you can lose sight of yourself so thoroughly you will never make it back again. I have known…so many people…”

Tom, Harry realized, the thought resounding like a bell tolling somewhere in the distance. He’s talking about Tom Riddle.

Harry wouldn’t pretend that Slughorn’s words and general demeanour hadn’t rattled him, but—

Was Tom Riddle the driving force behind this conversation? Was Slughorn genuine in his warnings, or was all this a bid to ensure that he wouldn’t facilitate another orphan’s descent into violent madness?

(“If you do this at sixteen, where do you go from here?”)

I’m not Tom Riddle, Harry thought, gritting his teeth, and restrained the urge to snarl this out loud.

“Professor—”

“No, Harry,” Slughorn said, raising a shaking hand. “Truly, this is a subject of discussion we should leave well enough alone. And I do not wish to burden you with any more of my recollections…”

Whom would Harry’s protests convince? If Slughorn had learnt from his mistakes, he wouldn’t tell Harry a thing about Dark magic, about the power rituals, about the bloody Horcruxes. He never would have, no matter what Harry did.

The sudden insight struck Harry even as Slughorn smoothed down his moustache and tried for a smile.

“Now, then, before you go…I did mean to thank you, you know…” The Potions master turned to the mantelpiece, which was covered with numerous photos and trinkets. “Let us take this moment to break open that box of crystallized pineapple you’ve sent me. I feel rather in need of fortification, don’t you?”

It took Harry a couple of seconds to cool his temper and process Slughorn’s words. These were exactly two seconds he didn’t have.

“Pineapple I—but sir, I haven’t—sir!”
The denial reached Slughorn when he had already opened the box and swallowed the first bite of the
candied fruit. Shocked eyes met Harry’s as Slughorn froze with the next treat in his hand.

Then, even as Harry dashed towards him, Slughorn gave a rasping breath, expelling blue foam from
his mouth, and toppled over.

“Professor!”

Harry managed to catch Slughorn with a hasty spell just in time. He lowered the Potions master
gently onto the floor by the grate and checked him for signs of—he had no idea what. Everything he
knew about poisons crowded his head as Slughorn twitched and gasped in obvious agony.

“No… time…” the professor moaned.

Fuck that. There was always—

Oh, for—

*Accio bezoar.*

This would either work or it wouldn’t, but it was better than the alternative, which was figuring out a
precise antidote and brewing it double quick while Slughorn inched closer to death’s door.

A whole packet of bezoars flew into Harry’s hand. He tore one out and shoved it unceremoniously
down Slughorn’s throat.

The professor’s body lurched and wheezed and fell quite still.

Harry checked his pulse. Slughorn was still alive, and the terrible shuddering had stopped. Now he
looked gravely sick as opposed to mostly dead.

Harry cast a glance around. He was alone with an unconscious man, a bag of bezoars and a box’s
worth of poisoned candy strewn about the floor.

“No… time…” the professor moaned.

Harry sighed and got up, looking down at the professor. It was time to contact the hospital wing. And
Dumbledore. And potentially Snape, as the other Potions expert.

Harry winced in anticipation of all the conversations he was about to have, and reached for the Floo
powder on the mantelpiece.
I cannot express in words how grateful I am to my beta agedsolarwhisk. She managed to hold my hand and provide much-needed advice in the middle of her own very busy life, and I don’t know what I’d do without her. Also, Imogen Nolen has drawn OWG!Harry, which is super awesome.

Since Harry had alerted the infirmary first, Madam Pomfrey was already hard at work on Slughorn’s prone form when Dumbledore and Snape arrived.

“How is Horace, Poppy?” Dumbledore asked, once he’d exchanged greetings with everyone present.

“He’ll recover,” she said. “Fortunately, he ingested only a minuscule amount of poison, and Potter reached him in time.”

Harry hadn’t wanted to get in the nurse’s way or to touch anything on the crime scene, so he’d sat down at the table, which was still crowded with dishes from the Slug Club dinner. Going from a heated argument to the adrenaline rush of a crisis left him jittery; he fiddled with a teaspoon as he watched Snape head over to offer his assistance to Madam Pomfrey.

Dumbledore examined the box of poisoned fruit.

“And you say these sweets were sent directly to Professor Slughorn and signed with your name,” he murmured, slowly twirling the box in the air.

Harry gave a jerky nod.

“What happened exactly?” Snape demanded, walking back to Harry and Dumbledore’s side.

Harry had already told Madam Pomfrey, of course, but it didn’t take long to rehash his tale.


“And with his preference for crystallized pineapple so well known… yes, quite clever, quite effective,” the Headmaster concluded, in that same absent tone. “I am sure it would have done the trick, had you not been here so fortuitously, Harry.”

“Yes, it’s clear that someone wanted to murder Slughorn and implicate Potter,” Snape said. “That’s hardly something we need to puzzle out at length.”

“Oh, but you must see what it means, Severus,” Dumbledore said, piquing Harry’s attention, but just then Madam Pomfrey spoke up.

“I would like to take him down to the hospital wing for observation,” she said.

“Perhaps it will behoove us to be discreet about Horace’s condition,” Dumbledore said, his tone mild.
Deliberately mild, if Harry was any expert.

“My patient needs the infirmary’s resources,” Madam Pomfrey said.

“And I shall not argue with your expertise, Poppy,” Dumbledore replied. “I merely believe that, in
the interests of preserving Horace’s health, it might be best to conceal the exact nature of his
indisposition from the rest of the school. After all, it will serve Horace better if the perpetrator thinks
his plan might yet succeed…”

Madam Pomfrey’s face adopted an expression that clearly communicated, the things that happen in
this school are beyond the pale.

“Very well,” she said. “And on your head be it, Dumbledore.”

The Headmaster inclined said head and asked whether she required help to transport Slughorn to the
infirmary. Madam Pomfrey waved him off and departed, the unconscious man floating beside her.
Harry, Snape and Dumbledore remained as the sole occupants of Slughorn’s living room.

Dumbledore sighed and took a seat on a high-backed dining chair. The box of poisoned pineapple
drifted through the air after him and settled down on the surface of the table.

“Well, I shall not pretend that it gives me pleasure to discuss what we must address tonight,” he said.

His good hand stretched to pick up the note that came with the deadly fruit: generic well wishes,
signed Harry Potter.

The perpetrator of the attack had to be on tenterhooks, waiting daily to hear whether their scheme
had worked, whether the blame would fall onto Harry.

Harry could think of only one person whom the thought would please quite so much.

“Draco Malfoy,” Snape said, and Harry blinked, because for a moment he’d thought the words had
come from his own mouth.

“Yes, regrettably, all signs do point in that direction,” Dumbledore agreed.

“What signs?” Harry asked, wondering how it was that he ended up feeling like a very slow student
playing catch-up whenever he talked to Snape and Dumbledore.

Snape scowled and glanced at the Headmaster, who gave a subtle nod.

“We knew that Draco Malfoy had a task to fulfil at Hogwarts,” Snape said. “Until now, we weren’t
sure what it entailed.”

“You—” For a moment, Harry’s mind went blank with anger. “With all due respect, Headmaster,
was this not something you could have let me know?”

“Potter,” Snape said, whip-sharp, “if this is how you show respect—”

“Ah, Harry, but this intelligence was quite recent, and what would telling you achieve?”
Dumbledore asked, entirely too equable. “Professor Snape was keeping a close eye on Mr Malfoy,
and he could claim to be doing so on the request of Draco’s mother. If you, on the other hand,
developed a suspicious tendency to watch Mr Malfoy, it might have compromised Severus, since he
was the only one from whom you might have learnt of the scheme.”

“I always watch Malfoy,” Harry said. “That’s what we do.”
“Forgive me, Harry, but we could not risk you being indiscreet,” Dumbledore replied. “It was imperative that there was no change at all in your behaviour.”

Harry opened his mouth, but Dumbledore held up a hand before he could speak.

“Harry, this is something that you must understand. Professor Snape’s cover as a spy is the single most effective advantage in this war that our side possesses.” Not a glimmer of the usual twinkle shone in Dumbledore’s eyes as they bored into Harry’s. “I would be extremely reluctant to take any action that might cast suspicion onto his role, and I will ask you to do the same. It is vitally important that we retain a watchful eye in Voldemort’s camp.”

“Yes, okay,” Harry said, expelling a long breath. “But while I understand that—”

“And we are so grateful for your forbearance, Potter,” Snape said silkily, but bit back whatever else he’d been about to utter at Dumbledore’s warning glance.

Harry shook his head, recognizing that further argument would be futile.

“You said it was recent, that you knew Malfoy was planning something,” he said. “How recent are we talking?”

“Professor Snape conveyed this intelligence to me over the winter holidays,” Dumbledore said. “But it seems that Draco was given the task significantly earlier—quite possibly, at the start of the school year.”

“What changed, then?” Harry asked. “Why do we find out now?”

Snape glared at him. “I’m sure that even your feeble brain can think of a reason why the Dark Lord was in a towering mood with Draco’s family after Christmas.”

Harry swallowed and looked away.

The Lestranges. Bellatrix, Malfoy’s aunt, who’d acted against Voldemort’s orders—

Had Voldemort taken his anger out on the Malfoys?

“The Dark Lord was of the opinion that Draco had been too slow in the execution of his task,” Snape said. “He let his displeasure be known.”

Dumbledore steepled his fingers. “And the boy?”

“I believe that he has come to realize that the task was given to him as a form of punishment for his family,” Snape said, locking his hands behind his back. “Something to hold over the heads of his parents if he fails, even as he lives in fear for their fate.”

“And what will befall him if he fails?” Dumbledore asked, eyes keen on Snape’s face.

Snape was silent for a moment.

“The Dark Lord would probably let him live, as leverage against Lucius,” he said at last. “Or he might offer Lucius a choice, Draco or Narcissa. The Dark Lord does like his little games, after all.”

At that, Harry winced, but—

He wasn’t going to feel sorry for Draco Malfoy who’d nearly committed premeditated murder. Malfoy had probably been overjoyed to get the task; Harry could imagine him delighting in the idea
of showing up Nott, of being accepted in the Death Eaters’ circle and earning Voldemort’s esteem.

“Besides,” Snape continued, “Draco bears the Mark, and Narcissa does not. That is something to consider.”

“Malfoy’s taken the Dark Mark?” Harry repeated, incredulous, and then caught himself: “Sir?”

“Watch the Malfoy boy, do you?” Snape asked, mouth twisting. “And yet you’ve failed to notice such a significant detail. I just don’t see why we didn’t engage your services in espionage.”

Harry gritted his teeth over Dumbledore’s, “Now, Severus—”

“When did he take it? Sir?” Harry asked, because—

Okay, so Harry might not have devoted all his time to observing Malfoy’s moods, but such a thing should have been impossible to miss. Malfoy would have crowed about his initiation and advertised the fact far and wide. Even if Harry had missed the memo, there should have been a change in the junior Death Eater dynamic, and his classmates weren’t that good at acting, not by a long shot.

“Draco was indicted on New Year,” Snape said.

Harry frowned, looking at the empty plate in front of him.

Malfoy—a Death Eater, officially, and by all appearances he hadn’t told anybody. Not so long ago, he would have used the Mark to boost his standing. Now, he’d been sullen and withdrawn and snappy, and the best his sidekicks could do by way of explanation was he’s got stuff.

The Dark Mark was not stuff. No way did Crabbe and Goyle know.

Which left them—where?

(“Your father wouldn't be where he is now if the Dark Lord didn't want him to be.”)

Maybe Malfoy was starting to realize just how screwed he was.

Which: too little, too late.

“Albus, you cannot possibly be thinking to let the Malfoy boy run unchecked,” Snape said, unknowingly echoing Harry’s thoughts. “He’s a menace, and he’s desperate. He knows the Dark Lord will show him no mercy if he fails.”

“Most assuredly, we will have to take some action,” Dumbledore agreed.

As Harry was about to open his mouth to offer helpful suggestions—like, how about booting him out of Hogwarts—the fireplace flared green and Poppy Pomfrey’s head appeared in the flames.

“Horace is awake, Dumbledore,” she said. “And he requests to speak to you immediately.”

***

Dumbledore must have recognized that neither Harry nor Snape would have agreed to stay behind, because he took them along to Slughorn’s ward without protest.

The greyish tinge still clung to Slughorn’s skin, and he looked as though he’d shed a chunk of weight through the sheer force of the trauma.
“Albus!” he rasped as soon as he saw them. “I was nearly killed… And you swore to protect me…”

“I know, Horace, and I was exceedingly sorry to hear about what happened,” Dumbledore said, settling into a chair next to Slughorn’s bed. “Poppy assures me that you will make a full recovery.”

“Poison!” Slughorn’s eyes bugged out. “I—”

“I will thank you not to agitate my patient,” Madam Pomfrey said, frowning at Dumbledore.

“Certainly, Poppy,” he agreed. “If you would give us a few minutes?”

The dismissal must have been as clear to her as to everyone else, given the way she huffed before leaving the ward.

“I do apologize for failing to see that you were in danger not only outside Hogwarts, but also from within,” said Dumbledore. “However, now you may rest assured that—”

Slughorn attempted a frantic movement of some sort, ending up flapping a hand against the blankets.

“Your… apologies do nothing,” he said. He coughed, and Dumbledore solicitously conjured a glass of water. “I cannot stay here.”

“I understand your fears, Horace,” Dumbledore said after a small pause. “But I shall secure this room and take other steps to guarantee your safety. I give you my word that you will rest unharmed.”

Slughorn gave a shuddering sort of half-wheeze, half-snort.

“Your word! I’d be… I’d be a fool to trust it now.”

“Horace—”

“I’d be dead if not for Harry.” He turned to face Harry at that and said, reaching out with an ineffectual gesture: “My dear boy…”

Harry shifted awkwardly on his feet.

“I’m just glad you’ll be okay, sir.”

“Oh Harry,” Slughorn said, with—were those actual tears in his eyes? “So like your mother…”

Harry gave a smile that felt brittle on his face, and Snape stiffened for some reason, as if the words had struck him as well.

Dumbledore observed this byplay with his usual amiability.

“Well, Horace, let us speak again later, when you are not so distressed,” he said. “You need rest, and we ought not perturb you further.”

“Do not… do not dare patronize me.” Slughorn’s glare was weak, but he’d given it a good try. “I have made up my mind.”

“Horace, do consider. When you evaded Voldemort before, he sought merely to recruit you, and even then you found your whole life uprooted. You fled from place to place, living as a hunted man…” Dumbledore’s expression turned solemn. “If you leave now that he wants you dead, what odds do you face against him, alone? I wish that you would allow me to aid you.”
Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape cross his arms in impatience; all this emotionalism had to be grating on his nerves. Harry, for his part, stood frozen next to him.

