The Colours of the World

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Summary

When Roy Mustang went to retrieve his eyesight from Truth, he wasn’t expecting to end up doing a job in exchange. It couldn’t even be an easy job, of course, because Edward’s assessment of Truth was a pretty accurate one.

Notes

This story is a bit of a self-indulgent whim that I’ve been working on for the last week, a mix of my resurfacing love for FMA (manga and Brotherhood) and having gone through the FMA/HP crossover section one too many times. It’s a whim I intend to complete, though (I waited to post until the entire thing was plotted out to my satisfaction), and it’s a long story. I cannot promise any frequency for the updates (and I’m crap at keeping up with those anyway, when I do), but I wanted to make that point clear. There will be semi-regular updates at first, though, because I have the first three chapters in process.

I’m working from the premise that Truth only agrees to return what it’s taken under very specific circumstances (from the conversation with Ed, I gather giving up his alchemy was the only payment Truth would’ve accepted for Al), and Roy’s case is a bit of an exception as far as opening the Gate is concerned (I think that’s the only reason the Stone worked for him in canon, because there was no ‘lesson’ to be learnt from the experience). But that Stone was made from a handful of people and saw a lot of use before Roy had it, so I took
that thought and ran with it.

This chapter is a little longer than I expect the others to be, but I wanted to reach a certain point in the story before cutting it.
“Hello, Mr. Alchemist.”

Roy froze. Even though he had prepared himself for it, had known this was coming, it didn’t stop his blood from freezing upon hearing *that* voice. It had been terrifying the first time he had been here, with the enormous Gate looming before him, the grinning white figure standing in front of it and his mind weighed down by the certain knowledge that *something* was going to happen, something Roy was powerless to avoid, just like everyone else before him.

Now, with his sight gone, it was even worse. He couldn’t see the Gate, that was true, but the voice echoed all around him, and there bloomed an entirely new layer of helplessness with the realization that he couldn’t even tell *where* Truth stood. Not that it mattered, but human instinct was a silly thing sometimes.

“Are you here to retrieve your sight?” Truth asked, an underlying current of amusement to its voice hinting that it was aware of Roy’s minor panic attack.

Roy breathed deeply (part of him wondered if here, in whatever this place was, it was necessary to breathe, if there even *was* any oxygen or if it was all just a construct in his mind to process the experience) and raised the hand clasped around Marcoh’s Philosopher’s Stone.

“Yes,” he replied, his voice miraculously steady.

Truth hummed, and Roy had the uncomfortable sensation of being studied while Truth remained silent.

“There is just one problem,” Truth said finally, and Roy closed his eyes. Not that it made a difference on the utter *darkness* that had surrounded him since his last time here, but the gesture was unconscious after so many years of doing it.

“You won’t return it,” Roy guessed, falling short of the dry voice he had been aiming for.

It had been a possibility, Roy had known.

Right before she left Central after the Promised Day, Izumi Curtis had approached him and explained that not even Van Hohenheim, despite being a Philosopher’s Stone himself, had been able to restore what the Gate had taken from her. Roy had understood what she hadn’t voiced: even with the Stone, he might never be able to see again. He had thanked her, and she had been right that Marcoh hadn’t been able to restore Roy’s eyesight using the Stone the same way he did for injuries and illnesses. Coming here had been a last ditch effort.

Edward *had* managed to retrieve Alphonse, though, of course, not exchanging a Stone. Maybe… Roy had to go back. He needed his sight to accomplish his goals: to restore Ishval, to become Führer, to change Amestris. That was *Roy’s* goal, not the Flame Alchemist’s, and maybe putting the Flame Alchemist to rest was the first step to atonement.

“Hey, slow down, Mr. Alchemist,” Truth said, breaking Roy’s train of thought. Somehow, Roy wasn’t surprised it had known what he was thinking. “That wouldn’t be equivalent exchange. Your sight has not the same price as Alphonse Elric.”
“And yet the Stone is not enough. Why?”

“Because that,” Truth paused for a short moment, and Roy thought it might be pointing at the Stone, “is nearly out of energy.”

“Then?” Roy asked, resisting the urge to cross his arms. He was still here, which he hoped and dreaded meant Truth had something in mind. Maybe exchange his sight for a couple limbs? Roy could manage automail, and the delay the recovery time would require was still better than retiring from the military the way he would have to do if he remained blind. He even had access to some good mechanics through Edward.

“Will you stop thinking and listen?” Truth asked, and it sounded amused again. That was definitely better than angry.

Roy forced himself to clear his mind.

“I was thinking we could make a deal. A little unorthodox, but then the original circumstances that brought you here were unorthodox to begin with.”

Roy didn’t need the reminder. He had been told, once the battle was over, that Pride had taken the brunt of the toll, that he lost most of his energy as a consequence of forcing Roy to open the Gate, and Roy didn’t want to know what the knowledge he had gained his first time through the Gate would have cost him had he done human transmutation willingly.

“Do you mean… you are going easy on me?”

“You’re not one of the fools in need of a lesson I usually meet.” Roy remembered what Edward and Alphonse had shared of their experiences at the Gate.

“What are you offering?” Roy asked.

“There are always idiots playing at being gods. I usually leave them alone, unless they step over certain boundaries, as you well know. Right now, there is someone who has stepped over a few of those boundaries. Unfortunately, he managed to block my access to his Gate, while still keeping his access to it. He is… annoying. I want that fixed. You can figure out how to undo what he did, though killing him would get the job done just fine.”

Roy wasn’t too keen on killing people, not after Ishval, and he was relieved that Truth had added the first option. Still, that didn’t mean he knew how to take the offer. A life had no price; wasn’t killing someone, the way Truth had so casually suggested, just as unequal as comparing his sight to Alphonse had been?

“Not really,” Truth replied. “Under normal circumstances it would be, but this being is so damaged that normal rules don’t apply to him.”

That only confused Roy further. He couldn’t think of anything that would ‘damage’ a being too much to be seen so poorly by Truth, not when the souls held in a Philosopher’s Stone didn’t lose their value, just the same that had happened with Alphonse; even if his soul, for some reason, had been worth just an arm when Edward had retrieved it the first time.

“How much would the Stone be able to restore?”

“Most of your sight,” Truth admitted. “I could return your sight, sans some colour perception, if you’d prefer. But I thought with your ambition you’d much rather not have that handicap.”
Which… was true. Missing colour perception could also be seen as too much of a disability by the military, in which case Roy would be discharged anyway and all of this would be for nothing in the long run. Truth had said it was possible to undo whatever this being had done to his Gate without killing him, though, and maybe that was worth a try if it returned his sight whole.

“It could take months,” Roy pointed out, because the last think his team needed on top of everything else was the panic his disappearance would cause, “and I won’t be much use while blind.”

“I’ll give you back the sight that the Stone in your hand is worth. As for the time, I am in no hurry. And, given that we are talking about an entirely different world and this arrangement still overbalances somewhat on my favour, I can return you to the moment you activated the array, it’s no effort. That way we will be even again,” Truth added, though Roy was too stuck on the ‘different world’ line to pay much attention to the rest past processing it had been said. “Well then, what’s your response, Mr. Alchemist?”

Roy took a deep breath and put himself back together. He didn’t have much of a choice here, did he?

“Who is the being?”

“Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

Suddenly, the darkness was gone and Roy was face to face with Truth’s grinning white form, the Gate looming behind it. It was the last thing Roy had seen, before, a scene that had haunted his nightmares ever since. Roy never thought seeing it again could bring him relief.

Then the Gate opened.

Roy stood in the middle of a dingy dark alleyway. A wonderful, dingy dark alleyway with a wet smelly corner, two dumpsters to one side and windows lined up in what might be the second floor of the buildings cramped around. A dingy dark alley that Roy could see.

He spared a moment just to look around, take in the cracked bricks, vandalized walls and empty crates piled opposite the dumpsters while he acclimated to his surroundings, convinced himself that he was really seeing. Not dreaming —not even his worst nightmares could have fabricated that meeting with Truth, they limited themselves to bringing back the one Pride and Bradley had forced on him the first time around—but really, truly seeing. Roy leant his head back, taking in the clouded over sky above the tops of the buildings.

Roy blinked and looked down at himself, shaking his head. He couldn’t stop to stare at everything; he wasn’t in a position to waste so much time. Roy was in an unknown place —a different world, Truth had called it, helpfully not providing any other information— and unknown locations were, short of openly hostile areas, the worst possible places where to lower one’s guard. Besides, Roy admitted somewhat ruefully to himself, he doubted any amount of staring around would ever erase the wonder of seeing.

Sight was something he would never again take for granted.
Roy checked himself over. He had a moment to feel grateful that he was wearing inconspicuous civilian clothes instead of his uniform—black slacks, his black long coat and a white shirt—before the thought crossed his mind that he didn’t know anything about where he was. For all that Roy knew the fashion here was to walk around naked. That would be interesting, actually.

He had his gloves on, hadn’t felt comfortable taking them off since the Promised Day (he had only agreed to do so at night because he had the unfortunate habit of snapping his fingers when he had a nightmare). He snapped his fingers to reassure himself that his alchemy worked just fine. After a moment of consideration, Roy clapped his hands, envisioned the array he wanted and pressed his palms to the closest wall, observing in fascination as the alchemy acted with as much ease as his flame alchemy always did. Roy may have used this method frequently over the last week (being stuck in a hospital room was bound to bore anyone, and sharing said room with Alphonse and Edward by extension had resulted in them talking a lot about alchemy because Roy and Edward had reached the silent compromise not to argue while Alphonse was still so weak), but this was his first time seeing how he did it. Shaking his head before he could lose himself to staring again, Roy took a step back and felt a petty surge of satisfaction over the ‘Bradley was an asshole’ message the name previously painted on the wall had transformed into. Roy blamed that on Edward’s influence, but couldn’t bring himself to care.

Once reassured that his alchemy still worked, Roy rummaged though his pockets to see what he had on himself. He came up with his house and car keys, his pocket watch, his painkillers, his wallet (Roy seriously doubted anything in there would be of use to him here) and his notebook and pen. Seeing those, he decided he would be best served writing down the name Truth had given him in the very unlikely case he forgot. As well as the little information Truth had provided.

He opened the notebook to the first blank page and wrote ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle’ on top, followed by ‘blocked Gate’, ‘circumstances make him worth less than an average life to Truth’, ‘passed various boundaries’, ‘possible to undo’. Then, after a moment of consideration, added ‘library’ at the bottom of the page, because someone who had managed to block Truth was likely to be a renowned alchemist. Or had done it accidentally while working on something else. If it was the first option, he might be able to find information about him in a library.

Before he went looking for a library, Roy decided scouting the area he was in would be a good idea. He needed to figure out a way to obtain currency or he wouldn’t manage to move around, and for that he could either ask some very awkward questions of strangers that would make him seem to be a few screws loose, or he could observe. Roy was good at observing people and places without appearing to be doing so.

His first objective decided, Roy pulled his coat closer around himself, just now paying enough attention to his surroundings to realize it was a little too cold for the clothes he had on, and walked to the open end of the alley.

The fashion in this place wasn’t to go around naked, as it turned out, and the clothes he could see on the few people present at the wider street he stepped into were, in fact, familiar enough that Roy didn’t think he stood out, even if there was a little more colour than he was used to seeing on civilians. A woman hurrying down the street wore a bright red coat reminiscing of Edward’s in colour with matching red high-heeled boots.

Roy stepped onto the wider street, affecting an air of casual familiarity as he looked surreptitiously around. There were a few open stores and eateries on sight, from a florist to a bookshop where Roy was sorely tempted to step into and browse around a little. He didn’t, and instead kept walking, taking in the prices announced on shop windows to try to develop a sense for the value of the money here. From the general appearance of the streets he was walking through, Roy would guess
he was in a working class area, which would mean the stores he was passing by weren’t on the expensive end of the scale. He had no idea what the symbol for the currency meant, but it didn’t take him long to guess that value was divided into fractions of one hundred. The currency was worth more than the cenz, then.

He had been walking for maybe an hour, making use of his reasonable sense of direction to ensure he didn’t pass through the same street twice and risk drawing attention, and was considering finding a protected corner to cover from the cold for a while when he spotted a very interesting sign on a storefront.

‘We buy gold’.

Roy nearly grinned. That meant gold was valuable in this world as well, and Roy had just found a way to acquire funds. He looked around and located the closest side street, headed there and walked to the back of a building. The narrow street, which also happened to be a cul-de-sac, was deserted, and a quick scan proved that all the windows with a view to it were closed. Roy looked around to locate a few loose bricks, broke them off the wall entirely to pile them on the ground, hoped nobody here had the skill to discern transmuted gold, clapped his hands together and pressed them to the bricks.

He couldn’t transmute a large ingot of gold, no matter how quickly that would solve his money issues, because that would be too conspicuous. Instead, Roy created a small pile of thin gold chains with tiny gold pendants, another one of simple rings and a few bracelets, fully intending to sell a few of those in each shop he came across with that announcement.

He paused when he removed his hands from the pile of jewellery. He hadn’t noticed, back when he had glanced over the store window, but now it was glaringly obvious. The gold was white. Part of him, a sceptical and dubious one, suggested that he might have transmuted platinum, which was ridiculous because the arrays necessary to transmute gold and platinum were different. A quick check of the composition proved it was indeed gold. Gold that didn’t look like it.

Then Truth’s words came back to him.

“I could return your sight, sans some colour perception.”

Well, at least now Roy had proof that his sight wasn’t back to what it had been prior to first crossing the Gate. He hadn’t stopped to think about it, too caught up in the wonders of sight and the knowledge that he had to learn to move through another world, but he resolved to pay attention and discover what other colours he was missing the capacity to discern.

He returned his attention to the gold, hiding it spread amongst all his available pockets, and stood up.

Now, Roy might not be an expert in jewellery values, his knowledge just enough to be able to tell higher quality apart, but he was an expert at reading people, and that allowed him to know the shopkeeper’s first intention had been to swindle him. Roy managed to have him raise the price twice, and while he suspected it was still far from fair, he decided it was not worth the argument. He could just transmute more gold whenever he needed it, and so he agreed to the third offer.
Roy spent his first day exchanging gold for money—pounds, he learnt the currency was called, and the fractions were pennies—and walking around. He had to stop to eat twice, and it wasn’t until he sat down the first time and looked at the café’s menu that he realized a very important detail: he shouldn’t be able to understand the language. The writing on the menu wasn’t Amestrian, and yet his brain processed it with almost as much ease as it did his mother tongue. Truth’s doing, he guessed, and he had to fight the impulse to check he wasn’t missing any body part. He could walk, he had two arms, had stopped by the bathroom with no problem upon entering the café, and the lack of coughing fits accompanied by blood suggested he probably wasn’t missing any inner organs.

He decided not to question Truth’s reasoning, least he go mad in the attempt.

Roy had his next encounter with a missing colour when his food arrived. Either that, or lettuce here was blue, something he doubted after a quick scan and a taste test that proved it was normal lettuce. So far, Roy was missing green and yellow, and he realized he might need to find a better way than just wait and see what didn’t match to test which other colours were gone if he was to be able to work around the issue. That would be a problem, because he was effectively an illegal immigrant here—maybe he should have asked Ling Yao about his experience when he had the chance—and for all that he knew this place was as nice to illegals as Amestris was.

No visits to a doctor, then.

It was growing dark and Roy had reached an area of town he would label middle class when he decided he should find somewhere to spend the night. Because he had no idea of how much that might cost, he had avoided buying anything other than his meals, and finally approached a hotel that didn’t appear excessively expensive.

A tenth of his illicitly procured money went to pay for his night stay, including dinner and breakfast in the morning, and he chatted the receptionist up—a pretty girl by the name of Emma in her early twenties who was clearly interested in getting to know him intimately—with a story of how his luggage had been stolen and now he was left trying to replace everything. She provided him with a map of the city (the map read ‘London’) and a timetable for something called the Tube (Roy didn’t ask what that was, because he got the impression that it was common knowledge and appearing odd now wouldn’t be a smart move), she suggested a few nearby affordable stores, most of them in something she called a ‘mall’, to replace his supposedly stolen belongings, and gave him directions to the closest library when Roy had asked about it.

Roy checked the clock behind the front desk, fortunately displaying the same system for measuring time that he was familiar with, and set the time of his pocket watch as soon as he was on his way to the dining room. Under different circumstances he would have accepted Emma’s very obvious hints and offered to take her out as soon as her shift was over, but he was tired, overwhelmed by the entire situation and suspected his various scars would rouse a series of questions he didn’t feel like lying his way through.

Roy had feared that he wouldn’t be able to fall asleep, his mind too busy mulling over everything that had happened today, but when he crawled into bed after removing his clothes, he was out so quickly he wouldn’t even remember getting into bed the next morning.
Roy’s inner clock had him awake earlier than he was used to wake up to go to work, because it was two hours earlier than in Amestris here but his body didn’t care about technicalities like that.

He didn’t have the luxury of a moment of confusion in which he didn’t remember where he was and what had happened, because his brain had been working on his situation the entire night, his dreams warped up versions of yesterday; from the conversation with Truth to his wandering around the streets and his expectations for the foreseeable future.

He blinked around the room, taking in everything the dim morning sun filtering through the buildings and the uncovered window illuminated. There wasn’t much aside from the bed: a nightstand to his right, a narrow desk with an accompanying chair on top of which Roy had dropped his clothes last night, a side table supporting a square box made of a mix of metal, wood and a crystal surface on the side facing the bed of which Roy didn’t know the purpose, a closet, two small paintings on the wall and a closed door that Roy guessed led to the bathroom. He hadn’t looked last night.

Roy stared around for what might well have been a full couple of minutes before shaking himself back to the present. Staring wouldn’t bring him any closer to his goal, no matter how good it felt.

He rolled out of bed and walked to his clothes, going for the left front pocket of his trousers where he kept his watch.

Six ohthree, far too early for the time he had seen yesterday most shops opened —nine was the average opening hour, according to the timetables stuck to many doors. He set his watch down, made a half-hearted attempt to straighten his clothes a little, which didn’t work because they had spent the night crumpled, and headed for the bathroom, decided to see what he could do about his appearance.

It was a nice surprise to discover the hotel provided a toothbrush and small tube of paste —for which Roy may or may not have lunged— as well as a small sponge in a plastic bag, a set of tiny bottles with basic bath products and a small bar of soap. Hotels in Amestris didn’t usually provide toiletries unless they were high end ones.

There were no shaving utensils, though, and Roy decided he would have to buy some.

After an unusually long and relaxing shower, Roy wrapped a towel around his hips and draped another over his shoulders before leaving the bathroom, the heating in the room set at a nice enough temperature that he didn’t need to dress immediately. He checked the time again —still too early— and moved his clothes to the unmade bed before taking out his notebook and pen. He settled on the chair and started on a list of things he would need to buy, and then ordered them by priority, because he needed to be able to carry them around easily. He didn’t know if his quest would allow him to settle down anytime soon, if at all.

It wasn’t until he was debating with himself what would be an acceptable size for his suitcase that it occurred to him he was going to be an alchemist living off a suitcase. A *State Alchemist* living off a suitcase.

He was turning into Edward Elric.
After a copious breakfast during which Roy had taken full advantage of the buffet and downed half a carafe of coffee, he headed for the front desk and returned the key to the man now sitting behind it before he walked back out into the street.

Following Emma’s directions, he weaved through the streets, busier now than when he had arrived at the hotel yesterday, until he reached the shopping mall where she had said most of the shops she had told him about yesterday were located. It wasn’t what he had been expecting.

The building was nowhere near the largest one Roy had seen, but he was used to shops being along the streets, and while he had seen plenty of those as he walked, this place was a giant three-storey building that housed nearly exclusively shops selling clothes, shoes, personal care items and jewellery. There was much more variety than Roy was used to.

Denim, Roy decided after his two hour shopping trip, was popular.

As it turned out, clothing in Amestris and wherever this London was wasn’t as similar as Roy had originally believed, but there was enough in common between one and the other that he had managed to find things to his taste. His taste which, in comparison to what he had observed was usually worn here, was formal and conservative enough that at one point a shop assistant had asked if he was looking for clothes for work. Roy, seeing a chance to find some help to navigate the overwhelming amount of clothes from where to choose, had confirmed it, smiling his most charming smile, and asked if she could help him find something. Which she did, even offering to give an opinion of the clothes he tried on despite the fact that there were more customers in the shop. He had agreed; his self-confidence could always use a brush-up.

Now Roy owned two new pairs of trousers and long-sleeved shirts, two sweater vests that he had discreetly checked to ensure they were indeed one brown and the other red and not just his eyes messing with him, and a scarf of mixed greys, plus an amount of underwear he had estimated would be enough and a pair of pyjamas. He had debated on whether or not to buy a warmer coat, but had decided against it when the shop assistant had suggested if he wouldn’t like to look at their new summer collection. He guessed that meant it was spring here, just like in Amestris.

After he was done with the clothes, everything else was much easier, and the mall had just started to really fill with people by the time Roy walked out with his handful of shopping bags, dragging behind a suitcase. One with wheels.

(Maybe Roy should consider inventing the suitcase with wheels when he returned to Amestris. It could make him rich, and money was always useful.)

He was halfway to the library when he realized he would have been better off if he had put everything in the suitcase before leaving the mall.
Roy’s first observation of the library was that it was a public one, as the sign at the entrance claimed. The second, that it was relatively large. The bathroom was off to the right side of the entrance, and it was Roy’s first stop once he arrived, where he relocated all of his new belongings to the suitcase (it wasn’t nearly the close fit he had estimated, which meant he would be able to buy some extra things if he needed to). When that was done, Roy returned to the centre of the building, where there was another sign opposite the front desk showing the general distribution of the sections. According to it, the ground floor held fiction and children’s and teen literature, while the first floor held humanities and the second, science.

He hefted his suitcase up and headed for the stairs, climbing straight for the second floor. There weren’t any clear directions on sight, which left Roy with the option of walking by every aisle and reading the plates there. Biology sections, chemistry (Roy really couldn’t afford a detour if he wanted to complete the mission in a timely fashion), medicine, physics, mathematics…

When he finished his tour, he hadn’t seen a single aisle on alchemy.

That was unexpected, and he took a second round around to look more closely, this time walking into every aisle and checking the smaller signs that marked each of the subsections.

Nothing.

Nonplussed, Roy decided to look downstairs. Alchemy had no business with humanities’ disciplines as far as he was concerned, but there was some polemic with those who believed either that there should be a more theoretical approach to it, or who refused to acknowledge some of the greatest discoveries as true simply because they didn’t fit their limited vision of the world.

Roy had run into more than one bookstore and library that had alchemy shoved in a dark corner, and had listened to a fair share of tirades —mostly courtesy of one Edward Elric— on the stupidity of people who belittled alchemy out of sheer narrow-mindedness.

If the alchemy section was downstairs, that diminished Roy’s hopes of finding something of use, but basic or outdated books would still be better than the absolute lack of knowledge he currently had about the alchemy of this world.

He climbed down the stairs and walked through the sections of geography and history (which he really should check, if only to gain some basic knowledge of where he was), philosophy, linguistics, a door between two shelves labelled ‘magic’, foreign languages…

Roy came to a halt and backpedalled three shelves.

Yes, magic, he had read that right.

The door was narrow, non-descript, and was placed at a strategically horrible place, out of view from the stairs, the elevators, and most of the room. It was open, and the tables Roy could see inside were empty except for a woman of around sixty with grey frizzy hair surrounded by giant, old-looking tomes and bent over a paper. She was writing with a quill.

Shaking his head, his faith in finding something useful in this library dwindled considerably after
stumbling over such a ridiculous section, Roy continued his search.

He didn’t find a section on alchemy, not even a shelf labelled as such, and he turned around to leave.

He was walking through the ground floor when he noticed the stand of newspapers and stopped.

Bizarre magic section and lack of alchemy or not, there was a reasonably sized history section that he had thought to read through. He took one of the newspapers —mostly to have a reference of the date, but also to get a feel for the society and maybe the political situation he was in— and returned to the first floor. There, after checking the date Tuesday, April 3rd, 1995— he went in search of a few books on recent history.

It was mid-afternoon when Roy’s stomach managed to be obnoxious enough to draw his attention away from the first volume of the encyclopaedia he had been engrossed in for the last three hours.

Reading about historical events, it hadn’t taken long for Roy to realize that this place was technologically more advanced than Amestris — airplanes, Roy really needed to ride one of those — and what had started with him looking up unfamiliar terms as he read on the history of the second half of the twentieth century had evolved into him pushing the history book aside and devouring the contents of the much more concise encyclopaedia. Roy was no slouch when it came to reading, years of meticulous and abundant study under Master Hawkeye had seen his speed greatly improved, and he had a good portion of the book read by the time he stopped. He checked the page he was at and wrote it down on his notebook, along with the title of this book and the one he had put aside, before returning the small pile of books he had gathered to the ‘read books’ cart and leaving for the day.

Despite the lack of information on alchemy, Roy had decided to return tomorrow, and so approached the librarian at the front desk to ask for the closest hotel.

He bought a few snacks at a large store on the way (he had missed lunch, after all), and it wasn’t until he had paid for the night that Roy realized he would have to transmute more gold, because he only had money left to pay for one more night.

Which he would do the next morning, because he spent most of his time until he went to bed tinkering with the television. Fuery would have loved it, Roy thought with a hint of wistfulness, and wondered if he would be allowed to keep whatever knowledge of the technology of this world he gained during his stay.

He wasn’t suicidal enough to attempt to take anything back with him, not even a book.
Information was essential in any situation.

After the second day of reading, Roy had reached the conclusion that familiarizing himself with this world as much as possible was his first priority (above finding Tom Marvolo Riddle, for now) if he wanted to succeed. It hadn’t taken long for him to realize that it wasn’t just the library that lacked an alchemy section, but the science itself wasn’t mentioned anywhere. Not in general recent history books, or in those focused on scientific advancements of any kind. Frustrated at one point, when he hadn’t spotted a single mention of alchemy in a fairly thick book focused on the many approaches all the parties involved in a conflict known as the Second World War (some of its aspects so gruesome they had reminded Roy he was just human as much as the homunculi had) when they attempted to surpass one another, Roy had considered the possibility that alchemy here might be seen as something less important, and that was the first time he had glanced in the direction of the ridiculous magic section.

What if it hadn’t been as developed here as it was in Amestris? Or it could be that it was simply called something different. Some people, mostly those lacking any knowledge of the subject, were unable to identify alchemy when they were exposed to it, and confused it with something else. Wasn’t that how the priest in Liore, the one Edward and Alphonse had defeated, had convinced so many people to follow his fake religion? By making them believe he was doing miracles when in truth he had a Philosopher’s Stone?

Maybe alchemy simply wasn’t common knowledge here, and people mistakenly thought of it as something else.

Then a man stepped out around the bookcase where Roy knew the entrance to that particular section was, dressed in a flowery blouse and a bright pink skirt.

Roy grimaced and closed his eyes, opening them again when the image remained.

He reached for the book of important figures of the twentieth century, hoping for a lighter read after the horrific accounts from the war, too reminiscent of Ishval; Roy couldn’t let himself think about them.

In retrospect, Roy was an idiot. That in itself was nothing new, anyone familiar with Roy Mustang could give a list of reasons as to why ‘idiot’ was an apt description for him, but this time the reason had nothing to do with excessive procrastination, womanizing or receiving calls unrelated to work at the office. Not even showing off, which Roy liked to do from time to time.

This time Roy had committed a very serious oversight: he was nearly out of painkillers.

While Roy, upon making his deal with Marcoh in the aftermath of the Promised Day, had agreed to have the bones in his hands healed (otherwise the recovery period might have take years and he would have been unlikely to ever be able to use his hands properly again) he had refused for his skin to be repaired the same way, only agreeing to let Marcoh fix the muscles to avoid permanent damage. Dr. Knox had called him an idiot and rattled off a very long list of reasons why that was one of the stupidest ideas he had ever heard, even enlisting Marcoh’s help to try to convince Roy to just get rid of the wounds altogether (he had tried with Edward and Alphonse, but they had just
said it was Roy’s choice). However, the only person who might have been able to sway him was
Riza, and she hadn’t tried. They may not have been able to exchange any looks, but when she had
been finally allowed out of the ICU and Dr. Knox had dragged her to the room Roy shared with
Alphonse, she had only been silent a moment before announcing that it wasn’t her place to
intervene.

Because she understood.

Roy had nearly lost himself to the rage of revenge, Riza, Edward and Scar had barely managed to
stop him, and that couldn’t happen again. Roy needed a reminder that he couldn’t lose himself to
rage, and there was nothing better than the wounds inflicted by the embodiment of wrath to prevent
it. With his bones restored, his dexterity would be barely impaired (it was getting better already,
Dr. Knox had knocked down Roy’s dosage of painkillers the day before he did the transmutation to
go to the Gate), but whenever he felt the skin pull, whenever he saw the scars, Roy was reminded
of the Promised Day, and of everything he wished to protect.

His problem now was that during his initial inventory of the items he had arrived with, and he
would blame this on the stress of the moment, Roy hadn’t kept in mind that he would need to
restock his painkillers, because while his wounds were better they weren’t still well enough that he
could entirely forgo medication. His experience with the burn on his side, while different, told him
that in his current state he still had a few weeks to go.

Roy currently had five days’ worth of pills left and not many options for obtaining more. He
couldn’t exactly waltz into a doctor’s office, an illegal immigrant with stab wounds on both hands
but perfect bones and muscles below the surface demanding a medicament that he didn’t even
know for sure existed here.

He could settle for a substitute, of course, but that wouldn’t solve the problem of how to buy it.
Black market, perhaps, if Roy was willing to risk whatever a dealer assured was the product Roy
needed.

Or…

Roy looked down at his gloved hands and grinned crookedly. He was already transmuting gold, so
why not add drugs to the list? This way, at least, he would know for sure that the medication he
had was the one he needed.

Roy reached for his bag of painkillers and took one out to examine and write down the
composition. He would have to hunt the components down separately, in as inconspicuous a way
as possible.

*Roy Mustang, the drug manufacturer.*

He wasn’t telling *anyone* about this when he returned home. He would never live it down.

It had occurred to Roy at some point that walking around with gloves that had a transmutation
array stitched to them might not be such a good idea when he didn’t know the standing of alchemy
in this country. He could have simply taken them off, but his scars would draw attention as well,
maybe even more than the gloves, and finally Roy had settled for an intermediate option. Finding a pair of gloves he liked proved to be difficult, wool was far too common for them here and it was a horrible material for his ignition gloves. He had resorted to buying the fabric and transmuting the gloves himself, adding the necessary elements to turn them into ignition gloves without transmutation arrays on the back. This way he would have to clap to activate them, which would slow him down slightly, but using flame alchemy itself wouldn’t be more complicated than usual.

Paranoia and too many experiences in which his gloves had been a direct target of his enemies convinced him to buy two lighters and store them in different pockets, just in case he ever needed them.

Roy may have improved his skills in other fields of alchemy, having passed through the Gate, but resorting to flame alchemy was still his first reaction in a battle.

Two weeks was as long as Roy could resist.

There was no mention of a Tom Marvolo Riddle in any book of important personalities in any field that Roy had managed to get his hands on in the library. He had a large list of technological wonders that didn’t exist in Amestris folded and tucked into his notebook, to study it periodically, remind himself that they actually existed and thus try to avoid reacting strangely when he came across them (it had been a surprise, amongst other things, to discover that the oddly-shaped cars he had seen around were much faster than the ones he was used to) and he had a reasonable timeline of the events of the last century formed in his head.

He had also seen a number of odd characters walk in and out of the magic section once he had started paying attention to it, and his curiosity was piqued. While it was true that these people received the occasional strange look from other visitors at the library, Roy had soon noticed that nobody paid a second thought to the ridiculous section they came in and out of. In fact, there had been a few instances when he could have sworn someone hadn’t noticed the section at all. One of them was when a teenage girl had practically pressed herself against a wall to avoid the pervert in the skirt (who always wore one whenever Roy saw him) and looked the way he had come from. Her eyes had passed over the entrance to the section without giving any indication that she had noticed it.

Besides, as much as he had wanted to brush the idea off, now and then he had a sporadic thought that maybe, just maybe, the alchemy section might be there.

Today he had intended to browse the chemistry section, see if maybe this Tom Marvolo Riddle appeared mentioned somewhere there (chemistry was, of all the sections available, the one closest to alchemy) but he stopped on a whim at the first floor landing and headed for the magic section instead.

It was early, the library had just opened, and the floor was still empty. Just inside the section, Roy didn’t bother to hold back a snort at the first sign he came across. ‘Potions’. Someone, many people given the amount of books filed under the sign, should have their heads checked. Transfiguration came next, which might have sounded interesting if it wasn’t in such a bizarre place, followed by herbology (wasn’t there a subsection of botany upstairs, in the biology one?).
astronomy (again, upstairs, physics?), divination... And then, when Roy was about to turn around, walk out and pretend he had never entered this section, he found it.

Alchemy.

Two entire bookcases of leather-bound books, comfortably settled at the back of the room next to one of the reading tables.

Roy didn’t even look around, nor did he consider leaving based on the absurdity of the place: he walked up to the bookcases and started looking for the first comprehensive guide on the subject. Knowing how advanced alchemy was here was the first step to finally finding a starting point for his investigation.

Chapter End Notes

A little background that I doubt will come up in the plot: this story takes place a week after the Promised Day. Roy agreed to be healed after Havoc, but it took a few days to bring Havoc to Central because of the generalized chaos that followed the battle. He had his hands healed because the way Bradley impaled them would’ve broken a good deal of the bones in them (how Roy moves them after the battle makes no sense, it should have been excruciating, especially once the adrenaline was gone) and it would have been a very long recovery with not very good odds of him ever being able to use them properly. Hence, Marcoh healed the bones. During that week, Roy was stuck in hospital, there were a great number of wounded in the battle, many of whom needed hospitalization, which meant no individual rooms. Al, of course, had to be hospitalized, but Ed refused to let him share a room with just anyone, even if that anyone was a soldier who fought on their side. As much as they argue, Ed trusts Roy and Roy trusts Ed, so it was decided that Roy and Al would share a room. In deference to Al, they attempted to keep bickering to a minimum, and trying to find topics of conversation that weren’t depressing usually resulted in alchemy-related talk. Roy learnt to handle clap alchemy more consciously, and Ed found a kind of perverse pleasure in showing him some of the weirdest arrays he knew. Al had to transmute them so Roy could feel the shape, but it worked to pass the time once they figured out how to do it without Roy accidentally activating it (they just didn’t close the circle entirely). Before they figured that out, there were a few accidents. The hospital staff wasn’t pleased.

