The Power of a Well-Organized Mind
by FalconLux

Summary

Trying to deal with his grief after losing Sirius, Harry makes an effort to “clear his mind” before going to bed. It works this time, and Harry discovers that his supposed Power isn’t love at all. He soon finds that his trust has not always been well placed. His choices for taking control of his life may be fewer than he’d hoped.

WARNING: This is a W.I.P. It is not finished. It may never be completed. READ AT YOUR OWN RISK.

Notes

DISCLAIMER: I don't own Harry Potter and I don't make any money from this or any other work of fanfiction.
Know Thyself

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Chapter 1

Know Thyself

1 July 1996 - Monday

Harry eased himself into his bed on his side, mindful of the terribly tender skin stretched taut across his back. He’d been sunburned a week ago. Now, he was covered in blisters. It was painful enough that he’d have been weeping in agony if he hadn’t been too numb to care. He accepted the pain as his penance. Sirius had died because he’d been a stupid, impetuous, spoiled little brat. He’d spent an entire year sulking because Dumbledore ignored him. Because no one would tell him what was happening. Because he was being taught Occlumency by his worst enemy.

Ha!

He mentally sneered at his own melodrama. It had all seemed so awful at the time. So tragic. It had been so easy to feel sorry for himself. So easy to conclude that he was beyond reach of any adult who actually cared about him – namely Sirius. Umbridge and her insanity hadn’t helped, but that wasn’t any kind of excuse either. He’d wrapped himself in his Gryffindor pride and tried to face her down head-on when she’d held every advantage.

He sighed heavily and tried to organize his drifting thoughts. Dumbledore had been unwilling to speak with him, but he should have gone to McGonagall. If she had resisted, he should have made her listen. He should have explained his problems with Snape. At the very least, he could have gotten someone to chaperone his lessons. Someone from the Order.

He should have worked harder at the lessons. He should have actually tried instead of thinking himself smarter than Dumbledore. He should have sucked up his forsaken pride and kissed Snape’s boots if that had been what it took to get a decent lesson out of the man. His professor regularly looked Voldemort in the eye and lied, for Merlin’s sake. He should have at least tried to learn from him.

Even if Snape was a completely unmitigated arse, that did not excuse Harry’s own weakness in stooping to that same level.

“Well, it won’t happen again,” he vowed into the darkness, as he’d done at least once every single night since Sirius had died. This next year was going to be different. He wasn’t a little kid anymore. He was almost sixteen years old. And he was Harry Potter. By all rights, he should have grown up a long time ago. Too many people depended on him. Sirius was dead because of him. Five of his best friends had almost been killed because of him.

Not this year. This year, Harry Potter was going to Hogwarts as an adult. He would hold his ruddy temper. He would turn the other cheek to Snape’s worst insults, even if he started laying into Harry’s parents…

He chuckled humorlessly. Snape had every right to hate James Potter. Harry would never again attempt to defend the man. Not to Professor Snape. That was a man who had earned the right to every deplorable comment he could think up. As painful as it was to make the comparison, expecting Snape to think kindly of James Potter would be like asking Harry to think kindly of Dudley. Not in this lifetime.
With a small sigh, Harry pushed those thoughts from his mind, and sent all others after them. He cleared his mind, as Snape had always pressed him to do. As he never had when it might have saved Sirius’ life.

It took a long time, but Harry finally felt himself pull free from the grief, guilt, and self-flagellation that occupied his waking hours. Drifting in a haze of blessed silence, his weary body soon surrendered to exhaustion.

Harry opened his eyes and blinked against the bright light. He squinted as he sat up, alarmed to realize that he wasn’t at the Dursleys’. He also realized that he wasn’t in pain.

And then he recognized his surroundings. He was at Hogwarts, on the grounds near the lake where he and Ron and Hermione usually sat and studied when the weather was nice.

He slowly got to his feet, and tried to figure out how he’d gotten here.

After a long minute of remembering nothing except going to sleep in pain at the Dursleys, he cautiously started walking toward the castle. There had to be someone in there who could tell him how he’d gotten here.

He barely stepped through the main doors of the castle when a flash of movement had him drawing his wand and pointing it at… Himself.

For a moment, he thought it was a mirror, but… no. This boy looked almost identical to him, but there were small differences. For one thing, he was wearing a Hufflepuff uniform. The other boy smiled warmly at him. “Hello, Harry.”

“Who are you?” Harry demanded.

“I’m you,” the other boy chuckled slightly. “Or rather, I am an Aspect of you. Specifically, I am your capacity for Loyalty.”

Harry blinked, stared, realized his jaw was hanging open, and closed it. Then stared some more. “What the hell?”

The boy smiled a little wider, but it was a commiserating smile, not a mocking one. “You’re a little confused right now. That’s to be expected. It might help if I told you that you’re not at Hogwarts. You’re still at the Dursleys’. Asleep.”

“This is a dream…?” Harry ventured.

“Sort of,” the boy shrugged. “This place is a metaphysical representation of your mind. The good and the bad. The light and the dark. Happiness and sadness. Hopes. Fears. Memories. And, of course, the aspects of your personality. We all exist here.”

Harry stared for a long time, trying to process the odds on whether he’d gone insane, was having a really weird dream, or if this was some kind of trick by Voldemort.

“Don’t believe me?” the boy offered. “I can prove it. Or rather, you can. This is your mind. Here, you are God. Try doing something impossible and see if it works.”

After staring for a little longer, Harry decided to give it a try. If this was his mind, then he should be
able to do anything. Like… fly without a broom.

He’d barely had the thought before he found himself floating a meter above the floor, staring wide-eyed down into the smiling eyes of… part of himself?

He quickly thought about being on the ground again and he was.

“Satisfied?”

Harry nodded uneasily.

“Great! Do you have any more questions?”

“Um… You’re… my loyalty?”

“Yep,” the boy grinned.

“That’s why you’re in Hufflepuff robes?”

He shrugged. “This is your mind, Harry. I am as you view me, even if you hadn’t ever actually imagined what the loyalty aspect of your personality would look like if given form. You see yourself as a loyal person, which is why I look like you. Clearly, you also recognize that it’s a Hufflepuff trait. Hence my wardrobe.”

Harry nodded slowly and gradually lowered his wand. That did kind of make sense. “You said there were others?”

“Of course,” Loyalty grinned. “You’re far from a one-dimensional person, Harry. There are many Aspects here. Would you like to meet some of them?”

Harry nodded warily.

“Follow me,” Loyalty offered warmly.

Harry slowly took up with the other boy as they left the Entrance Hall and moved further into the castle. “Why can’t I just bring them all to me instead of going to them? I should be able to do that right? Since this is my mind?”

Loyalty shrugged. “Yes and no. Of your impression of yourself,” he gestured to Harry’s person, “you can do almost anything. As for the rest of this place… There are some limits. Self-imposed limits, of course. First of all, you can’t do anything that you don’t believe you can do. Secondly, you can’t do anything that you don’t know how to do. Third, you can’t control anything that you don’t understand.

“Me, for instance, you both understand and embrace. You’re a loyal person and proud of it. That’s not true for every aspect of your personality. Until you’ve come to understand and accept every aspect, you will have very little control over them. In this place, there are suppressed urges, forgotten memories, repressed fears, lost hopes, nightmares and fantasies… everything that is who you are. With practice, you can lock it away, bring it to light, heal what’s hurt, fix what’s broken…” he shrugged. “It’s all you. With time and dedication, you could gain absolute control of this place. You don’t have that yet.”

Harry nodded slowly, and asked hesitantly. “Where are we? This… doesn’t look like Hogwarts. I mean, it does, but… It doesn’t.”
“It’s not,” Loyalty smiled gently. “Hogwarts is the only home you’ve ever had. That’s where the similarities come from. But your life doesn’t revolve around Hogwarts, no matter how much you may wish that it did. This place reflects all of you. Ah, here we are. The library.”

Harry blinked as he realized that they were standing in front of the doors to the Hogwarts library, though he was certain that they’d not left the ground floor. Then Loyalty pushed open the doors and Harry blinked again when he found himself looking into a room that was not the Hogwarts library. In fact… It was the library from Harry’s primary school.

“What…” he asked in bewilderment.

“This is where Knowledge lives,” Loyalty offered. “Come on.”

Harry hesitantly followed the other boy into the little library. “Why would the Knowledge aspect of my personality be in a primary school library?” Harry asked uneasily.

“When was the last time you embraced your thirst for knowledge, Harry?” Loyalty asked conversationally as he stopped in the back corner of the little library.

Harry’s eyes widened. “Um…”

A small whimper drew his attention to the table in front of him and he swallowed hard before cautiously crouching next to it. His breath caught when his eyes met those of a small, frightened boy in tattered, oversized clothes. He was about seven years old, huddled under the table like he was trying to hide and looking quite frightened at being found.

“Hello,” Loyalty smiled at the small, green-eyed boy as he knelt at Harry’s side. “How are you today, Knowledge?”

“F-fine,” the boy said, barely loud enough to be heard.

“Why does he look like that?” Harry breathed in horror.

Loyalty turned compassionate eyes on him. “You’ve been repressing him since you were seven, Harry. You taught yourself to ignore him. It was then that he stopped developing. What you see is the state at which this Aspect was when you locked him away in here. Of course, you do still touch on him occasionally, but you’ve never embraced him enough for him to mature or evolve.”

Harry felt vaguely sick. He felt like he’d been neglecting this Aspect the way the Dursleys had neglected him. And that wasn’t even taking into account what this must mean for the state of his mind. How many more Aspects were in a state like this? “It’s okay,” Harry said cautiously. “You can… you can come out of there.”

The boy just whimpered and crouched back further when Harry offered him a hand. Harry looked at Loyalty in helpless appeal.

Loyalty gave him a small, sad smile. “You have to mean it, Harry. You can’t just want to help him. You have to be willing to accept him.”

Harry swallowed hard and his stomach turned despite the fact that he shouldn’t really have a stomach, being in his mind and all. He closed his eyes and tried to remember the moment at which he’d started shunning any desire to learn. He had been seven. He’d gotten into the spelling bee at school, and he’d been so proud. He’d thought for sure that the Dursleys would see that he wasn’t worthless. Only, when he’d gotten home and told them… He winced as he remembered the weight of Vernon’s belt slamming against his back, over and over again while his uncle told him how stupid
and worthless he was, accused him of cheating to make Dudley look bad, and only hit harder when
Harry tried to argue his innocence. It was that night, weeping in his cupboard, that he’d decided he
was never going to learn anything again. And however absurd that idea was, he’d meant it with
complete conviction at the time.

Even now, it was so hard to convince himself that he didn’t have to believe that anymore. Even
knowing how pathetic it was to be determined to do the impossible in ceasing to learn anything, he
still felt fear, bitterness, and he could almost feel the leather striking his back.

“I’m not helpless,” he whispered fiercely, summoning the courage he’d used to face Voldemort four
out of the last five years. If he could face that, he could bloody well face this!

When he opened his eyes again, he had to wipe tears off his face, but the little boy under the table
was giving him a hesitant smile. Harry returned it tremulously and offered his hand again. The boy
took it this time, and allowed himself to be drawn out from under the table.

“Why is he still so small?” Harry asked quietly.

“I won’t grow up overnight.” To his surprise, it was Knowledge who answered. He sounded shy,
but at least he was talking now. “This is a start, but you have to keep believing if I’m going to
grow.”

“You called, boss?”

Harry spun around at the new voice and found himself gaping at the figure that had entered the
library behind him. It was a man of about thirty or thirty-five wearing auror robes. He had a wand
in his right hand and the sword of Gryffindor in the other. His black hair was trimmed short and
neat. He had a close-cut goatee and did not wear glasses over his bright green eyes.

“Who…?” Harry breathed.

“Courage, at your service,” the man saluted quickly.

Harry’s eyes widened as he looked the man over again. He looked like him, but grown up, filled
out, and somehow dangerous in a way that had nothing to do with the wand, the sword, or the robes.

“If you don’t need anything else, I’ll head back to the perimeter.”

“O…okay,” Harry huffed incredulously.

With one more hasty salute, the man vanished.

“Okay… So. If Knowledge stopped developing at seven, how did Courage end up… like that?”
Harry wondered.

“Well, he’s had plenty of chance to develop, hasn’t he?” Loyalty smiled. “He’s healthy and
nurtured, and your personal interpretation of Courage Personified. He can also be a little suicidal, so
I wouldn’t suggest taking his advice at face value.”

Harry huffed a small, breathless laugh and nodded. After the Department of Mysteries, Harry
strongly agreed with that sentiment. He’d been surviving on courage alone for too long, and Sirius
hadn’t been as lucky this time.

“Well, shall we move on?” Loyalty suggested.
Harry nodded uneasily, glancing at Knowledge again as he wondered what else he’d find here.

“Don’t worry about me,” Knowledge smiled shyly. “I think I’ll just stay here and do some organizing.”

It wasn’t until he mentioned it that Harry realized the place was a God awful mess. Books were scattered over most of the floor with just a clear path between the back table and the door. Some of the books looked to have been shredded. Haphazard piles of books and scrolls and torn pages lay everywhere.

“Do you… do you need some help?” Harry asked uncertainly. It seemed terribly rude to make Knowledge clean this place up when it was Harry’s neglect that had let it get like this.

Knowledge smiled a little and looked around. “Nah. Just keep wanting to know, and I’ll be all right.”

Harry nodded hesitantly and slowly followed Loyalty’s urging back out of the library.

“How you doing?” Loyalty asked sympathetically.

“I’m starting to think that I really might be insane,” Harry admitted. “Even if all of this is really my mind… that might just confirm it.”

Loyalty sighed and slung an arm around Harry’s shoulder. “Well, I’m not really qualified to judge – a bit biased, you know? I will say, however, that this is all a work in progress. You’ve already made a ton of progress with Knowledge. Try not to think of this as a testament to your sanity, but an opportunity to improve. That was your goal for this coming year, right? To be better? To grow up and stop being childish?”

Harry nodded slowly.

“Well, this is your chance,” Loyalty pointed out. “From here, if you are willing to face the truth, and stop hiding from who you are and what you’ve been through, you can heal a lot of wounds you probably don’t even realize that you have.”

Harry smiled a little and looked at the boy who looked so much like him. “Huh. I’m a pretty good friend, huh?”

Loyalty grinned at that. “You see? There are positives to see here as well.”

They walked for a little while in silence before they were stopped by a stunner zinging across their path right in front of Harry’s nose.

“Who goes there?” a nervous, slightly hysterical voice called from a doorway that led up a flight of stairs.

“It’s me, Loyalty. Don’t shoot!” Loyalty grinned.

“What… Who is that?” Harry asked uneasily.

“Paranoia,” Loyalty said sheepishly.

“How do I know that you’re you and not someone else made to look like you?!” Paranoia shouted down the stairs.

“We should probably… come back later,” Loyalty suggested, ushering them carefully passed the
stairway.

Harry shuddered slightly. His paranoid aspect sounded barmy. Then again, he supposed that he had reason to have a pretty strong streak of paranoia.

A few corridors later, Harry paused at the sound of bright, happy laughter. Relieved at something in this place that seemed so cheerful, Harry hurried over to the nearest window and blinked when he found himself looking out at the Quidditch pitch. Not over the grounds at the pitch, but as though the pitch was built into a courtyard right there.

A flash of movement drew his eyes up to where a small boy was zipping around on a racing broom, laughing at the top of his lungs and doing crazy stunts.

“Who’s that?” Harry breathed.

“Playfulness,” Loyalty smiled as he joined him at the window.

Harry sighed as the boy zoomed down to the window and stopped to greet them. He looked like Harry had at the beginning of his first year. Had it really been that long since he’d truly embraced playfulness?

“Pull my finger.”

Harry blinked and looked at the boy who was trying hard not to smirk.

“Go ahead,” he said with overdone innocence. “Nothing’s going to happen. Just pull on it.”

Harry looked warily at Loyalty, who was smiling warmly at the boy.

“Pull it, pull it, pull it, pull it!” the boy chanted.

Harry grimaced, but pulled the finger. And stumbled back when it came off in his hand.

The boy laughed uproariously as he wiggled his real finger out from the sleeve of his robe. “If you could see your face!” he laughed breathlessly.

“Let’s move on,” Loyalty suggested with an amused smile. “I don’t think there’s much you can do here right now.”

They continued walking down the corridors that could have come right out of Hogwarts and yet didn’t line up the way they should.

Harry didn’t know how long they walked before they came around a corner and Harry froze at the sight of another adult version of himself. This one was wearing plain black battle robes. His hair was long, tied back at his neck, and his face was grave. He was holding a wand and facing a black door that looked to have been blasted to pieces, then put back together. It was held in one piece with everything from chewing gum and spell-o-tape to randomly sized planks and nails that looked to have been repurposed based on the unusual shapes and colors. Some of the cracks and holes were stuffed with nothing more than a dirty sock or a ratty towel. His threadbare baby blanket was stuffed in the crack under the door.

“Hello, Will,” Loyalty greeted.

“Loyalty,” Will nodding without looking away from the door.

“What is that door?” Harry asked uneasily.
“Evil,” Will replied flatly.

Harry gulped. “There’s… evil i-in my mind? That’s my evil side in there?” he asked with growing panic.

Loyalty put a soothing hand on his shoulder. “Relax, Harry. That’s not an Aspect. That is a demon.”

Harry hardly felt any better. “There’s a demon in my mind?”

“Yes,” Will answered quietly.

“How… What… Why… What the hell is a demon doing in my mind? Is it a real demon? Or like, a collection of bad dreams, or…”

“It is there,” Will turned away from the door for the first time, lifting a hand to point at Harry’s head. …no. Not his head. His scar.

Harry’s hand flew to his mouth as he fought the urge to be sick. “Voldemort left that in me, didn’t he?”

Will’s head snapped back toward the door and Harry realized that there was an inky blackness seeping through some small cracks in the door. It looked disturbingly like that blackness that had come out of the diary when he’d stabbed it with the basilisk fang.

Will’s wand was up in an instant and a brilliant green beam of light shot out of it. It hit the blackness and there was a faint scream from behind the door as the tendril was destroyed under the green light.

“What… What just happened?” Harry gasped.

“The demon tries to get in. Always. I have been fighting it since it arrived, but it has grown stronger. Sometimes, it got out,” Will said gravely without looking away from the door. “He caused a lot of damage when he got in here completely. When he possessed you. When Loyalty and I forced him out that time, he was badly weakened. I was able to make repairs to the door at last, but he’s getting stronger again.”

Breathing unevenly, Harry sat down on a chair that was behind him as soon as it occurred to him to sit, and he buried his face in his hands.

“That’s my connection to Voldemort,” he groaned into his palms.

“It is,” Loyalty said quietly. “But Harry…”

Harry looked up when Loyalty paused.

The Aspect gave him an encouraging smile. “Remember, you can fix things here.”

Harry blinked, then looked at the door again. “I can fix that?”

Loyalty nodded.

“There’s no way to… get rid of… the demon, is there?”

“Perhaps,” Loyalty shrugged. “We don’t know.”
“Okay. How do I fix the door then?”

“Will is guarding it, and keeping the demon at bay,” Loyalty explained. “But he would need help to seal it. You, Harry, are all of us combined. Like Knowledge, however, some Aspects do not have the strength they could. Strengthen them, free them from where they are bound, and you will have the power to make that door impregnable.”

Harry nodded determinedly, and looked at Will again. Just by looking at him, it was obvious that he was one of Harry’s strongest Aspects. That wasn’t really surprising. He’d not have survived without a powerful will. No wonder he could resist the Imperius Curse.

“What else will I need for this?” Harry asked.

Loyalty shrugged, “Well, you’ll be strongest when you’ve accepted and empowered every Aspect, but the most important for this would be…” He looked thoughtful for a minute. “Cunning, Ambition, Logic, Knowledge, Protectiveness, Pride, and probably Paranoia, too.”

Harry blinked. That was more than he’d expected, but he supposed it made sense. Ambition to do it and do it right, Cunning, Knowledge, and Logic together to figure out the best way, Protectiveness because it was all about protecting him from that thing, Pride to believe that he could do it, and Paranoia to anticipate every possible weakness. “Okay. Who’s closest?”

Harry’s day – night? – just got more bizarre and traumatizing from that point on.

Cunning and Ambition turned out to be the closest. To Harry’s horror, he found them both in his mental recreation of the Slytherin common room that he’d seen briefly in his second year. Both were bound wrist and ankle in irons that were driven into the floor in the center of the common room, the length clearly not enough for them to leave. Ever. When he and Loyalty entered, they found the pair – both appearing about eleven and dressed in Slytherin robes – sitting on one of the sofas having what seemed to be a philosophical debate.

Harry groaned at the sight of more apparently repressed Aspects. “How long have you two been locked up in here?” he asked uneasily.

Cunning quirked an eyebrow – disturbingly reminiscent of Snape – and lazily drawled, “Since you found out that we were both ‘Slytherin traits’.”

“Not for lack of trying to escape,” Ambition added stonily, lifting his wrists, both of which were worn bloody from where the cuffs had rubbed as he’d apparently strained against them.

Well, they weren’t in as bad a shape as Knowledge, Harry recognized. These two were bound, but their spirits had evidently survived fairly intact. It wasn’t as though he never used his cunning or felt ambition. He just ignored them most of the time except in circumstances that he felt warranted them.

Harry ran a hand heavily through his hair as he felt nauseous again. Truly, there was no more blatant way to have his own stupidity shoved in his face than with visual evidence like this. Ever since starting Hogwarts, Harry had been prejudiced against the aspects of himself that were Slytherin. Deep down, he had been a Slytherin, but he’d refused to admit it. He’d forced himself to be a Gryffindor, even if it meant training himself to ignore parts of himself.

Not only did it feel profoundly wrong now that he was looking at Ambition’s chafed wrists and the scars on Cunning’s cuffs and chains that suggested he’d tried many, many times to find ways to remove them.
Maybe it was Harry’s right to decide which parts of himself to embrace, but he realized now that he’d been doing it for really pathetic reasons. It was childish and he could not afford to be childish any longer. If he was going to survive, much less have any chance of defeating Voldemort, he absolutely had to embrace his every advantage.

And really, if he didn’t let himself think about how it made him a Slytherin, he could hardly think that ambition or cunning were “bad” or in any way “evil” traits to have. If he’d had any ambition, maybe he’d have tried to actually learn something at Hogwarts instead of treating it like his primary school and just drifting through it. And there was a slight chance – wince for the understatement – that facing some of his considerable difficulties with cunning rather than slamming headfirst into all of them with nothing but courage and will might have been a good idea here and there.

The sound of iron hitting the floor drew his attention to the fact that Ambition and Cunning had just been freed of their bonds. They were now exchanging somewhat malign grins of satisfaction. Those looks made Harry a bit uneasy, but he refused to ever stymie himself by suppressing useful Aspects again. He wouldn’t. He could avoid completely giving himself over to those Aspects without pretending they didn’t exist – mentally chaining them in the dungeons where he’d apparently felt they belonged.

“Um… Look,” Harry said uneasily, uncertain if they wouldn’t be holding a grudge against him for locking them up for so long, “Do you two think you could go hang out with Will for a little while. I need your help to repair the door keeping Voldemort out, but I have a few other Aspects to pick up first.”

They both looked very pleased by that as they started away.

Harry looked after them uneasily before looking at Loyalty again. “I really wish the two of them were stronger. Do you think they’ll really be able to help?”

Loyalty shrugged. “Well, they’re not really eleven, remember. That’s how old you were when you started repressing them, but they have been around since then, just like Knowledge has. You’ve utilized them from time to time. They’re not as strong as they could be, but they’ll do what they can. And they’ll grow quickly as long as you’re able to hold onto the conviction that you found tonight in order to release them.”

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. He almost didn’t want to find any more tonight, but he didn’t want to waste any time in strengthening that door as much as possible. The memory of being possessed by that psycho was more than enough inspiration to continue.

The next stop was Pride. They found him in a courtyard that just happened to look exactly like the backyard at the Dursleys where Harry had been spending most of his days on one task or another that kept him under the blazing sun but out of sight from the neighbors.

Pride wasn’t working though. He was just standing in the yard, staring defiantly at the wall across the way that looked exactly like the back of the Dursleys’ house. And maybe it actually was. Pride was dressed in the tattered clothes given to him by the Dursleys, oversized and filthy from working. They were also bloody, the source of the blood very obviously being Pride himself as he looked like he’d endured one of the worst beatings that Harry had ever gotten from them just minutes ago.

At least this one, Harry was pretty sure, wasn’t his fault. It was his so-called family that had put his pride in such a state, but still, it held strong. The Aspect looked a little older than Harry was, maybe as much as twenty, and he didn’t look at all weak despite the humiliation anyone would have felt to wear such clothes and the beating he’d obviously taken.
Harry hadn’t received any beatings this year, thanks to the Order’s threats. He was pretty sure that’s why they kept finding reasons to send him out in the sun. It just wouldn’t do if Harry wasn’t in as much pain as they could cause.

After sending Pride off to join the others, Harry and Loyalty returned to Paranoia. After ten minutes of trying to convince the Aspect that they were who they claimed to be, Harry got fed up and just willed himself to be next to the Aspect, and then hastily willed himself to be impervious to anything Paranoia could do when he started trying to curse him.

Harry finally had to slap him before the man would calm down. Even then, his eyes darted around constantly, searching for threats. Harry could see the benefit of having a developed streak of paranoia, but he seriously needed to get a handle on this. The Aspect was based out of the Astronomy tower – for the full range of vision and few access points. He was holding a wand in each hand with four more stuffed into available pockets and two into the waistband of his trousers. The room also looked a lot like Fake Mad-Eye’s office had. It was filled with foe glasses, sneak-o-scopes, dark detectors, and every other manner of spying or detection device that Harry had ever heard of.

It took him a while to figure out how to tone down his paranoia to improve this Aspect. He had lots of very good reasons to be paranoid, after all. Finally, he thought about Mad-Eye, about how much he didn’t want to be “that guy”, and spent a good half hour convincing himself of ways to make his paranoia healthier. He hadn’t even realized that he was that bad, but he wasn’t too surprised. He hadn’t had many opportunities lately to get worried, being that he’d been between Hogwarts, Privet Drive, and Grimmauld Place fairly exclusively, generally only around people that he already knew. Thinking about it, he could see how he’d gotten a bit paranoid lately when he’d stepped out of those comfort zones.

Finally, he looked at Paranoia again, and was pleased to see that the Aspect looked considerably less crazy. Though he still had all the extra wands, at least he’d started using the mirrors to watch his back instead of constantly looking over his shoulder, and the feverish light in his eyes had diminished.

“Just Protectiveness and Logic left, right?” Harry sighed tiredly when he’d sent Paranoia off and rejoined Loyalty.

The Aspect nodded. “Nice work with Paranoia, by the way. That’s the first time he’s left that tower since the Third Task.”

Harry chuckled ruefully at the truth of that statement and what it said about him.

“Well, come on,” Loyalty smiled. “Let’s go get Logic.”

Harry was surprised when he was led to the headmaster’s office. He was still struggling to understand why this Aspect would be hanging out there when they neared the door and an angry roar came along with a crash and the sound of things breaking.

Alarmed, Harry hurried to open to door, only to be forced to make himself impervious once again as an object flew at him. Harry was stunned at an image of himself – looking almost exactly like him right down to the Gryffindor robes – except that his face was contorted in fury as he destroyed Dumbledore’s office. He almost expected to find the old man sitting calmly behind the desk, but was very glad to find the chair empty. Even a representation of the old man in his head would have severely disturbed him. Not that he was particularly comforted by seeing how he must have looked when he’d thrown that fit.
“Rage,” Loyalty spoke as he stopped next to Harry.

That explained it. It was somewhat disturbing to find that this aspect of himself was so much more powerful than some of the others that seemed much healthier and much more useful.

For some time, Harry just watched in disturbed awe as Rage went on without pause, throwing things around the office, only to have them return to their original position in pristine condition a few moments later until he put hands on them again.

He wasn’t drawn from the astonished staring until he realized that there was another Aspect in the room when the last one had to dodge a flying object. This latest Aspect was dressed in Ravenclaw robes, impassively watching the destruction.

“Now was there any point in that?” the Ravenclaw said emotionlessly. “Do you really feel any better?”

Logic, Harry realized. No wonder he had such a hard time being logical if that Aspect was constantly trying to talk sense into Rage.

“Um… Can we talk to you outside?” Harry managed to ask the unaffected Aspect between violent crashes and howls of fury.

“Of course,” Logic nodded, still with that disturbing lack of emotion.

Harry winced as something collided with the door just as it closed behind them, and they rode the staircase back down to the relieving silence of the corridor. “He’s always like that?” he uneasily asked of the one they’d left behind.

“Since you let him loose in Dumbledore’s office,” Logic nodded, looking slightly disapproving, but still scarily blank-faced.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. “That was a rough night, and Dumbledore was a prick for the way he handled it.”

Logic just nodded silent agreement.

“Come on,” Loyalty suggested. “Protectiveness will meet us back at the door.”

Harry raised a curious eyebrow at that.

Loyalty just shrugged, “Protectiveness, Harry. You need protecting. He’ll be there.”

“Oh.” That made sense. “Why wasn’t he there with Will already?”

“Well, it’s usually not you that you’re worried about protecting, is it? He spends most of his time guarding your memories of Innocence, and some of the more recent happy ones.”

“Innocence?” Harry asked interestedly. He didn’t even want to imagine what shape that Aspect must be in.

Loyalty grimaced slightly. “Innocence died when you were four, I’m afraid,” he said quietly.

Harry gulped, but he wasn’t greatly surprised. Just went to show how stupid Dumbledore had been to try to give him a “childhood” though. It was now confirmed that he hadn’t been a “child” since he was four. In fact, if Aspects had human rights, he was pretty sure the Dursleys would be going to prison for murder.
When they got back to the door, Harry had the interesting experience of seeing so many of his Aspects together.

Will was still watching the door. Ambition and Cunning were having a whispered conversation that was slightly unnerving for the way they kept sending speculative looks at the others. Knowledge was sitting in a corner, hugging his knees, though his face was up and he seemed to be evaluating everyone. Protectiveness – a well-developed adult Aspect – stood in the back with his hand on his wand like he was standing guard over the group. Paranoia was huddled back in a second corner, trying to watch everyone at once, but he still looked markedly saner than when Harry had first met him. Pride seemed to be trying to look down his nose at everyone despite his ragged appearance.

“Okay…” Harry said somewhat uneasily as every eye turned to him on his entrance. He did realize that it was somewhat ridiculous to be nervous addressing a crowd of various Aspects of himself, but… He really had no idea what to do now. He automatically looked to Loyalty for advice. That Aspect had been the one giving it all night.

Loyalty smiled a little in response, but it was Logic who spoke in his emotionless tone. “We will all be necessary to accomplish our goal. Perhaps we should compare thoughts,” he suggested.

Harry nodded, glad that some part of him knew what was going on. “Right. So, does anyone have any ideas on how we should go about fixing that to keep Voldemort from getting in here again?”

Knowledge spoke first. “The original door was formed by Mother’s sacrifice and secured by Will,” he said quietly, staring at his knees. “It was damaged in first year when we killed Quirrell because we used a lot of the sacrifice’s remaining power. In fourth year, when our blood was used in his resurrection ritual, most of the power that was left was drained and he was able to break it down.”

“I held him back as much as I was able,” Will said with quiet intensity – not looking away from the door. “Without the door, there was little that I could do. We made what repairs we could over time, but it wasn’t until after the possession that we were able to get it to fully close again. I fear, however, that it may not remain that way for long once his strength has recovered.”

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Okay. So how do we fix it?”

“Memories,” Logic supplied.

Harry frowned uncertainly and Logic continued before he could ask a question.

He moved over to the door and pointed to the blanket beneath it. “A memory of comfort and a wish for family and identity.” He next directed attention to the old sock, “A memory of bitterness, embarrassment, and longing.”

Harry frowned at that until he realized that it was an old sock he’d received from the Dursleys for Christmas one year. It had been way too big, had a hole in the toe, had no mate, and had not even been washed after Vernon last wore it. Still, he’d kept it in his cupboard because it had been a gift, however pathetic. The memory was not a pleasant one.

Logic pointed to a piece of used chewing gum next. “A memory of playfulness and friendship.” In primary school, before Dudley taught everyone to avoid him, a boy named Josiah had shared a piece of gum. He then indicated one of the strangely shaped boards. “A memory of home and happiness.”

Harry blinked as he realized that the board looked like a piece of his bed at Hogwarts.

“A memory of loyalty and friendship,” Logic pointed to the spell-o-tape.
Harry wondered if it was from the memory of Ron attempting to fix his broken wand in second year. “So the door is patched up with memories,” he concluded. “How, exactly, can I even make memories into objects?” he posed to anyone, though his eyes stuck on Knowledge.

The Aspect didn’t disappoint. “Here, memories are objects. Everything that you see, hear, smell, touch, taste, and feel here is made of memory. Some, like the walls, floor, sky outside, and other things are a conglomeration of general knowledge gleaned through the context of many memories. Others are more specific to certain memories. The latter have more strength because there are emotions in them. The stronger the emotions, the stronger the memory.”

“Thank you,” Harry nodded to the apparently small boy. He got a little smile in return. “So how do I go about finding memories to use on this door?” he wondered.

“You’re asking the wrong question,” Cunning admonished. “Locating memories here is easy. What you need to be wondering is which memories to find.”

Ambition nodded his agreement. “When we were possessed, how did we get rid of the demon?”

Harry frowned, recalling that Dumbledore had asked him something similar. “I thought about Sirius.”

Cunning smirked, “Right. The biased old bastard concluded that you’d frightened away the demon with thoughts of love,” he sneered the last word with almost as much distaste as he’d put into “biased old bastard”.

“I didn’t?” Harry frowned uncertainly.

Cunning rolled his eyes. “What is love, Harry?” Logic posed.

“It’s…” Harry frowned. He was sure that he knew this, but… He couldn’t bring a definition to mind. Maybe he should look it up the next time he found a dictionary.

“Exactly,” Logic nodded to the non-answer. “If you’re wondering, that Aspect is still alive, but he stopped developing the night our parents were killed.”

Harry’s eyes widened and he almost choked to hear that. “That’s my great weapon against Voldemort?! An Aspect of my personality that I haven’t known since my parents died?!” In retrospect, he should have realized that sooner, but he’d never really thought of it that way. Love was… Well… He loved Hedwig. Right? He cherished her, at least. He’d be heartbroken if she died. And surely he must love his friends. And the Weasleys. He liked them, at least. Thinking about it though, he really hadn’t the first idea how to tell if he felt love or if it was just “like” for anyone.

That was incredibly disturbing to think about.

“Dumbledore’s an idiot,” Cunning scowled.

Logic nodded his agreement. “He is intelligent, but not smart. Despite his age, he is capable of understanding only his own narrow spectrum of experience in many things. He knows that our life with the Dursleys was difficult, but has truly never imagined how bad because he cannot comprehend a reality in which family would harm family on any real level. At least, not without the corrupting influence of Dark Magic at work. Since the Dursleys are muggles, he believes that they must truly love you, even if they do not often show it.”
“They hate me,” Harry said without the slimmest doubt. “They’ve gone out of their way to make sure that I understand that.”

Logic dipped his head in agreement again. “He left you with the Dursleys. He abandoned Sirius to Azkaban when he could have demanded a trial for him, being the head of the Wizengamot. He attempted to give you a childhood by sheltering you from the truth since you’ve started Hogwarts, yet he has not protected you from the true dangers. Perhaps he has been carefully manipulating you throughout your entire life or perhaps he is merely a very foolish and misguided old man. Either way, his grievances against you, personally, are many. Trusting him would be folly.”

Harry stared at Logic and tried not to let himself get too angry. He remembered what Rage had looked like, throwing a tantrum up there in his mental reproduction of Dumbledore’s office. He didn’t want to be that. He was better than that. Rage might be able to do a lot of damage, but that Aspect alone was not going to keep him alive.

After a long moment, he managed a fairly calm nod and tried to return to the topic at hand. “So we don’t think that love is the power the prophecy was talking about?”

“Quite likely,” Logic noted, “this is the power. Us, together, here. If you can master your mind, you can maximize your power, intellect, and memory.”

Harry’s eyes widened as he realized that Logic was right. This probably was his great secret weapon. He kind of wished that it was something more like being invincible or shooting lasers out of his eyes, but he could work with this. And now that he knew, he was going to work that much harder to use it.

“All right. So, if it wasn’t my love for Sirius that got Voldemort out of my mind when I was possessed, what was it?”

“Grief,” Will said in his quiet, intense voice. “Whether or not you loved Sirius, you saw him as your last chance at a family. Losing him was like losing your parents all over again. There was an entire future that you watched die with him. A future that you had only begun to imagine. The pain of that was incredibly intense. It weakened him drastically and Loyalty and I were able to shove him out.”

Harry sighed. That made more sense than Voldemort being unable to be in the presence of something so “pure” as love. As though there was anything about Harry that was pure or innocent anymore. The Dursleys had literally killed his Innocence, and he was far too scarred and bitter to ever be pure in anything. Besides, it seemed to him that Voldemort would be more likely to sneer at evidence of love than flee from it. It’s not like he hadn’t murdered enough families in his life, and their love of each other had never slowed him down.

“Was it really my mum’s love for me that saved me from the Killing Curse?” he wondered. He really had no idea if any of them knew, but he was curious.

“It was a ritual,” Knowledge supplied. “Black magic. The kind that you will get the Kiss for being found to use.”

Harry’s jaw dropped as he stared at the small boy. “How do you know?” he breathed.

“You have very old memories of it. At the time, they meant nothing to you. Cross-referenced with more recent knowledge, however, they take on meaning. Blood was taken and offered as sacrifice on a full moon night. The ritual was put into motion months before Voldemort’s attack. When he came, our mother enacted the power of the ritual by verbally offering her life in your place. By killing her then, Voldemort accepted her offer and the magic of the ritual then empowered you with
protection from him. That is why his curse backfired. When the demon latched onto you, that magic continued to protect you, though it has waned slightly each Samhain since. Now that Voldemort bears our blood, the protection is almost useless,” he nodded toward the desiccated door.

Harry felt the need to sit again. Happily, a chair appeared for him as it had before. It hadn’t been a desperate choice in the last moments of her life. His mother had made the choice to give her life for his months before. She definitely deserved to be in Gryffindor.

“Okay…” he struggled to calm down. “Okay. So… All right, so memories of pain are the ones I should be using to keep Voldemort out? How come all of those are happy memories? Or happy-ish,” he gestured toward the patched-up door.

“They’re what we had,” Loyalty smiled sadly. “We’ve had only limited power. Some of us have more than others.”

Harry sighed. That’s right. Cunning and Ambition were chained up in the basement. Knowledge was hiding under the table in the library. Paranoia refused to leave his tower. Logic was stuck trying to talk sense into Rage. Loyalty, Courage, Will, and Playfulness were probably the only ones with relatively free reign in here. Well, and Protectiveness, though he apparently spent most of his time looking after Harry’s sadly few happy memories.

“We need to construct a new door entirely,” Ambition spoke up.

Cunning nodded, “The power of that sacrificial ritual is almost completely gone. Patching isn’t enough anymore.”

“How do we do that?” Harry asked, standing again as he tried to force his mind onto the most urgent matters at hand. He’d worry about the sad state of the rest of his mind later.

“The demon remains weak,” Logic offered. “This is the ideal time to do it.”

Cunning nodded his agreement. “If we put a powerful memory in place, it should hold until the new door can be secured. I would suggest emotional pain, since the demon is not unfamiliar with physical pain, though the latter might also be incorporated.”

And so they set to work. The Aspects led Harry around his mental castle, locating memories to use. It was… not pleasant to be handling those memories, but Harry had endured them all before. It was the pain after Cedric’s death that was used to hold the demon at bay while they worked on piecing together a door crafted of Harry’s very worst memories.

With the help of the Aspects, Harry figured out how to fashion a memory into the object that he desired. It was really just a matter of taking the memory in hand, and enduring the pain within it while he concentrated on what he wanted it to be. It took form then, fairly quickly, though it always seemed longer than it was. The door was made of heavy wooden planks, then plated in iron, and bound with steel, including four heavy, steel locking bars. Then, over that, he made heavy granite blocks and bricked it all over. All of the Aspects lent their strength to each construction, infusing it with Will, Courage, Protectiveness, Logic, Ambition, Cunning, etc. Through this construction, they would all work toward keeping the block strong without having to actually have their attention on it all the time, which he could only imagine would improve his willpower significantly.

The last block slid into the wall, supported by Harry’s trembling arms, and a flash of verdant light sealed the edges together.

Harry immediately collapsed, more exhausted than he’d ever been in his life, including right after
escaping Voldemort in fourth year.

“You did well, Harry,” he heard whispered in his ear, and then everything went dark.
The Truth Hurts

Chapter Summary

Chapter One Synopsis

Harry goes to sleep at Privet Drive, for the first time actually trying to clear his mind properly after vowing to himself to grow up and start acting like an adult before he got more people killed. When he falls asleep, he discovers a detailed, if chaotic, mindscap[e and a number of sentient entities that apparently represent Aspects of his personality. Together, they reinforce the barrier protecting his mind from Voldemort’s.

Chapter Notes

This story is AU. That means I'm going to be having my randy way with canon. What is relevant at the moment is that Severus has not made any vows to kill anyone and Dumbledore does not have a blackened hand. Though many aspects of HBP have been hijacked, this is NOT leading into anything resembling DH. Seventh year will be completely AU.

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 2

The Truth Hurts

2 July 1996 - Tuesday

Harry woke to a sharp rapping on his door demanding that he get up and make breakfast. He groaned quietly at the pain in his back and lamented leaving his bed as he barely felt like he’d slept at all. That had been an exceptionally weird dream though. Even for him.

Well, at least it hadn’t been another nightmare.

It wasn’t until several hours later, while he was guzzling water from the hose on the short break he’d been given for lunch, that he finally began to wonder if it hadn’t been a dream. Despite how incongruous it seemed that he’d really spent the night with the Aspects of his personality building a better defense in his mind against Voldemort, Harry was starting to realize that he actually did feel different. His mind felt clearer and calmer than it had in years. He felt like he could really think. Reason. He was still sad about Sirius, but the worst of the guilt had faded.

Sleep was a long time coming that night. The blisters on his back were oozing. He suspected that his relatives were trying to kill him via skin cancer now. His mind drifted dazedly through his
memories of the night before while he lay there. He didn’t quite realize that he was falling asleep until he noticed that the pain was gone. He opened his eyes then and found himself back in that room, staring at a freshly bricked-over section of wall where that black door had stood.

“Welcome back.”

Harry blinked and looked up at where Loyalty was standing over him with a warm smile.

“Yeah, good to see you. Come on, get up, we’ve got more work to do,” Ambition added impatiently.

With a sigh, Harry pulled himself up off the floor. All the Aspects he’d worked with last night were here. “What’s on the agenda tonight?” Harry asked. He was starting to suspect that this really was real. Surely he couldn’t possibly be having a perfect continuation of last night’s dream. His mind was way too chaotic for that.

“Security,” Protectiveness said sternly. “You may have blocked the demon’s backdoor, but the front remains wide open.”

“Organization,” Knowledge added. “I’m cleaning up the library, but there’s still far too much chaos here. You need to sort your memories.”

“No,” Will put in. “He needs to have a look at his magical core. It’s in bad shape, and it could be a lot stronger.”

“All those are important,” Logic countered the three of them. “And I could add that he needs to get Rage under control and deal with Fear as well. You are far too emotionally driven to function productively whenever you face antagonism. Emotions are powerful motivators and can lend a great deal of strength to certain spells, but you must master them rather than allowing them to master you.”

“I agree with everyone,” Loyalty smiled. “I can’t say that any are more important than the others, either. I suggest that you devote a couple hours each night to each of those pursuits.”

Harry sighed. He couldn’t help but feel like he deserved a break, at least at night, but he knew that they were all right. He had to get his mind in order as soon as possible. And he was very curious about what Will had said about his magic, too. He just hoped he wouldn’t feel so tired every morning or he couldn’t imagine how he was going to survive the summer. Of course, this was considerably better than the nightmares that had plagued him every night since Sirius’ death.

Harry decided to start with Will, since he wanted to know what the Aspect had meant about his magical core. He was led down deep within the bowels of the castle, and when they stopped before the doors, Harry realized with some unease that they were standing at the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets – or so it appeared. He gulped and looked at Will again. “Why is it here?” he asked weakly.

“Because this is the least-accessible place you know,” Will shrugged, his face as stony as ever.

Harry nodded. That made sense, he supposed, though he didn’t like it that Voldemort was the only other person who could enter this place. Well, that wouldn’t matter as long as he kept him out of his mind entirely, he supposed. Kind of like at Hogwarts. Voldemort might be able to open the chamber, but he’d have to get into Hogwarts first. “We just go in, then?” he asked uneasily.

Will dipped his head in a slight nod.

Harry took a deep breath and hissed the door open. As soon as he’d done it, an idea struck him. “Hey, can I change the password?” he wondered.
“It is your mind,” Will nodded. “Just speak the new phrase and will it to be so.”

Harry thought about it for a minute, and then smirked vindictively. “Voldemort’s a whiny bitch.”

Will snorted quietly and his lips trembled with the suggestion of a smile. “That is one way to keep him from guessing it,” he agreed quietly.

Harry grinned, pleased with his own cunning, and stepped through the now-open door into…

His jaw dropped. The interior was not the Chamber of Secrets despite the door. Instead, he found himself entering a perfectly spherical room. In the center of the room, something was floating. It was bright green and… Well, it looked like a lumos light wrapped in cloth. There were a few tears in the cloth where light was bleeding through unimpeded. A steady stream of bright green liquid was leaking out at the bottom, dripping onto the floor to make a small puddle that didn’t seem to be growing any larger. In addition to the cloth, there were several ribbons tied around it. They looked a little frayed.

“It’s not supposed to look like that, is it?” he whispered uneasily.

“No,” Will said flatly.

“Why does it, then?”

“Your magic is bound by several sources. Our mother’s sacrifice was the first. The ritual magic has drawn strength directly from your core, greatly impeding your potential, but offering what protection it could as it began to degenerate. The ribbons are intentional magical bindings. I do not know their origins, but I believe the memories are still stored in the deepest archives.”

“Can I see them?”

Will shook his head. “The archives are sealed by an outside source.”

“Outside source?” he frowned.

“An obliviate.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. He’d been obliviated? “Wait, if I was obliviated, shouldn’t the memories be gone?”

“I do not know. You would have to confer with Knowledge.”

Harry nodded uneasily, making a mental note to head there next. “Is there anything that I can do about this?”

“Yes. That is why I brought you here. It will take time and effort, but you can begin to unravel the blocks.”

Harry’s stomach turned again. “Someone deliberately blocked my magic, didn’t they?”

“The obliviates make that very likely,” Will agreed. “Some of it may have also been your doing.”

“You’re saying I did this to myself?” Harry asked, incensed.

Will just nodded, unaffected by Harry’s anger. “You were punished for accidental magic. It is natural that you would suppress it just as you suppressed Knowledge.”
Harry growled quietly and took a few moments to try to calm himself again. Logic was right. He really did need to do something about Rage. “Okay. Tell me what to do.”

And so the next couple of hours—though it felt much longer—were spent in that room, literally unraveling a ribbon one thread at a time. They didn’t want to come free and they were painful to touch, but Will promised him that the pain was a defense mechanism and not doing him any physical, mental, or magical harm. It wasn’t Cruciatus pain, but it was bad enough that he had tears streaking his face and his jaw hurt from clenching by the time Will informed him that his allotted time for the night had ended.

Gasping and trying not to weep with relief, Harry almost crawled back out of his core and gratefully locked the door again. Considering how much he’d accomplished, he probably had a couple more months of nightly sessions like that before he removed the last ribbon. He really hoped that the cloth surrounding it didn’t have to come off the same way.

He sought out Knowledge next, and took a trip down to the archives. Unfortunately, when they got there, he found himself staring at nothing more than a solid wall.

“The archives are hidden here,” Knowledge explained to Harry’s questioning look.

“But I thought obliviate was supposed to remove memories, not conceal them,” Harry pointed out. “Is this what happens to everyone, or am I… different?” Am I even more of a freak than I thought? Was left unspoken.

Knowledge just shrugged. “I know no mind but yours. If you can find an account of similar situations in others, I can store the knowledge, but I can’t create it from nothing.”

Harry sighed and shook his head. “You seem to know a lot more than I do.”

“I do not,” Knowledge said quietly. “I am, quite literally, the sum total of your knowledge. I simply am able to access things that you’ve forgotten, and things that you never realized you’d learned. A conversation to which you did not pay enough attention to note or recall, for example, would still be here. When I am finished organizing all of your knowledge, you will be able to access it all at will.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Really? I’ll have a perfect memory?”

“Everyone has a perfect memory,” Knowledge corrected. “Knowledge is never lost once it has been gained. The question is rather if an individual’s mind is capable of locating and utilizing the knowledge on command. Your ability to access your mind in this way makes you capable. Well, once I’ve got it all sorted, at least.”

“So, anyone could potentially do this?” It seemed bizarre to Harry, who’d always thought that a perfect memory was an extremely rare gift that some people just had and most didn’t.

“Yes and no,” Knowledge shrugged. “Muggles cannot access their mind in this way. Many magicals could never delve deeply enough into their mind to manage it.”

Harry shook his head, “Okay, where did I learn that?”

Knowledge smirked. “It is derived from impressions, insinuations, half-heard conversations, ignored lessons, and television programs heard through the cupboard door. A benefit of having me singled out from your other Aspects is that I am capable of compiling this sort of thing almost without thought. Even a perfect memory would not grant that.”

“But how?” Harry had to wonder. “How is this possible? How come I can do it?”
Knowledge frowned thoughtfully for a moment before offering. “Think of it this way. When you dream, you can often perfectly recall things that you could not in the waking world. Dreams can also show you parallels that you would not draw on your own. Everyone has this ability. They merely cannot access it at will. You have tapped into your subconscious. Each of us is an Aspect of your subconscious mind, while you,“ he gestured to Harry’s person, “are the sum total of your conscious mind. I can’t be sure, but I imagine that you are perhaps unique in your ability to do that.