With the discussion of Malfoy’s actions, Harry hadn’t even considered—he’d completely forgotten to think about why Voldemort had instructed Malfoy to kill Slughorn. It hadn’t hit him, until now, just how big a disaster they had narrowly avoided.

If Harry hadn’t been there—

Slughorn would have died. And the information about Voldemort’s Horcruxes would have died with him.

*He knows,* Harry thought in a moment of panic. *Voldemort knows. He must know we’re onto him, because why else is he—*

But reason re-established itself scant seconds later. Of course Voldemort wanted Slughorn dealt with; this was nothing new. He’d pursued the man for a whole year, hoping to lure him into his camp. Slughorn’s decision to come teach at Hogwarts instead must have sealed his fate.

And yet, Voldemort couldn’t have been too worried, because he hadn’t ordered Snape to kill the man. He’d chosen to heap the task onto Malfoy and punish him with it; if he’d thought there was real danger of Slughorn blabbing—of Dumbledore figuring out what questions to ask—

No, Voldemort didn’t know, or he wouldn’t have acted the way he had.

Harry took another, easier breath, and caught Snape frowning at him. Dumbledore and Slughorn were still locked in their debate.

“Horace,” Dumbledore was saying, “I cannot hold you here if you wish to leave. But if you will not reconsider, please at least accept my offer to help you hide.”

Slughorn appeared, at that moment, as if he’d lost all faith in the world. His hands shook, and his eyes were wild; far from the self-assured Potions master, he now resembled an animal trembling in front of a large predator.

“What can you do?” Slughorn whispered, lying back against his pillows in defeat. “If… if he hunts me…”

Dumbledore leaned towards Slughorn with an intent look on his face. His eyes gleamed with confidence; even the ridiculous robes with stars all over them didn’t detract from his air of authority.

“We can hide you more completely than you imagine, Horace. It will not be a decision made lightly, but, if you are determined to conceal yourself from Lord Voldemort, we can engineer a ruse so masterful he would never see past it.” And, when Slughorn gave him a listless glance, Dumbledore said: “We can make him believe that his attack was successful. We can use the opportunity he has so generously provided us with, and put up a pretence of your death.”

In the ensuing silence, Harry stared at Dumbledore.

The ploy wouldn’t only shield Slughorn; it would also protect Draco Malfoy from Voldemort’s wrath.

“Albus,” Slughorn breathed out. “I… I don’t know…”

“You must think on it, of course,” Dumbledore said, standing up. “We shall let you consider it in
peace. But you must know that, if you truly desire to depart from Hogwarts and retire from the public eye, there is no surer way… Voldemort will not be surprised to hear of your death, since he himself has ordered it; he will see nothing but the realization of his own plans, and this will make you safer than any other deception we can conjure…”

“Yes,” Slughorn murmured, dazed. “Yes…”

Harry thought that Slughorn didn’t even register his and Snape’s departure; he gave a nod to Dumbledore, but otherwise stayed motionless, as if watching potential futures play out in his mind’s eye.

“What now?” Snape asked as soon as they stepped out the infirmary doors.

“My office, perhaps,” the Headmaster said. “We have a few more things left to discuss.”

Harry tagged along, because fuck anyone who tried to exclude him at this point.

Even so, he had to restrain a yawn; it had to be nearing midnight, and he’d had a rousing discussion with Slughorn even before the real shit had hit the fan… not that he’d had any time to process what they’d talked about, but the fun just kept rolling on, as it always did.

Once they arrived, the Headmaster sat down behind his desk, while Snape and Harry took the chairs in front. A wave of Dumbledore’s wand brought forth a tea set of exquisitely thin china.

“Is this your preferred strategy?” Snape asked Dumbledore head-on, before anyone had got in a word edgewise. “Faking Slughorn’s death?”

“It certainly allows us to shoot more than one bird with a single stone.” The Headmaster poured tea for everybody. “Violent as the analogy is, it is also quite apt.”

“You are so confident that Slughorn will agree to your scheme?” Snape said.

“Oh, he will agree to it,” Dumbledore replied. “It goes without saying, Severus, that I shall rely on your expertise for a way to make Horace appear to have breathed his last.”

“It is done,” Snape said.

Dumbledore beamed and took a sip from his cup.

Harry wondered what Slughorn was thinking right at this moment, when here they had already decided on his future.

“What about Malfoy?” he asked.


“I cannot act against him, you know that,” Snape said.

“No.” Dumbledore stirred and gave Snape a faint smile. “No, of course not. You must be kept entirely out of the scheme.”

“Why not give him up to the Ministry?” Harry asked. Snape and Dumbledore gave him looks of… he wasn’t sure what, but it wasn’t approval. He continued somewhat defensively: “If we set it up as murder, the Ministry will investigate. You want the Dark Lord to think Malfoy killed Slughorn, fine, but that doesn’t mean he should just walk free. What if Voldemort gives him another task?”
“Do consider,” Dumbledore said, putting his cup aside, “that, with the Ministry’s current situation, Draco would not remain in their custody for long. Ousted from Hogwarts, he would have no recourse but to become a full-time combatant in Voldemort’s forces. We would be effectively pushing him into Voldemort’s arms, and I admit I am in no hurry to do that.”

“He’s taken the Dark Mark,” Harry said. “He’s already part of Voldemort’s forces.”

“Enough,” Snape barked, cutting him off. He turned to Dumbledore. “The boy does, however, have a point. Draco Malfoy cannot be allowed to run unchecked; he has planned and executed a cold-blooded murder.”

“An attempted one, yes,” Dumbledore said. “But I believe we would be erroneous in calling it cold-blooded. I have observed clear signs of distress and agitation in Draco over recent weeks. I am certain that, should you think on it, you will find the same.”

“So he was upset he had to assassinate Professor Slughorn!” Harry said. “He still did it and might do something like this again! If I hadn’t been there, Malfoy would have killed Professor Slughorn, and then what?”

Snape must have agreed with the sentiment, because he failed to reprimand Harry this time.

“Mr Malfoy found himself in a terrible situation, Harry,” Dumbledore said, folding his hands on the desk. “People do unspeakable things when they feel cornered, and Draco is far too young and far too wretched over this affair to consider him a lost soul. The Mark was forced on him as a punishment, not bestowed as an honour. I believe that he can still be redeemed, but that path would be closed to him should we push him off the edge instead.”

(“The Headmaster tends to believe in the goodness of humans. Even of those who are not, exactly, human.”)

Harry rubbed his scar. Snape’s expression conveyed nothing whatsoever, a perfect stone mask.

“Besides which, we can hardly furnish the Aurors with proof of Mr Malfoy’s wrongdoing,” Dumbledore said. “Not without exposing Severus and putting you in the metaphorical line of fire, Harry. The note is the sole viable connection to Draco, but it implicates you in a far more direct manner, more so since you were ostensibly the last person to see Horace alive.”

“Bullshit,” Harry wanted to say. There had to be a way. But Dumbledore had clearly made up his mind.

“What will you do?” Snape asked. “The boy is a menace. There’s no telling how unbalanced he will become after the news of his success with Slughorn, and he has already injured two children who had nothing to do with the affair.”

Harry started. Yes, of course; the attack outside Slughorn’s quarters last semester must have been Malfoy’s doing. And if Malfoy hadn’t been planning to set Harry up before then, the aftermath of that debacle would have given him the idea.

“An excellent question, Severus,” Dumbledore said. “But not to worry, I imagine an answer will come to me in due time. And, in the meanwhile, Harry…” Dumbledore focused on him, piercing him with a look. “In light of recent events, the timing has become critical. I’m afraid we can afford no more subtlety as regards Horace, my boy.”

Harry nodded, ignoring the sinking feeling in his stomach. He had to get the Horcruxes information out of Slughorn, and fast.
Snape looked between Harry and Dumbledore; his expression grew thunderous.

“Albus, what are you playing at?” he hissed. “What does Potter know?” And why don’t I know it too went unsaid. Harry thought Snape couldn’t lower himself to utter it.

Ha. Let him feel what it was like to be left out of the loop, for a change.

“Please do not be offended, Severus,” Dumbledore said with a gentle smile. “But this is another case where information must, at all costs, remain uncompromised.”

“Would that be information on why the Dark Lord chose to target Slughorn in particular?”

Dumbledore inclined his head. “Indeed, my boy.”

Snape eyed Harry in distaste. “And you would trust Potter with it.”

“Well, Severus,” the Headmaster said, “you are aware that, like you, Harry is of utmost importance to this war.”

Snape stiffened. “If this is about that blasted prophecy—”

“Let us not argue, Severus; it will do us no good,” Dumbledore said. “The fact remains that there is a reason why Voldemort might have wished to recruit Horace and keep him close, and for that same reason he might be uneasy letting him linger too long in my vicinity. A mere precaution on his part, I imagine, but not an unreasonable one, and it lets us know something about his state of mind…”

“It does?” Harry asked.

As far as he could see, this was just a matter of tying up loose ends.

“Well, certainly, Harry,” Dumbledore said, smiling. “It tells us that he spins his web with care; the events since his return have made him cautious. I imagine that you have had a crucial part to play in that.”

“Er,” Harry said. “I have?”

Snape’s face indicated that he was equally dubious of this claim. Dumbledore observed them both with some amusement.

“You can hardly deny having presented him with an unexpected challenge,” he said. “After all, Harry, he has struck you down with the Killing Curse thrice now, and thrice you have lived, each time contriving to do him harm in return. The first time he attempted to kill you, he was almost erased from existence; the second time, he lost consciousness alongside you; the third, you unwittingly attacked his mind… He lifts his wand against you, and he fails. He lifts his wand against you, and you win…”

Harry shivered. Put like that, he did sound like something strange and mystical.

Something, apparently, unusual enough to give the Dark Lord pause.

“That thing he’s looking for abroad,” Harry began.

“He will not find it,” Dumbledore said, and there was an odd note in his voice. “He cannot learn enough to discover the full truth.”

Harry had no idea what this meant, and he could see that Snape didn’t either.
At last they were on the same page.

“I imagine we shall not accomplish anything else tonight,” Dumbledore said. “Horace’s decision, whatever it will be, will come tomorrow, and, Harry, I do recommend visiting him at your earliest convenience, given the probable brevity of his stay…” At Harry’s nod, the Headmaster went on: “I suggest we retire for the evening.”

As he left the Headmaster’s office, Harry didn’t think of what would’ve happened if he hadn’t been on the spot when Slughorn had tried the poisoned sweets; if the note implicating him in the murder had been found next to the Potions master’s corpse; if Slughorn had died without first divulging the keys to defeating Voldemort.

Bizarrely, it could be said that they got off easy with this latest turn of events. Now Harry just needed not to balls up his part in the drama about to unfold under Dumbledore’s direction.

***

The next morning, Harry rolled out of bed feeling like he’d been up all night fighting trolls. He’d got all of four hours of rest, the events of the previous evening stood even more ugly in the daylight, and he’d very nearly overslept and run late for Transfiguration.

He glared at Malfoy, who sat several desks over. It was all his fault, and so help him, if Dumbledore even considered sparing Malfoy’s poor misguided soul—

Blaise nudged him in the side.

“Harry? You want to start practicing before McGonagall catches you?”

“Urgh,” Harry said, and tried out the spell they were supposed to master.

His attempt to turn his own hand into a paw produced a very hairy limb, instead.

He glared again and undid the enchantment with a jerky wave of his wand.

He didn’t have time for this. There were bigger things going on, he had Slughorn to interrogate—

“Well, you’re a little ball of sunshine,” Blaise muttered, edging away. “Try not to poke anyone’s eye out with that thing, okay?”

“Concentrate on the desired outcome!” Professor McGonagall said, addressing the whole class. “Visualize the end result!”

Theodore Nott was already sporting a perfect wolf’s paw. Malfoy was attempting to copy him. Daphne Greengrass was going red in the face from the exertion of the nonverbal spell.

None of them knew, yet, what had happened to Slughorn. It wouldn’t be long, not with how fast rumours travelled around Hogwarts.

Sure enough, on the way to the next class, Harry bumped into a troubled-looking Hermione.

“Where have you been?” she asked, by way of good morning. “Have you heard? Slughorn’s been attacked! He’s in the infirmary!”

“Yeah, I know,” Harry said in an undertone, and out of the corner of his eye saw Blaise whip his head around to stare at him.
“We need to talk,” Hermione said. “I’ve got Ancient Runes now, but—Hidden Room, at lunch. I’ll tell the others.”

“Sorry, can’t,” Harry said.

“Why not?” Hermione asked, frowning.

“Prior commitments, just—let’s do it later, okay?”

Hermione looked like she heavily suspected his commitments had to do with Slughorn. Well, she wasn’t wrong.

“All right,” she said, “we’ll meet up anyway, so join us if you can.”

“Sounds good,” Harry agreed.

“And there will be explaining to do,” Blaise promised, looking unhappy. “You couldn’t have mentioned Slughorn earlier?”

“Look, I—” Harry shook his head. “We’ll talk, okay?”

They’d probably have talked right then if not for the fact that Blaise had Magical Runes with Hermione instead of Arithmancy with Harry. The Ravenclaws in his class tried to get answers from him too, but Professor Vector maintained no less strict a discipline in her class than McGonagall, and talking opportunities were thin on the ground. So much the better, since Harry didn’t feel like discussing the whole thing in public.

He’d sat through the class—Merlin, why were things so slow today?—and dodged everyone afterwards to make a dash for the infirmary.

If they were going to pretend that Slughorn had died, he had one day, at most, to squeeze information out of the Potions master. If he failed—

No, that wasn’t an option. He had to find out what Slughorn had told Voldemort about the Horcruxes, by fair means or foul.

However, in the hospital wing Harry’s plans ran aground of Madam Pomfrey, who blocked his way to Slughorn’s door with a most resolute look on her face.

“Er,” Harry said. “I’ve come to visit the professor?”

“Even if I have to let you see him,” the matron said, “which I do, according to Dumbledore, and isn’t that the most outrageous thing I’ve ever heard—meetings in the night and what not—you can’t, Potter, because my patient is asleep, and he won’t be disturbed. Come back later, if you must.”

“Right,” Harry said, tamping down on his annoyance. “I’ll do that.”

“Though I would prefer it if none of you bothered him at all,” Madam Pomfrey added.

“I’m afraid it’s important,” Harry said. “Besides, I don’t mean to—”

“With Dumbledore, it’s always important,” she huffed. “Now off with you. I won’t have you making a racket.”

Harry left, meandering down the corridor.
He could, he supposed, see Dumbledore and check on the situation, but he should probably minimize open visits to the Headmaster’s office; it wouldn’t do to make it look like they were plotting something. And with Slughorn unavailable to him for now…

Well. Perhaps Hermione would get her wish; Harry suddenly had free time on his hands.