Also, I should warn you that English is not my first language and I don’t have a beta for this story, so I apologise for the mistakes. This is my first time writing Roy (and it’s been a very long time since I wrote anything about FMA), so I should probably apologise about the mistakes there, too.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Last chapter I mentioned I wouldn’t be following any updating schedule, and you really shouldn’t get used to me updating so quickly, because this is a one time occurrence. But today is my birthday and the chapter was almost completed, so I decided to finish it and update this story with all my other birthday updates :) (In fact, the next update will probably take a while, because I start finals next week).

I’m really glad people like the story so far, because I’m enjoying working on it a lot.

I received an anon question from ArtofthePlate on fanfiction.net asking about Roy’s colour blindness: without giving any spoilers, I can tell you that, while it isn’t one of the main plot elements of the story, it’s not just a quirk. Think about which colours you know he can’t see and how that might influence him in the Harry Potter world ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The possibility of whatever had blocked Truth’s access to Tom Marvolo Riddle’s Gate being the result of a freak accident was becoming more and more likely. Roy had dropped the comprehensive guide halfway through and had grabbed one of the books that claimed to be most advanced. Which... wasn’t advanced at all.

The only advanced element introduced in the books had been an offhand mention of the Philosopher’s Stone (Roy had nearly bolted from his seat upon reading it, but the mention was immediately followed by a claim that its creator had destroyed the Stone and died a few years back) but everything else was fairly basic alchemy. Or not alchemy at all, because half of what Roy had read so far fell simply under the category of chemistry, with a little physics thrown in. Something else he had noticed was that these people weren’t keen on updating their resources, and they referenced constantly to books that had existed for hundreds of years. Inventions and discoveries, too, were far between occurrences, and for some reason the alchemists in this world had a very philosophical approach to the science.

It was treated, in the most recent resources Roy could find, as an ancient and nearly dead art in the Great Britain (the country where Roy had learned he was), and as an alchemist Roy couldn’t help but be offended.

The books also made a considerable amount of references to magic, something Roy had scoffed about at first. Then an older woman wearing the ugliest purple hat Roy had ever seen had waved a stick in his peripheral vision, and a stack of books had floated to her from a nearby bookcase.

Roy had dropped the book he had just picked from a shelf, and had barely managed to put on a sheepish mask, smile and mumble something about clumsiness when the woman had looked in his direction. As soon as her attention was on her books, Roy had returned the fallen book to the shelf and moved to the closest of the sections he had previously discarded as utter nonsense.

Three days later, he still couldn’t accept most of what he had read about the so-called magic, and whenever the absurdity started to overwhelm him, he would resort back to one of the alchemy texts. Simple as they may be, at least they made sense, something Roy couldn’t say of much else of
what he had seen in this section. Transfiguration disregarded the rule of equivalent exchange, astronomy and divination were a waste of time and perfectly good materials that could have been used to create useful books, charms (and any ‘spell’ he had read about, honestly) made absolutely no sense... of all the disciplines he had ventured into, the only one that made the slightest bit of sense was potions, and only if one overlooked how utterly ridiculous some of the ingredients were. It wasn’t so strange, after all, to find new uses for already-known elements, or to discover that a very specific process could result in an entirely new reaction. Taking seriously ingredients like ‘newt eyes’ or ‘dragon liver’ wasn’t made any easier by these thoughts.

But Roy had been observing his surroundings while he read, and he had seen enough of those sticks (wands, he corrected himself, the books called them wands) waved around before the impossible happened to accept that maybe, just maybe, there was some truth to the nonsense.

It was only then that Roy decided to venture into the history of magic section.

The books specifically covering the history of alchemy shed no light on the character of Tom Marvolo Riddle, but they did confirm that alchemy wasn’t a very active art in the current day, at least not in this country. The most prominent name in most of the books was Nicolas Flamel, the man who had created a Philosopher’s Stone (fortunately, it would appear Flamel at least had the sense not to pass any information on the process of how to create the Stone) and they also mentioned a partner who had assisted in some of his experiments, a man by the name of Albus Dumbledore. According to the book Roy was reading right now, which somehow was only a two-year-old edition, Dumbledore was the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, which by the way it had been mentioned sounded like something important.

It occurred to Roy that information on schools often mentioned prominent students, and checking if there was anything on Hogwarts was as good an option as any to get started.

Not even ten minutes later Roy held a very thick tome titled *Hogwarts: A History* in his hands, a much better find than anything he had expected. The edition was nine years old, very recent judging by the standards he had encountered in this section.

Now, Roy could be efficient and backtrack from the most recent events in the book to see if Riddle’s name popped up anywhere, but curiosity about how a magical school that no book he had read in the history section outside had mentioned could exist won (no magic had been mentioned outside as anything but ways to explain away things that hadn’t been understood in the past but which had a perfectly reasonable scientific explanation, and Roy itched to know how that was even possible) and that was how Roy Mustang spent an afternoon and part of the following day reading the too dense, yet very informative *Hogwarts: A History*.

As it turned out, Tom Marvolo Riddle was mentioned in the book. Born December 31st, 1926, he should be sixty-eight years of age, and during his fifth year at the school he had discovered the author of a chain of attacks and a murder, the reason why he was first mentioned in the book. Though, later, Roy found him both in the index of Prefects and the one of Head Boys, hinting that he was, most likely, at least a smarter-than-average person.

In the bibliography of *Hogwarts: A History*, there appeared a book titled *Prefects Who Gained*
Power, which was the next one Roy looked for. Unfortunately, Tom Marvolo Riddle wasn’t mentioned anywhere in there. A quick browse of the book’s contents proved that it focused mainly on political and economic achievements, instead of more scientific ones. Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century and Notable Magical Names of Our Time, while they included researchers in diverse fields, shed no more light on the figure of Tom Marvolo Riddle than the previous books had.

Before he knew it, April was over, and the only information Roy had on Tom Marvolo Riddle was that he had been a promising student back in his day who by all accounts had disappeared shortly after leaving school nearly fifty years ago and had given no further signals of life.

He had nearly exhausted his resources in the magical area of the library and had gone through a good portion of the normal (‘muggle’ was the name used to refer to non-magical people) sections. In a moment of exasperation, Roy had even decided to check if wizards had somehow discovered the existence of the Gate itself, and if there maybe existed any resources that could serve as a base to study one’s connection to it. He had found no references to the Gate or anything that might be the Gate called by another name. That didn’t necessarily mean there weren’t any resources on it, simply that he would have to keep looking.

On May 3rd, exactly a month after he first set foot in this library, Roy came by one last time to read both the muggle and magical newspapers (it was hard to take seriously a newspaper called The Daily Prophet, but the moving pictures had helped him accept it as more than a joke) and work on his plan from now on.

Careful exploration of the city over the last month had helped him grow used to both the Tube and the bus system, two things that could be really useful in Amestris, as well as gain the general knowledge to handle himself well in daily life. He still transmuted gold every few days to pay for his necessities and had been living with his few possessions even though he had stayed in the same hotel room for an entire month. To avoid drawing attention to how little clothes he actually owned, Roy had bought a fashion magazine early on and transmuted his clothes every few days to give the impression that he possessed more than he actually did. Used to dress in uniform as he was, Roy didn’t mind repeating outfits, but it had occurred to him that if he was to visit the same place for an extended period of time wearing always a combination of the same three outfits, someone could draw the correct (enough) conclusion, and Roy wasn’t eager to know if people here were as prejudiced about the homeless as they were back in Amestris.

Now Roy had two options. He could move to the area of a larger library (he had learnt the British Library had its own magical section as well) or he could try his hand at Diagon Alley and head to the library from there.

At the library, he hoped to find a record of old newspapers in which to look for more information on Tom Marvolo Riddle, something he had been disappointed not to find in this library. Failed that, locating some of his contemporary students would be another possible way to find information on him.

Staying in an hotel close to the library meant that he could spend more time there, but if he went to Diagon Alley he could try to grow more acquainted with magic than he was. Roy figured that, if he had to interact with people at some point, he would need to be more used to magic than the occasional spell cast by a nearby wizard. If he didn’t, he risked giving himself away by reacting poorly to something that wizards found innocuous. (Roy had read about the recent war and the social and blood prejudices surrounding it, and he had decided he needed to learn to blend in as much as possible. Thirteen years weren’t enough for things to have changed substantially when the government hadn’t put forth an effort to change the population’s view on the different blood
Roy settled on going to Diagon Alley. Aside from an immersion experience, it was an experiment on his part. Roy had first come across the concept of muggle-repellent wards while reading *Hogwarts: A History*, and it had been more out of curiosity than anything else that he had pulled a specific book on the topic. According to it, no muggles should be able to, for example, see the magical section in the library (which explained why there had been no apparent security despite wizards’ obsession with secrecy), but Roy was perfectly capable of seeing it, and the only explanation he could come up with was that he didn’t register as a muggle to the wards. And yet, Roy had never done anything that could qualify as ‘accidental magic’ (Roy had learnt about it when he had wondered how wizards located the ones they called ‘muggleborns’). It was then that Roy remembered Riddle had severed Truth’s connection to his Gate, but not his own, and the thought formed that maybe Tom Marvolo Riddle was no alchemist, that maybe magic was just another way to call one’s connection to the Gate. Except that magic ignored the principle of equivalent exchange, but a snarky voice in the back of his head that sounded suspiciously like Edward pointed out that Truth was an asshole, and it could have set entirely different rules for magic.

It was just a hypothesis, but there were some minor elements that suggested it might be true, like how having an alchemist parent nearly ensured their children would be capable of alchemy, the same way that happened with magic, but there was an exception now and then, and how some alchemists and wizards were born with the skill but had no known ancestor who could have passed it on to them.

Roy had read that magic was necessary to access Diagon Alley, but if he was right then alchemy would work just as well.

Over the last month, Roy had been asked a few times from where he was. Despite the knowledge Truth had passed on him, he had a slight accent when speaking, and because he didn’t know enough of this world’s languages and the different accents foreigners would have, he settled for a vague implication that he had been travelling for years and diverted the conversation before anyone could enquire further.

Using his traveller cover, Roy settled at the bar of the dingy pub that the Leaky Cauldron, the entrance to Diagon Alley, had turned out to be with a butterbeer (he had asked for a light drink) and casually quizzed the owner about the shops while he waited for someone to head to the back. Tom, the owner (Roy had casually commented that he had been hearing that name a lot lately, but Tom had just laughed and said it was a very common name, so no luck there) had told him when Roy had asked that touching a certain combination of bricks at the back, combination which he had described for Roy, the wall opened into Diagon Alley. Roy wanted to see a demonstration first, just in case, but he preferred not to ask.

When a man in his early twenties moved in the direction of the back, Roy finished the last of his drink and excused himself. He had already paid.

Roy watched the man tap the brick combination with his wand before the wall retreated in on itself, forming a huge archway and revealing a large, colourful commercial street with cobbled
ground and some witches and wizards dressed oddly milling about. The wall closed right after the man had passed and Roy stepped all the way out of the door. There had been no spell and no visible source of energy, which suggested the bricks only required some form of confirmation that whoever wanted to pass had access to magic.

Clapping his hands together, Roy thought of the simplest array he knew (a transmutation usually used by beginners to create figures in the mud) and tapped the bricks in quick succession right afterwards. Even though the transmutation energy had only been present for the first tap, the wall obediently parted for him, and Roy stepped foot into a street so bizarre it could have been built by the joint efforts of Alex Armstrong and Edward Elric.

Gringotts was Roy’s first stop in Diagon Alley. Roy hadn’t wanted to risk trying to sell them his transmuted gold, because while everything he had read so far suggested that alchemists in this world hadn’t figured out that particular transmutation (it was presented as one of the main appeals of the Philosopher’s Stone), he had read enough about magical creatures, and especially goblins once he had learnt they handled the bank, to decide he would rather not anger them when he could just as easily sell the gold in the muggle world and safely exchange that currency for the one used in the wizarding world (galleons, sickles and knuts with unreasonable equivalences from ones to others).

Acquiring two robes was his first order of business afterwards, because his walk down the street had been enough to show that not many wizards or witches wore simple muggle clothes, and Roy wanted to blend in as much as possible. He settled for plain black, but of good quality.

Roy stopped before Ollivander’s wand shop for a moment, considered it, then shook his head and continued towards Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour, of which Tom had told him about. While obtaining a wand would become a necessity eventually, Roy wasn’t sure he was prepared to carry something so illogical on himself at all times.

Lunch today had consisted of a quick sandwich bought shortly before reaching the Leaky Cauldron, and he took advantage of his previous lack of food to ask for the largest sundae available.

“Surprise me,” he told Fortescue with an easy grin when he asked which ingredients Roy wanted, and that was the perfect opening for a relaxed conversation that spanned two hours and a second, smaller ice cream.

Learning about any events from people was entirely different than doing so from the very biased perspective of a newspaper article. Roy had read a few articles about an event known as the Triwizard Tournament that was currently taking place at Hogwarts, had even seen it mentioned in Hogwarts: A History, but talking with Fortescue introduced him to the viewpoint that not everybody was as thrilled by the return of the tournament as The Daily Prophet made it sound. Despite the many reassurances provided by the enhanced security measures, it would seem many thought it was still too dangerous, and the fact that the name of a fourteen year old had somehow made it into the champions list was seen as proof of it (Roy had to concede the point when he learnt the first task had been to face a dragon; not that he believed a seventeen year old student would be any better qualified for it).
When a group of middle-aged women sat down at a nearby table gossiping about some celebrities’ romantic scandal, Roy was treated to a short speech about how Harry Potter was “a good lad, spent an entire month coming here a couple summers ago; he doesn’t deserve some girl doing that to him.” Roy had a policy of not taking anything printed on a newspaper for granted, much less if the source was a gossip rag, but he felt sorry for the kid. Having your life printed all over the papers was generally annoying (unless it was part of your persona), but having it happen at fourteen... At least when Edward had made it to a newspaper at that age it was because he had somehow destroyed an entire street of whatever town he had been passing through, not because a reporter had decided his love life was anyone else’s business.

All in all, outside of the events surrounding the Triwizard Tournament and its champions, he didn’t learn of anything that seemed to be of special interest to the population right now. There had been mention of a missing Ministry employee named Bertha Jorkins and the absolute lack of interest to find her on the Ministry’s part on a couple articles, but that was all.

His second day at Diagon Alley, Roy decided he was so surrounded by craziness that it wouldn’t make much of a difference if he carried a magic stick, and thus stepped into Ollivander’s right after eating lunch.

The shop was narrow and appeared to be in a far worse state than all others from the outside, and the inside wasn’t much better. It was dusty and filled with shelves, crammed to full capacity with narrow boxes, sometimes reaching up to the ceiling, all over the store. It was empty at first glance, but Roy’s (fortunately again) sharp eyes caught sight of the old man amongst the piles of boxes. It was a good thing, too, because the man approached silently and from one side, and Roy would have reacted had he been caught by surprise.

“Good afternoon,” greeted the man –Ollivander, most likely- in a soft voice. Roy wondered how many people he startled this way.

“Hello,” Roy greeted back.

Ollivander tilted his head, his large eyes looking Roy up and down for a moment.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” he observed, continuing before Roy had spoken. “I never forget any wand I sell.”

“No, we haven’t,” Roy replied, smiling as if he didn’t find those eyes creepy (Ollivander hadn’t blinked, Roy didn’t want to think about unblinking eyes he had encountered in the past), “I am not from the country.”

“Ah.” Ollivander nodded. “Are you in need of a wand, Mr...?”

“Mustang,” Roy offered, “and yes, I’m afraid I need a wand.” He had prepared a story, just in case, about his wand being broken in an accident. However, offering too much information unasked for in the wrong point of a conversation was an easy way to give a falsehood away, so Roy wouldn’t mention the story unless he was asked about it.

Ollivander nodded.
“Very well, Mr. Mustang. Your wand arm, if you would?”

Roy raised his right arm, and this time he wasn’t so startled by the measuring tape that launched itself at him as he had been yesterday at Madam Malkin’s, where it had taken a great effort not to show any outward reaction.

As the tape did its work, Ollivander warned Roy that he might end up with a wand made of different materials than his previous one, because people changed with time and so did the type of wand best suited for them. He finished the speech by telling Roy to forget any expectations he had, to which Roy nodded while inwardly he sighed in relief: Roy had looked into wands a few weeks ago, in an attempt to untangle the absurdity their mere existence signified, but had discovered that the process by which a person obtained their wand was too arbitrary and not scientific enough to make the slightest bit of sense. When he had decided to come here, he had reached the conclusion he would be best served, if asked about it, stating the most common wand core and a common wood (there was some lore on woods, so he picked one he thought might fit him) and say he didn’t remember the other properties.

Ollivander had wandered off to one of the shelves and was looking through the boxes, selecting a few as he went.

“That is enough,” Ollivander said, placing a small pile of boxes on the counter, and the measuring tape fell listlessly to the floor. “Well, Mr. Mustang, try this one; maple and dragon heartstring, nine inches, quite whippy.”

He offered Roy a wand, which Roy took cautiously and he knew he had to wave it because he had read how the process went. Roy waved it, and Ollivander snatched it away before the movement was complete.

“No, it won’t do. Try this one. Elm and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, springy.”

Again, Ollivander found fault with that one, and offered a third with no better results. The process continued and discarded wands had started to pile on the counter. Roy was growing frustrated, and started to ponder if maybe his alchemy didn’t mean he could practice magic the same way these people did, but Ollivander only became more gleeful with every discarded wand.

“It has been a while since I had such a difficult customer,” Ollivander commented when they had passed the forty minute mark –Roy had started checking his watch after the tenth wand- going for a few more boxes, “but no worries, we will find your match somewhere in here.”

Roy simply nodded, deferring to Ollivander’s expertise, because it did look like they were narrowing down the possibilities. The last nine wands he had tested had all been unicorn hair, and Ollivander had only repeated a wood, with a different core, twice, but had shaken his head both times.

After the next batch of wands had been discarded Ollivander didn’t turn around right away to look for more. Instead, he looked closely at Roy. Roy very pointedly didn’t tense. Ollivander must have reached some conclusion, because he nodded and walked back into the jungle of wand boxes.

“You are a very interesting character, Mr. Mustang,” he said from behind a bookcase, and there was the noise of some boxes falling. Ollivander walked back out with a single box and opened it. “Try this wand. Cedar and unicorn hair, eleven inches, rather bendy.”

Roy accepted the wand, wrapping his fingers around the handle with the familiarity that had developed after having held so many wands in so short a time. He felt a warmth even through the
fabric of his gloves, and carefully waved the wand, somehow expecting it to work even before he felt a pull through him—not dissimilar to the way using alchemy felt—and a shower of sparks burst out from the tip of the wand. Fortunately, they vanished before they could set anything on fire.

“Oh, yes! Oh, very good!” Ollivander exclaimed, delighted. He extended his hand for Roy’s wand, then placed it back in its box. “This is a very interesting combination,” he continued as he wrapped the box in brown paper. “I have a feeling crossing you would not be a wise choice.”

“I don’t know about that,” Roy said with one of his easy smiles. He wondered, though, how much Ollivander had learned about him from this encounter. Wand lore may be unscientific and confusing, but it was based on the personality traits of the wand users, and Ollivander had based his selection of wands on whatever he saw and Roy couldn’t see when Roy held each of the wands.

Roy’s perusal of old newspapers was proving to be tedious, ineffective and depressing.

Roy had nothing useful at his disposal that gave him a reasonable list of possible people who knew Tom Marvolo Riddle aside from the few prefects who had been at school with him, but nothing containing all the students’ names such as a yearbook of his promotion (he didn’t know if Hogwarts had yearbooks, but if they didn’t, someone should bring up the idea).

He had tackled the monstrous section of the library holding the newspapers from two different points in time, and switched from one to the other whenever he became either too bored or too overwhelmed.

His first approach, the plainly boring one, was to read the newspapers backwards from the most recent editions, looking for mentions of anybody of around Riddle’s age. It was a long shot, but Hogwarts: A History had specified there were rarely over a hundred students in one same year; Riddle, as a Prefect and Head Boy, must have stood out amongst his peers, and chances were that someone remembered him. These reporters had a thing for mentioning people’s ages, even their addresses in a few cases, and that made his search easier.

Roy’s second approach was the one that could be overwhelming. Wars had a way of affecting everyone’s lives, even the people who put their greatest efforts into staying uninvolved, and there was a real possibility that Riddle had been affected by the war that had ravaged the country for nearly a decade. He could have been victim of an attack, or maybe a member of the security forces. Perhaps he had been one of those Death Eaters under Lord Voldemort’s orders, but Roy really hoped that wasn’t the case because he had read about Azkaban and its reputation. He didn’t want to add ‘breaking into a maximum security magical prison’ to his already too long list of questionably wise and downright suicidal stunts. (With his luck, there was a break-in in his future).

He hadn’t found any Tom Marvolo Riddle mentioned anywhere, but the reporters didn’t shy away from the more gruesome details, and after the third nightmare in so many nights Roy had been forced to take a break from newspapers to research silencing spells, because that third night he had made noise and Tom had come upstairs to check if he was alright. The only reason he hadn’t set the entire building on fire was that he hadn’t been wearing his ignition gloves when he was startled awake and snapped his fingers on instinct.

It was a good thing Roy’s instinctive reaction wasn’t to clap his hands.
(After silencing spells, Roy researched warding ones, to prevent anyone else from entering the room the way Tom had).

The lack of results by mid-May had forced him to start considering an even less appealing means to obtain information: approach someone directly to ask about Riddle’s whereabouts. Roy was willing to risk talking to an average former classmate, but the only person he knew of that had interacted with Tom Marvolo Riddle was Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, who had already been teaching at the school back when Riddle had attended (Roy had settled for ignoring just how long these people lived after the mention of the perfectly healthy eighth person past one hundred years of age he had come across).

Roy had some misgivings about Albus Dumbledore. First and foremost was that he had at one point worked on alchemy with Nicolas Flamel, the man who had created a Philosopher’s Stone and used it to live for over six hundred years along with his wife. While Roy knew that creating a Philosopher’s Stone didn’t necessarily mean someone was a monster (aside from the fact that Roy was in no position to go around calling other people ‘monster’, Marcoh was proof that good people were dragged into it as well), Flamel’s use of the Stone disinclined Roy to think positively of him. It cost Roy a conscious effort to avoid doing the calculations to know how many souls a thousand and two hundred years would cost. Aside from that, Dumbledore was hailed a hero. Roy knew how misleading that title could be. He himself had been called the ‘Hero of Ishval’ for burning alive hundreds of his own countrymen. ‘Hero’ could as easily be a compliment as it could be a way for society to justify the unjustifiable.

Roy finally conceded defeat on May 20th, after he came across the fifth name of a potential classmate of Tom Marvolo Riddle. All of them were from the newspapers from the war: four were dead, and the fifth had been sentenced to a lifetime in Azkaban for assisting Lord Voldemort.

His letter was concise, written on parchment but using a pen because he didn’t see the point of spending countless hours learning how to use one of the ridiculous quills wizards favoured, and he felt like a fool sending it with an owl.

________________________

Dear Headmaster Dumbledore,

I write to you in hopes that you could help me locate a former student of yours whom I haven’t managed to find through any other means. If you could provide me with contact information of either this student or of someone else who could put me in contact with him, I would appreciate it.

The name of this student is Tom Marvolo Riddle, and he attended Hogwarts from 1938 to 1945.

Sincerely yours,

Roy Mustang

________________________
I did my homework on alchemy in the Harry Potter world for this story. There isn’t much information on it, but from what Rowling has said I get the feeling that most alchemy is really chemistry, which in the middle ages (when it was most active) would appear to be magic, because the muggles (and especially European muggles, that are the most relevant for the british wizarding world) were so behind on anything science that wizards wouldn’t have believed them capable of doing that kind of thing. Wizards simply have more materials available to work with than muggles do. We don’t know much of arrays in the wizarding world, so I based my theory that they are behind in that field on two things:

1- Wizards are pretty lazy people in general from what we’ve seen (they don’t study math or physical education, have spells to do the simplest of things, etc.) If they can wave a wand and get something done (even if many spells wear off with time or directly don’t work all that well, depending on the wizard’s skill and all that) they wouldn’t see the point in developing an alternate means to do it, even if that way is more permanent. With a few exceptions such as the Weasley Twins, wizards don’t seem keen on inventing new things, and an object will remain the best of its field for many years. Like the Firebolt.

2- Transmuting gold is presented as one of the main appeals of the Philosopher’s Stone, hinting that they don’t have any other way to successfully create it, whereas State Alchemists are explicitly forbidden from transmuting gold, meaning it’s a widely enough known array that making it illegal was a necessity. This hints that Amestrian alchemy is far more advanced than the one in the Harry Potter world.

Working on Roy’s wand was both frustrating and fun. I’ve read everything Rowling has written on the subject, and while what she’s said about length and flexibility is so vague I basically wrote down the first thing that came to mind for those, the woods and cores were more interesting. I chose every one of the wands mentioned here for a reason, you can look them up on Pottermore or the Harry Potter Wiki if you want. (Roy almost ended up with a Poplar wand, but in the end I decided (x) suited him better).
Chapter Notes

Most of this chapter is actually the first thing I wrote of this story, and I’ve been obsessively editing it whenever I wasn’t studying for the last week.

I just came out of a horrible exam (which I very much doubt I’ll pass) and decided to post it, because I could use a bit of a mood lift. This is the chapter where the story either works or it becomes a complete disaster. Let’s see.

I’m used to writing straightforward characters, so Roy in general, and specifically here, is a challenge to work with. At this point in the story, Roy is still trying to figure out the persona for Roy Mustang the Wizard, because a good part of his Colonel persona either doesn’t work or has no point here (like being a complete womanizer wouldn’t make sense because he has no information network to cover with dates, but at the same time being vain might be of use; the trick is to figure out how much). Also, he can’t be a completely different person because he’s been acting for years now and he can’t risk slipping, so things are complicated on that front right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dear Mr. Mustang,

I would like to invite you for a cup of tea at Hogwarts so that we can discuss Mr. Riddle, as I am afraid locating him is a tad more complicated than having the right address.

Would you be amenable to meet on the 22nd at 4pm?

Awaiting your response,

Albus Dumbledore

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Well, that was fast.

That was the first observation to cross Roy’s mind after reading Dumbledore’s response. Roy had sent his letter barely past noon, and yet it was not even time for dinner and he had already received a reply.

‘A tad more complicated’, that was an understatement if Roy had ever read one. Hogwarts was currently hosting a time-consuming event and housing around two dozens of guests, all of that heaped on top of whatever other tasks Dumbledore had as a headmaster. Yet, he had casually found time to meet Roy only two days after being contacted.
Roy pulled a piece of parchment closer, wrote his conformity with the agreement, asked about the place where he should go (according to *Hogwarts: A History*, the school’s exact location was a secret, and the fireplace at the headmaster’s office was blocked from external calls and visits unless otherwise authorized. And despite his affinity with fire Roy would be much more comfortable if he never had to experience the floo network anyway) and stood from the table.

He sent the pile of newspapers he had been sorting through back to their place with a flick of his wand, enjoying himself as much as he had when he had mastered the trick, and headed out of the library. The trip back to Diagon Alley felt like an eternity, and Roy wasted no time in going to the post office to send his letter. He returned to the Leaky Cauldron afterwards, sequestered himself in his room and spent the remainder of the day drawing every single rock manipulation array that he could remember on a piece of parchment. Hogwarts was a castle, and Roy didn’t know what kind of situation he would be walking into. It was better to go prepared.

To Roy’s absolute lack of surprise, he didn’t manage to avoid using the floo network (his only comfort was that he didn’t stumble when he reached his destination, like he had seen so many people do at the Leaky Cauldron). Dumbledore had instructed him to go to a pub known as The Three Broomsticks, in the village of Hogsmeade, where a man by the name of Hagrid would be waiting for him. The only description Dumbledore had provided of Hagrid was a large man with dark hair and a long beard, and had assured Roy that he couldn’t miss him.

Roy would have doubted him, except that his quick investigation of Hogwarts’ faculty yesterday had uncovered some very sensationalist newspaper articles from a few months ago. A quick scan of the room revealed a man considerably larger than Alex Armstrong who fit the description waiting by the bar.

“Mr. Hagrid?” Roy asked, walking up to him with one of his best polite smiles firmly in place.

“Yeh mus’ be Mr. Mustang,” Hagrid exclaimed amiably, offering him a large hand to shake.

Roy accepted it with his firmest grip, showing no external sign that Hagrid’s too enthusiastic movements sent a jolt of pain through his hand and discomfort up his arm.

“Roy, please. Mr. Mustang makes me feel old.”

It was easy to see, even through the beard, that Hagrid smiled. His body language was relaxed and perfectly at ease, which suggested either he was an exceptional actor or Dumbledore hadn’t confided in him whatever had prompted him to meet Roy with such celerity.

“Mos’ people call me jus’ Hagrid,” Hagrid offered, pushing back from the bar. “Professor Dumbledore asked me ter escort yeh to Hogwarts.”

“As after you,” Roy said, gesturing to the door.

As they walked out, Roy didn’t miss that many eyes followed him. He understood why once they stepped outside, because a look around was all he needed to confirm Hogsmeade was little more
than a tiny village, and new faces attracted a lot of attention in these places.

“Do you teach at Hogwarts?” Roy asked conversationally once they started walking, even though he already knew. It was the easiest opening for a conversation in this situation.

“Ah, yes, I do. I—“ Hagrid hesitated, his slow steps (to keep from making Roy have to jog to after him, no doubt) faltering for a second before he continued. He threw Roy a worried look. “Aren’yeh—? There were… on the newspaper…”

Roy feigned ignorance and slight concern.

“Is everything fine? I confess I haven’t been paying much attention to the news lately, I’ve been too absorbed by my research ever since I came to the country.”

Hagrid perked up.

“Yeh’re not from here?”

Roy shook his head, a little surprised that Hagrid hadn’t noticed his accent (then again, Hagrid too had an accent that Roy hadn’t encountered before, so maybe he hadn’t given it much thought).

“I arrived last month.”

Hagrid visibly relaxed. Those articles had come out during the end of December and January, meaning he had no reason to think Roy had read them (Roy didn’t put any stock in social prejudice, he had seen the damage it had done to Ishval and its people).

“Yeh’re a researcher? What ‘bout?”

“Alchemy.” Roy had debated how much of himself he was willing to reveal, and his status as an alchemist was part of that information. Having a profession was an important element of any adult’s introduction, and it was very unlikely Roy would be able to gain much information without revealing, at the very least, that his project was related to alchemy. Before Roy could follow with anything else, Hagrid spoke again, grinning in enthusiasm.

“Is that why yeh’re meetin’ with Professor Dumbledore? He’s a very renowned alchemist. Worked with Nicolas Flamel and everythin’.”

“So I’ve heard,” Roy agreed easily, as if that wasn’t the very reason why he was cataloguing everything they walked by to form a clear idea of the layout of the area in his mind, in case he needed to retreat. “I was hoping he could assist me with a project.”

“I’m sure he will!” Hagrid assured him. “Professor Dumbledore is a great man.”

They continued talking as they approached the school. Roy sidestepped the questions he didn’t want to answer while carefully fishing for information. By the time they crossed the gates into the grounds, Roy had decided Hagrid couldn’t lie to save his life, held Dumbledore in the highest of regards and was absolutely loyal to him. Earning this kind of respect from someone, Roy knew, meant that you either were a master manipulator or had done something to earn it. Or both.

When the castle came fully into view, Roy made no effort to hide the interest it roused in him. Doing so when it was his first time here might look suspicious, so Roy let himself falter in his steps and stare up at the looming majestic castle.

Hagrid stopped a couple paces ahead and turned around, amusement and fondness in his eyes.
“’S a great place, isn’t it?”

Roy nodded, and started walking again.

“It’s fascinating. I imagine the students use any excuse to go exploring.” He looked up at Hagrid with a grin. “I certainly would.”

Hagrid laughed.

“Sure they do. They’re mighty creative skippin’ curfew, an’ avoiding Filch an’ Mrs. Norris is a bit of an unofficial sport here.”

Hagrid launched into a retelling of some of the best anecdotes he knew of students skipping curfew. He cut himself a few times, and Roy guessed it was because he had been about to say something that the rest of the faculty didn’t know about. Hagrid spoke so fondly of certain students (mainly Harry Potter, whose story Roy had read in a few books, and his friends) that Roy wouldn’t be surprised to learn they were his friends and Hagrid covered up for them sometimes.

They started to cross paths with small groups of students as the castle drew closer, Roy’s presence garnering a good deal on curious looks and, he noticed with a certain level of amusement, appreciative ones from many of the older female and some of the male students.

Roy winked at a group of girls that had stopped a ways back to whisper amongst themselves, and they giggled in response. Next to him, Hagrid chuckled.

“Mus’ be nice, bein’ so popular with the ladies,” he commented.

They climbed the front steps.

“Oh, yes. It’s really nice,” Roy stressed, grinning.

He heard uneven steps approach from the left, and while he did not tense, he readied his right hand to clap if necessary. He had put on the new gloves without the array, because, as an alchemist, Roy’s usual gloves would draw Dumbledore’s attention.

“Ah, Professor Moody!” Hagrid greeted jovially, and Roy took the chance to turn to look in that direction as if Hagrid had been the one to alert him to Moody’s presence.