“As to why you are able,” he shrugged again. “Perhaps it relates to the ritual our mother used. Perhaps it is a side-effect of that protection existing within us for so long. Perhaps it is caused by the demon’s presence that you unconsciously battled for most of your life. It could even be a combination of all three and more. Maybe if the Dursleys had been kind, you would not have been as connected to your subconscious. Maybe it is all of the near-death experiences you’ve had. I can’t say with any certainty given your current knowledge, but I can tell you that you are unique, Harry. And it’s not because of the prophecy. You are unique because a great many improbable circumstances have combined to make you unique.”

Harry sighed wearily and Knowledge giggled. “Everyone’s unique, you know,” he pointed out. “No two people are the same. Your differences just tend to be a little more blatant.”

Harry frowned at that, but dismissed it for the moment. “Is there any way to get in here?” he asked, nodding toward the wall.

Knowledge scowled at the wall. “Memories can’t be used against this. The wall is a memory trap. Any that you try to employ would merely be lost within. You’ll need pure magic to breech this. I suspect more pure magic than you can access at the moment. Keep working on your core, and we’ll come back to this.”

Harry glared at the wall, but nodded. He really wanted to know who’d obliviated him and why, but he supposed grumbling about it wasn’t going to fix anything. He’d just have to wait and keep working on his core. But no more of that tonight. He didn’t think he could handle it. “Okay. Let’s work on organizing my memories, then.”

Knowledge led him back out of the deep archives and up to the library where Knowledge liked to hang out. Though it had only been a day, Harry could already see that the library looked slightly cleaner, and it was getting larger. Knowledge must have been adding more shelves as he sorted through the mess.

“Okay, your memories are, literally, scattered everywhere in your mind,” Knowledge started. “Not only does that make it extremely difficult for me to find them so that you can use them, but I believe it is a large part of the reason that your mind is so chaotic. Now, your memories fall into the domain of all of your Aspects, generally more than one in each memory. Your memories have shaped who you are. They are, in essence, you. That is why they are so powerful here. As you learned last night, they can be used to your benefit, but they can also be a detriment if left to their own devices.

“So, a few things need to happen here for you to get your memories into proper order. First things first, we need a depository for your new memories so that they’re not ending up scattered all over the place for you to search out and organize later.”

Harry blinked. “How the hell do I create a memory depository?”

Knowledge smiled. “Remember, Harry, this is your mind. All things are possible in here. You need only to convince yourself that it is so and it will be. Once the depository is ready, we’ll move on to the memory archive. That’s where you’ll store all of your memories, sorted, labeled, and carefully ordered. When the archive is ready, we’ll be able to start moving your memories directly
from the depository into the archive without you having to manually order them, which will save you a lot of time and effort.”

Harry nodded. Saving time and effort sounded good. One day, he hoped to relax at night, again.

“So, you need to choose a location and means for the depository.”

Harry sighed and sat down to give it some thought. Then he frowned. “I could use some help. Maybe Logic and Cunning?”

“I’d suggest Ambition and Will as well. Once you get the hang of controlling this place a little more, you won’t need Will’s direct influence, but it couldn’t hurt now. And Ambition might have some ideas that you may not consider.”

Harry nodded, “Do I have to go and find…?” he trailed off as the four Aspects in question just appeared in the room. “Never mind. Okay,” he addressed the group. “I need to make a memory depository. I’m trying to figure out what form it should take and where I should put it. Any suggestions?”

“Craft it from a memory of studying,” Logic offered. “The memory will already contain a desire to retain memories, which will do much of the work for you.”

Harry smiled. He really liked brainstorming with his Aspects. They made him feel so smart. “Great idea. What else?” he asked of the group.

“Don’t allow the memories to take physical form,” Cunning put in. “Some of them are volatile, and they may not react well together. Restrain them to a single, uniform form.”

Harry nodded. That made sense.

“What form do you plan for the archive to take?” Logic asked.

Harry frowned, “I hadn’t really thought about it yet.” How would he store his memories? Books, maybe? But that made him think too much of his knowledge, and they were two very different things. It would be inconvenient though, to have them take physical forms like they’d been doing naturally. How could he possibly organize them all when some were in the shape of a flower, and others a statue or a living animal? It would be like a storage room meets museum meets zoo. That hardly sounded well-organized.

What did he think about when he considered his memories? Well, a pensieve, he supposed, but it would hardly be that efficient to have a mess of pensieves holding each memory. There had to be thousands of them, after all. Many thousands.

That made him think about the prophecy orbs at the Department of Mysteries. Each had held something very like a memory of a prophecy. But even thinking about that place gave him the creeps. He didn’t want a Hall of Prophecies in his mind, even if it was holding memories rather than prophecies. What did that leave?

Wait a minute, he frowned. Photographs. They were memories, in their way, and especially wizarding photographs, which not only moved, but seemed to somehow harness something of the people in them, allowing the people in the photos to act in a way that went with the personality and mindset of the people when the picture was taken.

But how would he store those…? He could frame them and hang them on a wall, but that would take a lot of space. He could put them into albums, he supposed. Actually, that was a really good
idea. He relayed the thought to the Aspects, who nodded thoughtfully.

“So kind of like a library, but for photo albums rather than books,” Logic extrapolated. “Then the memories coming in could be in the form of photographs, which is convenient, because they will take little space and will not be able to attack each other or wander off…”

“Just have them collect in a shoe box,” Cunning smirked. “Put it in the room with the archive, near the door.”

“I would suggest having them automatically copy themselves.”

Harry blinked and looked over at where Protectiveness was standing. “When did you get here?” he frowned. He hadn’t called for him.

“Well, your mind does bear evidence of past obliviates,” he shrugged. “If you copy all of your memories and store them in a secondary location, no one attempting to obliviate you could possibly think there was a need to steal the memory twice.”

Harry nodded, then slowly grinned. “Brilliant,” he congratulated. He really hated the idea of being obliviated, and the fact that he had been at some point, only reinforced that. “Thanks.”

Protectiveness only nodded.

Harry made a mental note to include that guy more often. Knowledge nodded and Harry looked at him strangely for a moment before he realized that Knowledge was probably storing his mental notes for him. That made him smile before moving on. “Any other suggestions?”

“I vote we raze this castle,” Ambition put in.

Harry blinked at him. “Excuse me?” he asked, bewildered.

Ambition shrugged unrepentantly. “This place was constructed out of a chaotic mind throughout your life. Hogwarts is more organized, which is saying a lot. This is your mind, I think that you should wipe the slate clean, so to speak, and start over. Build it properly, exactly as you want it, with nothing extra.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully. It was an ambitious suggestion – not surprisingly. It sounded like a lot of work too, given everything that he already had on his plate. Ambition did make a good point though.

“It’s something to keep in mind,” Logic temporized. “Obviously, it would be better to clean up the old memories laying around before knocking down the walls. I suggest that you organize your memories first, but create the archive somewhere not within the castle so that you won’t have to worry about disturbing it when you begin demolitions. Perhaps if you started with the memories outside and cleared that first, you could build the archive out there.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “But what about the deep archive and my core? Those are both in the castle.”

“You could leave them and tunnels to them while building new over the top.”

Knowledge raised his hand to add, “Point of fact, your core isn’t beneath us. It isn’t anywhere. It isn’t in your mind at all, but your soul. The access point to it within your mind can be anywhere that you wish it to be.”
“Good to know…” Harry said slowly. Messing about in his mind, he could handle. It was his mind, and his to mess about with. His soul, however, was something that he didn’t even want to think about messing with. And it disturbed him a little that his core was so repressed if it resided within his soul. Wait a tick… “Where did you learn that?” he asked incredulously.

Knowledge frowned and his eyes unfocused. For at least a minute, he seemed entirely occupied with his thoughts. Finally, he shook his head. “No idea. I can’t find the source of the knowledge.”

Harry frowned, but nodded, “All right. Keep organizing, and let me know if you figure it out.” He really didn’t remember any time that he might have picked that up, and Knowledge had seemed really sure that it was right.

No one else seemed to have anything else to offer at the moment, so Harry spent the next hour searching out the memories outside and gathering them up so that he could start building the archive. The memories weren’t really hard to find, but it was time consuming to locate them and go to collect them, and then reform them into photos and store them. The worst of it was that some of the memories were hard to catch! There was a disturbingly large number of them in animal form outside. Snakes and rabbits and mice and birds and more.

After an exhausting couple of hours, Logic finally took pity on him and pointed out that he was doing it the hard way by not utilizing the power of his mind. After that, Harry turned himself into an eagle and found it infinitely easier to catch the rodents. He also started flying to get around faster, or even just vanishing from one place and reappearing in another if he knew exactly where he was going. He still had to hunt down most of the memories, but he could just jump back afterward.

And it was a few hours, that hour that he spent on collecting memories. Since thought moved much more quickly than action, and he was now existing in an entire world comprised of thought, time was not the same at all. It seemed to be about three times as fast, though Knowledge believed that that speed would likely increase as he organized his mind further. He did wonder how any of them were keeping track of time outside while he was in his mind. Knowledge had rolled his eyes at that question and very dryly pointed out that he wasn’t keeping track of anything. He was merely extrapolating the amount of time that Harry had spent there the previous night and comparing that to the number of hours that Harry remembered sleeping to estimate how long this night would last. He cheerfully added that the previous night could have been an anomaly or the speed may fluctuate, in which case he could be completely wrong. Which was… less than encouraging.

When knowledge informed him that the estimated time he’d allotted for working on his memories had elapsed, Harry gratefully sought out Protectiveness to discuss security. He quickly decided to bring what he was rapidly coming to think of as his advisers in on the conversation as well. Considering the context, he invited Cunning, Ambition, Will, Knowledge, Loyalty, Logic, and Paranoia.

“Now that the demon cannot get in through that door,” Knowledge began, “we’re focusing on blocking Legilimens, correct?” he addressed Protectiveness.

“We’re not actually sure that the demon can’t get through the door,” Paranoia pointed out disapprovingly whilst fingering one of his many wands and eyeing everyone in the room suspiciously. “We’ve definitely made it more difficult, but it is completely untested as of now so it would be extremely precipitous to say that he couldn’t get in.”

“He makes a good point,” Logic nodded.

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Protectiveness agreed. “At the moment, however, we must focus on the known weakness. Snape demonstrated very clearly last year how easily we are penetrated. To
protect against him, Voldemort, and Dumbledore in addition to anyone else with the skill, this needs to be done before school resumes at the latest.”

Harry nodded. “All right. So how do we protect… um… all of this?”

“Using our experience with Snape as an example of that from which we are protecting ourselves,” Knowledge mused, “I suggest that we create a place into which any invading mind may be directly shunted.”

“Then we can work on securing that place to keep them from coming any further. I suggest that we base it near the demon so that we can focus security in one area,” Logic posited.

“It should be multiple parts,” Cunning expounded. “One for invited guests, should you ever wish to bring someone in for any reason. One for uninvited guests, should the outer defenses be breeched, and perhaps a third as a sort of prison, should you wish to hold a mind within yours.”

Harry grimaced slightly at the idea of that, but nodded his agreement. It wouldn’t hurt to have it, after all. He didn’t have to use it, but he’d rather be prepared for anything than find himself regretting it later. “That all sounds good. First things first, though, how do I make anyone coming in go to a certain place?”

“Luckily, Snape’s example has shown us how an aggressive legilimens will come in,” Knowledge smiled a little. “With that memory, I think we should be able to create a sort of… vortex that will shunt any invaders directly where we want them. Well, that’s assuming that each legilimens doesn’t have a unique method, in which case we’ll need to rethink that defense if we want to defend against anyone but him. For now, however, I believe we have to assume that his entrance was typical of any legilimens attempting to enter through anything but the Demon Door.”

Harry nodded his agreement, though he did fervently hope that Snape’s way of getting in was the same as everyone used. Not only would it be a lot harder otherwise, but it would be difficult to ever be sure that his security was adequate until he’d been legilimized by a lot of different people. An experience that he hoped to avoid in general.

“Okay, so we need somewhere to have the vortex drop them out before we can create the vortex, so… Let’s go to the Demon Door,” he kind of liked that term, “and figure out how to set up the rooms that they’ll come into if they get in.”

The next few hours were spent figuring out what forms the rooms would take and how they would be aligned. Unfortunately, if they were going to build off the Demon Door, Harry would need to clear the existing memories out of the area first, so he didn’t actually get a chance to start on that yet. Though he knew this was important, all of his other current projects seemed important too, and he didn’t actually expect to be meeting any legilimens at Privet Drive, so he dutifully moved on to trying to sort his emotions when the time was up.

Unlike his other projects, managing his emotions turned out to involve a lot of sitting and talking. With Logic, Knowledge, and Loyalty there to offer advice, Harry found himself dealing with a lot of issues he generally tried to avoid or ignore. That avoidance was why Rage had become so powerful, though. Something had to be done about it.

Fear, Harry hadn’t thought was a problem. Courage generally seemed to subsume his fear when necessary. That and Will. But it wasn’t fear of injury or death that was the problem apparently. It was his fear of rejection. That was something that he definitely didn’t want to think about, but Logic made a damnably good point that it was a weakness he couldn’t afford. It could be used against him by people like Dumbledore who recognized it, and he was increasingly certain that the old man had
used it against him. All of those disappointed looks… and the proud ones too, on the opposite end of that spectrum.

As much as Harry hated to admit it, he was eventually forced to – by his annoyingly persistent Aspects. He craved acceptance and approval and was terrified of being rejected by those for whom he cared. That was the Dursleys’ fault, too, Logic was “kind” enough to point out. They’d spent so much time convincing him that he was worthless – no more than a burden – that even five years at Hogwarts hadn’t been able to take away that bone-deep conviction that he was what they said. Though Logic obviously knew it to be wrong, Fear couldn’t believe it.

So he’d made himself into what he thought other people wanted. An average student so Ron didn’t feel inferior and Hermione didn’t feel challenged. Lazy, so that Ron would like him. Gryffindor, because the whole wizarding world seemed to expect that of him. A hero, continuously throwing himself into the path of danger because that’s just what heroes did. And for Dumbledore, he’d made himself obedient. He’d sculpted his opinions around the old man’s opinions.

He really thought he was going to throw up for a while when he was finally made to recognize the fact that, in the process of hiding from or trying to please everyone, he’d shaped himself into something he hardly even recognized. That boy who’d first met Hagrid barely existed today. Oh, he was still there, increasingly so since he’d started freeing his repressed Aspects, but he was deeply buried. Harry soon discovered that he didn’t even like the person he’d become. He let the whole world walk all over him just to avoid upsetting anyone.

He spent half of his life fighting just to stay alive, and he was worrying himself with stupid things like Quidditch and exploding snap. Even with all of this logic percolating in his mind, he was sickeningly conflicted. He wanted to be his own person. He wanted people to like him for whom he really was or not at all.

…but he didn’t want to lose his friends. He didn’t want to be alone as he’d been for most of his life. It was so much easier to just keep pretending and let everything stay as it was, but Logic was smothering him with a constant stream of all the very logical reasons why he couldn’t do that. For one thing, Rage had been getting stronger every year. No matter how much he wanted to believe he was content with things as they were, part of him loathed every minute of it, and that part was feeding Rage. Add to that all of his other stressors and it was no wonder that he’d been on a very short fuse all last year.

3 July 1996 - Wednesday

“…Up! Wake up! Breakfast!”

Harry gasped as he was startled awake in the middle of a very volatile struggle with his emotions. He just barely clamped his jaw shut on the urge to scream profanities at his horrible aunt. He was breathing very heavily as he dragged his aching body out of bed and began to dress. He didn’t feel quite as exhausted as he had yesterday morning, but he was considerably more emotionally frayed.

“Hey, Knowledge,” he whispered, sure the Aspect could hear him, “remind me to never work with my emotions right before waking up.”

Though he’d expected to be heard, he had not expected to hear a dry chuckle in return.

He glanced around the room, but it was still empty. Shaking off that disturbing new development, Harry hurried downstairs to make breakfast for the disgusting muggles. Dudley and Vernon would be better off skipping breakfast all summer, not that he was dumb enough to inform the obese duo of
that fact.

When he was again told to go outside and mow the lawn – which he’d done the last three days in a row – and then scrub the driveway, only his extremely substantial willpower kept him from screaming at them, refusing flat out, or storming back up to his room. He kept repeating in his mind over and over again that it could be worse. The summer at Privet Drive could be much, much worse if he angered them. They could lock him in his room and deny him food again. Or Vernon could get the belt that he’d not taken out yet this summer since the Order had threatened him. Considering the current state of Harry’s back, he did not want to imagine what that would feel like.

Harry spent most of the day repeating all those logical reasons over and over again in his mind, constantly fighting the urge to do something – anything – to end the agony in his back. On his hands and knees in the driveway with a scrub brush, his back was right to the sun and felt like it was literally on fire through his thin cotton shirt.

After a lean dinner, Harry stumbled into his room and collapsed onto his bed in helpless, furious tears. Before Hogwarts, he’d not cried because of the Dursleys’ treatment in years, no matter how much they hurt him. Unfortunately, his time at Hogwarts had restored enough of his self-worth for him to believe that he didn’t deserve their treatment. He knew that he shouldn’t have to put up with it. The fact that he had to anyway was infuriating. Feeling so helpless against these muggles when he’d fought people like Voldemort, Lucius Malfoy, and Bellatrix Lestrange and lived to tell the tale was just disgusting.

After screaming his throat raw into his pillow and nearly suffocating himself in the process, Harry had finally let off enough of his rage to think somewhat clearly.

This wasn’t permanent, he reminded himself. This summer and half of next and he would officially be quit of these muggles. A few minutes of thinking about that calmed him enough for him to wonder if there was anything he could do about his situation.

He had Hedwig. He could write to someone. He knew that Dumbledore wouldn’t let him leave before he was damn good and ready, so writing to ask for that was pointless. He could owl order some healing potions from an apothecary, but he’d have to give his name to pay for them, which meant that if the person on the other end was a Death Eater or sympathizer, they could add poison to the potions and he would have no way of checking or getting help quickly if he needed it. He could write to someone in the Order asking for healing potions, but then someone would probably wonder why and come out and then the Dursleys would be even more upset than if he just refused to do the chores. Unless one of them was going to move in with him, they couldn’t control the Dursleys’ treatment of him, which was obvious by his burned back.

Somewhere in the midst of searching in vain for a solution to his problem that didn’t involve homicide, suicide, or mild starvation and beatings, Harry must have dozed off, because he suddenly found himself in the middle of the Great Hall, sitting in the chair he’d been in when he’d been woken that morning.

He blinked around and processed that he apparently appeared here wherever he’d last left it. “Okay, guys, I need some help,” he sighed.

Cunning, Ambition, Logic, Knowledge, Will, Loyalty, and Protectiveness all popped in around him within seconds of each other.

“Get the hell out of Surrey,” Protectiveness scowled immediately.

Harry blinked at him. “How? Dumbledore won’t...”
“Did I say anything about Dumbledore?” the protective Aspect nearly growled.

“No,” Harry admitted, looking around at the others for help.

He didn’t find any.

“Muggle London,” Cunning offered. “One thing that all Death Eaters have in common is a severe lack of knowledge of the muggle world. That makes it the safest place for us.”

“Assuming, of course, that our relatives are nowhere around,” Protectiveness griped.

Cunning nodded his agreement.

“I can’t just go into muggle London,” Harry protested. “I’m underage. I have no money…”

“No money?” Ambition glared. “You’re rich, idiot.”

Harry sighed, “I have no money that I can get to right now.”

“You think Gringotts doesn’t take owls?” Cunning asked skeptically. “Write them. Tell them that you need to access your account, but that you’re unable to get there.”

“Think about it, Harry,” Logic entreated. “Do you honestly think that Lucius Malfoy goes to Gringotts every time he needs money? Do you think Sirius just walked into the bank to get the funds for that Firebolt? He most likely conducted the entire transaction by owl.” He didn’t look angry, of course, but he was extra stone-faced.

Harry frowned, “You all seem really hostile tonight.”

“A reflection of your stress,” Loyalty explained, but he was scowling a bit, too. “Wake up right now and write a letter to Gringotts. Send Hedwig out, and then come back.”

Harry blinked at the Aspect. “How do I just wake up?”

Loyalty gave him a little smile. “You keep forgetting, Harry. You can do anything you want from here, including wake yourself on command. Just believe that you can, and it will happen.”

Harry nodded slowly. Of course, he could wake himself up. Why couldn’t he? Sure, he was asleep, but his conscious mind was still conscious.

Ow. The pain was back. Okay, that really did work quick. He wondered if it would be possible to put himself to sleep like that, because it would be really handy if he could.

After sending Hedwig off to Gringotts, Harry returned to bed and between the physical and emotional exhaustion, it didn’t take him too long to drop off again.

“So what do I do if I can get some money?” he asked of the group that had waited for his return – or maybe just come right back. “Just take the train to London? Without telling anyone?” That seemed weird to him. He’d spent most of his life under the thumb of the Dursleys or doing as Dumbledore instructed. “What about the blood wards?”

“What powers the blood wards, Harry?” Logic asked.

Harry frowned. “My aunt, because she took me in…” He trailed off and then sighed as he understood what Logic was getting at. “They only work because of mum’s ritual, and that’s almost worthless.”
Logic nodded. “Given the condition of the Demon Door before you repaired it, and our aunt’s complete lack of warm feelings toward us, I think that the only reason Voldemort hasn’t walked right through those wards is because he has yet to try it. Either he doesn’t know where you are, doesn’t care about getting you as much as you’ve been led to believe, or he has just assumed that you are protected too well and hasn’t bothered to actually check. Either way, we’re living on borrowed time here.”

Logic made a scary amount of sense. And Harry knew that Dumbledore would never believe him about the wards. It wasn’t like he could explain about his Demon Door. He’d probably sound insane if he tried, and if Dumbledore did believe him, the old man would most likely try to find a way to use it that Harry would find unpleasant.

So, that decided it. He had to get out of Privet Drive as soon as possible, and he wouldn’t be telling the Order. “I can’t just leave though,” he reasoned. “They’ll most likely think I was kidnapped and turn Britain upside down trying to find me. Good people could get killed looking for me, and at the very least, I’d waste all of their time when they should be worried about Voldemort.”

“You can’t be held accountable for Dumbledore’s overreaction,” Logic pointed out, but continued before Harry could protest. “He probably will overreact anyway, but you can leave a note for them to find when they realize you’re missing.”

Harry nodded. That sounded reasonable. The next few minutes were spent figuring out exactly what he’d need to do and how to go about it to get away from Privet Drive and settled in muggle London. Once he felt relatively confident that he knew what he was doing, he turned his attention to resuming the projects he’d started the previous night.

He didn’t feel quite ready to deal with his emotions yet, so he decided to start with his core again. Nothing like some mind-numbing pain to distract you from dwelling on your problems. When he finished his allotted time on that – trying not to despair at the slow progress – he reluctantly decided to work on controlling his emotions better. Pain was much easier to deal with than being made to not only recognize his weaknesses, but discuss them and how to mitigate them. Really though, he figured he was lucky in that he was able to serve as his own therapist. It was much easier than telling some stranger about his problems.

So, Harry gritted his teeth and he talked and he listened while Logic made all of his emotional reactions seem petty and foolish and continually stressed that Harry could not afford to continue to pander to them. Knowledge, meanwhile, collaborated with Logic by hitting Harry with very disturbing stats that he’d really have rather not known. Things like the exact number of hours he had wasted in the last five years between practicing, playing, and discussing Quidditch, and exactly how few aspects of that time had had even the smallest benefit upon the skills to protect himself and his friends. Mostly, that included reaction time and fitness, both of which, Logic heartlessly pointed out, could have been honed in a fraction of the time with specific exercises.

Loyalty did manage to soften some of the blows by pointing out benefits to his mental health in the form of the camaraderie and stress-relieving effects. Of course, it would have been a bit nicer if Loyalty wasn’t also loyal to Logic and Knowledge, and therefore compelled to add that the camaraderie was purchased with Harry’s acting like something he wasn’t, and the stress-relief could come from less time consuming and more practical activities.

And so, after a solid six mental hours of psychological battering, feeling drained and fairly disgusted with himself, yet strangely hopeful at the prospect of a slightly less disappointing future, Harry tried not to glare too much while he thanked the Aspects for their help, and moved on to searching out and collecting memories from the area in which he wanted to begin construction on what he’d come to
call the reception rooms, which would consist of parlor, prison, and purgatory.

Of course, because it was just his luck, the memories nearest the Demon Door seemed to be the most god-awful of the lot. Memories of pain, fear, despair, grief, and rage all seemed to lurk fairly heavily in the area.

Most disturbing though, was that not all of the memories there turned out to be his. As best he and his advisor Aspects could figure out, those memories had ended up there when the demon had first arrived – when he was scarred that Halloween night – or they’d come through when Voldemort had entered his mind at various times to give him visions and to possess him. Though Harry had very much wanted to destroy the memories outright, Knowledge soon informed him that it wasn’t possible to destroy them. At that point, he thought that either locking them away or even sending them into the deep archives with his obliterated memories might be a fine idea. Again, he was overruled by Logic and Knowledge and the simple fact that those memories could be useful. Knowledge could glean quite a bit from them, after all.

Finally, resigning himself to defeat, Harry had turned all of those memories into photos and bound them into their own album.

He did manage to clean up enough to begin construction before the time to work on security rolled around. Demolition, once all of the memories in the area were gone, was as simple as willing the constructs made more of knowledge than memory to go away. A large chunk of the castle simply vanished, leaving him standing on an open expanse of grass next to the bricked over Demon Door. Curiously, he found that there was no rear side to the door, nor anything else that he could see the door was holding back.

He discussed that with his Aspects as well, and it was soon concluded that, apparently, that door opened into his connection with Voldemort directly. The reason the door had no second side was because that side was actually in Voldemort’s mind. Or maybe it was in some nonspace between their minds or something of that sort. It didn’t take Harry very long to decide that he wasn’t going to give too much thought to the situation right now, lest he drive himself mad. He did, however, track down a memory comprised of searching and paranoia from his trip into the Department of Mysteries, and used that to create a kind of ward all the way around the Demon Door, which should alert him to any activity involving it without his having to charge an Aspect with constantly babysitting.

And then it was time to begin constructing the reception rooms.

The first thing he did was mentally conjure a model of the rooms that he wanted so that they could get it just right before they started building. The scale model was a simple matter of thought to create and modify, and Harry decided in the process that if he was ever going to design a house in the real world, he was coming here to plan it.

With Protectiveness and Paranoia leading the design of the security, Cunning coming up with the best ways to combine it all without making it any more apparent than they wished, and Ambition pushing them all to take everything one step further whenever possible, while Logic kept it from getting too out of hand and Loyalty mitigated the inevitable arguments, Harry designed, discussed, and redesigned the model. Progress was swift, and Harry again found himself filled with a sense of accomplishment. Even though he hardly felt like he was doing this alone, he knew that he actually was. The Aspects of his subconscious may be capable of functioning fairly independently within the realm of the traits they encompassed, but truly they were all Harry. And he was so much smarter than he’d ever thought. Apparently, he just hadn’t been able to utilize his mind effectively. Between suppressing so much of himself and the general clutter in his head, his mind had never been very efficient. Until now, anyway.
It took about four hours for them to finalize—well, for now—the design, which left a couple of hours to begin construction.

Unfortunately, “construction” was nowhere near as easy as demolition. These rooms couldn’t be built with knowledge as the previous structure. Knowledge, in his mental world, wasn’t powerful enough. The entire thing would have to be constructed of memory. Well, the furnishings inside could be knowledge, but the walls, ceilings, floors, and anything else that he didn’t want a visiting or invading mind to penetrate had to be crafted of memories—the more powerful the better.

And so the work began by forging memories into the desired building materials and layering them into the security they’d decided upon. For once, his painful life was proving beneficial, as it allowed him to construct defenses much more secure than most people his age would have been able to manage. Happy memories could be very powerful, but they weren’t as much of a deterrent as pain, fear, despair, and grief. Those were things that pretty much anyone alive instinctively recoiled from, and that added an extra layer of protection. Of course, Knowledge did have a theory about truly powerful love being just as dangerous for its ability to ensnare and bedazzle, but that was purely academic speculation considering Harry’s literally infantile understanding of love.

He finally was able to cease his labors when Knowledge informed him that he’d estimated it was nearly time for him to wake up. They didn’t want to risk him being abruptly awoken while handling a volatile memory. Not only could that damage their progress, but Harry could end up being thrown into a waking nightmare of perfect recollection of the painful memory. Given the physical pain and emotional upset to which he knew he’d wake regardless, adding to that seemed like a good way to push him over the edge into accidental magic or at least a furious rant at his “dear” family. Either possibility would be unfortunate, so Harry stopped work.

He didn’t leave just yet though. He knew what awaited him when he woke up. Pain from his tormented back. He was in no hurry to return to that. Instead, he just sat down with Logic, Loyalty, Knowledge, and Cunning and talked through the coming day, trying to ready himself for the pain and anger so that he could deal with it.

4 July 1996 - Thursday

Not long after that, he was woken by his aunt’s strident voice outside the door demanding that he get up and make breakfast. He was much, much calmer and more centered than the day before thanks to his deliberate preparation and the fact that he hadn’t been woken in the midst of an emotionally torturous exercise in self-improvement.

That unnatural calm in the face of his relatives and his pain lasted throughout the day, and Harry silently asked Knowledge to remind him to start every day that way. His work on his emotions might have contributed to his improved calm, but he was sure that his preparation had done the lion’s share. Though he was still incredibly annoyed with his situation, he was much more capable of dealing with it. Life in general would be greatly improved for him if he was able to duplicate this sense of calm.

That evening, shortly after dark, Hedwig returned from her trip to Gringotts—he had, of course, instructed her not to come back during daylight hours. The Dursleys didn’t want to risk any of the neighbors seeing something as unnatural as a pet owl flying in and out of windows during the day.

Harry nervously opened the package that she carried. There was a darkly stained wooden box inscribed with runes. It had a hinged cover and some kind of crest on it that he didn’t recognize. He didn’t look into that too closely before opening the letter that had been stuck to the top.
Mr. Potter,

Gringotts is, of course, pleased to accommodate your request. This box is spelled to access your trust vault. To use it, you must press your thumb to the latch. It will take a single drop of blood to validate your identity. Then you must simply speak what you wish in the format of “[amount]galleons” or “[amount]British Pounds”. Other muggle currencies may be accessed in the same manner. The requested value will be transferred automatically to your box. If the amount is in galleons or more than would fit within the box, it will arrive in an expanded bag and a fee of three galleons will be charged to your account. Empty, undamaged bags may be returned for a refund of the fee by simply placing them inside the box and closing the lid.

If you wish to pass correspondence to me, you may also do so with this box. To do so, open the box without requesting anything, place your missive inside, then close the box and speak “Account Manager Orblok”. Your missive will be instantly delivered to the In Box on my desk, though please account for my working hours in expecting a response. The box will not function for anyone other than yourself. If you wish to add another user, you must bring the individual to the bank directly to make that arrangement. Should anyone other than you attempt to force the magic of the box, I will be notified and will pass the notice on to you immediately. The enchantment on the box will be rendered inert and you will have to request another box or bring this one to Gringotts to be reset.

As per your request, I have included a full accounting of your vaults with this missive. That is the blank parchment. To read it, you must apply a single drop of blood to the corner of the parchment to confirm your identity.

There is another matter that I would like to discuss with you if you can spare the time to visit the bank this summer. It is in regard to the will of Sirius Orion Black. Due to Lord Black’s legal status at the time of his death, his will has been automatically sealed. That means that any and all beneficiaries are being notified individually and confidentially. You will have to visit the bank and sign the appropriate documents in order to claim your inheritance. I have attempted to notify you previously, but my owls were unable to reach you. It is my hope that your owl may be more successful.

If you are able to meet with me, please respond via this box with a time and date that would work for you.

Potter House Accounts Manager

Orblok

Gringotts Bank

London Branch
Chapter Summary

Chapter Two Synopsis

Harry wakes from his mindscape believing that it had been a very strange dream. After a day of enduring Dursley abuse in the form of sunburn, he returns to his mindscape exactly where he’d left it and begins to think maybe it hadn’t been a dream. He spends the night working on organizing his mind, removing bindings from his magical core, and building protections against Legilimens trying to enter his mind. Then he sits down with his Aspects and works through his problems in what he dubs self-therapy. The next day is severely trying for him and at the end of it, he and his Aspects decide that he must leave the Dursleys. He sends a letter to Gringotts requesting funds and Gringotts sends back an enchanted box through which he can request any form of currency from his funds. Harry continues work on organizing and protecting his mind and unblocking his core as well as his self-therapy.

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 3

Double-Edged Swords

5 July 1996 - Friday

To People Concerned For My Welfare,

I do not feel safe at Privet Drive. Not safe from Death Eaters or Voldemort or the Dursleys. I don’t expect anyone to believe that. If I did, I’d have sent a letter asking to leave instead of just leaving. At this point, it doesn’t really matter if anyone believes me or not. I’m safe now. Please don’t worry for me too much. I know what I’m doing.

I’ll be on the train September 1st.

Harry Potter

The first three days after leaving Privet Drive, Harry spent at a hostel in London. After taking the train to the city, he took four buses, two taxis, and walked a couple of kilometers to make sure he wouldn’t be easily tracked. Then he found a hostel and locked himself in his room.

Those first three days, he did little more than sleep and eat while his health recovered from a very long two weeks with the Dursleys. He was not idle in his sleep, however. The long hours of unconsciousness gave his body ample time to heal while he worked to organize and protect his mind, to free his core, and to overcome a lifetime of issues the Dursleys had bred into him. It was stressful, but the steady, if slow, progress became more apparent each morning. It was enough encouragement
to keep him going at it.

Since he was sleeping so much more, he found some time to practice his dueling with Courage and Protectiveness. It was a bit of a challenge until Harry managed to put together a dueling hall. It was built of his knowledge and memories of the way that the world worked, and it prevented him from accidentally controlling his mental world to cheat in the duels.

When even his exhausted body balked at more sleep, Harry spent his time venturing out to the nearest market to buy more food or rereading his old course books, attempting to actually understand them this time. Not too surprisingly, with a firm determination to learn and Knowledge free and clear for the first time in so long, Harry felt like he was learning a lot. It was surprising, however, to realize just how much he’d actually managed to not learn the first time. Particularly considering that he’d actually passed all of his classes. Okay, well he wasn’t sure if he’d passed them all in his OWLs. He’d fallen asleep in History, pretty much skipped the second half of Astronomy thanks to that whole situation with McGonagall and Hagrid, and… Well, he may have done enough to appease Trelawney, but he wasn’t sure that he’d ever actually learned anything in Divination.

Still, he did feel decently confident about the other core classes. Even Potions, he thought, he hadn’t done too badly. Without Snape there distracting him, he thought he’d done pretty well.

Thinking about next year’s classes got him thinking about what he was going to do if he actually survived Voldemort and had to worry about a career. Those thoughts led him to spending some time in his ever-growing mental library, looking through the career information that he’d barely glanced at last year. He’d been too full of rage and self-pity to care last year, but with all the work he’d been doing to get his mind into order, he’d started to realize that planning to have a future might just be the best way to live long enough to have one. He needed something to live for. He needed to be doing something that made him feel like life extended beyond the war.

As he looked through the career information, Harry soon discovered a few areas of interest that he’d never before even begun to consider. Healing, he found quite intriguing, and he suspected that his Saving People Thing would be greatly appeased by it. Enchanting was a process of creating or modifying objects with sustained magic. Racing brooms, invisibility cloaks, Moody’s eye, the Sorting Hat, the portraits – those were all examples of enchanted items. That appealed to him because it was interesting, versatile, and had so many possibilities. He couldn’t imagine that he’d ever get bored with it.

Another interest was Warding. Though he wasn’t sure if he’d be happy being a Wardmaster as a career, it was certainly something that he’d like to learn more about. Some Wardmasters worked for places like Gringotts. Some worked for the Ministry – they could use some more good ones, judging by how six fourth and fifth year students had penetrated the Department of Mysteries. There was also a large private sector for Wardmasters. The good ones apparently made good money warding businesses and private homes.

And those were only a few careers of many that seemed interesting. Harry couldn’t believe that he’d been so stupid last year as to not pay any real attention to this. It had been so difficult for him to think of the future beyond Voldemort. Painful, really, since most of him didn’t think he’d live through it. But if that’s really how he was going to approach it, he may as well just give up now and be done with it, because he’d never win if he didn’t think it was even possible. Now that he suspected he’d found the mysterious “Power” that would be his secret weapon, he was finally able to embrace the idea that he might survive. And he meant to actually start living. Now.

There was, unfortunately, one glaring problem with his career interests. Before one could enter into training or apprenticeships post-Hogwarts, one needed to have the required NEWTs. All of the
careers he was interested in required Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, or both.

So… Seeing as Harry hadn’t taken Ancient Runes or Arithmancy, not one of his first choices in career was a possibility. If he really wanted to go into any of them, he’d have to hire tutors and take the NEWTs at the Ministry when he was ready after graduation. Only then would he be able to properly start studying toward the career of his choice.

It took Logic and Loyalty almost a solid mental hour to get Harry to stop raving furiously about not having any kind of career advice prior to choosing his electives for third year. Eventually, he was forced to concede that they probably assumed they could count on the parents to talk to their kids about it and help – or command – them to choose proper classes. Of course, muggleborns would have to do independent study into the subject since their parents wouldn’t know, but at least they might encourage them to think about it. Ron’s parents had probably been through it so many times that they hadn’t bothered, or they’d assumed that he knew what he was supposed to pick. Hermione had just taken everything.

Harry hadn’t even realized the smallest portion of the point of those classes. To him, it had just been school. He hadn’t even considered how it would affect his life later. No one had ever told him that it would. Well, Hermione may have mentioned something about it, but her general propensity to overestimate the value of all academics had made it easy for Harry to laugh off her claims. He’d chosen his classes for third year based on what sounded “fun” and “easy” and what Ron felt like taking.

And now he was paying for it.

Harry didn’t consider for even a minute curtailing his future career choice based on his mistake made when he was twelve. He refused to spend the rest of his life regretting that. No, he had enough money to put off getting a job after school and to hire any necessary tutors. He could do independent study to get himself started, and formally learn those things after Hogwarts, but he absolutely refused to go into a more mundane career just because he was an idiot at twelve. Well, it wasn’t entirely his fault. It was unforgiveable that Hogwarts didn’t offer some kind of coaching for muggleborn or muggle-raised students specifically. They couldn’t expect preteens to have the forethought to figure everything out on their own.

Until just now, Harry hadn’t ever really thought about most of the magical occupations. In addition to those he was most interested in, there were some obvious ones like Potions Master, which required only an A in Arithmancy and O in Herbology. Defense Mastery, which required an A in transfigurations, Charms, and Potions. Basically any subject could be mastered in with an A or sometimes an O in the most closely related subjects. Such Masters were usually teachers, tutors, researchers, and writers. Then there were things like tailors, cobblers, chandlers, armorers, specialized enchanters (such as trunk makers and clothiers), lawyers and legal aides, journalists, secretaries and personal assistants, chefs, writers… There were as many careers in the magical world as the muggle world. Some were almost the same in both and others were completely unique to the magical world. And, of course, there was everything in between.

And all that Hogwarts offered were a few pamphlets and fifteen minutes to discuss it with your head of house. In fifth year. That may be enough for wizardborn students, but again, muggleborns were forced to do a lot of independent study if they wanted to really know anything about their options. It seemed like the more Harry thought about the magical world, the more he realized just how unsympathetic it was toward the muggleborns that made up a quarter of its population.

It wasn’t fair at all. But then, as Logic was keen to remind him, life is not fair. Assuming that it should be would result only in self-pity and anger, and would accomplish nothing. Getting past that
Gryffindor misconception was one of the things Harry was working on in his self-therapy sessions.

Harry’s fourth day on his own saw an owl from Dumbledore tapping at the window of his hostel. He was just about to take the letter from it when Paranoia shouted at him about portkeys and tracking charms.

With that in mind, Harry shooed the owl away and left the hostel that day. It also made him realize just how vulnerable he was despite being out of the wizarding world. He had no protection against any of what he could only guess were many magical means of tracking, and that didn’t even take into account things like portkeys being delivered via owl.

That day, Harry went shopping in Muggle London. Thanks to his direct line to his vault and the ability to request muggle currency courtesy of Gringotts, Harry was able to replace the disgraceful excuse for a muggle wardrobe provided by the Dursleys with a collection of the nicest clothing he’d ever owned in his life. Luckily, a large amount of money and a willingness to spend it had made the salespeople in the clothing shops incredibly accommodating. He just hoped that they had a good fashion sense, because he was completely lost when it came to knowing what to buy beyond just finding something that fit comfortably. The salespeople, on hearing that, gladly plied him with a wide variety of clothing and sent him into the changing rooms over and over and over again.

By the end of that day, Harry was exhausted, irritable, and – hopefully – very well dressed. He found a different hostel that night. The following day, he went out again. This time, he got his hair cut so that it hung tastefully tousled instead of as an unmanageable mess. He also had it dyed a dark brown with lighter highlights instead of black. Then he stopped by an optometrist and replaced his glasses with ones that – amazingly – actually allowed him to see things more clearly than he had thought was possible. He’d never before guessed just how bad his eyesight was even with his glasses, but he now suspected that he’d be able to clearly read the board in every classroom, even from the back. That would be a nice change. Maybe he wouldn’t fail potions this year – assuming he’d done well enough on his OWL to even take the class. In addition to the small, silver-framed, rectangular glasses, he got a variety of contacts, both clear and colored blue, hazel, and brown. He liked his natural eye color, not least because he got it from his mum, but considering how well-known he was and how distinctive his bright green eyes were, he figured changing them would be a very good thing when he didn’t want to be recognized.

Finally, though it challenged his masculinity to do it, Logic talked him into visiting a cosmetics shop. After showing his scar to the lady working there, and explaining how self-conscious it made him, she happily sat him down and experimented with makeup for half an hour before finding the perfect cover-up. The scar was too defined to disappear completely under the makeup, but between that and his fringe, he was confident that only a close inspection would reveal it. He bought enough of the concealer to last the summer and next if he wanted – with luck, he’d be able to find a charm to keep it matched to his skin tone as his tan faded.

At the end of the day, Harry settled in yet another hostel, across London from the previous, and examined himself as critically as he could. With lighter hair, brown eyes, and the scar concealed, as well as the nice muggle clothing, no glasses, and manageable hair, Harry strongly suspected that even those he knew best would have to get a good look at him before they’d recognize him. It also helped that two weeks in the sun had left his complexion notably darker than usual now that the bright red burns had faded.

11 July 1996 - Thursday

On the morning of his sixth day since leaving Privet Drive, Harry took two busses to Charing Cross
Road and walked to the Leaky Cauldron. Doing his best to avoid self-consciously flattening his fringe over his forehead – a tell quite a few people would probably recognize, not to mention that it may well draw eyes toward his forehead that would not have otherwise gone there – Harry entered the tavern. He tried to act as casual as possible, like he was just an average muggleborn or halfblood who’d come through here plenty of times.

Harry had some things that he needed, but he wanted to be in and out as quickly as possible. He’d worked it all out in his head before leaving for Diagon Alley. He didn’t waste any time in going directly to the trunk store. There, he bought the premade trunk that most closely fit his desires. It was four compartments, including potions, wardrobe, library, and basic storage. The interior was expanded and it was feather-light, but most importantly, it had a shrinking charm built into it so that he could use the function without using magic during the summer. Hauling his old trunk around Muggle London with him was not only an inconvenience, but a powerful identifier for anyone looking for him. Plus, after his clothes shopping, he’d barely been able to fit everything into his old trunk. If he started buying books, there was no way he could fit it all, much less lift it to move it. And, of course, the password protected lock was another bonus. He really didn’t want to chance a curious muggle peeking inside and finding magical stuff.

After leaving with his new trunk shrunk down in his pocket, Harry made a quick stop at the stationery store to replenish his quills, ink, and parchment so that he could do his summer assignments and still have more for anything else he wanted to do.

After that, he went to a robe shop that he’d never visited before. He had no doubt that Madam Malkin would see through his disguise, and he didn’t want to risk her spreading word of his new look. With his current olive complexion, he’d just stand out more with blond or red hair, so he wouldn’t be able to change that again.

He very quickly found out why he’d never been in this shop before. It was apparently a very high-end place that Harry was sure neither Hagrid nor the Weasleys had ever been into. And seeing as he’d always gone shopping with them, it made sense that he wouldn’t be able to afford it. He’d wait to get his Hogwart’s robes, since he was pretty sure this shop didn’t sell them – he remembered meeting Malfoy in Malkin’s, and he would never have been there if he could have been here. What he wanted now was a casual wizarding wardrobe. Passing as a muggleborn worked, but if Harry really wanted to blend in and further separate himself from Harry Potter, he needed robes.

The man inside sneered at his muggle clothes in a way that highly suggested he dealt almost exclusively with purebloods or halfbloods that leaned toward the wizarding roots. Harry just met him with a smile – he was finding more and more uses for his long-suppressed Slytherin side.

“Hello, young sir,” the snooty man said with cautious politeness that Harry was sure would disappear in an instant should he prove that he couldn’t afford what the man sold. “My name is Haman Guilder. How may I assist you today?”

“Fashion sense has never been one of my talents,” he admitted straight off, “which is why I’ve come to you, Mister Guilder. I usually have my robes done by a personal tailor; unfortunately, we’ve recently had some… disagreements. Until I can secure another, I shall have to trust my image to you. I’ve heard good things. I hope you can live up to them.”

The man had relaxed into a more pleasant image while listening to Harry’s best impersonation of Malfoy. “I shall certainly endeavor to do so, Mr…?”

“Smith,” Harry threw out dismissively. He knew from school that the Smiths were an expansive pureblood family with many lines from well-off to filthy rich. They had their fingers in just about
everything in the wizarding world if half of what he’d heard mentioned was right. It was part of the reason Zacharias was such a prat. He was from one of the wealthier branches of the family. The name allowed Harry to insinuate that he was likely rich, probably pureblooded, despite his attire, and such a large family would make it hard for anyone to know half of the members. And if this man was busy trying to put together which branch of the Smith family he came from, he wouldn’t be looking too closely at any resemblance to Harry Potter. He was really coming to love Knowledge for his ability to compile errant data floating around in his head and Cunning for putting it together so… well… cunningly.

“What are you interested in today, Mr. Smith?” Guilder asked, now the picture of graciousness.

“I’m afraid I’ve recently suffered a bit of a growth spurt,” Harry smiled with only his lips. “I probably should have come before I’d outgrown the majority of my wardrobe, but I was hoping to secure a personal tailor sooner. I expect I’ll grow more this summer, so I’ll make due with just a few things for now. Let’s say… a dozen casual robes, three business-cut, and just one set of dress robes, I think. And while I’m here, I may as well pick up cloaks. Let’s go with three, one for each style.”

Harry was small for his age, but Guilder didn’t know his age, so he could go ahead and assume Harry a year or two younger and tall for his age instead.

As expected, the only questions that the man had from that point were about cut, color, and material. The wardrobe was a little larger than Harry thought he really needed, but he’d added a few more robes once he’d realized what this man would expect. He had no doubt that Malfoy would think he was practically destitute with only fifteen sets of robes. It wasn’t like he couldn’t afford it anyway, even at the higher prices of this store, and it would be nice to have plenty of comfortable clothes for a change. He also thought the business cut robes might come in handy if he wanted to look professional. He wished he’d had something of the sort when he’d had to go to the ministry for his trial last summer.

Again, Knowledge had helped him out a lot by compiling information that he’d overheard but never really paid attention to in the common room and the dorm while his fellow Gryffindors – the purebloods and some of the halfbloods mostly – argued about clothes. Cuts, materials, colors, seasonal styles, practical versus attractive, etc. His admission to having little fashion sense helped, but any rich pureblood would know some about robes.

Thanks to Master Guilder’s tailoring expertise, he was able to get all sixteen robes and three cloaks chosen, tailored to a perfect fit, and ready to take with him when he left two and a half hours later.

Carefully concealing his relief to be out of that store, Harry, now dressed in a set of casual robes that even he knew were nicer than ninety percent of those worn by Hogwarts students, made his way to his last and most important stop of the day. Books. Since he’d very rarely been recognized or addressed by name at Flourish and Blotts, he didn’t worry about being recognized there now that he was properly disguised.

Another two hours and nearly five hundred galleons later, Harry again gave thanks for the brilliance of feather-light and shrinking charms as he tucked his trunk into his pocket and made his way to Gringotts. He’d had to rush a bit at the end there, but he made it just in time for his appointment.

“Yes?” the goblin at the counter glared at Harry when he approached.

Harry gave him the same pleasant smile that he’d been using all day, and replied smoothly, “I have an appointment with Accounts Manager Orblok.”

The goblin eyed him briefly, flipped a few papers on his desk, and then looked over his shoulder.

“Render will take you back.”
So Harry followed another grumpy goblin into the labyrinth of corridors beyond the main lobby and shortly found himself at a door inscribed with unfamiliar runes that Harry assumed were gobbledygook. The door opened shortly after Render knocked and an older goblin behind the desk gave Harry the first smile he’d ever seen from one of their kind.

“Heir Potter,” he said almost pleasantly. “Please, have a seat and we can begin.” Pleasant, perhaps, but clearly still not given to pleasantries.

Harry took a silent breath and worked to clear his mind. He’d spent his entire last self-therapy session preparing for this and he was fairly sure that he’d be able to get through it without breaking down. He took the offered seat and Orblok unrolled a scroll on the desk in front of him.

“The late Lord Black has named you his heir, Heir Potter,” Orblok began directly, black eyes on the scroll in front of him. “There is no age stipulation set, which means that you may assume the lordship and Head of Family status today if that is your wish.” He looked up at that, brow raised inquiringly.

Harry blinked. “Ah. I’m sorry, but I’m not entirely sure what that means or how I would go about it,” he admitted.