He climbed the stairs to the seventh floor, dodging various duelling club members and saying absent-minded hellos. Yes, yes, he’d heard about Slughorn, no, there wasn’t much info he could give them, hopefully they’d all get some news soon, and how was he to know anything?

Given his detour, Harry thought his friends would be inside the Hidden Room already. He hadn’t expected to see Blaise, Millie, Hermione, Terry, Anthony, Padma and Neville standing with their backs to the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy and staring at the blank wall in front of them.

“Guys?” he said. “What’s up?”

“There’s no door,” Terry said, sounding betrayed.

Neville only shrugged at him.

Harry walked over to them. Then he did a bit of experimental pacing.

The corridor, no matter how much he courted it, refused to turn up a door.

“Well, this is strange.” Harry touched the wall, the stones cool and uneven under his hand. “Has this ever happened?”

Padma exchanged glances with Hermione. “Just before you got here, we were saying that there’s probably someone inside. We know the Room doesn’t open if it’s taken on some other shape for someone else.”

“We do?” Harry asked, because he knew no such thing—though it did make sense.

Padma gave him a condescending look. “It was one of the first things Granger, Lovegood and I found out.”

“So someone’s shagging in the Hidden Room and we can’t get in,” Terry said. “Great.”

Hermione gave him a smack on the arm.

“Charming,” Millicent snapped.

“This is very inconvenient,” Padma said, cross. “I suppose we have to go to the library. It’s about the only other place we can talk.”

“At least there won’t be many people there right now,” Anthony pointed out.

They found the quietest, most secluded corner, and Harry cast a reinforced privacy charm. The new setting was a far cry from the Hidden Room with its soft couches and many cushions, but it would have to do.

“So,” Padma said, sitting up straight in her chair. “What’s going on?”

“Yes, Harry, stop with the mysterious not-talking,” Blaise drawled.

“The attack on Slughorn is a fact, right?” Anthony said.
“Lisa and I tried to see him,” Padma said. “Pomfrey wouldn’t let us in beyond the threshold. It looked like half the hospital wing was sealed off.”

“They’re being really creepy about it,” Terry said. “Is he even alive?”

“It’s just so awful,” Hermione said. “He was fine when we left him yesterday evening. Harry, what happened?”

Harry looked from one face to the next.

“Slughorn got poisoned,” he said bluntly. “Someone sent him sweets laced with enough toxins to knock off a hippogriff, apparently.”

“Yesterday?” Neville asked. “After the Slug Club meeting?”

The meeting Neville hadn’t attended. It spoke volumes that he was here now, with the rest of them.

Harry nodded.

Millie pinned him with a look. “And you were there when he took the poison?”

“Yeah.” Harry glanced at Blaise. “Which—I didn’t want to let everyone else know that, hence no talking earlier.”

“Oh, Harry,” Padma said. “And then what?”

“Well, I called Madam Pomfrey, Dumbledore—the usual,” Harry said.

“And?” Terry asked.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. This would be difficult.

“And they carted him away,” he said. “And Dumbledore asked me what happened. I told him. Then I went to bed.”

A pause hung for a couple of seconds.

“And that’s it?” Padma asked, crossing her arms. “That’s all you’re going to give?”

Harry set his jaw.

(“Forgive me, but we could not risk you being indiscreet...”)

Harry would have told his friends in a heartbeat, spilled the whole tale with all its twists, but the bitch of it was that now he wasn’t sure he could risk them being indiscreet. The Dumbledore-esque logic of it made him scowl, but—

He didn’t even know yet that Slughorn would definitely agree to the fake death ruse. And if he did, it had to be flawless. What if Harry’s friends made an incautious remark, or acted too blasé with the situation? What if they fell short of genuine bafflement and grief when the announcement was made?

Slughorn might pay for their mistake—Harry’s mistake—with his life.

So. Not much for it. Harry took a deep breath and made himself say:

“Slughorn is either already dead, or dying.”
Even though they had to have known it was on the cards, what with their discussion earlier, Harry’s friends still recoiled in shock.

“What?”

“How do you know?”

“Are you sure?”

“No, I’m not sure,” Harry said. “They wouldn’t let me see him either. But it really, really didn’t look good, and I don’t think anyone would tell me if—” He drummed his fingers on the table. “It’s not high on anyone’s agenda to let me know. But I think there will be an announcement today.”

They looked sickened, upset. Neville had blanched, while Hermione appeared to be near tears. Harry met their eyes, one by one. Imprinting the moment in this memory, he thought, I did this.

(“And what does that make me?”)

There was a time when Harry had thought Dumbledore soft for preaching about love and refusing to use Dark magic. He’d thought it meant the Order didn’t do any dirty work. It was hilarious, it retrospect.

“Do we know who sent the poison?” Blaise asked.

He and Millie, of course, held it together best, but Harry could still see he looked a bit rattled. Inured as they were becoming to hearing about war casualties, it wasn’t every day that a teacher was murdered within the school walls.

“I have some ideas,” Harry said grimly.

Blaise gave him a searching look. “You think it’s the puppies changing bark for bite?”

“Let’s not,” Harry said.

“You mean Malfoy and his sidekicks, don’t you,” Hermione said, rounding on Blaise. “You think they did it.”

“I don’t know, Granger, or was it you? Did you have enough of Slughorn going on about Harry’s potions skills?” Blaise asked. “Envy is such an ugly feeling.”

“Hey, cut it out,” Terry said.

“I don’t think Granger’s ever needed a defender, but if that’s how your relationship works—”

“Blaise, can it,” Harry said.

Blaise leaned back in his chair, not looking abashed in the slightest.

“You’re all so stupid, squabbling when there’s so much—” Padma pursed her lips. “I can’t believe Slughorn really—he’s always been so nice to me—”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. She reached over to slip her hand into his, and he gave it a light squeeze. “Maybe I’m wrong? Maybe the teachers will say he’s fine.”
She gave him a weak smile.

“What’s going to happen now?” Neville asked.

“I have no idea,” Harry said. “A Ministry investigation?”

“Will they question you?” Millie inquired.

“Yeah. Probably.” Harry shook his head. “They might question all of us, the Slug Club.”

“Isn’t it bad for you that you were there when Slughorn was poisoned?” Anthony asked, delicately. “I mean—with the newspapers and all—”

“It’s not ideal,” Harry admitted. “But I’ll figure it out. Dumbledore will back me up. Uh, though it would be better for me if you guys didn’t come out and say I confessed to being there at the time.”

“If they ask us—” Hermione began.

“You can say you took off first and Slughorn was with me,” Harry said. “It’s the truth. You weren’t there for anything that happened after.”

“We can say you left with us,” Padma interjected, glaring at Hermione.

“You’d lie to the authorities?” Hermione asked.

“For Harry?” Padma said. “What do you think?”

“Thanks,” Harry said, smiling at her even as guilt grew heavier in his gut. “But I hope it won’t come to that. Anyway, it’s all hypothetical, we don’t even know what’s going on yet.”

“Something tells me things won’t stay like that for long,” Blaise muttered.

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Eventually, Harry and his friends broke up the meeting to grab lunch. A few of them said they weren’t hungry—Hermione, for one, stayed in the library to revise—but Harry chose to get some food instead.

If he lost his appetite each time something terrible happened, he’d die of malnutrition.

In the Great Hall, he glanced at the high table, wondering what Dumbledore and Snape were doing. Snape wasn’t there; Dumbledore was talking to Professor Flitwick about something. The teachers looked grimmer than usual, but besides that it might have been any other day.

Malfoy, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen…

Harry wolfed down his meal, hoping to still make it to the infirmary before the next class.

“I don’t know where you think the fire is, but we’ve got Herbology in ten minutes,” Millie said.

“Harry’s far too important for classes,” Blaise said seriously. “Look at him giving you that magnificent glare.”

“Urgh, lay off,” Harry said. “I’m not glaring.”

“I know, it’s hard to live like one of us lowly students,” Blaise agreed, and here Harry did threaten to
whack him with a dessert spoon.

A look at the watch told him that Millie was right, of course.

But Herbology—during which more people tried to ask him about Slughorn, expecting him to know things—gave way to a free period, and Harry finally turned his steps towards the hospital wing again.

This time, it occurred to him that maybe he shouldn’t be too blatant in his attempts to visit the Potions master if others had tried and been turned away. As such, a few corridors away from the infirmary, Harry cast a Disillusionment Charm and kept close to the walls, making sure to avoid bumping into people. Not the end of the world if someone saw him, but still.

Arriving at the Potions master’s ward, Harry smiled winsomely at Madam Pomfrey.

“Can I—?”

“Fine,” she said, short. “But don’t you dare tire him out.”

“Of course not, ma’am,” Harry said.

Nothing tiring about Horcruxes. Nope.

Today, the Potions master looked somewhat better than he had the night before. He was sitting up in bed, a journal in his hands, but he was still very pale, and winced every so often as if in pain.

“Harry!” Slughorn said, seeing him and putting the magazine aside. “Well, this is a pleasant surprise.”

His voice, too, sounded a lot stronger. Harry thought back to Madam Pomfrey’s words yesterday; the poisoning could have been a lot worse had Slughorn not tried to spit the candy out at the last moment, or had Harry not been so close at hand. Even a minute’s delay would have set Slughorn back significantly.

“Hello, Professor,” Harry said. “How are you feeling?”

“It doesn’t bear talking about,” Slughorn said, casting anxious glances about him. “You didn’t see anyone come in with you, did you? No one knows I am on the mend?”


“Yes, yes, naturally.” Slughorn heaved a gusty sigh. “This has been a terrible ordeal for me, my dear boy, I don’t mind telling you. Terrible.”

Harry nodded, giving a sympathetic murmur, and sat down in the chair by Slughorn’s bedside.

“Attacked in the sanctity of my own quarters!” Slughorn’s whole frame trembled. “And did you hear, that stone fall outside my door was also intended for me!”

“It’s horrible,” Harry agreed. “But now that we know, Professor Dumbledore will protect you, right, sir?”

He held still, waiting for Slughorn’s answer.

“So he says.” Slughorn scowled. “He has a plan that I—well. Such risk! And yet, I do not see what else I can do to escape this persecution.”
“Well, sir,” Harry said cautiously, “for what it’s worth, I think it would work. I mean, if your attacker thinks he succeeded—”

“Yes, yes,” Slughorn said. “No doubt, it is so. But to pretend that I am no more! Even on the run, I could stay in contact with my favourite pupils, carry on a semblance of normal life!”

“I’m sure it will be inconvenient—” Harry began.

“Inconvenient!” Slughorn interjected. “To say the least!”

Harry didn’t know what to answer, but, luckily, the Potions master didn’t seem to require much input from him. Presently, he gave another sigh and deflated.

“But, of course, needs must,” he said. “If certain doom is my only other choice, I shall submit to Dumbledore’s scheme.”

“Have you already told him, sir?” Harry asked, careful not to push.

“Yes, just this morning.” Slughorn waved a hand. “Oh, Harry, I have so little faith!”

“It will be hard,” Harry said. “But if the Dark Lord has marked you as his next victim—”

“Yes,” Slughorn said, shuddering. “Yes, if the Dark Lord…” He stared off into the distance. “It is almost too impossible for me to believe…”

This was probably the best opening Harry would ever get.

“Yes, I can imagine,” he said. “Really, after how close you were, it’s hard to think that he could mean you harm.”

Slughorn flinched. His eyes widened in betrayal as he stared at Harry.

“You—”

“Professor, it’s okay,” Harry said, leaning forward on his elbows. “Tom Riddle lied to you and took advantage of you. He did that to many people. I don’t think any worse of you for that.”

“Harry,” Slughorn said, ashen-faced, “why do you—”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Harry said. “I know it’s hard for you to talk about it, but the Dark Lord tried to kill you. You must realize why.”

“I did know him, once, at a vulnerable age,” Slughorn murmured. “Perhaps he can’t bear the thought—”

“Please, Professor,” Harry said. “You know that’s not all there is.”

Slughorn’s expression hardened.

“Been talking to Dumbledore, have you, Harry?”

“After yesterday, I asked him,” Harry said. It wasn’t a complete lie. Harry had asked Dumbledore a whole number of things. “I assumed that you knew something, because, well. Like I said. I knew Tom Riddle was your student. He told me—” Harry hesitated and glanced aside. “He said you might have information that will win us the war.”
“Well, he’s wrong,” Slughorn said, drawing himself up. His trembling got worse. “I don’t know anything, whatever Dumbledore thinks. And if he’s set you to question me, we may as well end this conversation here, Harry.”

Harry sat back in his chair and tilted his head to the side.

“Why, Professor? I honestly don’t understand. The worst, what you must have feared, has pretty much already happened. If you were worried that this knowledge would get you killed, now you know you were right.” He went on, ignoring Slughorn’s flinch: “Do you really want him to win this? You’re the only person who can help us, and you’d rather protect his secrets to the last?”

“I don’t know anything,” Slughorn repeated, agitated. “And, Harry, if you persist in this, I will have to ask you to leave.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “But I know what you say isn’t true, and I really don’t get it.”

“You dare—”

“Professor, I’ve seen the memory you gave Dumbledore,” Harry said, cutting to the chase. “Why tamper with it if you’re telling the truth?”

“Because it’s none of his business what we discussed!” Slughorn said, letting out a laboured breath. “Some matters should remain private!”

“And you’re still defending him,” Harry said in a bitter tone. “Like he’s worth something, like you’d rather shield the man who killed my mother than admit you made one wrong choice!”

“Harry, I won’t have you trespassing on—”

“Professor, I genuinely like you! I don’t care what you told and to whom fifty years ago! I wouldn’t be asking you this at all if it weren’t so important, if it wasn’t something that could save my life, your life, so many other—” Harry glanced down at his hands, clenched tightly in his lap. “Do you even know that him making these Horcruxes made all the difference to me? That I wouldn’t be here, like this, if—do you know that I—that he—”

Harry had never talked about Voldemort’s Horcrux imbedded inside his soul with anyone but Dumbledore and the shades of his parents. It made his throat close up just to consider bringing it up now.

He didn’t even know why he’d gone in this direction. God, he was slipping. It had already been a long day.

“Harry, what are you saying?” Slughorn asked, still on edge but also sounding somewhat confused, now.

Harry made a conscious attempt to get his vocal cords working again.