Alastor Moody was a former auror who had been brilliant in the day but had grown paranoid over the years to the point that he had become a popular joke amongst the citizens. Aside from his check of the faculty, Roy had read about Moody quite often in the newspaper articles from the war.

Moody could really use automail instead of that peg leg, if automail existed in this world, and his clearly not human left eye swivelled over Roy, halting revealingly on his hands and left side. Magical eye, Roy’s mind provided. He had read a mention of them, and would most likely look them up in more detail after the meeting.

“Hagrid,” Moody saluted gruffly, coming to a stop before them. He fixed both eyes on Roy. “You must be Mustang.” He didn’t let Roy say anything, instead addressing Hagrid. “You have those hedges to attend to, right? I’ll take him to the headmaster.”

It was a very transparent attempt to get Hagrid out of the picture and keep an eye on Roy the rest of the way, but Hagrid didn’t seem to notice. He muttered something about keeping to a schedule, thanked Moody, wished Roy good luck with his project, and cheerfully said goodbye. Roy thanked him, waved with a smile, and hurried after Moody when Moody took off without a word. He didn’t
make any obvious gesture to indicate that he was measuring Moody up, because for all that he knew that creepy eye could see through Moody’s skull, but Roy reached the conclusion that the peg leg was a too obvious target, which meant there most likely was a countermeasure in place to protect it if it was attacked, and Roy decided that if a fight broke out he would aim for Moody’s wand arm (or directly set his wand on fire, because a fighter as experienced as Moody had to be quick deflecting any disarming or incapacitating magic).

“It must be useful,” Roy commented when they were walking side by side. Moody grunted and Roy took it as an enquiry. “Your eye. Can you see through anything?” He raised his eyebrows meaningfully and grinned, earning a disgusted glare from Moody.

But, comments aside, Roy was surprised the school hadn’t received a flood of complaints about Moody’s voyeur eye. Were he a parent, Roy would have charged into the building to set the thing on fire himself. (He fervently didn’t think of what Maes would have done in that situation).

“What do you want with Riddle?” Moody demanded, apparently deciding to ignore Roy’s comment.

“Nothing much,” Roy replied, not even needing to lie because he didn’t want anything with Riddle.

“You’re looking for him,” Moody said, as if that invalidated Roy’s reply somehow.

“True,” Roy agreed easily, but didn’t offer any more information.

By then they were on the third floor (Roy really wanted a chance to dissect the school’s moving staircases that he had needed so much effort to pretend didn’t faze him at all) and Moody stopped in front of a gargoyle.

“Cockroach cluster.”

The gargoyle moved.

The gargoyle revealed a slowly ascending stone staircase, not dissimilar to an escalator; they stepped on it, and soon were at the top. The door swung open on its own accord and Moody gestured for Roy to walk in ahead. Roy did, hands clasped together behind his back in a seemingly casual manner. The office he stepped into was circular, the walls covered in moving portraits (and, alright, maybe Roy had grown used to the ones at the library and the moving pictures on the newspaper, but he still found them unnerving) and had a diversity of trinkets spread over various surfaces. Trinkets that whirred and moved, and could prove a nuisance to keep track of other background noises in a situation of emergency.

Standing before a large window, his back to the door in a gesture that by all appearances was meant to be taken as unconcerned, was a tall man dressed in horrid blue and white robes (which might actually be green and yellow, for all that Roy could tell) and a large matching pointed hat. He turned around, a benevolent smile and twinkling maybe-blue eyes behind half moon spectacles focusing on Roy.

“You must be Mr. Mustang,” Dumbledore, because Roy had seen some pictures of him, greeted jovially, and Roy decided that, whatever his intentions or moral compass, he was most likely a good manipulator. “Take a seat, please,” Dumbledore offered, gesturing to the armchairs before the large desk as he walked to his own throne-like chair behind the desk. A little overdone, but Roy supposed it worked wonders on impressionable students.

“Thank you,” Roy said with an easy smile as he took a seat, not looking in the direction where
Moody had very pointedly settled himself against the wall. The armchair was spacious enough that Roy would be able to roll out of it with little trouble if necessary. Roy clasped his hands on his lap; it could easily be taken as a nervous gesture. “I admit I wasn’t expecting you could spare a moment to meet with me so soon when I wrote to you,” he said, in a way that implied he hadn’t been sure Dumbledore would agree to meet him at all. It wasn’t even a lie, because someone contacting him to ask about a man who had left the school fifty years ago should have been very low in Dumbledore’s list of priorities.

Yet, here they were.

“I was most curious to learn you are looking for Tom. Although I didn’t expect you to be quite so young.”

“I hear that a lot,” Roy said with the same easy smile as before, and avoided replying to the first part of Dumbledore’s statement.

“May I ask why the interest in Tom?”

“I’m just working on a project and I need to ask him a few questions.” Or that had been his original plan, but given the level of paranoia surrounding this meeting Roy was reevaluating his options.

“Project?” Dumbledore prompted, projecting such a perfect level of polite curiosity that Roy was impressed.

“As a fellow researcher,” because Dumbledore had a few discoveries under his belt and Roy had done his part to keep his title as a State Alchemist, “I’m sure you understand my reticence to share what I’m working on.”

Before Dumbledore could reply, and Roy had been aiming to force him to reveal some information himself, Moody scoffed behind him and obligingly offered more than Dumbledore would have.

“Cut to the chase, Albus. Why the hell are you looking for Riddle, Mustang? Are you interested in the Dark Arts?”

A dark wizard? Somehow Roy couldn’t find it in himself to be surprised. Truth wouldn’t have offered this as part of his toll if it was an easy and straightforward endeavour. Roy considered that maybe he would have to immobilize and kidnap Riddle to get some answers out of him.

“Not in the slightest,” Roy replied, still watching Dumbledore. Dumbledore was giving him a piercing and considering look.

Moody scoffed, disbelieving.

“Do you know who Tom Riddle is?” Dumbledore asked finally, and Roy understood that he couldn’t get through this conversation with his current mask on. Somehow, he had found himself in the middle of something deep, dark, and murky. Again.

And this time he hadn’t even been looking for it.

“Enlighten me.”

“Sometime during his school years, Tom decided to discard his birth name and adopt a new one, the name he has been using ever since and the reason why you haven’t managed to locate him: Lord Voldemort.”
Well, fuck me, Roy’s brain supplied helpfully.

Of course Truth would set him to hunt the would-be dictator who had died thirteen years ago, except for the fact that he obviously hadn’t died or Roy wouldn’t be here in the first place.

This changed everything. Dark wizard he could handle, but undead Dark Lord who had been said to possess immense power and a wide variety of tricks at his disposal (not to mention his own guerrilla of fanatical maniacs willing to do his bidding) was out of Roy’s current league, alone and with very limited knowledge of magic as he was here.

“Isn’t he supposed to be dead?”

“What makes you think he isn’t?” Dumbledore asked back, his benevolent appearance gone.

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation if he was.”

Behind him, Moody scoffed again.

“Whatever. Now that you know, you should focus on something else, boy.”

Roy didn’t react to that, too used to jibes at his age.

“I’m afraid that’s not an option,” Roy replied, still looking at Dumbledore.

Albus Dumbledore was said to be the only man Voldemort feared, had participated actively in the war against him, and clearly had access to more resources than Roy could get his hands on in a reasonable timeframe.

“Why is that?” Dumbledore asked, and Roy reached the conclusion that he would need his assistance.

Under one condition.

“Before I answer that question, would you mind answering something for me?”

“I can’t promise I will, but you may ask.”

“Did Nicolas Flamel ever tell you the process to create a Philosopher’s Stone?” Roy spoke, making sure his voice and body language conveyed that he didn’t want to know, he already did.

Dumbledore had tensed, and he closed his eyes and heaved a deep sigh before responding.

“Not for a long time. He just told me it was best for me if I didn’t know, no matter how many times I asked him. But at the end, before he destroyed the Stone, he explained everything.” The grief was plain on Dumbledore’s face, and Roy could only guess how he had felt discovering that someone he had probably considered a friend had done such a thing.

“Would you make one?” Roy asked softly, seeking confirmation of his guess.

“Never. You?” Dumbledore asked, though the way his eyes had softened suggested he had already guessed, too.

“Under no circumstances.”

Dumbledore nodded. Then he looked past Roy, to where Moody stood, and addressed him.
“This conversation is going to take some time, I’m afraid. Maybe you should return to your duties, Alastor,” Dumbledore suggested amicably, though it didn’t get past anyone in the room that it was an order.

“If you’re sure,” Moody replied, and Roy heard him move. “You should be careful about bringing things like the Philosopher’s Stone into a conversation, Mustang.”

The door opened and closed again behind him.

There was a short silence before Dumbledore, some of his affable appearance returned, asked:

“Would you care for a cup of tea?”

“If you don’t mind me being paranoid about it,” Roy replied, gesturing to the wand at his hip.

“Of course not,” Dumbledore said in obvious amusement, and with a wave of his wand a tray with a teapot, two cups and a plate with assorted biscuits appeared floating lightly above the desk. It spun slowly down to the surface.

Roy’s inner scientist wailed at the display, because there was no way that could have happened without defying at least a dozen laws of physics, even accounting for the possibility that the tray had been already waiting somewhere and Dumbledore had just brought it here. As much as Roy had decided to stop questioning magic (his mind wouldn’t do anything else otherwise), blatant displays of magic like this one still made a corner of his mind react.

Once Roy had bought his wand, and aware that his search would take a while, he had started to teach himself some magic. Out of a mix of experience and a well-developed sense of paranoia over the last year, the first field Roy had delved into, aside from basic useful spells, had been detection spells of all kinds. Listening devices (magical, because muggle technology didn’t work around too much magic), spells, various substances in food… and so Roy pulled his wand out and cast every single detection spell he could think of on the tea, the cup itself, the spoon, and all the biscuits. By the time he was done, Dumbledore’s eyebrows were up, his expression a mix of surprise and amusement.

“Maybe,” he suggested, serving himself a cup of tea, “you should consider having a talk with Alastor in a less hostile environment. I think you could learn some useful things from him.” He placed the teapot back on the tray, pointedly allowing Roy to serve his tea, and took a very obvious drink from his own cup.

Roy shrugged and reached for the teapot. Dumbledore had a point there, and he might just do that if he determined that he could trust Moody. Not for now, though.

“I am curious, though, to know what an alchemist might need from Tom. He was never interested in the subject, as far as I am aware. He didn’t even take the class, and it was offered the two years he could have.”

“It’s not so much what he can do for me as what he has done,” Roy replied, aware of how vague he was being, and considered his next words. “Tell me, how are you so certain Riddle is still alive?”

He took a sip of his tea —a fairly good one, but he still preferred coffee— and let Dumbledore think over his answer.

“I suspected it from the beginning,” Dumbledore started carefully. “Tom has always feared death, he is obsessed with living forever, and I couldn’t be sure, with the depths I knew he had sunk into, that he hadn’t found a way to elude death. Then, a few years ago, I had confirmation of it. Tom
possessed one of the professors in this very school, and attempted to steal the Philosopher’s Stone Nicolas had entrusted me to keep safe.”

“That is… odd,” Roy admitted, his mind immediately turning to the souls he knew had survived past being removed from their bodies: Alphonse, Barry the Chopper, the other armour the Elrics had encountered in laboratory five… Binding Alphonse’s soul to the armour had required for Edward to go to the Gate again and pay a toll, though that could have been because Alphonse had already been at the Gate. The others... it could as easily be that it hadn’t been necessary to open the Gate, or the researchers had circumvented it by using a Philosopher’s Stone (Roy had no way to tell, but he knew if any of those researchers had opened the Gate and survived, they wouldn’t have been turned into a Stone when the activities in the fifth laboratory had stopped).

“You don’t sound surprised,” Dumbledore commented. “Most people would be questioning my sanity right now.”

Roy had too many experiences with the impossible to discard anything as such without prior consideration. He needed time to analyze whatever few facts he had, though. He didn’t have that time now.

“It’s not the first time I hear of soul manipulation,” Roy said simply with a shrug. “Though, admittedly, in all other instances I have encountered it, the manipulation was done by someone other than the person affected. I suppose there was no one else present the night Riddle was defeated?”

Dumbledore, who had been looking extremely interested by Roy’s words, shook his head.

“The only ones in that room that night were Tom, young Harry and Lily Potter, who died before Tom attacked Harry.”

Roy nodded.

“Could he have kept his soul tied to something before going there?” he asked.

He didn’t know anything about magic that could affect the soul, an oversight that Roy would have to rectify, but it was the only thing Roy could think of that might have worked. Whatever Riddle had done that prevented Truth from reaching him must have been on a soul level, rather than the body, because then Truth could have reached him the moment his body was destroyed. Or disconnected from his soul. Whatever had happened that night.

If Dumbledore had looked interested before, his gaze now burned into Roy’s. There was a long moment of silence in which Dumbledore clearly considered his next words, and Roy tried hard not to fidget in place.

“You are very sharp, Mr. Mustang,” Dumbledore commented finally. He reached a hand down, opened a drawer on his desk and pulled out a black book. A book that, once on the table, Roy noticed looked like someone had stabbed it. “This diary belonged to Tom while he was in school. We found it two years ago, in the aftermath of a series of attacks on students. While it didn’t come to my possession until it had already been destroyed, according to the people who dealt with it, it contained a ‘memory’ of the sixteen year old Tom Riddle, who had been growing in strength as it absorbed the life force of someone who had been writing on the diary.”

“Memory?” Roy asked, looking at the diary as if it could tell him anything. On closer inspection, more than simply stabbed, Roy would say it had been melted as well.
“That is what he said.”

“And what do you think it really was?” Roy asked, because in his mind memory equated to some sort of illusion or reflection, maybe a mirror image of a person, but that wasn’t a soul.

“I believe, though I am still collecting all the necessary evidence to confirm this theory, that Tom came across the information to create one of the darkest magical items in existence. A horcrux. It is, in essence, an object enchanted to store a piece of someone’s soul, and while it exists its creator cannot be truly killed no matter what.”

“That’s not possible,” Roy blurted out. Seeing Dumbledore’s expression, he continued before an argument could start. “I don’t mean creating that, I mean… Soul manipulation, in alchemy, is part of human transmutation.” Dumbledore’s eyes widened. Human transmutation, while much more difficult to achieve here given the lower level of knowledge, was as taboo as in Amestris. The only reason it wasn’t illegal was because not enough people believed it to be a real possibility, and no law had ever been passed on the subject as a consequence. “Human transmutation has a series of secondary effects,” he said, barely containing a grimace, “and I have reasons to assume they should apply to using magic to the same end.” (Because if Riddle was no alchemist but had blocked his Gate, it meant there was an equivalent of human transmutation in magic). “What you are saying, doing that to oneself… he shouldn’t have survived it.”

While not everything that fell under the category of human transmutation as humans saw it matched Truth’s boundaries (human chimeras, for example, didn’t open the Gate, or Shou Tucker would have died the first time he attempted it), Roy was as certain as he could be that splitting one’s soul fell in Truth’s boundaries. In part because he couldn’t imagine it otherwise, but also because Truth had said Riddle had stepped over various boundaries. Missing his body, and with a mangled soul, Roy could begin to see why Truth saw Riddle as less than he did Alphonse.

It was sickening.

“And yet he did,” Dumbledore replied sombrely, cutting into Roy’s thoughts. “Tom didn’t develop the method to create a horcrux, nor is he the first wizard in history to create one.”

Roy bit into a biscuit to avoid letting out a very creative string of curses. He suspected, if the tea was anything to go by, that the biscuit must be delicious, but all he could taste was ash.

“This is obviously related to why you are looking for Tom, and yet I can tell you have no interest in doing the same,” Dumbledore said, and there was, thankfully, no question in his voice or his expression. He considered Roy for a long moment. “What is it that you want from Tom?”

Mentioning the Gate had been entirely out of the question when Roy had first set foot in Hogwarts. Then again, he hadn’t expected to find himself thrown into the cold phase of a war, either, or that he would have to go against the insane, brilliant madman leading one of the war’s sides. Because, whatever else Tom Riddle was, he had to be brilliant if he had managed to execute something as complex as splicing his soul —without being consequently killed by the Gate as his toll—at sixteen. The process had already existed, true, but one didn’t do something like that without first ensuring they understood every aspect involved. And it occurred to Roy that, to work in the first place, part of the process had to involve the block on the Gate. As the first step, most likely.

Whether Riddle knew the Gate existed or not Roy had no way to tell, but whoever had invented the process, at the very least, had known about it.

Now it was Roy who considered Dumbledore. While it was true that he had found no mention of the Gate anywhere he had looked, it wasn’t mentioned anywhere in Amestrian alchemy books either. There existed the possibility that someone had encountered it at some point, someone other
than the sick bastard who had created the first horcrux (or maybe that person hadn’t; they could simply have learnt about it from someone else and realized that blocking the Gate was essential for their magic to work). Nicolas Flamel, renowned alchemist who had lived for over six hundred years, was one of the most likely candidates to either have been there himself or to have met someone who had.

“Tell me, Headmaster, have you ever heard of something known as the Gate? Or the Truth? It really has many names, but anyone who has encountered it is most likely to remember it by one of those two names.”

“The Gate?” Dumbledore asked, pensively. “I don’t think so, but I could check Nicolas’ notes. He did leave me everything, except the ones regarding the Stone. Those, he destroyed.”

Roy nodded.

“In essence, the Gate is a place where those who attempt certain forms of human transmutation find themselves, facing a being who, amongst many names, introduces itself as Truth.” Roy had never had to explain this to anyone, because Edward and Alphonse had already known, and none of his team had asked about the events surrounding his human transmutation. “Aside from the moral dilemmas surrounding it, these forms of human transmutation don’t work, and those who attempt any of them have to pay a toll for it.” He didn’t mention the knowledge gained, or the ability to transmute without an array. It was best to be as discouraging as possible, even if he was inclined to believe Dumbledore wasn’t the sort of man to attempt it. “It varies depending on the person, but it is related to whatever one was attempting to achieve, and not many people survive opening the Gate in the first place. While what you are talking about is pure magic and not related to alchemical arrays, I have reason to believe magic is connected to the Gate as well, and attempting to prevent death should have cost Riddle a toll that would have killed him. Yet he is alive.” Roy closed his eyes for just a moment, a cruel reminder to himself of the time he had spent in darkness, and repeated in his mind that there was no law forbidding human transmutation in this country. He had read through both muggle and magical law, wanting to know if there was something he should avoid doing here but that was legal in Amestris. Human transmutation was seen as a hypothetical terrible thing, but it wasn’t illegal. He opened his eyes and met Dumbledore’s intense gaze. “I have a score to settle with Truth, and to do it I have to undo whatever Riddle has done to block Truth’s access to him. I believe you have just given me the answer.”

“You have performed human transmutation,” Dumbledore stated, and while he didn’t raise his voice, nor did he sound particularly harsh, there was something about those words that would have made a lesser man look away and spill his entire life story. Roy didn’t do either, he just clasped his hands on his lap again. Dumbledore had no idea of the circumstances surrounding Roy’s use of human transmutation, and Roy didn’t want to explain about it, nor the whole mess that had been the Promised Day that would be necessary for context. It was none of Dumbledore’s business, so instead he chose a different response.

“You can’t tell me you haven’t made mistakes.” While Roy didn’t count that particular event as part of the long list of sins he had to atone for, that was something Dumbledore didn’t need to know. By the way the skin around Dumbledore’s eyes tensed slightly, Roy knew he was on the right track. “You defeated a dark lord in 1945, and then dedicated years to fight the next one. After this conversation, I would go so far as to say it is one of your life goals. One doesn’t invest so much effort into a cause unless they have a personal reason to do so, and in your case,” (because Roy had looked up Dumbledore, and he didn’t seem to have suffered any losses significant enough to warrant this level of dedication since before Riddle was born) “I would say you are trying to atone for something.”
They stayed silent for a long moment, both of them trying to stare the other down, and finally Dumbledore sighed.

“Are you trying to atone for something, Mr. Mustang?”

Roy nodded. Dumbledore nodded back at him, then looked down at the ruined diary and met Roy’s eyes again.

“You implied it is possible to manipulate souls using alchemy. Do you think it could affect a horcrux?”

“Maybe, I don’t know.” It was nowhere near Roy’s field of expertise, but he had looked into it once he had known Edward would join the military, in case something happened to Alphonse when Edward wasn’t available. He had, unsurprisingly, not found much information back then, but now he had the knowledge from the Gate. Roy hadn’t stopped to analyze everything he had gained there in detail, but he knew Edward had managed to seal Alphonse’s soul to the armour because of what he had learnt there. “But aren’t there other means to destroy them?” he asked, aiming a pointed glance to the ruined diary.

“Yes, but all of them require the destruction of the object the soul is tied to. While that usually wouldn’t be a problem, I have a… theory.”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Roy prompted when Dumbledore didn’t elaborate.

“Tom is paranoid and superstitious. I don’t think he would have contented himself with a single horcrux, much less given how little effort he put into protecting this one, and I am still trying to determine how many he created.” This time Roy did curse, but Dumbledore didn’t pay it any mind. “Whenever a horcrux is created, both the remainder of the soul and the person’s body are damaged, and for that reason it isn’t advisable to create more than one horcrux. Tom doesn’t give the soul and everything it is related to much value, which is why I believe he wouldn’t have paid this warning any heed. As you no doubt know, as a result of Tom’s failed attempt to kill him, Harry Potter has a scar on his forehead. This scar has a tendency to hurt whenever Tom is either close to him or excessively angry. The year he was possessing Professor Quirrell, Harry’s scar hurt when they were in close proximity, and lately he has dreamt of Tom a couple of times, very vivid dreams, and woken up to find his scar hurting.”

Roy really didn’t like where this was going.

“Is there no way to check?” he interrupted, because he didn’t need to hear that, unless he found a way around it, a fourteen year old kid (younger than Alphonse, even) would have to die to defeat Tom Riddle.

“I’m afraid I don’t know of any, and that is why I cannot be certain.”

Roy sighed.

“And these dreams…?”

“Appear to be connected to a series of events that have been happening lately. I am afraid that Tom is already moving to return to power.”

“Fucking Truth…” Roy muttered, looking down at his gloved hands for a moment. There wasn’t anything to think about: he needed Tom Riddle dead (because he no longer had any qualms about killing him) if he wanted to go back home, and he couldn’t step back when he had basically been told that a child would die unless he found a way to prevent it. And yes, Roy had his suspicions
that Dumbledore might have brought Potter into the conversation with the objective to cause that exact thought (had Dumbledore planned to kill Potter, or was he looking into other ways to destroy the horcrux?), but it didn’t change the simple truth of things: Roy didn’t want any more blood on his hands if he could avoid it, there was already more than he could ever hope to atone for.

Finally, he looked back at Dumbledore, who had been patiently waiting for his decision.

“All right. I’ll help you, but I want to know everything.” He emphasized the last word. “Whatever information you have about Riddle’s horcruxes, I want to see it, if you go to check out a possible location for a horcrux, I’m coming too. And don’t destroy any more of them until I have a working theory. I’m not going to try it directly on Potter if I can avoid it.”

Dumbledore smiled, a pleased tiny expression that was accompanied by the return of the twinkle that had been in his eyes at the beginning of their conversation.

“Very well. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t share this knowledge with anyone else, for now. It would only cause people to panic.” Roy nodded. “Would you like to get started?”

“If you have anything I can work with.”

Nodding, Dumbledore stood up and headed to one of the many bookcases around the room. He tapped a shelf that had been converted to a glass cabinet; the front glass disappeared and Dumbledore extracted a large and ancient tome. With another tap of his wand, the glass was back in place.

“This book was available in the Restricted Section of the library until I became headmaster,” Dumbledore explained as he approached again. “I have no doubt that it was from here that Tom learnt how to create a horcrux.” Roy accepted the book. “Would you rather be more comfortable for that?” Dumbledore asked, gesturing with a hand to a set of couches around a low table that Roy hadn’t given a thought to past his cursory scan of the room. “It’s not an easy read, I warn you.”

“I’ll manage,” Roy said, standing up. What he didn’t say was that he had undoubtedly experienced worse.

No book could equal the horror that had been the Ishval Extermination.

Chapter End Notes

Comments, please? :3 I really appreciate any input, it makes my day.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A book may not be as bad as the horrors of real war, but if Roy ever had to name one that came close to it, this would be the first title to come to mind. Despite the fact that the section describing horcruxes was clearly marked (and of course they required to kill someone to be created, all the sickening things required sacrificing lives), Roy had decided to have a look at the rest of the contents, to see if anything might be of use.

The only reason he had finished browsing, rarely stopping to look at something in more detail, was a mix of stubbornness and practice doing things he honestly didn’t want to do.

By the time he was done, it was dark outside the office’s windows.

“How are you feeling?” Roy looked over at Dumbledore, who had been working through a pile of paperwork (more parchment, because the concept of paper seemed to elude these people) while Roy read and jotted down a few notes on his notebook.

Human.

“Like I just delved into the worst side of humanity.”

Dumbledore hummed and looked outside for a moment.

“It’s late. Would you like to stay for dinner? We have some wonderful foreign dishes available, aside from the usual meals served at the school.”

Roy nearly refused the offer, his stomach in no way ready for food, but thought better of it. Maybe being surrounded by living people, including hundreds of loud children, would be a good way to dispel the sick feeling crawling through him.

“I would appreciate that,” he said instead, standing up.

He took the book to Dumbledore, who wasted no time in returning it to its place, and they both headed for the door and the descending stone stairs.

“I’ve been wondering, Mr. Mustang,” Dumbledore started.

“Roy,” Roy corrected. Because if they were going to work together, they could as well dispense with the ‘mister’. Roy had never felt comfortable being ‘Mr. Mustang’, anyway; Colonel, or whatever other rank he had been in the past, certainly, or just a ‘Mustang’ coming from certain people like Olivier Armstrong, even Edward’s usual ‘bastard’; but ‘Mr. Mustang’ always made him feel odd.

“Roy then. You may call me Albus,” Dumbledore offered. “Tell me, as an alchemist, have you delved into the field of arrays?”

Roy scoffed. He couldn’t help himself.

“Arrays are the essence of alchemy. Maybe five hundred years ago it was different, but now you can find most of the other branches of alchemy mirrored in muggle sciences; mainly chemistry.
The only difference is that muggles don’t know as many substances as wizards do.” Or at least that was what wizards thought. From what he had read on some muggle books (because he hadn’t been able to completely resist having a look, especially after a particularly frustrating read through one magical book or another), muggles also knew a fair amount of elements that wizards seemed to be unaware of. Still, independently on their view of muggles’ worth, most wizards seemed to agree on the opinion that muggles were somehow behind them in basically every field. Most muggle supporters saw them as quaint, cute people trying to wade through a complicated life without magic.

“Really? I admit I don’t pay much attention to muggle science. Maybe I should rectify that,” Dumbledore mused.

“It’s interesting,” Roy offered vaguely, because it was more than interesting. He had seen enough to understand some fields in this world were really advanced, and only the reminder that he wanted to go home as soon as possible had prevented him from camping in a library for as long as it took him to read through everything of interest available. He may not be as much of a bookworm as certain people, or have much time for it in his daily life, but he still enjoyed reading and learning new things. “And yes, I work with arrays, it’s always been my main approach to alchemy.”

From that point onwards, they started a much lighter conversation than earlier. Apparently, Dumbledore hadn’t delved too much into arrays, because Flamel had disliked them. Roy suspected it had to do with the Stone, but he didn’t say it. Roy mentioned some arrays, on the basic end of the scale and mostly safe unless you had the skill and power necessary to pull off something fancy with them.

They eventually reached the ground floor, and the noise coming from what Albus called the Great Hall could be heard even from the stairs. The Great Hall, as it turned out, was very aptly named, for it was an enormous room with a high ceiling — that showed the sky outside — housing four long tables full of students and a fifth one on the opposite end to the entrance, where a group of adults that could only be the staff were sat.

They attracted a lot of looks as they walked between the two central tables of students, and Roy pretended not to pay attention to them (though he was ready to react at any time) as he continued his conversation with Albus. Once at the head table, Roy nearly raised an eyebrow when he realized the only seat available aside from the ridiculous throne-like chair that no doubt was for Albus was right next to said chair, between it and a stern-looking woman who might be in her sixties. If that was a coincidence, Roy would eat his ignition gloves.

He wondered when, exactly, Albus had decided Roy would stay for dinner to have arranged that.

“I hope you don’t mind, Minerva,” Albus addressed the woman. “Roy and I got carried away with our meeting, and I invited him to stay for dinner. We’re having a fascinating conversation.” His eyes were twinkling again (Roy was starting to wonder if it was a spell to enhance his projection of a light-hearted mood or something) and he followed that with a quick introduction of Roy and the staff (and the heads of the two visiting schools). Too many odd names, but Roy ensured he memorized them all and put on his best non-flirtatious charming behaviour. Hagrid was delighted to see him and commented on how he had known Albus would help with his project, Moody gave him a mistrustful once-over with his creepy magical eye and there was a general spike of curiosity when Albus mentioned Roy was an alchemist. Through the course of the meal, Roy gathered the impression that wizards saw alchemy as a funny curiosity. Inoffensive, too, judging by the questions he was asked.

He didn’t correct them.
As for the students, stealth wasn’t a common skill amongst them.

Telling Roy Mustang about Tom’s horcruxes had been a risky gambit, one that Albus didn’t know if he could have taken back.

Albus had been intrigued when he had received the letter regarding Tom. Worried, of course, because anything to do with Tom worried him, but all of Tom’s old followers from when he had still used that name were either dead or imprisoned, and so intrigue had been stronger than worry in his mind.

He had never before heard the name Roy Mustang, and had asked some friends at the Ministry of Magic to see what they could find about him before the meeting. They had found nothing; whoever Roy Mustang was, there were no papers concerning him anywhere. Strange, but unfortunately it still wasn’t unheard of that some wizards refused to register even a birth certificate with the Ministry. The Wizengamot had been trying to pass a law on the matter for decades now, but it had never come through because the different factions on the Wizengamot couldn’t agree on the specific aspects the law should cover.

As such, Albus had gone into the meeting without a clue of what awaited him. He had come up with a few speculations of his own, of course, but the attractive, maybe foreigner young man that had walked into his office with an easy and polite smile hadn’t been amongst them. On first sight, Albus hadn’t been able to guess a possible connection between Tom and Roy.

Now, Albus was no fool; he had immediately noticed how sharp Roy’s eyes were, how he appeared to be taking in everything. And, despite the fact that Roy’s wand had been on sight at his waist at all times and he had kept his hands clasped together on his lap during most of the early part of their meeting (a position that didn’t allow for the quickest draw), a part of Albus’ mind had been certain Roy had been ready to jump into action if he believed he had to.

Roy was a mystery from any angle Albus looked at him. Albus had the questionable but sadly necessary habit of prodding the minds of people whose intentions he didn’t know. He did it carefully, of course, he didn’t want to cause any damage or draw attention to his intrusion. When he had prodded into Roy’s mind, Albus had found himself in a vast sea of whiteness with no noticeable way deeper into Roy’s mind. He had withdrawn, unable to push without giving himself away. An occlumency shield was an inconvenience, but not an unexpected one. It had simply confirmed to Albus that Roy had something to hide (Albus had expected as much from someone looking for Tom). But Roy hadn’t known who Tom had become once he had left Hogwarts, that much had been obvious in his reaction (because, no matter how good an actor one was, there were certain elements of body language that couldn’t be faked).

Then Roy had asked about the Philosopher’s Stone.

That had been a shock. Many people had asked Albus about the Philosopher’s Stone over the years, but no one had done so the way Roy had. There had been no doubt in Albus that Roy wasn’t asking because he wanted to know the Stone’s secret; he knew, and he wanted to know if Albus did too. Watching the meeting play again in his pensieve, Albus had realized something he had missed in his initial shock: had he said he would create the Stone, he had no doubt Roy would have walked
out of the office, despite the fact that he needed Albus’ help.

And that was the most puzzling fact of all.

**Human transmutation.**

Opposite to most people, Albus had already known human transmutation was a real possibility before meeting Roy. Nicolas had told him, accompanied by a warning to never, under any circumstances, attempt it. Moral dilemmas and dark magic implications aside, Albus knew not everybody who researched human transmutation was a dark wizard. That was the main reason he had been willing to continue his conversation with Roy after Roy had admitted to having performed it. While there were many dark uses for human transmutation (Albus had never stopped to think horcruxes could be related to it, but it made a twisted kind of sense) he knew there were also people who researched it out of desperation and love. To bring back a dead loved one, or even to save a dying one.

There was no successful case recorded in history for any type of human transmutation. There were so few cases recorded of an attempt at it that human transmutation was mainly regarded as a loony idea, on par with the belief in the Deathly Hallows. (The world was sorely mistaken, sometimes).

As he had promised, Albus was going through Nicolas’ notes to see if he found anything on the subject. Nicolas had protected his texts against all searching magic he had known of, and had also developed his own spell to quickly search through them, because there were so many it could take *months* otherwise. Albus simply had to point his wand at a roll of parchment or notebook, cast the nonverbal spell and say the words he was looking for. ‘Gate’ and ‘Truth’ were too common words, and thus Albus was directly looking for ‘human transmutation’. He had found a few mentions of it in Nicolas’ research notes (the research had, fortunately, never been on the subject), but nothing useful, and he had now moved to Nicolas’ large collection of diaries.

An early seventeenth century diary lit up in the yellow light that signalled a positive result, and the pages fluttered open to near the end of the tome. Albus bent over it to read.