Orblok gave a simple nod in return. “I suspected such may be the case. It is rare for an heir to not be trained in all that this entails from early childhood, but it does happen very occasionally. The duties of each family Lord vary based upon the family involved, but some things are universal. The Family Vault and all it contains, minus what your predecessor has willed elsewhere, will go to you. I have prepared an accounting of the vault contents for your perusal. All properties, shares and contracts, and other resources of the family not specifically entailed away will also go to you. All of the Black Family holdings that are now yours are detailed here.” He passed a thick scroll across the desk to Harry, and continued.

“Upon assuming the Lordship, you will acquire the ability to recognize or disown family members. Disowning will cut an individual entirely from the family. He or she will no longer have the right to claim the family name and the individual’s spouse and current or future children, grandchildren, etc., will be likewise severed from all family ties. Access to family wards, funds, and resources will be removed.

“Alternately, you may recognize family members that have previously been disowned, granting them the right to claim the family name and access to wards, funds, resources, and anything else tied specifically to the family. You may also recognize others through family adoption. That adoption is not inherently recognized by your Ministry, but it will be recognized by the family magic. That is the means through which you became the late Lord Black’s heir. To do so, you must only speak the ritual phrase, similar to a wand oath. The spouses of all family members must be recognized by the current Lord in order to be a part of the family. If the spouse is recognized, any children resultant from that union will automatically be family. If the spouse is not recognized, any children must be individually acknowledged if you wish them a part of the family. In this manner, you have some influence over the spouses taken by any member of your family. Should you not approve, you may refuse to recognize them and the children produced by the union. You may also disown the family member for that offense if you wish.”

Harry was incredibly happy to know that Knowledge was logging all of this information safely away so that he didn’t have to worry about forgetting anything.

“As Lord, you are also entitled to the family seat on the Wizengamot, and I believe, the Black Family may own a seat on the Hogwarts Board of Governors as well. I know that the Potter family does.”
Harry opened the scroll he’d been given and let his eyes briefly slide over each page while he listened, silently asking Knowledge to go over it and let him know of anything pertinent to the conversation at hand. Thus far, he was going with Logic’s advice to let all of this information slide over him and not give too much thought to any of it lest he become overwhelmed. There would be plenty of time to sort it all out tonight, and Knowledge would inform him of anything that should be addressed before leaving today. After glancing down the scroll, he rolled it up and tucked it into his pocket, then focused again on the goblin who’d not paused in his explanation.

“As Lord, you will be expected to marry and produce an heir within a reasonable amount of time. The exact timeframe varies from family to family, but that is more of a very strong suggestion than anything binding. Unless there is an existing marriage contract.”

Harry’s brow rose at that last bit. “How would I determine if such a contract exists?”

“All marriage contracts in Britain are filed at Gringotts, and most at the Ministry as well. Would you like me to check for you?”

“Yes, please. For the Black and Potter families.”

“Of course,” Orblok nodded, sliding off his chair to move to a cabinet at the back of the room. He opened one of the doors and poked around inside and Harry focused on not freaking out while he waited to see if he was betrothed without knowing about it. “There are no active contracts for either family,” the goblin said at last, prompting Harry to sag slightly in relief.

“Still, tradition does dictate that an heir be produced somewhere between your twentieth and thirtieth birthday,” Orblok added as he resumed his seat. “And given as you are to be head of two families, you will need to produce at least one male child to take each upon passing of your title, be that upon your death or before if you wish.”

A nudge from Cunning had Harry frowning. “You said that there were no active contracts,” he noted cautiously. “Are there any inactive contracts?”

Orblok smiled rather disturbingly in response to the question. “Very astute, Heir Potter.” He rose again and returned to the cabinet, then came back to his desk a moment later with two scrolls.

Harry accepted the scrolls, making a mental note to never underestimate goblins, no matter how pleasant they acted. He wasn’t sure why Orblok had apparently planned to withhold this information, but it wasn’t something he’d soon forget.

Reminding himself to stay calm and let the information wash over him, Harry opened the scrolls one at a time and scanned over them briefly, allowing Knowledge to sort through the information more quickly than he would have been able to process it in the waking world.

“I’m not familiar with the Prince family,” he noted as Knowledge imparted the information to him succinctly. Apparently, the Black and Prince families had a contract almost sixty years old. The initial intended union had been reneged upon by the Prince side—no reason given. The contract still existed, but was inactive due to lack of suitable participants.

“It is an Ancient and Noble line, as is the Black line. Like the Potter family, however, it has been reduced to a single heir. The reason that the contract is inactive is because the heir came from a branch of the Prince family that was disowned. The heir himself was only recognized as part of the family in the will of the last Lord. He has yet to claim his inheritance or his lordship. Should he do so, the contract would become active.”
Harry frowned uncertainly and checked with Knowledge, but he didn’t seem to know this. “I’m sorry, but my muggle upbringing seems to be impairing me again. Are you suggesting that this contract would become active for this Prince heir and me?”

“That is correct, Heir Potter, on the condition that you assumed the Black Lordship.”

Harry narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “But the Prince heir is male?”

“Yes. I believe I see what has confused you. I am not familiar with such customs in the muggle world, but in wizarding Britain same-sex marriages are uncommon, but not considered unusual. Magical surrogates make it possible for same-sex couples to procreate without introducing outside blood. It has been a viable means of procreation for wizards for at least half a dozen centuries.”

Harry took a deep breath and told himself to examine his feelings on the gender issue in more detail later. “Okay. So this means that if I were to accept the Black lordship, and the Prince heir was to claim his, then this contract would activate and I would be bound to marry this… man?”

“That is correct.”

Harry turned his focus inward to figure out how binding the contract would be. Unfortunately, Knowledge very quickly imparted that it was magically binding. The witch who originally reneged on the contract, someone named Eileen Prince, would have lost most of her magic and been just slightly more than a squib because of it. Harry knew that the Black family was dark, but surely Orion Black couldn’t have been so bad as to sacrifice her magic to stay away from him. Could he?

_Perhaps she was in love with someone else and considered that love worth the loss_, Logic suggested.

_Perhaps_, Harry dubiously acknowledged. He had to admit that he didn’t know enough about love to even imagine that. He didn’t have anything against muggles in general, but he couldn’t imagine giving up his magic. Harry hadn’t really even thought about getting married yet, but surely it couldn’t be that bad to submit to an arranged marriage. Well, that depended on who the other side of the marriage was, of course, but…

And then Knowledge passed on the information from the other contract that Harry hadn’t examined closely enough to even note the names.

His mind came to a screeching halt when that bit hit him.

It wasn’t until the goblin cleared his throat that Harry snapped out of his shock. “Sorry,” he said vaguely. He took a breath and pushed that information and everything it entailed to the back of his mind with the help of Logic. He would devote some time to freaking out about that later. “Would you, by chance, have the name of the current heir of the Prince family?”

“That would be Severus Alexander Snape,” Orblok said without needing to check.

“Okay,” Harry nodded, immediately shuffling that information away with the rest. “So, what happens if I don’t claim the Black lordship, or if I want to wait?”

“As per the edict of the family, you, as the stipulated heir, have one month from the time of notification of eligibility – today – to claim the lordship or it will be offered to the heir apparent. In this case, that would be Draconis Lucius Malfoy. Should he accept the claim, you would lose all rights to it and the family.”

“Very well,” Harry nodded blankly. “And the other contract. That one will become active when I
“Or when you assume the Potter lordship. Generally, that would be when you are seventeen. However, the introduction of the Black lordship can change that. Assuming a lordship automatically grants you the status of adult by magic and law,” Orblok explained. “As soon as that is done, you will become eligible for the Potter lordship. At that point, the contract will become active.”

“And according to the contract, I will then have thirty days to conclude negotiations and complete the bonding ceremony,” Harry nodded, using every bit of his mental discipline to keep himself calm. “The bride price. Is a quarter of a million galleons a common bride price?”

“No,” Orblok said at once. “Given the financial status of the bride’s family in this case, a tenth of that would be acceptable, but as little as five thousand would not be seen an insult. Anything over fifty thousand would probably be considered exorbitant.”

“So, it’s not so much a bride price as a bribe,” Harry concluded.

“That would be speculation, but a reasonable one,” Orblok allowed.

Harry clenched his trembling hands as he asked Knowledge to confirm it a third time, but there was no doubt. There had been four signatures on that contract. Dumbledore. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. And Ginny. She knew. She’d signed the contract two years ago. And it was just as binding as the other contract. Marry or become a squib.

“Is there any way out of the contract without losing my magic?” Harry asked, though he couldn’t see any. “Can it really be that binding without my consent?”

“It is, Heir Potter. Your magical guardian signed the contract for you. By millennia old pureblood edict, you are bound to the contract. Your only means of evading it would be to relinquish your blood right to the Potter lordship. If you choose to do so or fail to assume the lordship within one year of being informed of your eligibility, by stipulation of the last Lord Potter, the entirety of the estate will go to Albus Dumbledore, or in the case of his death before assuming it, he has entailed it to the Weasley family.

“Of course,” Orblok added musingly, “If the Black-Prince contract were activated, the greater status of both families would negate the second contract.”

“Did Dumbledore or the Weasleys know about the Black-Prince contract when the Potter-Weasley contract was created?” Harry wondered.

“I do not believe so. The only one who has viewed the Black-Prince contract in the last twenty years is Severus Snape when he came to claim his lordship. After learning of the contract, he chose not to claim the lordship at the time.”

Harry nodded. He could very easily understand Snape turning down his rightful lordship rather than being forced to marry Sirius. He was willing to bet, however, that Snape did not know that Harry had claim to the Black lordship now.

“So I have to marry Severus Snape or Ginny Weasley or lose both inheritances,” Harry sighed. “Rock, meet Hard Place. ‘I need to think about this,’” he admitted. “Can I speak with you again tomorrow?”

“Certainly, Heir Potter. Shall I set the appointment for the same time?”

“Please,” Harry nodded. He was just getting up to leave when Cunning nudged him again. “Is there
a reason that you didn’t immediately divulge the inactive contracts to me when I asked about them?” he paused to inquire.

That disturbing smile that made Orblok look like a dangerous predator returned in response to the question. “Headmaster Dumbledore specifically instructed that you not be informed of the contract until it became active. As your magical guardian, it is his right to do so. As your Account Manager, however, it is my duty to honestly answer any question directly asked of me. In this, your authority subsumed his due to your greater value to Gringotts.”

Harry just nodded. Not only had Dumbledore signed a marriage contract without his permission or knowledge, but he’d actively worked to keep that knowledge from him until he’d have been well and truly trapped by it. That was good to know. “Thank you, Master Orblok. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As he left the bank, Harry firmly tucked all of this world altering information away deeply in his mind. If he thought about it now, he’d either start screaming, crying, or go completely catatonic – none of which would be ideal while trying not to draw attention to himself in the middle of Diagon Alley.

He stopped in the Leaky Cauldron to visit the loo and take off his robes and tuck them into his trunk, then let himself back into Muggle London, and walked to the bus stop. He could afford a taxi, but he was a little worried about someone who was looking for him in Muggle London having the forethought to check into taxis specifically going to and from the area of the Leaky Cauldron. It was highly unlikely given how little most of them knew about the muggle world, but he preferred to not take unnecessary risks.

When he got back to his hostel, he packed all of his old things into his new trunk. Though he had some sentimental attachment to his old trunk, it was too large to fit it into his new trunk, and hauling around the empty trunk wouldn’t be all that much better than when it had been full. And there really wasn’t anything special about it, being the standard, off-the-rack Hogwarts special. So, he regretfully left it in a dumpster behind the hostel after prying his initials off it, then boarded a bus again.

He was a little worried that someone might be onto him staying in hostels, or they might guess that he would be if they didn’t know that he had a direct line to his vault. With that in mind, he went to a hotel – a nice one, though not the best. He got a suite under the name Elliot Johnson – randomly selected for the fact that it wasn’t anything one could trace to him – and closed himself into the rooms.

He didn’t bother to unpack or undress before throwing himself across the bed and finally letting his mind stray to the revelations of the day. He couldn’t decide if he should be more heartbroken or furious about Dumbledore’s betrayal. The Weasleys’ betrayal. He desperately wanted to know if Ron or the twins were aware of it. Or Hermione, for that matter, though he doubted that she’d have anything to do with it. Her innate, muggle-bred sense of what was right would have strenuously objected to the very concept of an arranged marriage, even one established with the knowledge and consent of the subjects. She’d probably have an aneurism when she found out what had been done to him. It would be SPEW all over again.

Harry couldn’t be so sure about Ron or Fred and George. They were purebloods, so they probably wouldn’t have anything innately against an arranged marriage. And, they were Weasleys. They might have been convinced by that ridiculously exorbitant bride price that had probably convinced Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Ginny… Well, she’d had a crush on him since long before she’d even met him. It probably hadn’t taken all that much to convince her to go along with it, unfortunately. He
hoped, at least, that neither the Potter fortune nor name had anything to do with it. It didn’t mean that he approved of her going behind his back to rope him into marriage, but at least it would be based on emotion rather than greed.

His eyes burned, but he didn’t cry. Maybe he was too angry to cry. His mind kept swinging back around to all the ways he wanted to get even with everyone involved. Most of all, he knew that he’d do almost anything to prevent them from getting away with it.

The real question was… Did that involve marrying Snape? The very idea made him cringe, but at least Snape wasn’t plotting to use him or steal his inheritance.

He needed more information about exactly what an arranged marriage entailed. With that in mind, he finally got off the bed and enlarged his trunk. He dug around in his new books until he found the three on pureblood customs and etiquette that he’d picked up. He piled them on the bedside table and started going through them one at a time. He didn’t try to read them. He just looked at each page one at a time the way he’d done with the documents at Gringotts, allowing Knowledge to absorb the information.

Once he’d gone through all three, he laid down again, and used the exercises he’d been practicing to put himself to sleep. It took a little while with his current stress, but he eventually opened his eyes to his mental landscape.

His advisor Aspects were there waiting for him when he appeared in what he was using as his self-therapy room at the moment.

“Okay,” he looked at Knowledge first. “If I were to… marry Snape… What would that entail?”

“A minimum of three heirs,” Knowledge replied as he settled into his chair across from Harry in the circle that they used for these meetings. “One for each noble family that you two collectively represent. Sexual intercourse would not be required.”

Harry breathed a relieved sigh at that.

“You would be required to keep mutual lodgings, though not bedchambers. Your fortunes would be connected, but separate. Given that the families will be split between your children when you pass on the lordships, it would be expected for the family fortunes to remain independent. As for tradition and propriety, arranged marriages are common in the wizarding world. Married couples who do not even like each other are also relatively common, though most learn to live amicably over time. Regardless of your personal feelings, you would dishonor all of your families if you were openly hostile toward each other. Public displays of affection are not in any way necessary, but you must present a unified front, and at least pretend to get along. Should anyone speak ill of your spouse in public, you would be required to speak on his behalf. An insult to him is an insult to you and your families. Infidelity is not possible.

“Other than that, what goes on behind closed doors is not anyone’s business but yours. Whether you are desperately in love or barely manage to make it through each day without killing each other does not matter.”

“Seems likely to be the latter,” Harry noted grimly. “What about divorce? Is that an option at any point?”

Logic lifted an eyebrow. “How many pureblood couples have you heard of getting divorced?”
Harry frowned. “None,” he admitted after a minute.

“That is because there are none,” Knowledge supplied. “Divorce does not exist in the magical world. You are bound together for the extent of your mutual lives. Only as a widower may you ever remarry. It is possible to annul a marriage, but only in very extreme circumstances, which usually result in blood feuds.”

Harry grimaced, wondering how long it would take before Snape poisoned him. This might be harder than he thought. “Okay, so we’re talking about a lifetime commitment then. Granted, with the war – me being me and him being a spy – there’s a good chance one of us could be single again in a rather short time…”

“Best not to plan on that,” Logic noted.

Harry nodded. Whether they were married or barely able to breathe the same air – or both – he wasn’t going to wish Snape dead, not even to reclaim his own freedom. If he did go through with this, he would go into it planning for the long haul.

“What do you guys think about this?” he asked quietly after a minute.

Logic spoke first, “It is your best option. You don’t want Malfoy getting the Black fortune, and you don’t want Dumbledore or the Weasleys getting the Potter fortune. That means that you have to marry. Between a man with whom you share a very strong mutual dislike and a girl who would trap you into marriage for her own selfish purposes, the choice is not so difficult. Also, there is the fact that the Potter-Weasley contract was arranged for you whereas the Black-Prince contract was created for someone else and merely fell to you. You must consider the likelihood that Dumbledore plans to get something from your marrying Weasley. Her family gets money, she gets you, but what does Dumbledore get? It may be best to avoid finding that answer the hard way.”

Harry nodded. It was really hard to argue with Logic.

“Snape would be a beneficial marriage,” Ambition noted. “The Prince family is Ancient and Noble – therefore powerful and probably wealthy. He’ll have his own seat on the Wizengamot that you may sit in his stead should he permit it. Furthermore, Snape is respected in circles that you are not. He is a brilliant potions master, even if he doesn’t excel at teaching it. He is also the head of Slytherin house at Hogwarts, and therefore respected by most Slytherins by default, both past and present. That is definitely one area in which you lack support.”

“Let’s not forget that Snape is a spy,” Cunning put in. “A marriage to you would get him killed. … or set him free,” he smirked slightly.

Harry winced. Somehow, he’d not yet factored that in.

“I think we should consider the fact that Snape may have been trapped by Dumbledore as well,” Cunning remarked. “After today, we’re quite aware of the lengths to which that man will go to get his way. Is it not possible that Snape got trapped into being a spy thanks to that old man’s manipulations? We can’t count on it, but it’s possible that Snape will embrace this opportunity to escape that position. It can’t be pleasant. We’re all aware of how Voldemort treats his minions, and that’s not even factoring in the very slow and painful death Snape would face should his true loyalty ever be revealed.

“Though, that does assume that he really is a spy for the Light and not the Dark.”

“Logically speaking,” Logic offered, “he has had many opportunities to deliver you to Voldemort or
to simply kill you. Were he loyal to the Dark Lord, I suspect that he’d have found a way to slip you a portkey in a way that didn’t implicate him at some point since Voldemort returned. He’s had more than enough access to you and your possessions.”

Harry nodded. That was true. Even Cunning was nodding his agreement.

“And he didn’t have to protect you from Remus in your third year,” Loyalty chipped in. “Even though he apparently hates you, and though he had more reason than usual to loathe you just then, when Remus transformed, he put himself between you and an uncontrolled werewolf.”

Harry frowned as he remembered that. That whole night had been so crazy, and then Snape had helped to try to get Sirius Kissed, and he’d exposed Remus as a werewolf… Well, it had been sadly easy to focus on the horrible, vindictive things that he’d done and forget all about that one moment in which the snarky dungeon bat had done a remarkable impersonation of a Gryffindor. To protect Harry and his friends.

He sighed, but nodded. “Okay. I think it’s safe to say that Snape’s on our side.” And it did feel good to finally make up his mind about that based on logical facts. Even if it did mean that he’d been wrong in suspecting him of something just about every year he’d attended Hogwarts. “Any other thoughts about the idea of marrying the git?”

Loyalty smiled, “I think there’s more to him than we know.”

“We know only one side of him,” Logic concurred. “And I think it’s safe to say that it’s his bad side, given the way he feels about us.”

Loyalty nodded. “He may not be as bad as we think. He does have cause to hate Sirius and our father, after all. And Remus. No, it’s not fair that he’s transferred that hatred to us, but it seems unlikely that he’ll be able to maintain that level of hatred for the rest of our lives. That would be exhausting,” he smiled. “I don’t think that there’s any chance Ron will understand, particularly as you’re choosing Snape over Ginny, but I’m not sure how much loyalty we even owe him right now.

“We know that Hermione will object to the concept of an arranged marriage, and most likely waste half the year searching for a loophole to the contracts. It’s unlikely that one exists, but if it does, we’d almost certainly gravely dishonor our families to pursue it. She won’t blame us though. Neville’s a pureblood. He probably won’t be comfortable, seeing as we’re talking about Snape, but he’ll stand by us. I don’t imagine that Luna will care at all, but trying to anticipate her reactions to anything is probably foolish. Dumbledore, of course, will be furious that you evaded his plot, but I think that’s a good thing.”

“Snape is intelligent and dangerous.” Protectiveness put in. “If you marry him, he will have no choice but to use both those traits to your benefit.”

“And he’s a Slytherin,” Cunning added. “If we can make it beneficial enough of an arrangement for him, I doubt he’ll be able to say no.”

“We do need to consider the Dark Mark though,” Logic contributed. “If Snape renounces Voldemort, that Mark could become a problem. Whether an annoyance or a slow descent into insanity – or even instant death – we don’t know. Until we can answer that question, we don’t know if this is in any way feasible.”

“Voldemort can’t kill through the Mark, and I doubt he can drive anyone insane through it either,” Knowledge put in.
“Why’s that?” Harry wondered.

“Karkarov,” Knowledge shrugged. “He was tracked down, caught, and tortured to death over a month after Voldemort’s return. If he could kill him through the Mark, or drive him insane, why waste his limited resources tracking him down and dragging him back?”

“Good point,” Harry nodded, encouraged by that. “So… Does this mean that we’re going to marry Snape?” he grimaced faintly. The concept still disturbed him, but not quite as much as it had at the beginning of this conversation.

“It is the only logical choice,” Logic affirmed.

“It might not be so terrible,” Loyalty smiled encouragingly.

“Exponentially better than permanently tying ourselves and our families to those gold-digging redhead traitors,” Cunning grinned.

“It will open a lot of interesting doors,” Ambition agreed.

“We are backed into a corner,” Knowledge nodded.

“I don’t trust Dumbledore. Distancing ourselves from him and his machinations is only a good thing,” Protectiveness concurred.

Harry sighed heavily. Holy shit. They were really going to do this. “Great. Now, I’ve just got to convince Snape to marry me.”
Chapter Summary

Chapter Three Synopsis

Harry leaves a brief note for the Order, then leaves Privet Drive. He goes to London, avoiding the Order for fear they’ll force him back to the Dursleys. He spends three days resting and recovering in the real world while working all night in his mind. He decides that he doesn’t want to be an auror and realizes he’ll need to take Ancient Runes and Arithmancy to have a chance at any of the careers that do interest him, namely healing, enchanting, or warding. He goes shopping for a new muggle wardrobe and new glasses as well as several different colored contacts. He also buys a new wizarding wardrobe and a multi-compartment trunk.

He meets his account manager at Gringotts about Sirius’ will and finds he received everything as well as being named Heir Black. He discovers two marriage contracts that will activate should he accept his lordships. One with Ginny Weasley, made by Dumbledore and the Weasley parents and one with Severus Snape which was made generations ago, but would activate for him. After buying some books about arranged marriage and pureblood etiquette, Harry discusses the matter with his Aspects and decides that the thing to do is to convince Severus Snape to marry him.

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 4

Knowledge is Powerful

12 July 1996 - Friday

“Greetings, Heir Potter,” Orblok smiled thinly as Harry took his seat in front of the desk.

“Hello, Master Orblok,” Harry nodded in return. “What do I need to do to accept the Black lordship?”

Orblok gave another one of his scary smiles. “It is very simple, Heir Potter. All you need to do is put on the ring with the knowledge of what it means and the desire to assume the lordship.”

Harry narrowed his eyes slightly. “I assume, from what you told me yesterday and some reading I’ve personally done on the subject since then that there is a magical component to accepting the lordship and putting on the ring. What can I expect?”

“I only know what I’ve heard, having never assumed any wizarding lordship myself,” the goblin replied with what Harry thought was a silent “duh” at the end. “In theory, it will align your magic with the magic of the Black family. You will definitely feel something from your magic when that happens. What, exactly, you will feel, I could not speculate. Every time I have heard it described, it
has been done differently. I’ve heard it called cold, hot, slick, comforting, painful, and as a simple feeling of power. Regardless of the sensation you feel, it should last only moments.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, then added, “Considering that you are also undergoing magical emancipation, you may expect your magic to change even more. It is somewhat rare for a lordship to be assumed by a minor, but I have never heard of it being dangerous.”

Harry winced internally. He seemed to have a habit of defying convention. There really was no telling what might happen. It could be perfectly ordinary and hardly of note, or he might level half of Gringotts. He did, however, consider that latter possibility highly unlikely and completely unnecessary to voice.

“After our discussion yesterday, I took the liberty of bringing the Black ring up from the vaults for your convenience.” He opened a desk drawer and lifted a black-lacquered wooden box onto the desktop. He slid it across to Harry.

He recognized the Black Family crest and motto set into the lid of the box. Three ravens, a hand wielding a wand, and a skull set onto a black, white, and blue shield – very cheerful. And, of course, *Toujours Pur*. Harry would need to do more research to figure out if it would be appropriate for him to change the family motto now that they were definitely no longer “Pure” with him at the head of the family.

Resolute in his decision by now, Harry opened the box without hesitation. Inside was a shining platinum ring. The stone appeared to be onyx with fine platinum filigree embossed over it in the shape of a crow with a wand in one talon and a tiny human skull in the other. Altogether, a very cheerful bunch, the Blacks.

Harry frowned slightly as he lifted the ring from the box and could literally feel the magic tingling against his fingers. He wasn’t sure if that was because he was the recognized heir or if anyone could feel it, but he wasn’t too concerned for that at the moment. Before he could start to second-guess his very rational decision, he slid the large ring onto his middle right finger.

As soon as it was in place, he felt the metal tighten around the digit, and then Orblok’s office was gone and Harry was in the parlor receiving room in his mind. Will, Protectiveness, Courage, and Paranoia stood in tight formation around the back of his chair while Logic, Knowledge, Cunning, Ambition, and Loyalty were arrayed in front of him.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked cautiously.

He’d barely gotten the words out before another chair appeared right in front of him with an unfamiliar man seated in it. He had almost violently blue eyes – a dark royal blue – and long white hair. Age had etched itself around his eyes and mouth, but he didn’t look nearly as old as Dumbledore. He was dressed in what seemed to be extremely rich robes, though the style looked somewhat archaic.

Harry started badly at the unexpected presence. And then his eyes fell to the man’s hands where he was twirling a familiar ring between his fingers.

“Hello, Heir Black,” the man said slowly, an odd cadence to his words.

“Are you one of the Black ancestors?” Harry asked carefully, eyeing the ring.

The man dipped his head slightly. “I was Corvus, the first recognized Lord of House Black. I commissioned this ring, and enchanted it with a portion of myself, as was tradition at the time.”
“Do you speak to all of the potential lords?”

“No,” the man chuckled. “No, I have not had autonomy such as this since my death. Your mind and magicks are incredibly unique, young Heir.”

“Are you going to accept me?” Harry wondered.

The former lord lifted his gaze and his eyes traveled over each of the Aspects around them. “I do not like the idea of the Black Family leaving the bloodline,” he admitted at last. “But you have a bit of Black blood in you. Dorea, I believe. Your grandmother?”


The spirit smirked. “Very unique. Very powerful. Intelligent. Driven. A bit of Gryffindor,” he said with a faint sneer, “but I see more Slytherin and Ravenclaw than anything here.” His eyes settled on those behind Harry and the approval there grew. “You are a fighter. A survivor. A conqueror. My family has been nearly snuffed out of existence for the choices of the last few Lords. Always, we have been drawn to power. In my time, it made us great. In recent times, it has nearly destroyed us. Perhaps, instead of following Power, it is time to lead with it.

“I find you acceptable, Heir Black, despite your less than pure blood. Return honor to the family. Groom your heir well, and be sure he is prepared before you pass the ring.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said carefully to the ancient wraith.

Corvus Black just smirked in reply and passed over the mental representation of the ring.

Harry accepted it with a nod and slid it onto the same finger that he had in the real world. As soon as it settled into place, Harry felt a strange stirring from his core and moved from the reception room to the Core Chamber with a thought. As soon as he arrived, he turned and shielded his eyes against the blinding green light.

The entire room was trembling with what he could only describe as Power. Harry started as a black crow burst out of the ring on his finger and squinted against the light to watch as the crow attacked his core. He had just a moment of panic before he realized that it wasn’t attacking his core. It was attacking the bindings on his core. He’d managed to remove two ribbons, but several more had remained.

The crow ripped at the bindings with his sharp talons and beak, screeching furiously at them. Finally, the last was torn away and the crow drove right in through the tattered, threadbare cloth.

The light seemed to dim for a moment and Harry fought against a wave of dizziness before the cloth just disintegrated.

Blinding light filled the room with a physical force and Harry hit the wall hard. He squinted and his eyes slowly began to adjust. Finally, he blinked his watery eyes and his jaw dropped in wonder as he marveled at the brilliant green light undulating with threads of black that didn’t unnerve him. He recognized those as the same as the crow. That was where the Black family magic was intertwined with his own.

He stared a moment more, and then he blinked and his core vanished, along with the chamber, and he was in Orblok’s office again.

And Harry got to see what a goblin looked like completely gobsmacked. Beady black eyes were
bugging out, toothy maw hanging open as he stared at Harry.

Harry looked around the office and frowned uneasily. It looked like it had suffered a minor earthquake. “I apologize,” Harry said sheepishly. “There were a few blocks on my magic that seem to have been removed.”

The goblin finally blinked and seemed to recall himself as he closed his jaw and sat up properly. “I’ve never heard of a lordship ring causing such a strong reaction,” he muttered. “What did it feel like?” he asked intently.

Harry smiled ruefully at the goblin. “Power,” he admitted.

Orblok nodded, evidently not surprised by that.

Harry looked down at the ring on his finger and ran his thumb lightly over the face. It didn’t look quite so ugly anymore. His ancestor hadn’t seemed that bad, after all.

“Would you like to claim the Potter lordship today, Lord Black?” Orblok inquired, apparently recovered from whatever had happened on this side while Harry’s core was unblocked.

Harry shook his head definitively. “No.” He was going to need a lot more than a month to convince Snape to marry him, and he had no intention of finding himself married to Ginny before he was able to reason with the surly git.

“Very well, then it is my duty to inform you that you have one year from today to assume or forfeit the Potter lordship. The Potter vault will remain sealed for now. Is there anything else that you require today, Lord Black?”

“Yes,” Harry said slowly. “The Black-Prince contract. If Severus Snape wishes to claim the Prince lordship, can you be sure that he’s first informed of the contract? I want to discuss it with him before he inadvertently activates the contract, but I won’t be able to do that immediately.”

“That can be done. I will make a note of it in the Prince file so that it will be flagged regardless of whom he speaks to about it.”

“Thank you,” Harry sighed. The last thing he wanted was for Snape to think Harry had tried to trick him into it. Harry had some idea of how vindictive the man was, and he was pretty sure that Snape would die before he married Harry if he felt like Harry had done what Dumbledore and Ginny tried to do to Harry. It would be difficult enough to convince him as it was. “I think that’s all then, except that I would like to view the Black Vault.”

“Of course, Lord Black. Bloodaxe will take you down.”

Harry thanked the goblin again and left the office to find Bloodaxe, the goblin who had led him back today, waiting right outside. He informed the goblin of his desire to go down to the Black Vault, and he was led to the carts.

The Black Vault was very deep. Number 32. Harry had to press his ring against the door to unlock it – Lords, apparently, did not use keys – and he almost tripped over his feet as he stepped inside what seemed to be a massive cavern filled with towering shelves sagging under the weight of gold and platinum bars, trunks full of galleons, chests full of gems, a library of books, and shelf after shelf of apparently random objects that were most likely enchanted and more than likely dark artifacts. At a guess, there were at least a thousand books and items in this room that would earn him a one-way ticket to Azkaban.
The books alone in this room might make it worth marrying Snape. They really might.

He chuckled quietly to himself as he felt Knowledge’s hearty approval of that thought, and he ventured into the room absolutely choked with magic. Magic that felt both dark and welcoming. It recognized him as Lord Black.

Four hours later, Harry left the Black Vault with a much fuller trunk. He didn’t yet know enough about any of the items or have the means to identify them, so he’d not touched any of them. He highly suspected that they were mostly quite dangerous if handled improperly. He did find the Black Grimoire though, and he’d taken a copy of that with him. He’d also combed through and appropriated dozens of books on everything from ancient magicks to rituals, defense to dark arts, both legal and illegal. He couldn’t help but grin at the thought of certain people’s faces if they knew what kind of stuff he was reading. Granted, Snape might have a stroke at the simple fact that he was voluntarily reading something educational – during the summer, no less.

And every time he had a thought like that, he was reminded of just how much work he still had ahead of him if he wanted to keep the Potter fortune out of Dumbledore’s hands and not end up married to Ginny.

When he left the bank, he started back toward the Cauldron. He was nearly there when a shop caught his eye. It was a bookstore that he’d never been into before. Though he had a great deal of reading material between yesterday’s visit to Flourish and Blotts and today’s raid of the Black Vault, the last four hours in particular had gotten him salivating for knowledge of all forms. Flourish and Blotts had a lot of mainstream stuff and was a good source for knowledge on the wizarding world that muggleborns didn’t know, and the Black library was definitely an ideal source of very dark knowledge, most of the former was very new and most of the latter was very old. This was potentially another source that may fill the gap between the two. After just a moment of hesitation, he changed course.

It wasn’t until he was almost in front of the shop that he realized he’d entered Knockturn Alley. He wasn’t that far in, but he was only two shops down from Borgin and Burkes that he’d inadvertently visited before second year. Again, he hesitated, but he wasn’t Harry Potter today. He was Lord Black. He wasn’t going to be afraid of a bookstore.

Mentally bracing himself and throwing back his shoulders confidently, he stepped into the store. It wasn’t nearly as dark or dingy as Borgin and Burkes, but it wasn’t as neat and open as Flourish and Blotts either. All in all, he figured it could be much worse.

Surprisingly, shopping at the Knockturn Alley store turned out to be pretty much exactly the same as shopping at any store on Diagon. It made him wonder how much of Knockturn’s scary reputation wasn’t exaggerated by the adults to scare them away from it, and their own imaginations. After all, hadn’t Hagrid come down here for slug repellant? If it was all about evil and illegal, the gentle half-giant, Dumbledore-worshipper never would have put a toe in here.

Some of the prices were a little higher, but many of the books were also borderline illegal. Some looked fairly dark whereas others just seemed the sort of thing that the Ministry might find annoying. It did turn out to be a pretty happy medium between the Diagon Alley store and the Black library.

By the time he left that store, his library compartment was in danger of being filled, and Harry was over a thousand galleons poorer – not that he was the slightest bit concerned about money anymore. He was, however, very warmly invited to return to the store often as they regularly got in new stock, both newly published and rarer items that didn’t often become available. Harry just smiled and promised that he would certainly be back. And he would, though probably not this summer as he already had more than enough to read.
So Harry left feeling rather good about himself for having braved Knockturn Alley and not only come out alive but unscathed. Considering the day’s haul of books, he wasn’t even feeling too stressed out about his impending nuptials to a man who not only hated him, but didn’t yet know that Harry was dead set on marrying him.

Harry dedicated the next few days to going through many, many books. Knowledge seemed to be maturing at a rate of almost a year a day while Harry devoured more than a dozen books each day, carefully scanning each page and leaving it to Knowledge to sort it all out. If he wanted to peruse it later, he could find the complete books in his mental library, he didn’t doubt. He also switched hotels every day, hopping from upscale to low rent and everything in between, doing his best to be unpredictable. He was sure that the Order was looking for him, but he was just as sure that they were looking for a boy with messy black hair, green eyes, over-large round glasses, and baggy rags for clothes, probably lugging around a trunk. He suspected that Snape had been roped into the search, and he also suspected that the man was likely to be extremely unhappy with him – well, more so than he usually was – by the time school resumed. That ought to lend a great aid to his plans…

Unfortunately, Harry refused to put himself back beneath Dumbledore’s wrinkled old thumb any sooner than necessary. And he wasn’t entirely sure that he could remain civil if he had to see three particular Weasleys right now. At least when he went back to school, he’d only deal with the Weaslette – he decided that he liked that nickname – and with her being in a different year and all the distractions at school, it would be much easier to evade her than if he was stuck at Grimmauld Place or the Burrow.

At least as fulfilling as his new access to so much reading material – and questionable reading material at that – was the fact that he was now an adult. Magically and legally. Which meant that he could use magic whenever the hell he felt like it. He still needed to learn to apparate, but he’d get lessons in that next term and then he could take his test with the older students in his year, like Hermione, who’d be seventeen in September.

Once he’d consumed all of the books, he spent a week practicing what spells he could safely practice in a muggle hotel. He also spent the time that he’d previously been using to work on his core during the night going over the theory that he’d assimilated, but not actually learned. Essentially, the knowledge was in his head and his Knowledge Aspect could relate it all to him, but his conscious mind couldn’t access it without help. So he needed to go through and actually incorporate it all into his conscious mind. It was magnitudes easier than it had ever been for him to learn anything before – likely because he was no longer fighting his Knowledge Aspect – but it still took time.

19 July 1996 - Monday

Conscious of the fact that trips to Gringotts wouldn’t be easy once school started, Harry made another trip to his vault. He stopped at the luggage shop first and bought an expensive trunk dedicated solely to storing books. This one would hold five thousand books, and kept them at the perfect temperature and humidity as well as surrounding them with stabilizing and cushioning charms to prevent any damage. It did, of course, have feather-weight and shrinking charms built in as well. Just because he was capable of casting those charms whenever he felt like it now, that didn’t mean that he wanted to be bothered with it when he could get both added for an extra ten galleons.

Once he was armed with extra storage, he headed for Gringotts. There was one brief moment of panic when Tonks literally almost tripped over him on her way out. Luckily, he recovered first and recognized her before she did him. Though he’d hated to do it, he’d stuck his nose in the air, huffed, and impersonated Malfoy again, storming away from her as though he was deeply affronted by her clumsiness even though he may have been partly at fault. He then hit the first open teller and his
status as one of their wealthiest clients had gotten him taken back immediately.

He breathed a sigh of relief once he was ensconced in his vault, and headed toward the towering shelves of books. After filling his new trunk, he estimated that the vault had held close to ten thousand books, because he’d cleared out about half of it. He returned the books that he’d taken the first time and filled the rest of his standard trunk – which he carried everywhere with him – library with another hundred or so books. At the rate he was assimilating books, he figured that he could make it through most of what he’d just collected in around four months – factoring in general living in addition to digesting literature. He’d have to bring back the ones he’d finished and restock just before school started. Then he could hopefully make it back over winter break to get some more. Though it would take him a very long time to properly learn all of that, he wanted Knowledge to have it. He would then always have it with him when he needed it, and Knowledge would be his own personal search engine. He was truly beginning to adore that Aspect. He may not comprehend love, but his feelings for Knowledge right now were as close as he could imagine.

With any luck, Harry figured that he should have been able to memorize the entire collection of books in the Black Vault by next summer. And by then, he should be married and have access to the Potter Vault, which Harry suspected may well have more books. He didn’t know if there would be as many and he highly suspected that they wouldn’t be nearly as dark, but he would have the Potter Grimoire at the very least, and hopefully a further collection of valuable old books.

Harry soon found himself falling into a routine. He would wake up at sunrise and head out for a jog, as far as he could push himself without having to drag himself back to his hotel after. He’d always been a strong runner, having had Dudley to teach him that skill, but he was a little out of practice. Considering how often he found himself fighting for his life, good physical endurance seemed very important. When he got back to his room, he’d take a hot shower and get dressed for the day. Depending on where he was staying, he’d either eat what food he’d brought with him, get a breakfast in the hotel, or order room service. He vastly preferred the room service, but his desire to not stay in one place two days in a row meant that he didn’t always get the nicest hotels.

After breakfast, Harry would spend three hours paging through and assimilating books from his portable library. Then it was two hours of practicing what magic he could safely do. After that, he’d have lunch, in his room if possible or at the nearest diner. After lunch, he’d move to his new hotel, into a room reserved the night before under a constant cycle of unremarkable names – Knowledge made sure he didn’t forget which one he was using. Once he was settled, he’d spend another three hours paging through books, then if he needed to run any errands, he would do so or he’d just practice some magic. Just before dinner, he’d pick another hotel out of a telephone directory and make a reservation for the following night. He’d tried going without reservations in the beginning, but after the second time he’d been thwarted by a lack of available rooms, he’d decided that a reservation one day in advance was safe enough since he was using fake names anyway.

After dinner either in his room or the nearest restaurant, he’d either practice more magic or page through more books depending on his mood or sometimes indulge in an hour of television to recharge his mental batteries. Finally, he’d push himself through as many sit-ups and pushups as he could manage, have a quick shower to rinse off the sweat, then turn in for the night in time to get a solid eight hours of sleep.

The next eight hours, thanks to the time difference between the conscious and unconscious worlds, actually ended up being about twenty-four hours. The order in which he did things at night mostly depended on his mood, but it included about six hours organizing the apparently endless memories, and six hours on building, reinforcing, and tweaking his mental security system. Then there were four hours of transferring his assimilated knowledge into his conscious understanding – which basically ended up a very great deal like studying with Knowledge as his personal tutor. Again, it
was much faster than he’d ever been able to learn before, and it seemed to get easier the more organized his mind became. The last eight hours were divided between self-therapy, dueling practice – in which he could only practice spells he’d successfully cast in the real world because he couldn’t simulate in his mind anything he hadn’t experienced in real life – and working on designing and constructing his new and improved mental landscape – mindscape, he now knew it was called.

He very quickly lost himself in his routine. His lust for knowledge seemed to increase daily. A combination of the speed at which he was able to learn, his understanding that he had certainly not seen the last attempt on his life, the fact that he was most likely going to end up dueling Voldemort again, and the simple *usefulness* of so very many of the things he was learning was turning him into a chronic bookworm. He was assimilating forty or more books every day now, depending on their length – the charm he’d learned to set the pages to turning at the proper speed had increased his efficiency considerably – and his Knowledge Aspect was into adulthood and was actually getting a bit cocky in direct opposition of his former shyness.

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**2 August 1996 - Friday**

Harry didn’t realize that he’d missed his birthday until he was ambushed by an owl one day while he was in transit from one hotel to another. He almost banished the owl before noticing the Ministry seal on the envelope. A few surreptitious detection charms quickly determined that it was free of curses, hexes, poisons, tracking charms, and portkeys. He’d made a point to learn all of those detection spells as soon as Knowledge acquired them.

Once he felt it was safe, he apologized to the irritated owl and accepted the missive. He waited until he was checked into his new hotel room to open it. As expected, it was his OWL results. He was less than pleased with his seven OWLs, and he had to spend a few minutes calming down before he was able to look at the scores objectively. As he’d expected, History of Magic and Divination were both fails. He hated himself for ever thinking Divination would be an easy O. Not only had he failed the OWL, but he was not remotely interested in any career that actually required that he take the stupid class anyway. Three years of being told that he was going to die soon every single class, for absolutely nothing.

Pushing past that point, he figured he could retake the History OWL at the Ministry later along with the NEWT if he wanted to. With Knowledge available to supply him with relevant facts whenever he wanted, he knew that he’d ace it as there was no practical that he needed to practice. He didn’t give a flying fuck about Divination. Astronomy was only an A, which wasn’t surprising given that the exam had been interrupted. That one he could also retake later if he decided that he wanted it. That was also just memorizing data.

He’d gotten E’s in Care, Charms, Herbology, Transfiguration, and – shockingly – Potions. He’d thought that he’d done pretty well on the Potions OWL, but it was still bizarre to connect an Exceeds Expectations with Potions. Snape would probably faint.

No, Logic corrected in his mind. *Snape will assume you cheated or were given special treatment.*

Ah. So true. And even an E wouldn’t be enough to get him into the NEWT potions class. Well, he supposed he could try a little mild begging. If that didn’t work, it would have to be independent study and tutoring at some point down the line. Still, he would like to be in the class just for an extra excuse to get close to the man that he was going to have to somehow win over in the next… 337 days. Well, he’d worry about that later.

He had, at least, gotten an O in Defense. Considering that he’d been teaching N.E.W.T. students last year, that wasn’t really surprising.
Well, at least these were only OWLs. It was the NEWTs that would really matter toward his future career, and he was positive that he could improve exponentially in the next two years given his new control over his mindscape and his unconscious mind.

The problem was Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. With a little help from Hermione, he could probably manage Arithmancy on independent study, but Ancient Runes – from what he’d learned thus far – required practical work that would be much easier with some proper instruction. Though he could easily afford tutors, he hated the idea of waiting until after graduation to get proper training in the subject.

That’s when Knowledge reminded him that the Ministry held OWL exams in the summer at the Ministry in the Department of Education. Homeschooled kids, retakes, and older people going back for their OWLs took the tests then. After a few minutes of consideration, Harry headed back out of his room. If the tests hadn’t already been held, he could take them and sign up for the NEWT classes. He was sure that he could do well enough on the theory portions to scrape at least an A, which would be enough to get him into the NEWT classes. There weren’t enough students who took those classes for them to be picky. It was quite sad actually, given how many careers preferred if not required those NEWTs. But then, those were mostly the more specialized careers – equivalent to doctors, architects, engineers, and computer programmers in the muggle world. Only a small percentage of people did those careers, so he supposed it made sense. He still thought they should probably both be required third through fifth year. Then those without the aptitude or interest could drop them, but hopefully, everyone would be old enough to make a semi-informed decision.

He pushed those thoughts from his mind as he hailed a taxi to the area of the public entrance of the Ministry.

During the ride, Harry turned his mind to reviewing his knowledge of Runes and Arithmancy.

By the time he got into the telephone box, he was starting to wonder if this was a mistake. He was going to have to give his real name. He was going to have to check his wand with security. That meant that his visit would be on official record and at least one person would know that he’d been here. Also, if he stated the reason for his visit, it was very possible that his return – if he hadn’t already missed the tests – would be expected.

He conferred briefly with his advisor Aspects. Logic ended up convincing him with the good point that, if he was caught by Dumbledore at this point, it wouldn’t be too tragic. He still had a great many books to go through and they were on his person. He didn’t want to have to deal with anyone whose name was on that contract, but it would be doable.

With a sigh, he typed in M-A-G-I-C on the number pad.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” the bland female voice greeted. “Please state your name and business.”

“Harry Potter, visiting the Department of Education,” he said clearly.

With a click and a rattle, the little silver badge was expelled from the telephone. *Harry Potter, Visiting DoE.*

Harry smirked slightly at that and pinned it to his robe.

“Visitor to the Ministry, you are required to submit to a search and present your wand for registration at the security desk, which is located at the far end of the Atrium,” the voice advised, and then the box started sinking into the ground.
He found the Atrium pleasantly busy when he arrived. Hopefully, it would be busy enough that he would pass as unnoticed as it was possible to pass when he was walking around with a badge stating his name.

He moved quickly and was pleased to find that no one was looking much at him and no one even glanced at the visitor badge.

At the security desk, he found a bored looking middle-aged man going through the monotonous motions of his job with as little evident thought as possible. “Step over here,” he said when Harry stopped at the desk. Harry quickly moved the same way he had last summer, and submitted to being scanned with the thin golden rod that was presumably checking him for dark artifacts or extra wands. It didn’t even blip at the trunks in his pockets, so it either didn’t notice the dark books or couldn’t see through the trunks. Given the general incompetence Harry had encountered in this building, he wasn’t ruling anything out.

“Wand,” the man almost sighed when he was done with the scan.

Harry passed it over and watched while it was scanned by the strange scales. To Harry’s absolute delight, the man stuck the slip of paper on the brass spike, handed back Harry’s wand, and didn’t seem to notice his name at all.

Containing a sigh of relief when he was allowed past the desk, Harry hurried to the lifts. He boarded the first one available along with an auror in uniform and someone else that probably worked there judging by the lack of visitor badge. Neither gave him more than a glance.

Harry exited the lift on the proper floor and followed the signs toward the Department of Education with the uneasy feeling that his good luck could not possibly continue.

He stepped through the door with the proper label and very easily found the large notice advertising that OWL tests would be held on August 5th, NEWT tests on August 12th. The sign advised anyone interested in taking the exams to sign up at the desk.

Harry mentally groaned. They were going to have his name down. He didn’t doubt for an instant that Dumbledore, Voldemort, and the Daily Prophet would know all about this by end of business today.

He stared at the sign for a few minutes, wondering if it was going to be worth it to do this. Unfortunately, Logic couldn’t resist pointing out that he needed to learn these things because they would help him to stay alive. And that Voldemort wouldn’t try anything at the Ministry in broad daylight. And that Dumbledore was annoying, but very unlikely to literally kill him.

With a disgruntled sigh, he moved over to the desk.

“I’d like to sign up for some OWLs,” he said to the elderly witch seated there.

She gave him a kind smile. “Which ones, Dearie?”

Harry was uneasily reminded of Mrs. Number 12 on Privet Drive, who was a very sweet old lady who also happened to be the biggest gossip on a street full of gossips. But, he’d already committed to this. “Um, Arithmancy and Ancient Runes.”

“And first time or retakes?”

“First time. I took my other OWLs at Hogwarts, but I was doing independent study on these, so I couldn’t take them at school.” May as well give her some sort of explanation. That way, if she did
gossip, at least some of the more outlandish rumors might be nipped in the bud.

She nodded and jotted something down on a parchment in front of her. “Arithmancy is scheduled for one p.m. and Ancient Runes will be at three p.m., both on Monday. What’s your name, sonnie?”

“Harry Potter,” he didn’t quite sigh.

Her eyes immediately darted up to his visitor badge, then his forehead, where his scar was pretty well concealed, then to his face. “Are you really?” she blinked.

Harry gave her something between a grimace and a smile. “Yes, ma’am.”

She frowned at him. “You don’t fit the pictures I’ve seen, granted that was a couple years ago…”

He sighed, “Yes, ma’am. I’m trying to avoid making too much of a scene.”

Her eyes widened in comprehension, then that sweet smile was back. “Well, don’t you worry, lad. I won’t be telling anyone you stopped by. Least I can do after all you’ve done for us.”

Harry was moderately surprised, decently skeptical, and rather wishing that more magical folk thought like that. Most of them seemed to figure that everything he’d “done for them” just made him public property. “I’d appreciate that,” he admitted, then for good measure, added, “I’d hate to make a scene, and if You-Know-Who found out when exactly I was going to be here…” he let that thought hang.