“I know he has several Horcruxes because he’s nearly made me one of them,” he said, and Slughorn recoiled in horror. “He didn’t, I’m—I’m fine, it’s not that. But I know he has several, and I’ve destroyed… I’ve destroyed some, and, and almost died doing it, but I don’t know how many there are, and it could be anything, any number, and as long as he has them he’ll stick around, and I know I can get rid of them, but unless I know how many, I’ll never get them all, and—” Once working, his vocal cords seemed determined to keep going. Harry bit down hard on his lip to stop himself rambling.
“You—he—” Slughorn seemed at a loss for words. “He tried to make you—?”

“Please,” Harry said. “Professor, please, if Voldemort told you anything, if he mentioned any number, please tell me. You’re the only one who can, and without you, I can’t do—I can’t end this.”

“And it has to be you,” Slughorn said, looking fixedly at him.

“It has to be me,” Harry agreed, running a shaky hand through his hair.

“When you saved my life, just then,” Slughorn said slowly, “was that—was that about the knowledge I might have, or—”

“What? No,” Harry said. He jerked back, staring at Slughorn. “Professor, do you think so little of me that I—what, that I’d let you die if you didn’t tell me something? What kind of a world would I be trying to save if this was how I—”

“No, no, of course not,” Slughorn said. “An old man’s paranoia—but you really are extraordinarily like your mother, Harry. Your eyes… you resemble her so much sometimes.” He wiped sweat from his brow. “I suppose I have been too afraid for too long…”

Harry nodded as if to say that he understood, that all was forgotten. Slughorn was still frowning.

“My boy, you… if there was anyone I would trust… for you, Harry, if not for anyone else…”

Harry’s breath caught, but Slughorn went on:

“In the current circumstances, however, so soon after I have been attacked, and when I am putting my life into the hands of Dumbledore, rendering myself so incredibly vulnerable that the risks of the deception seem sometimes to outweigh the risks of facing the Dark Lord… Harry, truly. You I would confide in. But, much as I value Albus, I cannot help but fear what might happen should he learn the extent of what I have wrought…”

It took Harry a few seconds to parse this. When he did, his earlier incredulity returned.

“Sir, you think Dumbledore might kill you if you tell the truth?”

Slughorn appeared distressed.

“I would never speak so ill of Albus,” he said. “And yet one cannot help but think—I would be putting an awful amount of trust—and should he lack sufficient… incentive, shall we say, to see me through to the other side…”

Just how deep did the man’s paranoia run?

“Sir, I’m sure”—Harry took a better look at Slughorn and let assertions regarding Dumbledore’s character die on his tongue. Clearly, it was better to take a different tack. “Sir, you said you could trust me. If you told me, I—I’d give you my word, swear on anything you wish, that I wouldn’t tell anything to the Headmaster until after you were awake again.”

Slughorn met Harry’s gaze.

“You would do that?” he asked. “You would withhold information from Dumbledore, for me?”

“Yes,” Harry said without hesitation. “I’m asking for myself, because I need to know. Not for him. If you didn’t want me to tell him, I wouldn’t.”
“You mean it, don’t you,” Slughorn said, visibly taken aback. “And if I asked you to—to swear on the memory of your mother—”

“I would swear it,” Harry said.

“And if I asked you to swear a—”

“Sir, I would do it, whatever it is,” Harry said. “Whatever it would take for you to believe me.”

“If it had to happen,” Slughorn said, looking somewhere past Harry, “I suppose it is well that it happens this way.”

Harry’s heart hammered in his chest loudly enough that Dumbledore could probably hear it in his office. The whole of Hogwarts could probably hear it. He was so, so close.

“Pass me a vial, Harry, would you?”

Harry got up, forcing himself not to take off at a run, and took a clean glass bottle from Madam Pomfrey’s supplies. It occurred to him a moment later that he could have Summoned one, but perhaps it was for the best that he hadn’t; just now, he might have fetched all vials available in the United Kingdom.

Upon his return, he held his breath the entire time Slughorn withdrew a silver thread of memory from his temple and deposited it in the bottle.

“Sir,” Harry said, grasping for words.

Slughorn was considering the memory now ensconced within glass.

“I will give you the entirety of my recollection, my boy,” he said. “However, as I am unsure you will be able to view it without the aid of Dumbledore and his Pensieve, I may as well tell you what you most want to know…” He seemed to steel himself and looked up at Harry. “The figure you are looking for—the one he particularly mentioned to me in regard to the number of times a soul could be split—is seven.”

Harry closed his eyes for a moment.

“Thank you,” he said. “I—sir, I cannot tell you how—just, thank you.”

“Of course, you will not be able to verify my words until you view the memory,” Slughorn said. “But you will have to forgive me, Harry, if I ask you to give me your word before I hand this vial over. Until you see it—until it is confirmed—you cannot know the full truth of it, and you must allow an old man this much assurance…”

“Anything,” Harry agreed. “What would you like me to swear?”

He rattled off the words, hardly taking them in.

He’d succeeded. He’d got Slughorn to talk.

Seven pieces of soul. Six Horcruxes?

Oh, god, six Horcruxes.

“I guess this is something of a goodbye, Harry,” Slughorn said when Harry got up to leave.
He looked miserable, and frightened, and tired to the bone. Harry smiled, trying to appear encouraging even as his thoughts fled in a dozen different directions.

“It’s a goodbye for now, sir, but unlike everyone else I’ll know you’re really alive,” he said. “It could be we’ll meet again. I hope so.”

“So do I,” Slughorn said heavily. “But it is so hard to be certain…”

“Dumbledore will do all he can to hide you,” Harry said. “You’ll be okay, sir, you’ll see.”

“I wish I shared your optimism, my boy.” Slughorn sighed. “Please wish me good fortune as I go…”

“Good luck, professor, though you won’t need it,” Harry said emphatically. “Everything will work out fine. We—” He nearly said, we’ve got everything under control, but perhaps this wasn’t the time to lump himself with Snape and Dumbledore. “We’ll meet again,” he amended. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Slughorn gave him a weak smile.

It was the last expression Harry saw on his face before he left the ward.

***

Harry knew that he had to report to Dumbledore; in so doing he’d be giving the effective all-clear for stage two of the plan.

Still, he walked slowly, studying the floor under his feet as he went.

He needed five minutes to himself, at least, to assimilate the information he’d just got out of Slughorn.

He got about four.

“Potter,” Snape demanded, appearing from around the corner, “what are you doing loitering in the hallways?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “I mean, I need to see the Headmaster.”

Snape frowned at him. Harry nodded, both unable and unwilling to articulate, in such a public place, the magnitude of everything that had happened.

“As the whereabouts of the Headmaster’s office have apparently slipped your imbecilic mind, I shall have to accompany you.” Snape gave him a sneer and turned around.

Harry followed, dragging his heels.

If Voldemort had split his soul into seven, it meant six Horcruxes plus the piece of soul remaining inside his body.

Harry tried to calculate, figure it out—

Two Horcruxes were destroyed, the diary and the ring, so, assuming Voldemort had made all six, four remained out there—

“Potter, sometime today,” Snape said, and Harry walked faster.

On the way, he passed several people he knew, including Terry and Anthony. He shrugged at them,
grimacing at Snape behind his back. Snape disliking Harry was nothing new, so the sight of him marching Harry through the hallways didn’t provoke that much surprise.

Snape gave the password to the statue in front of Dumbledore’s office and gestured at Harry. “In.”

Harry stepped on the moving staircase.

“Headmaster, I checked on Potter as you suggested,” Snape began as soon as they entered the office, “and, unless I’m mistaken, the boy has something to tell you.”

“Harry?” Dumbledore gave him a keen look, turning around.

He stood near Fawkes’s cage, stroking the bird’s crimson feathers; the phoenix squawked upon seeing Harry, and let out a little questioning trill. Harry gave the bird a blank look.

“I’ve talked to Professor Slughorn,” he said.

“Ah.” Dumbledore’s eyes lit up with an animated sparkle. “Very expedient of you. Please, make yourself comfortable.”

Harry could not recall a time when he’d felt comfortable in this office, but obligingly sat down.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, “if you could—”

“You want me to leave?” Snape asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I do apologize,” the Headmaster said softly.

Snape banged out of the office, making no effort to conceal his temper.

“It is unfortunate that we cannot talk without reservation,” Dumbledore murmured, “but some secrets, as we’ve said, must be guarded more closely than others… So, Harry. How did your conversation with Horace unfold?”

“We’ve made… something of a deal,” Harry said. “He’s very—um, anxious at the moment, sir. He’s worried about how things will go in the next few days, and…”

“I suspect you are talking in this circuitous manner in an effort to deliver whatever news you have with most tact, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “I wish you would be candid with me.”

“I think he views the information as something of a collateral for the successful cover-up,” Harry said. “He’s owned up to knowing about the Horcruxes, but he refuses to share the memory with you until after he’s safe and sound on the other side of this fake death ruse.”

Dumbledore had to be scanning Harry’s mind; his gaze was too intense, even though Harry felt no intrusion. Still, he stared back, unflinching.

The vial with Slughorn’s memory sat in his trouser pocket. He could feel it pressing against his leg as he waited out Dumbledore’s scrutiny.

“The vial with Slughorn’s memory sat in his trouser pocket. He could feel it pressing against his leg as he waited out Dumbledore’s scrutiny.”

“I see,” the Headmaster said. “Well. It is unexpected, but not wholly without reason, given Horace’s situation. He is, after all, putting his life in our hands.”

“He did say that,” Harry acknowledged.

“And you are confident he will indeed divulge the information, once he is safe again?”
“There was an oath involved,” Harry said.

If not for that, Harry would have talked to Dumbledore about the Horcruxes right now, Slughorn’s doubts be damned. They couldn’t move forward in the war until they got rid of the bloody things, which meant that every moment wasted not doing something about them was a moment too long.

“Ah,” Dumbledore said. “Would you, all told, consider today a success? Do you think we can leave it at this and move to the next stage in our plan?” _Do you have what we need?_

“Yes,” Harry said, firm.

Dumbledore beamed. He hadn’t missed, then, the implications of _he refuses to share the memory with you._

“Excellent, my boy. In that case, I had better alert Severus. A delay would only hurt us. I shall contact the Ministry, and Horace’s death will be announced at dinner this evening.”

Harry started a little at that; he hadn’t expected things to move quite this fast.

“So how will it work?” he asked. “We say Professor Slughorn is dead, and… what? The Ministry swoops in and takes him away?”

“Horace has no living relatives, but many friends, including those in high places,” Dumbledore said. “His funeral ought to proceed with all the pomp and circumstance appropriate to the occasion. While the Ministry will certainly investigate, I believe they will have little interest in arranging his burial and will gladly surrender this duty to me. He will be interred in his family’s crypt.”

Harry fought down a shiver. “You’re actually going to bury him?”

“We will, for a very short while,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “And only to save his life, paradoxical as it sounds.”

To Harry it sounded grim and morbid more than paradoxical, but whatever. In light of these details, no wonder Slughorn felt the need to secure as many guarantees as he could.

“Sir,” Harry said, “what do we tell the Aurors?”

“An excellent question, Harry,” Dumbledore said, sitting back. “It believe it would be most prudent of us to equip you with an alibi for yesterday evening. I, on the other hand, can take over as the person who last saw Horace alive.”

(“_You’d lie to the authorities?_”)

“I was the one who called Madam Pomfrey,” Harry pointed out.

“Poppy is aware of the importance of this affair,” Dumbledore said. “You can trust her not to create extra complications.”

“It’s not that easy to lie to law enforcement officials,” Harry said, thinking of his friends.

“No,” Dumbledore agreed, “but you need not worry about Poppy. Now, let us simply assume that, while you may have stayed back to talk to Horace, I encountered him soon after, hale and healthy.”

“And nobody’s ever seen any notes that came with the sweets,” Harry said drily.

What was his life that he needed to suppress evidence in a murder investigation lest he end up the
With so few clues at hand, I believe the Ministry will fail to penetrate through our deception,” Dumbledore said. “Not least because, from what I have been able to determine, Mr Malfoy has covered his steps well. The shopkeeper he must have obtained the sweets from has no memory of the incident. A notable absence of memory, even.”

Harry blinked. Malfoy going around Obliviating people was… a terrifying thought.

“Headmaster, are you sure—I know you want to save him from Voldemort’s retribution and everything, but are you sure—”

Dumbledore gave him a benevolent smile.

“Right,” Harry muttered. “Have you decided on what you’ll do with him, sir?”

“At present, the solution does persist in evading me,” Dumbledore said. “Let us hope that it will not stay elusive for long.”

Harry gave him a strained smile.

“You’ve done well, my boy,” the Headmaster concluded. “We shall speak of the Horcruxes again at a later date, but for now let us part and ready ourselves for the next step in our plan.”

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Having left Dumbledore’s office, Harry turned his steps to the library. The knowledge of Horcruxes sat like an itch in his brain, and maybe he would read a bit while he waited for the Aurors to arrive; maybe he’d find something he’d overlooked before…

However, first things first. Retreating behind stacks, Harry unfolded the Marauder’s Map and searched for the dot labelled Dumbledore.

It turned up in Snape’s office, alongside Snape’s dot. They disappeared and materialized in the hospital wing. Probably Floo. They joined the dot labelled Horace Slughorn.

Madam Pomfrey approached them after a few minutes.

Snape and Dumbledore vanished again, each professor returning to his own office. Horace Slughorn stayed where he was, unmoving.

Harry didn’t take his eyes off the map even though nothing happened for a good long while. Then—Robert Proudfoot and Emma Savage appeared outside Hogwarts gates. Aurors.

Well. They’d find him when they needed him.

Harry walked over to the history section, absently touching the books’ spines.

Seven pieces of soul, six Horcruxes… well, seven, counting the shard of soul that had been expelled from Harry, but Voldemort didn’t know about that. He’d wanted six. He’d made the ring, the diary, and probably four others…

Harry stopped before a row of tomes on the history of Hogwarts. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting to find here now; he’d combed through this section when Dumbledore had shared his thoughts with him months ago.
Four objects from the four founders would, I am sure, have exerted a powerful pull over Voldemort’s imagination…"

Four Horcruxes still out there, and the Hogwarts founders’ belongings made up exactly that number.

Hufflepuff’s cup and Slytherin’s locket had to be among them; that red gleam in Voldemort’s eyes when he’d seen them at Hepzibah Smith’s spoke of too much. The sword definitely wasn’t a Horcrux, but what else of Godric Gryffindor’s was there? Rowena Ravenclaw had obviously had the diadem, but that had been lost for centuries now, and no accounts of it survived.

Harry hesitated over a copy of Godric Gryffindor’s biography.

He wondered: could Voldemort have tracked down the descendants of Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, the way he’d done with Hepzibah? Dumbledore couldn’t trace them, and Harry hadn’t had any luck either, but Voldemort had devoted months, years to finding the objects he needed. He might have succeeded where they’d failed…

“Mr Potter?” came the call from a few feet away.