Nicolas had known many alchemists over the years, and had partnered with those he found interesting enough to do joint research with. The son of one of these partners had died in an accident, and the man had become obsessed with bringing him back. Nicolas had assisted somewhat with the research, but hadn’t taken part in the development of the human transmutation theory itself. Back then, he had never come across practical human transmutation, and he had been curious to see it in action. Nicolas’ partner had developed what he had called ‘a perfect theory’, something Nicolas had agreed with upon seeing the man’s research, and Nicolas had stood back to observe as he applied it. When the light from the transmutation array had vanished, there had been a being in the middle of the circle. A misshapen, definitely not human being moaning in pain as it writhed on the ground. Nicolas had only paid attention to it afterwards, because his attention had been immediately drawn to his friend, who lay on a pool of his own blood with his arms gone. Nicolas hadn’t managed to save him with the times’ limited medical knowledge, and he had listened to what he had described as his friend’s delirious ravings: he had told Nicolas to never attempt that transmutation, to never cross the Gate, warned him that the Truth would punish him. Nicolas had dismissed the words themselves as nonsensical, but had settled for never attempting such a transmutation himself, and wrote he would warn any future partner against it.

There, in Nicolas’ crammed handwriting, Albus had proof of Roy’s Truth.

Roy had said not many people survived human transmutation, but Albus had to wonder what Roy’s toll had been, because Roy wasn’t missing any body parts as far as Albus could tell. In fact, according to Alastor, the only visible damage to Roy’s body was a burn scar on his left side and
two strange scars on his hands. Alastor wasn’t sure how those might have come to happen, he had said they looked almost like someone had stabbed Roy there, but a stab wound would have easily been healed without leaving a trace behind.

Not even three days after his meeting with Albus, when Roy was still putting down everything he could remember about souls (he had drawn the array that had bound Alphonse to his armour, and after some trial and error had reproduced Barry’s; they might prove of use) an owl appeared at his window. The only owls he was used to were the ones that brought The Daily Prophet each morning, and that one had already arrived with the absolutely uninformative paper. Roy cast his now usual round of detection spells for owls on the very indignant bird before accepting the letter.

The owl flew off after throwing him an annoyed look.

Roy,

A worrisome incident happened last night on the school grounds. I believe you should come see me to discuss the events that have been taking place in the last few months, because I am afraid Tom may be closer to regaining his powers than I feared. Is Friday at 3pm a good time for you? I will send someone to collect you at The Three Broomsticks.

Albus Dumbledore

PS: I would advise you to be on your guard until you are inside the castle.

Roy frowned. It was true that, due to the conversation about horcruxes and Roy reading the book, they hadn’t had any time to discuss whatever had been going on lately. Still, those had seemed the most important things to cover, and Roy had no doubt that Albus didn’t want to see that book anywhere outside his office. Roy certainly didn’t.

He reached for a piece of parchment and penned his response.

Albus,

Send Hagrid. I’m not sure Moody wouldn’t see it fit to attempt to interrogate me. I got the impression he thinks I might be a dark wizard.

The time is fine, I’ll be there.

Roy Mustang

Roy had nearly written that if Moody tried anything, then Albus would have to find himself a new professor, but there was a difference between being confident in one’s skills and implying he could take on the most feared auror from the war. He had made sure to hint that he wasn’t defenceless the other day, but little details like flame alchemy or all other battle-related uses of alchemy were things he preferred to keep to himself.

Because the indignant owl had left, Roy was forced to pocket his notebook and leave the room to go to the post office. At least he had decided to work on this in the room instead of going to the
library, which now saved him some time.

To summarise: Harry Potter could see into Lord Voldemort’s mind; people were disappearing and the government preferred to keep their collective heads up their arses rather than look closely into events; the most likely suspect Albus could think of with the information he had at his disposal was Igor Karkarov, a man who had sold part of the current residents of Azkaban and information about the Death Eaters in exchange for his freedom, who was terrified of the possibility that Voldemort could return, and was not a good enough actor to fake it; and the Dark Mark was growing clearer by the day. As for this last bit of information, because it didn’t make sense for Albus to know that, Roy had insisted that Albus tell him how he knew. Albus had a former Death Eater working for him who had informed him of it. The identity of the Death Eater remained a secret, but Roy figured he would learn it when the war kicked off.

He suspected it wouldn’t take long.

As for the events that had brought him here? Barty Crouch, one of the organisers of the Triwizard Tournament and judge, who hadn’t shown up for anything in months, had appeared last night on the grounds before two of the champions, out of his mind, talking to trees and begging to see Albus whenever he came a little back to himself. He, of course, had disappeared in the span of time it had taken Harry Potter to find Albus and lead him to where Crouch had been. And by disappeared, Roy meant that Viktor Krum, the other champion, had been stunned in the process.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“Most likely. We haven’t found his body yet. Alastor has been working on it during his spare time.”

“Do you have any idea why he might have been a target?”

“Not exactly,” Albus admitted wearily. “In general, during the war or if this had happened with the Death Eaters active again, then yes, Barty would be a reasonable target. He was the head of the Department for Magical Law Enforcement back during the war, and took as many measures as he could to ensure the Death Eaters were stopped.” Which was a nice euphemism for saying that he had been ruthless and had made some very questionable decisions. Crouch’s name had come up in many articles Roy had read. “But I can’t see how he could be of any use to Tom’s return. Barty Crouch is one of the few men I can tell for sure would never assist him.”

“And the insanity?”

“Any number of spells could have caused it. We won’t know without a body, and maybe not even then.”

Roy hummed pensively, then looked around at the collection of portraits pretending to be asleep (he had seen too many people doing it to be fooled by the act; none of them were snoring).

“I’m still compiling all the information I have,” he said finally.

“If you need any book, you are welcome to visit the library,” Albus offered.
Roy almost said he had the giant section of the British Library for that, but paused.  

“How large is the library?”  

“How large is the library?” Albus said with a knowing smile.  

He meant it for punctual research, most likely, but then Albus had no idea of how limited Roy’s knowledge of magic was. Right now, he had virtually zero knowledge about the ways in which magic could affect the soul, with the unfortunate exception of how to create a horcrux. While he suspected Albus had removed any books pertaining to horcruxes from the library (Roy would have to get to them at some point, he had no doubt they were all with the first one), there might be something that, combined with the bizarre amount of knowledge the Gate had provided him on the topic of souls, might be of use to him.  

He should also brush up his knowledge of biology, just in case. That comment Doctor Knox had made about the fake body Roy had created some months ago still stung.  

“If you don’t mind, then, there are a few things I’d like to look up.”  

“Of course. Give me just a moment to write a note for Madam Pince, or she will chase you out. I’ll include the Restricted Section, but I should advise you to be careful with the books there. Some of them are cursed.”  

Charming.  

Wizards were too prone to speculation without any sound theoretical foundation. That was a conclusion Roy had reached early on when he had started reading on magic, and it was an annoyance when he was looking for something, because he had to wade through all the speculative texts in search of the hard facts he needed. (Scientific thought wasn’t very important in the wizarding world, he had found out: if something had an effect, if something worked, very few people stopped to think about the mechanics behind it).  

There was a lot of literature on souls and magic related to them, but Roy had yet to come across something believable, forget about it being serious or useful to his research. Roy’s definition of believable was much broader than that of the average person.  

This was his second day here. Officially, he had requested access to the library for a much more innocuous research project (Albus had arranged things with Tom, the owner of the Leaky Cauldron, so that Roy could floo from the Cauldron’s back room to Albus’ office), and he was at a point where he needed to imagine the reactions of various people he knew to what he was reading to keep his mind from giving up on him. So far, Havoc and Breda were completely useless because they were too busy trying not to choke on their own laughter, Fuery was valiantly attempting to keep up while he snickered, Falman was interrupting every now and then to give a speech on how an already verified fact proved this or that speculation fake, Hawkeye had decided to have mercy on them and had stopped trying to order them to behave (maybe it had something to do with the way her lips were twitching at the suffering Roy was attempting to keep from his face but wasn’t successful enough to fool her) and Edward was trying to bully Alphonse into alchemically removing the ink from five particularly offensive tomes to “end those poor books’ suffering”. Roy
felt a pang of regret when he realized the Alphonse he envisioned was the one in the armour, because he hadn’t seen him as a human, and the descriptions he had been given weren’t enough to imagine him as one. Roy was very firmly not thinking about the way Maes would torment him with all the soulmate nonsense some authors liked to wax poetic about.

When Edward gave up on Alphonse and moved to try to convince Roy, he decided enough was enough. He closed the tome he had been skimming, placed it on the ‘useless’ pile and reached for one of the alchemy books he had found that the other libraries he had visited didn’t have. He very much doubted he would find anything on soul-related alchemy, but at least the alchemy books weren’t attempting to murder his brain.

Hermione had long since found a small nook in the library that housed a table with four chairs where she could study uninterrupted for as long as she wanted. It was deep into the library, half-hidden in the Muggle Studies section, behind the bookcases with the outdated collection on muggle history and technology that nobody bothered to seek out, because the standard procedure at Hogwarts was that, if you were taking Muggle Studies and needed any information that wasn’t in the textbook, you asked a classmate who knew more about muggles than you did (or just made it up).

Muggle Studies was a subject rarely taken for any other reason than it being one of the easiest classes to pass, and thus its allotted section in the library was the quietest, least visited one save for the Restricted Section. That was why Hermione was so surprised when she stepped past the history bookcase and found her nook occupied.

The table was empty, and the four chairs had been pulled out of their places and now served as improvised side tables for books, though there were more books piled on the floor than on the chairs, all of it placed around a dark haired man that was slouched over a large and dusty tome.

She immediately recognised him as the unidentified man who had been talking animatedly with Professor Dumbledore a few nights ago (there were still rumours and speculations about his identity going around the school; a large portion of the female population defended that he was their next Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, and would take over Professor Moody’s position next year). Hermione’s eyes automatically flickered to the title of the book, and she was surprised to see it was a compendium on alchemy. The alchemy section was practically across the library, which meant the man had sought out this spot, the same way she had in her first year.

Before she could think of a polite way to draw his attention, he raised his head and his eyes fell on her (and, okay, maybe a part of Hermione could understand why there had been so much swooning over him the other day during dinner). From her face, his eyes trailed to the pile of books she was carrying in her arms.

“Oh, sorry, is this your spot?” he asked, a sheepish little grin taking over his face.

“Ah, yes, yes. It is.” Hermione berated herself for stammering, but she didn’t like to be caught off guard, much less by a stranger. She never knew how to tread in those circumstances.

He closed his book, placed it on a pile to his left and made to stand. Hermione took a step forward.
“No, wait,” she said before he had done more than put his left hand on the nearest chair for leverage. He stopped and looked at her. “I don’t want to kick you out.” Her eyes ran over the spread of books. There had to be at least thirty. “This place is large enough for two. If you don’t mind sharing?”

He smiled again, tiny and maybe a little amused, and settled back.

“I guess I should free a chair for you, then,” he said, turning to remove a small stack of books from the chair closest to Hermione. Then he pushed it by the legs on the right side back to its proper position.

“Thank you,” Hermione said with a smile of her own, and walked to place her own books on the table. “Why are you on the floor?” she asked, curiosity taking the better of her.

“I find it better for research, and I can move before I get any cramps.” As if to demonstrate, he uncrossed his legs and stretched them forward, leaning his back on the leg of a chair as he did. “And it’s not as if these chairs are very comfortable.”

A true statement, Hermione conceded as she sat down. The hard-backed chairs required some getting used to, and her body still protested if she spent more than four hours in one without stretching.

“I’m Hermione Granger, fourth year,” she introduced herself, because if they were going to share a study space, the least she could do was to be polite.

“Roy Mustang, alchemist.”

“An alchemist? Like Nicolas Flamel?” If she didn’t count Professor Dumbledore, with whom she had barely spoken a handful of times, she had never met an alchemist. She had read about the subject back in her first year once they had discovered the Philosopher’s Stone was in the school, of course, but nothing more.

“I wouldn’t say like him,” Mustang replied, rubbing at the back of his neck with his right hand.

Hermione belatedly berated herself. Comparing an alchemist to Nicolas Flamel—especially one that didn’t look even thirty—must be like comparing a transfiguration apprentice to Professor Dumbledore. Intimidating, she would say.

“What are you studying?” she asked a little hurriedly, trying to avoid any awkward moments.

“Not much. I’m trying to figure out why there are differences between alchemy and all other branches of magic,” he said, gesturing a little helplessly with the book he still held.

Differences? She thought, confused, until she remembered one of the basic principles of alchemy.

“You mean equivalent exchange?”

“Amongst other things,” he admitted, and then leaned forward. “Did you know alchemy doesn’t interfere with muggle technology?”

“Really?!” she asked, whipping around in her chair to look at him fully. The inability to use magic around electrical muggle appliances was one thing she wasn’t looking forward to in her future. As much as she loved the wizarding world, there were many fields in which muggles were more advanced (for example, wizards enslaved house elves to do the job a dishwasher or a washing machine could do in a much more civilised way, she thought bitterly).
Mustang nodded.

“Yes. I fixed a television with alchemy not too long ago, actually.”

“Fixed—?” she started to ask, because her first thoughts in regards to alchemy were always the chemistry-like processes from the Middle Ages. Oh. “With a transmutation array?” she asked, fascinated. She had read about them, of course, but they were said to be difficult to use.

“Of course,” Mustang nodded, as if the idea that he wouldn’t use an array offended him.

“May I see?” she asked before her brain could filter her words. She nearly winced, because she knew how many people found her curiosity obnoxious, but Mustang just smiled at her and nodded.

He pulled a piece of chalk out of an inner pocket of his robe and looked around.

“Any request in particular?”

Hermione hesitated. She wasn’t familiar with transmutation arrays, but she knew they were supposed to be considerably more exhausting than casting a spell. She glanced around too, searching for something that didn’t seem very difficult. The idea came when she looked down at her books.

“Could you make a lectern there?” she pointed at the opposite end of the table from where she was sitting. A lectern there would allow her to consult a book without having to move her parchment around or rest it on the book itself.

“Easily,” he said with a smile that had a cocky edge to it. More like a smirk, really.

He stood up, walked to the table and quickly drew a transmutation array on the surface (Hermione was a little impressed at how little he needed to stop to think about it, and she couldn’t identify more than the symbol for wood). He rested his fingers on the finished array and it lit up, the wood on the side opposite to Hermione shrinking as a lectern rose up where Hermione had indicated, the angle just right for her to be able to read a book on it easily.

“Amazing...” she breathed once the light had vanished. While it was true that she could have transfigured it with magic, there was something... well, magical about witnessing a transmutation like that. It was beautiful and fascinating.

Mustang cleared another chair and sat down, resting his left ankle on his right knee.

“Now that you know what my research is, what about yours? That can’t be material for class,” he commented, and looked down at the title of the book on top of Hermione’s pile. The Secrets to Information: Learn to Uncover the Truth When They Don’t Want You to Know.

Hermione blushed and covered the book with her hands in embarrassment.

“It’s not what it looks like,” she mumbled and, realising how incriminating that sentence was, added: “I’m not trying to spy on anyone. It’s just... do you know Rita Skeeter?”

“The reporter?” Mustang asked. “She doesn’t give the impression of being a very serious one.”

Hermione huffed. There was an understatement.

“She isn’t. She was banned from entering the castle at the beginning of the Triwizard Tournament, and yet she’s managed to sneak in all year and learn things she shouldn’t have been able to find out
to write those awful articles of hers.”

“And you’re trying to learn how she is doing it,” Mustang surmised. “Have you spoken to Moody? That eye of his could be useful.”

“I have, but he hasn’t seen her,” Hermione admitted with a sigh. “Whatever she is doing, it fools his eye.”

Mustang hummed and leaned back on his chair.

“Given his reputation, it makes sense she would use something that could fool him... Would you like some help?”

“Eh?” Hermione blinked, caught off guard, and looked down at the collection of books on the floor. “What about your research?”

Mustang sighed dramatically.

“I’m afraid I’m at that stage where I’ll end up doing something unforgivable to a book if I don’t take a break from it.”

Hermione had to smile at that. She had experienced that feeling many times in the past.

“Alright, you can help me.”

He grinned, and it was a very nice grin.

“Have you investigated Moody’s eye?”

“No, I’ve been focusing on concealing spells. Why?”

“If you learn everything he can detect, you can discard those options and concentrate on everything else.”

“Right!” Hermione jumped to her feet, already wondering if she was more likely to find information about magical eyes in the healing section or the general information one. “I’ll be right back!” she announced, and walked out of the nook. She knew better than to run in the library.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there’s Roy’s meeting with the first third of the Golden Trio. I feel like it’s always Harry the one that first meets any character in crossovers (when it’s not the trio as a whole), so I wanted to try a different approach.

There’s a few notes for this chapter, because I just can’t help it.

On Roy’s occlumency shield: he doesn’t even know what legilimency is, but crossing the Gate gives someone an automatic, impenetrable shield. What’s the point in paying a toll if then someone can come and just pull all the knowledge from your mind without any consequences for them? Truth ensures that’s not a possibility when someone survives the encounter.
As for Roy’s age, he’s thirty (my personal headcanon is his birthday is early in the year; he was born 1885 and the Promised Day was spring of 1915), but it’s a bit of a recurring joke in the manga (mainly the strips at the end of the volumes) that he appears younger and that’s part of why he’s not taken very seriously, hence people think he’s in his late 20s here. He doesn’t even have the uniform to give him an air of authority.

About what Dumbledore thinks of the lack of a proper registry of wizards and witches: I decided that made sense because the wizarding world seems to be a very spread-out community with a good number of suspicious individuals that value their privacy, to the point where many addressed aren’t even known (let’s not forget the Fidelius, which is never even hinted to be illegal and prevents anyone from finding a place). This, I imagine, stems from the time of the witch hunts, the same reason that made them hide in the first place. As a consequence, I imagine many people would’ve gone under the radar in an attempt to stay as safe as possible. Eventually, the Ministry started to gather the community and solidify, but that couldn’t have been an easy process, and there would’ve been many opposing parties, which always makes things more complicated (plus, not everybody would be willing to accept the Ministry’s authority, just look at the Gaunt family in the 1920s). They have some serious arguments every couple years on this matter, but including things like specifically the blood status in the certificate (plus if the person is an hybrid) is one of the main reasons no law has been passed so far.

And there is also, of course, the fact that Dumbledore thinks Roy might be foreigner but can’t place his accent, which would make digging up information on him all that more complicated in case there was any somewhere.

On a side note, more for curiosity’s sake, the reason Flamel disliked arrays was because of the failed human transmutation he witnessed, not the Stone as Roy thinks. Flamel already knew some arrays by then, and he didn’t stop using them, but he became leery of developing new ones after that event.
Roy hadn’t thought he would regret not asking Barry the Chopper any specific details of how his soul had been transmuted, and yet here he was, regretting it. Barry was the only case he knew where a soul had been transmuted out of a living body and the body had still survived afterwards. It was true that Barry’s body had been at the verge of collapse by the time it had shown up at Falman’s apartment, but that could have been as easily from lacking its own soul, being incompatible with whatever animal soul had been put into it or any other option Roy could come up with, all of them as impossible to prove as the others. Roy was looking for a way to remove a foreign fragment of soul from a living body while leaving the original soul in it, which should, in theory, be a less damaging process for the body. Once Roy figured out how to do it, of course.

He needed to know if Riddle’s soul fragment had any effects on Harry Potter’s body or brain, first of all. He asked Albus about it the next time he went to Hogwarts after the thought had crossed his mind. While Harry Potter experienced no ill-effects that anyone had noticed, aside from his unusual connection to Riddle and the accompanying pain from his scar, he had inherited an ability that Albus knew of from Riddle: Potter could speak to snakes. Roy didn’t ask how doing that was possible, just nodded and accepted the skill was passed down through families and none of Potter’s close relatives had been capable of it.

Roy was still parsing through all the knowledge the Gate had given him. It was all there, and he knew he understood it on a subconscious level as part of his trip through the Gate, but he had to go over it and process it all to be able to use it more deliberately than on instinct. Because he already understood it, Roy was systematically destroying any notes he made as he studied this knowledge. Coded or not, he didn’t want to risk anyone finding and deciphering them.

Roy spent a couple afternoons per week in the library at Hogwarts, and somehow ended up assisting Hermione Granger in her project to catch Rita Skeeter when she wasn’t simply studying for her upcoming final exams (he had read Skeeter’s article about her, and understood why Hermione was so intent on catching her). He learnt about the school in conversations here and there, from the perspective of a student instead of the staff as he had so far. It turned out Hermione was a close friend of Harry Potter, probably the reason Skeeter had come up with her article in the first place —Hermione had been surprised when Roy hadn’t reacted like an awestruck idiot when that particular fact had come up— which helped Roy learn a few facts about Potter. Unsurprisingly, he didn’t enjoy the media’s attention, and perhaps more surprisingly, he hated being part of the Triwizard Tournament and wanted it to be over. Even with the dangers it posed, Roy would have expected most teenage boys to enjoy some of the benefits being a champion afforded them. He couldn’t help but imagine how Edward would have acted in that position, and all the flashy ways he would have come up with to show off.

He started to teach himself magic more seriously, because with a looming war on the horizon it would be foolish not to be as prepared as he could manage. His main focus was Defence Against the Dark Arts, backed up with a reasonable amount of Dark Arts resources from the Restricted Section whenever he was alone in the library because, while he would never use the kind of spells he found in those books, knowing what to expect from your enemies was an essential part of war. Healing was also something he looked into, mainly first-aid magic he could apply on himself. He read and practiced various assorted charms, spells and jinxes that he thought might be useful as well.
Meanwhile, whenever he wasn’t busy with his duties as headmaster, Albus was analyzing whatever information he had compiled on Riddle over the years in an attempt to figure out what objects he had turned into horcruxes. Roy left it to him, because that knowledge was of no use to him until he figured out a way to extract Riddle’s soul from Potter.

Before he knew it, June 24th had arrived, the date for the last task. Albus had invited him to attend, and so Roy used the floo to go to Albus’ office half an hour before dinner was scheduled to begin at Hogwarts, as they had agreed. (Usually, Roy had learnt, meals were much more flexible affairs at the school, but today they were on a stricter schedule because of the third task).

“Ah, Roy,” Albus greeted jovially once he had stepped out of the fireplace — at some point over the last month, Roy had grown used to travelling by floo. Albus put down his quill, pushed aside a pile of parchment that looked suspiciously like paperwork, and stood up.

“I’m not early, am I?” Roy asked, checking his watch even though he knew he was just in time. It was odd to be able to pull out his pocket watch without anybody who didn’t know him reacting to the sight of it.

“Oh, no, not at all. I believe Ludo and Cornelius have just reached the entrance of the grounds; would you care to greet them with me?” Albus offered, gesturing to the door. How he knew so well what was going on in the school was beyond Roy: inside the castle, he suspected the portraits passed along any information, but he still hadn’t figured out how Albus knew about the grounds (Albus didn’t know how Skeeter sneaked in, though, Roy had asked. He was also noticeably annoyed by her articles).

“Cornelius?” Roy asked as they descended the stairs.

“Cornelius Fudge,” Albus clarified. “He will be taking over Barty Crouch’s position as judge for the third task.”

“How is Mr. Crouch doing?” Roy asked politely, mindful that anybody could hear them in the hallway. The Ministry was trying to keep Crouch’s disappearance a secret, not a peep about the incident a month ago had been mentioned in any paper, and Albus still hadn’t managed to convince anyone in power who knew Crouch had appeared at Hogwarts that something more than Crouch just snapping due to stress and going insane had happened.

“Not very well, I’ve heard, though nobody knows exactly what the problem is.”

By the time they reached the Entrance Hall, students had started to trickle into the Great Hall. Albus led the way outside, where they waited for the rest of the guests’ arrival. Meanwhile, Albus explained about the changes made to the quidditch pitch to create a maze for the task, chuckling at the horror some students had expressed upon seeing the maze, and assured Roy that they had taken as many precautions as possible to ensure nothing would go wrong. Roy rubbed the tips of his right hand’s thumb and middle finger together in the pocket of his robe. He was again wearing the gloves without the array (he hadn’t worn gloves a single day since his arrival, he didn’t want his hands to draw attention even though he was certain Albus knew about his scars through Moody), but he had the other pair in an inner pocket. Fuck Moody’s paranoia, with the events surrounding this tournament it was very unlikely this task would go as relatively smoothly as the previous two, and anyway when the war started Roy would have to use those gloves sooner or later. They were, after all, the weapon he was most accustomed to.

Hagrid’s bulky form appeared, leading two average-sized men towards the castle. Roy could easily recognize them from the pictures he had seen in the papers.
Ludo Bagman was a former quidditch star who had, back towards the end of the war, been involved in some dubious affairs with Death Eaters and had been ultimately acquitted under the argument that he had only dealt with them because they were old family friends whom he believed to be on the Ministry’s side. Albus hadn’t expressed any suspicions of him being behind the events that had been taking place at the school, but Roy would make his own assessment of Bagman.

Cornelius Fudge was a man with a terrible taste in clothes — much worse than the average wizard, and that was saying something — who had a reputation for being a benign and easy-going politician. Reading his declarations to The Daily Prophet, though, Roy could see he was a pompous and self-centred man. And he couldn’t be as easy-going and nice as he portrayed himself to be; personal experience told Roy he wouldn’t have reached such a high position if he was.

Albus greeted them with a friendly smile, and while Bagman responded in kind, Roy noticed that Fudge’s greeting was considerably more strained, most likely as a consequence of the tension surrounding Crouch’s disappearance. He wasn’t a particularly good actor for a man in his position, Roy thought. Proper introductions followed, and Roy was unsurprised to see the same curiosity that had arisen at the staff table when he had dined there the first day. Most wizards, he knew by now, regarded alchemy as a mix of a rarity and entertainment, and treated it as such. Roy resisted the urge to rub his fingers together again, if only because he had left his hands at his sides after the mandatory handshakes.

They had just moved to walk up the entrance steps when the group of Beauxbatons students passed them, followed by Madame Maxime. She joined the party, and Roy immediately catalogued Fudge’s discomfort from the way he fidgeted and not-so-discreetly moved away from her. Madame Maxime noticed, too, judging by how the skin around her eyes tensed and her lips thinned, so Roy stepped smoothly next to her and asked about life in France, commenting he had never been to the country. He didn’t want to deal with a racist incident because an idiot couldn’t keep his mouth shut about his bigoted opinions (Madame Maxime was as tall as Hagrid, and Roy had read those articles; he could put two and two together). When they arrived at the Great Hall, Roy led her to a chair a handful of seats away from the one Fudge chose, and pulled it out for her. The only ones in their group who didn’t notice what he was doing were Fudge, who had given Roy an incredulous look when he had willingly approached Madame Maxime, and Bagman, who was talking cheerfully with Albus.

Only a few members of the staff were present by then, but the rest arrived before half the students had occupied their tables. Roy knew the families of the four champions had come to the school to witness the third task, and he checked on them discreetly as he continued his conversation with Madame Maxime. He didn’t know who, exactly, to watch out for; Karkarov appeared as illogical an option as he had from the beginning, so he wanted to identify all new faces, just in case.

Harry Potter was sitting with two adult redheads — an older woman and a young man — who didn’t look anything like him. They, in fact, resembled much more four of the students sitting with them, which was curious to say the least. Hermione was with the group, too, and at one point her attention was directed to the staff table. When she saw him, she looked surprised for just a moment before flashing him a manic grin he had seen in other people before. She had figured out the mystery.

Finally, Albus stood up to direct the champions to follow Bagman to the quidditch pitch, announcing everybody else would follow in five minutes. The Great Hall broke into applause as the champions left.

The spectators followed soon after in a disorganised mass of bodies that didn’t seem to care for student rivalries or even staff and students; everybody around Roy was too excited about the
upcoming task.

Hermione caught up to him halfway through the grounds.

“I figured it out,” she announced, grinning.

“You have?” Roy asked, interested. He had invested enough time into this project of hers that he wanted to see the results, too.

Nodding, Hermione looked around as if making sure no one was paying them any attention (no one was), and for some reason patted all over her hair before responding.

“She’s an animagus,” she said finally. “And I’m fairly certain she turns into a beetle.”

Roy faltered, and very nearly choked. He had to make himself keep walking.

“That’s not—“ he started to say, because an adult turning into a beetle could not, should not, be possible. Envy had been able to shape-shift, true, but he had been assisted by a Philosopher’s Stone. This was... This was the crazy magical world where they turned turtles into chairs. Roy shut up.

“I know it sounds unlikely,” Hermione replied, oblivious to his inner conflict. “There is a very strict control on animagi, and she’s not registered —I checked— but this makes sense.”

“You have evidence that points to it, don’t you?” Roy asked, not sure his brain was ready for whatever pseudo-reasoning could make this make sense. It was very hard to keep his poker face on.

“I do,” Hermione said, nodding vigorously. She looked sideways at him. “Could you... could you help me catch her?”

“What is your plan?” Roy asked. They were approaching the stadium, and it was a matter of a few minutes before he had to go up to the faculty stands with Albus and she had to go to the students’ ones.

Hermione pulled out a bag full of small glass containers, judging by the clinking noises and misshapen outline of the bag, and gave it to him. Roy accepted it, looking at her askance.

“Each of those vials has an unbreakable charm on them, and some leaves inside —I don’t want to kill any poor beetles. Skeeter is most likely to be either close to the judges or with us,” she said with a small grimace, referring to her group of friends, “so if you could capture any beetles you see? Or any insects,” she added hurriedly, looking up at the darkening sky, as if she hadn’t considered the time. “I imagine it’ll be too dark to distinguish them soon.”

“I’ll do my best,” Roy agreed. Then, as an afterthought, he gave her a lazy military salute, because it had been long enough that he actually missed them and they were similar enough in the muggle world. He had checked. Hermione giggled and they parted ways.

“Something I should worry about?” Albus asked, his eyes twinkling in that impossible way of his,
when Roy joined him. He looked at the bag as Roy started to pull vials out and distribute them over the pockets of his robes —magically enchanted to be larger than they appeared and not bulge out, forget physics— to avoid drawing Skeeter’s attention to the bag if she was around.

“I’m just assisting one of your students with a project.”

“Oh? Has Miss Granger figured it out, then?” The twinkle in Albus’ eyes somehow increased.

“She believes so,” Roy replied.

It was then that Ludo Bagman, his voice magnified to reach the entire stadium, announced the beginning of the third task, and everybody fell silent save for clapping at the appropriate moments of his speech.

Roy had bought himself a forearm wand holster two weeks ago, and he discreetly flicked his wrist to release his wand and summoned an insect he saw out of the corner of his eye into the first vial. Non-verbal magic was supposed to be hard to master, but Roy found it exactly as difficult as verbal spells. Perhaps because he didn’t have the preconceived notions of magic wizards grew up with or learned in school, or perhaps because the amount of control flame alchemy required meant the control needed for non-verbal magic didn’t pose a challenge to him.

The task itself was a boring affair, given that the maze and the darkness prevented the spectators from seeing what was happening inside. The only things that could be seen in the dark were the bright red stars that the teachers patrolling the edge of the maze carried on themselves, and murmurs started to rise after the first ten minutes. Speculations, no doubt. Roy knew Hagrid had been in charge of selecting most of the creatures in the maze, and from a conversation with Hermione about her classes he had learnt that the creatures Hagrid found cute, most people found terrifying and downright dangerous.

Before long, Roy was checking the crowd instead of attempting to see anything in the darkness of the maze. The stands were illuminated well enough that he could make out shapes and movement, but he saw nothing of interest; just students talking, pointing to virtually nothing —Roy followed the directions every time he saw an outstretched arm— and trying to move over one another.

The most interesting thing Roy had done so far was catch five more insects.

Then, there was a scream.

Everybody startled, rushing forward in the stands. It had been short, and high-pitched enough that Roy would bet it had come from the Beauxbatons champion, Fleur Delacour. People were murmuring now, and it only increased to an almost deafening level when Minerva McGonagall —following Moody’s directions, Roy could see— slashed through part of the hedges to levitate an unconscious Fleur Delacour out of the maze. She restored the hedges, and someone ran up to her to take Delacour away so McGonagall could continue her patrol. Moody had already moved on.

Not even five minutes later, more screaming was heard. This time, the screams were longer and desperate, filled with pain and terror —Roy knew them, Roy had caused them. Someone dashed out of the faculty stands, and Roy was on his feet and ready to go before he could think about it. A hand on his forearm stopped him.

He looked down to meet Albus’ worried eyes. Albus shook his head.

The screams had stopped.

“They can handle it,” Albus said, and Roy knew he meant the professors below. The much more
competent wizards below. What was Roy going to do? Burn the entire maze and hope he didn’t
catch any of the three children still in it? Transmute all the hedges away and force them to repeat
this task, putting them in danger all over again?

Nodding, Roy sat back down. He relaxed his right hand; he hadn’t even noticed his fingers had
been poised to snap. It was a good thing he was wearing the other gloves.

Red sparks rose in the sky, and soon afterwards Viktor Krum, unconscious, was levitated out of the
maze as well.

Roy concentrated on catching Hermione’s insects, if only because that was the only thing he could
do to distract himself from the thoughts that there were still two children traversing a maze full of
dangerous creatures.

As part of the many spellwork used on the maze, the stand where the Triwizard Tournament Cup
had been placed had been enchanted to trigger a spell that would send a column of golden sparks
into the sky as soon as one of the champions lifted it.

It was with an immense sense of relief that Roy, along with everybody he could see at least,
watched as the golden sparks rose into the sky, signalling that the cup had been claimed and the
tournament was over. Now it was only a matter of waiting for the patrolling professors to bring the
two champions out of the maze, because it could take them a while to navigate their way out on
their own. Bagman started a running commentary and speculation on who might have won. It
wasn’t particularly interesting, because the two remaining champions were the Hogwarts students.

“Shouldn’t the other champion send a sign of his location now that the task is over?” Roy asked,
because he didn’t know the exact instructions the champions had been given but that was what
made sense.

“Maybe he hasn’t seen the sparks with the hedges,” Albus offered. “But no worries: Alastor can
find him.”

It was a little anticlimactic, Roy thought, that after so much anticipation, nothing had happened.
He regretted that thought immediately when he saw a red star dart across the outside of the maze,
and identified it to be McGonagall as she hurried to cross to the stairs leading to the faculty stands.
The other stars had converged together at the entrance of the maze, but one of them was moving
inside.

Next to him, Albus stood up, and Roy followed suit. Whatever this was, he had a bad feeling about
it.