The woman nodded sagely. “Of course, Mr. Potter,” she said quietly. “We wouldn’t want him here again. Certainly not. Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll make sure no one sees your name until it’s time to take the tests, okay?”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said politely, hoping that she’d do just that, but not at all counting on it. Even if she meant it at the moment, it would take only one errant comment in the cafeteria to have the news spreading like Fiendfyre.

That evening and the next two days were spent almost exclusively on reviewing Arithmancy and Ancient Runes.

5 August 1996 - Monday

On Monday, he slept in a bit to get a few more hours of study. He ate a small lunch, his nerves proving a bit too much for him to really stomach very much. He wasn’t nervous about the tests, of course. He’d learned as much as he could and Knowledge would be there to supply the rest. Whatever happened, he was sure that he’d at least pass them both. And if he didn’t, for any reason, he’d just have to continue his independent study and probably beg Hermione to tutor him.

No, what had him nervous was wondering how much of a circus he was going to face. Would Dumbledore be there waiting for him? The media? Death Eaters? Voldemort himself? He didn’t really think that Voldemort was quite strong enough after what happened in June for him to risk showing up at the Ministry during the middle of the day, and it would be stupid to waste his Death Eaters there, particularly as he must expect Dumbledore to be providing a guard if not going personally. It was mostly Paranoia that wouldn’t let him completely dismiss that concern.

He really didn’t know if he was ready to see Dumbledore yet, not to mention giving up some of the first freedom he’d ever known in his life to spend the rest of the summer locked up at Grimmauld or the Burrow. He’d made his decision though. There was nothing left to do now but to face it with
dignity.

With that in mind, he changed into his robes in the nearest public loo before heading for the visitor’s entrance.

And so, he was only slightly disappointed, and not the least surprised when he spotted Kingsley loitering across the street. He assumed that Tonks was around somewhere, too, but she could almost literally be anyone.

He did, however, find it extremely satisfying when he realized that Kingsley did not seem to have spotted him yet. Considering that they knew he’d be here and when, it was immensely satisfying to see that his disguise was so good.

He stepped into the box and typed in the code. A surreptitious glance toward Kingsley found the man watching him intently, but it didn’t seem like he was sure of his identity. Harry had foregone the colored contacts today considering the certainty that he would be recognized once he reached the exam if not before. He left his hair brown, but there didn’t seem to be any good reason to give up a valuable part of his disguise.

He was also extremely unsurprised when he exited the telephone box in the Atrium to find Dumbledore there twinkling at him.

Harry very carefully checked to make sure that Rage was firmly locked up before approaching the man.

“You’re looking well, Harry,” he greeted, far too amiably.

“A summer away from the Dursleys is apparently good for me,” Harry replied flatly. “If you’ll excuse me, sir, I don’t want to be late.”

Dumbledore fell into step at his side as he moved through the atrium, the old man’s unmistakable presence clearing the way for them. “We do need to talk, Harry.”

“I expected as much,” he answered smoothly, keeping his voice as low as Dumbledore was lest all of the eager listeners get what they so badly wanted – more gossip.

“You seem to have changed a great deal this summer,” Dumbledore said thoughtfully.

“It’s necessary,” was Harry’s ambiguous answer. Two could play at the mysterious game, after all.

Dumbledore eyed him briefly before nodding sagely.

The old man’s presence got the security wizard’s attention this time, and of course he had to figure out who was accompanying the headmaster, which prompted the gaping and staring that Harry had been so grateful to avoid last time. Like his eyes, he hadn’t hidden his scar behind anything more than his hair today. Let them think that the presence – or absence – of that annoying disfigurement was a sure indicator of his identity.

Dumbledore accompanied him all the way to the exam room, and Harry tried not to let it annoy him too much. After all, his presence at least guaranteed that any Death Eaters on staff would restrain themselves from trying anything. Harry was learning fast and had become a much more competent dueler with the influx of so much new knowledge and the ability to practice against his dueling equal – even if only in his mind – but that didn’t mean that he was eager to have someone try to kill him again. After all, as his increasingly healthy Paranoia loved to point out, even the best dueler or the most suspicious, aware man in the world wasn’t infallible. If Mad-Eye Moody managed to get
himself tied up in his own trunk, it would be all too easy for Harry to find himself in such a situation. Of course, Harry wouldn’t just be imprisoned. He’d be taken to Voldemort and tortured, then executed.

So, Harry tolerated the old man’s presence as well as he was able until he reached the exam room. Outside the closed doors, he faced him again. “Thank you, headmaster, but I doubt that I’ll need a babysitter inside,” he said coolly.

Dumbledore sighed sadly in response to the tone, but nodded. “We’ll talk more when you’re done, Harry.”

Harry didn’t bother responding before he turned and let himself into the room. There were three other kids about his age that he didn’t recognize, two that looked two to four years post-Hogwarts, and one middle-aged witch inside. Harry found a seat in the back so that he’d be able to concentrate without worrying about anyone cursing him in the back.

The wait was almost ten minutes before the elderly wizard at the desk in the front looked up from the book that he’d been reading right when the wall clock indicated that it was “time to begin”. He set it aside carefully, then picked up a small roll of parchment and unfurled it. He then went down the brief list of names, calling them and waiting until the individual responded in the affirmative. There was a slightly protracted pause as the old man leaned a bit closer to the parchment, then lifted his eyes again. “Harry Potter.”

“Present,” Harry said no louder than necessary while everyone else twisted around in their desks to get a look at him. Harry ignored the attention with the experience of long practice and the instructor soon passed out their exams. They were informed that they had ninety minutes, but should turn in their parchments sooner if they finished.

As he went through the test, Harry guessed that he was probably at a level of competency that deserved an A right now after all his recent studying. Of course, with Knowledge silently cross referencing any of his questions and providing any answers that had Harry uncertain, he didn’t doubt that the final product deserved an O.

After that test was over, Harry had to wait half an hour until the next. He adjourned to the nearby lounge that was open to the testers and got himself some tea, then took a book on Ancient Runes from his pocket and read through it while he waited. Knowledge already had this book, so it wasn’t necessary, but it did prove an excellent means to keep anyone from trying to talk to him. Most of the other students awaiting the next exam were likewise doing last-minute studying, but Tonks was loitering near the door and probably would have loved to chat.

The next test wasn’t as easy as the last, due to the practical portion at the end. Though he knew that he’d get an O on the theory thanks to Knowledge’s help, he’d be lucky to scrape an A on the practical seeing as how this was the first time he’d tried it. He wasn’t worried though. He was sure that the overall grade would be enough to get him into the NEWT class.

When the exam at last concluded, Harry exited the room to find Dumbledore again waiting for him. “How did you do?” he asked too cheerfully.

“I’m sure I passed,” Harry replied neutrally.

Dumbledore eyed him thoughtfully. “I hadn’t realized that you had any interest in Arithmancy or Ancient Runes,” he noted as they started toward the Atrium again.
“I hadn’t realized how many careers require the subjects,” Harry countered, not looking at the old man lest he glare at him.

That comment bought a thoughtful silence from the old coot all the way up to the Atrium. “I thought we’d go to the Burrow now, Harry. Molly and Arthur have invited you to stay the rest of the summer.”

Harry just nodded. He wasn’t going to commit himself to accepting the invitation, but he wasn’t going to try to fight Dumbledore on this either. It didn’t seem worth it.

When Dumbledore realized that he wasn’t going to say anything, he added, “Do you have everything that you need or should we go pick up your things?”

“I have everything,” Harry said simply, which got him another assessing look.

Finally, the old man nodded as they stopped before one of the exit floos. “After you then, Harry,” he smiled benignly.

Harry forcibly kept his face blank as he threw some powder into the fire and stepped inside. “The Burrow,” he called out, and tried to focus carefully to avoid letting himself be dumped on his rear upon exit.

He still stumbled, and he was sprinkled with soot, but he was considerably more graceful than the last time he’d traveled this way. Unfortunately, by the time he’d caught his balance, he found himself in the crushing embrace of one of his least favorite people in the entire world.

“Oh, Harry, dear! We were so worried about you! How could you just run off like that! Don’t you know how dangerous it is?!"

Harry stiffened and forcibly repressed the urge to shove the vile woman away from him. She’d always been an overbearing mother type, but knowing that she would pretend to care for him like one of her own while at the same time plotting to trap him into a marriage with her daughter against his will turned his stomach – and their poverty was no excuse. Before this, he’d have given them a quarter million galleons if they’d asked nicely – no marriage required.

By the time he’d extricated himself from her grip, he was immediately enveloped in another – this one with bushy brown hair that tickled his nose.

Though Harry had never been much for casual touch, he did relax some. Hermione, at least, he had found no reason to suspect of plotting against him.

“Oh, Harry! Where on Earth were you? Everyone’s been ever so worried!”

“It’s good to see you, too, Hermione,” he smiled, cutting off her rant.

“Good to see me?” she demanded, pulling back to glare at him, then smack him on the shoulder. “That’s all you’ve got to say? You go and vanish for a month, then think you can just show up and act like nothing happened?!”

“I promise that I’ll explain later, okay?” he entreated.

She huffed an annoyed sigh, but they were too used to keeping secrets for her to press the subject now.

“Molly, might Harry and I borrow the kitchen for a few minutes?” Dumbledore inquired, and by the
Harry sat down at the kitchen table across from Dumbledore and wondered if the twins were home. He wondered how many extendable ears were already snaking toward them. There was no such thing as a private conversation in the Burrow without heavy secrecy warding. Well, no matter. He wasn’t planning on telling Dumbledore any secrets anyway.

Dumbledore bustled about preparing some tea before settling down when they both had a cup. “I need for you to explain to me why you left your relatives’ house this summer,” he said somberly.

“Did you not receive my letter?” Harry asked blandly.

“I did,” Dumbledore nodded slowly. “You stated that you didn’t feel safe.”

“That’s the truth,” Harry shrugged.

“And why is that? Harry, my boy, you know that you are safest behind the wards powered by your aunt’s blood.”

“I disagree,” Harry said simply. “You said at the end of the year that Voldemort shed my mother’s blood and that you therefore used that sacrifice to seal a charm that you placed upon me when Petunia took me in – however unwillingly.”

Dumbledore nodded slowly as though waiting to see where Harry was going with this. Harry took a moment to remind himself to stay calm. It wouldn’t do to lose his temper and start ranting about things he shouldn’t know. “But when Voldemort created a new body for himself, he used my blood in its creation. My blood now flows in his veins. He and I are now, for all intents and purposes, blood kin.”

Dumbledore frowned thoughtfully and leaned back in his chair, waiting for Harry to go on.

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Dumbledore frowned thoughtfully and leaned back in his chair, waiting for Harry to go on.

Harry sighed. “‘Even the greatest of sins, if committed by kin, cannot be revenged in blood of the blood’,” Harry quoted. “‘Even the magic of the lord upon the unworthy of his brood may never disengage the bonds of fraternity that flow within the flesh’. These are among the most basic rules of blood magic,” Harry said flatly. “However powerful that magic is, particularly when imbued with emotion, blood magic cannot be used against blood kin. You may be an expert in love-based magic, but Voldemort is an expert of blood-based magic. He knew what he was doing when he used my blood in that ritual. My mother’s sacrifice, and your little protection charm has been worth nothing more than a mild aversion to him since his resurrection. That’s why our connection became so much stronger after. That’s why he was able to possess me in June. That’s why I no longer feel safe at Privet Drive.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were a bit on the wide side as he stared at Harry for a long moment before speaking. “Harry, my boy,” he said finally. “Where did you learn that?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Magicks of Blood by Thelna Selwyn. It’s in the restricted section. I read it last year, but I didn’t make the connection until the beginning of this summer when I was thinking about what you’d told me about the protection offered by my aunt taking me in.” Again, he silently thanked Knowledge for somehow remembering the title of that book on a shelf in the restricted section. Another copy existed in the Black library.

“I see…” Dumbledore muttered thoughtfully. “Well, you’ve certainly done your homework, Harry. I will… look into it. I still don’t approve of your leaving without notifying me first, but… Perhaps I
can see why you did.” He was silent for a moment more before he focused shrewd eyes on Harry again. “I see that you’ve been shopping in Diagon Alley at least once,” he looked pointedly at Harry’s robe. “Do you understand how dangerous that is, to go there alone now that Voldemort is gaining power once more?”

Harry restrained himself from rolling his eyes again. “Well, clearly I wasn’t recognized or you’d have heard about it.”

“True,” Dumbledore conceded. “I couldn’t help but notice that you changed your hair. Is that why?”

“Of course.”

“And your glasses?”

“Muggles have a nifty invention in which tiny lenses are placed directly onto the surface of the eye to correct vision. They’re called contact lenses or contacts for short.”

“I see. Most ingenious. And you can see as well with them as with your glasses?”

“Much better, actually,” Harry huffed. “My glasses were never the right prescription. I never even realized how poor my sight was until I got these.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said sadly. “Shall I assume that you wish to sign up for Arithmancy and Ancient Runes next term? Assuming that you’ve passed your exams, of course.”

Harry gave a brisk nod, “Yes, sir.”

“Can I ask about the sudden interest?”

Harry shrugged, “I’ve changed my mind about becoming an auror. If I manage to kill Voldemort and survive it, I want to be done fighting for my life.”

“What else did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking about enchantment,” Harry shrugged, “Though I haven’t ruled out a career in healing, either.”

The old man twinkled at that. “Very well, Harry. There is only one more thing to discuss.”

“Yes?”

“Grimmauld Place. The Order has vacated the premises for the time being. I believe that Sirius left most of his possessions to you, but due to his legal status at the time of his death, the goblins have sealed the will. What that means is that only those stated in the will have been informed of it, and then only as it pertains to them. Thus far, no one in the Order has reported having been contacted, which leads me to assume that he probably left it all to you.”

Dumbledore sent him a questioning look.

“Yes, sir. He did,” Harry replied neutrally after a brief pause.

“Ah,” Dumbledore nodded with something like relief. “That is fortunate. May I assume then that you’ve been to see the goblins?”

“I needed to access my vault,” Harry said, leaving the “obviously” unvoiced.
“The house is yours, then?”

Harry just nodded.

“Well… Black family tradition decreed that the house was handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of ‘Black’. Sirius was the very last of the line as his younger brother, Regulus, predeceased him and both were childless. While his will may make it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible that some spell or enchantment has been set upon the place to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pureblood.”

Harry frowned as he tried to figure out what spell or enchantment that Dumbledore might be thinking about. For all of their pureblood obsession, there wasn’t anything of that sort in the Grimoire. Nor, actually, in any book that he’d assimilated, according to Knowledge. The fact of the matter was that “pure” magical blood was more of an urban legend than a fact. Magic was magic. While it was possible to differentiate between certain wizarding lines and between those or greater or lesser power, magic did not make any distinction between muggleborn and ten centuries of “pureblood” breeding.

Of course, it was possible that Dumbledore knew something he didn’t, having had decades more to accumulate knowledge, but Harry suspected that he’d have heard hints of “pureblood magic” if such a thing existed, particularly as he’d been delving so deeply into the Black library, which would have coveted such a thing.

So, the only conclusion Harry could draw was that Dumbledore meant “Black” blood rather than “pure” blood. Of course, Harry did have Black blood, thanks to his paternal grandmother, but Harry was sure that Dumbledore knew that. What it came down to was that Draco had more. Harry wasn’t the slightest bit concerned for that, however. The Black Family Ring had accepted him. He was now Lord Black. His magic had acclimated to the Black family magic. He couldn’t imagine any way that Grimmauld Place would recognize anyone as its master over him, even one with more Black blood.

Of course, he hadn’t told Dumbledore about that yet. He was wearing the ring on a cord around his neck under his robe now. As long as he lived or until he deliberately passed the ring onto his chosen heir, it wouldn’t matter if he was wearing it or not. Nothing could take the lordship away from him.

After a moment of hesitation, he decided to continue to keep the lordship to himself for now. Once Dumbledore knew about it, he would know that Harry was legally and magically an adult, which would mean that the Potter lordship was available to him, of which he would know that the goblins would have informed him. And that would mean that Dumbledore would wonder why he hadn’t accepted the lordship yet, and he may start to wonder about Harry’s awareness of the contract. No, it was better to keep his secret as long as possible. Ideally, until he was safely married. To Snape.

He shook that thought and focused back on the conversation at hand. “Is there any way to know for sure?” he asked innocently.

“Fortunately,” Dumbledore twinkled. “There is a simple test. You see, if you have indeed inherited the house, you have also inherited…” He flicked his wand and there was a loud crack. Kreacher appeared next to the table. “Kreacher,” he finished.

“Kreacher won’t, Kreacher won’t, Kreacher won’t!” the house-elf croaked, stamping his feet and pulling his ears. “Kreacher belongs to Miss Bellatrix, oh yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won’t go to the Potter brat, Kreacher won’t, won’t, won’t…”
“As you can see, Harry,” Dumbledore said loudly, over Kreacher’s continued croaks of “Won’t, won’t, won’t”, “Kreacher is showing a certain reluctance to pass into your ownership.”

Harry stared at the filthy, pathetic creature that was responsible for Sirius’ death – or that had, at least, aided in it. He knew from his study of pureblood culture and etiquette that Kreacher’s contribution to his master’s untimely death had earned him a death sentence. He also knew, from the Black Grimoire, that his crime had earned him immolation. His head wouldn’t be mounted among those of the faithful. Of course, if Harry were a traditional Black, Kreacher wouldn’t just be killed and immolated, but tortured until his body was ready to fail, and then immolated alive.

It was disturbingly tempting to respect family traditions in this case.

“Give him an order,” Dumbledore suggested when Harry just stared at the pathetic elf. “If he has passed into your ownership, he will have to obey. If not, then we shall have to think of some other means of keeping him from his rightful mistress.”

Harry didn’t let himself roll his eyes at the man’s assumption that killing the little beast was out of the question.

“Won’t, won’t, won’t, WON’T!”

“Kreacher, be silent,” Harry snapped irritably.

It looked, for a moment, as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, his eyes bulging as he attempted to ignore the order. Finally, he threw himself face forward onto the floor and beat his hands and feet onto the worn wood, giving himself over to a violent, but entirely silent, tantrum.

“Well, that simplifies matters,” Dumbledore said cheerfully. “It seems that Sirius knew what he was doing. You are the rightful owner of Number twelve, Grimmauld Place and of Kreacher.”

Harry would have liked to just kill the elf, but there were a few problems with that. Dumbledore would be horrified. Hermione would be furious. And Harry really could use a house-elf. If he could make the little blighter behave.

“Kreacher, stand up,” Harry ordered quietly. “Remain still and do not speak unless in direct response to a question.”

The elf did as he was told, of course, but he was glaring at Harry furiously. Harry took a deep breath and silently asked Knowledge to help him out. After receiving an affirmative, he directly repeated the lines the Aspect fed to him.

“Kreacher, you will never again speak to, write to, or in any other way communicate with anyone except for me unless I give you direct and specific permission to do so. That includes allowing yourself to be legilimized or otherwise forced. You will carry out all orders given to you in the most efficient, effective manner possible without contradicting any of your other orders. Now and until you are told otherwise, you will go to Grimmauld Place and you will clean the house properly as befits the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black. You will do so as quickly and thoroughly as you are physically and magically capable of doing. You…”

The elf vanished with a crack.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Kreacher!”

The elf appeared again, looking furious and defiant.
“You will never again leave my presence when called for until you have been dismissed. You will not disturb any of the contents of the house any more than is strictly necessary for the purposes of cleaning. You will not remove any of the contents of the house without my direct and specific permission. Any trash or broken or useless items, you will safely and neatly collect out of the way and await my approval to dispose of them. You will never take actions that you believe could result in someone being harmed or killed without my direct and specific permission. If you believe one of my orders may result in such harm or death, you will inform me of your concerns as soon as you are able. If you ever discover a way around my orders that would allow you to betray me, you will inform me at once. You are now dismissed to carry out the duties I’ve given.”

With a malicious sneer, the elf vanished again.

“That was… very efficient, Harry,” Dumbledore said speculatively. “Though perhaps it may have been better to send him to Hogwarts where the other elves could monitor him.”

“He’s already responsible for one death that we know of,” Harry frowned. “I’m not going to trust him around all those children. Besides, it seems counterproductive to put him in proximity to Draco Malfoy.”

Dumbledore just gave a small, conceding nod. “Well, he is your elf. Now, as the house belongs to you, I must ask your permission that the Order of the Phoenix continues to utilize it.”

Harry considered that for a moment, and then nodded. “Yes. But. If you want to renew the Fidelius, I want to be the Secret Keeper, as it is my house. Also, I want to spend the rest of the summer there, and I want to leave within the week.”

Dumbledore frowned in response to that. “If you wish to be the Secret Keeper, that is your right, Harry. Is there a reason that you don’t wish to stay at the Burrow, though?”

“Several,” Harry nodded. “First, the Burrow is overcrowded. There’s no reason that I need to be here taking up space when I have my own house. Second,” he added before the headmaster could say anything against his first point. “Grimmauld is much more secure than the Burrow even without the Fidelius. My presence here puts everyone else at risk. Again, it’s unnecessary, even if the risk is relatively slight. Third, I would like to keep an eye on Kreacher and make sure that he doesn’t find a way to destroy the house despite my specific orders. And finally, I would like to get some studying done in the remainder of the summer, and that will be much more easily done at Grimmauld where there are fewer distractions.”

Dumbledore sighed sadly, “All excellent points, Harry. I do hope, however, that you don’t mean to isolate yourself from your friends or to forget that you must have some enjoyment in your life. Your studies are important, but no one can survive on work alone.”

“I am aware of that, sir, and I wouldn’t object to my friends visiting me at Grimmauld Place, but I’ve been neglecting my studies for far too long. I have a lot to learn if I want to have any hope of actually surviving this war, and I do mean to survive.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Harry,” Dumbledore said with a sad smile. “Very well. I’ll see about opening Grimmauld Place once more and make preparations to renew the Fidelius.”

Harry gave a brief nod as he stood. “Excuse me, sir,” he said quietly, and left the kitchen before he said something unpleasant. He ignored the guilty-looking pile of Weasleys – and Hermione – trying to pretend that they weren’t hiding extendable ears behind their backs at the bottom of the stairs, and made his way directly up to Ron’s room.
Chapter Summary

Chapter Four Synopsis

Harry claims the Black Lordship, and meets Corvus Black, the first Lord of the House, whose memory was imparted to the lord’s ring. The memory meets him in his mindscape and they talk before Corvus accepts him as the new Lord. The blocks on his magical core are removed at this time and he is emancipated. Harry gets a trunk load of books from the Black vault before leaving. He shops in Knockturn and finds it far less intimidating than he’d expected.

Harry makes an appointment at the Ministry to take his Arithmancy and Runes OWLs, then returns in a few days to take the test. When he arrives, he finds Dumbledore waiting for him. He talks to Dumbledore on the way in and the man is waiting for him when he is done. As expected, Dumbledore escorts him directly to the Burrow where they have a long talk about why Harry left, the result of Sirius’ will, and Grimmauld Place. It’s decided Dumbledore will put Grimmauld under the Fidelius with Harry as the Secret Keeper. Harry also gives Kreacher a list of orders hopefully without any loopholes that will force the elf to act civil, do his job properly, and stay away from Death Eaters. Harry leaves him to work at Grimmauld Place.

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 5

Friends and Enemies

8 August 1996 - Thursday

The next few days at the Burrow were tense. Harry was slightly cold toward pretty much everyone except Hermione. He tried not to be because he didn’t want to give himself away, but he just couldn’t help it. He felt betrayed by at least three of the Weasleys, and he had no idea if any of the others had been aware of the situation or not. Hermione was the only one that he was basically certain hadn’t known anything about it. Luckily, given what had happened with Sirius in June and his disappearing act this summer, as well as his general moodiness all last year, everyone seemed pretty content to assume that Harry was just grieving and temperamental and leave it at that.

He turned down all offers to play Quidditch and spent as much time as he could manage locked away in Ron’s room working on assimilating books and practicing magic. It still wasn’t nearly as much as he’d been doing when he was staying on his own, but at least he was getting something done. And if Dumbledore didn’t get him out of here within a week, he was going to leave on his own, and when he got to Grimmauld Place, he was going to lock it down and the Order could go fuck themselves.

Not that he was spiteful or anything. Not at all. And he didn’t care what Logic had to say about
The book lists for the coming year arrived at the Burrow on Wednesday, and the family planned a trip to Diagon Alley on Thursday. They floo’d to the Alley that morning.

“Harry!”

Harry spun around just in time to nearly be crushed as Hagrid hugged him. “What are you doing here, Hagrid?” Harry asked, trying to imbue some pleasure into the voice. He really wasn’t in the mood to deal with Hagrid. The man may have been his first friend, but given that he was slavishly devoted to Dumbledore, Harry just couldn’t quite bring himself to trust the half-giant.

“Security, innit?” Hagrid grinned. “It’s just like ol’ times, eh Harry? See, the Ministry wanted ter send a bunch o’ Aurors, but Dumbledore said I’d do,” he said proudly, throwing out his chest and tucking his thumbs into his pockets.

Harry’s eye twitched as he fought to avoid rolling them. It was disgusting that the Ministry just listened to Dumbledore like that. And why did he think that a single half-giant was good for security? Did he not think that anything much was going to happen? Sure, Hagrid was tough, being freakishly strong and naturally resistant to most magic, but he was also not a trained wizard. Legally, he wasn’t supposed to be doing magic at all. Not to mention that the man stood out like a flashing neon sign to anyone wondering exactly where Harry Potter was.

Harry managed to smile and nod and join the others in entering the Alley. He grimaced as they all came to a stop and took in the setting that was even gloomier than when Harry had last been here. Ministry posters were pasted everywhere, giving security advice that would barely give a single Death Eater pause – the more inept Death Eaters, that is. New stands had sprung up everywhere, the nearest one advertising amulets that protected against “dark” creatures.

Harry clenched his jaw and fought the urge to sneer at the sign. Doubtless reading so many dark books was affecting him, but he was coming to see with increasing clarity that “dark” did not equal “evil”.

“One for your little girl, madam?” a seedy-looking little wizard with a rattling armful of silver pedants on chains called to Mrs. Weasley as they passed, leering at Ginny. “Protect her pretty neck?”

Harry carefully did not smirk at the way Ginny bristled at being called a “little girl”. Instead, he stepped forward even while Mr. Weasley was turning a glare on the wizard. “Can I see one?” he wondered.

“One for your little girl, madam?” a seedy-looking little wizard with a rattling armful of silver pedants on chains called to Mrs. Weasley as they passed, leering at Ginny. “Protect her pretty neck?”

Harry carefully did not smirk at the way Ginny bristled at being called a “little girl”. Instead, he stepped forward even while Mr. Weasley was turning a glare on the wizard. “Can I see one?” he wondered.

“Of course, Laddie, of course!” the wizard crooned, quickly separating one out. “Just two sickles now. Guaranteed protection against werewolves, dementors, and inferi.”

“Harry, that’s all rubbish!” Mrs. Weasley chastised.

Harry ignored her and brushed his magic over the pendant. He was able to make out a mild cheering charm and something else that he didn’t know specifically, but the way the magic moved and interwove felt to him like some kind of relaxant. So the pendants weren’t actually made to protect against anything, but to lull the wearer into a false sense of security. Harry was notably unsurprised. He leaned forward as he handed it back and whispered to the repulsive little man, “How long do you think you can sell this trash before one of these creatures you’re vilifying decides to rip out your throat? I do hope a cheering charm proves as effective as you claim.”
The man was pasty white as Harry drew away with a sheepish smile for Mrs. Weasley. “You’re probably right,” he shrugged.

“If I were on duty…” Mr. Weasley glared at the man who seemed like he wasn’t even hearing him.

“Yes, but don’t go arresting anyone now, dear. We’re in a hurry,” Mrs. Weasley chastised. “Now, I think we’d better do Madam Malkin’s first. Hermione wants new dress robes and Ron’s showing much too much ankle in his school robes, and you need new ones, too, Harry. You’ve grown so much.”

That’ll happen when you actually get to eat, Harry didn’t let himself voice.

“Molly, it doesn’t make sense for all of us to go to Madam Malkin’s,” Mr. Weasley pointed out. “Why don’t those three go with Hagrid, and we can go to Flourish and Blotts and get everyone’s schoolbooks?”

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Weasley said anxiously, clearly torn between a desire to finish the shopping quickly and the wish to stick together in a pack. “Hagrid, do you think…”

“Don’ fret, they’ll be fine with me, Molly,” Hagrid said soothingly, waving an airy hand the size of a dustbin lid. Mrs. Weasley did not look entirely convinced, but allowed the separation, scurrying off toward Flourish and Blotts with her husband while Ginny joined Harry, Ron, and Hermione with Hagrid toward Madam Malkin’s.

Hagrid elected to wait outside the shop while the rest of them went inside, seeing as his excessive size coupled with the four of them would take up most of the shop. They’d barely gotten in the door when they heard a familiar voice issuing from behind a rack of dress robes.

“…not a child, in case you haven’t noticed, Mother. I am perfectly capable of doing my shopping alone.”

There was a clucking noise and a voice Harry recognized as that of Madam Malkin, the owner, said, “Now, dear, your mother’s quite right. None of us is supposed to go wandering around on our own anymore. It’s nothing to do with being a child…”

“Watch where you’re sticking that pin, will you!”

As expected, Draco appeared from behind the rack wearing a handsome set of dark green robes that glittered with pins around the hem and the edges of the sleeves. He strode to the mirror and examined himself for a few seconds before he noticed them in the reflection. His eyes narrowed.

“If you’re wondering what the smell is, Mother, a mudblood just walked in,” he sneered in their direction through the reflection.

“I don’t think there’s any need for language like that!” Madam Malkin snapped as she scurried out from behind the clothes rack holding a tape measure and a wand. “And I don’t want wands drawn in my shop either!” she added hastily as a glance toward the door showed Ron standing with his wand out and pointed at Malfoy.

“Yeah, like you’d dare do magic out of school,” Malfoy sneered.

“That’s quite enough!” Malkin said sharply, looking over her shoulder for support. “Madam. Please…”

Narcissa Malfoy strolled out from behind the clothes rack. “Put that away,” she said coldly to Ron.
“If you ever touch my son again, I shall ensure that it is the last thing you ever do.”

“I think that’s enough,” Harry interceded coolly, stepping forward to touch Ron’s wrist and gently ease his wand arm down. He turned back to the angry matriarch then and took a non-threatening step forward. “Lady Malfoy. I don’t believe we’ve officially met. I’m Harry Potter.” He lifted one hand in offer.

She stared at it for a moment, then at him as though trying to define him.

“Don’t touch her, Potter!” Malfoy snapped, spinning around to level him with a glare, his hand going to his wand, but not drawing it.

“Hush, Draco,” Narcissa said after a moment, shrewd eyes studying Harry. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Heir Potter,” she said at last, lifting her hand to place it in his. Harry’s addressing her as Lady Malfoy while offering the introduction had invoked pureblood custom. As there was no official feud between their families, it would dishonor her to ignore him or slight him at the moment.

Harry gripped her hand gently and bent over it to just brush his lips across her knuckles without lowering his eyes. “The pleasure is mine, Lady Malfoy,” he said as he straightened again.

Draco seemed to have realized what Harry was doing by now and he didn’t appreciate it at all by the way he was glaring pure murder at him.

Ron, just as clearly, seemed to have no idea what was going on. “Harry, what’s wrong with you!? They’re Death Eaters!” he burst out, his wand rising slightly again.

Harry grimaced faintly, though the way he was standing, only the Malfoys would see it – and they both did by their calculating expressions.

“Really, you shouldn’t accuse...” Madam Malkin gasped, one hand clutching at her heart. “Dangerous thing to say… Wands away, please!”

“She’s right, Ron,” Harry said with a glance over his shoulder. “There’s no need for accusations,” he gave Narcissa a smile as he said that, but his eyes were serious as he looked at her.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn’t speak as Harry went on.

“Lady Malfoy, I apologize for my companion’s behavior. Would you allow me to pay for Draco’s robes by way of apology?”

She studied him a moment while Draco just gaped at him. His jaw had slipped open at the sound of Harry saying his name. Finally, she dipped her head in consent. “That is kind of you, Heir Potter.” She then turned back to Draco to see about how his robes were coming, and ushered him back to the mirror while Harry turned to his friends, who were also gaping at him.

“What the hell was that?” Ron demanded too loudly.

“Tact,” Harry growled in return, keeping his own voice low enough that it wouldn’t carry. “Try it sometime.”

“But...!”

“Ron, we’re not going to duel anyone in the middle of Diagon Alley, and they’re certainly not dumb enough to attack us, so what the hell is the point in making ourselves look ridiculous?”
“But… You’re going to buy his robes?!” he asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Harry snapped. “Because I am better than Malfoy and I disagree with shouting malicious slurs in public!”

“But they are Death Eaters!”

Harry clenched his jaw and prayed for patience. “Ron, just go get your robes,” he ordered coldly.

Ron gaped at him a moment longer, then turned it into a glare and stormed toward the racks. Ginny gave him a bewildered look before following. Hermione stayed.

“Seriously, what was that about?” she whispered.

“Pureblood etiquette,” Harry explained quietly. “I may not be pureblood, but I am Heir to a powerful family. What I said to Narcissa invoked custom. It would have shamed her to not respond in kind. It’s… I’ve got a book you can read. It’s rather complicated.”

She nodded in response to the book offer. “But why did you do it?” she wondered.

“Like I said,” Harry sighed, “there’s no point in antagonizing them. And… You’ve really got to read the book. Can you just go get your robes and I’ll explain later?”

“You keep saying that, but you haven’t explained anything yet,” she complained.

“I’ll explain when we go to my house, okay?” he entreated.

She hit him with a look that clearly said “you’d better”, but she did finally go to find her robes.

Harry suppressed a grimace and went to get fitted for his own robes.

The atmosphere in the robe shop was tense while Harry’s group and the Malfoys coexisted in mutual silence.

“It was pleasant meeting you, Heir Potter,” Narcissa said when they were ready to leave.

“You as well, Lady Malfoy,” Harry smiled pleasantly enough as he bent over her hand again. “Heir Malfoy,” he nodded to Draco when he’d straightened, “I’ll see you at school.”

Draco’s jaw was visibly clenched as he seemed to be strenuously forcing himself to act as his breeding commanded. “Heir Potter,” he said stiffly through clenched teeth.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter, for controlling that situation,” Madam Malkin sighed as she worked on Harry’s robes after the Malfoys had left. “Some kids these days…” she shook her head in exasperation.

“I was happy to help, Madam,” he assured her.

“You know young Malfoy requested five extra robes after you offered to pay for him,” she muttered warningly.

Harry just chuckled. He wasn’t surprised in the slightest. “That’s fine, madam. Honestly, I’m surprised he didn’t consider the offense worth more.”

“He did,” she smiled conspiratorially. “His mother wouldn’t let him get more than five extra.”
Harry grinned at that, but sobered quickly as the clothier continued to work. Narcissa wasn’t Marked, but Harry could feel the black magic radiating off Draco’s Mark from across the room. That automatic sense of magic seemed to have come when Harry’s core was unbound, not that that surprised him given the way his magic had improved. He may not be fond of the prat, but he wouldn’t wish being a slave to Voldemort on anyone. And he highly suspected that Draco didn’t really have the stomach to be a Death Eater. He wondered how long he’d survive.

They did eventually get out of the robe shop. Ron had apparently decided that he wasn’t talking to Harry and was only glaring in the opposite direction. Ginny didn’t seem to know what to make of the situation. Hermione looked exasperated by Ron’s behavior. Harry had overheard her a few times in the store trying to reason with him that there really hadn’t been any sense in starting a fight and that he could have gotten expelled for it if he’d actually cast any spells. Ron clearly hadn’t wanted to listen.

They met up with everyone else at Flourish and Blotts, and from the bookstore, they made their way to the newly established Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Harry was thoroughly impressed by the shop that somehow managed to defy the gloominess of the rest of the alley with sheer cheek.

Shortly after they got inside, Fred and George pulled Harry into the back for a tour.

“We’ve just developed this more serious line,” said Fred. “Funny how it happened…”

“You wouldn’t believe how many people, even people who work at the Ministry, can’t even do a decent shield charm,” said George. “Course, they didn’t have you teaching them, Harry.”

“That’s right… Well, we thought Shield Hats were a bit of a laugh, you know, challenge your mate to jinx you while wearing it and watch his face when the jinx just bounces off. But the Ministry bought five hundred for all its support staff! And we’re still getting massive orders!”

Harry shook his head. Sadly, he could believe that.

“So we’ve expanded into a range of Shield Cloaks, Shield Gloves…”

“…I mean, they wouldn’t help much against the Unforgivable Curses, but for minor to moderate hexes or jinxes…”

“And then we thought we’d get into the whole area of Defense Against the Dark Arts, because it’s such a money spinner,” George continued enthusiastically. “That is cool. Look, Instant Darkness Powder, we’re importing it from Peru. Handy if you want to make a quick escape.”

“And our Decoy Detonators are just walking off the shelves, look,” said Fred, pointing at a number of weird-looking black horn-like objects that were indeed attempting to scurry out of sight. “You just drop one surreptitiously and it’ll run off and make a nice loud noise out of sight, giving you a diversion if you need one.”

“Handy,” Harry smiled.

“Here,” said George, catching a couple and throwing them to Harry.

“Thanks,” Harry grinned, stuffing them in a pocket. He eyed them briefly, but he couldn’t believe that these two would have been involved with the contract. And it they were… Well, it was probably worth the risk to find out. “Hey guys…”

A young witch with short blond hair poked her head around the curtain. She was wearing magenta staff robes. “There’s a customer out here looking for a joke cauldron, Mr. Weasley and Mr.
“Weasley,” she said.

“Right you are, Verity, I’m coming.” George nodded before turning back to Harry. “As you can see, we’re a bit busy right now, Harry, but what did you need?” he inquired.

Harry sighed. This wasn’t exactly a conversation that could be had quickly. “Look, I need to talk to you guys about something important. Something absolutely top secret. I should be settling in at headquarters in a few days, and I’ll be there the rest of the summer. Do you think you two could stop by to talk?”

Both Weasleys became very serious in response. “Course we can, Harry.”

“Send us an owl when you get there and we’ll stop by, yeah?”

“That’d be great guys. Thanks,” Harry smiled. “But when I say top secret, I mean it. Don’t even mention to anyone that I want to talk to you, okay?”

The redheads exchanged grim looks, but they both nodded. “Will do, Harry.”

“All right,” George said briskly. “We’ve got to get out there, but, Harry, you help yourself to anything you want, all right? No charge.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but he could see that they weren’t going to budge. Instead, he smiled. “I just may take advantage of that.”

“What?” Fred said forcefully. “We owe you, Harry.”

Harry followed them back into the main showroom and stopped in his tracks when he found Ginny perusing the love potions. He silently but firmly instructed Knowledge to never let him eat or drink anything without checking it for potions first. While Fred talked to Ginny, Harry pulled George aside. “Do you, by any chance, sell antidotes for love potions? Or even better, immunizations?”

George grinned at him, “Blimey, Harry. You sound worried.”

“I am,” Harry grimaced, glancing at Ginny again.

George followed his gaze and lifted an eyebrow curiously. “We don’t have any preventative for love potions, but that’s a brilliant idea, Harry. If we get that worked out, we’ll send you a crate.”

“That’d be great,” Harry nodded. “And if you need any extra capital to fund research and development on that one, you let me know.”

George eyed him a bit strangely for a moment, but then he nodded. “Will do, Harry.”

When Mrs. Weasley and Ginny were distracted by Pigmy Puffs, Harry noticed Draco moving passed the window outside, looking mighty suspicious throwing glances over his shoulder as he was.

Harry glanced back at Mrs. Weasley, who was apparently extremely distracted by the balls of fluff. “Wonder what he’s up to,” Hermione frowned warily. Ron was sulking elsewhere, still refusing to look at Harry.

“I don’t know,” Harry noted, but silently added that Malfoy seemed to have the right idea. Harry could use a little detour as well. “I’m going to go find out. Cover for me,” he said, already pulling his Invisibility Cloak out of his pocket.
“Oh, Harry,” Hermione fretted. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea…”

“Don’t worry,” Harry soothed. “I promise not to do anything stupid. I’ll just be a few minutes, really.”

Before she could complain again, he slipped on his cloak and ghosted out the door.

Once he was well away from Wheezes, he took off the cloak and used a color-changing charm he’d taught himself specifically for his contacts which prevented him from having to change them to enjoy the benefits of changing his eyes color. He then flipped up the hood of his regular cloak and strolled into Knockturn Alley, which didn’t seem nearly as intimidating as it used to between his growing confidence in his ability to defend himself and his previous successful shopping trip there.

He caught a glimpse of Malfoy at Borgin and Burkes as he moved passed, but he wasn’t too interested in what he was doing there. Oh, it might have been nice to know, but gawking was one thing that one did not do in Knockturn unless one wanted to draw a lot of negative attention. That was blindingly obvious to anyone paying attention. He wasn’t sure exactly what he was looking for today, but he knew that he didn’t have very much time if he didn’t want his disappearance to be noted.

A shop with a picture of a basilisk on the sign caught his attention. The sign over the door read, “Pure Silver”, which Harry thought, combined with the picture, was most likely an allusion to pureblood and Slytherin House.

He slipped inside a dimly lit shop that reminded him slightly of Borgin and Burkes for the fact that it seemed to carry a wide variety of merchandise. He automatically gravitated toward the bookshelves in the back.

On the very top shelf in the corner, almost hidden by shadow, he noticed a small collection of black leather-bound books. He squinted at the words on the spine. They read only Volume 1 through Volume 13. It wasn’t very interesting by itself, but there was something about the manner of the letters that intrigued him. He reached for it and let his magic brush over the books before touching, but he didn’t feel anything aggressive, so he lifted the first one and looked at the silver letters embossed on the front in that same strange script.

_The Rise and Fall of Serpents: Volume 1_, was the title.

Harry quickly tore his eyes away to look over his shoulder when he felt someone approaching behind him.

“Can I help you to find anything, sir?” a stooped old man inquired before his eyes fell to the book Harry held. “That’s written in parselscript,” the man said proudly before ruefully adding, “Not that anyone can read it,” under his breath, likely not intending to be heard. “Quite rare,” he said more clearly. “A thousand galleons for the lot.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, already knowing that he was going to buy it if it cost him five times that much. He hadn’t even known that there was such a thing as parselscript, but he’d be damned if he didn’t find out what these were about. “Rare, they may be, but they’re still books that can’t be read. I’ll give you five hundred.”

The man’s eyes widened slightly as he apparently hadn’t expected that Harry would buy them at all. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded, “Well enough, good sir. Well enough. Right this way,” he nodded toward the front desk.
Harry drew his wand and levitated the pile of books over to the desk in front of him. He really loved being able to do magic with impunity. He retrieved his expanded coin purse from his pocket and poured into the bowl on the scale until it read 500, then tucked it away and shrunk the books to slip them into his pocket.

“Nice doing business with you, sir,” the old man grinned once he had the money. “Come back any time. I get new stock in often.”

Harry just gave him a nod and strode out of the shop. With any luck, he’d make it back before he was missed. Of course, because his luck couldn’t be good without being bad, Harry literally bumped into Malfoy coming out of Borgin and Burkes. The blonde’s eyes widened comically when he realized who he’d run into, and then they narrowed suspiciously.

“Spying on me, then, Potter?” he snarled unpleasantly.

Harry just lifted an amused eyebrow in response. “Hardly, Malfoy,” he smirked in return, already beginning to move again, though he remained on high alert for an attack in the back. He didn’t really think Malfoy would try it, even in Knockturn, being that he ought to know by now that he couldn’t take Harry in a duel, but Harry wasn’t dumb enough to get arrogant about it and make assumptions.

His guess proved accurate however, when, rather than attacking, Malfoy was suddenly pacing at his side. “What are you doing here then, Potter?” he demanded.

“Shopping,” Harry replied blandly.

“In Knockturn Alley,” he said doubtfully, his voice pitched low to avoid drawing attention. Even Malfoy didn’t want to draw undue attention here. Not when he was alone.

“I believe that’s what I said,” Harry said mildly.

Malfoy sneered at him. “What’s with you, Potter? Acting like a pureblood with my mother? Wandering around Knockturn Alley? Careful, your loyal subjects might start to wonder about you.”

“We’ve all got to grow up sometime, Malfoy,” Harry said grimly as they reentered the brighter Diagon Alley.

Malfoy didn’t quite seem to know how to respond to that, but whatever he might have said was lost when a sharp, “Draco!” was heard from up ahead.

They both looked up to find Narcissa hurrying toward them, though her step faltered slightly when her eyes met Harry’s.

He quickly drew his wand and surreptitiously canceled the color charm on his contacts, which neither Malfoy missed.

“Draco,” Harry said quietly before Narcissa reached them. “I know what the Dark Lord is like. If you ever need help, I’ll do what I can.”

Malfoy froze in his tracks and Harry paused to turn and face him.

“What?” Malfoy gasped, his face giving a new definition to the word “pale”.

“You heard me,” Harry said seriously. “It’s not a joke. You don’t have to choose between Dumbledore and the Dark Lord. There’s another choice.”
“Draco, where did you wander off to?” Narcissa asked pleasantly as she joined them, though her eyes were assessing them both shrewdly, with emphasis on Draco’s pale face. “Heir Potter. I hadn’t expected to see you again so soon.”

“Oh, Draco and I just bumped into each other,” Harry smiled pleasantly. “I really must be going now. Draco, keep it in mind, hm?” With a polite nod, he excused himself and hurried back to Wheezes, where he eased inside, happy to find that no one had noticed his entrance and the general lack of panic suggested that he hadn’t been missed.

“So what was Malfoy up to?” Hermione whispered intently.

“Shopping in Knockturn, looked like,” Harry shrugged.

She frowned deeply. “You didn’t see what he bought?”

Harry shook his head, “No, but he was at Borgin and Burkes, which is basically a dark junk shop, so it could have been almost anything.”

Harry hid out in Ron’s room with his books when they got back to the Burrow. The first thing he did was assimilate all of the parselscript books. The script itself was fascinating. It wasn’t English, just as he wasn’t speaking English when he spoke the language. It was simply so natural to him that it felt like his first language, which was why he’d confused it with English when he was young. If he wasn’t paying attention, he could still do so now.

When he went to sleep that night, he made his way directly to the library and sat at a table where the books were already assembled. Knowledge took a seat across from him.

“The books are an account of the rise and fall of the naga,” Knowledge said without needing any prompting. “They were a manner of creature with origins predating the written word. As centaurs are a cross between man and horse, naga were a cross between man and snake. There were many tribes throughout history, usually relatively small in size. Depending on the specific race, they lived in deserts, swamps, jungles, tundra, and even the sea. These books specifically, were written by a naga named Freeshis, which of course is parseltongue that roughly translates to Warm Breath of Morning.

“Freeshis was among the last of the naga, his tribe the last that stood. He was young when his parents and several of his siblings were killed, and he knew that the end of their kind was coming. So, he devoted his life to scouring the world for everything he could find on the history of the naga. What he found, he compiled into these thirteen volumes, enchanted with the most powerful spells known to his people with the hope that they would survive the ages to come – to preserve them through memory and to warn others of their mistakes. This is the full set of them, but he does mention the existence of a series of journals that detailed his life and trials while he watched his race dwindle. Evidently, he passed these books and his journals down to his descendants, tied to his blood to keep the enchantments on them strong as long as a single living person bore the smallest trace of his blood. Since the enchantments are obviously still in effect, it is safe to say some of his line yet lives.”

“Didn’t you say that the naga died out, though?” Harry frowned curiously.

Knowledge nodded. “The naga did. Yes. That does not mean that all of their blood died out. It was, apparently, possible for the naga to breed with magical humans, though their serpentine traits
did not carry dominantly. Their more human offspring did, however, carry some specific naga traits. First, was their instinctive understanding of the snake tongue.” He stopped then and lifted an eyebrow meaningfully.

Harry spent a few moments working to lift his jaw. Maybe it shouldn’t have surprised him so much, but… Well, he knew that most of the pureblood lines had creature blood somewhere in there. Mostly it was werewolves, veela, vampires, sirens, kelpies, and the occasional ogre and giant. There was just one problem. “I’m the first Potter to be a parselmouth, Dumbledore said so. How come the trait just appeared in me? I thought it was the demon that made me a parselmouth. Or was Dumbledore just lying to me?” he wouldn’t put it passed the old bastard.

“I don’t have enough information to form a guess about the last,” Knowledge shrugged. “It is possible that he was simply mistaken, seeing as he couldn’t possibly know what we’ve learned through these books. As to why you’re the first Potter to bear the trait… Well, that’s rather simple, actually. You see, there’s more than just the language that was passed from the naga to their children. Most relevant at the moment is coloring. Each race of naga had very distinctive coloring, usually directly related to the terrain in which they thrived. This coloring was passed onto their more human offspring. The first generations often had complete naga coloring – skin, hair, and eyes. As the naga blood grew more diluted, the skin color was lost first, and then the hair color. The eyes, however, seemed to linger throughout the generations.”

“I have my mother’s eyes,” Harry whispered in dawning understanding.

“You do,” Knowledge smirked in reply. “Every magical human since the introduction of naga blood would have borne the same striking color. Our mother was not born of muggles, but a very long line of squibs. As the first magical in the family in untold generations, she picked up the eye color. And I am willing to bet, were you ever able to get Petunia to talk about it, that she could confirm that neither of her parents had bright green eyes, nor her grandparents on whichever side the squibs were.”

“So I’m descended from the now-extinct naga,” Harry said numbly. “On my mother’s side.” He’d never before even thought to imagine that he’d inherited anything magical from his mother’s side – for obvious reasons. “Wait, doesn’t that mean that she would have been a parselmouth as well?”

Knowledge nodded matter-of-factly. “Without doubt. However, she was said to have been a very clever witch. It’s highly likely that she discovered early on that parselmouths bore a very poor reputation and simply chose to conceal her gift. In fact, I’d wager that parselmouths are considerably more common than anyone realizes. Most simply know to keep it secret.”