Harry stepped out from behind the shelves to see Dumbledore and an unfamiliar Auror approaching him. Emma Savage, presumably.

"Good afternoon, Mr Potter," she said. "Will you please come with me? Professor Dumbledore can accompany us, of course."

Of course. Harry being a minor who was legally allowed an adult with him. He managed not to snort over this thought as he followed them back to Dumbledore’s office.

On the way, they picked up Auror Proudfoot, who’d apparently been interviewing someone else; he nodded amiably at Harry and talked to Emma Savage in an undertone. Harry heard nothing, though he’d tried to eavesdrop.

"Now, Mr Potter," Auror Savage said, sitting behind Dumbledore's desk, "can you tell us what happened yesterday evening?"

Harry dutifully recited everything that had transpired until he’d had to stay behind. The Aurors asked clarifying questions only rarely, and, as Harry talked, he realized that, from their point of view, he was hardly implicated at all; as long as he wasn't the last person to see Slughorn alive, he became just another witness. A famous witness, yes, but in this case it meant that, for his interviewers, he was at least something of a known quantity.

Certainly, Auror Savage didn't display any hints of suspicion, while Proudfoot seemed more sympathetic than anything.

"And then the rest of your classmates left, is that right?" Emma Savage asked, looking up from her notebook.

"Yes," Harry said.

"Why didn't you leave with them?" she asked.

"I wanted to talk to Professor Slughorn," Harry said.

"What about?"
Harry hesitated. Oh, this and that, a bit of Dark magic, don't you know how it goes.

"Mr Potter?"

"My mother," Harry said, dropping his eyes. "She used to be in the Slug Club too, back in the day, and Professor Slughorn liked her, and—sometimes he'd talk. About her. That's all."

In the ensuing silence, Auror Proudfoot cleared his throat. It sounded very loud.

"I see," Auror Savage said. Her face remained inscrutable. "What time did you leave his quarters?"

"I'm not sure. It was close to, or already after, curfew."

"Did you see anyone else arrive?"

"No."

"Did anyone call on him while you were there? Did he mention any appointments?"

"Not that I recall."

"Just as a matter of routine, can anyone confirm what time you left Professor Slughorn's office?"

Ah. "I'm not sure—"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Emma, leave him be," Proudfoot boomed. "Miss Patil already told us he was with her, what more do you want?"

Miss—? Oh god, what had Padma done?

"I need to hear it from him, Robert," Emma said, giving Proudfoot an unimpressed look. "Mr Potter?"

"I didn't want to—I mean." Harry shrugged uncomfortably. "Do we have to? Is this going on record anywhere? She has a—"

"Boyfriend, we know, but we aren't here to deal with student morality," Proudfoot said. "We only need to know if you were in fact with her."

Harry nodded, shoulders slumping in very real defeat. If Padma had claimed he'd been with her, not like he could make her into a liar by denying it now.

Also, it did make things easier; having secured his confession of an illicit tryst, the Aurors didn't seem interested in hearing much else from him.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Mr Potter," Emma Savage said, shaking his hand. "We'll keep in touch if there's anything else."

"Of course," Harry said. "Please give my regards to Mr Scrimgeour."

"I would like to speak to you further, Harry, so if you would stop by my office at—oh, let's say eight o'clock, shall we?" Dumbledore suggested.

"Yes, Headmaster."

No rest for the wicked, was that what they said?
“You didn’t have to cover for me,” Harry told Padma as they strolled by the lake later that afternoon. “I mean, I’m grateful and all, I’m just saying—”

“I know,” she said. “But we all discussed it and figured that, if one of us was going to do it—which we were, by the way—I was the best option. Zabini and I were the only ones who had private rendezvous that evening, and it seemed a bit more credible that you’d be with me than with him.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah, okay. Still—”

“Get over it, darling,” Padma said, flipping her hair back. “Maybe we’re not as good in a fight as you are, but we can protect you too.”

Harry suppressed repeated assurances that they didn’t have to. Instead, he murmured, “Thanks, then.”

“There, there.” Padma patted his arm. “Was that very hard?”

“I think I sprained something,” Harry answered wryly, earning her laugh.

They walked a few paces in silence, treading over freshly grown grass.

“What about Justin, won’t he mind?” Harry asked.

Padma’s smile turned sharp. “He won’t be a problem.”

“The Aurors won’t check with him?”

“Even if they do…” Padma rolled her eyes. “Honestly, though, I think they won’t unless they suspect a lie, and why would they? Especially with our history.”

True, that. Padma and Harry’s breakup had made headlines a couple of years ago. Connecting their names would be the work of a moment.

“Do you ever think it’s weird?” Harry asked. “I mean, we actually, like, dated at some point.”

Padma glanced at him and gave a laugh. “Oh Merlin, don’t remind me.”

“It’s like we were different people. In a different life.” Harry shook his head.

“We were children, Harry,” Padma said. “And it’s far too embarrassing to think back to how silly we both were. I mean, you at that Yule dance? That was horrifying. And me! I spent half of our so-called relationship trying to be someone I wasn’t. Some sort of a diva from magazines.”

“You weren’t that bad.”

“Of course not,” Padma said.

“And neither was I, at that dance! I had nice dress robes and everything.”

“Yes, dear,” Padma said. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Harry gave up and laughed, tilting his head back to look at the sky.

Padma threaded her arm through his.
“Let’s go back, shall we? I’m getting a bit cold.”

Spring or not, the air still carried enough of a winter’s bite that Padma’s cardigan offered little protection. Harry grinned.

“Would you like my coat, m’lady?”

“Keep it, you ruffian,” Padma said, turning her nose up. “I’ll let you know if your services are needed.”

“As you wish,” Harry murmured.

They turned towards the castle. However, as soon as the front entrance came into view, their pace abruptly dropped.

“Is—is that—” Padma cut herself off.

Harry stopped walking when she did. They watched as Auror Proudfoot levitated a covered stretcher down the stairs, Dumbledore walking next to him. A crowd of students had gathered, whispering on the sidelines.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“This whole thing, Slughorn—it seems so sudden.” Padma bit her lip. “One day he’s—and then. What will happen now?”

“A funeral, I guess,” Harry said. “In his home town or something. I don’t even know where that is.”

“He liked you.”

“I know.” The vial with Slughorn’s memory never left Harry’s pocket.

“It’s—it’s so hard to believe—”

“Hey.” Harry put an awkward arm around Padma’s shoulders. “It’ll be okay.”

“Oh, really? What exactly about this—”

The honest distress in Padma’s voice resounded with another pang of guilt in Harry’s chest. The thought from earlier surfaced again. I did this.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, even as she buried her face in his shoulder. “I just—I’m really, really sorry.”

“What for?” she asked, her voice muffled.

Harry kept silent.

Auror Proudfoot and Dumbledore proceeded down the path to the gate, the stretcher floating next to them. Harry, Padma and the assembled audience stayed in place until they’d made it to the gate and disappeared from sight.

“I don’t even know why it’s hitting me so hard,” Padma said, drawing away from Harry. “I mean, it’s—there’s already been so much, I’m not sure why—”

“We’re all stressed out,” Harry said. “Maybe it’s like the last drop or something.”
“True,” Padma said. “This year’s been plenty stressful. I think I’m getting wrinkles.”

Harry smiled tightly. Padma didn’t do vulnerability for long; already, she was gathering herself up.

“All right, darling,” she said, brushing down her skirt. “It’s been lovely, but you know how it is. I’m too popular to spend all day with you.”

“I’ll try to bear the pain of separation.”

Padma blew him a kiss as she walked away.

***

By the time the Aurors left the school, they’d interviewed the entire Slug Club and all the teachers. At dinner, Dumbledore—apparently back from the Ministry—stood up and announced Slughorn’s death, but by then everyone already knew.

Malfoy didn’t turn up to dinner. The junior Death Eaters talked in low voices, throwing cautious glances around.

Harry grew increasingly tense as he neared Dumbledore’s office; the things they might discuss ranged from the Ministry’s inquiry to Slughorn to Horcruxes, and Harry felt like he’d seen more of the Headmaster in the past 24 hours than he wished to in a whole school year.

“Ah, Harry! Come in, my boy,” Dumbledore said, beckoning him into the office. “Severus has just arrived.”

Snape scowled at Harry as if resenting his presence. Well, tough luck. Harry didn’t want to deal with Snape, either.

“The students suspect nothing,” Snape said, turning back to Dumbledore to continue what was clearly an ongoing conversation. “Though they wonder why Slughorn was killed.”

The accompanying glare communicated that Snape, too, would like an answer to that question.

“Harry?” Dumbledore prompted.

Harry sat down in a chair next to Snape’s.

“Yeah,” he said. “I mean, I agree, everyone’s wondering why Professor Slughorn or how it happened, but that’s it.”

“Very well,” said Dumbledore.

“And the Aurors?” Snape asked, apparently giving up on his other line of inquiry.

“They have gathered that the poison was sent to Horace by someone close enough to him to have known, or heard, about his love for crystallized pineapple. However, given Horace’s circle of acquaintance and the fact that the parcel was delivered by post, they realize the field of suspects is almost impossibly large,” Dumbledore said.

And, enthusiastic as Filch was about scanning everything and everyone coming into Hogwarts, Secrecy Sensors wouldn’t pick up on poison, since it wasn’t a Dark object…

Harry frowned. “What do they reckon about the motive, though?”
“Again, with Horace as well-known as he is…” Dumbledore spread his hands. “They seemed first to consider that he is another casualty of war, but naturally there might be someone with a personal grudge, and now would be a fortuitous time to strike if one wished to divert the blame towards the Death Eaters.”

Huh. Harry felt almost bad for Aurors Savage and Proudfoot; there was no way they’d be solving this murder, not without the suppressed evidence.

On the other hand, they also didn’t know it wasn’t a murder, so, really, out of the loop didn’t begin to cover it.

“Draco Malfoy has spent the day in a state of nerves,” Snape said pointedly. “Waiting for the metaphorical axe to fall, or then not. If we take no prompt action, he will start believing himself victorious, and there is no saying what he might do then.”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said. “With all these other matters attended to, I believe we must next focus on Mr Malfoy and the conundrum he presents… I suppose I could speak with him,” he said in a thoughtful tone. “As a warning and a way to establish communication…”

“Your reasons for not talking to him before all stand, Albus,” Snape said. “And if you thought to tell him that Slughorn is in fact alive, because you don’t want him to fancy himself a killer, know the boy’s Occlumency will not be a match for the Dark Lord. He will pluck this intelligence from Malfoy’s mind as soon as they meet again.”

“Unless they do not meet again,” Dumbledore said. He steepled his fingers, withered digits meeting healthy ones.

Snape gave an honest-to-god sneer. “Draco Malfoy might fear the Dark Lord, but he hates and fears you too, and he’ll never abandon his family. Talk to him if you wish, but don’t expect him to fall to his knees in front of you.”

Dumbledore put his hands one on top of another on the desk, regarding Snape with what seemed liked studied calm. “Very well then, Severus. What do you recommend?”

“I recommend not telling the boy Slughorn is alive.”

“It would be cruel,” Dumbledore said gently.

“And you believe the boy’s actions weren’t?” Snape raised an eyebrow.

“We do try to hold ourselves to a higher standard than our enemies,” Dumbledore said. “It is what makes a rather crucial difference. However, I understand your view. Any risk of Voldemort learning the truth is a risk we cannot take.” He gave an infinitesimal frown. “I could warn young Malfoy that I have my eye on him, but if we are to make it appear that he succeeded in killing Horace…”

“Your readiness to overlook his crime may rather lessen the effect of the lecture,” Snape agreed, drawing another one of Dumbledore’s reproving glances.

Harry sighed. He really, really didn’t feel like doing what he was about to propose. And yet:

“You can let me deal with Malfoy,” he said, eyes fixed on an ornate golden clock. “Please give me the note that came with the box, though. The one with my name on it.”

Dumbledore made an inquiring noise.
“I don’t need to know anything about his task in order to be mad at him,” Harry said. “So I won’t be blowing anyone’s cover or risking letting him in on too much or whatever. Sometime during today, I found out about the note and suspected him, and… It doesn’t have to be politics or Voldemort, it can just be us at each other’s throats, like always. He’ll buy it.”

“My boy, are you suggesting we let you inflict violence on your classmate?” Dumbledore asked, a touch of humour in his expression.

But Snape looked considering. “The idea is not without merit.”

“Severus?” Dumbledore tilted his head to the side.

“Potter could threaten Malfoy with going to you, Headmaster, and telling you of his suspicions. And if that fear doesn’t keep the Malfoy boy in check, you can always do what you wanted and talk to him then. We lose nothing.”

“You would charge Harry with such an assignment?” Dumbledore asked, the weight of his gaze resting on Snape.

“I did not say he should torture the Malfoy boy!” Snape said. “But you know the nature of the job, Headmaster.”

“Your job, certainly, Severus,” Dumbledore said mildly. “Not Harry’s.”

“Someone has to do it.” Harry fiddled with his cuffs. “I’m not saying I want to, but if strategically it can’t be you, and it can’t be Professor Snape, that leaves me. So.”

“It does relieve me that this is your chief consideration,” Dumbledore said. “You are truly learning to shoulder responsibility with grace, Harry. However—”

“Let the boy try, Albus,” said Snape. “Potter would do this if he’d seen the note and suspected Malfoy. If nothing else, it will lend credence to the situation.”

Dumbledore observed them both in silence for a moment.

“Very well, Severus,” he said at last. “You know your students best. Be that as it may, Harry, I would remind you that Hogwarts has explicit rules against fighting. And you’ll have to be very careful with what you tell him.”

“I know how to be careful,” Harry said.

Snape gave him a dark look for insubordination, but Harry had no wherewithal left to care.

He, Snape and Dumbledore acted more or less as co-conspirators now; Dumbledore may have arranged for the practical matters regarding Slughorn’s death, and Snape provided the means, but Harry was pulling his own share of weight. Over the course of this past day, Harry had lied to his friends and essentially betrayed Slughorn’s trust, all to better carry his part in the ruse. Now, he’d volunteered to deal with Malfoy, the one person who could get him spitting mad even on a good day and who was sure to test his temper to the limit. Harry was just… not in the mood to play he obedient pupil while attending secret meetings in the night.

“It might not even work, with Malfoy,” he said. “But I’ll let you know.”

Harry returned to his common room after curfew. On the way, he reflected that boundaries had to be blurring for Dumbledore, too. Neither he nor Snape remembered to give Harry a note to excuse his
tardiness, as if they’d forgotten that he might need one; as if, in their minds, he was no longer a student.

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At Quidditch practice the next morning, Harry didn’t need to fake his angry tension. He’d hoped to catch Malfoy alone before the session began, but luck had been against him, and now he had at least an hour of Quidditch between the present moment and the looming confrontation.