“What is happening, Dumbledore?” Fudge asked as they started to move.

“I am going to find out. Wait here, please, Cornelius.”

Whether Fudge realized that Albus didn’t want to deal with him right then, he made no movement
to follow, and soon Roy and Albus were hurrying down the stairs. They met McGonagall right
before she started climbing them.


Taking this as a cue that she could speak in Roy’s presence, McGonagall replied.

“They aren’t here!” she exclaimed in a composedly urgent manner that reminded Roy of Hawkeye.
“When Alastor checked to find the winner and the other champion, he couldn’t find them!”

Albus turned to look up the stairs for a moment, then addressed McGonagall.

“Tell Severus and Pomona to come down there, and assign the rest of the professors to ensure the students stay at their stands. If would be best if no one else interfered for now.” Which was his was to say that the Minister and the other two headmasters should stay away.

With a brisk nod, McGonagall passed them and hurried up the stairs.

“Here’s your disaster,” Roy commented unnecessarily as they got out of the way of the entrance. “Aren’t the wards supposed to prevent things like this?” The chapter in *Hogwarts: A History* covering the many measures taken to protect the school practically waxed poetry about how thorough and secure the wards placed around it were.

“They are secure, but they don’t block every means of transportation.”

Hagrid and Flitwick were waiting by the entrance of the maze, proving the one who had headed inside without waiting had, unsurprisingly, been Moody.

“Alastor has gone to investigate,” Flitwick said as soon as they were in earshot, shifting nervously from foot to foot. “Albus, he says they aren’t anywhere. Neither Potter nor Diggory.”

Albus nodded.

“Minerva should be back any moment with Severus and Pomona. When they are here, I want you to scan the perimeter outside the maze for anything that might be off. I will go inside to assist Alastor.” Hagrid and Flitwick nodded, then both of them glanced at Roy. So did Albus, and under different circumstances Roy suspected he would have been amused. “I suppose you are coming with me?”

Roy nodded. He wasn’t going to sit back and watch when this was so obviously the endgame for which Potter’s name had been entered into the tournament. Staying close to Albus was the best way to ensure he didn’t miss any relevant information, and it made sense that Albus wanted him nearby: by now Albus knew Roy well enough that he must realize ordering him to stand back would be useless, and Albus had no idea of the level of Roy’s fighting skills. Keeping him close was the easiest way to ensure he didn’t wander into the maze on his own and get himself killed (not that he would get himself killed).

Roy remembered to flick his own wand down to his right hand when he saw Albus draw his wand. Albus summoned a ball of light that hovered next to them and they stepped into the maze. He moved with purpose, clearly knowing the path to the centre, and Roy let him lead the way. Albus kept casting shield charms on the diverging paths they left behind, a good idea to keep anything from sneaking up on them.

“What means of instant transport can be used inside the wards?” Roy asked as soon as they were far enough from the entrance.

“Under these circumstances, I would say a portkey. Someone touched the cup before the boys disappeared, and given that they are both missing, I’d say they touched it at the same time.”

Roy had read about magical means of transportation in an attempt to find a less unpleasant way to reach Hogwarts than the floo, however all of the legal —and thus accessible to him— ones were either gravity-defying broomsticks he had no interest in trying, ever, or the equivalent of being sucked through a pipe. Also known as a portkey.
“Is there a way to create a portkey that only activates when a certain person touches it?” he asked, because whoever had gone to all this trouble to get Potter here had to have a way to ensure he was the one to reach it. Roy kept his thoughts firmly on the how and ignored the after, because if Potter was the target and Diggory had been taken along, the situation didn’t look good for him.

“None that I know of,” Albus replied. A giant spider appeared out of a side passage and Albus calmly set it on fire. Roy found it a little bizarre he wasn’t the one setting things on fire. “But if there is, Tom is certainly brilliant enough to figure it out.”

“And if he hasn’t?”

“Then we have a greater breach in security than I feared,” Albus replied, his voice grim. Spider aside, they hadn’t run into anything, which Roy found disturbing. Given how dangerous the other tasks had been, he would have expected to be testing his recently acquired magical knowledge by now.

“How difficult is it to make a portkey? I have never tried.”

“Not as difficult as many would think.” For a moment there, a spark returned to Albus’ eyes, and Roy wondered how many illegal portkeys he had created over the years. Albus sobered up again. “Alastor brought the cup here himself this afternoon, right before Hagrid started to set the magical creatures free into the maze.”

Roy hummed. They reached the corpse of what appeared to be a modified giant ten feet scorpion, and Roy eyed it suspiciously as they parted to walk around it.

“How much, exactly, do you trust Moody?”

Albus gave him a look that in a better situation would have been of amusement. “Alastor Moody is as likely to be working for Lord Voldemort as I am.”

“If that’s the case,” Roy started, fully aware of how most people had someone they could trust in unconditionally. Roy had no reason to share that trust, though, “that means someone managed to waltz through there, when all of the maze’s charming inhabitants were still alive, turn the cup into a portkey and leave, all the while erasing any traces of their presence. But that still leaves us the question of how they knew Potter would reach the cup first.” If Roy sounded a bit sarcastic, the situation fully warranted it. As a plan, what they knew made absolutely no sense, and the only justification he could think of for it having worked was dumb luck.

They reached Moody soon after Albus made an odd gold mist disappear, and found him muttering to himself and casting a barrage of spells on the stand that was very distinctly lacking a cup.

As soon as they stepped close, Moody’s creepy magical eye zeroed in on Roy. Roy smiled, simply because he preferred the reactions of people when he smiled at their suspicion than when he smirked or rolled his eyes.

“Aside from the fact that I am not a dark wizard, I have been in Albus’ sight all but ten minutes during the walk here from the castle. I’m afraid I’ve had no time to put my nefarious plans in action. Next time, maybe.”

Moody scoffed, gave Roy a distinctly unimpressed look, and went back to casting spells.

“What have you found, Alastor?” Albus asked.
“Nothing. Whoever did this, they didn’t put any magic on the stand, and all the traces of spells around here appear to be from the champions.” Moody gestured in the direction of a nearby dead giant spider. “It must have been the cup.”

“That’s the conclusion we have reached, too. The main questions now are who, how, and where,” Albus said, looking worriedly around at the hedges.

Just then, a silver streak flew up to them, and it materialized into a doe before Albus.

“He’s back,” Professor Snape’s voice said from it, and the doe vanished.

Moody rose from his position, half-leaning over the stand, and he and Albus looked at each other for a moment. They moved in the direction of the entrance as one. Roy followed, quickly putting the pieces together in his mind.

There was no stopping the students when Harry Potter and Cedric Diggory reappeared. Roy wasn’t close to the spot then, he had been standing to one side while Albus spoke hurriedly to Snape (much to Moody’s disapproval, on their way out of the maze Albus had explained the exact workings of the Dark Mark, and now Roy knew who the spy was) and instead of swarming them like everyone else did, he stood back and observed the crowd. The most worried and the most curious students were the ones pushing to get closer, while the rest remained at the back of the crowd.

Cedric Diggory was dead, that was the first clear piece of information that reached Roy.

It was on.

A war had started, once again triggered by the death of a child. Roy clenched his fists.

He couldn’t see the centre of the crowd, too many bodies piled too closely blocked his view, but he knew Albus, Moody, and Fudge had pushed their way there. The rest of the staff had remained out of the crowd, and Roy watched as Albus came out a minute later, looked for Professors Snape and McGonagall and gestured them to follow him. His eyes met Roy’s, and he hesitated for just a moment before gesturing for him to follow as well. It was a good decision on his part, because Roy had been dead serious about wanting to know everything, and he would have followed them anyway.

He ignored the dubious glances McGonagall and Snape sent him, the same way that Albus ignored the questioning ones aimed at him. They walked briskly towards the castle, and once they were far enough from the crowd that they couldn’t hear them Albus spoke.

“Alastor has taken Harry away from the stadium.”

“Mr. Potter needs medical attention and to be away from the crowd, that might be a good idea,” McGonagall said, but she didn’t slow down at all.

“The Alastor Moody I know would never have taken Harry away from the scene, much less without warning me first.”
They crossed the castle’s main doors and hurried to the staircase.

“The Alastor Moody you know?” Snape asked, voicing Roy’s exact thoughts.

“I am starting to suspect we might find a surprise.” He looked at Roy as they climbed the stairs. “I believe you were right in being suspicious.”

Again, Snape and McGonagall looked at him.

“Did Potter tell you anything?” Roy asked.

“He said Voldemort is back,” Albus replied gravely, turning into a hallway. McGonagall took in a sharp breath and her steps faltered before she got a hold of herself and followed.

Roy knew they were approaching their destination because Albus slowed the slightest bit before speaking.

“That office is full of foe detecting artefacts. We don’t have the luxury of opening the door before attacking, so aim your strongest stunners at it. We can’t risk hurting Harry.”

Roy had never cast a stunner on another living being before, unless insects counted, but he had practiced the spell enough that he knew he could cast it. Not holding back was not a problem. This may not be alchemy, but the energy source was the same. He just had to attack as if he intended to incinerate a body.

*Like the Promised Day.*

Four stunners flew out at once, blasting the office door out of its hinges. When the dust cleared, the man who might or might not be Alastor Moody was sprawled on the floor, unconscious, and Harry Potter stared at them through a mirror, wide-eyed.

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Barty Crouch Jr.

Albus was still reeling from the story he had just heard, the chain of love, pity, misguided intentions, cruelty, and insanity that had eventually resulted in Lord Voldemort’s return to power tonight.

He stood up, cast a binding spell on the still grinning Crouch and turned to look at the others in the room.

Winky was sobbing uncontrollably, still kneeling on the ground. After tonight, Albus suspected she would have a harder time than she already had to get back on her feet.

Severus stood next to her, face white and fists clenched tightly, though not many people would notice a difference from his usual countenance. To Albus, though, it was glaringly obvious, made only worse by the tight, haunted look reflected in his eyes. It had been thirteen years since Albus had last seen that look, and he truly wished the time to see it again had never come.

Minerva’s paleness was more noticeable, her lips pressed into a thin, hard line as she glared down
at the insane Barty Crouch Jr.

Harry appeared to be mostly in shock, slight incredulity still painting his features. Albus knew he had liked the man he had believed to be Alastor Moody, and learning that everything had been an act to deliver him straight to Tom must have hurt. People had died in the process, too, and Albus needed to make sure Harry didn’t blame himself for those deaths. Especially Cedric Diggory’s. By the way Harry had acted outside, he already did.

Roy was standing by the wall against the door, arms crossed over his chest. His expression was one of grim determination, but there was no noticeable paleness or fear on it.

Looking at Roy reminded Albus of something that had slipped his mind in the excitement of the night and he turned to Crouch again.

“I have one last question.” In the stupor caused by the Veritaserum, Crouch didn’t react. “Have you told Lord Voldemort about Roy Mustang?”

He could sense the inquisitive glances sent his way, except for Roy’s, who was now staring at Crouch intently. Crouch’s smile grew.

“Yes. My master was most pleased. He thought he had lost it with Flamel’s death. My master knew he couldn’t get it out of Dumbledore. But now here Mustang is. An alchemist who can create the Philosopher’s Stone.” Audible gasps followed these words, and Albus heard movement behind him. He looked only at Roy, who was still staring at Crouch.

“Well,” Roy said after a short silence, “it appears I’m in trouble.”

“In trouble?!?” Minerva gasped, and Albus turned to see she was looking at Roy with incredulous eyes. “You have become one of Lord Voldemort’s main targets, young man!”

It was interesting that Roy didn’t even flinch. Most people, when faced with the truth that they had drawn the Death Eaters’ attention, much more if it was Voldemort himself, were terrified and wanted a way to flee, to disappear without leaving a trace. Roy just smiled wryly.

“Minerva,” Albus said, deciding to leave the puzzle that was his new friend for another time, “could I ask you to stand guard here while I take Harry upstairs?”

“Of course,” said Minerva. She still appeared unsteady, as if she very much wished to sit down and take a moment to just breathe deeply and attempt to process the overload of information. However, her hand was firm when she aimed her wand at Crouch, and Albus had no doubt her capacity for casting a spell hadn’t been compromised, should she need it.

“Severus,” Albus continued, turning to look at him, “please tell Madam Pomfrey to come down here; we need to get Alastor Moody into the hospital wing.” He turned to Roy then. “If you could go with him? I believe Harry’s friends will be there by now, and they must be very worried; they could use some reassurance.” Roy nodded in understanding. Albus needed to sort everything out and talk to Harry before they could begin to guess what, exactly, Tom had done to return. It would be best for Harry to talk before as little people as possible right now. He looked at Severus again. “After that, go down into the grounds, find Cornelius Fudge, and bring him up to this office. He will undoubtedly want to question Crouch himself. Tell him I will be in the hospital wing in half an hour’s time if he needs me.”

Severus nodded, turned around, and left without even casting a glance at Roy. Roy, appearing unfazed by Severus’ brusque manner, followed.
Finally, Albus turned to Harry.

Chapter End Notes

One thing I really like about the way Crouch impersonates Moody is how he expresses his own thoughts (as the time he tells Harry there’s nothing he hates more than a Death Eater who walked free) and does questionable things he wants (like turning Malfoy into a ferret) but does it in a way that it appears as something Moody would do. I’m kind of glad I got to use it in this story, honestly.
Okay, so here’s the next chapter.

And I have a beta! :D Lindril has nicely offered to help me with this (and the scientific part of alchemy, which you guys should be VERY grateful for, because I pretty much suck at science) —bows— Thank you so much for helping!

And also thank you to everybody for the wonderful comments, I’m really happy by the reception this story has had so far :D

Roy had no idea where the hospital wing was, so he let Snape lead the way. They were both silent, but Snape was sneaking glances at him every now and then.

“You should just ask,” Roy told him eventually, though he already knew what the question would be about.

“Why haven’t you made it?”

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

Snape scoffed and threw him an amazing unimpressed look.

“Crouch said you can create it, not that you have.” He had an impressively derisive voice as well. If he used any variation of those two elements in class, Roy understood why Hermione had hinted that Snape wasn’t exactly the most popular professor amongst the students.

“Some things, Professor, are best left out of this world.”

A strange look crossed Snape’s face, a mix of understanding and confusion. It was as if he understood the concept, but didn’t know what it had to do with the Philosopher’s Stone. Good for him, Roy thought.

“I’ll talk to Madam Pomfrey,” Roy offered once they reached the hospital wing, and Snape left with a nod and a grunt that might have been assent.

Roy pushed the door open, and the action immediately drew the attention of the five occupants of the room. Madam Pomfrey looked annoyed, the three redheads present —the two adults and the boy who looked to be around Hermione’s age— appeared dejected when they saw him, but Hermione perked up.

“Roy!” she exclaimed before he was completely inside the room (he had insisted she used his first name the first time she had called him ‘Mr. Mustang’), and she came over to him. “You left with Professor Dumbledore, didn’t you?” The others looked at him with interest at that. “Have you seen Harry?”

“Yes. He doesn’t appear to have any serious injuries,” Roy offered. There was something off with
Potter’s leg, he had noticed, but nothing worth worrying about. Before Hermione could ask any of the questions he saw bubbling on her face, he gestured for her to wait and turned to Madam Pomfrey. “Madam Pomfrey, the headmaster asked if you could go to Professor Moody’s office. There is a patient waiting to be moved here,” he explained, as vague as he could make it. “Not Harry,” he added when he saw the others worrying instantly.

Madam Pomfrey sighed and nodded. She went for a bag —Roy assumed it was something like a first aid kit— and left the hospital wing muttering about irresponsible headmasters kidnapping her patients.

“Do you know… what happened?” Hermione asked, suddenly much more hesitant.

Roy shook his head. She meant tonight, he could tell as much, and it wasn’t a lie to say he had no idea what Potter had experienced while he had been away. He had no intention of sharing anything else; while he suspected Potter would tell his friends, Roy didn’t know who the adults were or if they were trustworthy. It was up to Albus to share information now: Roy would just observe.

“You should ask Harry, but it’s probably best if you wait at least until tomorrow,” he suggested, because he had seen how anxiously everyone here had been crowded around Madam Pomfrey. “He appeared very affected.”

Hermione nodded, biting her lower lip.

“Where is he?”

“Talking with Professor Dumbledore. They should be down here in around half an hour.”

They trailed into silence, the group appearing too worried to start a conversation. It wasn’t long before the door opened again, and Madam Pomfrey walked in with a grim expression on her face, levitating the unconscious Alastor Moody behind her. Their entrance drew everyone’s attention, and Roy took the chance to retreat to lean against the wall right off the door. He needed to think.

McGonagall hadn’t been exaggerating when she said Roy had become one of Riddle’s main targets. Riddle had dared to possess a professor and come to Hogwarts —under Albus’ nose— at his weakest time in an attempt to steal the Philosopher’s Stone. Roy, a no name alchemist that nobody had heard about or known until he had shown up at Hogwarts a month ago, was a much easier means to acquire the Stone in Riddle’s eyes. Obsessed with immortality as Riddle was, Roy knew there was no way for him to avoid being in the centre of this war now. (He rubbed his thumb and middle finger together; it had become a bit of a nervous habit lately).

There was Potter, too: Riddle’s pride must have been really stung about his previous defeats if he had gone to such an extent to capture him, which meant Potter was in as much danger as Roy here (it also brought up the point that Riddle must not know Potter had part of his soul in him, otherwise he would want to keep Potter alive, which meant he had no conscious connection to the horcruxes; that, at least, would prove useful once they located them).

Albus was another main target, of course, given how crucial his intervention had been during the previous war.

Then there were the people who would be dragged into the war. People were always dragged into wars, whether they wanted to take part in them or not. Roy’s eyes slid to Hermione. She was Potter’s close friend, which alone was enough to mark her as one of Potter’s weaknesses, and she was also a muggleborn.
Moody had just been given a sleeping draught—to prevent him from waking up, because he had remained unconscious throughout the medical examination— when Albus finally arrived escorting an exhausted-looking Potter with him. And a dog (Roy remembered Albus had asked McGonagall to take a dog to his office before Crouch’s interrogation, an odd request).

“I will be back to see you as soon as I have met with Fudge, Harry,” Albus said once he had arranged for the dog to stay with Potter.

“May I accompany you?” Roy asked, drawing attention to himself for the first time in a while. Fudge’s reaction, as the Minister for Magic, was an important aspect of tonight’s events, and Roy wanted to be there to witness and analyze it.

“Of course,” Albus agreed easily. The redhead woman—Molly, Albus had called her—turned to look at Albus in surprise. Albus ignored her and spoke to Potter instead. “I would like you to remain here tomorrow until I have spoken to the school.” It was probably for the best. Potter was going to be pestered with questions no matter what (or avoided, maybe, depending on the stories the rumour mill decided were most likely or interesting to spread), but it would be better if some damage control had been done before he was exposed to the rest of the student body.

Albus gestured for Roy to follow him and they left the hospital wing.

“What happened?” Roy asked as soon as they were out of hearing range from the doors.

“Harry shared with me everything that happened since the cup took him and Mr. Diggory away from the school, including the ritual Tom used to build himself a new body. I’d like to analyze the memory in my pensieve with you later, once every impending matter has been taken care of, to see if you spot anything I might miss on my own.”

Roy nodded. He had no idea what a pensieve was, or how a memory of all things could be analyzed by someone who hadn’t experienced it, but he wasn’t going to ask. Instead, he would look the term up later in the library when he had a chance. He doubted Albus would have much free time tonight.

“But I believe the first matter we need to discuss is your situation,” Albus said, glancing sideways at Roy. By now it was obvious they were heading to Albus’ office: given that Fudge hadn’t shown up at the hospital wing despite the time that had passed—which had exceeded the half hour estimation by far—it was likely he would want to meet Albus there (a self-important politician, Roy hadn’t been wrong).

“Ah. Yes. I suppose I can’t remain at the Leaky Cauldron when Riddle is after my head, now can I?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“You have already thought of a solution,” Roy guessed. For some reason, the stairs behaved today, just like they had earlier, as they climbed up to the third floor.

Albus smiled.

“I have been thinking of it since we first met, actually.” They reached the gargoyle and Albus named something Roy knew was a sweet but had no intention of trying, ever, just because of that name. They stepped on the ascending stairs. “I don’t know how familiar you are with Hogwarts and its curriculum, but for the last few hundred years there hasn’t been much consistency in the teaching of alchemy. It has been in and off, based mainly on the availability of a professor.”
They entered the office, where the portraits weren’t bothering to fake sleep today.

“Oh, dear,” Roy took advantage of a lull in Albus’ speech to interject, “I hope you’re not suggesting what it appears you are. I would be an abysmal professor.”

“Would you?” Albus asked with a slightly amused glint to his eyes. “You are a very likeable man, and it seems to me you are a diligent scholar as well, something that requires patience. It is a good trait for a professor.”

Roy very nearly scoffed. He held it in, but it was a close call.

“I’m motivated, it’s not the same. But I am harsh and demanding, and I have no tolerance for stupidity or laziness.” Despite what his and his office’s reputation and outward appearance was, when it came down to important matters they were all efficient to a fault, and the best at what they did. And Roy had been called a slave-driver on a number of occasions.

Albus just appeared even more amused.

“You should watch Severus teach one of his classes. I won’t force you to do it, Roy, but Hogwarts is the safest place in the British wizarding world, and here you would have access to the most resources. Not to mention, we could easily work on anything that presents itself.”

Roy knew that Albus was right, as much as he didn’t want him to be. But the idea of teaching a bunch of noisy, hormonal teenagers was... Roy imagined himself trapped in a classroom with twenty Edward Elrics (then again, twenty Edwards would mean twenty geniuses, which would at least be interesting: Roy expected to encounter a fair share of idiots amongst the students).

“I have conditions,” he settled on finally.

“Which conditions?”

“Give me twenty-four hours and you’ll have them on your desk.” Because Roy had only come up with a couple of them, but if he was going to do this, he intended to turn the situation as much to his advantage as he could manage. And make it the least painful he could, too.

“Very well,” Albus agreed, nodding. He still looked annoyingly amused, and now pleased with himself.

“Headmaster!” Someone yelled, and it took Roy a moment of glancing around to realize it came from one of the portraits. It wasn’t a former headmaster, but a pretty lady in an elegant gown that appeared... winded. “There’s trouble! You have to go to—!” The portrait paused to think. “They should be heading to the hospital wing. You must go!”

Roy followed Albus down the stairs and they hurried through the hallways, amongst a veritable flurry of activity and furious whispering from the portraits that were running from one frame to another. A variety of them confirmed in passing that yes, whatever was going on was currently in the hospital wing.
They didn’t run into any students —Roy was willing to bet the students had all been sent to their common rooms after the end of the task— and soon were approaching the doors of the hospital wing. They could hear raised voices inside.

Albus went in first, striding into the hospital wing in clear annoyance —neither Potter nor Moody needed something like that ruckus in their condition— and asked what was going on. Roy slipped in unnoticed, because Professor McGonagall was practically shrieking accusations about Fudge, while Fudge defended himself indignantly and Snape glared at him. Everybody else —including a very much awake Harry Potter— was staring.

Roy leant against the wall out of the way, crossed his arms over his chest and observed.

Fudge had brought a creature with him, called a dementor, which had killed Crouch straight away, no questions asked. Whatever a dementor was, something that could kill so easily was something Roy needed to look up and learn how to block, especially if the government had control over them. Given what he was witnessing here, it would be best to be prepared. No matter what Fudge said about his personal security, that had clearly been a very ill-advised manoeuvre on his part to cover up everything they had discovered tonight, one that would only bring trouble and eventually backfire horribly.

The situation spiralled down from there. In Roy’s mind, Fudge went from self-important pompous man to an absolute power-obsessed idiot who would cling to any straw (even what he read from reporters as reliable as Rita Skeeter) to uphold the illusion of his happy world, and it became clear early on that he would not be swayed from his belief that Crouch had been acting alone out of a delusion. Every attempt to convince him otherwise only served to make him increasingly suspicious of Albus and his intentions.

Fudge finally left, disdainfully throwing the tournament’s prize on Potter’s bed and finishing with an ominous announcement that he would return the following day to discuss how the school was run. By all appearances, Albus seemed to disregard these words, though Roy knew he was more than intelligent enough to realize the rift that had just opened between him and the Ministry of Magic would cause trouble, and he started to direct people.

He sent the redheaded young man off to contact his father, who apparently worked at the Ministry and had been a member of Albus’ guerrilla order the first time around, warning him about what had just happened and charging him with the task of finding useful allies amongst the Ministry employees. Roy knew from similar experience that it was a dangerous job. Professor McGonagall went to look for Hagrid and Madame Maxime, which Roy suspected was related to Albus’ earlier suggestion to Fudge about contacting the giants (Fudge had been horrified by it, his racism preventing him from seeing the advantages of gaining an ally that otherwise would most likely become a dangerous enemy). Albus charged Madam Pomfrey with tending to the house elf that had been sobbing uncontrollably during Crouch’s interrogation, effectively making her leave the room without it appearing that he wanted her away (which he might or he might not; while Snape was clearly part of Albus’ order and Roy was reasonably sure McGonagall was as well, he didn’t know how involved the remaining members of the staff were, if at all).

Then Albus closed the door and turned to the remaining people in the room, except for Roy, who was still leaning against the wall separated from the group. Everybody was still looking at Albus, waiting for instructions.

“And now,” he said, “it is time for two of our number to recognize each other for what they are. Sirius... if you could resume your usual form.”

Roy very nearly jumped out of his skin when the dog that had come in earlier with Albus
transformed into a man. Hermione had mentioned it when she explained her theory that Rita Skeeter was an animagus, but seeing it was an entirely different story. It defied so many laws in so many scientific fields that Roy’s brain didn’t even know where to start complaining about how that shouldn’t have been possible.

Molly screamed, mercifully dragging Roy’s mind away from that particular path of suffering.

“Sirius Black!”

That name was faintly familiar, and it took Roy a moment to remember where he had learnt it.

“Mum, shut up!” the redheaded boy yelled, very insensitively, at her. “It’s okay!”

“You’re the mass murderer,” Roy said at around the same time, finally calling attention to himself. He had read the occasional newspaper article reminding the population that Sirius Black still roamed free. His presence here suggested a more complex story.

“Who are you?” Black asked, glaring at him suspiciously.

Judging by the way most people present were looking at him, they were wondering the same thing, though in varied states of emotion. Snape was glaring at Black, completely disregarding Roy’s presence; Hermione appeared mostly curious, probably wondering what exactly Roy had to do with all of this now that she was reassured Potter was fine; Potter himself was giving him a suspicious look, matched by his redheaded friend and, to a lesser extent, Molly.

Albus smiled.

“Oh, of course. This is Roy Mustang, he will be joining the school’s staff starting next year, and he is assisting me with a few projects as well.” Here, Albus’ eyes twinkled, but the implication that Roy would also be part of this guerrilla order of his (to which he hadn’t explicitly agreed, but he knew it was part of the deal) was enough to lessen the suspicion and return everyone’s attention to the matter at hand. Albus really did have an impressive amount of authority over these people.

The matter Albus wanted to settle was a very obvious enmity between Snape and Black, something that wouldn’t be put aside with a handshake. Whatever had happened between those two, it appeared like they wouldn’t even bother to assist each other during a battle. That was bad.

Black was sent to round up what Albus had referred to as the old crowd, while Snape was sent to return to Voldemort’s side. This fact was not stated out loud, but the way Albus asked him if he was ready to do what Albus needed of him and the way Snape had paled when he had agreed were enough for Roy to figure it out. Roy didn’t envy Snape’s position, and seeing the apprehensive look with which Albus followed his departure, he expected he wouldn’t return in the best of shapes.

Finally, Albus turned to Roy.

“Our conversation will have to wait, I’m afraid. I must go downstairs to see the Diggorys. In the meantime, I’ll have the house elves set a room for you. Is there anything you need to retrieve from the Cauldron?”

“Just a few things.”

“I can have a house elf go there in a moment. Unless you would rather do it yourself?” Roy understood what he wasn’t saying: while it was unlikely for the Death Eaters to strike this early, Albus would feel better if Roy didn’t leave the school when they had no clue about Riddle’s plans.
Roy might have objected, but he carried everything of value on his person, and finally simply shrugged.

“A house elf is fine. Everything is either in the closet, my suitcase or on the desk.”

Albus nodded, and Roy didn’t think he had imagined the relief in his eyes. It was one less thing to worry about.

“Harry,” Albus continued, turning to the bed, “take the rest of your potion. I will see all of you later.”

Albus left, and Roy followed him out, not interested in whatever personal drama was about to unfold in the hospital wing.

He went to the library. Not only didn’t he have a room yet, he doubted he would be able to fall asleep anytime soon. First of all, he searched for a guide on magical creatures to look up the creature that had killed Crouch; a dementor, it had been called. It wasn’t mentioned in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, the only book on magical creatures he had browsed before, and it took a while to find it.

It was a good thing the library was deserted of students and he wasn’t anywhere near the librarian’s desk, because Roy dropped the book with the information on the stone floor when he read the entry on those creatures.

Fudge had taken Albus’ words as a challenge. The Ministry of Magic was going to deny Voldemort’s return until it slapped them on the face so hard they couldn’t deny it anymore. To do so, they would try to undermine and oppose Albus. The Ministry of Magic had control over the dementors. Dementors could be used as weapons.

Roy reached down for the book, leafed through the pages until he found the right one again and looked for a way to defeat them. There was no known way to kill them according to the book, but a spell known as a *patronus*, claimed to be remarkably difficult to master, could drive them away.

An image of Riza bleeding over a transmutation circle flashed through his mind.

The Gate.

Yelling at the receiver of a phone for Maes to answer.

*Ishval.*

Roy was going to master that spell if it killed him.

Shaking his head, Roy confirmed that the spell wasn’t explained in this book, closed it, and put it back in its shelf. He pulled out his notebook and wrote down the name of the spell. He would search for it later, probably in a couple days. For now, he had some urgent things to do. He didn’t know what a pensieve was, for one, or whether it was a common object or not; he couldn’t risk being caught off guard by it and giving himself away to someone as perceptive as Albus.

Wizards didn’t have anything as practical as an encyclopaedia (of course they didn’t, they didn’t know what the word practical even meant) and Roy was left browsing through books on random magical artefacts. It was tedious, and his mind wandered to other things. Namely, teaching alchemy. Roy hadn’t paid much attention to the explanation of how that had been handled in *Hogwarts: A History*, and he collected the book when he went in search of another one on magical artefacts.
He decided quickly that he wasn’t going to follow the traditional teaching method.

Roy didn’t attend breakfast the following morning. He had spent most of the night in the library, even after a house elf had popped up—the elf had been very lucky that Roy had been wearing the gloves without his array stitched on them—and informed him where the room that had been prepared for him was.

He debated whether or not to attend breakfast, but he knew Albus would address the school about the events from the previous night and decided against it. The mood would be gloomy, and there would be mourning and tears. It was selfish on his part, but Roy preferred to avoid it if it was possible.

He had found one of the vials containing an insect when he had removed his robe last night, remembering then Hermione’s operation, and had decided to take the insects to her. At this hour she could either be still at the Gryffindor tower, the Great Hall or already in the hospital wing. She would eventually go there to check on Potter if she hadn’t already, and so Roy headed there himself.

They crossed paths on the hallway outside the hospital wing.

“Oh, hello, Roy,” she greeted him, a little subdued, and glanced at the closed doors. “The Diggorys came to visit Harry.”

Roy nodded in understanding. That conversation was better had in private.

“Did you have any luck last night?” Roy asked her.

“No,” Hermione replied with a sigh, “but there wasn’t one of her articles in the paper, either.” Or any article at all about last night. Roy had checked. That was probably Fudge’s doing.

“Well, maybe it’s one of mine,” Roy offered. Hermione perked up, eyes shining viciously, and Roy imagined she had forgotten about that with everything else that had happened.

“Of course! Let’s go... there should be an empty classroom around.” She started walking again. Roy followed, amused by the sudden change in demeanour. Hermione tested the handle of a door. It was closed, so she pulled out her wand and cast an *alohomora* at it. She poked her head into the room, which was presumably empty, and she walked in.

Roy closed the door once he was inside and warded it, because there was likely going to be a good deal of blackmailing happening here, and those things were best kept private.

“Here we go,” Roy said, walking to a nearby desk to start putting vials down. “Do you have a way to test it without letting her out of the flask?” he asked Hermione.

“Yes. I had to look it up, because the spell Sirius and Professor Lupin used wouldn’t work in this case,” she said, talking mostly to herself, and took out her wand. The spell was one of the most ridiculously swishy ones Roy had ever seen, but Hermione shrieked in triumph when one of the insects glowed bright blue. “YES!” She jumped in place excitedly, the very picture of someone
celebrating a huge victory.

The glowing beetle flew up in the vial, hitting the bottom of the cork keeping it closed, and went back down again.

Hermione bounced over to it and crouched down to be as close to eye level as possible.

“Well, hello there, Rita. It’s a real pleasure to see you,” she practically crooned, her resentment plain on her face. “Now, don’t try to pretend you’re just a beetle, or I’ll keep you in there until you change your mind. Are we clear? Fly up and down twice if we are.”

It took a painstakingly long moment, but the beetle complied. Hermione grinned sharply.

“Well’s talk. You’ve been writing a lot of harmful articles, telling lies about people, and that won’t do. So I’ll make you a deal. Unless you want your dirty secret to be spilled to the Ministry —and I hear the sentence for being an unregistered animagus is really quite harsh— you will stop writing articles altogether for, say... a year. Let’s see if that helps you stop being such a liar.”

Roy shook his head. Hermione may be a brilliant girl (she had to be, if she had managed to figure out something like this), but she was still just that: a girl. She had no idea of how to handle the fine art of blackmail. He took a step forward and placed a hand on her shoulder to draw her attention.

“If I may?” he asked when she looked up at him.

Hermione nodded, frowning in confusion, and stood up to let him the space. Roy crouched before Skeeter’s vial.