Harry grimaced, wishing that he’d figured that out before second year. If he hadn’t been working so hard to suppress any and all desire to learn, he probably would have had the forethought to learn enough about the wizarding world to figure that out by then. Hermione had known it, after all. Probably all he’d have had to do is read *Hogwarts: A History*, as it was most likely discussed in relation to Salazar Slytherin.

Harry ended up spending half of that night doing nothing but reading the parselscript books. Freeshis had, of course, known human languages, being as well-traveled as he was by the time he inked the books. He’d deliberately written them in the snake script so that humans wouldn’t be able to read it. Magical humans were something that Freeshis hated with a frighteningly pathological obsession similar to Voldemort’s feelings for muggles. Not that Harry blamed the naga in the slightest.

The basic gist of the books was that the naga had never much been involved in the wizarding world. They’d kept mostly to themselves for millennia. Then, the “rise” of their people came in the form of
a magical plague that had swept through Africa. It didn’t affect muggles, but it was killing off magical humans in droves somewhere around five thousand years ago. A naga healer had decided to help, and through parselmagic healing spells, the plague was cured. Naga were heralded as saviors, and the first large-scale comingling of humans and naga began. Within a few generations, there were mixed villages, and the naga were revered for their healing abilities – that was actually the origin of the caduceus.

For millennia, they thrived, and the magical humans came to respect them for more than their healing abilities. Naga enchanters and warders became highly sought-after for the unique magicks they were able to work. For a time, they were seen almost as Gods.

That lasted until somewhere around five hundred B.C. when a dark lord named Kamir’Vizahn decided that he wanted to be the one worshipped instead. He led a crusade to purge the naga from the wizarding world, decrying them as demons. And, as history is written by the victors, within a few generations, the magical humans had forgotten that Kamir had been a dark lord, and instead continued to worship his memory as a prophet. The naga were vilified as incarnations of evil, which is where the superstition about parselmouths being dark apparently started.

Despite their best efforts, the naga tribes were too divided and were unable to quell the human uprising. It spread like locust through the areas less familiar with the species and it was soon a “fact” that naga were creatures of evil. And so they began to hunt the naga all across the world.

By the first century A.D. the naga were all but extinct. Freeshis procreated with a quarter naga in hopes that his descendants may survive while his species died. Clearly, that had been successful. He’d apparently used some kind of rituals to increase the odds of his kin lasting the ages, but he didn’t go into exactly what those rituals were. That information was evidently in his journals.

Obviously, the books were written well before Salazar Slytherin was born, but Harry could only guess that, after pretty much all the naga were gone, the fervor about them had waned since he knew that Slytherin had been fairly respected at one point and a known parselmouth.

9 August 1996 - Friday

Friday morning after breakfast, Mrs. Weasley announced that they would all be moving to Grimmauld Place for the rest of the summer. Harry blanked his face at hearing the news lest they see the annoyed sneer trying to form. He was virtually certain that it was because of his demand to stay at Grimmauld that the entire family was relocating. He’d told Dumbledore that his friends could visit and that the Order could use the house. Clearly, he should have been much more specific. Honestly, it was like trying to deal with Kreacher.

Harry didn’t object though. To do so now would only draw undue suspicion to his motives that he really did not need to deal with.

They were all told to pack up and be ready to leave right after lunch. Harry wandered outside instead. He was already packed since he’d not broken his habit of keeping his possessions in his trunk and his trunk in his pocket. He didn’t want to risk losing any of it – particularly his books, which were probably worth a fortune by themselves – and he didn’t want to leave anything out for anyone to snoop through anyway.

He wandered down to the nearby swimming hole and found a comfortable seat against a tree, then closed his eyes, slowed his breathing, and worked on one of the new meditation exercises
Knowledge had suggested. It had been in some of the older books from the Black vault, and there had been mentions of it in the grimoire as well.

Apparently, in times before wands – which only became popular around the time of the Founders – when any magical focus was cumbersome and rudimentary, magical humans had learned to do wandless magic through meditation. The trick was to learn to draw out the magic from your core without the assistance of a focus. In addition to casting spells, your magic could be used this way to monitor or explore your surroundings, identify and examine wards, and sense incoming spells among other things. Harry’s now mature, unbound magic was already performing a rudimentary form of the basic passive magicks just because it was so powerful that the standard magical radiation given off by all magical creatures was considerably more potent. In essence, everyone’s magic did that. It was just so weak that they didn’t notice it much without training. Harry was willing to bet that Dumbledore and Voldemort, at least, had experienced the same thing. And they’d almost certainly both trained the skill by now. The fact that Dumbledore had never asked Harry if he could do this or offered to train him despite apparently believing him Voldemort’s equal highly suggested that he knew about Harry’s magical blocks, and if he hadn’t engineered them, he’d clearly not tried to remove them or even seen fit to inform Harry about them.

Harry first meditated on putting himself into the trance-like state somewhere between sleeping and awake. Once he accomplished that, he should be able to see and control his mindscape just as he could when he was asleep, but also retain awareness of the waking world around him. With enough practice it was – theoretically – possible to slip in and out of his mindscape without anyone being able to even tell that anything had happened. True masters were supposed to be able to hold a conversation while fully cognizant within their mindscape. Harry had no doubt that he was still a great deal of practice away from achieving that.

At the moment, he needed to reach his magical core without going completely into his mindscape. From there, he could start learning to reach his core in the waking world. Only when he could do that relatively easily would he be able to start trying to cast wandless spells. If he ever wanted to use it effectively in a duel, for example, he’d need to be able to access the magic very quickly and without having to stop and think about it. He had to train himself to pull on that magic instead of counting on his wand to do it for him.

Harry had no plans to give up using his wand, but he’d been rendered helpless in absence of his wand before, and he really didn’t care for the feeling.

In the couple hours that he spent there before lunch, he made what he hoped could be categorized as “progress”, but it wasn’t really significant enough for him to be certain. Mostly, he just felt like he was reaching a higher level of waking calm in his mind than he’d managed before. It was slightly frustrating that it was going so slowly, but at least the meditation was relaxing. By the time he headed in for lunch, he’d managed to banish most of his stress brought on by the announcement that he was going to have a lot of uninvited guests while he settled into his new home. That calm was tested when he walked into the chaos of the Burrow and remembered that he would be bringing that with him – including at least three people that he’d have liked nothing more than hex into oblivion.

After lunch was finished, there was about half an hour of chaos as everyone rushed around to grab last minute things they’d forgotten. Finally, they all gathered around a length of rope. Luckily, the portkey was set to a password rather than a time-limit, or they’d have almost certainly missed it. The fact that the password was Butterscotch Balls made it clear who they had to thank for the transportation.
They landed on the street in front of Grimmauld Place where Dumbledore was waiting for them.

“Ah, there you are,” he twinkled merrily. “The Fidelius is prepared, Harry. If you’ll just step over here, I’ll complete the charm, and then, of course, you’ll have to remind us all of where we are.”

Harry nodded and stepped forward. Knowledge, happily, was aware of the charm and able to confirm that Dumbledore cast it correctly without modifications or qualifications, which was comforting, at least. When it was done, Dumbledore blinked and looked around before focusing on Harry again.

“Ah, Harry, my boy. I believe you have something to tell me?”

Harry fought the urge to leave the lot of them standing on the sidewalk with no knowledge of his house. “Perhaps you can raise a silencing ward around us, sir?” he asked instead. It would hardly be productive, after all, if anyone spying on what had been until moments ago known to be the House of Black could hear him give the Secret.

“Ah. An excellent idea,” Dumbledore twinkled while Harry tried to imagine what Mad-Eye would say if he was there. No doubt something less than flattering about Dumbledore’s lack of vigilance.

Harry waited until the spell was cast – he could feel that it surrounded their group but went no further – and then spoke for all of them to hear. He’d find other ways to keep out the unwanted Weasleys after he was safely married. He could always adjust the wards to block them specifically – which he knew from studying the family grimoire. “The Ancient and Most Noble House of Black is located at Twelve Grimmauld Place.”

He watched as they all gained the knowledge of and ability to see the house, then led the way to the front door. As soon as he touched the handle, he felt his magic stir through the ring and interact with the wards and the door clicked open.

The candles and lamps all flared to life as he stepped inside and Harry froze on the threshold, his eyes wide with shock.

“Well, it seems that Kreacher was unable to find a way around your orders, my boy,” Dumbledore said cheerfully from behind him.

Harry could only nod as he stepped inside a room that bore virtually no resemblance to the house he’d seen last summer. It glistened and sparkled, the floors shone, the wallpaper was at least six shades lighter, and actually an attractive greenish gray once all the grime was gone, and the air even smelled fresh and clean. The magic of the house wrapped around him in welcome.

“Well, this is much better,” Mrs. Weasley sighed happily from behind him. “All right, you kids,” she whispered, “go and put your things in your rooms. The same that you used last year, I think.”

Harry headed up first, and walked right passed the room he’d used last summer.

“Where you going, mate?” Ron stopped him as he approached the next staircase.

“This is my house now,” Harry shrugged, “I’ll be staying in the master suite.” He’d be damned if he was going to endure the lack of space and privacy inherent to sharing a room with someone that he didn’t trust when he was in his own house. Sirius had never claimed the master suite, but that was because of his issues with his parents – not to mention that he probably hadn’t wanted to clean the large room, and hadn’t been able to get Kreacher to do it. Or, more accurately, hadn’t forced Kreacher to do it for whatever reason.
Ron huffed sulkily and slammed the door behind him.

Harry just shook his head and continued up to the master suite, which was comprised of a sitting room, bedroom, walk-in wardrobe, and bathroom. Also, he was pleased to find, there was a connecting door between the sitting room and the adjacent study. A look around and he was sure that he’d have to evaluate most of the stuff in the room before it would be safe to touch it, but at least he had his own office.

He was just coming out of the bedroom after examining it when Hermione stormed into the room.

“We’re at your house,” she pointedly reminded.

Harry smiled and moved to close the doors, then drew his wand and threw up the strongest privacy wards that he’d learned – which were really strong. He also reached out to the house wards so that he’d know if anyone approached the door or tried to tamper with it.

“Harry!” Hermione gasped when he turned to face her again. “What did you do? You’re going to be expelled!”

“Relax, Hermione,” Harry chastised as he moved to sit near the fireplace and casually lit it. “I’m allowed to do magic whenever I want to now.”

“How?” she demanded as she plopped herself down in a facing chair.

In answer, Harry reached into his robe and pulled out the Black family ring. She grimaced when she got a look at it. “This is the Black family ring, worn by Lord Black. Sirius willed it to me.”

She gaped at him for a moment. “And that means that you can do magic?” she finally asked.

He nodded, “The stipulations on assuming lordship vary by family and can be set by a lord before he passes. These stipulations often include a minimum age at which an heir can ascend. Eleven is the youngest allowed, but most demand at least fourteen or fifteen. The Black Family in particular has no restriction on that, and Sirius didn’t name one, probably since I was old enough by his reckoning. It’s not possible for a minor to be the Lord of a Noble House. The process of accepting the lordship enacts magical maturity. The moment that I put on this ring, I was magically emancipated. My magical core matured. I can now use magic without restriction, and I’ll be able to get my apparation license as soon as I’ve learned how to do it.”

She was quiet for a long moment and Harry could practically see her referencing everything that she knew to figure out if she’d heard of that or anything that might contradict it. Finally, she focused on him again. “When did this happen?” she asked shrewdly.

“I accepted the Lordship on the twelfth of July.”

She frowned at him, then shook her head slowly. “Why didn’t you tell anyone sooner? Why did you leave the Dursleys? What’s with all these secrets? Why are you so different since the end of the year?” she asked rapidly.

Harry sighed and settled back further in his chair. “I assume that you heard what I told Dumbledore…”

“Professor Dumbledore,” she automatically inserted.

He ignored the interruption, “…about the blood wards on Privet Drive being useless.”
She nodded.

“That’s all true.”

“How did you learn so much about blood magic? And don’t tell me that you were sneaking away to the restricted section, Harry, because I’ve spent too much time with you to believe that you were disappearing that often without my knowing. And while we’re on that, how did you learn enough Arithmancy and Ancient Runes to take the tests?”

Harry smiled. “Okay, I’m just going to start at the beginning, but you have to swear to me that you won’t tell anyone about this.”

“Of course,” she said immediately, frowning at the fact that he’d even had to mention it.

He sighed, “I mean anyone, Hermione. That includes Dumbledore, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and even Ron.”

Her eyes widened and she looked a bit nervous. “Harry, are you sure that you should be keeping things from Professor Dumbledore?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. “Yes, I am very sure, and I think that you will be as well by the time I’m done explaining.”

“Okay,” she said slowly.

Harry took a deep breath. “Okay, so you remember what I told you about the prophecy, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I think I’ve discovered that power that Voldemort isn’t supposed to know about. And it’s not love.”

She leaned forward further in her chair. “What is it?”

“About a week into the summer, I tried – really tried – to clear my mind before I went to sleep. I was… still really grieving, and the Dursleys were being… difficult. I wasn’t in a good place. Anyway, I actually managed to clear my mind, and when I fell asleep… I found myself in my mindscape. I seem to have an extremely evolved, instinctive grasp of occlumency.”

Her jaw dropped. “But how…? How could you not have… I mean, when Professor Snape was teaching you last year…”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I know. I was…” he sighed heavily. “I never really wanted to learn it, Hermione. I was convinced that my connection to Voldemort was the only thing that I could do to help the Order, so I wasn’t trying. Oh, I put in some token effort. I didn’t truly admit to myself that I didn’t want it to work, but I know now that that’s what happened. I was subconsciously preventing myself from succeeding. It wasn’t until this summer when I was at an emotional rock-bottom and utterly desperate for any relief from the pain and exhaustion that I finally wanted it to work.” He shook his head, “I was an idiot, and it cost Sirius his life.”

“Oh, Harry…” she started to protest.

Harry held up a hand to forestall her. “I know that I’m not the only one at blame here. Sirius shouldn’t have gone after me. Really, going into the Ministry considering that he was to be Kissed on sight? I don’t blame him for risking himself to try to save me, but that doesn’t mean that it wasn’t
partly his fault. It was Kreacher’s fault for lying to me. It was my fault for not learning occlumency and for not thinking it through. Mostly though, it was Dumbledore’s fault. He confessed to me at the end of last year that he suspected Voldemort would try to lure me to the Department of Mysteries with a false vision. He knew exactly what Voldemort was going to do. If he’d shared his suspicion, I’d have been much more cautious.”

He shook that line of thought. “Anyway, this has nothing to do with who was at fault for what happened last year. The point is that I finally wanted to calm my mind, and it worked. My mind was chaotic, damaged, and virtually unprotected against Voldemort or anyone else. That’s what I discovered that night. The way that I was able to access my mind though…” He shook his head. “Hermione, the level of innate control that I have is almost unheard of. Not only can I protect and organize my mind from my mindscape, but I can access my unconscious mind and my memories with perfect recall.

“That is how I learned Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Blood magic in a month. I’ve learned a lot more, too, including pureblood customs and etiquette. I have, essentially, a photographic memory, but it’s even more than that. It’s like I have a computer search engine in my brain capable of accessing and cross-referencing everything I have ever learned in seconds – even things that I hadn’t realized I’d learned. That, I believe, is my prophesized ‘power’.”

Hermione blinked at him in shock for a long moment before visibly shaking herself. “I don’t understand why you don’t want Professor Dumbledore to know about that, Harry. It… This could be really important!”

Harry shook his head, “Hermione, I haven’t even told you the half of it. I…” He took a deep breath. “I learned something else when I went to Gringotts.” Harry ignored the irrational urge to look over his shoulder and make sure they were alone. He could feel through the wards that there was no one else in the rooms with them and his privacy warding was preventing anyone from eavesdropping. “Dumbledore,” he ground out in such a way that she didn’t even correct his neglect of the man’s title, “as my magical guardian, signed a marriage contract for me.”

She gasped with all the horror that he’d expected. “What?!”

“It goes into effect the moment that I accept the Potter lordship, from which time, I have one month to magically bond myself – until death – to Ginny.”

It took Hermione almost a minute to regain the ability to speak, but it was clear that she’d just been building up to the proper level of outrage. “How can he do that?! You don’t actually have to go through with it, do you? I mean, there must be some kind of clause… Surely, he couldn’t do this without your consent!”

“Unfortunately, he can. As my magical guardian, until my magical majority, he had the right to sign any magical contract in my name. It is binding, unfortunately, and should I try to back out, I will be the next thing to a squib.”

She looked like she couldn’t decide if she wanted to cry or break something as she surged out of her chair and began to pace the sitting room. “Why would he do that to you and Ginny?” she finally demanded.

Harry sighed, “Just to me, Hermione. Ginny’s signature was on the contract.”

There were tears in her eyes once she’d comprehended that. “What?” she breathed in horror. “Ginny wouldn’t… Would she?”
“She did,” Harry shrugged. “You can’t forge a signature on a magically binding contract – I looked that up. It won’t take if you’re under any kind of mind-controlling effect, either. Of course, her consent wasn’t actually needed since she’s a minor and both of her parents signed…”

“They did?” Hermione sighed as she sank back into her chair.

“Yes. It’s traditional in some families for the minor children to sign the marriage contract to document their agreement to the union but obviously Dumbledore didn’t feel that was necessary with me. Even worse, he instructed my account manager at Gringotts to withhold revealing the existence of the contract until after I’d assumed the Potter lordship. If I hadn’t asked him directly, which forced him to choose between upholding the wishes of my guardian and keeping with Gringotts policy of honestly answering any direction question for a client, I wouldn’t have known.”

“There has to be something that we can do,” Hermione insisted. “The entire institution of arranged marriages is not only archaic, but unethical, when the participants don’t even get a choice…” she muttered to herself.

“I’ve looked into it pretty thoroughly, Hermione,” Harry sighed. “There is no way out of the contract unless I refuse to accept the lordship. Unfortunately,” he added before she could get any ideas, “my father had a lot of faith in Dumbledore. He stipulated before his death that if I was unwilling or unable to accept the Potter lordship within one year of being notified that I was eligible, the entire thing goes to Dumbledore, probably a precaution in case I ended up like Neville’s parents.

“And…” Harry sighed. “I assume that you know what a bride price is.”

She nodded, “Similar to a dowry, it is a price paid by the groom’s family to the bride’s family.”

Harry nodded grimly. “Apparently, anything between five thousand and twenty-five thousand galleons would be considered an acceptable bride price for me to marry Ginny. The price stipulated on the contract is a quarter of a million galleons.”

Hermione’s eyes widened as she processed the implications, and she actually looked a little sick. “They’re doing this to you for money?”

“Apparently,” Harry said tiredly. “So, the only choices that Dumbledore left me is to marry Ginny, refuse the lordship to him, or keep the estate, but lose my magic. Considering his faith in the prophecy, I can’t imagine that he thought there was any chance I’d choose the last option – which there isn’t.

“There is, however, one other option that I don’t think Dumbledore foresaw.”

“What?” she asked hopefully.

Harry sighed. He knew that she wasn’t going to be greatly receptive to this idea. “He didn’t know that Sirius would name me his heir. Even if he did give me everything he owned, it’s quite unorthodox – particularly for a family like the Blacks – to name an heir that isn’t of the Black family. In fact, he might even believe that it’s impossible. The family magic could have rejected me no matter what Sirius did, and given that I’m a halfblood…”

“And Dumbledore didn’t know that there was an inactive marriage contract for the Lord of House Black. It was originally written for Sirius’ father, Orion, but the woman who was supposed to marry him refused, gave up her magic, and apparently married a muggle. The Lord of House Prince, before his death, recognized the woman’s halfblood son as his heir – as it was that or the family would have died since he was the last of the line. That son never accepted the lordship of his house
after learning of the contract with the Black family, which had by then passed to Sirius.

“The point is that that contract is still there. If the heir of House Prince were to accept the Lordship, the Black-Prince contract would override the Potter-Weasley contract. So I’d still have to get married, but at least it would be on my own terms and to a person who hasn’t tried to trap me into it.”

“Let me see if I’m understanding this correctly,” Hermione said dazedly. “You’re telling me that your plan to avoid marrying Ginny is to marry some random… man. You’re not even gay. …Are you?”

Harry frowned at the question. Somehow, his sexuality and the gender of his potential spouses hadn’t even crossed his mind in his considerations. It had startled him when he’d first been told, but then he’d dismissed it. After a moment, he shook his head, “It doesn’t matter. There are magical means of producing a child regardless of the gender of your spouse, and… sex is in no way necessary to the marriage or reproduction.”

“Okay, but… Harry, you’re talking about getting married. Do you really not care if you’re in any way attracted to your spouse?”

“I can’t see how it matters,” he admitted curiously.

“Harry! How can it not matter?! You’re talking about marriage! And magical marriage. That’s for life, I hope you know!”

“Of course, I know, Hermione,” he attempted to placate her. Really, this wasn’t the point he’d imagined her getting upset about. “But I’m talking about an arranged marriage. It doesn’t have anything to do with attraction.”

She stared at him as if he was speaking a foreign language – one that she didn’t know – and then shook her head slowly. “Harry…” She stopped, apparently trying to figure out how to continue. “You realize that you’re giving up on… On dating. On falling in love?”

Harry sighed at the mention of that dreaded word. “I don’t care about love, Hermione.”

She looked purely scandalized.

He ran a hand roughly through his hair and tried to figure out how to explain this. “Look, I don’t think I was ever meant to fall in love. It’s just… not me.”

“Harry, how can you say that?! Everyone is meant to fall in love!”

“Can we just agree to disagree on this point?” he asked hopefully.

“Not when you’re talking about entering into a magically binding marriage that will last you the rest of your life! Harry, someday you’re going to feel differently, and then it’ll be too late.”

Harry shook his head sharply, “Hermione, you are missing the point here. I don’t have any other choice. I’m not choosing to enter into an arranged marriage. I’m only choosing the lesser of two evils. I can either marry the man that has just happened to be connected to me and this contract, or I can marry the woman who would trap me into marriage against my will. Those are my only feasible options.”

Hermione visibly deflated. “Do you even know who this man is?” she asked dejectedly.

“Oh, you know my luck, Hermione,” he smiled grimly. “It’s Snape.”
She gasped and then fell into a coughing fit.

Harry smirked mirthlessly while she recovered.

“Professor Snape?” she finally managed, her eyes about as round as they would go.

Harry nodded.

“How can you…? No. _No_, Ginny would be better!”

As a teacher,” she asserted forcefully. “As a _person_! Yes. As a _husband_?! For _you_?! Harry, he _hates_ you!”

Harry nodded his agreement. “Yeah. And I’ve got about eleven months to convince him to marry me.”

Hermione stared at him a moment, then buried her head between her knees, her face in her hands and just kind of moaned for a minute or two. “You can’t possibly be serious,” she finally sat back to say.

“I’m completely serious,” Harry assured her.
Confessions and Proposals

Chapter Summary

Chapter Five Synopsis

Harry and the Weasleys go shopping for school supplies. They meet the Malfoys at Madam Malkin’s and Harry shocks everyone by using pureblood etiquette. At WWW, the twins tell Harry to get anything free of charge and Harry tells them that they need to talk in private later. He also asks them to try creating an antidote or vaccine to love potions. He sneaks out and trails Draco to Borgin and Burkes, then does some shopping in the alley himself, where he finds a set of books written in parselscript. On the way back, he runs into Draco. Harry offers Draco help if he ever needs it against Voldemort, having felt the Dark Magic now attacked to his left arm.

Harry learns that the books he bought are an account of an extinct species called the naga. Their human descendants are the only ones capable of speaking Parseltongue.

Dumbledore casts the Fidelius on Grimmauld and Harry is forced to let the Weasleys move in for the summer to avoid acting suspiciously. Once in the master bedroom, Harry finally tells Hermione everything. She’s horrified by the arranged marriage and unhappy that he’s planning to marry Snape as she’s afraid he’ll be miserable the rest of his life.

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 6

Confessions and Proposals

10 August 1996 - Saturday

Harry appeared in his comfortable sitting room and stood with a stretch. He knew what he wanted to do tonight, but he’d barely turned in that direction when he started badly at suddenly finding himself face-to-face with Corvus Black again.

“Ah… what are you doing here?” he asked uneasily.

The elder man just smirked at him. “This is your mind, young Lord. Should not you know that?”

Harry nodded vaguely and had just thought to ask Knowledge when he appeared next to them. The Aspect was now a dignified thirty-ish. He was dressed in fine black robes that somehow just looked scholarly. His hair was waist-length, tied back neatly. The somewhat disturbing part was that he was starting to exude an air that Harry could only classify as… dark. Quite likely, he needed to work on including more “Light” knowledge to offset all the Dark tomes he’d been absorbing.

That particular Aspect had grown considerably more than any other in the last month, but maybe that wasn’t surprising with the way Harry had been greedily drinking in all the knowledge he could lay hands on.
Harry just pointed at Corvus and lifted his eyebrows at Knowledge questioningly.

“You have bonded with the magic of House Black,” Knowledge responded simply. “And with the family ring. Something in how your mind and magic function allowed this piece of the ancient Lord Black to enter your mind when you first put on the ring. It is reasonable to extrapolate that, so long as you remain Lord Black, the connection that grants him entrance and autonomy within your mindscape will remain as well.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “Okay… What is he, exactly?”

“According to what is recorded in the grimoire, the original lord rings were enchanted with a ritual that tied the lord’s memories into the ring with his magic.”

Harry shuddered slightly at the uncomfortable parallel to another memory bound within an object.

“Can he affect me in any way?”

“Beyond what he has already done in harmonizing your magic with that of the Black family, no. He holds no more power here.”

“You’re certain?”

Knowledge’s eyes unfocused for a few seconds while Harry knew he’d be double and triple checking his information against everything else that he knew. “Yes,” he said at last.

Harry sighed with relief.

“It should be possible to bind his memory within the ring or at least imprison him within a portion of your mindscape if you wish, but the only power he has here is to converse with you. Anything more, you would have to grant him.”

Harry nodded.

“If you care at all for my opinion, I’d just as soon not be imprisoned,” Corvus smirked with a hint of underlying concern. “I can offer you the wisdom I gained throughout a long life and help you to understand and control the Black family magic and wards around our properties.”

“Fair enough,” Harry allowed after a moment. If the memory became annoying, he could always imprison him later, and he really might be useful. “Do you know anything about removing obliviates?”

Corvus blinked in surprise. “I’m afraid not. I don’t believe that spell existed when I was alive.”

Ah, well. It had been worth a try. Corvus and Knowledge joined him as he started toward the deep archives.

“Obliviate comes from the Charms school of spells,” Knowledge explained while they walked. “Though it is also categorized within the Mind Arts. With elements of both legilimency and occlumency, obliviate delves within an unprotected or under-protected mind to seek out a single memory or group of memories.” Harry had made a point to research this spell after discovering that it had been done to him. It was part of the reason he’d waited so long to try this. That and the fact that he was a little nervous to learn the truth.

“It then causes the memories to be forgotten,” Knowledge continued, “burying them so deep within a mind that some believe they are entirely destroyed or removed from the mind. Of course, it’s not actually possible to remove or destroy memories in any mind connected to a magical core, but they
can be virtually impossible to locate or rediscover. If it is poorly done, it may remove pieces of memories that were not intended, sometimes removing so many as to leave the mind incapable of functioning productively. It can also create unrooted memory traps that will leave an individual with permanent, chronic forgetfulness.

“If it is done with skill, but not finesse, it can remove the unwanted memories, while leaving an obvious gap that results in the subject feeling as though he’s forgetting something, or even being aware of the fact that he was obliterated if he knows enough to suspect the tampering. Finally, there are the truly gifted, who can lock away memories with such a delicate touch that only a master Occlumens has any hope of discovering the loss, and even then it is highly unlikely that the memories can be recovered. Unfortunately, we’re dealing with the last,” he concluded as they came to a stop before the unremarkable wall beyond which his memories lay.

“Don’t get too close,” Knowledge advised Corvus. “This wall is a memory trap. It is the means with which obliterated memories are contained. Any memory that touches the trap will be pulled inside and none can get back out. That is why obliterated memories are so difficult to recover. Within the mind, memories are the most powerful substance. This manner of construction ensures that memory cannot be used to free memory.”

“Ingenious,” Corvus admired, though he did stand well back from the wall. “I assume that we don’t know who is responsible for this?”

“I have an idea,” Harry frowned at the wall. “I only know three Legilimens powerful enough to have done this. Honestly, it could have been any of them, but I’m really hoping that it wasn’t the man I’m planning to marry. That… wouldn’t be a good way to start.”

Corvus’ brow rose, “You’re already engaged? He’s from a suitable family, I hope.”

Harry smirked slightly at his ancestor, “Of course. It’s the product of an old contract between the Black and Prince families.”

“Prince?” Corvus smiled. “I don’t know how well the family is doing now, but in my day, they were one of the oldest and most powerful families in existence, dating all the way back to the World Monarchy when the family ruled the entire magical world. When the monarchy was dissolved, the last crown prince named himself Lord Prince. Though they no longer ruled, they remained the wealthiest and most influential family in my time, which was about a thousand years later.”

Harry’s brow rose at the sudden influx of new information. He was already glad that he’d allowed his ancestor to stay. “Freeshis mentioned a World Monarchy, but only vaguely. I don’t think he ever imagined that that might not be common knowledge. Well, that and he hated all magical humans with a pathological intensity.”


Harry nodded, “He was a naga. He wrote a thirteen-volume collection of books about the history and demise of his people.”

Corvus’ eyes widened, “Are you a parseltmouth, then?”

Harry nodded, wondering what that would mean to Corvus, who had probably been alive shortly after Freeshis.

A slow, satisfied smirk curled the old man’s lips. “Young Lord, I’d have accepted you into House Black on that alone had I known. And you’re marrying a Prince… Is he highly placed in the
“He’s the last of the family, actually,” Harry admitted. “He is heir currently, but he’ll be Lord if I can get him to agree to marry me.”

Corvus chuckled quietly, looking extremely pleased. “And your soon-to-be affianced is one of three individuals you believe capable of binding your memories in this way?”

Harry nodded grimly as he looked at the wall again.

“He is powerful, then,” Corvus concluded with satisfaction.

Harry sighed, “I guess. I still hope that he wasn’t responsible for this. I’m not… entirely sure what I’d do if he was. I have to marry him, but… Well, I dislike him now. If I find out that he obliviated me, I will most likely hate him in truth.”

“Then let us waste no more time in discerning the answer,” Knowledge suggested.

Harry nodded briskly and willed the rest of his advisors to join him. “Okay. So… How do I do this?” he prompted.

“This wall was constructed with magic,” Knowledge began. “You must destroy it with magic. Hopefully, you are more powerful than the caster, as that will make it considerably easier.”

Harry grimaced, “I kind of hope it wasn’t Voldemort, then,” though it would be a lot easier on his mind if it was. The problem was that he was having a hard time imagining why Voldemort would have done that. The man had always been quite candid with him when they’d… met. It was hard to imagine anything the man would have wanted to make Harry forget – unless he’d discovered some weakness… But Voldemort generally never planned on Harry surviving their encounters, so he wasn’t sure why he’d take such a precaution.

“Even if it was Voldemort,” Logic offered, “you should be able to manage it as you can continue to feed power into it whereas he cannot affect it anymore.”

“You need to draw on your magic,” Knowledge continued. “Draw deeply before touching the wall. Funnel it into the memory trap and you should be able to feel the gaps within the spell’s construction. Depending on how powerful the caster was, you may be able to identify the gaps immediately or it may take more time – more power. If the caster was significantly more powerful than you, you won’t be able to find them at all. Of course, if you truly are Voldemort’s equal, then it is exceedingly unlikely that there is anyone alive that is significantly more powerful than you.”

Corvus perked up again. “Who’s this Voldemort fellow, then?”

Harry frowned at him. “You don’t know?”

“Well, no, lad. I’ve been dead for the last two thousand years.”

“But when we talked last time, you said that your family’s been nearly destroyed by following…” he struggled to remember the exact wording.

“I believe his exact words were, ‘My family has been nearly snuffed out of existence for the choices of the last few Lords. Always, we have been drawn to power. In my time, it made us great. In recent times, it has nearly destroyed us. Perhaps, instead of following Power, it is time to lead with it’,” Knowledge supplied.
“Ah,” Corvus nodded, “Of course. I was referring to what I have gleaned through the family magic. I can feel each and every member of the family and his or her health. I can feel when family magic is bound to outside magic through marriage or other magical means. I do not know names or specific circumstances. That is outside the parameters of the magic that made me. Only by connecting to your particular magic have I become more.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I see. Well, Voldemort is the current dark lord. He killed my parents and tried to kill me when I was a baby, but my mum used a sacrificial blood ritual and gave her life to protect me, so when Voldemort cast the Killing Curse on me, it destroyed his body. I… Well, Knowledge can probably give you the whole story later. Cliff-notes version, there’s a prophecy that says I have to kill Voldemort or he has to kill me and that we’re equals. He’s generally considered the most dangerous dark lord in at least two hundred years.”

“And you’re his equal. I’m quite impressed.”

Harry shrugged somewhat uncomfortably. “Yeah, well a lot of the last two generations of your family have followed Voldemort. Some of them still do. Which reminds me, I still need to disown Bellatrix.”

Corvus’ eyes sharpened. “Considering how small the family is, you shouldn’t disown anyone without a very good reason, young Lord.”

“She killed the last Lord of House Black,” Harry said flatly.

“Oh. Well, in that case, purge her from the family at your earliest opportunity, and kill her yourself if possible,” he immediately endorsed.

Harry smiled faintly and looked at the wall again. “Okay, so feed my magic into the trap, find the holes, then what?”

“Fill the gaps with your magic,” Knowledge advised. “Fill them completely, and then fill them some more. Your goal is the put so much pressure on the wall that it simply implodes upon itself.”

“Is it going to hurt?” Harry wondered, remembering what it had felt like trying to unravel those ribbons. He was more than willing to deal with pain to remove this, but he wanted to be prepared.

“No,” Knowledge replied immediately. “None of the information on this indicates that it should be painful for you. It is said to feel like a great deal of pressure followed by a rapid release that may leave you dizzy and momentarily disoriented while the memories rush back. The time that that lasts will vary somewhat based upon how many memories were lost inside. Depending on how much magic you have to draw, you will likely feel exhilaration and some amount of euphoria as well.”

Harry nodded slowly and mentally prepared himself for all of that and more. He did tend to have unusual and often extreme reactions, after all. He took a deep breath and prepared himself. “Any last minute advice?” he wondered.

“No,” Knowledge said again. “There’s no way to know the result if you leave the job half done. You may, inadvertently strengthen the trap.”

Harry nodded. “Good point.” With another bracing breath, he faced the wall and let his eyes fall closed, reaching into his core without sending his mind there entirely. It was still almost blindingly brilliant as it had been right after becoming Lord Black. It was primarily green in color – the same hue as his eyes, which he now wondered if that was related to his distant naga blood – with streaks of black running through it where he had bonded with the magic of the Black family.
He reached into the center of that luminescence and pulled on the indefinite power that he discovered there. The glow intensified steadily until it was like staring at the sun. His entire body felt so warm – almost feverish – his every nerve charged and alive. He felt like he could do anything – like nothing could ever challenge him, harm him.

It took a considerable application of will to force himself to recall what he was supposed to be doing, and he managed to open his eyes to that dark dungeon wall that did not belong in his mind. Gritting his teeth as he felt Rage stirring in response to what someone had done, he drew even more deeply upon his magic and the dim corridor was suddenly bathed in green light. He lifted his hands and found them coated in brilliant verdant flames that licked harmlessly along his skin and clothes. He slammed his hands against the wall and the flames seemed to attack it, leaping off his hands to splash along the stone, running swiftly out in all directions until the entirety of the trap was drenched in them.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he began to feel the tiny imperfections in the wall, the miniscule voids within the sturdy construct. He began to push his magic into those voids and watched as the green flame began to sink right into the stone, the holes too small to see with the naked eye. He drew more power and continued to push at the wall. The feverish, jittery feeling intensified with the more magic that he drew, but he gritted his teeth and kept going. Whether this was the work of Voldemort or Dumbledore or Snape, Harry refused to believe that he didn’t have enough power to overcome it. This was his mind. He was master here and no one else. He couldn’t stop now. He was virtually certain that if he were to do that, his magic would remain within the voids, making the trap stronger than ever and quite possibly making it impossible for him to remove.

After what may have been moments or eons, when Harry felt certain that the pressure would crush him utterly, he suddenly felt every knot shatter simultaneously and his mind was violently shoved into the blackness of true unconsciousness for the first time since he’d discovered his mindscape.

Freak screamed when Uncle brought the belt down on his back. Uncle had spanked him before, but Freak had never made Uncle this mad. He didn’t like this. He didn’t like it at all. It felt like that belt was going to cut him right in half.

The pain continued and Freak was sure that he was going to die. He panicked, and then there was a loud crash and the belt didn’t come again.

Dudley and Aunt were screaming now and Freak slowly turned around to find Uncle was inside the wall. There was a big hole and Uncle was inside it. He looked like he was sleeping.

Knowing that he always got in trouble when Dudley broke something, Freak was sure that he was going to be in huge trouble now that Uncle broke the wall. He raced to his cupboard and closed himself inside, making himself as small as possible under the lowest stairs.

He heard the family leave, eventually, and he fell asleep. When he woke again, it was to the sounds of them returning.

Freak became very confused when he heard them talking like nothing had happened. Uncle went through the wall and then they decided to go to the cinema?

After a while, he heard them all cluster in the kitchen and he very cautiously peeked out of his cupboard. He gasped in shock when he found that the wall was all fixed like nothing had happened and the room was clean and neat as always.
“Harry, my boy…”

Freak flinched away from the voice behind him and spun around to find himself looking at who he could only assume was Father Christmas. He was too skinny and he wasn’t wearing red, but surely only Father Christmas had a beard like that. Freak wondered what he was doing here when it was still warm outside.

Then Father Christmas pointed a stick at his chest, wiggled it around, and said a few words that Freak didn’t understand.

Freak whimpered when he felt the cold, tight feeling close around his chest. Was Father Christmas going to hurt him, too? Uncle and Aunt always said that he was too bad to get presents, but was he so bad that Father Christmas had come all the way here to punish him when it wasn’t even Christmastime?

“I’m sorry, my boy,” Father Christmas frowned, “but this really is for the best.”

Then he pointed the stick at Freak’s face and said, “Obliviate.”

Harry smiled when Dudley started whimpering and crying again. Dudley was such a baby. Harry was only making him feel what Harry had felt when Dudley pushed him down a half-flight of stairs at school last week. It was just scratches and bruises. He hadn’t even broken anything.

Harry had figured out a couple weeks ago that if he really wanted to – if he thought about it just right – he could make people see and hear and feel things that weren’t real. When Uncle had taken his belt to Harry, he’d made Uncle feel the same thing he did every time the belt came down – he’d stopped very quickly, then. When Aunt screamed at him for not finishing his chores when she’d given him more than he could do, he’d made her see the dirty clothes come alive and chase her around the house. And when Dudley tried to hurt him, Harry made Dudley feel some of the pain Dudley had made him feel. He’d made him feel like he broke his hand the first time but Dudley had screamed so loud that he didn’t try that again. Now he just made him feel smaller hurts and now he was the one who got to laugh when Dudley cried.

“Harry!”

He spun around in shock at the unexpected voice in the house and his eyes widened as he found himself looking at a very tall man in an ugly dress with a white beard all the way down to his belt.

Disappointment curdled in bright blue eyes as the man looked between him and Dudley.

“Who are you?” Harry asked warily. He’d never seen such a man in his life, not even on the telly!

“You remind me so much of Tom,” the strange man said sorrowfully. Then he pulled out a stick and pointed it at Harry, who stumbled backward in alarm.

“Don’t be afraid, child,” the man chided. “I wouldn’t harm you.”

That’s what he said, but when he whispered some strange words and wiggled his stick, Harry felt like he’d been harmed. His chest felt tight and cold, like he couldn’t quite breathe right anymore. Then he pointed the stick at Harry’s face and said, “Obliviate.”

Harry ran as fast as he’d ever run in his life. Luckily Dudley had given him all that practice, because the bobbies were even faster than Dudley. He cut sharply around a corner into a dirty old
alley and as soon as he’d hunkered down behind the rubbish bin, he teleported.

He appeared back on his roof where he’d decided that he was going to live. There was a small cupboard up here – it was bigger than the cupboard under the stairs – and he thought it would be a perfect home.

It had been two days since Harry had discovered that he could teleport. He’d been running from Dudley then, and he’d really wanted to get away, and the next thing he knew, he was on the roof of his school. The Dursleys had not been happy when they’d heard that he’d been found up there. They’d locked him in his cupboard and promised that he’d not be getting out for a long time. That’s when he’d decided to run away. Er, well, teleport away.

He pulled from his pocket now the sandwich that had nearly got him arrested. It wasn’t that big and it was kind of smooshed after being stuffed in his pocket, but he was sure it would taste good just the same. He was proud of himself for being able to feed himself better than the Dursleys did.

He was just reaching for the door to his new cupboard home when someone stepped out from behind it. He flinched back and prepared to flee as he observed that the man was the strangest-looking fellow that he had ever seen. He was wearing a pink and yellow dress and a pointy hat and his beard could have been tucked into his trousers if he’d been wearing any.

The man pointed a stick and him and Harry turned to run. He’d barely made it two steps when something hit him and his body got really stiff and he couldn’t move. He crashed hard into the gravel on the roof. A tiny whimper was all that managed to escape as he felt his body float up and turn over in midair.

The strange man was frowning at him. He looked angry. Harry’s heart was pounding like it was trying to run away even though the rest of him was frozen stiff. He wanted to cry and scream and beg the man not to hurt him but he couldn’t do any of that. He could only wait to see what the man would do to him.

He said some words that Harry couldn’t understand and Harry whimpered again as he felt an icy fist squeeze his heart until it thought for sure it would stop. A dull, cold ache seemed to fill him up and his eyelids drooped with exhaustion. Only sheer terror kept him awake to see the man point the stick at his face and say, “Obliviate.”

“Kill him, you fool!”

Not wanting to die and not knowing what else to do, Harry launched himself at Quirrell, hoping that his touch would keep hurting the professor and keep the man from killing him like Voldemort said.

The next few minutes were a blur of fear and pain and screaming that he thought was coming from all three of them.

Then he found himself looking down at the still body of his professor. His neck and face was all red and the skin on his neck was kind of falling apart. It looked a bit like a well-cooked pork roast. Even worse, it smelled kind of like that, too.

Quirrell was dead, Harry realized. He’d killed him. God, he killed him.

He started badly at the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps and looked up just in time to see Snape charge into the room, wand drawn. The man’s dark eyes settled on Harry and then on Quirrell and they grew very wide.
Harry stumbled in his haste to get off the body of his professor and back away. “I didn’t… I-I’m sorry. He was gonna kill me. I didn’t mean to…” He felt tears sting his eyes and hated himself for being weak right now, especially in front of Snape.

Then there were more footsteps and Dumbledore was charging into the room.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Harry tried again, mentally cursing himself when he felt the tears trickle down his cheeks. “He just…”

Dumbledore sighed. “Don’t worry, Harry. I promise that you won’t remember this tomorrow.”

“Albus!” Snape said sharply when Dumbledore pointed his wand at Harry’s face.

“He is too young to handle this, Severus,” Dumbledore frowned at the professor.

“He needs to learn to deal with it, not be forced to forget it!” Snape argued.

“I’m afraid that’s not your decision,” Dumbledore said with finality before looking at Harry again and saying, “Obliviate.”

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14 August 1996 - Wednesday

Harry spent the days following the release of his obliterated memories testing out what he remembered of the instinctive magic he’d learned when he was little. Apparating came back with amazing ease. He kept his tests confined to his locked suite because he didn’t want to risk being discovered, but with what he now remembered about it, he doubted that he’d have trouble going anywhere that he knew.

The illusion magic was more frustrating. He couldn’t test it by himself. It worked by entering thoughts and concepts into the minds of others. The “others” part was a requirement. He supposed it wouldn’t work on anyone who knew occlumency. Knowledge believed that it was likely easier to use on muggles than it would be on magical people or creatures as their magic would try to instinctively fight his illusions, even if they weren’t consciously aware of their existence. The more powerfully magical a person was, the more difficult it would be to work the illusions on them. If his target knew occlumency, it would be many times more difficult and may not even work at all if they were good enough. Needless to say, he had no plans to use this on Voldemort, Dumbledore, or Snape.

It was on Wednesday that Harry was reminded of his conversation with the twins. He hadn’t actually forgotten it, but he had been trying to put it off as long as possible. He was no longer sure that it had been very smart of him to decide to broach the topic. He desperately wanted to believe that the twins were on his side. He’d given them a thousand galleons to start their shop, after all. He didn’t know what he’d do if he found out that they’d accepted that knowing that their parents had signed that contract.

Not that it was worse than Ron, if he knew, but Harry was trying not to think about that too much, either. Not until he could know for sure.

His desire to pretend he’d said nothing at all to the twins was thwarted when Dumbledore drew him aside after breakfast one day and had the audacity to instruct him to write down the Secret concealing his house and give it to Dumbledore so that he could bring in the twins and some other Order members.
“I’m sorry, sir,” he’d said flatly, “but doesn’t it rather defeat the purpose of me being the Secret Keeper if I give you carte blanche to tell it to anyone and everyone you want? What if the paper gets lost or stolen?”

Dumbledore had frowned at him as though Harry had just proved an incredible disappointment and wounded the old man grievously. “Harry, my boy, surely you trust me to be discreet and cautious…”

“I’m the Secret Keeper,” Harry had interrupted firmly. “If you want to bring in some other people, have them come to the neighborhood and I’ll tell them the Secret in person like I did with you and the Weasleys.”

Dumbledore hadn’t look thrilled with the idea, but he hadn’t pressed Harry on it either. “And you will allow in everyone in the Order?”

“Unless I feel like I have a good reason to do otherwise,” Harry had prevaricated. There wasn’t any way he was giving that kind of blanket promise, then or ever. For all he knew, Dumbledore had inducted Pettigrew as a spy or a Malfoy or something crazy like that.

Again, Dumbledore had looked less than pleased, but he’d accepted the answer. “Very well, then. I will invite some of them by for lunch, so be sure you are available to greet them at that time.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry had nodded obediently – he’d had to give the man something after being so difficult, after all.

Dumbledore had finally given him a twinkly smile and swept away to do whatever it was he did with his days when he wasn’t loitering at Grimmauld Place.

Just before lunch, Dumbledore had returned, as promised, and escorted Harry out to a nearby park – a rundown old place in sore need of maintenance – and there they had met Fred and George Weasley, Bill Weasley, Alastor “Mad-Eye” Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Nymphadora Tonks, Dedalus Diggle, Elphias Doge, and Severus Snape. Being faced with Snape for the first time since resigning himself to marrying the man, Harry found himself with the curious quandary of feeling not quite sure if he wanted to avoid looking at him at all costs, or study him keenly and try to imagine what marrying him would be like. Either way, he was certain that Snape noticed and brushed it off as more of his general, unpleasant arrogant stupidity or whatever.

Dumbledore had looked at Harry sharply when Harry looked at Snape, as though he feared Harry would deny the man access out of spite or something. Harry pretended not to notice that the way he was pretending that he didn’t hate Dumbledore for everything he’d done to him in his life, and, once Dumbledore silenced the area, gave everyone the Secret.

Snape had looked almost surprised that Harry hadn’t tried to exclude him.

It made Harry want to sigh and warily wonder what they would be like a year from now – or five, assuming they both lived that long. He was almost positive that they’d learn to live with each other, if not necessarily like it. Snape could hold a grudge a long time, after all, but not 24-7, surely.

Hopefully.

It was immediately after lunch that the twins cornered him coming out of the bathroom. Warily, Harry led them to his suite. Hermione had gone to the drawing room with Ron and Harry was grateful for it. Ron never let Harry alone with Hermione for very long. Harry honestly wasn’t sure if his friend – hopefully, his friend – was more worried about being left out or if he was jealous. He
was really obvious about his liking Hermione this summer. He had to be obvious if Harry had noticed it, because he didn’t usually pay much attention to that sort of thing.

Once the three of them were closed in his sitting room, he stretched his magic to the wards of the house as Corvus had been teaching him, and silently secured his rooms. The Black Wards made even Paranoia at his worst seem tame. When he brought up the wards, he was protected from all manner of eavesdropping. He was aware of all living things within the wards. The rooms were nearly impenetrable by means magical or mundane. He could even use them to spy on things happening elsewhere in the house, going so far as to listen and watch everything that happened, or just being alerted to general things, like if someone was hurt or fornicating. He’d temporarily disabled that last bit, because he really just didn’t want to know.

He faced the twins warily as they studied him with uncharacteristic solemnity. “Er… Please, don’t take this the wrong way, but would you guys be willing to take a wand oath that you won’t share what we talk about in here today?”

The identical pair shared a brief look at that, but Harry was absurdly grateful when they didn’t hesitate to draw their wands and make the oath. He wasn’t worried about Hermione telling anyone because she was _Hermione_. The only time she’d ever betrayed him had been about his Firebolt and she’d harped on about it _forever_ before she’d gone to McGonagall. Harry knew better than to ignore that now, so he was sure he’d have plenty of warning if she started thinking she had to tell someone for his own good. He really didn’t think that she would, anyway. She’d grown up a lot since third year and didn’t place so much faith in the adults – especially since she’d learned what three of the most trusted ones had done to him.

The twins were different. It was their _family_ that this was about. Harry didn’t have much positive first-hand experience with family, but he did understand, in the abstract, that Family Came First. It was a chance he couldn’t take here. Not with everything that was on the line.

And so, oaths in place that would bind their secrecy with their own magic, Harry sat them down and explained that he’d gone to Gringotts because of Sirius’ will. Then, rather than trying to convince them, he just showed them a copy of the Potter-Weasley contract.

They both looked it over for a long time, their faces deathly grave.

“We didn’t know about this,” Fred said at last, and Harry tried not to sag in relief.