It didn’t help that his teammates pestered him with questions about Slughorn even as Malfoy looked faintly green in the background.

“So who might want to do Sluggy in?” Vaisey asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry said, dropping the box with Quidditch balls on the ground with far less care than usual.

“Seriously? No ideas?” Urquhart insisted.

“No,” Harry bit out. He threw the Quaffle at Astoria Greengrass, who chose that moment to wring her hands and thus dropped the ball.

Vaisey sneered. Malfoy, normally quick on the insult, seemed not to even notice.

Crabbe and Goyle listened avidly, giving no indication of knowing anything; with their skills at subtlety, they couldn’t have been in on the plan. One less thing to worry about, at least.

“But we’re definitely talking murder?” Vaisey asked.

“Yeah, we’re talking murder,” Harry said. “And I might commit another if everyone doesn’t get up in the air right the fuck now.”

That got people moving. The practice that commenced, however, took the record for the shittiest session of the year so far. Everyone was distracted, understandably so, and Harry knew that his terseness didn’t help; ordinarily, he took care to appear unruffled, and his current disposition set a poor tone for the whole team. It felt like they were more worried about being near him than the Bludgers, which… It was a thought Harry wasn’t going to deal with right now, not when he had an agenda to pursue.

He dismissed them all early. Malfoy all but fled the changing rooms, ditching Crabbe and Goyle. Harry watched him go, thinking of the Marauder’s Map in his jeans pocket.

Malfoy wouldn’t go far.

Vaisey and Urquhart looked like they might have asked Harry more questions had they not reckoned that striking up conversation might bring on their immediate demise. Harry heard them talk, though, as they all trudged back to the castle, Astoria trailing behind. They wondered who did it, whether Harry knew who it was, and why Slughorn to begin with.

“Someone wanted into the Slug Club that badly?” Urquhart snorted. “Man was a puffed-up nobody, what harm was he?”

“You’d think,” Vaisey agreed.

Little did they know.
Harry nodded goodbye to his team when they reached the common room; he dropped off his broom, waited till Crabbe and Goyle left the dorm, and then opened up the map.

When he saw Malfoy’s location, he blinked and took a moment to double-check.

Apparently, in a time of crisis, Malfoy sequestered himself in the girl’s toilet on the second floor, the one with the wailing ghost and the Chamber of Secrets entrance. On the way there, Harry pondered why Malfoy had chosen that particular place. His reasons had better have nothing to do with Salazar Slytherin’s hideout.

Harry stepped into the bathroom and locked the door behind him with a wave of his wand. Malfoy flinched away from the sinks, where he’d been just—breathing into the drain or something.

“What do you want?” he asked, whirling around. But Harry’s binding curse was already flying at him.

Eyes wide, Malfoy dove to the side.

*Segrego,* Harry fired, not giving Malfoy a moment to breathe. *Mulco. Stupefy.*

“What the fuck are you doing?” Malfoy shrieked, very nearly slipping on the tiles. “*Crucio!*”

*Obumbrare,* Harry cast, and, as Malfoy fumbled in the resulting thick fog, Harry’s next cutting curse caught him in the arm.

He watched as Malfoy’s sleeve tore, as blood welled up in the wound, heard Malfoy’s sharp inhale. God, this was easy. What kind of training did Death Eaters give their recruits these days? Harry was embarrassed on behalf of their organization.

“*Crucio,*” Malfoy fired again, but he still couldn’t aim properly, didn’t know where Harry was, and Harry sidestepped the curse, fingers tightening on his own wand.

The magic pulled at him, tingled under his skin. Malfoy had started it; if Harry responded with another Unforgivable, it was only—

(“*You say you cast a lot of Unforgivables. You say they felt satisfying.*”)

Cold all over, Harry blasted Malfoy a couple of feet away.

It was time to end this.

Another curse, and Malfoy’s wand went flying, hitting bathroom tiles and falling down under the sinks somewhere. Harry slammed Malfoy into the wall, wand jammed into his throat.

“No,” he said, when Malfoy tried to twist in his grip. “I don’t think so.”

“Are you insane?” Malfoy rasped, straining away from the wand jabbing his neck.

“No, but I think you are,” Harry said in clipped notes. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out about this?” He took Slughorn’s note out of his pocket and thrust it under Malfoy’s nose. “Did you think you could pin this on me?”

Malfoy clenched his jaw. “I have no idea what you’re on about.”

Harry looked him straight in the eye. “Try again.”
“Why are you so sure it was me, you crazy fuck?” Malfoy demanded. “That’s a note with your name on it, not mine—”

“Okay,” Harry said, real anger surging up in him again. “It’ll be your word against mine, then. But, hey, your dad’s a convicted Death Eater, and you’ve got the Dark Mark on your arm—” And when Malfoy recoiled: “You thought I didn’t know that? Who do you take me for, Malfoy?”

“You still can’t prove—”

“Keep up,” Harry snapped. “I don’t need proof. I’m the Boy-Who-Lived. You think the Ministry is going to trust you over me when I drag you in and say you poisoned Slughorn? You think Dumbledore will?”

Harry saw the threat hit home. Malfoy’s face contorted, but he got hold of himself quickly enough.

“You won’t do it,” he said.

“Why, ’cause I’m so nice?” Harry laughed, and this, too, had nothing to do with pretence. It was just that funny.

He was apparently the kind of person who saw a fallen enemy and thought, prey. He was up to his elbows in blood and he lied, constantly, to everyone he met, and right now the unfulfilled desire for Dark spells still felt like a shiver on his skin.

“If you haven’t told the Aurors yet—” Malfoy began.

“If I knew about the note when I talked to them, you bet I would have told them,” Harry said. “As it is, I get to tell you first, and aren’t you glad? Isn’t it lovely to hear the news ahead of everyone?”

Malfoy tried to buck him off, but Harry kept him pinned, fingers digging into Malfoy’s forearm hard enough to leave bruises.

They’d been here before. Once, when they were thirteen and so, so angry, Harry had forced Malfoy still and watched him hurt.

But he wasn’t here for himself, now. This wasn’t mindless rage: he had a task, a reason for doing this.

He’d been right, though, earlier.

(“It can just be us at each other’s throats, like always. He’ll buy it.”)

Malfoy would buy this, because Harry was almost buying it himself.

“Fuck off, Potter,” Malfoy snapped, trying to dislodge Harry’s grip.

Harry gathered up his control.

“Sure,” he said. He pressed on Malfoy’s jugular one last time and then released him with a rough shove. “I think we’re done here, anyway.”

He turned for the door.

“You’re—where are you going?” Malfoy demanded, stumbling slightly on his feet.

Harry stopped.
“I’m going to report you for poisoning Slughorn,” he said. “I thought I made that clear.”

“You can’t,” Malfoy said, and that—that was real fear flashing in his eyes just now.

(“Malfoy’s not like me at all. I’m much better at this shit than he is.”)

Harry made another step towards the door.

“You don’t want to do this,” Malfoy said. He tried for a harsh tone, but to Harry it sounded like a fish flapping on the shore, straining to get to water. “You know I won’t end up in prison. The Ministry is a joke, they won’t keep me. I’ll be with the Dark Lord.”

“Have fun licking his boots full time, I guess.”

Malfoy’s wand lay on the floor directly in Harry’s line of vision. Harry looked down at it, gripping his own wand tightly.

“If I’m not here, I’m out there, with his forces,” Malfoy said. “Killing, torturing. Harming people. I’ll be one more enemy for you to fight against.”

“Because setting me up for Slughorn’s murder wasn’t you being my enemy?” Harry asked, and now he faced Malfoy fully again.

Malfoy looked wrecked, smeared blood contrasting sharply with the pallor of his face. “I didn’t—”

“Yeah, you did. Fuck up, that is.” The sight of Malfoy, as he was now, made something low and vicious stir in Harry’s gut. “What did you expect after killing Slughorn? A pat on the back?”

He let the pause hang for a moment.

“We can make a deal,” Malfoy said before Harry could turn to go again. “I can—I can owe you a favour.”

“Yeah, and I’ll just expect you to honour it,” Harry said.

Malfoy lifted his chin. “Are you implying a Malfoy’s word is not good enough for you?”

“Are you seriously asking me to trust you?”

Maybe Dumbledore was right. Maybe Malfoy had reached the point of being scared enough, desperate enough, that he’d consider switching sides. Maybe he’d let his self-preservation instinct triumph over his pride.

(“He’ll never abandon his family. Talk to him if you wish, but don’t expect him to fall to his knees in front of you.”)

The knees part might be negotiable. The family… not so much.

More importantly, if Harry started talking like he might be willing to compromise, his psychotic persona would fall apart, and Malfoy needed to be one hundred percent convinced that Harry would go through with his threats.

Harry tried not to wonder what any of his friends would think if they saw him now, doing this.

“Oh man, you’re really pissing yourself, aren’t you?” he said with a laugh. “All but begging me not to tell. And it’s not even the Ministry you’re afraid of. The fuck do you expect Voldemort will do to
“You don’t know anything,” Malfoy said, fists clenched.

“But apparently I still have you by the balls.” Harry snorted. “You’re full of surprises, Malfoy. You voluntarily signed up for this shit and now you’re bailing? Talk about terrible life choices.”

Harry saw the very moment Malfoy’s restraint cracked. He stepped forward, face contorted. “I didn’t choose—”

“Yeah, you did,” Harry said, and they were nose to nose again. “You spent years spewing Death Eater ideology, but things got rough, and suddenly it’s not your choice? Suddenly you’re the victim? Fuck you, Malfoy.”

The glare-off led nowhere, as usual.

“Wow, look at you being all silent,” Harry said, stepping back with a brittle smile. “A real first. This is—damn, you know, if I didn’t think you’d start shit up again as soon as you could, the idea of keeping you here, having you owe me—”

“I won’t start anything if you don’t tell.” Malfoy stared directly at him. “You’re the one with the power here. I do something, you can always sell me out then.”

“Right,” Harry said. “What could possibly go wrong? You’ve only killed a teacher and injured two kids. Letting a maniac like you loose on the school—”

“You’re calling me a maniac? You?” Malfoy said, a hysterical tinge to his voice. “You killed my—”

“I—” Harry hoped his expression didn’t falter. The Lestranges, Malfoy’s family.

“And you’re going on about me and Slughorn? Hypocritical much?”

“That was battle. This—”

“This is war,” Malfoy snapped. “People die.”

(“You and Draco Malfoy? Kids playing a sport?”)

Assassination, murderous rage, self-defence. People die.

There was an argument there, for sure. But Harry wasn’t about to start claiming moral high grounds.

“Fine,” he said, and the tiredness in his tone was probably too honest, but Malfoy looked stretched pretty thin too. “Give me that Malfoy word, whatever, but—do anything, give me the hint of an idea that you’re planning something again, and I’m done. The deal’s over.”

“I’m not asking you for anything else,” Malfoy said.

“The idea of you asking me for anything at all…” Harry shook his head.

“Fuck you,” Malfoy said. “And if you now expect me to kowtow to you at every turn—”

“I’m sure I could make you do it,” Harry said coldly. “Luckily for you, I’m not into that. Not like you don’t get enough practice. That’s your whole relationship with the Dark Lord, right there, isn’t it?”
Malfoy didn’t seem to find the dig funny. Strange of him.

When Harry left, promise secured and deal shaken on, Malfoy still stood in the bathroom, unmoving. He probably needed a moment to process everything. Harry certainly did.

He walked away in a determined stride, trying to calm his breathing.

That… had gone well.

For a given value of well.

(“I never knew that you could be like that.”)

He needed to just—not talk to people for a while.

He ducked around the breakfast crowds and plotted his course to the lake. People would find him if they needed to, which hopefully they wouldn’t.

He’d take an hour. Or three. As long as he could get. He’d stare at the sky and run through Occlumency exercises and not think, as far as he was able.

***

It wasn’t until Harry was heading for Monday’s Potions class that it sunk in that, hey, Slughorn had been their teacher. Which meant that they no longer had one.

“What do you think will happen with Potions now?” he asked Blaise and Hermione, who flanked him on both sides.


“They’ll get a substitute,” Hermione said.

Blaise sighed. “Or that.”

But even so, they drew up short when they entered the classroom and saw Dumbledore smiling at them from behind the teacher’s desk.

“Come in, come in,” he said. “Please sit down.”

Malfoy had already arrived and chosen a table as far from the front as possible. Hermione, with a baffled look at Harry, went to her station next to Terry. Harry and Blaise, after a moment’s hesitation, selected their usual seat.

“Given that Professor Slughorn’s time has been cut tragically short, I shall be taking over his class for the foreseeable future,” Dumbledore said, surveying the students. “We shall follow his syllabus and I shall attempt to answer any questions you might have… There was a time I was quite acceptable at the art of Potion-making,” he added with a good-humoured expression. “Now, if you would be so kind as to turn to the page 312 of your textbook…”

Prior to this, Harry wouldn’t have known what to expect from a class taught by Dumbledore. All in all, it was an odd experience; everyone was a bit shy, reserved—or, in Malfoy’s case, scared shitless—around the venerable Headmaster, but he turned out to be a patient instructor and clearly enjoyed the task.
When Dumbledore came by to inspect his work, Harry caught his eyes. He then flicked his gaze Malfoy’s way and gave a very brief nod.

“Excellent,” Dumbledore said, ostensibly in regard to the potion, but for a moment he looked somewhat more sombre. Message received, then. “I never expected anything less, of course, my boy.”

The exchange was quick and innocuous enough that it flew even under Blaise’s radar. Harry breathed a little easier as he started to clean up his desk.

He wondered if Dumbledore would hold him back after the lesson to talk, maybe update him about Slughorn, but the Headmaster gave no sign of wanting to converse with Harry beyond praising him for a potion well-brewed. Or a Malfoy well-intimidated, whichever.

“Well, that was interesting,” Ernie Macmillan said after the lesson. “By the way, Harry—” He lowered his voice. “—with everything that’s happened… will you be holding any—” He waved a hand vaguely. “—sometime soon?”

Harry wondered just when the duelling club had evolved into an institution whose members required guidance and reassurance on current events in addition to spell practice.

“Well, that was interesting,” Ernie Macmillan said after the lesson. “By the way, Harry—” He lowered his voice. “—with everything that’s happened… will you be holding any—” He waved a hand vaguely. “—sometime soon?”

Harry wondered just when the duelling club had evolved into an institution whose members required guidance and reassurance on current events in addition to spell practice.

“Sure,” he said anyway. “We’ll meet up.”

Not that he had any idea what Ernie expected to hear when they did. What could Harry tell them that Dumbledore hadn’t already?