“Hello, Miss Skeeter. You don’t know me, and given your reputation I wouldn’t have minded if things stayed that way, but now that we have met, we should get to business. While I think a sabbatical year would do you some good —and damage your bank account, which I imagine is what bothers you the most right now— we’ll add a few more stipulations to the arrangement. You are no longer allowed to write any articles —or, really, anything— about, or even slightly related to, either Harry Potter or Hermione Granger without their explicit permission. If they do agree, you will adhere to the truth and their exact words, otherwise you will be the one to appear on the front page of the Prophet. I’m sure one of the most controversial reporters of the wizarding world being an unregistered animagus will draw a considerable amount of attention from the public. And, because I have seen what your petty vindictiveness can lead you to, the same conditions about Hermione and Harry apply to me in case it ever crosses your mind to write about me. My name is Roy Mustang. That way you can’t attempt to use the weak excuse that you didn’t know the face associated to the name. Fly up and down twice if you have understood and agree to the terms.”

Today had not been a good day.

Albus leant back in his chair and pulled his glasses off to rub at the bridge of his nose. By midday, he had received letters from all the old members of the Order of the Phoenix confirming that they would assist in this new war as well as a letter from Charlie Weasley that had just arrived, in which he asked to join the Order. That was good, but everything else...
Alastor was still unconscious in the hospital wing. Albus wanted to wait until Harry was gone to wake him up, because that first conversation would not be easy. He couldn’t predict, at this moment, how Alastor would recover from his ordeal.

Albus had spent the entire morning in his office with Cornelius Fudge, trying to convince him, to no avail, of how real Tom’s return was. Fudge was no more willing to believe him today than he had been last night, and he had brought with him an absurdly long list of elements about the running of the school that he disagreed with. All of them petty and trivial, most likely thought up in a hurry to try to support a nonexistent point. For each and every one of those elements, Albus had reminded him that the Ministry of Magic didn’t have the authority to make those decisions about Hogwarts.

He feared Fudge would attempt to change that.

More letters, other than those from the Order members, had started to flood in as well: worried parents asking about the safety of their children and angry parents demanding answers about the security breach last night. Even if nothing had appeared in the *Prophet*, that hadn’t prevented the students from writing home.

Albus had attempted to release a statement in the *Prophet*, but his request had been denied. On Fudge’s orders, he had no doubt.

As for Tom, he had made no movements. If Albus knew him at all (and he liked to think that he did), Tom would wait for the Ministry to take an official stance, and lay low to rebuild his forces if Fudge didn’t come to his senses. Upon returning early this morning, Severus had informed Albus that Tom had given the Death Eaters orders to do nothing for the time being. Right now Severus was in his rooms, recovering from his meeting with Tom. He had refused to go to Poppy, just like he had always refused in the past when he had been in a good enough shape to walk.

There was a knock on the door, and Albus rubbed the bridge of his nose again and put his glasses back on before calling out.

“Come in.”

It was Roy, impeccably dressed as always and with bags under his eyes that suggested he hadn’t had any more luck than Albus in falling asleep.

“Is this a bad time?” Roy asked as soon as his eyes landed on Albus, no doubt noticing his mirrored exhaustion.

“Not really,” replied Albus, gesturing for him to step inside. “I could use a break from the post.” Because he was still writing back to the parents, and he had been basically rephrasing the same two sentences for the last hour. “Do you have your report?”

Roy closed the door and walked to one of the armchairs in front of Albus’ desk.

“I haven’t actually written it down. I figured you wouldn’t appreciate the extra paperwork. Although…” Roy crossed his legs and leant back in the armchair with a small smirk, “I’m sure I could fill at least two rolls of parchment if you’d prefer.”

Albus shook his head, thankful for the amusement the offer provided.

“There is no need for that. A reasonable conversation between two adults will do me much good right now.”
“I gather things didn’t go well with the Minister?”

“Not at all,” Albus said wearily. “All we can do is now wait and see what happens.” Roy nodded. “Then... Alchemy?”

“I refuse to teach it the way it has been taught before,” was Roy’s instant reply, and Albus couldn’t even pretend to be surprised. Roy had very particular views on alchemy, after all. “But I am not sure how to work that with the N.E.W.T.s. I haven’t found any curriculum for them.”

“Oh, that is because there is none,” Albus supplied, earning a sceptical look from Roy. “Some disciplines, such as potions, charms, or transfigurations, have certain guidelines and recommendations, but most don’t. The N.E.W.T.s assess the students’ higher level of proficiency in a field, and the deeper one delves into a field, the more branches of specialization there are available. If a student were to sit through an alchemy N.E.W.T. with a tenth of the knowledge of arrays you have displayed,” and given the ease with which Roy had done so, Albus was certain he hadn’t shown everything he knew, “they would earn an ‘Outstanding’, even if he didn’t expand on any of the other branches.”

Roy’s lips twitched in amusement.

“That’s good to know. I also want to extend teaching it down from third year.”

“Oh?” Now that was an unexpected request. “There is no alchemy O.W.L.”

Roy shrugged.

“That’s irrelevant. I want to be able to observe Potter, but starting a class from fifth year would be too obvious.”

To see if now that Tom was back Harry experienced any ill-effects, Albus suspected. It was a lot of extra work to take on, though. He wondered how Roy planned to deal with it and his other work.

“How do you know Harry will take the class?”

Roy smiled, amused.

“I’ve heard from a reliable source that he doesn’t exactly enjoy his divination classes. If he is given a chance to change it for a class in which he won’t be behind the other students, one that one of his closest friends will undoubtedly take as well, I daresay he’ll jump at the opportunity.”

Chapter End Notes

For a moment, when I first started this, I considered the possibility of not having Roy become a professor, but then I realised that with Umbridge in the picture that might be problematic. Besides: Umbridge. Imagine the possibilities (and I do have a few ideas for Roy at Hogwarts that I want to explore: this story is NOT going to be a canon retelling, so don’t fear there). Also, if you suspect Roy hasn’t told Dumbledore his whole reasoning for wanting to teach more classes, you’re right.

In case someone is wondering about it, the reason Roy hasn’t intervened in the
planning so far is because Dumbledore’s actions the first night when Voldemort comes back are actually the reasonable ones: gather his people, send some of them to find allies and try to learn what the enemy’s movements could be. That’s really all he could do then, aside from informing Harry of the truth. But Roy doesn’t know about that part, so he can’t comment on it.

You guys may have noticed Roy makes no mention of the dementors’ ability to suck out a soul and he directly jumps to the conclusion that Crouch is dead. That’s not a mistake, there’s a logical explanation for it. During McGonagall’s original rant, she says the dementor sucked Crouch’s soul right away and that he won’t be able to testify, never specifying if he is still ‘alive’. We know the body continues to function without a soul, but whether the person is alive it’s really up for debate. Roy, with his knowledge on soul alchemy and his experience with Al (who only had his soul for four years) is of the opinion that while both body and soul are part of a person, the essence of a person is the soul: as far as Roy is concerned (this is the conclusion he reaches once he learns what a dementor is), if the dementor sucks someone’s soul, that person is dead. He has further proof to justify this mindset with the whole situation regarding Barry the Chopper and his body.
Chapter 7

The last week of the school term was a deceptively calm one. The students were much more subdued than Roy had seen them before, and Cedric Diggory’s name could be heard frequently in whispered conversations in the hallways, accompanied often by Harry Potter’s. The students as a whole had decided to avoid Potter instead of accosting him with questions, which was probably the better alternative for him right now. Potter himself could rarely be seen walking the halls without at least either Hermione or the redheaded boy accompanying him. It was a good thing that he had friends willing to stick with him through this. Roy knew how much of a difference someone’s support could make during a difficult time.

As for Roy, he remained at Hogwarts, his presence becoming the second favourite gossip topic for the students. Roy occupied the space that should have been Karkarov’s during meals (Karkarov had, unsurprisingly, fled Hogwarts the night of the third task) and made an effort to get to know and catalogue all the members of the staff. They had been informed the day after the third task that Roy would be joining them next year, and were reasonably interested in him given the circumstances.

The second day Albus managed to free two hours in the evening to go over the memory of his conversation with Potter (as it turned out, pensieves were uncommon enough objects that it wouldn’t have been strange for Roy not to know about them). From Potter’s description of the ritual, Roy concluded that it was very likely something that classified as one of the acts that would have sent Riddle to the Gate. Creating mindless dolls meant to be moved by a Philosopher’s Stone the way the brass had done and used in the Promised Day only skirted the line, but creating a body meant to house and respond to a fragment of a soul was the kind of act Truth would most certainly punish.

There was also the detail of the magical protection against Riddle that Potter had received when his mother had died. Albus called it the power of love, Roy called it a spell Lily Potter had probably created herself to use as a desperate last measure (if love could protect that way, Roy suspected many more people would have survived the killing curse). They agreed to disagree.

The morning of the third day a portrait asked Roy to head to the hospital wing, where Albus and a still very weak Alastor Moody were waiting for him. It was kind of a morbidly hilarious experience
to be subjected to the same suspicious scrutiny by the real Moody than he had been by the fake one (Crouch had been a very good actor, otherwise he wouldn’t have succeeded so well or for so long in his deception).

“Interesting scars,” Moody said finally, his magical eye fixated on Roy’s left side, then swivelling down to look from one hand to the other. Albus didn’t react, proving that he had already known about them.

“Likewise,” Roy replied mildly, pointedly looking over the plethora of scars and missing parts on Moody’s face.

Moody grunted.

“Albus tells me you were the first to suspect Crouch,” he said gruffly, and while he was somewhat hard to read, Roy thought he saw something like approval in his good eye.

Roy shrugged with a slight smile.

“I don’t have the kind of history or preconceived ideas about you that most people here do. He seemed the most likely culprit, so I suspected him.”

Moody nodded, and that was definitely approval in his eye.

Roy didn’t think for a second this meant Moody had decided to trust him; it simply meant that he had decided to take Roy seriously.

That suited Roy just fine.

Now that exams were over, students avoided the library and spent most of their free time outside. Roy didn’t even see Hermione there, whom he suspected would have gone anyway if it wasn’t for Potter’s situation. Roy spent most of his time in the library, continuing on with his research of soul-related magic. Whenever he took a break from the nonsense, he started studying magical means through which a person could transform into something or someone else. After learning about the existence of animagi and the polyjuice potion Crouch had used to impersonate Moody, he thought it was a knowledge that could prove useful at a later date. It wasn’t as tedious a research as his main project, but he wasn’t sure if it was a good thing he was becoming so used to the nonsense that he now could ignore it when it came in small doses. Magical explanations still made no sense from a logical point of view, but he found them almost refreshing after all the philosophical absurdity about souls.

Albus informed him that the Order of the Phoenix would meet officially for the first time the evening of the day the students were scheduled to leave for their summer holidays, though he had already started to coordinate people. Sirius Black had volunteered his family home to serve as their headquarters; while Black had officially been disowned because his family had been pureblood supremacists and Voldemort supporters, his parents and brother were dead, and thus he had inherited everything. The house hadn’t been inhabited in a few years, which meant it would require very thorough cleaning, but Albus assured him it was large enough to serve their purposes.

Roy composed a mental speech on the spot of how he couldn’t possibly assist with the cleanup because his research demanded a lot of time, and he intended to make the most of the summer holidays before his duties as a professor took over a good part of his time.

On the morning of the fifth day, Albus left to place all the necessary protections on the house, including something called a *fidelius*. Roy spent that morning researching the spell, and concluded
it made for reasonably good security. Roy wouldn’t trust their safety solely on that spell, but Albus assured him the Blacks had been an extremely paranoid family and their house had layers upon layers of additional protective magic placed on it.

Finally, the end of term banquet arrived. It was nothing like what Roy had read these banquets usually were in *Hogwarts: A History*; instead of the colours of whichever house had won the house cup this year, the Great Hall was decorated with black banners and drapes in memory of Cedric Diggory.

Albus gave a speech, his attempt to reveal the truth of what had happened to the world despite the Ministry of Magic’s efforts to hide it and ask for unity in the difficult times to come. Roy studied the faces of the students as Albus spoke, trying to gauge their reactions. While grief over Diggory’s death was a common feeling with only a few exceptions, Albus’ words about Voldemort were met with a mix of scepticism and fear (and there were, as well, a handful of students who appeared excessively relaxed and even pleased. Roy marked them as likely the children of Death Eaters). For these children, Lord Voldemort was either a fear from their early childhood or the dark lord whose reign of terror they had never experienced in person but had heard plenty of horror stories about, especially those who had grown up in the wizarding world. Albus was a widely respected figure in the wizarding world, but it was clear many people in the room were desperately wishing he was wrong.

If they weren't the perfect targets for a discrediting campaign, Roy would eat his ignition gloves.

Roy smiled at Hermione when she waved goodbye at him while the students waited by the entrance of the castle for the carriages that would take them home. He stood back by the entrance doors and observed as they boarded said carriages, surprisingly unperturbed by the skeletal, winged horses that pulled them. Even if they were common creatures in the wizarding world — which Roy didn’t know, because he had no idea what those horses were; some type of chimeras would have been his first guess— he would have expected at least some of the children to be disturbed by them. The Beauxbatons carriage, pulled by far more beautiful winged horses, and the Durmstrang ship had already left, and once the last of the Hogwarts carriages disappeared into the grounds only the staff and the house elves remained in the castle (and the ghosts, whose existence Roy very firmly refused to even think about; how did ghosts *not* defy Truth’s rules of the world? Or maybe they *did*, but Truth wasn’t nearly as bothered by them as it was by Riddle?).

“Most of the staff will depart today,” Albus said, approaching Roy. “Ideally, you should be able to do so as well, but given the circumstances…”

“I don’t mind,” Roy said truthfully. “I was growing tired of hotel rooms anyway. I think I’ll explore the castle a little.”
“Oh? Well, there is a lot to discover in Hogwarts. Not even I know all of its secrets; sometimes rooms come and go as they please.”

Roy held back a grimace. That comment went straight to the list of things he wasn’t going to think about unless they proved necessary for his mission.

“Speaking of leaving,” Roy said, turning to face Albus, “I will need to visit Diagon Alley at some point this summer.” Because now that he had a permanent place to live, Roy refused to keep transmuting his handful of clothes every other day. He would be prepared for any incidents, but a trip there was non-negotiable.

Albus hummed.

“I suppose we could arrange something with another Order member. It would be best if you didn’t go alone; while Tom is content to lay low for now, it doesn’t mean the Death Eaters are going to be completely inactive.”

“And they won’t pass the chance to capture me if they see it, I know.” Roy had his doubts that it would be so easy for them to capture him, but he had learnt his lesson about taking unnecessary risks a long time ago.

He hoped he could go with someone reasonable, though, because he didn’t cherish the idea of a shopping trip with, say, Alastor Moody. Or Albus. Roy may like him, but Albus wouldn’t know a decent fashion sense if it slapped him on the face and then started bouncing around the room.

“Who’s in the Order?” Roy asked, digging for any information before he was faced with a room full of strangers.

Albus gestured for them to go back inside the castle, and Roy complied.

“A few people. You have already met Alastor, of course, and Sirius, Minerva, Severus, and Molly and Bill Weasley the night of Tom’s return. Aside from yourself and Bill, we have a handful of new recruits. Regrettfully, we lost many good people during the previous war, and the population seems more reticent to acknowledge Lord Voldemort’s return than I feared, with the Ministry refusing to do it, so we haven’t managed to recruit as many people as we would have liked.”

Roy hummed. He wasn’t surprised: as a general rule, people weren’t willing to accept a change that could be harmful for them unless they had solid, undeniable proof of it. Sometimes not even then. Of the people who might be willing to accept it anyway, they had to account for those who would not go against the government’s official version of events.

“Sometimes numbers are not what matters most,” Roy pointed out.

“True. We do have some very remarkable characters amongst our numbers, and, at least for now, I expect we will be even with Tom’s forces.”

“For now?” Today the stairs weren’t cooperating, and they spun around twice before stopping at the right hallway.

“Do you remember what I told Fudge about the dementors?”

Unfortunately, Roy did; it had been a persistent thought this past week. He hadn’t fully understood the implications of that part of the conversation at the moment, but he had understood it was a serious matter even then. Now it worried him, plain and simple.
“That they will join Riddle at the first chance they have. Yes, I remember.” Which was another good reason to start learning the patronus charm. Roy intended to hunt down a secluded empty classroom at the first opportunity he had.

“Once that happens, I’m afraid all of Tom’s imprisoned followers who are still in a state to do so will return to his side.”

They reached the office, and Albus gestured to the couches instead of his desk. During the last week, Roy had learnt to ignore the sudden appearance of food, and thus didn’t need to contain a reaction when a tea set materialised on the coffee table.

“I wanted to ask,” Roy started, reaching for a cup (they had eaten breakfast just a little while ago, but it was good to have something to occupy his hands with), “how is your search for the horcruxes coming along?”

“Both well and badly, it depends on your perspective.”

“Could you be any vaguer?” Roy asked when Albus didn’t elaborate, and Albus smiled, amused.

“I could try. I believe I told you about Tom’s superstitious nature, didn’t I?” Roy nodded. “Well, while I am still searching for a way to confirm it, I believe I know in how many fragments Tom has divided his soul. Or at least how many fragments he intended to have. As you no doubt know, the number seven is by far considered the most magical number.” (Roy hadn’t known, he had looked at the arithmancy section and decided he had no time to waste on that nonsense about the magical properties of numbers; it figured it would be relevant) “and so, if I had to hazard a guess, I believe that is the number of fragments Tom wished to create. Which means there are seven horcruxes, counting young Harry.”

“How can you confirm that?” Roy asked, because he didn’t want to leave everything up to a guess about Riddle’s superstition. If they somehow revealed their knowledge about his horcruxes too early, Riddle would simply create more and hide them, making it nearly impossible to kill him.

“Oh, of course, I haven’t told you the specifics. For the last few years I have been collecting memories concerning Tom, trying to figure out what he has been up to, his possible horcruxes, and the places where he has hidden them. There is one person whom I am certain spoke to Tom about horcruxes while he was in school, but I haven’t managed to convince him to give me that memory yet: Horace Slughorn. He was the Head of Slytherin during Tom’s school years, and he had a club to which he invited the students he believed would have a great future, both to offer them connections and to gain them as his own connections for the future. Tom was his favourite student at the time, and Horace was the member of staff most enamoured by him. If Tom attempted to gain a second opinion on the hypothetical scenario of creating more than one horcrux, he would have asked Horace.”

“Have you spoken to Slughorn?”

“I have,” Albus confirmed, “and he wasn’t as successful in his attempt to convince me he knew nothing of Tom’s interest in horcruxes as he no doubt hoped to be. He has gone into hiding, now, because Tom always wanted him to join his side. I know where he is, though, and I will continue to attempt to convince him.”

“I imagine that is one of the reasons your research is going badly. What about the good results?”

“Would you like to see?” Albus offered instead of a straight reply. “While I haven’t located any, I believe I have identified three of the remaining five horcruxes.”
He stood up and walked over to the cupboard where he kept his pensieve.

That day they didn’t manage to observe and discuss Albus’ whole collection of relevant memories, but Roy was introduced to the charming Gaunt family and their frankly disgusting living conditions, Albus’ theory regarding Merope Gaunt’s snaring of Tom Riddle Senior, a record of a man who swindled Merope out of her ownership of Slytherin’s locket, and Albus’ first meeting with the eleven year old Tom Riddle.

Sometime while they discussed how Merope had lost the locket, an enthusiastic house-elf called Dobby had popped up in the office laden with trays of food because they had long since missed lunch.

When Roy asked if Riddle’s little collection of the objects he had stolen from other children at the orphanage was relevant because Riddle had acquired his horcruxes that way, Albus nodded.

“That is my guess, yes.”

“The locket is a horcrux, then?”

“And the ring,” Albus confirmed. “We will look at that next time we can both spare a few hours. Now,” he looked to the clock on the wall, “I believe we have a meeting to attend. We’ve agreed to meet at the Hog’s Head —which is unfortunately closed to patrons today due to an incident with a few prancing tables— so I can give everybody access to our new headquarters.”

The Order of the Phoenix was a motley crowd of individuals, some of whom would never have come together during peaceful times. The most obvious example of this was a man named Mundungus Fletcher, who had received many distrustful looks from the people Roy soon learnt were the Order’s new recruits (he was, apparently, a petty thief with a bad reputation). However, the old Order members vouched for his usefulness, claiming that Fletcher could obtain information no one else there was capable of, and that was the end of that discussion, even if it was obvious that not everybody was happy about his presence (Molly Weasley, for example, kept sending glares his way).

Snape’s presence, while garnering many glares and considerably more distrust than Fletcher’s, did not start an argument, which proved that everybody present already knew the identity of their spy.

It was Black’s arrival, accompanied by a man later introduced as Remus Lupin, which nearly caused a fight to break out. Albus had to step in front of Black —whom Lupin was trying to hold back—to prevent any spells from being fired, and then had to tell the frankly depressing tale of the Potters’ deaths to convince the crowd that no, Sirius is not going to go ballistic and murder everyone in the room and yes, we are sure he’s innocent.. Judging by the stricken looks all over the room, nobody had ever doubted the official account of events or Black’s guilt. It made Roy wonder how reliable the Order was, if they were willing to dismiss one of their own like that without even a token amount of doubt.

Before anybody could respond with more than a guilty look, the bartender —whom Albus had introduced as his younger brother Aberforth— told them to hurry up and get out of his bar.
Moody disagreed with the hurrying up part, and proceeded to interrogate everybody present on their reasons to join the Order, all the while making it abundantly clear if he caught someone with hidden intentions things wouldn’t be pleasant for them. When it was his turn, Roy shrugged and revealed his knowledge of how to create the Philosopher’s Stone and Voldemort’s interest in him (he ignored Albus’ disapproving look: he needed a story, and he wasn’t going to tell the truth, but there was no reason to lie about that part when there existed a very real possibility that the Order could learn about it through a Death Eater anyway, and this way Moody couldn’t catch him in a lie because he wasn’t lying). Snape scoffed, sent Roy a look that made it clear how little he thought of Roy’s blasé attitude in regards to the Stone’s issue, and confirmed that Roy was one of the two people Voldemort had expressly ordered to capture alive (the other being Potter, which proved how badly Riddle dealt with defeat).

From there on, Roy proceeded to ignore any attempt at talking about the Stone and Moody’s interrogation of the new (and old) Order members proceeded. Amongst the Order, there were a handful of old friends of Albus’, his brother (who told Moody where to shove his questions, but Albus stopped any fight that might result), the Weasley couple and their son Bill, two aurors, Black, Lupin, Snape, and Fletcher. Plus, of course, some people who wasn’t present at the meeting, such as McGonagall and Hagrid.

Once Moody was satisfied there was no spy (other than Snape, whom he very obviously did not trust), Albus handed around a piece of paper with the address of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, then set the paper on fire once they had all memorised it, and, much to Aberforth’s relief, they finally took the Floo to the old house.

Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place was, to be generous, a dump. A dump with a grumpy and possibly deranged house-elf who hated them all —but especially Black— and a screaming portrait of Black’s mother. The place looked like something Edward might have decorated himself. While drunk.

The meeting was a dull but necessary affair. The Order was informed of Hagrid and Madame Maxime’s mission to contact the giants; Remus Lupin (who just happened to be a werewolf, but Roy was reserving judgement because he had yet to learn enough about any magical creatures to even be able to identify, let alone judge, them) was tasked to try to gain some werewolves for their side, something nobody seemed to expect would work; a guard rotation was set to keep an eye on Potter’s family house; Black was told in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t allowed out of the house because by now Voldemort and his Death Eaters would know about his animagus form and it would be too risky to leave; Molly Weasley volunteered her younger children, the ones she deemed too young to join the Order or participate in meetings, to help clean the house, which Roy expected her children would object to; Bill Weasley agreed to try to negotiate with the goblins, given that he worked at Gringotts, but the prospects with them weren’t much better than with the werewolves.

Roy had no set task, his status as a somewhat wanted man preventing him from participating into virtually anything, but he came up with two ideas during the meeting which he personally thought were just as, if not more, useful than the entire meeting had been. The first one pertained to his trip to Diagon Alley, something he thought of when one of the aurors, Nymphadora Tonks, turned her hair a painful shade of purple halfway through the meeting and explained she was a metamorphomagus when she received some strange looks. Roy had learnt about them during his
research on shape-shifting magic. Convincing Tonks (because calling her Nymphadora was out of the question, she had made that much clear when she introduced herself) to transform into an unrecognizable form and be his “date” for the trip was easy enough, and Albus couldn’t object because going with one of the Order’s aurors was one of the best choices available.

Roy’s second idea required a larger amount of persuasion on his part to convince Albus to agree. But he did. It was nice to get confirmation that his argumentative skills were still untarnished by this still-not-completely-familiar world.

At the end of the meeting, when people started to wander off to explore the dilapidated house—in teams, because they didn’t know what manner of dark objects could be around—or leave through the Floo, Roy walked up to where Black remained at the table, moping because he had been forbidden to step foot outside of the house, and sat next to him.

“Do you know how to cast a _patronus_?”

Black looked up at him from his sulk.

“Yeah, of course. Why?”

“I was wondering if you could teach me.”

Black looked him up and down, a mix of dubious and incredulous.

“You don’t know how to cast it?”

Roy shrugged nonchalantly.

“I never saw the point. Until what happened with Crouch, that is. Now I realize I would be better served learning how to cast it, and I figure it would go faster with a teacher. I hear it’s a complicated spell.”

Black let out something between a scoff and a laugh.

“That’s a way to see it. You don’t mind having to come here?” he asked, gesturing contemptuously around at the kitchen Molly was hurriedly cleaning with an impressive barrage of spells.

“Actually, I’ve spoken with Albus, and we believe we’d be better off practicing at Hogwarts,” Roy replied, and cut off Black’s predictable incredulous reply with an explanation. “The only ones in full residence at the castle during the summer will be Albus and myself, with occasional visits from Professor McGonagall. As long as you remain in your animagus form when you’re in sight of the portraits, there should be no problem.”

“And Dumbledore agreed to this?” Black asked in a way that made it clear he didn’t believe it.

“It took some convincing,” Roy confessed with another shrug. In fact, it had taken Roy pointing out Black didn’t appear to be the most stable of individuals (understandable after his long stay in Azkaban) and having him cooped up in this house would most likely worsen his situation: if Black was allowed outside, even in a controlled environment, and felt at least marginally useful, he would pose much less of a nuisance for the Order. At least during the summer, because that problem would appear anyway once school started.

Black grinned.

“Now I can’t possibly refuse that offer,” he said, and extended a hand. “Let’s do some proper
introductions. I’m Sirius Black, unfortunate owner of this hovel.”

“Roy Mustang, alchemist and future professor of Hogwarts starting next year,” Roy introduced himself, shaking Black’s hand.

“Hey, Moony!” Black called over his shoulder. Lupin looked at them from where he had been casting spells on kitchen drawers to see if the previous Blacks —or the crazy house-elf— had left any surprises in them. “You taught Harry the patronus last year, have any tips?”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Well, here I am with chapter 8, finally :D This took me longer than I expected, and I’m sorry about that. I just had a pretty horrible experience with a collab story for another fandom that took up a lot of my time, and I couldn’t work on anything that required more work than just typing the chapter :/ I’m not taking part on another of those events, though.

Again, thanks a lot to Lindril for helping revise the chapter, and this one really did need a lot of revision. I’m an abysmal writer when I’m upset.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first day after the school had cleared of non-Order members, Sirius Black came to Hogwarts through the fireplace in Albus’ office. After a reminder to Black to not be seen by the portraits, Albus wished them a good day and went back to organizing the Order’s resources. Roy thought the reminder was unnecessary and, judging by Black’s annoyed expression, Black didn’t appreciate it.

Albus hadn’t had time to meet with Roy for more than signing his contract since their meeting a few days ago to continue going over the memories, so they hadn’t looked any further into Albus’ research of the horcruxes.

Black was ecstatic, and he took his time wandering the halls in his dog form, running off and coming back to make sure Roy was still following, until they finally entered an empty classroom without any portraits. Roy closed and warded the door.

When Black transformed, he had a wide grin on his face.

“It’s been years since I was at Hogwarts without any pressure!” he exclaimed, looking for all intents and purposes like a child who had just been given an unexpected present.

It was rather sad to witness a man being so happy simply because he could return to a place that had once been like his home, a place where he hadn’t been able to set foot in years because he had been wrongly condemned for something.

It was also enlightening.

Roy wondered if the Ishvalans would react in a similar way to Black once they finally returned to their homeland. Probably not. Hogwarts was basically the same place that Black had attended years ago, but Ishval was just ruins and rubble where there had once been lives.

Roy pushed those thoughts back with the practice of years and put on an equally practiced easygoing smile.

“Maybe you could show me around later? I have to be used to the school come September, but I’m afraid I’ve seen little more than the library and the Great Hall.”

“Count on it,” Black agreed easily before they dove into the explanation of the *patronus* spell.
Roy was going to need a happy memory to power and maintain it. This would be harder than he had anticipated.

Roy had been moved to the quarters designated for the Alchemy Professor upon the end of the school year. Now that he knew for certain this mission would be a long one, he had settled properly into the rooms: his clothes were placed in the closet, his toiletries in the bathroom, and he had turned the guest bedroom (why there even was a guest bedroom was beyond him) into a study-slash-laboratory after a few claps of his hands.

Settling down meant the start of a new routine, and with it came one of many realizations Roy had been experiencing lately: Roy had become so engrossed in his research that he had neglected his physical training. Now, Roy was no Edward Elric, but he was a soldier, and one facing a war no less. A certain level of physical fitness was expected of him and after nearly three months of neglect it would take some effort to create a new suitable training routine, one adapted to his current location, and grow used to it. Roy might or might not have groaned in despair at the realization that he would suffer from the same cramps he remembered from his early days in the academy.

Roy decided the school grounds were an excellent place to run and do most of his exercises, or they would be as soon as he managed to get used to the fact that the grass and trees were blue. The only reason Roy hadn’t paid attention to the expanse of blue that made up the castle grounds the first time he stepped foot in them had been his state of alertness as he had been expecting a fight. Now that he could relax around the school, he had to admit the sight was rather unnerving.

Having to wait at the kitchen of Grimmauld Place for Tonks’ arrival bothered Roy. For his dates, even the pretend ones such as this one, he liked to go pick his partner up himself. However, the whole purpose of this arrangement was for Roy to avoid being in public alone, so that option was off the table.

Molly Weasley really wasn’t helping the situation.

“This is a bad idea,” she repeated for the fifth time since Roy’s arrival. She cast a very strong cleaning spell on the filthy ceiling. “Now, don’t misinterpret me,” she went on, “I understand that you want a wardrobe appropriate for a professor, Roy, and that is a respectable decision, but putting yourself in danger like this for the sake of clothing…” She shook her head. “Why don’t you let me take care of it? I am perfectly capable of finding you some good robes in no time. I have a large family, after all.”

Roy held back a sigh and maintained his very deliberate but still classy slouch on the chair.

“I appreciate the sentiment, Molly, but I’d really rather choose my own clothes.”
“Leave the man be, Molly. It’s enough with one prisoner in this house,” Sirius (he had insisted that Roy used his first name) called from the other end of the kitchen, where he was dousing cabinet doors with a horrid smelling yellow goo.

“I’m looking out for his safety, Sirius,” Molly retorted in annoyance. This was Roy’s first time at Grimmauld Place since the Order meeting, but he knew most of the Weasleys had been coming by to clean every day. Roy said “most” because some of them worked, and then there was one of the middle children that had been acting oddly since the start of the holidays and to whom they hadn’t told about the Order yet, on Albus’ request. From the looks of it, Molly and Sirius clashed constantly.

“I’ll be fine. I’m going with an auror, after all.”

Just then, there came a loud crashing sound from the entrance, and Mrs. Black’s portrait started screeching about blood traitors.

They rushed out, and Sirius ran to pull closed the drapes over the portrait.

Tonks was sprawled on the floor, an ugly umbrella stand fallen next to her.

“Oh, dear,” Roy muttered, amused, and approached to offer her a hand up. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, fine,” Tonks hurried to say, taking his hand. Roy helped her to her feet. “I just tripped. Are you ready?”

“Whenever you are,” he replied, gesturing to her and her still unchanged appearance. As per Roy’s request, she had put on soft pink robes (because that was a shade his eyes couldn’t trick him with).

Tonks squeezed her eyes shut and her face pinched in concentration. Her hair grew until it reached halfway down her back and whitened into what Roy suspected was actually a light shade of blonde. She shrank a couple inches, her skin lightened, and her breasts and hips grew while her muscle mass diminished. When she opened her eyes, they looked a beautiful shade of blue which might actually be green.

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Tonks was actually enjoying herself.

When Roy had approached her to ask if she could accompany him on this trip, Tonks had expected it to be just like another auror mission, only that this one was sort-of for the Order instead. And, certainly, she was paying attention to their surroundings and had her wand ready to draw it at any given time, but aside from that this pretend date was good. So good, in fact, that it put to shame many of the dates Tonks had gone on in the past.

Molly had made them promise they would be back at Grimmauld Place for dinner, something Tonks had agreed to because it made sense and she understood that Molly was worried. Roy had agreed too, though he had made a comment —Tonks still wasn’t sure how serious he had been—that it ruined his plans for dinner, which had resulted in Tonks telling Roy he could make it up to her by buying her the largest ice cream available at Fortescue’s. He had. Roy hadn’t tried to order for her (that had happened on a couple dates Tonks had gone on, where the man had assumed that,
‘as a girl’, she had to like certain foods and not others), and he wasn’t constantly talking about himself. He showed interest in Tonks and what she had to say. For obvious reasons, she couldn’t talk about her personal life, after all, ‘Andrea’ wasn’t Nymphadora Tonks, but they found more general topics about the wizarding world to talk about, and Roy didn’t try to impose his opinions over hers. That was odd enough by itself, because in Tonks’ experience attractive men were somehow convinced that they were always right and the best at everything, and it only puzzled her further when they went to Madam Malkins’ and Roy actually asked for her input about his clothes.