“They wouldn’t have told us,” George concurred.

“Rebels, we are,” Fred said with a brief, feral smile.

“We’d have teased you about it if we thought you knew,” George nodded.

“And told you had we known you didn’t,” Fred added.

“What are you going to do about it?” George posed, and they both looked so serious now that Harry wondered if they were afraid he was going to try to kill Ginny to get out of it or something mad like that.

In answer, Harry pulled the cord around his neck from under his shirt and displayed the Black Ring. “Sirius made me his heir. I’m Lord Black now. The title came with another marriage contract that will override the Weasley one if I let it.”

The twins looked at each other warily. “A Black marriage contract? Don’t they always marry families like the Malfoys?” Fred asked.
“The Averys?” George put in.

“And the Macmillans?” Fred finished.

“You’re not going to marry Malfoy, are you?” George teased, though he did look somewhat worried.

Harry rolled his eyes, relieved by their renewed teasing. “Of course not,” though he couldn’t be absolutely certain that he wouldn’t have allowed it even if that had been the case. If he could survive Snape, he could surely survive Malfoy. It’s the elder Malfoys that would have been the problem in the regard. Instead of explaining, he showed them the second contract.


“Is he Light?” George asked hopefully.

“Not as such,” Harry admitted, because he understood Dark Magic well enough now to recognize that Snape’s magic was attuned to it. He also knew enough to realize that it didn’t make him “evil”.

“He’s not a Death Eater, is he?” Fred pressed.

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again without speaking. He hadn’t really been meaning to tell them about Snape. That his future husband existed, yes, but not his identity. He wasn’t sure if they wouldn’t make leading jokes that people like Dumbledore and Snape could unravel. Unfortunately, he also hadn’t prepared himself to lie to them, so he wasn’t quick enough in denying the accusation.

“Blimey,” George muttered uneasily when Harry hesitated.

Harry sighed. Well, he may as well tell them now, before they jumped to really bad conclusions, thinking he was marrying Rabastan Lestrange or something.

“Snape,” he said finally, his voice lowered despite knowing that no one else could hear them if they shouted.

There was a moment of stunned silence and then uproarious laughter as both the twins cracked up, falling all over each other in their mirth.

It lasted almost a minute before they seemed to realize that he wasn’t laughing, with them.

“Well, you’re not serious, right, mate?” Fred asked incredulously.

Harry sighed. “Severus Snape’s mum was Eileen Prince. She was disowned for marrying a muggle, but when Severus ended up being the last viable heir for the family, Lord Prince left everything to Snape in his will, including the Lordship. Just after he graduated Hogwarts, Snape found out that he’d be betrothed to Sirius if he accepted the lordship, so he never did. Now Sirius has passed the contract on to me and I mean to make Snape accept it.”

The silence lasted longer this time. The twins spent the time either sharing looks or staring at Harry.

“I… No judgement, mate, but is Snape really better than Ginny?” Fred asked cautiously.

Harry frowned heavily at his lap for a long moment before meeting their eyes again and making an attempt at explaining his reasoning. “Ginny, your parents, and Dumbledore, they would force me into this. Your parents, presumably, for the money, Ginny because she must still think she’s in love
with me, and who knows what Dumbledore’s getting, but they all made the choice to force me to do this. I can’t live the rest of my life knowing that my wife… that she would do something like that to me. I can’t. Snape, he… Well, he’s unpleasant, and he doesn’t much like me, but he had nothing to do with the contract. It was made before he was even born.”

“Yeah…” George agreed.

“But he hates you,” Fred pointed out.

“And you hate him,” George concurred.

Harry shrugged, “It doesn’t really matter for an arranged marriage, honestly. There’s a lot we can offer each other – politically and with the war. And when it’s all over – if we’re both still alive – I think we can learn to live with each other. We’d be just… two people making the best of the situation. If I married Ginny, it would always be her fault, and I can’t live like that.”

The twins looked at each other again.

“If you’re sure,” Fred said at last.

“Like really sure, mate, because it’s Snape,” George stressed.

“Then you know that we’re behind you.”

“No matter what.”

Harry breathed a heavy sigh of relief. “Thank you, guys,” he swallowed hard and told his eyes to stop stinging because he was not going to cry over this in front of the twins. “You don’t know what that means to me…”

“We have an idea,” George said gently, briefly reaching out to touch Harry’s arm.

“What about Ron?” Fred asked suddenly, his eyes hardening.

“He didn’t know, did he?” George added.

Harry grimaced and shook his head, “I don’t know. I… I guess I’ve been too afraid to ask him.” Because he could have. He could have made him take an oath like this and asked him straight out.

Fred and George exchanged another look, this one full of determination. “We’ll find out for you, Harry,” they said together.

“And don’t worry. We’ll be discreet,” Fred assured.

“He probably won’t even remember the conversation if he doesn’t answer the right way,” George said viciously.

“Ah…” Harry frowned, “Do you two even know how to cast an obliviate…” because after reading so much about the spell, he knew exactly how dangerous it could be in unexperienced hands.

“Nah,” George dismissed.

“Obliviate’s for amateurs,” Fred grinned devilishly.

“There’s a potion…”
“Pair of potions,” Fred corrected.

“Right you are, George,” George agreed, “A pair of potions.”

“That we discovered by accident fifth year.”

“It’s why we failed so many OWLs,” Fred added wryly.

“Take one potion and it lasts twenty-four hours,” George explained.

“Doesn’t really do anything,” Fred admitted.

“Nope. Doesn’t. But if the second potion is administered before those twenty-four hours are up,” George grinned.

Fred matched his grin eerily, “Why, you forget everything that happened in between.”

“We forgot a lot of studying that year,” George admitted with faux sadness.

“Allegedly,” Fred added judiciously. “We made plans to study, but we can’t prove that we ever did,” he sighed.

“Right you are, brother mine,” George abetted.

“We do need to brew the potion,” Fred said more seriously.

“We’ll bring it by in a few days,” George confirmed.

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**18 August 1996 - Sunday**

Harry took a deep breath as the Order meeting began letting out. Then he took another. Then he forced himself to stop before he hyperventilated. It was all well and good to rationalize the need for this. It was something else entirely to actually propose to Severus freaking Snape.

“Professor Snape,” Harry said, quickly stepping forward when the man came out of the kitchen, clearly intent on beating a hasty path to the front door.

The professor stopped, then slowly turned to pin Harry with a malevolent glare. “Mr. Potter,” he sneered.

“Could I speak with you for a few minutes, sir? Privately?”

Snape’s brow drew down, black eyes scrutinizing Harry to within an inch of his life as he searched for the motive that could possibly inspire Harry Potter to actually request time in his presence.

“On my honor that I mean you no ill will,” Harry added in response to the hesitation. He’d mostly expected that that would be needed. Despite never having pulled a single prank in five years, Snape doubtlessly expected that that would be Harry’s intention.

As Harry had hoped, the formal line sparked enough curiosity to get Snape to comply. Once they were closed into the parlor alone together, Harry silently lifted the house wards around the room.

“What do you want, Potter?” Snape snarled when Harry didn’t immediately speak.
Harry resisted the urge to take another bracing breath and reached into his pocket to withdraw – slowly, so Snape wouldn’t get twitchy – a lacquered ebony box. “This is for you,” he said neutrally, holding it out in offering.

Snape stared at it for a long moment as though he fully expected the thing to animate and bite him. Finally, his curiosity seemed to win out again and he cautiously reached for it. Harry felt the man’s passive magic brush against his hands, certainly checking for hostile magic. At last, he snatched up the box and tipped it open.

Snape tensed when he saw the contents, his body going completely rigid. Harry knew what he was seeing. A platinum ring nestled into a black velvet cushion. After a long moment, black eyes snapped back up to meet Harry’s, looking somewhere between stunned and furious. “Mr. Potter,” he bit out, “do you have any idea the significance of this?”

In answer, Harry solemnly recited, “Severus Alexander Snape, I, Lord Harrison James Potter-Black humbly request your hand in marriage.” And he didn’t even stumble over the words.

Snape’s jaw actually fell open slightly before he mastered himself and turned the Death Glare up full bore. “Potter, only you would be deranged enough to find humor in this absurd jest.”

“I do not jest, sir,” Harry said gravely, taking a small step back when Snape attempted to thrust the ring box at him.

Snape’s eyes narrowed then. “‘Lord Black,’” he hissed under his breath. “You’ve seen the contract.”

“Yes,” Harry admitted, keeping himself utterly grave so that there wouldn’t be the slightest chance that Snape could think he was anything less than sincere.

“If you’d actually bothered to read it, Potter, you would know that it is not compulsory unless I accept my lordship as well, and I promise you that the Prince family does not have nearly enough wealth to tempt me into marriage with you,” he growled furiously.

“I understand that, sir,” Harry nodded. “There are, however, benefits beyond wealth to be had from such a union. The Black library, for example, is legendary, containing books that are priceless and some very likely unique.”

“Are you attempting to bribe me into marrying you, Potter?” Snape couldn’t seem to decide if he should be more astonished or enraged.

“I prefer the term ‘persuade’,” Harry said with dignity. One thing that he had known going into this was that he absolutely could not lose his temper in negotiations with Snape or he may as well hand the Potter estate to Dumbledore right now.

“Why?” Snape said after a moment, apparently foregoing rage and astonishment in favor of suspicion. Harry would kind of love to see Snape’s Paranoia Aspect. It had to be impressive.

“When I assumed the Black lordship, I discovered this,” Harry said quietly, offering the copy of the Potter-Weasley contract.

With a suspicious glare, Snape unrolled the parchment, his face blank as his eyes scanned rapidly over the contents. After a long moment, he rolled it back up and offered it back. Harry accepted it wordlessly and tucked it into a pocket.

Snape was silent for at least a minute before he pinned Harry with his dark gaze again. “You would
choose me over Miss Weasley,” he said suspiciously, not quite making it a question. Harry did notice, however, that Snape seemed to be taking him more seriously now.

“I refuse to marry someone who would force it upon me,” Harry said with quiet gravity. “I refuse to be anyone’s puppet.”

Snape continued to stare for a long while before finally giving a slow nod. “I assume,” he said with a great deal of precision, “that your display of etiquette indicates that you’ve properly researched the full ramifications of your proposal – or had Miss Granger do so.” Again, it wasn’t quite a question, but his pause suggested that he was waiting for an answer.

“I have,” Harry answered simply, forcibly preventing himself from reacting to the clear insinuation to his lacking intelligence or ability to research. That sort of thing was easier to ignore now that he no longer suspected that it was true.

Snape stared at him a moment longer, as though waiting for him to crack. When Harry just continued to meet his stare calmly, Snape nodded, almost reluctantly. “I accept.”

It took Harry a few moments to comprehend the meaning of those two words. “Wh… ah… you do?” he responded in surprise.

Snape lifted one eyebrow challengingly, “Hoping that I would decline, Potter?”

“No!” Harry assured at once. “No. I just… thought you would,” he muttered, then quickly pulled himself back on task. “Due to the circumstances surrounding the Potter-Weasley contract and its signatories I would like to complete the contract as soon as possible. Before school resumes if you’re willing.”

Snape looked very nearly amused as he listened, but answered formally after just a momentary pause. “That is acceptable. Shall I conclude that we will be keeping this entirely confidential until the contract is complete?”

“My only confidant is Hermione,” Harry admitted. “Fred and George know, too, but they’ve sworn a magical oath. No one else. We obviously can’t trust Dumbledore.”

Snape hummed lowly, “I shall make arrangements with Gringotts tomorrow, then.”

“And I will make an appointment for a marriage service at the Ministry on the thirtieth, if you’ve no objection.”

Snape seemed to consider that giving a slight nod, “The news will undoubtedly surface in the prophet within hours.”

“I’ll make the appointment late enough to ensure a late edition of the Prophet isn’t possible.”

“Then it will come out on the thirty-first.”

“I’ll move my things to your quarters at Hogwarts after breakfast, then.”

Snape grimaced slightly, but acquiesced with another small, sharp nod.

“Should I assume that you’re not concerned about repercussions from Volde- the Dark Lord?” Harry inquired, hastily side-stepping the use of Voldemort’s name when Snape’s eyes narrowed dangerously at the first syllable.
“Don’t worry, Potter,” Snape sneered, “I have no intention to make you a widower so soon.”

It wasn’t much of an answer, but he wasn’t about to press the man. Not when he’d inexplicably decided to make Harry’s life enormously easier by agreeing to marry him so readily. Once they were permanently bound to each other, then he’d worry about questioning his reasoning. Up until the vows were spoken, he could still back out… Well, up until the Prince lordship was claimed, he could still back out. Harry was fairly certain that Snape wouldn’t change his mind and make himself a squib, but it was probably best not to push his luck. Snape did hate him quite a bit, after all. And he must know an awful lot of poisons…

Anyway, Snape wasn’t suicidal. He wouldn’t be agreeing if he didn’t think that he had things in hand. Ignoring Snape’s tone, Harry nodded. “Fair enough,” he conceded. “Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

“I think, Potter, that we have spent more than enough time together for today,” Snape drawled.

Harry swallowed the snide comment on the tip of his tongue with some effort. They’d better get used to being in each other’s company soon, because they’d be sharing a living space for the rest of their lives. He pushed those thoughts away quickly. He’d made his decision for many very good reasons. There was no point in questioning it now, particularly right after Snape had accepted. “Then I’ll see you on the thirtieth. We’ll meet here, and go to the Gringotts together.”

Snape gave a single sharp nod and headed for the door.
The Bonds of Matrimony

Chapter Summary

Chapter Six Synopsis

Harry encounters Corvus Black in his mindscape and realizes that the memory will be sticking around but Knowledge is sure that he can’t affect anything, so Harry lets it go. Harry removes the Obliviates in his mind and discovers that the four instances were done by Dumbledore, the first three being when he learned magic too early and used it against the Dursleys, the last being just how much he remembered about Quirrell’s death and his complicity in it. Harry tells the twins about the marriage contract with Ginny only after they give him a wand oath to keep it secret. The twins are on his side and promise to figure out how Ron feels about it as well – without giving away Harry’s secret. Harry proposes to Snape and is shocked when the man says yes with very little persuasion necessary.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 7

The Bonds of Matrimony

18 August 1996 - Sunday

Severus filled his glass from the fire whiskey bottle and carefully placed a vial of Sober-Up potion next to the bottle before picking up the glass. Being inebriated was not merely dangerous in his position. It was nigh on suicidal. That’s why he only drank alone, and within arm’s reach of a sobering potion. Not drinking in the first place may have been more prudent, but his sanity sometimes demanded it.

That was never more true than now. It had been many years since Severus had given any thought at all to the concept of marriage. Indeed, since Lily’s wedding had crushed the last of his childish dreams he’d given no more thought to the institution at all. When he discovered that claiming his inheritance would tie him irretrievably to Sirius Black, he’d given up any thoughts about that as well.

Now, he was to be Lord Severus Prince. He’d not hesitate to drop his father’s muggle surname. Of course, it would come with a price. A high price. In eleven days, he would become Lord Severus Potter-Black Prince, husband of Lord Harry Prince Potter-Black.

Severus took a heavy swig of fire whiskey reveling in the burn as it slid down his throat. Potter… He’d never believed he’d see the day that the brat actually grew up. He probably still hadn’t, but he seemed to be heading in that direction. It was the reason he’d accepted the proposal. Had the boy had
the audacity to propose to him like some muggle he’d have laughed in his face. But he hadn’t. He’d done it as a proper pureblood. The boy had not only researched the pureblood customs, but apparently intended to uphold them.

The Potter-Weasley marriage contract had been the true determining factor, however. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the accompanying look in Potter’s eyes had been the deciding factor. The boy’s ire had been well and truly raised. Oh, Albus had miscalculated this time. His sacrificial lamb had grown claws, and he was learning to use them.

For Severus, personally, the marriage had far more benefits than drawbacks. Yes, he’d have to put up with Potter as a permanent fixture in his life. That, in itself, was highly disconcerting. In recompense, however, he finally got to claim his birthright, Potter was offering free reign of the Black library, and he got the “great” Harry Potter as his permanent champion in the political arena. Dumbledore would find it hard to do him any real harm politically when he was married to Harry Potter.

And he was free of Voldemort. He pushed back the left sleeve of his robe. The Dark Mark was gray now, surrounded by a ring of suppression runes keeping it disconnected from his former master. Severus was no fool. He’d been well on his way to discovering the means of neutralizing the Mark by the time he defected. Even when he’d considered himself loyal to the Dark Lord, he’d been intent on having a way out. He’d refined it over the years, while the Dark Lord was weakened too greatly to notice his mucking about with the magic. He’d changed nothing before, of course, but he’d been prepared to do so on a moment’s notice should his loyalty ever come into question.

When Potter had proposed, when he’d realized the boy was actually serious, he hadn’t been able to help but appreciate all the ways in which the marriage would make his life exponentially better. Oh, he still loathed the boy, but certainly not badly enough to turn down such an opportunity. He smiled sadistically at the memory of the boy’s face when he’d accepted. He wondered how much of a speech the boy had had planned. As though Severus couldn’t see the benefits for himself. As though he was such a fool as to decline the proposal of the wizarding world’s Most Eligible Bachelor – or he would have been had anyone realized he was legally an adult – no matter how badly he hated him.

He did have to wonder, however, how long it might take the boy to come to his senses and realize that the Weasley chit would’ve been infinitely easier to live with.

19 August 1996 - Monday

Harry sighed as he set yet another book onto the pile of those he’d assimilated. He still had literally thousands of books in his library trunk from the Black Vault to sort through but he’d taken a break from those in order to figure out exactly what all the books in the Master Study were about. Thus far, he’d determined that they were a pretty good mix of legal, political, and historical references, financial ledgers, and various journals kept by Orion Black before his death. He was learning a ton of interesting facts, according to Knowledge. Unfortunately, Orion had never been Lord of the Black family and therefore had information personal to him and his immediate family only. Harry was going to have to make a trip to Castle Black if he wanted more information about the family as a whole as kept by Arcturus Black, who’d died in ’92, according to Corvus. Despite not being sentient before Harry, there was a surprising amount of information Corvus had gathered just from the state of the lordship ring as it changed hands throughout the millennia since he’d created it.

Regardless, Knowledge had urged him to take in everything in the study. It was kept there to be within easy reach of the master of the study, which meant that it would most likely be handy for Harry to have it stuck in his head and therefore always within easy reach.
Harry had just picked up the next book to begin scanning through it when there was a light knock on the door. A touch on the wards allowed him to see through the door like it was a window, though it wouldn’t have changed at all from the other side. He smiled a little at seeing Hermione, but it faded quickly when he considered the probable course of the following discussion.

With a sigh, he disengaged the wards on the door and called out a quick, “Come in!”

As soon as Hermione had stepped inside and closed the door, Harry returned all the wards. The house was full of people, including Weasleys and an ever-shifting contingent of random Order members – he’d passed the secret to another group of them yesterday, prior to the Order meeting – and Harry trusted not one of them aside from the young woman who’d just joined him in his study.

Whatever Hermione had meant to say stalled as she got a look at the state of the room. Half of the bookshelves had been emptied, the contents presently piled all over the desk and a long table next to it, which Harry had transfigured for the purpose. His present organizational system probably was not obvious at first glance, he mentally acknowledged. Or second glance, honestly. Well, it really wouldn’t make sense to anyone except him. The piles were made up of books he was either planning to assimilate or those that had already been assimilated but he’d yet to return to their shelves. Of course, there wasn’t any real pattern to where each of these piles had accumulated, meaning that he’d be lost himself if not for Knowledge providing him with a perfect mental map of where he’d placed everything over the last couple of hours that he’d been at this.

“What are you doing?” Hermione asked after a long moment to take in the state of the room.

Harry flashed her an irreverent grin, “Learning! Well, memorizing, actually.”

With a slightly irritated frown, Hermione tugged a chair over near him and plopped herself into it. “Explain,” she insisted.

“Remember when I said that my mind worked like a computer to recall and compare everything that I know?” She gave a vague nod, glancing around at the piles of books as she clearly began to follow him. “Well, that works for everything I’ve seen or heard or otherwise experienced. I don’t have to actually read the books. I can just glance at the page and the information is permanently logged in my brain, even if I consciously have no idea of anything that it said.”

She blinked a few times and looked vaguely disturbed.

“It’s okay to be jealous,” Harry ventured after a long moment of silence.

Her frown turned into a mild glare.

“At least you’re not engaged to Snape, right?” Anything to make her stop looking at him like that. It worked. She was instantly distracted. “Engaged? Wait, does that mean that you asked him?”

“Last night after the Order meeting let out,” Harry nodded.

“And he said yes?!” she very nearly screeched.

Harry was glad that he’d restored the silencing wards after she’d come in. They did not need to be drawing any attention to this particular conversation. “He did,” Harry nodded with a curious frown.

“Why?”

Were Harry as insecure as he’d been at the beginning of the summer, he’d doubtlessly have taken
oblique offense at her tone of deepest shock. Luckily, he now had his Aspects with whom he could
talk these things out and he felt fairly confident that he understood what she was thinking. “What’s
that supposed to mean?” he asked with mock offense. “I’m one heck of a catch, I’ll have you
know!”

“Of course you are,” she automatically placated, “you know that’s not what I meant. Professor
Snape hates you. A lot. Why would he…?”

“You’re thinking like a muggle, Hermione,” Harry pointed out with mild chastisement. “Admittedly,
I kind of was, too. Snape… Severus,” must get used to calling him that as it would be highly
improper to refer to his husband by his surname – even his betrothed, really. Particularly because
Snape wouldn’t even be his name anymore, “is a wizard, and he thinks like one.”

Hermione looked mildly insulted, so Harry hurried to explain, “Arranged marriages are really
common among purebloods and some halfbloods, too. When you think of a marriage, you
immediately think about love, right? Or at least affection. That’s what I mean when I say you’re
thinking like a muggle. For a wizard, marriage is more like a business transaction. Maybe the most
important one you’ll make in your life, of course, but still a business deal. So when I proposed to
Severus, he cared less about his personal opinion of me as a person and more about what he could
gain from the marriage. Not to sound vain, but, frankly, that’s a lot.

“Between the Potter and Black lordships – one of which I’ve claimed and the other of which I’ll
claim just before I’m married – and the whole Boy-Who-Lived thing, I bring a ton of wealth and
prestige to any family that I marry into. On top of that, Snape is able to claim his own rightful
lordship and all the wealth and prestige that comes with that if he consents to marry me. I’m not
certain, but I suspect he’s also quite happy to use the marriage as an excuse to stop spying on
Voldemort.”

Hermione’s eyes widened at that, “But we need a spy!”

“And it’s his choice!” he snapped at her. Honestly, the girl needed to learn to think about the things
that came out of her mouth.

She wilted under his glare. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” She rubbed a hand roughly over her
forehead. “I’m just… I’m scared,” she admitted, her eyes slightly wide. “I’m scared that you’re
making a terrible mistake in marrying him. I’m afraid of this war and that we’re going to die, or
worse that we’ll live and they’ll win and then…” she shuddered.

Harry sighed and leaned forward to grip her hand in comfort. It was the most he could manage. He
didn’t think she’d be helped that much if he tried and failed to hug her properly. “I’m scared, too,”
he admitted after a moment.

She gave him a skeptical look. “Really? Because of everything I’ve seen of you this summer, fear
isn’t part of it.”

He shrugged, “I’m handling things better now, I guess. I really am terrified,” he admitted quietly.
He wasn’t honestly all that worried about himself. He knew that he could handle pain and he wasn’t
afraid to die. The thought of losing more people that he loved… That was a thought that had had
him wake screaming more than once before his mindscape had taken away normal dreams. “I’m just
doing the best I can, Hermione,” he sighed. “I truly believe Snape,” he paused irritably and started
again, “I truly believe Severus is my best choice, and I won’t change my mind.”

Hermione moved forward quickly to wrap her arms around him and Harry awkwardly tried to return
it. He knew that she meant well, but hugs always seemed to make him more uncomfortable rather
20 August 1996 - Tuesday

The twins arrived at Grimmauld Place in time for lunch and Harry felt his stomach lurch as he watched Fred distract Ron while George tipped a clear potion into his tea. Ron brushed off their badgering and Harry tried not to stare as he drank down the potioned tea without so much as a twitch.

Harry, certain that he couldn’t handle watching the questioning that was coming, retreated to his suite and worked on his meditation. It was a task that allowed him to clear all worries from his mind and submerge himself in his magic and it never failed to bring him a superior sense of calm and relaxation. Just exactly what he needed when he was stressed out about Ron. He worked on meditating and drawing out his magic every evening before bed, but a bit of extra practice wouldn’t hurt.

Thanks to the meditation, the time passed almost without notice until he was drawn fully back to the waking world by the sound of a knock on his door. A touch to the wards showed him Fred and George waiting outside his door with very grim faces.

Stomach clenching in dread, Harry called for them to enter and moved himself from the cushion on the floor on which he’d been meditating to a chair where they could sit together. He immediately lifted the wards once the door was closed behind the twins. “Bad news?” he assumed.

“Yes and no,” George admitted.

“Good news,” Fred offered, “is that he didn’t know.”

“Bad news,” George added, interrupting Harry’s relieved sigh, “is that he didn’t seem to understand why we found it a bad thing.”

Harry cupped a hand over his face and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“Thought it would be great if you married Ginny,” Fred went on.

“Didn’t seem to understand why you may not want to do that.”

“Got mad when we insinuated you didn’t want to marry Ginny.”

“Prat even said you were being ungrateful after all we’ve done for you,” George looked particularly infuriated by that bit. “Like you owe anything to us after all you’ve done, what with saving Ginny’s life.”

“Saving Dad’s life.”

“Financing our shop.”

“Putting up with Ron’s stupidity all these years,” Fred smirked a little.

“Thanks, guys,” Harry managed after a minute. “I needed to know.”

“Don’t let him get you down, mate,” George said cheerfully. “You’ve still got us.”

“Too right,” Fred concurred. “And you’ll be married soon, so there’s that to look forward to.”
Harry chuckled against his will, “He said yes, you know? Wedding’s scheduled for the thirtieth. I used the names Black and Prince, so I doubt anyone will realize either Severus or me are involved until we actually get there.”

Fred laughed malevolently, “Oh, to be a fly on the wall when the ritualist realizes who he’s marrying…”

“Won’t be half as interesting as breakfast the next morning when the Daily Prophet arrives,” Harry rolled his eyes.

Fred and George shared a look full of sharp grins before focusing on Harry again and chorusing, “We’ll be there!”

30 August 1996 - Friday

“Lord Black,” Orblok greeted in a way that passed for cheerful among goblins. “What can Gringotts do for you today?”

“Hello, Orblok,” Harry nodded as he sat down in front of the desk. He still wasn’t used to being called “Lord” anything, but he didn’t let that show. He was about to become a lord twice over, after all. Best get used to it. “I’m here to claim the Potter lordship, today.”

“Very well,” the goblin nodded, easily finding the lordship ring in a desk drawer.

Harry lifted an eyebrow at that and the goblin merely smiled one of his frightening smiles. “Is there a reason that you had that at hand?” Harry decided to ask considering that the goblin would only feel obliged to tell him anything if directly asked.

“When I heard that the Ministry had scheduled a Black/Prince marriage, I suspected you may soon be claiming the Potter lordship,” the goblin admitted.

Harry nodded his understanding and reached for the ring box.

The Crest on the front was his family crest. It struck him as deeply wrong that this was the first time he remembered seeing it. It was a massive tree in the background, three birds in flight in the foreground, and the tree itself seemed to be sprouting from a massive pot. He ran his fingers lightly over the symbol before opening the box to find a platinum ring. The tree on the ring was made of tiny diamonds in the reddish brown color of the Potter family. Actually, the diamonds were almost like dust with how small they were, but the effect was stunning. The tiny birds were chips of what he thought might be obsidian. He rather suspected that only magic made it possible to craft such a ring as this.

He slid the ring onto the ring finger of his right hand and was somehow unsurprised when he suddenly found himself in the parlor receiving room of his mindscape. His aspects were arranged as they’d been when he’d met Corvus, with Will, Protectiveness, Courage, and Paranoia surrounding his chair and Knowledge, Logic, Cunning, Ambition, and Loyalty in a looser formation around the visitor chair. They appeared at about the same time as an unknown figure materialized in the second chair. The man bore him no resemblance that he could see, but that wasn’t terribly surprising given how old the Potter family actually was. He had dark brown hair that hung straight to his waist, intelligent pale brown eyes, and a handsome face. He blinked a few times as he examined Harry and the Aspects and took in the well-appointed study that was the receiving room in Harry’s mind.

“So you are the Heir Potter,” the man observed with an accent that strongly reminded Harry of
Corvus.

“I am,” Harry said firmly.

The ancient Potter eyed Harry intently before studying each of the Aspects just as carefully. “You have a fascinating mind,” he decided.

“And you have poor manners,” Harry couldn’t help but quip. “You’ve not introduced yourself,” he explained to the raised eyebrows his assertion received.

Though he looked slightly annoyed, he responded, “Alucard Potter, first lord of House Potter, young man. As our name suggests, our family had humble origins. My grandfather was a potter. A crafter of ceramics and good at what he did. My father carried on the tradition, honing the magic used in the creation of his goods to make them the best in the land. I turned the craft into a thriving business. I trained apprentices in our craft. I opened additional shops. I spread our name and built our fortune. I earned our family a lordship. My concern is whether you will expand on the greatness of our family or destroy it as your father likely would have had he not died young.”

Harry felt a stir of irritation at hearing his father bad-mouthed, but crushed it just as quickly. From what he’d seen in Severus’ pensieve last year, his father more than likely deserved that. “I am already Lord of House Black,” Harry replied solemnly, “I am to be married, this very day, to the Lord of House Prince. I am one of the most powerful wizards alive. I have a unique and very beneficial grasp on my mindscape. And most importantly,” he glared at his surly ancestor, “I am the last living Potter. Reject me and you may kill our family.”

Alucard smirked a little for the first time. “You may be worth something yet.” He offered the Potter ring on his open palm.

With a respectful nod, Harry accepted the ring and slid it onto his finger. Upon feeling his core stirring, he moved to his core room to see what was happening. It made sense that it had been a substantial shift when he became Lord Black because it had to remove the blocks and force his magical maturity. He wondered what would happen this time.

He shielded his eyes against the blinding light, then squinted to watch the Avada green streaked with black begin to take on a new color. It was a reddish-brown – the color of clay – that slid into the light of his magical core and a wave of dizziness swept through him as his magic surged.

When his eyes cleared, he was back in Orblok’s office, the goblin staring at him with interest.

“Power,” Harry admitted, answering the unspoken question.

The goblin smirked a little. “Was there anything else that you required today, Lord Potter-Black?”

“Yes. I’ll need to take a trip to the Potter and Black family vaults.”

“Very well,” Orblok quickly summoned another goblin, “Riptooth will escort you down to the vaults.”

“Thank you,” Harry said before following Riptooth back out and down to the carts that took them down to the vaults. He made quick work of going through each vault for an appropriate wedding ring. The selection of male rings was smaller than female, but he didn’t find it too difficult to find ones that seemed appropriate for Severus. Both were platinum as he just couldn’t imagine Severus voluntarily wearing gold. The Potter ring was engraved with the tree behind a sizeable yellow diamond. The Black ring bore an engraved raven with wings down in flight encircling a black diamond. Harry tucked both into a pocket and headed back to the lobby to meet his affianced so that
they could travel to the Ministry together.

Riptooth led him straight to the floo room where Severus was waiting, looking as grim and unapproachable as always.

“You took your time, Potter,” Severus growled at him in an undertone.

“I had to visit two vaults, Severus,” Harry pointed out with a slight emphasis on the man’s given name that caused his jaw to clench, though he didn’t comment. “Shall we?” he gestured toward the wall lined with floos.

“After you,” the older man all but growled at him.

Barely feigned civility over thinly veiled hostility. Harry got the uneasy feeling that this was an accurate preview of his future.

Harry was quite pleased with himself when he managed to avoid falling over in the atrium of the Ministry when he came through. He did stumble, but at least he didn’t land on his face.

Severus stepped out after him as though he was born in a fucking floo and dispelled the ash residue from Harry’s robes with an irritable flick of his wand.

“Thank you,” Harry smiled coolly as he fell into step next to his soon-to-be-husband. He had to move fast to avoid falling behind, but he made the effort. The last thing he wanted was to trail after the man like a recalcitrant child. He managed to ignore all the stares with his years of practice, and no one dared approach with Severus looking like he’d have loved to verbally (or physically) flay someone alive.

“Do you have an appointment?” the wide-eyed witch managed to ask as they approached the reception desk in the Department of Magical Bonds.

“Lord Potter-Black and Lord Prince,” Harry answered while Severus watched him with an expression that managed to not look hostile, but perhaps pensive.

“Of course,” the witch muttered as she dragged her eyes away from the pair of them to consult her book. She paled several shades as she must have seen just what kind of bond they were here for. She swallowed twice before she managed to speak again. “Of course, my Lords. It’s the third door down the hall. Ritualist Lancing is waiting for… you.”

Harry rather doubted anyone was expecting them specifically, but he just gave her a polite smile and led the way down the corridor, pretending not to notice that Severus was very unexpectedly letting him lead. He could only assume that the man was curious as to what he would do.

The room they entered was far from a wedding chapel. Unlike in the muggle world, magical marriage bonds were not a spectator event. It was usually followed by a celebration involving friends and family, but the event itself was about the couple involved and the trained professional performing the ritual. It was about the magic of the individuals being permanently joined. It was rather private and the ritualist took an oath similar to a barrister involving the secrecy of those involved in the rituals he performs.

Harry had owl ordered a book about how the ritual actually worked and learned it all just a few days ago – well, he’d assimilated it, then learned it while he was sleeping. He was glad that he had as he’d hate to be fumbling around expecting a muggle exchange of vows. That wouldn’t be a very good way to show his new husband that he wasn’t an ignorant child… er… anymore.
The room they entered wasn’t overly large. There were no chairs or tables. Just a circular room with rows of runes carved into the walls. In the center of the room was a runic circle, carved into the floor and inlaid with gold and silver – not werewolf friendly, obviously, but as they weren’t legally allowed to marry in Britain, that didn’t really matter.

The ritualist was a man in his late middle years, dressed in a black and gold ceremonial robe. He glanced up at them with a smile as they entered, which froze on his face as he identified Harry. After a heartbeat, his eyes shot to Severus and widened even further. Two breaths and he pulled himself together with impressive aplomb. “Good afternoon, my lords,” he greeted respectfully. “You are here for a marriage bond, correct?” he asked, the epitome of professionalism. Harry didn’t blame the man for needing to double-check.

“Obviously,” Severus growled out irritably, apparently no longer able to keep his peace.

Harry just flashed the ritualist a bright smile and ignored his intended’s obviously sour mood, “That’s right,” he confirmed.

“Very good, sirs,” the man nodded amicably. “Do you have the rings?”

Severus produced a royal blue lacquered box embossed with the Prince crest – a crown surrounded by seven seven-point stars with an intricate sunburst in the background – and Harry provided a similar pair of boxes, though his were black and reddish brown respectively.

The ritualist accepted the boxes with a small bow and gestured to a door worked into the back wall seamlessly enough that Harry hadn’t noticed it before, “If you will proceed through that door, you can change into the ceremonial robes. Please ensure that you retain nothing except the robes on your body along with your lordship rings. No undergarments, no other jewelry, and no glasses,” he added the last with an apologetic look to Harry. “Just come back in here when you’re ready.”

Severus brushed passed him into the room and Harry followed at a more sedate pace, closing the door behind him. He was displeased to find that there was no sort of screen or curtain or any kind of privacy to be had, but he didn’t suppose it mattered that much. Turning away from the older man, Harry began methodically stripping off his robes, doing his best to ignore the fact that Severus was doing the same behind him. When he was wearing nothing but the pair of lordship rings, he gathered the white robe that was so thin as to be very nearly sheer and fought off a blush as it settled against his skin. He definitely didn’t feel decent to be seen by anyone in this, though he supposed he should be grateful that the ritual was no longer done sky clad.

He turned around when he was ready and he must have been terribly nervous because his first thought was that Severus looked shockingly good in white. You wouldn’t think it with a complexion like his, but there was something strangely otherworldly about the man at the moment. He shook the thought almost immediately. Doubtlessly it was just the shock of seeing the man in the exact opposite of his signature color. Then again, the lack of his glasses did soften the harsh features considerably. Yes, that was probably it.

Desperately hoping that he’d managed to control his blush, he followed Severus, who’d barely glanced at him before returning to the ritual room.

“Please be seated in the center of the circle,” the ritualist instructed once they were both in the room. “Fold your legs in front of you and move close enough that your knees touch.”

Fighting the urge to blush once more, Harry did as instructed. He fought the urge to flinch away from the contact as their knees came together lightly. He had a difficult time even touching his friends. Touching Severus was another level of discomfort altogether.
“Very good,” the ritualist said in an even, almost hypnotic tone as he moved fluidly around the room, lighting candles with a touch of his wand and extinguishing others, so the lighting in the room began to dim and take on a vaguely reddish cast. “Now join your hands to those of your intended and allow them to rest comfortably between you.”

Harry had known this was coming, but he hadn’t quite realized how difficult it would be. He felt at once uneasy and embarrassed by the unaccustomed physical contact as Severus’ warm hands lightly gripped Harry’s and came to rest of their knees. Sitting this close, Harry could see Severus’ face fairly clearly while the rest of the room was a colorful blur and it made the situation seem even more intimate despite the ritualist moving around them.

He tried to focus anywhere else, but looking at their joined hands didn’t help, and looking at Severus’ body was the opposite of helpful as the robe actually was slightly see-through and he could make out the patches of black hair beneath. He finally settled on letting his eyes roam the blurs above Severus’ head.

“Relax and open yourself to your magic,” the hypnotic voice encouraged and Harry happily took the excuse to distance himself from his unease. He was getting good at reaching his magical core while conscious and so it took barely more than a thought to bring his magic to the surface. He felt Severus’ magic tingling against his skin at every point of contact only an instant later and felt a small shudder fall down his spine. Merlin, he’d never felt anything like that before.

“Good,” the voice continued. “Very good. Feel your magic fill you. Feel the magic of your bondmate. Embrace your magic.” He then went on in Latin, though his tone remained smooth and even, allowing Harry to continue focusing on the magic rather than the words he didn’t know.

As the ritualist spoke the ritual chant, Harry felt his magic continue to rise and fill the room around him without his conscious decision to do so. A small part of him was alarmed at the sensation, but the magic of the ritual kept him calm. Not only his magic was filling the room, though. It was impossible to miss the foreign magic rising up with his own. His hands tightened convulsively at the same time as Severus’ grip became almost painful.

Their magic came together aggressively, burning and thrashing just this side of painful. It was thrilling and unnerving and not altogether unpleasant. The battle seemed endless as their magic sought a middle ground that just didn’t seem to exist. Harry started to wonder if the ritual would fail entirely and the whole gambit would be for naught, but then his magic seemed to tire of the game and it surged out of him as powerfully as it had done when he’d removed the obliviates and Severus’ magic very quickly settled down. It wasn’t cowed so much as overwhelmed into grudging acceptance.

Harry abruptly found himself in the room with his core whilst simultaneously conscious of the ritual room. He stared in wonder as his core was changed by yet another magical bond, this one to another person rather than family magic through his lordship rings. The royal blue of the Prince magic seemed to be shaded by Severus himself. Unlike the lordship bonds, this bond did not change his own magic, but rather settled itself in next to it. A band of shaded blue slithered around his core and settled in with a feeling strangely akin to an embrace despite the fact that it didn’t make him uncomfortable. Where the bindings on his magic had covered and suppressed his magic, this bond fused with his core and sank into it, and Harry fully understood why this ritual was permanent.

He could only stare in awe at what had just happened. This was nothing like aligning his magic to the family magic and power of his lordships. This was making Severus a part of himself. It was astonishingly intimate. Nothing he’d read about it had conveyed the depth of just what this ritual did to a couple. His mindscape was unique as far as he knew. Perhaps people just didn’t realize what it
did on a real level.

“Now the rings,” the ritualist’s voice reached him and he looked up to find the Black and Potter ring boxes held open to him. He removed the Potter ring first and slipped it onto Severus’ left ring finger, which was offered with a frown. The Black ring went on next, nestled right up against the Potter ring and obviously far too large for the finger if he hoped to bend it properly. As he’d expected, it wasn’t a problem. The ritualist merely tapped it with his wand and the two rings fused together into one properly sized ring. It now sported the Potter tree in the background with the raven over it, wings still encircling the black diamond. The yellow diamond seemed to have split into two smaller stones that now flanked the raven. An interesting and not unattractive ring.

The Prince ring was next presented and Severus slid it onto Harry’s finger. The ring was platinum as well, with the crown in the center inlaid in gold and the seven stars each made of a stunning white diamond.

“Now kiss to complete the bond,” the ritualist instructed when the rings were in place and their hands joined once more. Harry found that he didn’t even feel uncomfortable about it as he’d expected while researching the ritual. With the magic of the ritual flowing through him and the realization of how deeply he’d just bound himself, Harry thought nothing of leaning forward along with Severus to seal their lips together between them. He felt his magic flare in a way that he could only categorize as triumphant as it surged forward through their connected lips to claim what now belonged to him. Severus’ magic clearly had the same idea as it rushed into him and the part of Harry that was in his mindscape watched as fine blue tendrils of magic snaked their way into his core as though they belonged there.

Now, he supposed, they really did.

As their lips broke apart, Harry’s mind returned fully to his surroundings and he sagged forward, overwhelmed by the new sensations he experienced as his magic drew back into his core. He was magically bound to Severus now. Their very magical cores were connected and attuned to each other and he didn’t quite know how to process the unexpected new intimacy he felt toward a man he’d always strongly disliked.

Large hands settled on his arms, steadying him and the unease he’d felt at the physical contact before was completely gone. The fact alone was slightly unsettling, but the hands were gone again before he could figure out how to feel about it.

“You may notice a slight fluctuation in your magic over the next three to four days,” the ritualist was saying as Harry slowly straightened and pushed himself to his feet. “That’s completely normal. In some cases, you may detect strong emotions or significant distress from your spouse. That is uncommon, but not anything that should concern you.”

What the ritualist did not say was that the phenomenon was much more common when powerful magical cores were involved, particularly if both partners were powerful. There was a very good chance that he and Severus would experience that, and he couldn’t even guess how his unique mindscape might affect that.

“You should experience shared dreams or uncontrollable telepathy that you find unpleasant, please return and we will attempt to moderate the bond. Free of charge, of course,” he smiled.

Severus just stared flatly at the man for a moment before turning and sweeping his way into the back room to change.

“Thank you,” Harry smiled politely at the man.
“You’re welcome, Lord Prince Potter-Black,” the ritualist said with a genuine smile. “Congratulations on your marriage.”

Harry couldn’t help chuckling slightly in amusement at the way the man didn’t seem to know if he should be congratulating Harry or wishing him luck. He gave a nod of thanks and moved into the back room after his new husband, aware that the man wasn’t exceptionally patient.

He made a point of not looking at the other man as he stepped into the room and stripped off his ritual robe to change back into the robes he’d worn today.

They returned to the atrium without exchanging a single word. When they stopped at the floos, Severus finally spoke. “I will come by to collect you tomorrow morning at ten,” he said with subdued distaste.

“I’ll be ready,” Harry assured, quite certain that he would be more than ready to leave by that point. He was, however, glad that school would be starting the next day so they’d both have something else to draw their attention.

Chapter End Notes

No, Alucard Potter was NOT a vampire or related to Dracula. I just liked the name, and wizards have unusual names, so it seemed to fit.
Wedded Bliss

Chapter Summary

Chapter Seven Synopsis

Severus reminisces on his upcoming nuptials and his hopes and doubts for his future husband’s growing maturity. He is very relieved to be getting out from under Dumbledore’s and the Dark Lord’s thumbs and the wealth and prestige of the Prince family finally becoming his, even if he does have to deal with Potter for the rest of his life in trade.

Harry tells Hermione about his successful proposal. She’s shocked by it and worried about him. The twins question Ron and report back that he didn’t know but that he approved of it and was insulted that Harry didn’t want to marry Ginny. Harry and Severus go to Gringotts immediately before their bonding and accept the Potter and Prince lordship respectively. Harry meets Alucard Potter in the same way he’d met Corvus Black on accepting the Black lordship. Harry and Severus go to the Ministry together and are magically bonded in matrimony. After, Harry returns to Grimmauld and Severus to Hogwarts with plans to meet in the morning to move Harry in.

Chapter Notes

The first half of this has been written for nearly a year. The second half I wrote last night. I had a hell of a time with Dumbledore's reaction.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 8

Wedded Bliss

31 August 1996 - Saturday

Harry woke early that morning and ate his breakfast in the privacy of his suite, as had become his habit. He took his time in the shower and dressed in a nice set of everyday robes. There was precious little packing to do as he’d not lost the habit of keeping the vast majority of his possessions packed in his expandable trunk and the trunk itself in his pocket at all times next to his library. He felt more secure in his heavily warded house, but he was still nervous about going about without his things. What if, for some reason, he had to leave in a hurry and maybe couldn’t come back? Like if Voldemort managed to attack and take down the wards. It would almost literally kill him if he not only lost the collection of priceless tomes in his possession, but Voldemort gained them.

Despite the fact that he’d have loved to hide out in his heavily warded suite until Severus arrived to escort him to Hogwarts, he figured it would be better to just get the initial confrontation over with.
Well, there was also the fact that he was somewhat looking forward to the look on certain Weasley faces when they realized that he would not be bringing the Potter name or fortune into their traitorous little family.

He made his way down to the library as he usually did in the mornings. He was entirely too distracted to actually read anything, but he was perfectly capable of turning pages and glancing at them to let Knowledge add it to his library, so that’s what he did while he waited for the shouting to start. It was nearly nine-thirty, which was usually about the time they got the prophet here.

He heard the first raised voices echo from the direction of the kitchen and smiled against the lip of his teacup before returning it to its saucer on the table so that he could properly turn the pages of his book. The voices rose further for perhaps two minutes before the sudden rise in volume signified that they were leaving the kitchen. Harry almost wished he could have seen their initial reactions to the revelation in the Prophet, but he realized it would have been a little too obvious if he’d been loitering in the kitchen for the first time since coming to Grimmauld this summer.

He was sure he hadn’t missed too much though. No one was going to believe that he’d actually married Severus without getting confirmation from him.

As expected, Molly stormed into the library, leading the pack with the paper clutched in her hand and brandished like a weapon. Behind her followed her youngest four children. Ginny was looking very pale and somewhat frightened. Ron looked annoyed. The twins looked like this was the most entertainment they’d had in months. Behind the redheads came a frowning Hermione, her brown eyes focused heavily on the Weasley matriarch. Next was Remus. The werewolf was looking rather bewildered. Last was Arthur, his shoulders slumped and hands stuffed in his pockets. He met Harry’s eyes with what the young man cautiously deemed shame.

Harry closed the book he was holding and slipped it into an expanded pocket. Knowledge had lectured him the last time he’d assimilated half a book and not finished it, pointing out that they may someday wish to have access to the rest of it and it may no longer be available. Harry capitulated as much to avoid future lectures as because the Aspect had a good point. He rose from his seat as he doubted any of the newcomers planned on sitting and he’d rather meet them – the elders, especially – on more even terms.

“Harry, tell me that this isn’t true!” Molly demanded, her eyes burning with anger and maybe a touch of fear.

“May I?” Harry inquired calmly. Though he had an idea of what the headline might say, he wasn’t about to answer one way or the other until he was sure of what he was saying.

Molly handed it over without so much as blinking, which was slightly unnerving.

Harry turned the paper over and pressed out some of the wrinkles as he read the headline.

**Harry Potter Marries Potions Professor**

Harry’s lips twitched slightly at the headline. That was certainly eye-catching, he had to admit. He glanced at the rest of the article, even flipped through to the page on which it was continued. Knowledge was absorbing it all, he knew, and would give him the highlights if pertinent.

“Mate, tell her it’s mental,” Ron urged.

Before Harry could respond, Molly lunged and caught Harry’s left hand, twisting it almost painfully to examine the Prince wedding band sparkling there in all its glory.
“Explain this, young man!” she demanded.

“My wedding ring, madam,” he replied coldly, wrenching his hand free despite the pain it caused. Any tolerance he’d had for this woman touching him had gone the moment he’d seen that marriage contract.

“It can’t be true,” the woman had gone very pale and looked absolutely horrified.

“Of course, it’s true,” he couldn’t help but sneer. “We were bonded yesterday. All things considered, we’ve chosen to forego the traditional gathering of well-wishers – at least for now.”

“You didn’t really marry the greasy git, Harry,” Ron looked as horrified as his mother and somewhat nauseous.

Harry turned a hard look on his now former best friend. “Have care how you speak of my husband in my presence, Ron.”

The redhead looked like he’d been slapped before his face started to turn red. “Why would you marry that bastard?!” he demanded.

“You can’t have!” Molly finally rallied enough to insist. “The bonding can’t have took, Harry,” she seemed almost like she was trying to explain a difficult concept to a young child now. “Severus must be lying to you.”

“You’ve insulted my husband and my intelligence quite enough, madam,” he frowned at her. “The ceremony was performed in the ministry, which you would know had you bothered to read the article,” Knowledge assured him that it was mentioned. “The bonding ‘took’ just fine,” he repressed a shudder at the mere insinuation that that powerful bond of their very magic wasn’t real. Despite not being a great fan of the man’s personality, Harry was very much attached to that new bond. He needed to research more into magical bonds, but he suspected the very nature of the bond brought about the somewhat alarmingly warm and proprietary feelings he was discovering for it.

“It can’t have took!” Molly snapped, becoming visibly more upset, “because you’re already betrothed!”

Ginny looked like she was trying to disappear into the chair she’d fallen into shortly after arriving.

“To Ginny,” he sneered at the woman who’d nearly trapped him. “I’m aware of your treachery, madam,” he said coldly.

“Treachery?!” Molly gasped as though it was the most heinous falsehood she’d ever heard. “We welcomed you into our family!”