“I don’t know, but you’ve been doing this confidence and authority thing,” Blaise said when Harry brought this up a couple of days later. “So keep doing it, I guess.”

Harry had approached Eddie Carmichael about arranging a duelling club meeting, and Eddie seemed to think that it was precisely what people needed. Harry was beginning to feel like he wasn’t getting something.

“Confidence and authority?” he repeated. “Me? I don’t know what I’m doing half the time.”

“Well, you’ve tried your best to convince people you did know,” Blaise pointed out, turning another page in his book. “Are you picking now to be annoyed that it’s working?”

“I’m not annoyed, I just… Never mind.”

Harry dropped his head against the back of the couch.

He’d convene the duelling club session and say… what? Slughorn’s really dead, guys, now back to Patronus lessons? What were they looking for here? Because, god, if they wanted answers, they’d come to the wrong place. These days, Harry wasn’t even sure he had the right questions.

(“You’re calling me a maniac? You? You killed my—”)

“How, what is this about?” Blaise asked, dark eyes focusing on Harry. “Are you having some sort of a crisis of confidence? Because now is so not the time.”

Harry snorted. “That’s your argument?”

Blaise expelled a breath and shut his book, looking irritated.

“Yeah, actually, it is. Things are looking pretty grim at the moment, and you’ve set yourself up as
someone who holds their shit together. People need that. No one wants to see you having a crisis, so if you’re going to have one, do it quietly, okay?”

“Wow, tell me how you really feel,” Harry said. “What brought this on?”

“You, with that face,” Blaise said, scrunching up his nose. “You’ve been like a drowned rat since Christmas, and then Slughorn happened, and now this. Also, what did you do to Malfoy? He’s been avoiding you like the plague.”

Harry winced. “That obvious, huh?”

“It is to me, but I am blessed with uncommon intelligence.”

“Your modesty is overwhelming, too,” Harry said. “But—no, I mean. Long story short, you were on the mark, earlier, about Slughorn and him. So.”

Blaise stared at Harry, frozen mid-motion. “Malfoy killed Slughorn?”

“I did say it’s a long story.”

“Why are you letting—” It wasn’t often that Harry had seen Blaise at a loss for words. “Does anyone—”

Harry looked steadily at Blaise.

“Right,” Blaise muttered. “Right, of course Dumbledore knows. But then why—?”

“Cause he believes Malfoy is a lost soul who can still be saved, and no, I’m not kidding.”

“Why are you not kidding?” Blaise said. “Please be kidding. I need to know that we are not living in a world where this is a thing that happens.”

Harry shrugged.

“The long part of the story is that Malfoy was kind of blackmailed into it, in the end. I mean, he also dug his own grave, but he wasn’t all skipping merrily through the fields and assassinating Slughorn. So there’s that.”

“That wasn’t nearly as long as it needed to be,” Blaise said. “Keep talking.”

Harry grimaced. “I can’t. I’ve already told you more than the others.”

“Well, I should hope so, given that I sleep in the same room as the guy,” Blaise said. “Merlin’s balls.”

“We’ve kind of reached an understanding,” Harry said. “By which I mean, I’m holding this over Malfoy’s head as long as he behaves.”

Blaise looked sceptical. “You expect this to keep him in line?”

“No clue,” Harry said. “But if it doesn’t, we roll out the big guns.”

Blaise whistled. “Damn, that’s why he was such a shrinking violet in Potions, with Dumbledore being there and all.”

“Fun times,” Harry agreed.
Harry had made a habit of arriving early for duelling club practices; it made sense, since he ran the whole thing. He’d never asked it of anyone else, but Cedric had done the same in his time, and now Eddie was doing it too.

Which was why it was the two of them stuck in front of the wall which, once again, refused to give up a door.

“Come on,” Eddie said, pacing. “Open up!”

“You can stop doing that,” Harry told him for the third time. “It won’t help, that’s not how it works. There’s someone in there.”

Or else the room was broken, which was a possibility Harry didn’t want to consider.

“Do we know that for sure?”

“Well, no, but…”

People started coming one by one, looking surprised and mildly alarmed that their usual meeting space seemed unwilling to materialize.

“Sorry I’m late,” Hermione said, arriving with a harried look, though she was perfectly on time. “I run into Justin Finch-Fletchley, by the way, he can’t make it—Luna said the same thing earlier, and goodness, is the Hidden Room locked up again?”

“We’ll have to reschedule, I guess,” Harry said.

He wished he could have explained the situation remotely through enchanted coins. Hopefully, the twins would soon come up with that communication device they were developing. It sounded dead useful.

“But does anyone outside the club know the Room exists?” Seamus Finnigan asked, looking around. “All of us are aware there’s a meeting on.”

Hermione waved him away. “Someone’s bound to know, aren’t they? The house-elves do, and all those people who’ve put their things into the storage version.”

“It’s not common knowledge, but probably not a secret as such,” Padma agreed.

“I think I’ve seen Professor Trelawney stagger in there with a bottle in hand,” Morag McDougal said, provoking a few titters and Padma’s scandalized glare.

Harry was just about to announce that, never mind, meeting cancelled, they’d do it some other time —when Professor McGonagall appeared at the other end of the corridor.

Seeing a crowd of students milling about with no apparent purpose, she stopped, looking surprised.

“And what is this?” she asked, not unkindly. “A demonstration?”

Harry opened his mouth to reply, but then realized that, should he speak up now, McGonagall would immediately assume that he was the ringleader of this… whatever it was. On the other hand, as seconds ticked by and McGonagall’s gaze sharpened on him and Eddie, Harry’s mere presence had probably made her think he was involved, if not in charge.
“We’re just waiting for everyone before we head to the Quidditch pitch, Professor,” Harry said, going with the first excuse that came to mind. “We figured we’d play, for fun? Outside of matches.”

Murmurs broke out among the students, and McGonagall raised an eyebrow as a whole lot of stragglers appeared further down the corridor and froze at the tableau.

“Well,” she said. “That’s something that Hogwarts hasn’t seen in many decades.”

Harry gave her a weak smile. “Yeah, we’re… trying, with the inter-House unity.”

“An honourable goal,” McGonagall said. “Did none of you bring your brooms?”

“We thought we’d try with the school brooms, Professor,” Eddie said, in all seriousness. “To, er, not give anyone the unfair advantage.”

They might as well have announced themselves to be a homework club or a protest rally against the mistreatment of baby seals. Either way, their excuse was lame and unbelievable in the extreme, and Harry thought it just figured that they’d survived a year of Umbridge in absolute secrecy only to be defeated by a wall.

But it seemed that McGonagall was willing to let it slide, for now.

“Excellent,” she said, eyes glittering with amusement. “Good luck, Potter. I think you’re going to need it.”

She went on her way, the crowd of students parting to let her through.

“Urgh,” Eddie said, when she was gone. “That was smooth.”

“Oh yeah,” Harry said. “Also, guys, this is clearly not happening today, so…” He shrugged.

“By the way, if anyone’s up for the Quidditch thing, I’m totally in,” said Dean Thomas.

“Hear, hear,” Ron Weasley said. “Now we practically have to, anyway, or McGonagall will ask.”

“We can put a couple of decent teams together,” Cho said. “I’m game.”

Harry and Eddie exchanged glances.

“Why not?” Harry said.

That decided the matter. Most of the duelling club—minus those who had too much homework or just didn’t fancy it—trooped down to the Quidditch pitch, picking up a few bewildered spectators on the way.

“It’s an inter-House unity event!” Harry heard Lisa Turpin explain to someone behind him. “To cheer everyone up after all that sadness!”

“It’s going to be super!” Astoria Greengrass said somewhere to Harry’s left.

In the end, the impromptu match did turn out to be good fun. Harry and Cho squared off as Seekers, still on opposing teams, but normality ended there. Ginny Weasley chose to play Chaser for Harry’s team. Dean Thomas—Ginny’s boyfriend—played against Harry and Ginny alongside Astoria. Ron, too, was on Harry’s team, while Hufflepuff’s Keeper migrated to under Cho’s command.

Beater pairs got split up. Chaser formations crumbled. No real strategy stayed in place.
It was great.

The air felt fresh on Harry’s face as he soared through the sky, exhilaration flooding his veins; and this time, it wasn’t about rivalries or winning or—anything, really, except the game itself and spending time with people.

This had to be what pick-up matches with friends were like. Harry had heard the Weasleys talk about how they used to goof around back at home, but he’d never been part of that. Well, unless you counted those times he, Cedric and Viktor Krum had flown together during the Triwizard Tournament, but that… that had been something else.

At some point, Harry realized that their game had attracted a good few spectators; McGonagall, too, ended up in attendance, waving merrily from the stands. Zacharias Smith, who’d commented on the last few matches, had taken up the microphone and seemed to be having a swell time of it.

“When I said you should hold up morale, I didn’t mean stage a bleeding heart event,” Blaise told Harry, catching him after the game.

Harry grinned at him, still high from the rush of flying.

“Should’ve been more specific, then,” he said, and only to get distracted by other people.

Professor Sprout, moved to high spirits, awarded every House with fifty points, which made no difference whatsoever to the rankings, but spoke volumes of her feelings on inter-House unity.

“Never in all my years!” she said, clasping her hands to her chest. “What friendship! How beautiful to see young people getting along!”

“There, there, Pomona,” said Flitwick, patting her on the arm. “Though I agree. Simply delightful!”

Snape looked extra dour at dinner that evening, presumably in counterpoint to everyone else’s cheer. Dumbledore beamed approvingly at all assembled. Harry hoped that the jubilant mess had effectively hidden the identities of duelling club members at the core of the whole thing.

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Harry and Eddie ended up rescheduling the meeting for the following week, that being the earliest various prefects and Quidditch team members could make it. This time, the Hidden Room had let them in with no problem.

“Right!” Harry said. “Those of you who have already managed the Patronus, please gather on the left. The others—”

“Hey, before we start,” Katie Bell said, raising a hand like the good pupil she was, “is there any news about Professor Slughorn? Has the Ministry found anything?”

“No,” Harry said, submitting to the inevitability of holding a Slughorn-related info session.

(“You’ve been doing this confidence and authority thing. So keep doing it, I guess.”)

“They’re still looking for the person who killed him,” he continued.

Scrimgeour had written to Harry a few days ago, in fact. If you have information you couldn’t disclose to the Aurors, Harry, please let me know.

Harry had hesitated over that letter for, like, a whole minute. It would be so easy. Scrimgeour would
probably even understand the complications surrounding Malfoy, and he’d already be clued in if things went to shit.

On the other hand, he still represented the Ministry. He could only be trusted so far.

“Do they have any idea who it was?” Demelza Robins wanted to know.

“Not particularly,” Harry said.

“So it could be someone at Hogwarts?” asked Wendy Travers.

Judging by people's faces, the thought had been weighing on more than just her mind.

“It could be,” Harry admitted, “though it could also be someone from the outside. There’s not enough evidence to point either way.”

“So there could be someone walking around the school trying to kill people,” Morag McDougal said.

“Guys, let’s not panic, okay?” Harry said. “Chances are, someone had a personal grudge against Slughorn. I mean, what reason would anyone inside Hogwarts have to want him dead?”

“He wasn’t that bad of a Potions teacher,” Michael Corner said blandly.

“Yeah, if no one offed Snape…” Ron Weasley agreed.

“Hey!” Tracey Davis protested. “Snape’s not—”

“Speak for yourself, you’re in Slytherin—”

“Okay!” Harry said loudly. “About that spell practice, huh?”

Still murmuring, the crowd separated into those who had to work on the Patronus and those who had mastered the charm. Terry let out a whoop when a large silver wolf burst from his wand; Lisa Turpin produced very credible non-corporeal smoke; and Hannah Abbott practiced nonverbal offence and defence with Anthony, instead, since they’d both got the anti-Dementor spell down last month.

All in all, Harry felt that the group were making progress, which was just as well; he was in dire need of progress somewhere.

These days, he considered messing up in Potions on purpose, just to get Dumbledore to talk to him. The notice of Slughorn’s funeral had appeared in the Daily Prophet last Thursday; an article relating the event popped up soon after. Enough time had passed that surely Slughorn had been resurrected already, and Horcruxes waited for no man. If Slughorn was awake and well, they could get moving.

But apparently they couldn’t, and the delay grated on Harry’s nerves.

“Well done, guys,” he said, addressing the duelling club before everyone left for the day. “You’ve been working hard and it really shows.”

When people began filing out of the meeting, Neville lingered behind, absently picking up cushions from the floor.

“You know, you don’t have to do that,” Harry told him. “As soon as we leave, it’s all going to disappear anyway. Or it won’t have existed in the first place, if you trust Luna.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” Neville said, and looked down at the stuff in his arms as if he hadn’t realized he
was holding it.

Harry nodded to the last student leaving the room and turned back to Neville.

“Speaking of Luna, do you know what’s going on with her?” he asked. “She wasn’t here and I haven’t talked to her in a while. Not since the whole Slughorn thing happened, at least.”

“You too?” Neville said. “I thought it was just me. Er, I guess I’ll put these down, then.”

He let the cushions tumble awkwardly from his arms and stood, blinking down at them.

“Uh.” Harry cleared his throat. “What’s up?”

“What? Oh, nothing.” Neville’s gaze skittered away. “I mean—” He shuffled on his feet and then looked back at Harry, more intent this time. “This whole thing, the duelling club, it’s different now, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” News to Harry.

“Now that I’ve seen what’s out there…” Neville hesitated. “We’re so far away from that.”

“Sure, I guess,” Harry said. “But we’re training, not fighting.”

“I’d never been in a real duel before Christmas.” Neville poked one of the cushions with his shoe. “I’d never had to fight for my life. It’s not the same.”

“No,” Harry agreed, still not sure where this was going.

He sank down onto a beanbag, figuring they may as well not do this standing. Neville followed with a sigh a moment later.

“I thought you were training us up to fight,” Neville said. “But, really, you’re just trying to make sure we know how to not die. Aren’t you?”

Way to ask a blunt question. Harry ran a hand through his hair.

“Not—I mean, I want you to be able to defend yourselves.”

“So, what, that’s the best we can hope for?” Neville said.

“Of course not,” Harry said. “But I’m not training up an army.”

“You don’t think we can do it?” Neville pressed. “You think there’s no way I can ever do the stuff you do?”

“Maybe I think you don’t have to do it.” Harry said. “Maybe I don’t want you to have to fight, to kill people. Maybe it hasn’t been any fun for me, and maybe I don’t wish it on anyone I care about. I don’t know, Nev, I could be thinking a lot of things here.”

Neville frowned and didn’t say anything for several long moments. Harry took that time to contemplate the ceiling.