It was a bit of a pity that with magical measuring tapes Roy didn’t have to remove anything more than his outer robes to have his measures taken, and she had to agree with Madam Malkins’ assistant who, upon learning that Roy would be teaching at Hogwarts, had sighed and said that she almost wished she was back in school. Back in her fifth year, Tonks’ Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor had been extremely popular amongst the students, and yet looking at how the current pair of robes looked on Roy — *grey robes*, which were supposed to be dull, yet they looked great on him— she could already say Roy’s name would make it into far more hearts drawn on parchment than Professor Periwinkle’s ever had.

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When Roy and Tonks stepped out of the fireplace in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place — Roy had to hold onto Tonks to stop her from tripping and falling — they were greeted by an empty and darkened room. That was odd. They were a little later than the agreed upon time, and Roy had expected to find Molly adding the final touches to dinner and with a tongue-lashing ready for them.

“Molly?” Tonks called out, stepping away from Roy and deeper into the kitchen.

Roy rubbed his left thumb and middle finger together — it was stupid, they were in a protected house and he would have to clap anyway — and followed her.

Tonks waved her wand around and the kitchen’s lights lit up.

The door opened right afterwards and Sirius stepped in, covered in dust.

“How did it go?” Sirius asked. Roy relaxed his fingers.

“Well. Where’s Molly?” Tonks asked.

“At home. Bill flooed to say Arthur and Percy came home early. They were going to try to talk to Percy about the situation, see if they can finally stop hiding the Order stuff from him.”

“Professor Dumbledore agreed to it?” Tonks asked dubiously. Albus’ request to hide the Order of the Phoenix from Percy Weasley had caught many people off guard, and made some of them wary of Percy as a consequence.

Sirius snorted.

“They’re not going to *tell* him, just... test the waters, I guess. See what he thinks of the situation.”

“Oh.” Tonks nodded in understanding. “I should call and let her know we’re back.” She turned around and walked to the fireplace, transforming as she moved. Tonks was really fond of pink hair.
Roy turned to Sirius. He knew about how floo calls worked, and maybe it was stupid after travelling that way, but he didn’t want to watch as Tonks stuck her head into the fireplace.

“I’m guessing this means no dinner for us, then.”

Sirius scoffed.

“Guess so. It’s not like I had many chances to learn to cook as a fugitive or a prisoner. And don’t get me wrong, I love Tonks, she’s my cousin and she’s great, but I don’t want her anywhere near a stove.”

Given what he had seen of Tonks’ clumsiness, Roy had to agree.

“I’m afraid I never bothered to learn to cook. Of course, I could always go back to Hogwarts, Tonks could return home, and you’d be the only one without dinner,” Roy offered with a smirk.

“You wouldn’t!” Sirius exclaimed in fake horror, pressing a hand to his chest. “You’d leave me here alone? With Kreacher?!”

“And Buckbeak,” Roy reminded him. He had heard enough about Buckbeak to know Sirius was quite fond of him.

“I doubt Buckbeak knows how to cook, and if you tell me to eat him...”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Roy assured Sirius, though that had been the next comment in line. “Haven’t you had to eat on your own since you came here, though?”

“Molly always leaves leftovers, even when she’s angry at me,” Sirius replied with a shrug. “Not today.”

“Why don’t we see if there is anything that doesn’t require cooking?”

Roy and Sirius had littered one end of the table with two bottles of milk, a box of cereal, a handful of leftover homemade biscuits, and various packed sweets. Roy was examining a packaged chocolate frog when Tonks approached them, a sombre expression on her face.

“What happened?” Sirius asked.

“Percy was promoted to be Fudge’s Junior Assistant. He had an argument with his parents, said many things he’s likely to regret in the future, and stormed out of the Burrow.” Tonks shook her head. “Molly has been crying ever since.”

Sirius and Roy exchanged a worried look. This was going to have repercussions on the entire Order, but there wasn’t anything they could do about it right now. Roy looked down at the chocolate frog, then back at Tonks.

“What do you think about having breakfast for dinner?”

Tonks smiled, a worried but grateful expression, and sat down.
“I think my mother would kill me,” she said, reaching out for one of the biscuits.

Sirius laughed and waved his wand to summon the necessary tableware, and that was how three adults found themselves having a dinner worthy of the best lazy teenagers.

“I’ve been thinking,” Sirius said halfway through a bowl of cereal, “and I know the Order is sort of paranoid about it, but what do you two say that we explore a little? Have a look around at this dark wizards’ lair?” Sirius sounded very excited at the prospect, and Roy would bet he had been itching to do that ever since he had arrived at the house.

It was a terrible idea, and yet it probably was Roy’s best opportunity to look around the house and see if there was any potentially useful book for his research without too many people who could grow suspicious looking on.

“How not?” said Tonks. “I have the training for it.”

Sirius and Tonks turned to look at Roy.

“It sounds interesting,” Roy said, making sure he didn’t betray anything other than curiosity.

Sirius rubbed his hands together with a wide grin.

“It’s settled then.”

Roy closed the door behind himself and sighed in relief when that muffled the noise somewhat. Kreacher the house-elf had appeared while they were looking through one of the guest bedrooms on the first floor; he had baited Sirius, and Sirius’ too loud reply had set off Mrs. Black portrait a floor below. Roy and Tonks had left the bedroom when it became clear that Sirius wasn’t going to simply order Kreacher to leave him alone: Tonks had headed down to close the curtains over the portrait and Roy had decided to locate a bathroom.

He cast a nonverbal *lumos* and quickly realized this wasn’t the bathroom.

He was in a large and extremely dusty drawing room with an entire wall covered in curtains that emitted an odd buzzing sound (Roy wouldn’t be surprised if some creature or other had settled in them over the years, but they didn’t seem to react to his presence), and the others covered in various tapestries. In the faint light of his wand, Roy could see the shapes of what seemed to be a table, a few armchairs and chairs, and some glass-fronted cabinets at the very least.

He stopped a moment to ensure the argument was still going on. Mrs. Black’s portrait had shut up, but Sirius was still yelling. Roy raised his wand and started moving through the room, aiming the light at the glass doors to see if there was anything of interest in any of the cabinets.

He froze before a cabinet when the light caught on a locket he had seen in a seventy year old memory a few days ago.

Roy didn’t stop to think. He cast a spell that made the cabinet doors swing open silently, then threw a barrage of detection spells at the locket to make sure it wouldn’t kill him or have any other
unpleasant effect upon touching it. It didn’t seem likely, but Roy still walked up to the ratty curtains, slashed a piece off with his wand, and clapped his hands to transmute the piece into a bag. He then cast every single protective spell he knew of on the bag before he levitated the locket into it and sealed the bag with another spell.

Roy put the bag away in one of his enchanted pockets, closed the cabinet’s doors with magic, and left the room.

He returned to where he had left Sirius, fully intending to find a way to return to Hogwarts as quickly as possible without drawing suspicion.

Albus was reading a refusal letter from a former student that he had asked to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts next year. So far there had been no applicants, and given the discrediting campaign that had already started on the *Prophet*, he didn’t expect to receive any applications so he had started to look for a professor himself. Albus’s disheartening, but not unexpected, reading session was interrupted when the fireplace flared green.

Roy stepped out of the fireplace and walked up to Albus’ desk.

“How did it go?” Albus asked, noticing the grim look on Roy’s face. It was odd, given that Roy had only gone out with Tonks and then stayed for dinner at Grimmauld Place. If anything had happened during the outing, Albus expected he would have heard of it hours ago.

“Better than I expected,” Roy replied. He flicked his wrist to draw his wand to his hand, then levitated something out of his pocket. Albus watched curiously as a cloth bag dropped on his desk. “That was at Grimmauld Place. I wouldn’t touch it directly if I were you, just in case.”

“Are you being mysterious on purpose?” Albus asked, reaching into his robes for his own wand. Roy smirked and sat down on one of the armchairs before Albus’ desk.

“I kind of owe you.”

Albus shook his head in amusement. He guessed sometimes people were bound to turn the vague remarks on him. Albus waved his wand and the cloth ripped and fell around the contents of the bag. He took in a sharp breath, his good humour completely dissipated.

Salazar Slytherin’s locket sat innocently on his desk.

“...Curious.”

“Is that all you have to say?”

“For now, yes. I’m trying to guess how a horcrux might have ended in possession of the Black family,” Albus replied, his mind running over any possibility he could think of.

“Weren’t the Blacks Voldemort supporters?” Roy asked.

“Yes, but the only member of the family who lived in that house and joined the Death Eaters was
Regulus Black, and he disappeared shortly afterwards, far too early to have proven the sort of devotion Tom would have demanded of anyone he entrusted one of his horcruxes to.”

Roy hummed.

“I’ll leave that up to you. Can you keep the locket secure? I’m afraid I still have not found a way to destroy it.”

The following morning found Roy in Albus’ office. After the appearance of the horcrux yesterday, they had decided to resume their viewing of the memories concerning Tom Riddle.

“If I remember correctly, last time we left off after I met young Tom Riddle. I could produce many memories of the years that followed, for I taught him during them, but I believe it will be faster if I explain. At least for most of them.”

Roy nodded, and Albus started talking about the way Riddle had fooled the whole school into believing he was a model student, his obsession to discover which of his parents had been of magical descent, his eventual discovery of how he was the Heir of Slytherin, and the truth of what happened when he opened the Chamber of Secrets, the incident he had received an award for supposedly solving. That led to an explanation of the diary Albus had shown Roy the first day, its purpose, and how it had reached Hogwarts three years ago.

It was only after that was explained that Albus brought out the pensieve and the next memory to explain how Riddle had murdered his father and paternal grandparents, framed Morfin Gaunt for the crime, and acquired the ring in the process.

Once again, they missed lunch, but Albus and Roy were the only two people currently residing in the castle so Dobby simply brought it up to Albus’ office when it became obvious they weren’t going to appear at the Great Hall. Roy found it kind of unnecessary to eat there when they were only two people, if he was being honest.

Albus explained that he knew it had been after this incident that Riddle had approached Slughorn, and showed Roy the clearly modified memory Slughorn had provided of that incident, where Riddle was wearing the ring.

They moved on to Riddle’s actions after leaving school, which included working at a shop with a very murky reputation, a position he used to finally get his hands on the locket Roy had found yesterday and a cup that had belonged to Helga Hufflepuff. Albus had one more memory to prove this, and after that Riddle incident, vanished from the world for years.

Dobby came in with a mid-afternoon tea halfway through Albus’ explanation of his meeting with Riddle a few years after Riddle’s disappearance.

“I believe,” Albus continued once Dobby was done, “that Tom had created most of his horcruxes by then, because there was nothing of the student I had taught in his appearance, his body had already been distorted beyond recognition by the magic he had been performing.”

“Have you searched the castle?” Roy asked.
“What do you mean?”

“You said it yourself: both you and Riddle knew he wouldn’t get the position when he came to ask for it, yet he bothered. Why?”

“I wondered, too, but other than cursing the Defence Against the Dark Arts position, I have no idea.”

Roy raised his eyebrows. He knew the rumour, of course, but to think it was real... It sounded petty enough to be, really.

“There had to be another reason. Riddle seems pretty sentimental for someone who doesn’t believe in love—” Albus had brought this point up a few times already today. “—so hiding one of his horcruxes in the place that proved he was a wizard seems a likely possibility.”

Albus shook his head.

“It does, but the school has been searched thoroughly a few times in recent years. Tom’s horcruxes are well protected —I tested the locket, and while it doesn’t have any immediately deadly curses, there are a few very nasty spells on it— and anything at the level of Dark Arts Tom uses would have appeared in the searches.”

“Unless it is in one of those rooms that you said comes and goes at will,” Roy pointed out, remembering Albus’ words when Roy had brought up the idea of exploring the school.

Albus paused a moment to think over Roy’s words.

“I don’t believe it likely, but there is no harm in looking.” He smiled. “This way you will have something to entertain yourself with during patrol nights.”

“Patrol?”

Minerva was back at Hogwarts to prepare and send all the necessary letters the students were to receive this summer. She raised her head when there was a knock on her door and called the person in. She knew it was Roy even before he walked into her office, because she had sent a house-elf to look for him not even fifteen minutes ago.

“Good evening, Minerva. Did you need something?” he asked, closing the door.

“Take a seat, please,” Minerva said, trying not to sound too much like a stern professor, even if part of her wanted to. Roy didn’t look particularly fazed as he did as requested. “You should have sent me an owl with the title of the book your students will have to buy for your class.”

She had told Roy about this when she learnt that he would join them next year. His was the only subject she didn’t have a book, for other than Defence Against the Dark Arts, but she couldn’t put off sending the first years’ letters any longer. They still had to talk to all the families of the muggleborn students. It took a lot of time to convince some of them that magic was real and agree to send their children to Hogwarts. If anything, they would send a letter at a later date with the
“There is no book,” Roy replied easily.

Minerva blinked, caught entirely off guard.

“Pardon?”

“I haven’t found any acceptable textbook for the class, so I won’t ask the students to buy one.”

Minerva noticed that Roy was completely serious in his statement. She might not be an expert, but she had studied Alchemy during her Hogwarts years, and she remembered there had been plenty useful books on the subject. Her own textbook, while it had been a little too dense to read, had been decent enough.

“Have you looked closely?” she asked, realizing that maybe Roy hadn’t spared too much time for the search. It was understandable, of course: it had been barely over two weeks since Lord Voldemort’s return and Roy’s subsequent acceptance into the Order. Despite his calm demeanour when Barty Crouch had revealed that Voldemort knew about him, Minerva wouldn’t be surprised to learn he had been too distracted by his circumstances to focus much in the upcoming school year.

Roy sighed.

“I’ve spent far too much time browsing through useless books lately, believe me. There is no book that works for the way I intend to teach the class.”

Minerva raised her eyebrows, her curiosity piqued.

“You understand that will mean more work for you? Starting this job is hard enough, but if you add that...” she trailed off, unwilling to mention that the staff had a sort of unofficial bet regarding how long it would take Roy to start complaining about the students. Minerva didn’t doubt Roy’s skill as an alchemist as she had been there when Crouch had said Roy knew how to create a Philosopher’s Stone, but he was a scholar and Minerva was hard-pressed to find a vocation less likely to have prepared him to deal with a class full of hormonal teenagers. Her bet was on three weeks before Roy snapped, because he had struck Minerva as capable enough to keep a cool head.

Roy leant back in his seat and smiled pleasantly.

“Not necessarily. It just means the students will have to make more of an effort when they take notes. There isn’t really much material I’ll have to hand out.”

Now Minerva was even more curious. She remembered countless Alchemy lessons and study sessions bent over a textbook with instructions to create one process or another, and couldn’t see how Roy could manage not handing materials out to students. She decided to ask Albus later.

“Very well. The other reason I asked you to come is because I am going to send out a letter to all eligible students explaining that they have the possibility to take an Alchemy class now. Is there anything you want me to mention in it?”

“Actually, yes.” Roy leant forward on his chair. “Could you stress the point that it’s going to be difficult? I don’t want layabouts in my class if I can avoid it.”

Minerva caught herself before she could smile indulgently at Roy’s naivety. That was exactly the sort of mindset why the staff expected him to have trouble adapting to teaching.
“Roy, none of us want layabouts in our classes, and we try to warn the students about it. They don’t even listen to Severus.” Which came to show just how little self-preservation some students had. “I don’t think they’ll heed that warning.”

Roy smiled again.

“Mention it all the same. I don’t want anyone to whine to me later about the difficulty.”

Yes, Minerva’s curiosity was very much piqued.

Hermione barely held back a squeal when she read the letter that had just arrived. She had been very disappointed for a moment when she realized it wasn’t her list of school supplies, but the disappointment had disappeared the moment she had seen what the letter said.

Alchemy. They were going to teach alchemy, and Hermione could take it because they were moving the class down to start from third year.

And Roy would be their professor.

Wait, no, not Roy, Professor Mustang. She had better get used to it, or she risked slipping off and embarrassing herself in front of her whole class.

Muttering something she was pretty sure that made no sense to her parents, Hermione jumped out of her chair and ran up the stairs to write to Harry and Ron about this. They had to take this class, it would be so much better than that useless Divination class they were in right now.

Hermione paused for a moment halfway through the stairs.

She was taking as many classes as she could without using a time turner right now, and she couldn’t go through the stress that had been her third year again. She had to drop a class herself if she wanted to study Alchemy.

With a guilty grimace, Hermione decided to buy Hagrid something nice as an apology for leaving his class. Arithmancy and Ancient Runes were far too interesting for her to drop.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, first of all, to avoid confusion: Roy doesn’t know about the Room of Requirement. His comment about the possibility of there being a Horcrux in Hogwarts is a reminder to Albus of Albus’ own words the previous chapter: that there are rooms that come and go at will and Albus doesn’t know all of the school’s secrets. As such, Roy is simply pointing out Albus might have missed the horcrux despite all the searches of the school in the last few years.

Due to the fact they didn't find a DADA professor, the book lists arrived on the last
day of summer in book 5, once Fudge had forced Umbridge on Hogwarts, but I've added the thing with Minerva and the first years because I don't see muggle parents agreeing to "hello, magic is real and we're taking your kid off to start classes tomorrow".

Originally, I intended to have Roy find the locket when Harry and the others fail to open it while they’re cleaning that room, but then I realized that I’d have to rewrite a large amount of canon for that, plus it’d be a lot more difficult for Roy to sneak the locket out with so many people present AND Kreacher keeping an eye on them as they cleaned (we all know how important the locket is to Kreacher).
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Here I am with chapter 9 of the story :)

As always, it’s been beta-read by Lindril ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Roy stared, seriously attempting not to question whether he was awake or asleep, while Albus detailed to the Order of the Phoenix a guard rotation to protect an object Riddle wanted to get his hands on. That in itself wasn’t the problem, attempting to prevent the enemy from achieving anything was a common enough and perfectly reasonable goal during a war. No, Roy’s issue was with the object Albus intended to spend so many resources to protect.

To backtrack a little, Albus had asked Snape to inform the entire Order of one of his latest discoveries. Said discovery was the fact that Riddle was interested in obtaining the prophecy that marked Harry Potter as the one who could defeat Riddle.

A prophecy.

Fortunately, Tonks spoke before Roy’s currently malfunctioning brain could do anything stupid. Like making his mouth work and question out loud the sanity of everybody present.

“What else is in the prophecy?” asked Tonks.

While Albus explained the absolutely nonsensical prophecy, Roy had time to gather his thoughts. Something that Albus had told him a while ago came to mind: Riddle was very superstitious. That could explain, perhaps, Riddle’s interest in the prophecy. In fact, now that Roy thought about it properly, it said a lot about Riddle that one of his first actions after his return was to try to steal the prophecy. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea to protect it: the task would take up people and resources, certainly, but it was bound to cost the Death Eaters more effort to try to steal it than it would cost the Order to protect it. Any Death Eaters tasked with stealing the prophecy were Death Eaters that wouldn’t spend their time and effort doing something productive and potentially harmful.

This revelation, however, brought a certain event under an entirely new light.

“What about Potter?” Roy asked once Albus was done with his explanation.

“What’s wrong with Potter?” Moody asked in turn, and Roy raised an eyebrow. Out of all people present, Roy had expected Moody to reach the same conclusion.

“He appears to be Voldemort’s main target. Shouldn’t he learn to defend himself properly?”

“You want to teach him to fight?!” Molly asked, horrified. “He’s a child, Roy.”

“I somehow doubt Voldemort cares about his age,” Roy pointed out. He gauged the reactions around the room with a quick glance. Unfortunately, aside from a number of winces upon hearing Riddle’s alias, it seemed that most of the Order shared Molly’s opinion.
“Molly is right. Harry is too young to be exposed to the war,” Albus said in a conciliatory voice before an argument could start. “It’s our job to protect him, not to let him face danger on his own.”

Roy met Albus’ eyes evenly, trying to convey how *hypocritical* that statement was coming from someone who would likely sacrifice Potter if he thought there was no other way.

“I think the third task proved that keeping him out of Voldemort’s reach isn’t possible.”

“It proved that we have to be more careful,” Albus conceded, which wasn’t at all what Roy wanted to hear. But the firm voice in which Albus spoke made it clear that he wouldn’t change his mind, and he probably expected that Roy would follow his wishes. If anything had become clear over the course of the few Order meetings Roy had attended so far, it was that the Order members seemed to be under the impression that Albus was infallible. Which he was not.

Unfortunately, this mindset meant that Albus was used to rely almost exclusively on his own decisions, and he didn’t take criticism with the consideration he should give it.

Roy wondered if there was any way to make Potter more aware of the sort of danger he was in. Perhaps Hermione could be helpful with that.

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“No, not really.”

“Then I guess, if you forget to ask for permission, you wouldn’t be ignoring any orders.”
Hermione had arrived at the house two hours ago amongst a frankly ridiculous amount of secrecy. The secrecy made more sense now that Ron had explained this place was the secret headquarters of an organisation dedicated to fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters, but that was as much as Ron knew. They, along with Ginny, Fred, and George, weren’t allowed into any meetings.

There was a meeting going on right now, and Fred, George, and Ginny were testing some odd ear-shaped contraptions that Fred and George had invented to try to listen into it. Unfortunately, the space before the closed door was too cramped for Ron and Hermione to join them.

“So...” Hermione started after a brief pause, “have you decided to study Alchemy?”

Ron rolled his eyes. He had sent a very ambiguous response to Hermione’s letter a few days back.

“Can’t you think of something that’s not classes?”

“Classes are important, Ron, and you could use something better than Divination.”

“Alchemy is a dead art. Useless for useless, at least I know Divination is easy.”

Hermione frowned, holding back a knee-jerk reaction of disapproval to Ron’s reasons for choosing his classes. Instead, she focused on the reasoning she had known she would need to convince Ron.

“I wouldn’t be so sure it’ll be useless. I’ve met Professor Mustang, and I’ve seen him use a transmutation circle.” Ron’s eyebrows rose in the mix of surprise and scepticism Hermione had expected. “Besides,” she reached into a pocket and pulled out Harry’s reply about the Alchemy class, handing it over to Ron.

Ron read the letter, and Hermione saw his face take on the same disbelief that she had felt upon reading it for the first time. He looked back at her.

“The Philosopher’s Stone?” Ron hissed, and Hermione nodded. Ron looked to the door. “Do you reckon he’s in the Order?”

“Maybe,” Hermione replied. “He certainly is in danger, and Roy is plenty smart to be of help.”

“Roy?” Ron asked, raising his eyebrows at her.

Hermione’s cheeks heated up. That was exactly the kind of slip she wanted to avoid at school.

“I’m still getting used to him being a professor.”

Ron hummed and grinned wickedly.

“This is starting to sound like Lockhart all over again.”

“Shut. Up.”
Roy was frustrated. It had been nearly a month since he started his lessons on the _patronus_ charm, and he hadn’t managed to create more than a vague silvery shield that would be of no use in a real fight. That result meant he wouldn’t manage even a spark against a dementor, as Sirius had so helpfully worded it during their most recent meeting.

Finding an appropriate memory was proving even harder than Roy had feared. Whatever his intention was, he always found himself drawing a connection to the Promised Day. Or Maes’ funeral. He had carefully steered out of older memories.

Roy was now venting his frustration over the whole affair on his planning for his classes. Which, fortunately, was the same for every year, although he expected adjustments would be necessary depending on each group’s progress. Roy didn’t do things half-heartedly, but at the same time he had to minimize as much as possible the time his role as a professor would take outside of the classes. He had spent the last two hours leaning back on a chair, a pen in his mouth as he thought, jotting down the occasional note. It was the sort of behaviour that would earn him a glare from Riza.

Roy had briefly considered the possibility of learning to use a quill, for the sake of blending in, but had finally decided against it. It would take up too much time, and writing with muggle pens could work in his favour. Wizards underestimated muggles too much, and this would be seen as either a scholar’s quirk, or scoffed at by the more anti-muggle side of the school, meaning they would look down on Roy for copying muggles instead of doing the proper wizard thing.

Of course, that meant Roy would need more than his current blue pen to pass the school year, and so he had asked a bemused Tonks if she could buy him some muggle stationery. Roy had given her a list, because he had a feeling Tonks wasn’t familiar with what was available.

Roy hadn’t seen much of Albus outside of Order meetings since the revelation about the prophecy. If asked, he would say that he had been busy, but the truth was that he was annoyed by Albus’ approach to Potter’s situation and had been avoiding him. Roy was far too familiar with the reality of children being forced into wars they should never have been a part of, and letting them be as prepared as possible to defend themselves if necessary was the best way to protect them. An image of Edward, Alphonse, and Ling Yao staying behind to fight Gluttony at that abandoned house in Central came to mind whenever Roy thought about this.

However, Roy couldn’t postpone meeting with Albus forever, and so he headed for Albus’ office with his first draft for the Alchemy classes.

He gave the gargoyle the ridiculous password, stepped on the moving stairs, and walked through the door at the top when it opened for him.

Albus was at his desk, reading a letter with a sombre expression on his face. When he didn’t even utter a greeting, Roy felt curious.

“Is everything all right?” Roy asked, approaching the desk.

“Unfortunately, no. Fudge’s smear campaign continues to have its effects. He has finally managed to convince the International Confederation of Wizards to remove my title as Supreme Mugwump.”
“That is the last one, isn’t it?” Roy asked. He had been keeping an eye on the newspaper, and over the course of the month Albus had been stripped of all the titles he had held outside of Hogwarts, starting with that of Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot in early July.

“Yes, and it’s a worrying development. Fudge had a measure of control over all other titles, but this position goes beyond Great Britain. The fact that he has succeeded means his words are having a greater effect than I feared,” Albus said, finally looking up at Roy. He looked noticeably older than when Roy had first met him, which was saying something for a man of one hundred and thirteen years.

“Is this a bad time?” Roy asked, looking down at the many pieces of parchment strewn over Albus’ desk.

“Oh, no, not at all. I would appreciate a distraction from all the grim news.”

“Very well,” Roy said, sitting on one of the armchairs before Albus’ desk.

Roy decided to push his frustration over Potter’s situation to the back of his mind for now. Whatever their disagreements were, the fact remained that Albus and Roy were fighting a war most of the world seemed to try its hardest to pretend didn’t exist. They had to remain on the same page as much as possible.

Roy raised the stack of pieces of parchment he had brought.

“I have decided how I’m going to torture your students.”

Roy was in Albus’ office when a very nervous-looking Mundungus Fletcher came through the Floo network to inform Albus that dementors had attacked Harry Potter. While he was ‘otherwise occupied’. Albus’ face said that Fletcher had an epic scolding coming as soon as things had calmed down, but for the moment he limited himself to asking for Potter’s condition — safe, fortunately — and for as many details as Fletcher knew. Which weren’t many.

Halfway through the questioning, an extremely presumptuous letter from Cornelius Fudge arrived, announcing that Harry Potter had been expelled from Hogwarts for use of underage magic, and doing so in front of a muggle no less. At least, that was what the letter said once one removed all the pretentious words and veiled mockery.

Albus didn’t take it well. He asked Roy to head to Grimmauld Place, assemble an emergency Order meeting, and have them wait for him. Albus then left for the Ministry of Magic to remind Fudge that the Ministry didn’t have the authority to expel Hogwarts students.

Roy used his best military officer voice to order Fletcher to use the Floo ahead of him — the last thing he wanted was for Fletcher to decide to avoid the meeting — then crossed to Grimmauld Place himself. There, he explained what had happened, assured everybody that Potter was well, and let Molly and Sirius tear at Fletcher while Bill Weasley contacted the rest of the Order members. As they arrived, Roy explained the situation, and most of them had at least a few choice words for Fletcher before they started debating the situation.
It was the general consensus that Fudge would try to have Potter expelled from Hogwarts at all costs.

Last night’s meeting had mostly consisted of a lengthy debate about all the possible actions Fudge might try to take during the hearing he had scheduled for Harry Potter on the twelfth of August. Towards the end of it, they also reached the conclusion that Potter would be safer if he came to Grimmauld Place —*finally a sensible decision in regards to Potter*, Roy had thought dryly— but the hour was late, many of them had to show up at the ministry on the morning, and they had decided to adjourn the meeting for two nights later to decide how to handle Potter’s situation.

Roy and Sirius had a class scheduled for today, but it soon became clear that Sirius was in no state of mind to attempt to teach Roy anything. Instead, Roy suggested they could duel. He could use real practice fighting a wizard, and Sirius would benefit from a chance to let go of some of the tension from last night.

Roy practiced using his reflexes to dodge curses, and tried to fire his own as quickly as he could. Spells weren’t as fast as flame alchemy, but he could manage, and Sirius seemed interested enough in Roy’s lack of use of shielding charms to ask about it.

“From what I’ve learnt, Death Eaters favour the Unforgivables, and you can’t block those, so I figured having as much practice as possible dodging spells would be useful,” Roy explained.

From the pensive way Sirius nodded, it was obvious that he hadn’t considered that reasoning before.

The day Harry Potter was scheduled to be escorted to Grimmauld Place, Roy buried himself in the school library to avoid being part of either the main escort guard or the replacement one. He doubted he would be assigned the job, given his own status with Voldemort, but he didn’t want to take the risk. He had absolutely no idea how to ride a broom —the chosen means of transport for the trip— nor did he want to learn, but admitting his lack of knowledge would be suspicious when brooms were so common.

At night, Roy accompanied Albus to the Order meeting that had been scheduled after Potter’s arrival, but left to return to Hogwarts immediately afterwards. He didn’t want to be there once Potter was allowed to enter the kitchen. Potter was a teenager, he had spent over a month in the dark in regards to the situation with Voldemort and the existence of the Order of the Phoenix, and he had just gone through what was bound to have been a stressful situation with the dementors and his potential expulsion from school. The emotional explosion once Potter was updated on the situation —and then told he wasn’t allowed to attend Order meetings— was unavoidable, and Roy didn’t want to be anywhere near Grimmauld Place when it happened.
Whether Albus shared Roy’s thoughts or was telling the truth when he said that he had work to do, the fact remained that Roy and Albus both left Grimmauld Place together the moment the meeting was over.

Roy crumbled a piece of parchment, threw it aside, and clapped his gloved hands to set it on fire. There went another failed attempt at developing an array to safely destroy the horcrux in Potter.

Ideally, Roy would study the horcrux he had found at Grimmauld Place, but Albus had scanned the locket and found dangerous spells that he hadn’t found a way to dismantle yet.

The last thing Roy wanted to be exposed to was a spell that would distort his thoughts and emotions.

“I talked to Harry, about the *patronus,*” Sirius told Roy two days after Potter’s hearing. “I didn’t tell him why I asked, but his first time using it... it was odd, so I thought it could help. There was some time travel involved the first time. He couldn’t do it, but then he came back in time and did it because he’d seen the *patronus* the first time before passing out, and he knew he could do it. Harry said it wasn’t so much about happiness as it was the knowledge he *could* do it. And with the dementors the other day, he said he was afraid he couldn’t see his friends again, but then remembered them and managed it. I’m not sure if that’ll help you, but the happy memories don’t seem to work, so...”

Roy very pointedly ignored the time travel part of Sirius’ words and focused on the useful information.

“Determination?” he asked, thinking. “That might work.”

Roy would still need to find a way to stay focused on his thoughts and prevent them from wandering into the past, but finding his reasons to move forward should be much easier than finding his happiest memories.

That night Roy took a page out of Edward’s book. He took out the small amount of cenz that had been in his wallet when he arrived to this world, found a coin of five hundred and another of twenty, and transmuted them into the inner side of his state alchemist watch’s cover. That seemingly small promise, made in his car during one of the darkest times of either of their lives,
was the most innocent reminder Roy had of his objectives.

Roy made sure that the coins didn’t prevent the watch from closing and pocketed it again. It was strange to find the weight of that watch even the slightest bit comforting. He hadn’t felt that way since before Ishval.

Roy couldn’t believe he was so stupid. He had heard this story weeks ago, and yet the thought had only now crossed his mind.

According to the portraits, Albus wasn’t in his office, and Roy was left to return to his own room as he tried not to berate himself too much. But it was just so obvious.

Maybe Albus had already looked into it.

Two hours later, Albus was at Roy’s door.

“I hear you were looking for me?” he asked, and Roy stepped back to let him in.

“Did you ever search the Chamber of Secrets after it was found?” Roy asked without preamble.

Albus stayed silent for a few moments, a blank expression on his face.

“No, I did not. Do you believe one of the horcruxes might be there?”

“It makes sense,” Roy said, straightening into attention. “The Chamber of Secrets represents Riddle’s magical ancestry, maybe even influenced his decision to conquer the wizarding world. Back then, he was the only one who could access it —at least as far as we know— but he needed access to the school to do so. That would explain that sham of an interview you had with him.”

Albus nodded, conceding to Roy’s reasoning.

“I will ask Harry for the Parseltongue needed to access it. We will have to wait until Minerva arrives, to avoid leaving the school unattended, but it’s worth exploring.”

As soon as Minerva returned to Hogwarts, she busied herself with the organisation of the upcoming school year. She very pointedly didn’t think about the fact that they still didn’t have a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, and that she still couldn’t send the supplies letters because of it. Instead, Minerva focused on the things that she could work on.

Right now, Minerva was going through the replies about the Alchemy class, to see how large the groups would be. Once she had the list of students, Minerva would go talk to Roy and ask him what requirements he had for his classroom, then she would go find an appropriate room in case
the old Alchemy class didn’t suit Roy’s needs.

This was the first year that Minerva was grateful for the hassle of organising a new class.

The one thing Roy hadn’t planned about his classes was how he would set up the classroom. After some thought, he had settled on something simple: a blackboard taking up one of the larger walls, a cabinet to store materials for basic transmutations (if he ever thought any class ready for that), and large desks that would allow the students to spread their notes around where they sat. For decoration, Roy had transmuted an enlarged periodic table and another one with all the elements’ alchemical symbols to hang on the wall opposite to the blackboard. He didn’t add anything else because Roy had never had to decorate his own work space.