“No,” Harry corrected harshly. “You tried to trap me into your family. For that, I will never forgive you. Luckily, Sirius made me his heir. In becoming Lord Black, I was able to access an old marriage contract between the Black and Prince families. Severus assumed the Prince Lordship and we were married under the older, more powerful contract, making the one you and Dumbledore compiled null and void.”

“You can’t have…” Molly trailed off and lowered herself unsteadily into a chair, her eyes wide and glazed.

“I have,” Harry said firmly.

“Don’t you talk to my mum that way!” Ron snapped angrily. “Is my sister not good enough for
you? Huh?”

“Shut up, Ron!”

Harry turned with everyone else to gaze curiously at Ginny, who was glaring at her brother. Quickly realizing that she was the focus of the room, she turned wide brown eyes on Harry, her face pinched in what looked like genuine regret.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, but the room was virtually silent, so she was easily heard. “I was barely twelve when they made up the contract, I… I didn’t think it through. Mum said we’d be happy…”

“You would have been happy!” Molly had apparently recovered as she lurched out of her chair, her eyes burning.

“Oh, give it a rest, woman!” This time it was Remus who came to the rescue and Harry found himself no less surprised by the harsh reprimand than he’d been by Ginny’s defense. Remus was usually the peace keeper. He just didn’t get confrontational. “You’ve lost,” he all but growled at her, his eyes lightening a shade from his usual amber toward wolf-gold.

Heartened to know that he apparently had more people on his side than he’d dared to hope, Harry spoke over what Molly was attempting to snap at his former professor. “Molly, you and your husband are no longer welcome in my house. Gather your things and leave immediately. You may return for Order meetings as necessary, but you will not arrive early, nor linger late. Ron, that goes for you as well.” He’d been planning to include Ginny in that, but now… He turned speculative eyes on her.

She gave him a sickly smile, “I don’t deserve any better treatment,” she said bitterly. “I am sorry though.”

She showed herself out of the room before he could decide how to respond to that. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to forgive her for her part in the marriage contract, but he suspected that someday he might if she continued to behave like she deserved it.

Molly had, by this point, drawn herself up into a righteous fury, “Fine, Harry, if that’s what you want, we’ll leave,” she practically hissed at him. “I know that you’re too young to understand, but we were only trying to do what was best for you. If you won’t let us help you, then I don’t know what we can do.” She stormed out of the room looking somewhere between furious and tearful. Harry wasn’t greatly shocked by her reaction. She’d always hid behind the claim that she was only doing what was best for him and everyone else that she tried to manipulate or strong-arm into doing what she wanted them to do. She may have even convinced herself of it.

Arthur just shook his head and slunk out of the room after his wife, shoulders slumped and head down.

It was only the warning of his increasingly refined passive magic that allowed Harry to throw himself back before Ron’s fist connected with his face. He’d felt the sudden, aggressive spike in his former best friend’s magic as he moved with the intention to harm him.

Before Harry could even contemplate his response – be it magical, physical, or verbal – Fred and George had Ron restrained and quickly shoved him out the door.

“You’ve got packing to do, Ronnikins!” Fred said, the mockery of a jovial tone thinly veiling cold anger.
“Yeah,” George collaborated, “before we decide to pack you in your trunk, too.” He then cheerfully slammed the door in his little brother’s face.

Silence filled the room for a long moment now that all those not supporting Harry were gone.

“Albus and Molly set up a marriage contract against your will?” Remus finally asked. He looked a bit like he’d just taken a blow to the gut.

“And without my knowledge,” Harry confirmed. “I found out when I went to Gringotts to hear Sirius’ will.”

“Did you really marry Severus?” Remus questioned after a moment.

Harry nodded once, sharply. “I did.”

Remus sighed sadly, “I’m so sorry, cub.”

Harry shook his head, dismissing the apology. “The marriage is beneficial to us both. There’s nothing to regret.”

“Except the chance to meet someone else and fall in love,” Remus pointed out grimly.

Harry waved a hand, brushing away the topic. “I imagine, with time, we’ll grow content with each other.” He honestly didn’t believe even Severus was capable of hating him forever when they were stuck together for life. Hating a memory was easy. Hating a constant fixture in your life that wasn’t going out of his way to reciprocate the animosity was not so easy.

Remus didn’t seem to know how to respond to that.

“What was the bonding ritual like?” Hermione burst out with, blushing when all eyes turned to her. Harry had gone to bed immediately after getting home from the ritual, his magic feeling a bit ruffled. Hermione had probably been dying to ask that question since he’d failed to talk to her then.

He smiled a little at her curiosity. Of course, she’d had the longest to get used to the idea of him marrying Severus. “It was… intense,” he admitted to her. She’d read the books, so she knew the mechanics of it.

“James described it as more intimate than sex,” Remus recalled, studying Harry curiously, but with a hint of mischief dancing in his eyes.

Harry felt his face heat with a slight blush and tried to will it away. “I really wouldn’t know,” he admitted uncomfortably, “but it was… intimate. The bond literally makes you a part of each other for the rest of your lives. It’s… difficult to describe.”

Before he could be questioned further, there was a perfunctory knock on the door followed by it opening to reveal his new husband, whose black eyes flitted around the faces in the room briefly before settling on Harry with an expression that was dangerously close to polite. “Are you ready, Harry?” he asked in a tone that sounded polite on the surface, though Harry highly suspected it had been nearly painful for him to make it so.

He couldn’t help but smile at the effort his husband was putting in to appear passably amiable – at least in company. “Yes,” he assured him.

He glanced around to find Remus staring at Severus with something between befuddlement and fury. Harry decided to nip that in the bud before it could become something dangerous. “Well, we’d
best be going then. You four, of course, are welcome here whenever you wish and for as long as you wish.”

“Harry, what about the headmaster?” Remus pressed before Harry could make his exit.

“Oh, I don’t imagine he’ll be greatly pleased by this turn of events,” Harry admitted, surprised to hear a muffled snort that he tentatively labeled amusement from Severus. “There’s not much that he can actually do against the combined Potter, Black, and Prince Houses, especially considering the recent upswing in my popularity with the public since the existence of the prophecy was leaked.”

“That doesn’t mean he won’t try,” Severus warned ominously.

“I don’t doubt,” Harry agreed, “but he won’t find us an easy target.”

Severus eyed him with an inscrutable expression, but Harry paid it little mind. Considering how poorly Severus had always thought of him, it was very possible he was just marveling over the fact that Harry wasn’t quite what he’d always expected.

“Shall we?” he asked, gesturing toward the door.

Severus gave a sharp nod and stepped into the hallway. Harry endured a brief hug from Hermione and reminded her that he’d see her the following day at the Welcoming Feast, then made good his escape after a promise to write to the others whom he would not be seeing at Hogwarts.

Severus said nothing as he led the way back to the floo in the formal receiving room, which was rarely used and thusly unoccupied the vast majority of the time. “You’ve been added to the ward, so the floo will admit you,” Severus said briefly before clearly speaking his floo address, Severus Snape’s Quarters, Hogwarts, and stepping into the flames.

Harry followed immediately after, stumbling out into a sitting room that reminded him of the Slytherin common room. It was spacious with high ceilings and windows looking out into the Black Lake. The room was decorated mostly in dark, neutral shades with lighter tapestries and window hangings to keep it from feeling too dark. There were hints of green and silver here and there and the occasional serpent motif, but it wasn’t as overwhelmingly Slytherin as Harry had expected. There were lots of bookshelves, all overflowing with books. That was more expected.

“I plan to go to the Ministry to change the floo address later today,” Severus’ voice drew his attention back to his husband. “Do you have a preference as to the new address?”

“No,” Harry quickly dismissed. “I’m sure whatever you pick will be fine.”

Severus gave a small dip of his head in agreement. “My bedroom is through that door,” he pointed toward the back wall of the room. “The next is your bedroom. There is a shared bathroom between them. Through that door is a small kitchen,” he indicated the wall to the left from the floo through which they’d entered. “I rarely use it, but if you need any ingredients, the house-elves will be happy to provide them. Through there,” he indicated the sole door on the opposite wall from the kitchen, “is my private laboratory. If the door is closed, it means I am working on something delicate and do not wish to be disturbed unless it is extremely urgent. I will leave it open a crack if a disruption would not prove disastrous to whatever I am brewing.” He looked at Harry intently as he spoke of his brewing. It was clear that he had little hope Harry would actually be able to abide by these simple rules.

Harry just nodded, not the least surprised by the man’s lack of faith in him. He’d expected such treatment going into this marriage. Severus would just have to learn the hard way that Harry had
That door,“ he indicated the last door in the room, the only one on the wall with the fireplace, “opens into the dungeons. I can show you the way to the ground floor later if you wish. At the moment, I suspect we shall be receiving a visitor momentarily.”

Harry grimaced in acknowledgement of that. If he thought Molly Weasley was bad, he imagined Dumbledore would be a hundred times worse. Of course, he wasn’t likely to wear his true emotions openly like Molly. Dumbledore would probably be brassed off, but he wouldn’t come down here just to scold them or ask them questions. He’d be working on his next manipulation already. Harry had no idea just what Dumbledore’s end-game was and that bothered him more than a little, but there wasn’t anything that he could do about that for now. He could only watch and wait.

Having Severus on his side could only help.

“I’ll just get settled in then,” said Harry, and he turned to explore his new room. He didn’t think he was ready to actually unpack his trunks, but he supposed he could hang his school uniforms in his wardrobe and maybe a few changes of everyday clothes. His school uniforms were likely to skew the balance of power further in his marriage, and he didn’t think Severus needed any more reasons to treat him like a child, so he imagined he’d be changing robes right after classes most of the time.

The room was nice. It wasn’t overly large, but neither was it crowded. There was a full size bed, a wardrobe, two bookshelves taller than him, and a desk. The latter was near the interior door, which he assumed led to a bathroom that he didn’t feel the need to explore at the moment. It was decorated in a combination of warm and cool browns accented with earthy greens. Harry smiled a little. He liked it very much.

Severus stared speculatively after his young husband as he disappeared into the new bedroom.

Yesterday had been one surprise after another. He’d seen when Potter – Harry – had proposed that the young man had learned some pureblood traditions and had even grown up some, but he hadn’t realized the extent of it. Had he not known better yesterday, he’d have believed Harry a born and bred pureblood. He’d exuded confidence and conviction despite the rather… unusual circumstances. The most significant surprise, however, had been the bonding itself. Feeling Harry’s magic had been… alarming. Despite the prophecy, he never could have guessed the boy was hiding that kind of magical power behind his mediocre performance in lessons. His new husband was every bit as powerful as the Dark Lord, and that wasn’t even the most surprising part. No, that distinction went to the fact that the boy’s magic was Dark. Darker than Severus’ own magic.

Severus choked back yet another hysterical laugh – this had been happening to him since the bonding. Harry Potter, beacon of Light and symbol of hope to those who opposed the Dark. And he was Dark himself. Astonishingly so.

Virtually everyone was born with a neutral magical core. Magic didn’t start out Light or Dark. That distinction came with time and experience. In Britain, most magicals leaned toward the Light because Hogwarts only taught neutral and light magic and therefore automatically lent such an affinity to its pupils by the time of their graduation. The exception, of course, were most of the Dark pureblood families that routinely practiced Dark magic at home with their children. The only way a child could be born with a core already leaning toward the Light or Dark was if a ritual had been used in their conception or during their gestation and it was strongly aligned. Even then, it could often change as the child grew. It wasn’t until magical majority that magical alignment became set and much more difficult to influence.
Ambient magic could also affect the aligning of a magical core if a child was constantly exposed to it growing up. Perhaps that was how Harry had ended up Dark. He did grow up surrounded by blood wards, after all. Or perhaps it was caused by getting hit by a Killing Curse as a baby.

Severus sighed. It was impossible to know really. And realistically it didn’t mean all that much. The alignment of one’s magical core didn’t affect their actions or beliefs – it certainly didn’t determine if they were “good” or “evil”. Harry would find it easier to manipulate Dark Magic spells, rituals, potions, and wards. Necromancy, blood magic, mind magics, and other Darkly aligned schools of magic would come more naturally. The opposite would be true of Light magics. He could still cast them – as his command of the Patronus Charm proved – but they would be more of a challenge and somewhat more magically draining to control.

Despite that reality, the political ramifications if – or perhaps when – it eventually got out that Harry Potter was Dark would be enormous. He supposed he’d have to bring it up with the boy at some point because he was virtually certain that Harry didn’t know. However much he’d learned this summer, it wasn’t easy to come upon information about how magical cores actually worked. Not in Britain, at least. The Light held most of the political power at the moment and Voldemort’s war made it all too easy for them to push their pathology further every year.

Regardless of alignment, there was still the sheer power his young husband possessed. Severus was a very powerful wizard, but an order of magnitude beneath Dumbledore and Voldemort. Harry wasn’t. He was on their level, maybe more powerful than Dumbledore. Very possibly as powerful as Voldemort and that was both terrifying and oddly thrilling. To think that he was permanently bound to such a powerful wizard was… heady. Even accounting for the fact that said wizard was a foolish Gryffindor. Harry was still very young. If he continued as he’d begun this summer, he could grow into a very impressive wizard. A wizard Severus would be proud to call his husband, even.

“Lord Prince,” he was brought out of his ruminations by the voice of the portrait guarding his door. Lord Ribald Slytherin – or his portrait, rather – had taken enthusiastically to Severus’ new name and title, and would now call him nothing else. “The headmaster to see you.”

Severus grimaced distastefully at the expected announcement. Dealing with Albus was rarely pleasant, but it was certain to be considerably less so than normal today. A glance over his shoulder proved that Harry had heard the announcement, because he stepped back into the sitting room and closed his bedroom door behind him. He was standing tall and his face was grim, but he looked altogether much more impressive than his slight age should have allowed.

Or perhaps Severus was merely incapable of seeing that bumbling idiot he’d taught the last five years after feeling the sheer depth of his magic. Thoughts for another time. He made certain that his face was clear of emotion before waving a hand to release the wards on the door with a light brush of his magic. A glance at Harry showed the young man looking curious, but neither said anything as the door swung open to reveal a very grave-faced Albus Dumbledore.

“Severus,” the old man nodded, appearing sad and displeased as he gently closed the door behind him and turned eyes on the youngest of them, “Harry, my boy,” he sighed with pure disappointment. “How did this come about?”

Harry lifted a supremely unimpressed eyebrow at the old man and Severus suppressed an amused smirk. “A question I would like answered as well, Headmaster,” Harry said coolly. “How did you find yourself drawing up a contract to trap me into a marriage against my will? It was after my second year, yes? I’d just saved Ginny’s life and defeated Riddle for the second time.” He paused a moment, then added incredulously, “And somewhere in there you decided it would be a good idea to choose my spouse for me? How did that happen?”
Albus sighed a somewhat put-upon sigh, “Harry, my boy, why don’t we sit down,” he gestured toward the sofa and armchair near the fire.

“I’m quite certain I’d prefer to stand,” Harry didn’t miss a beat.

“Very well,” Albus capitulated like an annoyed, but tolerant grandfather. “I understand that you’re upset, Harry. You’re still very young and I know that you weren’t raised in the wizarding world, so an arranged marriage must shock you, but I assure you, I only meant to protect you. I saw in your second year just how powerful you were becoming, Harry, and how fickle the public was to your fame.”

Harry’s brow rose with exaggerated patient interest, but Severus could literally feel his growing anger, which was an odd and somewhat uncomfortable revelation. It was their marriage bond, he supposed. He’d expecting something like this immediately upon realizing just how powerful his husband actually was. Given a little time without interruption, he’d be able to control the link to avoid feeling it unless he wanted to, but at the moment, it was still new and untamed.

“When you came of age – when you took your lordship – the public would have given you no moment’s peace in their efforts to secure their House an alliance through marriage with your own. I felt it was necessary to bind you to a House that you could trust. The Weasleys adore you and would have been a strong support for you as you moved into adulthood. I only wanted what was best for you.”

Harry nodded and he actually looked like he was seeing the merit in what the headmaster was saying. Severus may have believed it had he not keenly felt the tightly controlled fury burning away through the newborn link between them. “I can see that,” Harry allowed. “I suppose that’s why you set the bride price at a quarter of a million galleons.”

“Harry, the Weasleys barely make it through each year, and they are too proud to accept a gift of money. Do you truly mean to tell me that you’d not give them money if you could? That you wouldn’t offer them all the appreciation that you could manage for the way they’ve cared for you since you’ve come into the wizarding world.”

Harry smiled a little despite the well of rage still burning strong, “No, you’re right. I’d have given them many times that much if they’d just asked.”

“But they never would,” Albus pointed out kindly. “I saw an opportunity to help them, and I took it, secure in the knowledge that you would never deny them such a paltry assistance as that.”

“And you were protecting me when you instructed the goblins not to tell me about the marriage contract until I’d accepted the Potter lordship?” Harry asked curiously.

“I didn’t want you to find out like this, Harry. I knew that you wouldn’t understand. Marriage in the wizarding world is so different from the muggle world. I wanted to ensure that I had the opportunity to explain to you exactly what it meant and why I did it,” Albus explained reasonably.

Harry smiled a little wider at that and nodded again. “Yeah, I guess it does make sense when you put it like that,” but it was clear to Severus that Harry was anything but meaning the words he was saying. “Of course, that doesn’t change the fact that you made a decision that would affect the rest of my life without consulting me. I understand that you thought you had valid reasons, but why not explain things to me, and then discuss the possibility of an arranged marriage?”

“My boy, perhaps that is what I should have done, but I wasn’t sure you were old enough to even be reasonable about the situation, much less make a prudent decision,” Albus reasoned.
“So, better to ask forgiveness than permission, huh?” Harry asked with a little bite leaking into his tone and eyes.

“Harry, can you really say that this situation is preferable?” Albus petitioned. “Instead of marrying a lovely, bright young witch your own age, you’ve chosen to tie yourself to a man twice your age with a long-standing animosity toward your family. Severus is a good man,” the old man said with an acknowledging nod to Severus, who just lifted an eyebrow at the old goat, “but you and he have never gotten along. Can you truly tell me that this will make you happy? I know that you wanted to feel like you were making the choice in this, Harry, but this is exactly why I didn’t tell you. You are not emotionally mature enough to make decisions of this importance.”

Harry smiled broadly now, but it was all teeth. His eyes were as cold as his tone when he spoke. “Not three months ago, you were apologizing and even voluntarily taking the blame for your contribution to my godfather’s death. You also apologized for leaving me to grow up in a home devoid of affection despite the fact that you clearly think you did the right thing there. Then, you apologized for not telling me sooner about the prophecy.

“Have you noticed the theme here, headmaster? Because I have. You make a decision that directly affects the course of my life. Then, later, you realize that you were wrong and you’ve harmed me more than helped, or at least nearly as much as you’ve helped. You then apologize, as though that will right the wrong,” he chuckled a little bit at that, and it wasn’t anything like amused. “And then you lie to me. I distinctly recall you telling me that you’d stop keeping things from me, headmaster. But that, in itself, was a lie. Even as you said it, you were still withholding the marriage contract.”

“I said that I wouldn’t keep from you things that involved Voldemort, Harry,” Albus corrected firmly.

Harry’s lip curled in a small sneer, but he didn’t contradict that explicitly. “The number of mistakes you’ve made in your attempts to do what’s best for me have lost you any right to continue making choices ‘for my own good’, headmaster,” Harry snapped. “It’s clear to me that you’re not doing what is best for me even if that has been your intention all along.”

Severus could almost hear the “which I highly doubt” attached to that sentence, but that may have been because he was feeling the younger man’s emotions.

“I am now a Lord twice over and married to one as well,” here, he gave a nod toward Severus, “I am an adult in all the ways that matter, and I will tolerate your meddling in my life no longer. If you wish to speak to me as an adult, I may consider your advice, but you will not attempt to make decisions for me. I am the husband of one of your professors and a student in this school, that is the extent of our relationship.”

Albus looked supremely saddened and disappointed at this point. “I can see that I’ve lost your trust, Harry, and for that I am truly sorry. I have only ever tried to do what I thought was best for you. I know that I haven’t always succeeded in that, and it grieves me deeply to know that I’ve hurt you. I will do what I can to earn back your trust, my boy. For now, I’ll leave you to get settled with your husband. I truly hope that you won’t come to regret your decision.”

With that parting shot, he dipped his head to them both and let himself out.

There was a moment of silence after the door was closed and then Harry drew in a very deep breath and his eyes fell closed. He held it for a moment, and then very slowly released it and the rigid tension in his body seemed to bleed away with the expelled breath.

Severus raised an eyebrow when he felt all that bottled fury that had been held in check just drain
away. Perhaps that explained the drastic change in the boy this summer. If he’d learned meditation well enough to control his emotions, it could have had a large impact on the teen that had possessed such a volatile temper last year.

“Well, that was bracing,” Harry sighed as his eyes opened once more. Rage was fully back under control now, though Harry knew he’d need to spend probably his entire self-therapy session tonight going over all the crap Dumbledore had been spewing. A ready fucking answer for everything.

Severus lifted a sardonic eyebrow in response and his face remained stony, but Harry noticed that he could feel the same amusement and intrigue that he’d been getting from their newly-developing bond all through that lovely meeting. He couldn’t help but wonder what his new husband was finding so amusing about this whole situation.

“Come,” the older man instructed perfunctorily before starting for the door to the rest of the castle.

“Why?” Harry asked blandly. He was pretty sure that he knew as Severus had mentioned showing him the way up to the ground floor, but he didn’t appreciate the assumption that he would follow commands, and he knew that if he didn’t put a stop to that immediately, it would set a very bad precedent for their entire marriage. He felt a sharp spike of annoyance through the bond as Severus came to a stop in front of the door, but it was tightly reined.

“I was going to show you how to get to the rest of the castle,” Severus bit out harshly. “Unless you’d prefer to fumble about on your own and doubtlessly become lost in the labyrinth of tunnels down here?” He managed to make that sound like an actual offer.

Harry huffed a small laugh against his will. He was emotionally wrung out between Dumbledore and the Weasleys this morning, and he didn’t quite have the ambition to fight with his bonded. Not without a good reason, at least. “Of course,” he said graciously. “Lead on.”

Severus’ annoyance grew stronger, by which Harry assumed the man was taking Harry’s laugh for mocking, but he wasn’t going to try to correct him. No amount of talking on Harry’s part was going to convince Severus that he wasn’t anything like his dad. Only time would prove that, so Harry didn’t bother wasting his breath.

Severus gave him a filthy look, but said nothing further as he led the way out of the room and down the corridors. He was right, they were labyrinthine, but it not overly complicated to remember the right way out. Or, they wouldn’t have been even had Harry not had Knowledge building a mental map as they walked. They passed the Slytherin common room entrance, which Harry remembered from second year. It was just a blank stretch of wall, though there was a sconce directly across from it that was slightly different than the rest in the corridor. Instead of being comprised on just three serpentine candle holders, there were a further three wrought iron snakes curving around them. It wasn’t so different as to draw the unwary eye, but easy enough to note if you were looking for it.

Impressively done.

Severus moved passed it without comment, not surprisingly, and they soon ascended to the entrance hall. “Can you remember that?” Severus asked, once again feigning politeness despite the fact there were no obvious witnesses.

“Yes,” Harry assured. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

Severus looked dubious, but didn’t contradict the assertion. “If you will be so kind as to accompany me back to our suite, I will key you into the door wards,” he said with overdone patience.
“I would be delighted,” Harry smiled a little wider than necessary.

The walk didn’t take long, as Severus kept to his usual brisk pace that had Harry struggling to keep up with his shorter stride. When they got back to their rooms, Severus introduced Harry to Lord Slytherin.

“What?!” Harry asked curiously.

“Lord Ribald Slytherin,” the portrait said haughtily. “Eldest son of Salazar Slytherin, professor here for twenty-three years. You’re a _Gryffindor_, aren’t you?” He said Gryffindor like it was a dirty word.

Harry smiled at him and used Parseltongue to reply, “Slytherin was the Hat’s first choice for me.”

“And you chose _Gryffindor_?” the portrait demanded incredulously. “A descendant of the Great House of Slytherin voluntarily put himself among the self-righteous fools?”

“I was eleven and taught nothing prior to that!” Harry snapped in return. Damn, he really was too emotionally frayed to be dealing with this shit. He really wasn’t going to even bother addressing the fact that he wasn’t technically a descendant, but merely connected to one and a deep and disturbing level.

Slytherin lifted an imperious eyebrow and switched back to English, “Well, then I hope you’ve corrected that oversight.”

“It’s a work in progress,” Harry admitted.

Slytherin nodded. “Very well, then,” he allowed. “Your password, Lord Potter-Black?”

Harry gave it a moment of thought before offering a parseltongue word that didn’t really translate, but basically meant “home”. Literally, it would be something more like, “Nest with mate” or something of the sort.

He glanced at Severus as the portrait inclined its head approvingly before swinging open. The older man’s emotions were tightly controlled enough that Harry wasn’t feeling enough to really define through the link, but his expression was vaguely curious. When Harry looked at him, the look went away and the man swept passed him into their rooms and directly into the lab. The door was closed all but the smallest crack and Harry took that to mean he wanted some time alone.

Harry wasn’t about to argue as he slipped into his bedroom and closed the door behind him before sprawling across his bed. Not even noon and the day had already been too long.

With a weary sigh, he sat up and toed off his shoes, then moved to the middle of the bed and folded his legs in front of him. He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, sending himself into the meditative trance that would let him fully access his mindscape despite being awake.

It took less than a minute now, to get where he wanted to be. A minor effort of will took him from the library where he’d been last to the new addition to his mindscape. His connection to Severus.

He took a deep breath and let it out in a shaky sigh as he took in the link. It was both beautiful and terrifying. It hovered in the air in front of him, large enough that he could easily step through it if he chose. It looked like nothing so much as the muggle cinematic approximation of a wormhole floating there. It was cylindrical in shape, the edges made up of a combination of swirling mists in the colors of his and Severus’ magic wound together. In the center, was what looked like a tunnel into darkness. Vague shapes moved on the other side, but nothing that Harry could make out, by
which he assumed Severus had already tightened off the connection from his end.

With a nod to himself, Harry conjured a thick fog to hang about at the entrance of the connection on his side. It wouldn’t really block Severus if the man decided to snoop, but it would prevent passive transference and it would let Harry know immediately if Severus did invite himself in. That would do for now. He then moved himself to the receiving room in his mind and went about building another anteroom.

With how much practice he’d had at building in his mind at this point, it took barely an hour for Harry to construct a very sturdy room with an iron-bound door separating it from the receiving room and the rest of Harry’s mind. From there, it was just an effort of will to move the location of the link to this room. He wasn’t actually manipulating the link in doing that, but just rearranging where he perceived it to be so that it lined up with the protections he was building. Of course, nothing in his mind had an actual physical location. It was all just in the way his mind was organized to access things, so moving them around was just a matter of concentration on his part. The trick was to ensure that it was impossible to do on anyone else’s part.

When the link was where he wanted it, he carefully constructed a door made of a wrought iron frame and many small squares of glass filling them in. The idea was that the window would block most of the noise from Severus’ mind – assuming the man ever let anything through – but wouldn’t keep out everything that Harry may wish to be aware of, like if Severus was in real trouble. The door could be opened in the rather rare circumstance that he ever wished to speak directly to Severus this way or even invite him in. There was also a pull-down blind that would further obscure the link. Harry pulled that down now, then carefully covered the door and the entire anteroom in a ward built of a memory of watching and listening intently as Remus taught him the Patronus Charm. The memory was laced heavily through with his magic and would let him know instantly if Severus so much as mentally breathed on the glass of the door.

That done, Harry stepped out of the anteroom, closed the iron-bound door, and flipped down a heavy locking bar. Severus would not be entering his mind again without permission.

Chapter End Notes

So, apparently, I'm really bad at bashing Ginny. I'd really meant to in this story, but I like Ginny. I don't like her as Harry's significant other, but she makes a great fag hag. I just couldn't stand turning her into a gold digging shrew. Sorry, if you were hoping for that.

Anyway, I hope everyone enjoyed this long overdue chapter. I make no promises for future updates, but I will say that the plot for the rest of the story is starting to come together.
Chapter Summary

Chapter Eight Synopsis

The Weasley’s learn of Harry’s marriage with the morning Prophet. Molly is furious, Arthur ashamed, Ginny both ashamed and embarrassed, Ron is incensed, and Remus confused. Ron tries to punch Harry only to be held back by the twins, Ginny apologizes, and Harry kicks the trouble-making Weasleys out of his house. Remus takes Harry’s side along with Hermione and the twins. Harry goes to Hogwarts with Severus. Dumbledore arrives promptly to tell Harry how disappointed he is for the deception and to provide a feasible excuse for his every questionable action and inaction though Harry is far from pacified. Severus speculates on Harry’s massive and Dark magical core and apparent newfound ability to manage his emotions productively. Harry and Severus each shield their mental link created by the marriage bond in their own mindscapes.

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 9

Cursed Curses

1 September 1996

Severus took his seat at the head table in the Great Hall, ignoring the staring from the other professors. Thus far, he’d managed to avoid their imbecilic opinions on his personal life, but he was certain it couldn’t last much longer. As though he cared what they thought about the fact that he’d married a sixteen-year-old student. It’s not as though there was anything lecherous to the union, but it wouldn’t be any of their business even if there was.

When Albus took his seat, Severus made a point of ignoring him just as studiously even though the old man seemed to want to catch his eye. He hadn’t been overly surprised when the headmaster had asked Severus to join him in his office for a game of chess the previous evening. Of course, the game played on the board was not half so important as the verbal one taking place. Albus was concerned that Harry was being influenced by the Dark Lord through their connection. Severus found that highly unlikely.

Yes, it was true that Harry had changed a lot over the last few months, but Severus didn’t see any similarity between the boy and the Dark Lord. Their personalities were nothing alike and their temperaments definitely had no similarity. If Harry was being influenced, Severus would have expected him to be more short-tempered and irrational. Actually, the boy had borne more resemblance to the Dark Lord last year than this one.

No, he didn’t think it was likely, but he would keep an eye on the boy. He wasn’t stupid enough to dismiss anything concerning the Dark Lord without absolute proof, and he’d already demonstrated his ability to get into the boy’s head. To possess him, even.
“Severus,” Filius greeted cheerfully as he took his seat at Severus side.

“Filius,” Severus nodded in return, vainly hoping that the man would turn the rest of his conversational intent upon Pomona on his other side.

“I hear congratulations are in order!” he exclaimed, disappointing, but not surprising Severus. “May magic bless your bond, my friend.”

“My thanks,” Severus had to nod a reply because that was a polite and traditional well-wish.

“Yes, it was quite a surprise,” Filius went on. “I wasn’t sure whether to believe it at all when I read the paper, but I can see from that ring on your finger that the Prophet wasn’t in error this time.”

Blessedly, Pomona picked that moment to address Filius with a question about some of his students and Severus was able to tune out them both.

Thus far, Harry truly wasn’t turning out to be anything like he’d expected – feared, really. He’d been very quiet, kept mostly to his bedroom, and never started any fights. Polite was probably not quite the right word, but perhaps nonconfrontational would not be inaccurate. He’d also been generally more mature. He didn’t glare at Severus, but neither did he cower from him. He didn’t defer to him in any way, which had been annoying at first, but was actually something of a relief. Severus dealt with enough bratty students in his life without being married to one. He just hoped the boy didn’t take too cavalier an approach to his behavior in Severus’ classes.

It was strange having someone in his personal space, but not quite as intolerable as he’d imagined. Though Harry didn’t spend much time in the common area, he didn’t give the impression that he was hiding from Severus so much as just seeking privacy. When they did come across each other, Harry didn’t act like a startled sheep. He usually just nodded or murmured a polite greeting before going about whatever he’d been doing.

It was an arrangement that Severus could easily see becoming rather comfortable with a little time. That was honestly more than he’d expected of this marriage.

Almost involuntarily, Severus’ eyes found Harry as he entered the Great Hall with his little friends – none of which were apparently Weasleys, he noted. There was a lot of staring and pointing and whispering behind hands going on as Harry moved toward his seat. Severus found himself mildly impressed by the fact that Harry barely seemed to notice the attention. A lifetime of practice at the center of attention, he supposed, rather uncharitably.

Harry had been in the great hall all of two minutes and he was already losing patience with the student body as a whole. Neville and Luna had been the only ones to wish him well in his marriage. Everyone else just stared and pointed and whispered to each other as though he couldn’t either hear or easily imagine exactly what they were saying about him.

He did his best to ignore them until his Gryffindor year mates evidently decided that it wouldn’t be impolite to interrogate him.

“Hey, Harry, did you really marry the greasy git?” Dean pressed immediately, oblivious to the way the purebloods around him widened their eyes and leaned back a little as they looked between him and Harry. Insulting someone’s spouse was a very serious social gaffe in the wizarding world.

Harry looked up at the boy very gravely and spoke, his voice loud in the sudden hush that had fallen around them among those who’d heard Dean’s comment. “Dean, you would do yourself a large favor to study a bit of wizarding etiquette. I am Lord of two houses. My husband is Lord of
another. To insult him in my hearing is to insult me.”

“He’s right,” Hermione interrupted before Dean could put his foot in it any further. “If he feels the insult is great enough, he can demand a duel. More commonly, as you’re underage and muggleborn, he could demand penance from your family. If it was refused, it could create a permanent rift between you and your families.”

“What?!” Dean exclaimed incredulously, looking at the students around them and finding no one saying otherwise. “Why haven’t I ever heard of any of this before?!” he demanded. “And what do you mean I’m underage. We’re all underage.”

“Probably because you don’t run across very many married people in school,” she shrugged, “And Harry is Lord of House Potter and House Black. It’s impossible to be Lord of a House and be a minor. The process of assuming Lordship induces magical and legal majority. So Harry is an adult now, regardless of his age.”

Dean was quiet a moment before sheepishly muttering, “Sorry, Harry.”

Harry dipped his head acceptingly. He’d been expecting this. It was bloody ridiculous that Hogwarts didn’t offer any kind of wizarding culture class for muggleborns. Not everyone had Hermione’s drive to learn everything about everything and Hogwarts never even let on that these things were important. “Just don’t talk poorly about my husband where I can hear you,” he advised, letting his eyes touch on each of his yearmates to include them in the warning. He knew it wouldn’t be easy for them. They routinely mocked and bitched about the man. Not that Harry could blame them as he’d done the same for years. He absolutely refused to dishonor himself or his marriage by letting it pass unchecked now. It wasn’t about Severus even, but about the fact that they were part of a team now.

Thankfully, the tension was diffused when McGonagall entered with a trail of first years following her like timid ducklings. Harry didn’t pay a lot of attention to the sorting, merely clapping each time the Hat shouted out Gryffindor. Thankfully, it wasn’t overly long before the food was served, because Harry was hungry. He was used to eating large, regular meals now.

Mostly to stave off stupid questions, Harry engaged Hermione in a discussion about Arithmancy and spellcrafting in particular that soon had her so distracted that he had to remind her to eat from time to time.

Harry did his best to ignore Ron through all this. The boy was sitting several places down on the other side of Seamus and glaring at Harry in between inhaling his food. It did sting to see, but Harry was really less surprised than he might have been. Ron had done the same thing in fourth year, after all. Then it had been jealousy. Now, Harry supposed, it was probably pride. Harry had “rejected” his sister, after all. And kicked his family out of his house. And the fact Harry had married Severus, whom Ron hated.

He forced himself to push any regret from his mind. This was Ron’s fault, not his. Ron was the one who always seemed to care more about his own feelings than his friendship with Harry. He couldn’t afford to put up with a fair-weather friend anymore, and he shouldn’t have to.

He repeated that thought to himself each time he accidentally caught Ron’s glare.

When the meal ended, Dumbledore rose and gave his usual announcements, welcoming everyone and warning them about the Forbidden Forest and Filch’s rules and restrictions. Anything from Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes was apparently banned, which made Harry smile a little. He really doubted that anyone would be abiding by that rule.
“And now, we have a new teacher this year,” Dumbledore went on, drawing all eyes to the unknown face at the table. “Professor Horace Slughorn be taking over the teaching of Potions this year.”

Murmurs of surprise rose across the hall at that and Harry turned his eyes to his husband, his brow furrowing curiously. He couldn’t help but feel that Severus could have given him a heads up about this. Honestly, how did it look that he was obviously surprised by this? When Severus’ eyes met his, Harry lifted an exasperated eyebrow. He thought the corner of Severus’ mouth may have turned up in response, but he couldn’t be certain because the expression was gone momentarily.

"Professor Prince will be serving as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher this year," Dumbledore explained.

It quickly became apparent that Harry's altercation with Dean would not be the last he encountered with regard to the Gryffindors and his husband as they quickly forgot themselves in the excitement of the announcement. As speculation about how the curse would get rid of their most hated teacher circulated, Harry slapped his open hand down hard on the table. A hush quickly spread through them as they turned wary eyes on Harry. He shared a glare among them and they quickly turned their attention back to the head table where Dumbledore dismissed them for the evening.

“Harry! Are you okay?” Hermione asked as she hurried to catch him up as he started quickly out of the Great Hall.

“Fine,” he assured her with a not entirely sincere smile. “Look, I’m pretty tired. I think I’m just going to head down for the night. I’ll see you at breakfast, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she sighed and Harry hurried for the dungeons before she could change her mind.

Harry stood in the room with his magical core, staring pensively at the multi-hued orb of his magic, streaked through with the magic of his Houses and wrapped in the warm embrace of Severus’ magic. He was sure that he could just bask in that connection for hours without growing bored. It was the strangest, most wonderful thing he’d ever experienced.

Despite his rather rocky history with his husband, that bond inspired powerful feelings of possessiveness and pride that he couldn’t fully understand, much less explain. Severus was his. That’s what that bond said to him. Severus belonged to him and no one else could have him. Not Voldemort. Not Dumbledore. Not anyone else.

Which, perhaps, is why he’d been quietly freaking out ever since learning that Severus was the new DADA teacher. Seriously, what the fuck was Dumbledore thinking? The position was cursed. Everyone with two braincells to rub together knew that. No one had been able to hold the position two years in a row for the last fifty years. That was so far beyond coincidence that it was ridiculous.

Umbridge was kidnapped by centaurs. Crouch was Kissed. Remus was exposed for a werewolf—an exposure that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Lockhart’s mind was permanently destroyed by an out-of-control Obliviate. Quirrell was killed.

Three of the last five defense teachers dead or as good as. One who would deal with the consequences for the rest of his life. The other who would hopefully never fully recover from the trauma.

And Severus just fucking volunteered himself for number six?
The fact that Harry was, at least in part, responsible for four of those five situations, he didn’t know if it was good or bad. It could be good because Harry might be able to influence the situation with Severus to not be as bad. Or it could be really bad because Harry could end up partly responsible for whatever happened to him.

Fucking hell. He really hated this.

With a weary sigh, Harry turned his attention away from the bond in his core and moved to his library. Knowledge looked up from the shelf he was perusing when Harry arrived.

“I need to figure out how I’m connected to Voldemort,” Harry said at once. His marriage bond had given him the idea. That bond in his magical core is what enabled the marriage bond.

So what the fuck was enabling his bond with Voldemort?

It had to be in his magic, he was sure of it. It was the only thing that made sense. It was way too similar to the marriage bond. The bond was obvious when he looked at his core, though. Before he’d assumed his lordships, his magic had been one solid, unrelieved mass. So, it stood to reason, that his connection to Voldemort was indistinguishable from his magic. He needed a way to find it.

Knowledge narrowed his eyes thoughtfully and turned to examine the shelves speculatively. Then he nodded to himself and crossed the room to select a large tome from one of the shelves. Harry met him at a study table and they sat down across from each other.

“Soul magic,” Knowledge began, opening the book in front of Harry. “The oldest school of magic – arguably the first form of magic known to the human race. The first witches and wizards are said to have harnessed soul magic to give themselves and all of their offspring the gift of magic in their souls. I have yet to see any proof of this legend, but I have seen it referenced from at least five unique sources, so it is widespread.

“Some of the oldest books you’ve assimilated regard Soul Magic as divine and those who mastered the art as clerics of Magick Herself. Modern day Britain, however, has come to see it as the Darkest of magicks. I do not know how it is currently viewed elsewhere. As you may imagine, Soul Magic is any magic dealing directly with the soul of any sapient being, though it is also sometimes defined as only that dealing with the human soul.

“What you are looking for is a spell capable of reading your own soul on a deep level. Something that will be able to identify every minute facet it.”

“I thought I was trying to read my magical core,” Harry interjected. “I know that’s contained within my soul, but…”

“The magical core is not merely contained within the soul as I previously believed with only the fragments of information I gleaned from some of Voldemort’s old memories. The magical core is the soul of the witch or wizard. Or, more accurately, it is a witch or wizard’s soul that is the magical core. It is what differentiates us from the muggles. Their souls are made of magic – as are all souls – but they cannot hold any. Of a magus, the soul is a well of magic. Think of it like a sponge. The most powerful magical cores are extremely porous and highly absorbent. They have a very high saturation point and are capable of holding an incredible amount of magic. Others are dense and hardened and can contain only a miniscule trickle, those, of course, being squibs. Muggle souls are solid, causing magic to wash off them without making any purchase whatsoever, which is why they cannot use magical objects and most potions have no effect on them.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. The information was fascinating, but disconcerting. It was bad
enough to think Voldemort was connected to his magic. To think he was connected to his very soul was…

Well, disturbing was the mildest term that came to mind.

This meant that the marriage bond was rooted right in his and Severus’ souls. No wonder it was so intimate and life-altering.

It also meant… “Doesn’t that mean that the blocks Dumbledore put on my magic were Soul Magic?”

“Magical blocks are technically soul magic,” Knowledge nodded. “They are only legal in two instances. The first is in containing prisoners. They’re not usually necessary because of the magic dampening runes on all the cells in Azkaban, but before the prison was built they were used routinely for criminals. They are still used occasionally in extreme circumstances. If Voldemort were arrested, for instance, magical blocks would doubtless be determined necessary. The second instance is for protecting children that come into their magic prematurely. The blocks protect the child and those around him or her until the child is old enough to learn proper control. It is only legal with the consent of the child’s parents or guardians.”

“So Dumbledore was within his rights to place those blocks.”

“Yes,” Knowledge agreed, “but it is not legal to leave those blocks in place once the child is enrolled in a magical school without the approval of a licensed healer indicating that it is necessary.”

Harry shook his head, more sad and bewildered than actually angry, “Why would he leave them in place? Why would he handicap me like that, especially as I seemed to end up fighting for my life every single year? Why would he not give me some kind of tutoring at any point to prepare me? Does he want me to die?”

“That, I can’t answer,” Knowledge said quietly.

Harry sighed and shook off the melancholic thoughts. “So, I need a spell to analyze my… soul. To look for signs of Voldemort hiding inside it,” he reasoned.

“Correct,” Knowledge asserted. “Unfortunately, I have not come across any such spell in any of the books you’ve assimilated, nor any indication that such a thing exists. I suggest you devote as much time as you can manage to assimilating every book related to soul magic that you can manage. In addition, spend a portion of your nights studying the books you’ve assimilated. I’ll direct you to those most relevant. We’ll either find the spell you’re looking for, or you’ll learn enough about soul magic to create your own spell for the purpose.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “You really think I could create a spell?” Despite studying Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, spellcraft wasn’t something he’d ever considered actually doing. Sure, the theory was interesting, but it was also really advanced stuff.

“You will need to study more advanced Arithmancy and Runes, but you should be able to manage it within a month or so with the help of myself and the others.”

Harry swallowed and nodded, leaning back in his chair and wondering why it was suddenly hitting him so hard, just how far he’d come since the end of last year. He honestly didn’t think Sirius would be proud of him given that he’d married Severus, but this wasn’t about making Sirius proud. It was about making him the last of Harry’s loved ones to die because Harry fucked up.

With that in mind, he took a bracing breath and resolutely turned his attention to the book in front of
him. He could do this because it was important. Finding out how he was connected to Voldemort could be important. Admittedly, it might not be important, too, but he thought the odds were in his favor. After all, Voldemort had used their connection to trick Harry into going to the Ministry. Maybe Harry could do something like that too if he had a better understanding of the bond, what exactly it was, and how it worked.

2 September 1996

Harry took a moment to glare irritably at the pile of his school books before he started stuffing them all into his expanded shoulder bag. He was missing three of his class books. It was his own fault, really. He’d been so focused on the wedding and assimilating the books in the Grimmauld Place study and then the ones from his library trunk, he hadn’t gotten around to going through his school books until last night. He’d meant to assimilate them all last night prior to starting classes so that he’d have the reference at hand and be better prepared. That was when he’d found the missing books. He’d foolishly allowed Mrs. Weasley to pick up his books for him while he’d gotten new robes. She’d obviously assumed he wouldn’t be attending NEWT potions and had just as obviously overlooked the fact that he was taking NEWT Runes and Arithmancy.

When he’d realized the oversight last night, he’d written a letter to Flourish and Blotts and sent it off with Hedwig straight away, but it would still take probably two days to actually get the books. In the meantime, he’d have to explain to his professors why he wasn’t prepared. At least Severus wasn’t teaching potions this year. Harry could just imagine how thrilled he’d be to see his new young husband show up to his class unprepared. Harry could almost hear the vicious rants about how he thought he was better than everyone else and didn’t have to bother being prepared.

At least those rants would happen in the privacy of their rooms – or even better, the privacy of Severus’ head – now that they were married.

With a sigh, he dismissed the extraneous fretting and headed up to breakfast. He hadn’t seen Severus this morning, though he’d heard the shower running between their rooms when he’d first woken and thus assumed the man had headed out earlier than Harry.

In the Great Hall, Harry found a seat next to Neville across from Hermione, the latter of whom was reading her Ancient Runes book in one hand while she ate with the other. No doubt getting some last-minute revision in before their first class.

In his attempts to avoid looking at Ron, who was sitting a bit further down the table, glaring at him again, Harry found his eyes falling on Ginny, who was seated among her yearmates with her head propped on her fist, elbow settled on the table next to her plate as she picked despondently at her food. She looked thoroughly depressed and Harry felt a pang of guilt that he told himself was mostly ridiculous. Her situation was hardly his fault.

Still, perhaps he should tell her that he didn’t really blame her. Not since it was obvious that she regretted the action she’d taken when she was barely twelve years old and at her parents’ direction. If she was still harboring the same delusions as her mum, he’d definitely be holding it against her, but it was clear that she wished she’d never signed that marriage contract. He supposed that he should probably tell her that he didn’t hate her.

With another sigh, he silently asked Knowledge to put that on his to-do list. There was no time to talk to her now before class, and even if there was, the Great Hall certainly wasn’t the place to do it.

Professor McGonagall distracted him as she came through handing out timetables. Neville, apparently, hadn’t scored highly enough to take Transfigurations at NEWT level, but would be able
to take Charms. Hermione, of course, was taking everything she could fit on her timetable without a time turner. When she came to Harry, he was pleased to hear that he’d be able to take potions. When he’d learned that Severus wasn’t teaching it this year, he’d hoped that his E would be good enough, but he hadn’t been sure.

As McGonagall moved on to the next student, Harry looked over his timetable thoughtfully. Classes were lighter this year than in the past. Most of them would only be attended once or twice a week, but they were all double periods and he didn’t doubt there would be more than enough homework to keep them occupied during their free periods. He had an edge there thanks to his mindscape and Knowledge, but that was good. He’d need all his extra time to figure out the spell he needed and once he understood how his bond with Voldemort worked, hopefully he could figure out what he could do about it.

Then there was always actually killing the bastard to contend with. Harry was making plans for after the war because he meant to survive it. And if he was going to survive it, he was going to need to learn everything humanly possible – magically possible, really – to prepare himself. He was going to need to come up with a plan and a really good one. He no longer trusted Dumbledore and he’d be damned if he continued to count on that man to keep him alive. Especially now that the old man had revealed the prophecy and the fact that Harry was expected to be the one to kill the Dark Lord when he hadn’t done anything to prepare him for it.

It was far too much like Dumbledore wasn’t planning on Harry living through it. Or maybe he was just delusional enough to think Love would miraculously overcome him with some superpower and Voldemort would just keel over dead.

Harry still didn’t feel like he really understood what love even was and he honestly didn’t know if he was capable of properly feeling it. Maybe his connection with Voldemort had broken something inside him.

Forcibly shoving those horrible thoughts from his mind, Harry glanced at the time and started in surprise, realizing that the Great Hall was already beginning to empty. He quickly nudged Hermione’s foot with his under the table, “We’ll be late,” he pointed out, already getting up and shouldering his bag.

With a gasp, Hermione checked her watch, then set about stuffing her book in her bag.

Harry frowned at the amount of food still on her plate and made a mental note to remind her to eat a few more times come lunch. He knew that he was hardly one to be scolding anyone on their eating habits, but Hermione had pushed him to eat enough times that he felt he owed her both the encouragement, and the irritation of dealing with a pushy friend.

With a small, secret smile, Harry followed Hermione out of the Great Hall and up to the Ancient Runes classroom on the fifth floor. They were nearly to the classroom when Hermione finally seemed to realize he was following her.

“Oh, Harry! I completely forgot that you were in Ancient Runes, too, this year. It’s going to be so great now we can finally talk about it and study together, and I’ll help you with your homework. I know you’re behind on this, even if you did pass your OWL, which is really quite impressive.”

Harry smiled indulgently as she rambled while they took seats, not surprisingly, front and center. Despite being among the last into the room, those seats remained conspicuously vacant. Harry wondered if no one else was brave enough to sit there or if these kids had just been taking this class with Hermione long enough to know she’d want the seat.
As soon as he and Hermione were sitting, Professor Babbling breezed into the room from the door connecting her office. She smiled at everyone like she was reuniting with old friends, and launched immediately into a lecture. Everyone else had their books open, clearly having expected this, and Harry nudged Hermione and silently asked to share.

She frowned, one part fond exasperation, one part confusion, and pushed her book to the middle of their shared table, barely pausing in her scribbling notes as she listened to the lecture and followed along in the book.