“Back there, in the fight… you used a lot of Dark magic.” There was no judgement in Neville’s tone.

“Mmm.” Denial would be pointless.
“You used the Killing Curse.”

Harry didn’t turn to check Neville’s expression. “So did you.”

“I tried. But you actually cast it.”

Harry had wondered when this whole thing would come up.

“So is it recent?” Neville asked tentatively.

“What, me flinging the Killing Curse around?” Distaste for the subject turned his words flippant, and Harry felt momentarily bad for taking that tone with Neville. But Neville’s issues didn’t cancel out Harry having his own mazes of barbed wire nobody was allowed to cross unharmed.

“You and Dark magic,” Neville said, more firm.

“No, not recent,” Harry said.

“So have you always—”

“Not always. Not from the cradle.”

“But at Hogwarts.”

“Yeah.”

“You never said.”

Harry shrugged.

He hadn’t gone back to the library except to engage in research on potential Horcruxes. He hadn’t touched the Dark magic books already in his possession, either, unwilling to wade back in until he’d figured out where he stood on the whole thing.

The fight with Malfoy had touched a few exposed nerves.

(“On occasion, we are forced to make terrible choices. Dark magic is another such choice.”)

Harry had spent a lot of time thinking about choices lately.

Neville sighed.

“So it’s what, a Slytherin thing? Did Blaise and Millicent know but not anyone else? Do all of you practice Dark magic in your common room where the rest of us can’t see you?”

“Yeah, Nev, it’s a conspiracy, us against the Gryffindors,” Harry said, irritation flaring up again.

He felt the weight of Neville’s eyes on him, could imagine his hurt expression. But, when he spoke, Neville took Harry by surprise.

“You’re not teaching any of that in the duelling club.”

Harry started. “Of course not.”

“Would you?”

This time, Harry did turn to stare at him.
“You want me to teach Dark magic to the duelling club?”

“Would you want me to learn it?” Neville asked.

“No,” Harry said, the answer out of his mouth before he’d even had time to process the thought.

“No,” Neville repeated. He crossed his arms, but it looked more like he was hugging himself.

“Because, what, it’s bad for me?”

“Sure, it’s bad, and why are we talking about this?” Harry rubbed his scar.

“Why do you do it, then?” Neville challenged. “Why is it okay for you, but not for the rest of us?”

“Because it’s too late for me, okay?” The realization settled on Harry’s shoulders even as he uttered the words. “I’m not… I’m not saying it’s all good, that stuff I know. But I can’t unlearn it, and I wouldn’t if I could, because I’ve needed it and I’d be dead without it. And if there’s another fight, I’ll use it again. And if I have to learn more, I’ll learn more. That’s… that’s just how it is.”

Harry swallowed. There was his answer, he guessed, to what he’d do about Dark magic now.

Neville’s eyes were still fixed on him.

“But you think I shouldn’t do the same thing. Like you don’t think I should fight the way you do.”

Harry stared back and realized that, whatever he said now, it would make him a massive hypocrite. This was a replay of every single one of his arguments with the Order, in pitch-perfect detail.

(“It is the job of responsible adults to make sure he is not as involved…”)

They wanted him safe, protected. Innocent. They tried to shield him from the cruel realities of war, because in their eyes he was someone who shouldn’t have to deal with all this. They were ready to step in front of him and bleed and kill and maybe die—like Kingsley, like Hestia—so long as he didn’t have to make the calls they did.

Harry understood this now, because he felt the same way about Neville, about the rest of his friends, about duelling club members. About those who still had innocence worth protecting.

(“You shielded me like you weren’t important. Like you knew you could take whatever they threw at you, and you knew I couldn’t.”)

“Harry?” Neville said, but Harry wasn’t listening, still distracted by the magnitude of his realization.

God, what a mess. If the Order truly saw him this way, no wonder they didn’t take him seriously; doing so would equal to admitting that they’d failed, that he’d gone down the road they’d tried so hard to spare him from.

They were in for a rough awakening. Still, they’d all better get on the same page soon, because this working at cross-purposes deal wasn’t at all productive.

“Sorry, Nev,” Harry said in a voice that sounded far away, even to him. “Just… a lot on my mind. But this really isn’t me thinking you aren’t good enough for something, okay? I mean it when I say nobody should have to be like me.”

“I know I don’t have to,” Neville said quietly. “But I want to do whatever I can, even if it isn’t a lot. I want to help you, and I want to fight, and I want to defeat Voldemort.”
“Then you will,” Harry said, imbuing the words with all the certainty he had.

It helped that he was entirely sincere.

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The moment Harry had been waiting for came during the first Potions class after the Easter holiday, when Dumbledore gave him a smile over his cauldron.

“See me after the lesson, Harry, won’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, straightening up and ignoring Blaise’s curious look.

Once the class ended, he hardly restrained himself from tapping his foot on the floor in impatience as the room emptied of students.

“Your brewing skills are admirable, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “but, as you can imagine, school assignments are not why I held you back. You will be pleased to know that Horace sends his regards.”

Harry nodded, shoulders relaxing minutely. “So everything went well.”

“Certainly, my boy,” Dumbledore said. “I hope you were not unduly worried.”

“It seemed like it was taking a while,” Harry said with as much tact as he could.

Judging by his smile, Dumbledore picked up on the implicit whatever the hell took so long.

“After Horace’s distinguished burial, we naturally had to let some time pass while the stream of mourners dwindled down,” Dumbledore said. “I have now managed to awaken him with no one being the wiser, though it did take some doing. Horace is enjoying solitude in a remote cottage, the location of which I will not, if you forgive me, divulge.”

With everything Harry knew about Slughorn, the likelihood of him enjoying social isolation was very low. On the bright side, Slughorn’s death wouldn’t cut off his access to money; goblins, after all, were tricky creatures, and they’d happily continue supplying a dead man with funds from his vault without ever informing the humans, provided he could satisfy their demands for identification.

“Now that Horace has rejoined the land of the living, however, I believe you have fulfilled the terms of your agreement with him, such as it was,” Dumbledore continued, eyes twinkling. “Or am I mistaken?”

“No, that’s right,” Harry said. He reached into his pocket and held up the vial that hadn’t left him ever since Slughorn had entrusted it into his hands.

“Marvellous,” Dumbledore said, and he looked genuinely elated. “You have done even better than I expected, Harry. Let us not delay.”

They Flooed over from what used to be Snape’s office next door. As soon as they arrived in the Headmaster’s rooms, Dumbledore crossed over to his Pensieve.

“Now, Harry,” he said, “if you please?”

Harry stood next to the Headmaster and poured the memory into the bowl. This was it. The moment of truth.
As he watched the events play out—familiar to begin with, and utterly predictable after—Harry couldn’t help but feel like a burden had lifted from his shoulders. Yes, Slughorn had told him that Voldemort had inquired after seven pieces of soul; yes, he’d spent night after night wracking his brain and hiding in the library to figure out what or where the missing Horcruxes might be—but this was the moment when Dumbledore knew it too. This was the moment when Harry had solid proof that he’d succeeded in his task.

This was also when he was no longer alone with the responsibility of acting on the knowledge.

“Well done, Harry,” Dumbledore said, emerging from the memory. He stood still, peering into the basin. “Now we have the piece that will help us complete the picture.”

“I hope so,” Harry said. “That’s quite a few Horcruxes, though.”

“Lord Voldemort has indeed gone further than any other in his quest to achieve immortality,” Dumbledore said, face darkening. “It is no wonder his soul was so unstable the night he went to attack you, my boy.”

“How many Horcruxes do you think he had at that point, sir? Because I’m coming up with at least four, maybe five,” Harry said, voicing long-rehearsed thoughts. “He made the diary and the ring first, obviously, and he had the locket and the cup really soon after, so that leaves the mystery two—”

“I do agree with you,” Dumbledore said, walking over to his usual chair. “However—”

“So then, either he got his hands on unknown founder stuff, or he chose to make Horcruxes of something else, and that’s not even starting on where they could be—”

“Disinclined as I am to belabour the obvious, Harry, I must point out that breathing is highly beneficial to your health,” Dumbledore said, smiling. “I am gratified to see you so intent on this matter, but let us keep a calm mind as we ponder it together.”

“Sorry, sir, I just—I’ve been pondering it a while,” Harry said, sitting down opposite Dumbledore.

“Perfectly understandable,” Dumbledore said. “You have outlined our existing knowledge quite well: two Horcruxes destroyed, two we can identify, and two more that elude us. I have only one further consideration to add as to what they might be.”

Harry looked at him, waiting. He noticed that the portraits on the walls of the Headmaster’s office all listened with equally keen expressions.

“We know from your own experience that a living being can house a fragment of a foreign soul.” Dumbledore reached out with his healthy hand to touch an instrument on his desk. “In your case, Voldemort was not conscious of it; however, he could very well have created a living Horcrux deliberately.”

Harry sat back. This possibility hadn’t occurred to him before.

“Isn’t it way too risky?” he asked. “I mean, in his place, if I had the choice between an object I can hide somewhere and a living being that can get itself killed—”

“No doubt you are correct,” Dumbledore said, frowning slightly. Perhaps he didn’t enjoy hearing Harry try on his Horcrux-making options. “However, Lord Voldemort is no ordinary wizard. Consider the diary, which was intended for use as a weapon… He’d wanted it to be found, even at the risk of destruction…”
“That confident, was he?” Harry asked. “Just because nobody else has made this many Horcruxes?”

“He does pride himself on his achievements,” Dumbledore said.

“He wanted to split his soul into seven,” Harry said. This was something else he’d thought about a lot. “In the end, he didn’t know, but he split it into eight, because of me. Does this—” Harry gestured uncertainly. “Did this make a difference? He wanted seven because it’s a powerful number, and if he’d managed exactly seven, would that have—I don’t know, made him stronger, more stable?”

Dumbledore observed Harry with a small smile on his face.

“A very astute question, my boy, and one I am afraid we shall have no clear answers to. I believe that, for a time, his soul had indeed been split into the originally intended number, but that was not a true test of his plan, for it did not happen the way he had intended…”

“You mean when he didn’t have a body,” Harry said. “You think he was missing a single Horcrux when he came to kill me? And then I became the sixth?”

“You were never a true Horcrux, and his soul was not sealed in you the way it would have needed to be,” Dumbledore said gently. “But, of course, he did inadvertently leave a piece of his soul inside you, only to destroy it soon upon his return. And it was shortly after he regained his body, I believe, that he created his final, effectively seventh, Horcrux…”

“The snake,” Harry said, staring. “You think it was his snake.”

Dumbledore beamed at Harry the way a proud grandfather might.

“Indeed, my boy; when I spoke of a living being, I had his faithful reptile in mind.” The Headmaster once again glanced at the instrument from which thin wisps of smoke were issuing. “Severus’s description of their closeness, the peculiar way in which he controls it, the use of the snake to penetrate the Ministry… Yes, I learned much from the death of Arthur Weasley,” Dumbledore said, grave.

“Right,” Harry said. “But, if you think the snake is one of the Horcruxes, that leaves us with only one unknown, doesn’t it? Could he have made a Horcrux out of someone else?”

“I believe it unlikely,” Dumbledore said. “I have not heard of his attachment to any other sentient creature. Voldemort may be cavalier with his soul, but not quite to the degree of making a Horcrux out of a living being he didn’t keep an eye on.”

“If he takes so many risks with his Horcruxes, does it mean he’s pretty careless about hiding them, too?” Harry asked. “I mean, sure the ring was protected, but it was casually lying about in his relatives’ house, and the diary was in Lucius Malfoy’s hands—as you say, meant for future use—and the snake slithers about places…”

“Harry, please do not oversimplify the matter,” Dumbledore said, a warning in his eyes. “Voldemort needs but one Horcrux to remain tethered to this world. The others are precautions; they are not vital to his continued survival. All he needs is to have hidden one Horcrux very well, and he can afford to keep the others in places where it will be easy for him to look in on them.”

“So you’re saying it’s fifty-fifty on whether the rest of the Horcruxes are just sitting in his fridge or if they’re in some dark tower guarded by a fire-breathing dragon,” Harry said, glum.

“Both these possibilities strike me as remarkably implausible, but I do acknowledge your gift for metaphor,” Dumbledore said, smiling.
“So how do we find them?” Harry asked. “I mean, fine, we know where the snake is, but the rest—”

“The snake,” Dumbledore interjected quickly, “ought certainly to be left for last, barring Voldemort himself. The moment we attack the snake, Voldemort will be alerted to our plan, and I need not reiterate how important it is that he be kept in the dark.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “But what about the other Horcruxes? I mean, there’s three of them out there somewhere.”

“I must say that, in this regard, you know very nearly as much as I do,” Dumbledore said. “I have a notion that at least one Horcrux location will have something to do with Voldemort’s childhood, but that does not get us very far.”

“Like the orphanage?” Harry said. “He hated that place. Would he hide something there? Does the building still exist? Can we go there?”

“Harry.” Dumbledore held up a hand. “As it happens, I have already visited the place, and I have found no trace of a Horcrux there; regardless, I agree that Lord Voldemort would not hide a piece of his soul in a location so distasteful to him. And when it comes to other possibilities… I have already visited the place, and I have found no trace of a Horcrux there; regardless, I agree that Lord Voldemort would not hide a piece of his soul in a location so distasteful to him. And when it comes to other possibilities…” Dumbledore joined his fingertips together. “You must realize, Harry, that you cannot accompany me on every search mission I undertake. Quite apart from the fact that you are, in fact, a student in this school and thus have daily responsibilities to attend to, together we would be doubly conspicuous, which would not be to our advantage. There are some places it is far easier for me to go alone; certain people who will not speak to me with a witness present.”

Harry frowned.

“So what would you have me do? I’ve been researching, but it’s all covering the same old ground. I’m getting nowhere new.”

“I assure you that I shall alert you as soon as I have found something of value,” Dumbledore said.

“Sir,” Harry said tightly, “you brought me in on the whole Horcrux thing because you thought I needed to know. You’ve made me a part of this, and you can’t—you can’t do it halfway. I get it that you have your reasons, but if any of this is about protecting me for my own good—”

“Ah, Harry.” And here Dumbledore gave a smile that looked somewhat sad. “You need not fear that I will exclude you from further involvement. Quite the contrary… I have not taken anyone as far into my confidence as you. You alone hold the same keys to defeating Voldemort that I do, and, believe me, I recognize exactly how much responsibility that entails.”

“I can’t just do nothing,” Harry said.

Dumbledore regarded him with a strange sombre expression.

“No, indeed. But, if you’d listen to an old man’s advice, Harry, do not waste a rare moment’s peace… You need not endlessly seek out battle. After all, you must have learned by now; for you, who is on the front lines of the war, the battle will always be nearer than you think.”