Harry didn’t bother taking notes, knowing that Knowledge was cataloging everything, but he did try to pay attention and follow as well as he could. He was getting much better with his working knowledge of the subject, but Runes had been only one small piece of his studying in his mindscape these last two months, and he was three years behind. Knowledge was ready to answer any questions he may silently ask, but the delay it took to gather the information was irritating. He was going to need to know all of this and more if he planned on trying his hand at spellcrafting this year.

By the time the class was over, Harry’s brain felt tenderized. He groaned as he followed Hermione out of the room and gave a moment to self-pity to wondering why he’d done this to himself, taking the extra classes.

Then, of course, Logic reasserted itself and all the very good reasons, ranging from surviving Voldemort to getting a job he actually liked made themselves known.

“Why didn’t you have your book?” Hermione inquired as they left the classroom.

“Mrs. Weasley,” he couldn’t say the name without sneering, “bought our books this year, remember? She didn’t get me Arithmancy or Potions, either. I didn’t even think to check them before last night,” and he was irritated himself for not thinking of it. Sixteen or not, he was legally an adult now, which meant it was no one’s responsibility but his own to make sure he was prepared. “I sent out an owl order last night, but it’ll take a few days.”

“Oh, dear! I didn’t even think of that!” Hermione exclaimed, clearly even more stressed about it than he was.

“Luckily Severus isn’t teaching potions this year,” Harry agreed with a wry smile.

Hermione opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again with a blush.

“Were you going to scold me for being so familiar with a professor?” he couldn’t help but smirk at her.

She scowled in return, and primly replied, “Well, it’ll take a little getting used to for all of us. I am very curious to see how Defense goes, though.”

“Well, we’re about to find out,” Harry said with a fatalistic sigh as they approached the Defense classroom. He honestly wasn’t sure how this was going to go. So far, Severus had done remarkably well treating him properly in public, but they hadn’t really had all that much time to practice, and their track record in the classroom was hardly glowing.

The classroom was sparsely populated when they entered, Severus not yet in attendance. Hermione, of course, chose the most front and center seats and Harry didn’t try to argue with her on it as he’d have done previously. It would hardly send the message of an amiable marriage if he was hiding in the back of the room, after all.

The class itself went rather well. Severus was clearly passionate about it. He didn’t sugar coat it,
though Harry kind of hoped he was a little more gentle with the younger students. Somehow, he rather doubted it considering the extremely graphic posters on the walls displaying the result of various horrifying ways to die via Dark Magic. Hopefully the younger kids wouldn’t be too traumatized.

When they split up to practice silent casting, Harry and Hermione faced off, both managing the offensive and defensive sides silently after a few minutes. Harry got it first, which wasn’t unusual in Defense, though he honestly didn’t know if he’d have been able to manage silent casting very well prior to getting his mindscape figured out. It seemed to be primarily a matter of concentration and manipulation of your magic, both of which he now excelled at. The same could not have been said for him last year. His mind had been a mess and he’d had no real clue how to control his magic at all beyond just practicing a spell repeatedly until he managed it and then he kept doing it like that. Now, he could feel the ebb and flow of the magic within his body as well as that surrounding him in the castle and his fellow students. Now, he could concentrate on the spell he wanted to cast, the effect he wanted to achieve, and direct a measure of his magic to travel from his magical core, down his arm, and into his wand, where the focus took up the majority of the work in forming and propelling the magic into the spell.

Neville, not surprisingly, managed absolutely nothing at all. Concentrating was hard enough without being terrified of your teacher. And, of course, Severus couldn’t give the kid a break. He supposed talking to his husband about it would be pointless, so instead he made a mental note to pull Neville aside for some pointers when he got the chance. Once Neville got the hang of it, Harry was sure he’d be able to reproduce it, even in Severus’ presence.

Severus even managed to avoid provoking Harry. Mostly, he ignored him, really. Harry saw the man watching he and Hermione cast some, but he gave no indication that their success was impressive. Still, it was more than Harry had hoped for.

No, the problem with the class was that mentally comparing Severus’ teaching methods against all the other Defense professors he’d had in the subject was a stark reminder of the fact that none of those teachers had come out of this job unscathed. The longer he remained in the class, in fact, the more irritated he became. By the time the class finally ended, Harry was sick of going around in circles in his head and more than ready to demand some answers. He shooed Hermione out the door without an explanation and waited until the last student was gone before closing the door and hitting it with a locking and silencing charm.

When he turned around again, Severus was facing him from across the room, and clearly ready for something he wouldn’t like.

“Why did you accept this position?” Harry demanded, a little more… well, demandingly than he’d planned.

Severus sneered in return, “That’s hardly your business-“

“I’m your husband. It’s my business and you know it,” Harry interrupted firmly. “Especially considering that the job is cursed. Are you out of your bloody mind?!”

“Twenty points from-!”

“Oh, don’t you dare!” Harry interrupted again. “I’m not speaking to you as your student right now, and you’re not going to bring House points into our marriage!”

Severus seemed to see the merit in that because he actually shut his mouth and took a bracing breath. When he spoke again, his tone was measured, if still irritated. “I accepted this position before you
proposed – well before we were bonded. I fail to see why it matters to you. Should the curse prove fatal to me, you will, as my husband and lacking heirs, inherit the entire Prince Estate and titles.”

Harry’s chest felt uncomfortably tight at the idea of Severus dying and an inarticulate noise of incredulous anger slipped out before he could pull himself together enough to furiously demand, “Are you bloody mental?! You think I give a shit about your estate or titles?”

“Are you suggesting you are actually concerned for my wellbeing?” Severus looked honestly shocked at the mere idea.

“Of course, I’m concerned, you bloody git!” Harry snapped. “You don’t-!” He cut himself off, his mind flying, trying to make sense of the fact that Severus honestly thought Harry wouldn’t mourn him if he died. Whatever he thought of the man himself, he was already extremely attached to that bond. It was really making him a little crazy just thinking about it being gone. Permanently and irrevocably. Did Severus not feel it, or was his occlumency just so advanced that he was able to ignore a bond in his fucking soul?

“You are not allowed to die; you understand me?” Harry growled, jabbing his finger at the older man. “I plan to live through this war, and I don’t plan to do it as a widower!” With that, he stormed out of the room, startling the gaggle of third years waiting in the corridor. Severus’ next class, no doubt. Well, that exit ought to do wonders for the rumor mill.

Severus moved back into his office as his next class began to cautiously enter the room. Stunned would be a vast underestimation of his current mood. Part of him wanted to accuse Harry of being dramatic and an idealistic fool for what he’d said, but a bigger part of him knew that Harry hadn’t been lying or exaggerating his feelings. The room had practically trembled with the younger man’s distressed magic when Severus had suggested that Harry had no reason to care if Severus died. He’d been absolutely certain that Harry felt no more warmly toward him than he did toward Harry, but what had just happened suggested that he’d been mistaken. Harry had seemed genuinely frightened of Severus getting killed. Genuinely distressed at the possibility.

Honestly, when Harry had deigned to linger after the other pupils, especially when he’d locked and silenced the door, Severus had been bracing himself for a rant about treating his friends better or something similarly inane. An expression of concern for Severus’ wellbeing was not at all expected. He truly wasn’t sure what to make of it. He would actually be worried that Harry had been harboring some form of crush on him before their wedding were it not for the fact that they’d shared emotions for about an hour before Severus had closed down the link from their bond and he’d felt absolutely nothing to suggest any such feelings existed.

And yet…

He huffed quietly and shook his head. Perhaps Harry was more old-fashioned about the concept of marriage than he’d realized. Perhaps the young man had simply reacted more strongly to the bond between them. Harry was an orphan, after all, and last year’s occlumency lessons suggested that his home life hadn’t been ideal. Perhaps he’d latched onto this marriage as the basis of a family he’d never had.

The thought of the younger man being so committed to their marriage wasn’t as disturbing as Severus may have expected.
Settling In

Chapter Summary

Chapter Nine Synopsis

Severus and Harry both endure the comments and opinions of their peers with little patience. Harry is forced to educate the muggleborns in his year about the extreme insult inherent to insulting someone’s bonded spouse within that someone’s hearing. Harry learns that Severus would be teaching Defense along with the rest of the school and doesn’t appreciate the excited speculation as to what the curse would do to him. Harry finds himself unexpectedly concerned about it and muses on how strongly connected he feels to the bond and how much he fears losing it if Severus were killed due to the curse or, more likely, the war. He confronts Severus about it after his first Defense lesson, angered to learn that the man would think Harry wouldn’t care if he died. Severus is shocked by the fact that Harry does seem to care. Harry realizes that he doesn’t have a Potions book and quickly orders one though he’ll have to borrow for his first lesson or two. Harry questions his ability to properly feel love. Harry learns that he and Voldemort are connected via their souls and begins researching a way to identify Voldemort’s soul among his own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Power of a Well-Organized Mind

Chapter 10

Settling In

2 September

Harry groaned quietly as he sprawled himself across the sofa in the sitting room. Runes, Defense, and Potions in one day, all double periods. Runes had given his brain a painful workout, Defense had been an adventure in unexpected emotional extremes, then he’d had lunch, which had been a study in schoolyard pettiness and House Prejudice. Though no one had been foolish enough to insult Severus to Harry's face again, it was all too easy to hear the acrid whispers and disgusted looks aimed his way. And then, as if that had not been enough, there had been Potions class. Slughorn had been a little too accommodating about Harry's missing book - and everything else. Harry had never liked that kind of treatment from other students, from a teacher it just made him look like more of a freak than ever.

The potions book he'd borrowed had been a nice surprise. Despite all the reading he'd done over the summer, no significant time had gone to potions and he was sure he'd have been only marginally better than last year if not for the alterations made in that book. He leaned forward to draw it out of his bag now and flipped through it, quickly assimilating the rest of it - it was too valuable to miss out
on anything. At the end, he lingered on the writing inside the cover.

Property of the Halfblood Prince.

Curious. Halfblood Prince. As in a halfblood member of the Prince family? A half smirk curled his lips at the thought of the only halfblood Prince he knew - a man with a prodigious talent in potions.

"The handwriting matches, factoring in some alteration with age and experience."

Harry looked up to where Knowledge was standing between Harry and the fire warming his legs. His Aspects had begun doing that – appearing in the real world – very recently. As his ability to control his magic and access it at will had grown, his awareness of them in the real world had as well until he could actually see and converse with them that way. Of course, they remained figments of his imagination and could be neither seen nor heard by anyone else.

Harry just nodded with a small smile and the Aspect disappeared. With a weary sigh, he leaned back again, stretching his legs out in front of him and crossing his ankles. It felt surprisingly good to be back in his private quarters, despite the fact that he shared them with Severus. Not that he hadn't enjoyed the noise and chaos of the common room and the Burrow, because he had, but probably mostly because it had been the antithesis to the Dursley house.

See, self-therapy was helping. He was coming to understand the way his mind worked and why much better than he ever had. Sometimes better than he really liked.

The soft sound of a door opening and closing was shortly followed by, "Rough day, dear?"

The snide comment had Harry snorting involuntarily as his eyes popped open to identify his husband shrugging off his outer robe by the door. A quirk Harry had noticed about his husband since they'd begun cohabitating was that he rarely ever wore his outer robe in their rooms unless he was leaving again within five minutes. It was a habit Harry had taken to mimicking as his muggle upbringing just made him more comfortable in fewer bulky layers.

"I've had better," Harry couldn't help but smile at his husband, "but I'm not complaining." He'd had much worse days, after all. Today was rather looking up now that classes were done and he was... home. After a day filled with the hateful, gossiping masses relieved only by Hermione's frustrated prodding and Ron's glares, Severus' snide disdain was like a balm on the soul. The fact that the marriage bond seemed to hum happily in response to his presence may have been affecting Harry as well.

Severus did not immediately respond, unbuttoning his cuffs and turning back his sleeves as he moved over to his desk at one corner of his room.

Harry let his eyes slide closed again, basking in the warmth of the fire and the quiet sounds of Severus moving around.

"Your classes are going well?" Severus finally asked, causing Harry's eyes to open again in surprise. The man looked sincere in asking, which would make this officially the first time Severus had ever attempted to make polite conversation with him.

Harry decided to answer in kind. "Yes, so far. Ancient Runes is a challenge as I'm rather behind in it. I expect Arithmancy will be much the same on Wednesday."

Severus slid into the chair behind his desk and looked honestly interested as he asked, "Why did you add those classes this year?"
Harry rose from the sofa and moved to lean against the armrest so he could face Severus directly, "I decided that I didn't want to be an Auror. Every career I found remotely appealing required one or the other if not both."

Severus lifted an unimpressed eyebrow, "The Auror Corps isn't glamorous enough for The Great Harry Potter?"

Harry sighed impatiently and shook his head, not letting himself rise to the bait that had probably been inevitable at some point. It was clear that Severus was trying, but it was obviously going to take some time. Still, the fact that he’d initiated this conversation at all seemed a positive sign for the future. "Yes, Severus," he answered drolly, "you've figured me out. Congratulations."

Severus' eyes narrowed angrily and he looked very much like he'd have loved to start taking House points and assigning detentions.

It occurred to Harry then that speaking as equals, with Severus having no particular power over him, changed things a lot.

"Are you suggesting that you don't care about furthering your fame?" Severus asked with supreme doubt.

"How did you survive as a spy if you're this bad with observation?" Harry couldn't help but ask, but quickly continued before the inflammatory comment could devolve this conversation completely into a shouting match, "Look, never mind, okay? I'm in no mood to fight. I have homework to start on before dinner and I'm certain you have better things to do as well." He started toward his bedroom, then paused and retraced his steps to the sofa table to pick up the Potions book he'd been lent. He crossed the room to place it on Severus' desk, right in front of the surly man, "I believe this is yours."

Severus frowned at the book and quickly flipped it open to a random page. His jaw clenched and he quickly flipped it shut again, "And where did you come across it?" he demanded.

"I wasn't aware that I would be permitted to take potions this year, so I didn't purchase a book," Harry answered simply because explaining that he'd meant to get one anyway but that Mrs. Weasley had failed to purchase it for him and that he hadn't even checked to discover it seemed unnecessarily expansive. "Professor Slughorn lent me that one."

Severus pursed his lips a little and looked no less annoyed, "And how, pray tell, did you deduce that it belonged to me?"

Harry smiled a little and leaned forward to flip the book to the inside of the back cover where the book was claimed by the Halfblood Prince. When Severus only looked more annoyed by that, Harry decided that he'd irritated his husband enough for one evening, and headed to his room without another word. He hadn't been lying about wanting to get started on his homework. He had a lot of research to do and he'd be free to focus on it entirely once his homework was completed. It wasn't like it would take him all that long with Knowledge tutoring him, after all.

Severus watched his young husband disappear into his bedroom with a vexing combination of curiosity and blood boiling annoyance. That brat definitely knew exactly how to irritate him with little to no apparent effort. His eyes fell to the book in front of him again and he clenched his hand around it. He could only assume it was one of the brainless house elves that had managed to mix this particular book in with the spares in the Potions classroom. He lifted the book and flipped through it again, stopping on the page where he'd scribbled the *Sectumsempra* spell in the margin.
For Enemies, he'd written. He swallowed hard at the memories associated with that spell now. Merlin, he didn't want to think about what would have happened had some foolish child unleashed that particular spell on their school rival. He should have put something like *lethal*, next to it, as it would have been much more accurate.

With a sigh, he drew his wand and took a moment to erase the note of that particular spell in the book before shoving the text into the bottom drawer of his desk.

He took a deep breath and pushed thoughts of his foolish sixteen-year-old self from his mind. Potter – Harry - was much more interesting and considerably less embarrassing to contemplate.

Harry had changed a lot; Severus would have to be blind to miss it, and he wasn't blind, despite Harry's accusation. He'd noticed over the summer that he'd matured a lot. He'd noticed the young man was making an effort to avoid rising to the bait that Severus kept automatically sending his way. He'd observed that Harry seemed to be deliberately trying to get along with him - even caring about his well-being. He'd also noticed that his vocabulary seemed to have expanded extensively.

His frown deepened as he leaned back in his chair, absently tracing his lips with one finger. Putting together all of the differences he'd noticed in Harry from last term to this one, it was actually alarming. Perhaps there was more to Albus' concerns than he'd previously credited.

Not to say that he thought he was being controlled by the Dark Lord. Only someone who spent as little time around Harry as Albus could come to such a conclusion. As he'd initially thought, Harry's behavior was further from the Dark Lord's than ever before.

He was more even-tempered, more rational, focused, and goal-oriented. He was mature and responsible...

That all added up to a significant personality change. The kind of change that usually signified a mind-altering spell such as the Imperius or some kind of brain-affecting illness.

Harry's resistance to the Imperius was well-documented, so that was extremely unlikely. Severus was nearly certain that the Dark Lord was far too removed from sanity to affect a change of this form, and it seemed very unlikely that he'd want to make Harry more rational and productive.

Which left...

Well, perhaps this actually was just how Harry responded to the mutt's death. If that was true, then dying was probably the best thing Black could have done for his godson. It was almost believable, but for the fact that the ways in which the young man had changed were simply too extensive to have occurred in the course of a single summer.

Then again, Harry had disappeared for a whole month over the summer. Severus would dearly love to know what Harry had been doing that month.

Despite his concerns, though, there really was nothing to be done about it at the moment. He'd just have to wait and watch. And possibly slip his young husband a potion or two that could negate some of the more likely spells or potions he may be under. They wouldn't hurt him if Severus was wrong, after all.

By the time dinner rolled around, Harry had assimilated all the books they were assigned to read for Runes, though he'd need to spend some time actually learning it all with Knowledge the next few nights. He'd also completed the essay for Severus about the advantages of silent casting, going into much more detail than Hermione's basic explanation from the *Standard Book of Spells*. Such as how
silent casting was more intuitive and therefore facilitated minute alterations to the rote spells to suit one's specific needs. It may have been an answer beyond the sixth-year curriculum, but Harry was beyond caring about trying to fit in. That wasn't ever going to be possible for him in the Wizarding World and he was only setting himself up for disappointment by trying.

His mind was still on his essay when he sat down in the Great Hall next to Hermione, so he was taken completely by surprise when he lifted his eyes to her to find her glaring at him. He blinked uncertainly and cautiously inquired, "What did I do?"

Hermione huffed irritably, "You really don't know why I'm mad at you, do you?"

"...no," Harry admitted.

Her lips pinched together tightly enough to turn white for a moment before she exhaled explosively, "I worked really hard in Potions today, Harry, and you beat me because you cheated!" she hissed at him quietly enough to keep it just between them.

Harry's brow rose sharply at the exaggeration. "How so?" He queried even though he was pretty sure he knew what she was getting at.

"That book," she said like it was a foul word. "You used the scribbles in that book!"

"Hermione, are you accusing me of cheating by following the instructions in a book?" He asked with mild sarcasm.

"They weren't the official instructions," she snapped.

Harry was thoroughly unamused by this point, "Hermione, I did exactly the same thing as you did. I followed exactly what a book instructed. Just because my instructions were better than yours, that hardly makes it cheating. Are you saying that one can only use published instructions?"

"You had a resource that the rest of us didn't. That makes it unfair," Hermione insisted.

"Really?" Harry drawled irritably, "You say that like I didn't offer you the use of the book."

"Well..." she floundered before rallying, "That's not the point. How was I supposed to know that those scribbles wouldn't ruin the potion?!!"

"So you're saying that it's cheating to read a book someone else didn't and trust it above another book?"

"I'm saying," she hissed, "that you can't just get the answers without even trying! It's not fair to the rest of us!"

Harry sighed, not surprised to find that this was about more than that potions book. He probably hadn't given as much thought as he should have to how his new academic advantage was going to affect his friend who'd built so much of her persona around being smart. She was used to being the one with all the answers between them and that couldn't be the case anymore. Harry just had too much access to information at all times. "Look, Hermione," he said more calmly, "I get that a lot has shifted in our friendship really quickly and I know that has to be hard on you, but it's not my fault. If the only thing you were getting from our friendship was validation for your intellect and a chance to play tutor, maybe try hanging out with Neville instead. I'm sure he'd appreciate the tutoring. I don't want to lose our friendship, but you need to accept me for who I am, not who I used to be or who you wish I was. Take some time and decide if that's something you can do, because I'm not going to put up with you calling me a cheater every time I manage to best you in any class but Defense."
With a frown, he stood and left the Great Hall. He'd get dinner from the kitchen tonight and get some more books assimilated before bed.

The next several days passed in a blur. He and Hermione were avoiding each other, which meant that Harry had no friends at all in the school. Fred and George had written him a letter praising him on his choice of husband since the Prophet had done an exposé on the history of the Prince family now that it was connected to their precious "Chosen One". They'd also asked him invasive, half-serious questions about life with the Bat. Harry didn't take offense at their references to Severus because he knew they didn't mean them maliciously. Harry had vaguely answered their questions and posed them a few ideas he'd had for products for their shop – mostly of the more serious, backroom variety.

Remus had written him as well, his letter heavy with self-recrimination for not knowing about Dumbledore's plan or the Weasley's maneuvering and clearly hating himself for letting Harry end up in a situation where his only choice was to marry Severus. It was apparent that he didn't actually hate Severus as Sirius had, but neither did he trust him to treat Harry properly.

Harry had responded to that one quickly, hoping to get the man to cut himself a little slack. They'd never been all that close despite the lessons he'd provided Harry in his third year. All the secrets the man had kept about Sirius and Harry’s parents that year had made it hard for Harry to feel really comfortable with him after he’d learned the truth. He knew Remus had had his reasons, but Harry would have been so incredibly happy to hear about his parents from someone that had known them. And it would have helped him tremendously to hear about Sirius’ supposed betrayal from him rather than have to eavesdrop it from his head of house. Still, Remus seemed like a good guy who genuinely cared about Harry, which was turning out to be rather rare, so Harry had to give him some credit.

Dear Remus,

Please don't blame yourself for my situation. There was nothing you could have done about it, even had you been here when Dumbledore and the Weasleys wrote that contract. The headmaster was legally within his rights to do it and he wouldn't have been swayed.

That said, you needn't worry about me now. Living with Severus hasn't been onerous thus far. If anything, it's been kind of nice. We get along tolerably well when he can't give me detention or deduct House points, and he's actually been making an effort to treat me better. Well... an effort for Severus, which honestly is more along the lines of "the thought that counts", but I have faith that he'll get better with practice. As for me, I've been avoiding his baiting and trying not to provoke him. He's really halfway decent when he's not trying to be a nightmare.

All joking aside, Remus, don't beat yourself up over this and don't worry about me. Severus and I will figure this out, and I'm increasingly convinced that our marriage will turn out pretty well if we both manage to survive the war.

I'm glad to know that you care, though. Lately, I've found that fewer people actually care about me than I'd thought and that hasn't been the easiest thing to deal with. It's good to know you're in my corner.

He'd signed it simply with his name, not knowing what kind of close would be appropriate considering his doubts about his ability to love and his conviction that Remus was probably closer to distant family to him than a mere acquaintance or former professor.
The rest of the student body gradually began to ignore him as the novelty of his marriage wore off and they became more concerned about who was crushing on whom and whose cousin was just killed by Death Eaters or arrested by the Ministry.

He cornered Ginny that first Friday and drew her away from her friends. She'd stared at her toes and looked like she was expecting a verbal lashing.

"Ginny, I don't hate you," he sighed.

She looked up at him cautiously, and warily ventured, "But it's my fault you had to marry Snape. I thought if you married me that you'd fall in love with me, but I was so stupid. It doesn't work that way. I... know that now."

"Ginny, you didn't force me to marry Severus. If anyone did, it was Dumbledore and your parents. You were barely twelve years old when you signed that contract, and you'd just spent a year being manipulated and having your magic drained by Voldemort's parasite. I don't blame you. If you had retained your mother's attitude, I probably wouldn't care for you much, I'll admit that, but you're obviously really sorry about it, so I'm not holding it against you. I just... wanted you to know that."

He finished with an awkward shrug and a nod, then walked away while she watched him with something that couldn't seem to decide if it would be gratitude or confusion.

Probably the worst part of the week had been Friday at lunch when Katie had confronted him about Quidditch practice. She had, apparently, gotten the captaincy this year and she'd been very unhappy when he'd told her that he wasn't going to be playing this year. He hadn't told anyone when the captain badge had shown up with his Hogwarts letter over the summer. He'd just sent it back to McGonagall with a letter thanking her for the honor, but declining the post. First Dementors and then Umbridge, Harry had honestly lost some of his ardor for the sport. He still loved to fly, but he could take half an hour or so to do that from time to time without all the obligation and drama that came with Quidditch.

To Katie, he'd only explained that he was taking a lot of classes this year and that he needed to focus on his marks. Needless to say, she hadn't been greatly understanding about losing her star seeker to academics. He assumed Ginny would play seeker again this year and she was good, if not quite as insane as him. Gryffindor would do fine without him as seeker.

Naturally the members of the House weren't very understanding either, which only increased his notoriety.

Whatever. He had enough to worry about without trying to make everyone like him, too. In fact, at the rate he was going, he was liable to end up as well-liked as his husband. A fact that made him smile for a reason he couldn't quite quantify.

Then there was Draco. The boy had seemingly been avoiding Harry since their confrontation over the summer, but Harry had caught him multiple times staring at Harry as though he was some kind of complex puzzle he was trying to solve. Harry was a little surprised to realize that he honestly did hope Draco would come to him for help. It wasn’t that he liked the blonde, because Draco had never shown him a likeable personality trait, but he kind of… empathized with him. Dumbledore had raised Harry to be a good little soldier for the Light and more than likely to die a martyr. Draco had been raised to be a loyal little minion for the Dark, and more than likely to die young for not being ruthless enough. Harry understood what it felt like to have a role to fill, a destiny all ready-made for him. He knew how hard it was to step out of the mold and do what he felt was best for himself.
He found that he actually wanted to help Draco.

But he knew that he couldn’t force it. He’d made an offer. Unless Draco showed some sign of wanting to take him up on it, there wasn’t anything more Harry could do.

In the evenings, after dinner, Harry had taken to jogging in the lower dungeons where almost no one ever went for fear of being lost in the labyrinthine corridors. Knowledge allowed Harry a perfect mental map, so he didn’t have to worry for becoming lost. The jogging he’d taken up after assimilating a book that had stressed the connection between physical endurance and magical endurance. Though the two were separate and had to be exercised independently, extreme use of magic did tire the body and vice versa. That, and the odds of him finding himself in a situation where being able to run far and fast might save his life was all too likely. His runs generally lasted somewhere between half an hour and an hour and a half depending on how tired he was, and by the time he was done, he tended to be pleasantly mentally relaxed. He didn’t know if it was the getting his heart pumping and his lungs working that helped clear his mind or if it was just endorphins, but it was addicting.

After his run, Harry retreated to his room for some sit-ups and pushups, which were starting to produce a bit of noticeable muscle tone that he really liked seeing after a lifetime as a scrawny wimp, so he’d kept those up religiously. Then he had a shower and settled down to wrap up any necessary homework and assimilate as many books as he could manage.

At night, Harry continued to work with his aspects in his self-therapy sessions, which had become somewhat less painful since he’d gotten used to it. They were more cathartic than vexing now, thankfully. Then he spent a while practicing dueling and the longest time with Knowledge, getting tutored. He always forced himself to study for his classes first, as he knew himself well enough to know he’d put it off indefinitely if he started on his more interesting studies first. Once he felt like he knew everything he needed for his classes, then he let himself work on soul magic and spellcrafting. Despite the reason he’d taken up the study, he found both subjects fascinating and had already started filling a journal with ideas he kept having for spells he wanted to create as he went along. He had to resist the urge to try working them out immediately and stay focused on the soul reading spell as he’d still found nothing remotely like what he needed in any of the books he’d assimilated.

The first Saturday of the school term, Harry cornered Neville on the way to dinner to offer him those Defense lessons he’d been thinking about the first day in Defense.

Neville looked confused by the offer, "Are you starting up the D.A. again?" he posed.

"No," Harry promised emphatically. "I don't have the time or patience to deal with that again. Besides, Severus isn't Umbridge," Neville started slightly at hearing Severus referred to by his given name, but Harry ignored the twitch, "he's not a patient teacher, but he's not systematically impeding our ability to learn like she did. But I know that you have a particularly hard time learning from him, so I thought I could give you a hand in picking up some of the technical bits, then I know you'll do much better in class."

Neville swallowed, his expression equally pride and confusion. "You really want to help me? You just said you're busy, and I know you dropped Quidditch because you didn't have enough time..."

Harry rolled his eyes, "I don't have time for games and ungrateful arses, Neville. I don't want to become to kind of person that doesn't have time to help friends."

The taller boy's shoulders squared and his chest expanded with surprised pride as though he'd never thought Harry could consider them friends before. It was both a little sad and somewhat shaming to realize he'd left Neville with such doubt. The boy had never turned his back on him in all the years
when the rest of the school - even his so-called best mate – habitually had done just that. And then, of course, there had been the Department of Mysteries last year. Neville had followed him into that with both bravery and loyalty enough for any dozen friendships. Harry hoped that Neville would believe that Harry considered him a friend and made a mental note to give Neville the recognition he deserved.

They quickly arranged a time to work on it after dinner that night and the following. Harry didn't know how long it would take Neville to be able to control his mind and/or magic well enough to get down silent casting, but he figured they could do this every weekend if necessary. To help a friend, he could spare that much time from his plans.

He and Neville had nearly reached the Great Hall when Hermione all but pounced on them, having apparently been waiting in the shadow of a statue for Harry's arrival. Harry waved Neville on with a cautious frown for Hermione.

"I'm sorry, Harry!" she blurted as though afraid he'd interrupt or storm off. "You were right, I was jealous. Am jealous. You have a gift that I've only dreamed of my whole life. You can remember everything that you see or hear or read and I know that I can't have that. That I never will, and I was just so...! I'm an idiot, Harry," she half-laughed at herself. "No one's ever been half so good a friend to me as you have and I am so grateful for that. I just... forgot. For a bit. I won't do it again."

Harry sighed, relieved but slightly wary. "Of course I forgive you, Hermione. You're my best friend. But don't... Don't do it again. I've had enough of conditional friendships after Ron. You either like me for who I am or leave me alone. I'm not going to pretend to be someone I'm not just to make you feel better about yourself. For Ron, it was the fame and fortune that he couldn't get past. I should have realized that for you it would be academics."

"But I can get past it!" Hermione promised hurriedly. "Really, I can. Your friendship means more to me than anything, Harry. If I start to act like an idiot, just smack me or something, okay?"

Harry laughed a little at her suggestion. "Okay," he agreed. He couldn't imagine ever hitting Hermione, but he would most definitely give her a verbal slap upside the head if she started up again.

Hermione's shoulders sagged with relief and she grinned wide at his acquiescence. They entered the Great Hall together, Hermione already going on about their Arithmancy homework at top speed. Harry suspected she was trying to distract herself, but he did notice that she was being very careful now to treat him as more of an academic equal instead of talking down to him about it as she'd taken to doing with he and Ron in previous years when they hadn't been bothered to put in any real effort to anything academically related. It wasn't only her fault that they'd fallen into the roles they had. He and Ron had been all too eager to slack off and then let her tutor them. The fact that she'd enjoyed it to some extent was probably the only reason their friendship had endured the disparity. He really did hope that his and Hermione's friendship could endure their new dynamic because she really was his best and oldest friend now that he'd stopped taking Ron's abuse. Though he liked Neville and they got along pretty well, he didn't know if he'd ever feel as close to the shy boy as he did with Hermione.

Time would tell, he supposed. For now, he focused on Hermione's mostly one-sided conversation and started injecting his input knowledgably, which brought a happy smile to Hermione's face.

After a longer than expected lesson with Neville, Harry returned to his quarters mentally drained. Severus was in his lab by the way the door was open just a crack. Harry changed quickly into his comfortable shorts and t-shirt that he wore for running, then headed immediately back out. The lesson with Neville had been frustrating and he really needed the mental clarity he seemed to get only
when running.

He wasn't terribly surprised that Neville didn't excel when it came to mental conditioning. He was easily frightened, easily distracted, and generally doubted himself at every turn. That, however, could be worked around relatively easily with the right magical control. He knew that Neville was magically powerful, so he hadn't expected it to be that hard for him to get the hang of it. The problem, he soon found, was that he'd spent so long training his magic with an unsuited wand, that he hadn't the slightest talent for controlling his magic. His magic had become accustomed to being just forced out of him in a haphazard manner rather than coerced out to a purpose.

What this meant for Harry was that he had his work cut out for him in helping Neville to learn silent casting, which wasn't absolutely vital for his future, but would be stressed in every single casting class for the next two years, so knowing what he was doing there would be innumerably helpful to him academically. Also, if he ended up fighting for his life at any point, the skill could very likely make the difference between life and death for him, a fact in which Harry was heavily invested.

He'd been increasingly frustrated by Neville's continued embarrassed attempts to give up and release Harry from his promise of help. He knew that Neville wasn't afraid of hard work, but the boy did seem afraid of angering Harry or ruining their friendship by doing poorly in these one-on-one lessons. Harry had assured him that it wouldn't happen as many times as necessary, but the lack of trust implied in Neville's self-conscious attempted withdrawals had begun to seriously try Harry's patience.

He devoted half of his run to trying to figure out what to do in the next day's lesson, then forced himself to let go of the thoughts and just let his mind relax so that he'd hopefully feel less stressed when he completed the run. He and his Aspects could discuss the situation involving Neville that night after he went to sleep.

Thanks to the lesson with Neville, it was much later than usual when he returned to his quarters that evening. Severus was apparently finished brewing for the night and sitting at his desk, marking essays again by the look of it. The man seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time marking essays. It made Harry think that he'd assign fewer of them if he were ever to become a teacher – not that that was anywhere in his plans at present.

"Where have you been?" Severus inquired with incredulity lacing his tone as Harry attempted to cross the main room for his bedroom and the shower beyond. He was hot and sweaty after his run and usually preferred to shower right away.

"Running," Harry admitted.

"Why?" Severus pressed warily.

"Exercise," Harry smiled a little, strangely endeared by the man's honest bewilderment. It wasn't a look he'd ever seen on Severus before.

The older man watched him a moment, still openly confused, but regaining his composure quickly, "And where, pray tell, have you been conducting this... exercise?"

Harry's amusement grew in response to the delicate way his husband wrapped his lips around the word "exercise" like it might be something awful, but he was trying to be politic about it. Harry knew that there were potions to keep wizards and witches fit, which is why "exercise" was such a foreign concept in the magical world. He also knew that none of those potions could build endurance the way actual physical activity could - though he wasn't ruling out the possibility of Severus having something better at his disposal. "The lower dungeons," he admitted. "I run every
evening. Usually when you're brewing. It got a bit later than usual tonight because I was studying with Neville after dinner."

Severus stared at him blankly for a long moment, his composure entirely recovered now. "I find myself at a loss," he said at last, just as Harry was beginning to assume the conversation over and preparing to continue on his way, "as to whether I should first address the inherent lack of sense involved in 'running' in the labyrinthine lower dungeons or the same poor judgement in studying with Longbottom of all people."

Harry couldn't help but roll his eyes, "Well, first, I've an excellent sense of direction and it hasn't proven a problem yet. Second, Neville's mind is a chaotic mess thanks to his gran treating him like an utter disappointment for most of his life and his magic is, if you'll believe it, even worse due to the fact that he's been forced to train it the last five years with an unsuited wand," he didn't want to get into a fight with his husband, but his irritation leaked into his voice anyway. He hated what had been done to Neville and at the moment, it was all too easy to blame Severus for the way he'd treated him so cruelly in his classes, though in reality, none of the other teachers had been any better. They may not have frightened the boy, but they'd failed to see his potential or the fact that it was his wand handicapping him.

Severus' brow rose and his jaw tensed in response to Harry's tone, "I wasn't aware that Longbottom was unique among my pupils in having problems," he purred dangerously. "Shall I hold his hand though class next time, Potter? Would that make the 'poor boy' more comfortable?"

Harry's anger snapped out of his control for the first time since he'd put Rage in his cage, "Fuck you, Severus! You're so busy hating the world and feeling sorry for yourself that you have no hope of knowing or caring if anyone needs real help! People like you ignoring and belittling the systematic abuse Neville has suffered, you may as well be engraving invitations to the Dark side, because when the Ministry and Hogwarts both make it clear that they don't give a shit about you, it's all too fucking easy to look for another option."

"Are we still talking about Longbottom, Potter?" Severus inquired coldly, rising from his seat to stare Harry down.

That surprised Harry out of some of his anger. Enough for rational thought to return. He mentally shoved Rage back into his cage and added another lock for good measure. He couldn't afford to lose it like that. At least Severus was a semi-safe target since their marriage ensured they were allies to the bitter end whether they liked it or not. He may suffer more than he could afford if he lost it like that in front of Dumbledore or in front of random witnesses. With a deep breath, he felt his temper cool once more.

His turned his cleared mind to Severus' question and answered calmly, "I'm making my own options now. And I'm trying to provide some to other people that no one else seems to care about."

Interestingly, he could almost see Severus swallow some comment, probably something inflammatory, but the man didn't speak.

Deciding that he'd said more than enough already Harry left it at that, turning to head toward the shower once more, throwing over his shoulder, "And my name is Harry, Severus."

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So the Potter temper remains, after all, Severus mused as he glared at the door through which his young husband had disappeared. It was almost a relief to finally see Harry speak emotionally again. Granted, being cursed at by a sixteen-year-old and being unable to take points or assign detentions had been uniquely frustrating, but he wasn't about to draw his wand and turn into the kind of abusive
piece of shit his father had been. Harry was more powerful than him magically, but not so much that Severus' much greater skill wouldn't have more than made up for it.

Slowly, he crossed the room to stare into the low-burning fire. He couldn't help but find it concerning, the way Potter – Harry – spoke of being driven to the Dark side. He'd said it with a little too much understanding. It made Severus wonder how lucky they should consider themselves that the Dark Lord hated Harry with such ferocity. Had he thought he'd be welcome, would Harry have turned to the Dark? It was a chilling thought, and one that brought Severus back to his own youth. He'd been driven into the Dark Lord's arms by the cruelty of the likes of Black and the elder Potter and the blind disregard of the adults who might have helped him with them or with his father. Black had nearly killed him when he'd been sixteen and he'd received only a slap on the wrist. That was the event that had really turned him from the Light once and for all. Malfoy's charisma and Regulus' true faith in the Dark Lord certainly hadn't helped matters either.

Surely Harry didn't have problems so grave. His relatives didn't beat him - he'd have seen it during their failed occlumency lessons were that the case. The worst he'd seen had been a mean dog and a little disregard. And his worst rival had ever been Draco, who talked a big game, but never actually succeeded in doing anything untoward to Harry or his friends.

No, he dismissed his concerns on that end. Harry's childhood had been nothing like Severus' own. His husband was just being liberal with the teenage melodrama tonight.

He refused to even consider what his young husband had looked like when he'd walked in the door. Shorts were not a common fashion statement in the wizarding world because cooling charms made them unnecessary, and given how little time Severus spent in the muggle world these days, it had actually shocked him to see Harry come in with entirely naked legs, his t-shirt clinging to his chest with sweat.

He swallowed and forced those thoughts securely behind sturdy Occlumentic shields. That way lay madness. There had been no suggestion of their marriage ever involving any form of sex and Severus was certain it would remain that way. He had little enough to recommend him under the best of circumstances and it was entirely likely that Harry wouldn't be attracted to even the most impressive male visage. No, he'd known going into this marriage that he was facing a lifetime of celibacy, but he knew that he could manage that without extreme difficulty. He'd been doing it for more than a decade, after all. He was more than capable of tending to his own needs without assistance, but he did not want to deal with the complication of thinking of Harry in that way.

His disciplined mind was turned away from the thoughts with little effort, and he instead turned to the anomaly he'd experienced when Harry's temper had flared. He'd felt the anger slip past the barriers he'd constructed in his mind to block their link. He probably shouldn't be surprised that Harry's raw and powerful magic was capable of eroding the barrier over time. There probably wouldn't be anything he could do that would last long-term. He'd just have to resign himself to reinforcing the barrier every week for the rest of his life and suffering the occasional bleed through when Harry was feeling particularly emotional.

Part of his consciousness slipped smoothly into his mindscape and moved effortlessly to the barrier he'd built. This layer of his mindscape was modeled after the void of outer space – something few wizards knew anything about as Hogwarts' astronomy class only taught about planets and moons and stars as they pertained to rituals and other magic. They didn't teach about what it would be like to be in space because that wasn't something magicals aspired to, unlike the muggles, whose curiosity literally knew no bounds.

He located Earth in the vast nothingness and his mind sped there, slipping into the second layer of his
defenses. Rather than going to Britain as an intruder might expect, he plunged into the Atlantic Ocean and drove down into the third layer. He pass into a deep trench and through an invisible barrier and then he was in a library of massive proportions. If one were to take Buckingham Palace and line every room and corridor with books from floor to ceiling, and then multiply that by a dozen, one would begin to gain an understanding of one small portion of this layer of his mindscape. Some of the books here held memories. Some held vicious traps. Some were empty. Some would open secret rooms or release beasts. To anyone but him, even walking these halls would spring a series of potentially deadly traps. A well-known route through this labyrinth brought him to a comfortably appointed potions laboratory with several cauldrons already bubbling away.

This was his inner-most sanctum. Even the Dark Lord had never ventured here. No one ever had. Which was at least part of the reason that he couldn't help but resent the fact that his connection to Harry now opened directly into it. He'd been able to move it enough to put it behind a door he could close, at least, but his attempts to wall it off entirely had been unsuccessful. The wall almost immediately began to crumble each time. The door, which he'd left bolted shut not a week ago, was now open halfway. With a sigh, he crossed the room to it, but as he placed his hand on the handle to swing it closed, he realized that the other end of the link didn't open into a chaotic mind, but instead there was another door on that end. Whereas the door Severus had built was solid mahogany the door on the other side looked like something one might see on the front of a muggle house. It was white and some kind of light metal, like tin or aluminum. Most surprising, however, was the fact that it had a large window in the top half. Like his door, it was halfway open.

He stared at it for a long moment, trying to make sense of this completely shocking discovery. He'd given Harry occlumency lessons last year. They'd failed thoroughly, of course, but he'd been in Harry's mind. He knew for a fact that the young man hadn't had even rudimentary shields, much less a proper mindscape. And yet...

Before he could think on it any further, movement at the other end of the link startled him and then Harry appeared at the door. Their eyes met and Harry looked surprised, then shrugged, stepped back, and closed the door. A second later, he reached up and pulled a blind down over the window. Severus hesitated a moment, then stepped back himself and closed his door. Perhaps that explained the change in him over the summer. Someone, in the month the young man had vanished, had managed to drill into him a proper command of Occlumency.

The following day, Harry received a note at dinner via a wide-eyed second-year.

"What is it?" Hermione inquired with concern.

Harry worked to moderate his frown as he stuffed the note into his pocket. "Dumbledore wants to see me after dinner." He looked at Neville where he was seated at his side and added, "You free after dinner tomorrow instead?"

"Yeah, sure, Harry," Neville said easily, then hesitantly inquired, "You're not in trouble, are you?"

"No," Harry dismissed. "I'm sure he just wants to talk about Voldemort." At least, he hoped that was the case. He didn't need to deal with Dumbledore attempting to meddle again after Harry explicitly told him to bud out.

Neville, of course, flinched at the Dark Lord's name and then gave a small shudder.

Harry gave him a brief, sad smile before going back to his meal. For the first time since learning that, but for a twist of fate, Neville could have been the Boy-Who-Lived, Harry thought he was genuinely
glad that it hadn't turned out that way. He didn't think Neville was cut out for it. Though maybe his gran would have raised him differently if he'd been so important and Neville would never have been so stifled. They'd never know, he supposed. Still, he didn't feel like he was doing too bad with it these days. He was learning to handle the fame and avoid being manipulated. Hopefully he'd be able to work out a way to actually defeat Voldemort without dueling him directly because, crazy or not, Voldemort was leagues ahead of him in that regard and he knew, even with his mindscape advantage and a team of dedicated tutors, he was years away from being a match for Voldemort.

And he didn't exactly see a team of dedicated tutors ready and waiting to teach him anything that might actually help in such a way.

Dinner passed more quickly than he'd really have liked now that he knew what awaited him when it ended. All too soon, he found himself passing the gargoyle - or grotesque, he now knew it was called – and riding the moving staircase up.

"Come in, Harry!" Dumbledore's jovial voice rang out immediately upon Harry's first knock.

With a bracing breath and a mental check to ensure Rage was well-contained, Harry opened the door. The office looked as it ever had. Red and gold was prominent in the furnishings, along with some other colors that his eyes shied away from examining too closely. There remained the dozens of portraits lining the walls, looking down on them or feigning sleep. Strange, clockwork gadgets whirred and blew bits of smoke from the shelves, though Harry thought there may be fewer of them than there were before he'd trashed the office in his rage last spring. He mentally winced at the reminder of watching the Aspect go at this office in his mind, ashamed of how out-of-control he'd been.

He took a seat in front of the desk at Dumbledore's invitation, and politely refused the offered lemon-drops. Perhaps he was overly paranoid, but he wouldn't ever trust any explicitly offered food or drink from the headmaster. There were far too many potions capable of controlling or influencing the mind. Some of them subtle enough that he doubted even he would notice the mental shift unless he was looking for it. He wasn't risking his free will on the faith the Dumbledore wouldn't cross that line to regain control of Harry.

"Harry, my boy," Dumbledore said with a sad smile once he'd replaced the lemon drop dish on his desk. "I was sorry to hear that you'd dropped out of Quidditch this year. I know how much it always meant to you."

Harry shrugged, "Honestly, I always liked the flying more than the Quidditch."

Dumbledore just gave a vague nod in response to that. "I was pleased to hear that you've been doing very well in your classes so far. I was quite impressed with how seriously you've been taking your studies, not only this year, but over the summer as well. You did remarkably well on your Arithmancy and Ancient Runes OWLs considering you'd never before taken the classes."

"Yes, sir. I studied hard," Harry said in a tone that wasn't quite impolite, but didn't invite him to continue the topic either. He didn't need validation from this man anymore. "Was there a reason you asked me to come, sir."

Dumbledore's smile looked the smallest bit strained as he nodded, "Yes, of course. I asked you here today, Harry, to take you up on your offer to accept my help with Voldemort."

"I believe," Harry interrupted, "that what I said was that I would consider your advice provided that you spoke to me as an adult and did not attempt to make decisions for me."
Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, "Perhaps your memory is more precise than mine."

Harry knew that his memory was perfect as Knowledge had relayed his words back to him directly, but he seriously doubted that Dumbledore's memory was anything less than excellent despite his age. The man was a master Occlumens, which ensured a flawless memory if one took the time to go back and look at previous memories.

Thankfully, Dumbledore didn't wait for him to respond to that. "Well, then, I hope you will concede to hear my advice and consider it."

Harry just gave a small nod. He considered it obvious that he was willing to do so or he'd no longer be there.

"Excellent," Dumbledore said with all evident happiness, "I would like to offer you lessons with myself. They would not be frequent, I'm afraid, as I've many duties to which I must attend, but they will be, I believe, vitally important."

"And what, exactly, would these lessons entail?" Harry questioned, not willing to agree to anything blindly.

Dumbledore seemed to sense that as he didn't prevaricate as he was wont to do, and hesitated only a moment before responding, "I have dedicated a number of years to learning more about Voldemort and the wizard Tom Riddle from whom he came. I believe it may prove greatly beneficial to you to understand some of it as well."

Harry nodded slowly, wondering what the old man was planning. Knowing his enemy better probably couldn't hurt, but the way Dumbledore said it, he seemed certain that it would be important. Harry wondered if this related to whatever the man imagined Harry would use "love" for in his fight against the Dark Lord.

"Also," Dumbledore went on while Harry was considering it, "I have spoken to some of the Order members and they have agreed to provide you some lessons as well. These lessons would vary based on who it was teaching you on the day, but I believe they will all prove useful in the future."

"Very well," Harry agreed, "It sounds like something worth trying." Between Kingsley and Mad-eye and Tonks, there were some pretty good, well-trained fighters amongst the Order. Harry's self-dueling lessons in his mind were better than nothing as they helped him to learn to respond to attacks coming at him in real-time, but there was only so much on the subject that one could learn from books, which had been his only resource up to this point, besides Defense class, which was, admittedly, more useful this year than most, but still didn't teach the kind of dueling that he'd need to know for Voldemort or Death Eaters.

"Wonderful!" Dumbledore all but cheered. "Well, then, I thought we could begin with our first lesson tonight, if you've the time."

"Sure," Harry allowed. Though he'd miss it, he could skip running one night if this ran too late.

"Now, I've told you all that we know of Voldemort for fact. At this time, we will begin venturing into the realm of supposition and theory..."

Most of an hour later, Harry left Dumbledore's office feeling both confused and concerned. The headmaster had shown him a memory of some Ministry worker visiting the rather horrifying family of Tom Riddle. Merope, Morfin, and Marvolo Gaunt, and the handsome, arrogant muggle that was Tom Riddle Sr. Harry had found it more than a little disconcerting to hear Dumbledore speak of the
fact that he believed Tom Riddle literally incapable of feeling love. It concerned Harry as he'd often wondered that about himself, and given the connection he'd had to Voldemort since he was just a baby, it was all too easy to believe it of himself if it was true of Voldemort.

Of course, that wasn't something that he could do anything about, so he steadfastly pushed the concerns to the back of his mind. He'd address them in his self-therapy sessions later and his Aspects would help him to figure out how he was supposed to feel about it. For now, he was more concerned with what Dumbledore was planning. Unfortunately, he couldn't do anything about that at the moment, but he would have to remain wary until he figured it out. For all Dumbledore liked to pretend that he just wanted what was best for Harry, the man took a lot more on his shoulders than the fate of one orphan. Harry found it hard to believe that Dumbledore would ever put Harry's needs before those of Wizarding Britain. That wasn't the kind of person that Harry wanted to trust with his well-being.

Chapter End Notes

Not much for the Aspects in this chapter, unfortunately, but fear not. They shall return in the next chapter!

I'm not sure what I'll update next, so we can all be surprised together!

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