He put a little more effort into his adjoining office.

Roy had an inordinate amount of fun choosing what would be on display there. He spent his little remaining money on some of the least outrageous books he had read over the last few months to put them on the shelves. There was still a lot of free space, but having as many books as he could afford was an essential part of his persona. He wrote down the formulas for simple transmutations that would be considered very advanced in this world and stuck them haphazardly to the walls, as if they were things that he was working on. After some deliberation, he decided to transmute the two chairs before the desk into the most uncomfortable ones that he could make seem like average comfortable chairs.

He cast a combination of protective charms on all the desk’s drawers, just in case some student decided to have a look through them.

As a last minute thought, Roy transmuted a wood vase, placed it on the desk, and put a few pens in it.

Albus couldn’t believe that he still hadn’t examined the Chamber of Secrets. With the basilisk dead, he hadn’t deemed it a priority, and more recent events had kept him busy, from Sirius’ escape to Tom’s return.

Albus had brought Fawkes along, just in case he and Roy didn’t find a way out of the Chamber and they needed his help to leave.

“Open,” Albus hissed at the sink. He had made sure to memorise the hissing sound Harry had made when Albus asked him for the word, and the sink obediently slid down to reveal the wide pipe that went down to the Chamber of Secrets.

“I wonder how Riddle found this,” Roy commented idly. “Was he snooping in the girls’
bathroom?"

“I don’t believe Tom was the sort of boy for such activities,” Albus replied, amused by the thought of Tom sneaking into the girls’ bathrooms.

Roy sighed theatrically.

“No wonder he turned to world domination: he was missing the little pleasures in life.”

Albus shook his head, unsure of how serious Roy was being now.

“Shall we?” he asked, gesturing towards the entrance.

“Of course.”

Albus walked up to the opening. Maybe he was a little too old for such a descent, but a small adventure seemed like the right thing to lift his spirits after these grim months.

After a steep descent through the large pipe, the fall sloped to a safer angle that slowed Roy down before reaching the end of the tunnel. Roy rolled across the damp stone ground before coming up to his feet in a dark corridor that was only illuminated by Albus’ wand. Roy drew his own wand and cast another *lumos*.

There was only one path to follow from here.

“According to Harry’s story when he returned from the Chamber, we will find a basilisk’s shed skin up ahead, and at the same place there is a caved in portion of the tunnel,” Albus said, starting to advance through the dark path with his wand raised.

Roy followed suit, matching his steps to Albus’ longer strides to walk next to him.

“Do you know any spell to secure the structure? It would be a nuisance if it trapped us on any side.”

Roy glanced sideways at Albus and saw him smile. And it was too dark for him to be certain, but Roy could swear that Albus’ eyes were twinkling.

“I made certain I did before we came here. Minerva would not be pleased if we disappeared for however long it took for us to dig ourselves out of the stone.”

The hole through the fallen rocks had clearly been made for a preteen, and it was too small for either Roy or Albus to get through. Roy stood back and watched as Albus first secured and then
enlarged the opening. Roy tried to memorise the spells Albus used, aware that they might prove useful in another situation, especially if alchemy wasn’t a viable solution.

From there on, the tunnel twisted again and again, its floor littered with the remaining bones of many small animals. Roy knew that the basilisk was dead, but his free hand inched towards the pocket of his robe where he kept his traditional ignition gloves all the same. He didn’t expect to need them, but he felt more comfortable knowing that he had the choice to switch gloves if the situation turned sour.

“This is an awfully long hallway to lead into a single chamber,” Roy observed after ten minutes of walking without coming across a single door.

“Maybe,” Albus said, “but keep in mind this place was home to a basilisk for a thousand years. I daresay it perceived distances in a different way than we do.”

Roy hummed an agreement, his mind going back to the massive basilisk skin they had just passed.

“Say, how expensive do you think are basilisk parts?”

Albus glanced sideways at him in amusement.

“Why? Are you in need of money?”

“Perhaps. My office could use an extra hundred books or so,” Roy said, thinking back to the mostly bare shelves that didn’t help support his cover as a scholar.

Albus chuckled.

“I suppose we could collect some. I imagine Severus would appreciate a few rare ingredients as well.”

They reached the end of the tunnel, a solid-looking wall that had two serpents with glinting emeralds for eyes carved into its surface.

Albus hissed at the serpents, the same way that he had done to the sink, and the wall parted, sinking to both sides of the hallway to reveal a massive cavern littered with stone pillars. Some of the pillars had fallen, a clear sign of the fight that had taken place here two years ago, but on the ones still standing Roy could see more carved serpents, barely noticeable next to the gigantic corpse of the basilisk. The place was half-flooded, and on the other end there was a massive statue of a man Roy guessed was Salazar Slytherin.

Roy whistled.

“That’s tacky.”

Albus smiled in amusement.

“It certainly is. Would you like to begin?” Albus asked, and Roy nodded. “We should stay together, who knows what kind of surprises Salazar Slytherin or Tom may have left here.”

Roy nodded and gestured for Albus to go ahead.

“I believe you have far more experience than me in this field,” he said.
Unfortunately, there was no horcrux in the Chamber of Secrets. They did, however, collect a good number of basilisk parts. Albus took a fang to keep in his office and a handful of ingredients to give to Snape. Albus had asked Roy if he could transmute the vials himself instead of transfiguring them, and watched in great interest as Roy took out a piece of chalk and drew the transmutation circle on a dry chunk of fallen pillar.

As per Albus’ suggestion, Roy stopped Mundungus Fletcher at the end of the next Order meeting to use Fletcher’s contacts to sell his part of the ingredients. Judging by Fletcher’s greedy expression, Roy expected he would try to take as much advantage of the sale as possible. As long as Roy obtained the money he needed, he didn’t care, and there was still a mostly-intact basilisk corpse beneath the school if Roy needed more money.

A week later, Fletcher handed Roy a large bag of money, and the following day ten owls arrived from Flourish and Blotts with a large order of books that would give his office the right appearance of a room belonging to someone who spent most of his time studying.

On the thirtieth of August, Roy found himself sitting at a staff meeting listening as Albus announced that Fudge had managed to take advantage of their lack of a Defence Against the Dark Arts professor to force someone into the school.

“And do we know who this... professor is?” Snape asked, disdain dripping from his voice.

“Unfortunately,” Albus replied. “I believe we are all familiar with the Minister’s Senior Undersecretary, Dolores Umbridge?”

Roy had no idea who this Umbridge was, but judging from the reactions around the room, they were very bad news.

Roy spent the following two days trying to learn whatever he could about Dolores Umbridge, and by the time lunch of the first of September rolled by, Roy was certain that Umbridge would have fit Bradley’s administration.

Dolores Umbridge appeared at the school barely a few hours before the students were scheduled to arrive, just in time for the staff meeting preceding dinner. It was a tedious affair in which Umbridge made clear what everybody had already feared: she was here to further the Ministry’s agenda and the students wouldn’t learn anything from her. She also treated all the professors as if they were little children when they were introduced. Roy put on his best smile to deal with higher
up officers. Umbridge wasn’t much different, so Roy pretended that he didn’t notice her attitude.

This year had just become even more trying than it had already been.

Chapter End Notes

From what little we see in the books of the Order’s activities, I am reasonably certain all the adult members knew about the prophecy. It's the only explanation that makes sense for the fact that they all go along with the idea that Harry is some sort of chosen one.

Also, I changed a little the events of the night Harry cast the patronus. In canon, the order learnt about it through Arthur Weasley when Dumbledore showed up at the Ministry to argue with Fudge, but because Roy was there when Dumbledore was informed, the Order learns about it in a more organised way.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I don’t know what happened to me, but don’t get used to this: weekly updates are not the norm, this is just a fluke.

Very special thanks to Lindril for dealing with this chapter. I had the brilliant idea of sending over my 2am writing, unrevised, and... well, let’s say I’d invented two words, amongst other things.

As a general rule I don’t like to use dialogue from the books, but sometimes it’s unavoidable. Here I had to take Dumbledore’s speech from the book and I tweaked it a little to fit the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Roy dressed up in a nice set of dark grey robes, made sure that his hair was arranged in his casually-dishevelled style, and exited his rooms to walk down to the Great Hall. The Hogwarts Express was scheduled to reach the station at Hogsmeade in a matter of minutes, and Roy had been informed that all members of staff who weren’t meant to monitor the first years were expected to be in the Great Hall before the students arrived.

Roy settled on his seat, between Professor Sprout and Minerva’s currently empty chair, and fell into an easy conversation about what to expect from the start of term with Professor Sprout. He kept half an ear on the exchange Albus was having with Umbridge two seats down the table: Umbridge was sprouting dangerous nonsense about the Ministry’s views of Hogwarts curriculum and some changes she felt were necessary in the school. An average professor had no power to enact any of those changes, which led Roy to wonder what ace she and Fudge must have up their sleeves. Fudge would not have sent one of his most loyal supporters to Hogwarts unless he believed Umbridge would manage to further his goals.

Shortly afterwards, the students started to enter the Great Hall and settle into their tables. Roy spotted Harry Potter amongst the crowd, easy to find due to the amount of students who either pointed at him or turned to look in his direction when they saw him. It was a good way to assess how effectively Fudge’s smear campaign was going, and his first impression wasn’t good.

Once the students had settled, Minerva walked in. She was carrying the Sorting Hat and its stool. The first years entered behind her, looking terrified.

“Don’t they look a little too scared for a sorting ceremony?” Roy asked in a low voice, his eyes fixed on a little boy who looked seconds away from fainting.

Professor Sprout chuckled.

“It’s a tradition to keep the sorting process a secret from the children. Parents, and especially older siblings, enjoy making up tales about what the ceremony is supposed to be, and these spread and grow in the minutes the first years wait outside,” she explained in an equally low voice.

Roy held back a snort.
“Do you mean that half of them expect to be faced with something horrifying?”

“Most of them, I’d say.”

They fell silent when Minerva placed the stool down. In theory, Roy knew that the Sorting Hat was enchanted to be able to speak, but he had to dig the nails of his right hand into his palm under the table to stop himself from jumping in place when the hat started to sing.

It was an interesting song, a clear warning to the students about the upcoming war, but Roy doubted anyone who hadn’t already believed in Voldemort’s return would change their mind because of it. Out of the corner of his eye, Roy saw Umbridge attempting to keep a neutral expression as the hat sang. She looked more as if she had bit into a lemon.

Applause and murmurs throughout the room greeted the end of the song, and it took a minute before the students quieted out enough for the sorting ceremony to begin.

Roy watched in mild curiosity as Minerva called the first years forward. They looked terrified, and most of them clearly wanted the ceremony to be over with and the room’s attention to leave them; as soon as the hat yelled a house, they practically ran towards the table. It was as Roy watched a little girl drop the hat on the stool and hurry up towards the Ravenclaw table that Roy realized an important detail he had overlooked so far.

Blue and grey.

The colours he saw in the students’ ties at the Ravenclaw table were blue and grey, but Roy knew—he had read it on *Hogwarts: A History*—that the Ravenclaw colours were blue and bronze. Roy’s eyes slid to the Slytherin table next. The house’s colours were green and silver, according to the book, and yet what he saw were shades of blue and grey. They were different enough that Roy was certain he would identify the Slytherin and Ravenclaw colours if put side to side, but he wouldn’t recognise the house colours if he saw only one student.

*Wonderful*, he thought reproachfully. He hadn’t thought twice of the concept of house colours as he reread *Hogwarts: A History* in preparation for the school year.

Roy looked at the Hufflepuff and Gryffindor tables next. He knew he wasn’t seeing those colours as they were meant to be either—he saw black and grey where it should be black and yellow for Hufflepuff, and red and grey instead of red and gold in the Gryffindor uniforms—but the red and black would allow him to identify those two houses easily enough.

Roy scanned the students’ uniforms next. The outer robes had the corresponding house shield emblazoned on the front, so that would be of use to identify the right house. If a Slytherin or a Ravenclaw student wasn’t wearing an outer robe and for some reason Roy needed to know the right house... well, Roy was going to practise his capacity to remember faces a lot, it would seem.

Finally, the sorting was over and the meal started. The conversation over dinner was the polite and trivial kind of talk that Roy remembered from the last week of the previous school year. Minerva, who was sitting between Roy and Albus, pointedly turned her back on the conversation that Umbridge was still subjecting Albus to as she asked Roy if he would like to know anything about his future students. Minerva had given him the class lists yesterday, and she remembered many of the names. Roy accepted the offer, welcoming any information he could have before classes started. It wasn’t long before Sprout and Flitwick—who was sitting on Sprout’s other side—joined the conversation, and within minutes Roy knew the years that most likely would give him trouble were the fifth and seventh years. In seventh year, he had two Gryffindor students that all three of his colleagues agreed on referring to as the greatest troublemakers of the school, twin boys
by the names of Fred and George Weasley. Fifth year, which incidentally was Potter’s year, boasted the most vicious rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin of the students currently in the school and Roy’s class happened to have most of the more quarrelsome students from both houses.

When everybody had finished eating, the food disappeared and Albus stood up. The noise in the Great Hall ceased and everybody’s attention focused on him.

“Well, now that we are all digesting another magnificent feast, I beg a few moments of your attention for the usual start-of-term notices,” Albus started. “First-years ought to know that the Forest on the grounds is out-of-bounds to students —and a few of our older students ought to know by now, too.” Roy raised an eyebrow, sensing more than one story behind that statement. “Mr. Filch, the caretaker, has asked me, for what he tells me is the four-hundred-and-sixty second time, to remind you all that magic is not permitted in corridors between classes, nor are a number of other things, all of which can be checked on the extensive list now fastened to Mr. Filch’s office door.”

Judging by the amount of eyes Roy could see rolling in the crowd, very few people took those particular warnings seriously.

“We have had three changes in staffing this year,” Albus continued. “We are very pleased to welcome back Professor Grubbly-Plank, who will be teaching Care of Magical Creatures,” he said, referring to the woman who was filling in Hagrid’s position until Hagrid returned from his mission. “Also, as all of you were informed this summer, we have a new class this year, Alchemy, which will be taught by Professor Roy Mustang.” He gestured to Roy. “And, finally, we are also delighted to introduce Professor Umbridge, our new Defence Against the Dark Arts professor.”

The round of clapping that followed these announcements was an interesting mix of polite disinterest and what could only be called enthusiasm. Roy noticed a fair amount of glances directed his way, accompanied by some giggling. He smiled pleasantly at the crowd.

Once the clapping was over, Albus resumed his speech.

“Tryouts for the house quidditch teams will take place on the——” he broke off when Umbridge stood up, glancing inquiringly at her.

Then Umbridge cleared her throat with a fake cough and Roy held back a groan. Umbridge was actually going to stand there and address the school halfway through Albus’ welcome speech. That, aside from terrible manners, was a very poor move for someone who clearly intended to manipulate public opinion in her favour.

Very unsubtle, Professor Umbridge, Roy thought, even as he schooled his face into polite attentiveness. Albus sat down, his face falling into the exact same expression as if he didn’t despise Umbridge as Roy knew that he did. Most of the staff didn’t bother to cover their surprise or annoyance.

And then Umbridge started speaking.

Had Roy been in her position, he wouldn’t have given a speech. Doing so at this stage meant giving a warning to her future opposition about what she intended to do and allowing them to prepare to counter her actions. However, Roy had to give it to her, her opening move wasn’t an entirely abysmal one: trite words, said in a high-pitched girlish voice and addressing the students as though they were little kids would certainly gain her some antagonism, but it would also make many people underestimate her. First impressions were important, and she was giving the first impression of being a bit of a joke. Roy knew a lot about masks, and he knew Umbridge would not
have reached her position in the Ministry of Magic if she was the person she was showing to the school.

Crossing his hands in his lap, Roy listened carefully as Umbridge continued on in a much more monotonous voice, giving a propaganda-ridden speech exposing her objectives. He wondered how many people managed to focus through the entire thing without tuning her out due to all the prattle in between the important facts. Roy spied many students putting their heads together to talk, and the volume in the Great Hall slowly rose as Umbridge droned on. He found some people paying attention, though, and saw Hermione amongst them, leaning forward on the bench with a frown on her face.

By the end of the speech, very few people outside of the staff had been paying attention, and the applause Albus started was sparse and short-lived. Roy wondered how many people would learn of what Umbridge had said through their peers, and how many of them would be caught unaware by whatever she had in store for the school. Roy glanced sideways and found both Minerva and Sprout stony-faced. Albus’ relaxed and nice mask was good, but Roy could read the calculating and worried glint in his eyes.

Albus stood up and continued on with his speech as if Umbridge hadn’t spent the last fifteen minutes aiming veiled barbs and threats at him.

The following morning during breakfast, Albus handed Roy the definitive schedule for his classes. Roy had already known the most likely configuration of his schedule, but the delay with Defence Against the Dark Arts meant that Minerva had been forced to leave the definitive organization of the lessons until the last minute. Roy pocketed the folded piece of parchment and sat down to eat.

Once in his office, Roy took out the schedule and unfolded it. A small slip of parchment fell out of it and to the desk. It was a short note, informing him that Sturgis Podmore, a member of the Order, hadn’t been seen since August 30th, despite the fact that he was supposed to be part of Potter’s guard yesterday.

Roy deconstructed the parchment and turned to his schedule. He had no class on the first period today, just as Minerva told him last night, and he spent that hour doing last minute checks in the classroom, as though the sparse furniture would have moved overnight.

He also rehearsed his opening speech and instructions, because Havoc was absolutely right when he called Roy overdramatic.

Roy found his first day of classes uneventful. The students were curious enough about him and what he intended to teach them that they hadn’t given him much trouble —Roy expected this to change, or at least for the students to try to change it, before long—and the day could almost be
called monotonous. That was, of course, until he set foot in the Great Hall for dinner and heard news that Harry Potter had gotten into a yelling match with Dolores Umbridge and had earned himself detention for the remainder of the week.

Minerva looked torn between annoyance and pride as she related her conversation with Potter following the argument, a clear sign that, despite the fact that one of her students had gotten into trouble the first day of classes, she was glad that not everybody was going to accept Umbridge’s meddling without complaint. She had warned Potter to keep his head down, but Roy, familiar as he was with angry teenagers under too much pressure, knew that was very unlikely to happen.

By the time Thursday morning dawned, Roy was bored of repeating himself. He had seen proof of how close-minded the wizarding world was in the fact that all four of the classes he had taught so far had reacted in virtually the same way to his introduction to the class, despite the fact that the youngest students were thirteen year olds and the oldest were seventeen. Today he had his last class of the week, a double period with his fifth year group first thing in the morning, and then he would be free for the remainder of the week.

Roy knew, through the incredibly effective gossip source that was the staff room, that another tradition in the school was for the students who had already attended a class with a professor to not reveal the contents of that class to their fellow students who hadn’t. According to a derisive mutter from Minerva, that was the only reason why anybody chose to take Divination in their third year.

Roy sat behind his desk and pretended to read a piece of parchment as the students filed into the classroom, listening to their conversations. They entered the class speaking loud and animatedly, but hushed when they noticed his presence. Roy heard the telltale sound of bags opening and objects being placed carefully on desks and held back a smirk when he realized that Minerva had been right: no one had bothered to inform this group of what the class was going to be about, and they had made the same mistake as everybody before them.

Roy brought his pocket watch out and opened it. The moment the hands signalled the hour the class was scheduled to begin, Roy set the parchment down, took his wand out, and flicked it to close the door.

“I hope everybody is here,” he said, standing up. He pocketed his watch and put away his wand. “Unless you have a very good reason, lateness won’t be tolerated: anyone who isn’t here on time won’t be allowed into the classroom.”

The same surprised expressions Roy had seen four times already in this classroom filled the faces before him. Roy scanned the crowd. Fourteen students wasn’t the largest group he had (that honour went to sixth year, where people seemed to think two years of studying Alchemy would allow them to prepare for the N.E.W.T. exam), but it wasn’t the smallest either (that was seventh year, with only seven students in the class). The students had, unsurprisingly, sat in groups with their housemates, leaving some space between the groups. Roy compared the grey and blue ties from two different groups—and the helpful shield on the outer robe of a boy who hadn’t removed it—and quickly surmised the three boys in the fourth row were from Slytherin, while the three boys and one girl in the front one were Ravenclaws. Hermione sat with three other Gryffindors, all of them boys, occupying seats at the second and third rows and three Hufflepuffs sat in those same
rows but at the opposite end of the classroom, leaving two free seats between both groups. Most of them had placed their potions’ scales on the tables, and Roy could see more than one cauldron on the floor next to the school bags.

“I don’t think Professor Snape would appreciate it if you broke the tools for his class. You should put those away, you won’t need them here,” he said, and held back a smirk at the surprise that instruction drew from the students. Roy had been surprised himself, in his third year class, to see the students had brought their potions’ materials, but he had quickly realised that they expected to learn the potions-like processes that wizards called alchemy.

Roy clasped his hands together behind his back and stood before his desk.

“I believe there has been a small misunderstanding in regards to this class. While it is true that the most commonly known branch of alchemy is the one that relates to potions, that is not the one we will be seeing here. You won’t need anything but your parchment and quills for some time.”

Roy saw confusion and a few grimaces on the students’ faces. Except for Hermione, who looked remarkably excited at the news. She had no doubt already figured out where Roy was going.

“What’re we gonna do then?” one of the boys at the back drawled derisively. He was pale and had what Roy saw as white hair but which was most likely a very light shade of blond.

Roy raised an eyebrow.

“Your name?”

“Draco Malfoy,” he replied arrogantly, in that way that implied the name should inspire some form of awe or respect.

“Well, as I was going to explain when Mr. Malfoy so rudely interrupted me,” (the red haired boy sitting next to Potter covered a snicker with a cough), “my area of expertise are transmutation circles, and that is what you will learn here.”

Roy very charitably didn’t roll his eyes at the shock and surprise most of the students showed. It may have been amusing the first time, but this was the fifth time he saw that exact same reaction in four days, and it didn’t say much in the students’ favour that they hadn’t thought of this possibility when transmutation circles were a known part of alchemy.

One of the boys at the first row raised his hand.

“Yes? What’s your name?” Roy asked.

“Michael Corner. What’s the point in studying transmutation circles? Can’t you do more stuff with transfiguration?”

Roy looked Corner up and down, tired of hearing variations of that same question. At least this one was genuinely curious instead of derisive.

“Tell me, Mr. Corner, do you believe the sole reason to acquire new knowledge is how useful it will be to you?” Roy asked, fully aware that, with Ravenclaw’s reputation, very few people in that house would dare answer yes to that question in public.

“No!” Corner replied, looking outraged enough in his response to be genuine.

Roy nodded in approval.
“While knowledge itself should be reason enough to decide to learn anything, there are other elements to consider. From your question, I gather that you see transmutations as no different from transfiguration, but they are. The principles and methods to achieve them are very different and that affects someone’s performance. You could be amazing at transfiguration but be unable to transmute a simple wood horse, or you could be terrible at transfiguration and capable of transmuting an entire house out of a single array.”

This last example had the desired effect, and Roy saw more than one student perk in interest. Hermione’s hand rose in the air.

“Yes? And what’s your name?” Roy asked, ignoring the confusion that flickered across Hermione’s face for a moment.

“Hermione Granger. Can you really transmute an entire house with a single array? It would take a combination of spells to do that.”

“I can, yes,” Roy replied. “Transmutation circles have their limitations, but those are different to the limitations of other types of magic.” It was curious, but after the time that had passed, Roy was barely bothered by referring to alchemy as magic. “The most noticeable example I have found in regards to something alchemy can do but other types of magic can’t is that a transmutation circle can be used on muggle technology without interfering with it.”

Just like in his other four classes, that revelation earned Roy mixed reactions. The three Slytherins scoffed, just like all their housemates had done so far (and wasn’t that curious? Roy just happened to have bigoted students in every class; he was developing a theory), but most of the other students showed at least a degree of interest, from mild curiosity to excitement. Roy guessed their level of interest depended on how relevant muggle technology was to their lives.

“Really?” a Hufflepuff girl with a prefect’s badge pinned to her uniform asked, and then a slight blush took over her cheeks. She clearly hadn’t intended to say that out loud. The three on the back snickered.

“I had to fix a TV not too long ago,” Roy offered, pretending that he hadn’t noticed her embarrassment. He wasn’t going to discourage participation in his class as long as it wasn’t ill-intentioned. As irrelevant as the question was, scolding her for it would ensure that people thought twice before asking him anything. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Oh, Hannah Abbott, sir.”

Roy nodded, then he looked around.

“If we are done questioning the usefulness of the class, may I continue?” he asked rhetorically. “As I said earlier, you will only need quills and parchment for a while. That is because I won’t allow anyone near a transmutation circle until I am certain that you understand the basic principles of transmutation. Once they are covered, you will sit an exam to test your knowledge of them alongside other basic information you should know by then as well.”

Potter and the red haired boy sitting next to him tried to hide grimaces, while the boy sitting next to Hermione looked frightened all of a sudden. The two burly boys sitting on each side of Malfoy grimaced as well, while Roy saw some worried or determined looks exchanged between the rest of the students.

“As many of you probably know, alchemy is only examined officially on N.E.W.T. level,” Roy continued. “The rest of the subjects have the O.W.L. exams to sort out the students without an
aptitude for the subject. As I don’t have that luxury, this exam will be the equivalent of the O.W.L.: anyone who fails it will be out of the class.”

“What?!” the boy next to Potter exclaimed, cutting through the muttering that had just started to rise. Everybody turned to look at him, but while his ears grew red in clear embarrassment, he didn’t retract the question. Instead, he elaborated. “You’ll kick us out of the class if you don’t like how we do?”

“That is one way to put it. I very much doubt this exam will be before December. If by the time you sit it you haven’t managed to grasp the most basic concepts of alchemy, then it is unlikely you will. It would be a waste of time on both our parts to continue. Of course, you are welcome to leave if you believe you aren’t up to the challenge.”

Now the class looked considerably more worried than they had when Roy had first told them what they would be studying. Good. He doubted any of the laziest students in the school had willingly chosen to take a new, unknown subject, and he was counting on the embarrassment of being expelled from a class to motivate them to work harder than most of them would have otherwise.

“Your name?” Roy asked as an afterthought.

“Ron Weasley,” he replied with a frown. Molly’s son, then.

Roy nodded.

“You should know, however, that there is another scenario in which I have the authority to expel a student from the class,” Roy continued, and paused to meet everyone’s eyes. He straightened his back. “I don’t care about your house or personal rivalries, I don’t want fights in this classroom. If any of you repeatedly stirs trouble, your skills on the subject won’t matter, you will be out through that door and won’t come back, is that clear?”

Roy waited for the hesitant nods that had followed that warning in every other class to continue.

“Good. I believe we have covered all the essential points for now. If you’ll turn around, there are two tables on the wall behind you, you have to copy them before we start with the class properly.”

“This isn’t fair!” Ron complained as soon as they had turned the first corner on their way out of the classroom. “Alchemy was supposed to be easy!”

“Nobody said that, Ron,” Hermione admonished him.

Ron turned to look at her with an incredulous expression.

“C’mom Hermione! We’ve only got one class per week, and you know why he’s—“ whatever Ron had been about to say, he glanced at Neville and cut himself off. “...Teaching,” Ron finished lamely.

Neville, however, was too distracted to notice Ron’s slip.

“Neville?” Hermione asked tentatively. “Are you all right?”
Neville sighed.

“I thought Alchemy would help me with Potions. That’s why Gran insisted I take it, but this is...” Neville trailed off and shrugged helplessly.

“You going back to Divination?” Ron asked.

Neville shook his head sadly.

“Gran won’t let me. I’ll have to wait till I’m kicked out.”

“Don’t think like that!” said Hermione, putting a hand on Neville’s shoulder. “Things will be fine, you’ll see. Professor Mustang isn’t an unfair man.”

Ron snorted.

“Yeah, I guess you know everything about how Roy is,” he muttered.

“Will you shut up?” Hermione demanded.

Harry shook his head and decided he didn’t want anything to do with Ron and Hermione’s bickering. Just like Ron, Harry had expected Alchemy to be an easy class (Mustang was only teaching it because he needed protection from Voldemort, after all), but there was no way Harry was going back to Divination if he could avoid it.

Chapter End Notes

I have chosen carefully the students who are in Alchemy class, and no one is there just because. Most of the students and parents/other relatives assumed that this class would focus on the more potions-like side of alchemy, because that’s the most commonly studied one, and thus the choices the students made were based on this. Here are some of the reasons:
- Fred and George thought alchemy might come in handy for developing some products for their joke shop and (much to their mother’s delight who didn’t know the reason) decided to take the class.
- Neville was pressured into taking Alchemy by his grandmother, who thought the class could help improve Neville’s abysmal skill in Potions.
- Malfoy isn’t there to annoy Harry, though he certainly won’t pass the chance. According to the information Rowling wrote about him on Pottermore, alchemy is one of his hobbies, and liking it is the reason he decided to study the class (he dropped out of Care of Magical Creatures to do so).
The first Saturday of the school year dawned with bad news for the Order of the Phoenix. Occupying a large portion of the central page of the *Daily Prophet*, there was a photograph of Sirius accompanied by an article warning the population of his presence in London.

Roy hadn’t been to headquarters since before the start of term, and he didn’t know if there was any basis for this article. But, regardless of how the article had come to exist, the truth in it about Sirius’ location was worrisome.

Scanning the rest of the news for anything that could be of use, no matter how trivial it seemed, Roy came across another familiar name. On August 30th, Sturgis Podmore had been arrested for attempting to break into an undisclosed area of the Ministry of Magic and had been sentenced to six months in Azkaban. After nearly a week without news of Podmore, Roy had been expecting to read about his body being found sooner or later. While it was good that he was alive, this development raised a few questions. As far as Roy knew, Podmore’s last assignment before Potter’s trip to King’s Cross had been to keep watch over the prophecy, and he wasn’t supposed to break into any forbidden areas in the Ministry of Magic. Had Podmore attempted it out of his own free will, were the Death Eaters involved, or was this a set-up by the Ministry?

Roy set his newspaper down and turned to his right.

“Minerva, is it alright if I leave the school for a few hours this afternoon? I have some errands to run.”

“Oh, Hey, hi there Roy.”

The kitchen at Grimmauld Place was deserted when Roy stepped out of the fireplace. It was an odd sight. Roy had grown used to seeing the place full whenever he came, but he hadn’t been here much outside of Order meetings.

Roy pulled his wand out, cast a *lumos*, and walked to the kitchen’s door. He tip-toed across the hallway to avoid waking up the portrait of Sirius’ mother and climbed up a flight of stairs. There was a sliver of light shining from the bottom of the door to the drawing room, so Roy walked to that door and pushed it open.

Sirius was lying on his back on a carpet that looked much cleaner than what Roy remembered from the day he had found the locket and he was making random things fly across the room.

Sirius looked up when Roy opened the door.

“Oh. Hey, hi there Roy.”
“You look busy,” Roy said, stepping into the room. He turned off the light from his wand, because here the drapes were pulled open.

Sirius rolled his eyes.

“Oh, yes, there is so much to do in here. I think Molly left a list of stuff to clean or whatever, but I’m sick of cleaning all day.”

Roy looked Sirius up and down: he was as dishevelled as the first time Roy had met him and, given that Sirius had been on the run back then, that wasn’t a good sign.

“You don’t look well,” Roy pointed out. Sirius snorted.

“I’m not well. Now that school’s started I’m trapped here again. Molly yelled at me for going with Harry to King’s Cross —in my dog form— and Dumbledore forbade me from going out. Again.”

Oh, so that is how that article happened.

Roy moved to sit on the carpet.

“Can’t you visit other Order members? I’m sure some of them have space enough for you to go out without anybody seeing you.”

Sirius threw him a dubious look.

“I doubt Dumbledore would allow it.”

“You won’t lose anything by trying. Besides, it’s not healthy to be cooped up in a house like this. I’ll ask him as well.”

Sirius sat up to look at Roy more closely.

“You sure of that?”

“Of course. I can’t have my teacher lose his mind due to isolation.”

Sirius snorted.

There was a tap on one of the windows. Roy looked up to see a snowy white owl waiting outside with a letter.

“Hedwig!” Sirius exclaimed, jumping to his feet.

“That is too risky,” Albus replied predictably.

Roy crossed his right ankle over his left knee.

“Not as risky as having him cooped up in that house until the Ministry decides to react and accept that Voldemort is back. And even then, I imagine it will take some effort to secure Sirius his freedom.”
“Still, Sirius proved just last week that he is disinclined to follow instructions when he went to
King’s Cross and endangered the entire operation to bring Harry safely to school.”

“Which is exactly my point,” Roy replied, and Albus raised his eyebrows in a question behind his
glasses. “We both agree that Sirius’ mind isn’t as stable as other Order members’. However, Sirius
is a very competent wizard and there will eventually come a time in which the need for firepower
will be more pressing than Sirius’ status as a wanted criminal. Let’s face it, our numbers are few
and as things are now Voldemort is very likely to gather new supporters faster than you can. Every
day Sirius spends trapped in that house is a day he spends wishing for anything but being there, a
day in which he grows more likely to do something reckless and dangerous the moment an
opportunity presents itself. Let him visit other Order members, let him hang out with Lupin or
catch up with his cousin Andromeda, let him be silly with Tonks and maybe run around in his dog
form somewhere away from London and from prying eyes. There are some risks, of course, but the
benefits for his mental health far outweigh them. Besides, isn’t everything the Order does a risk?”

Albus remained silent for a long moment, his eyes fixed on Roy. Roy returned his gaze evenly.
Eventually, Albus sighed.

“You won’t let this go, will you?”

“I’m afraid not. Are you agreeing to my proposal?”

“As much as I would like to disagree, I don’t have the time for lengthy discussions about Sirius
right now and I know you won’t back down simply because I ask you to. If anyone is willing to
welcome Sirius, he can visit their homes, but only as long as he is accompanied at all times and
never goes outside as a human.”

One of the reasons why Roy had spoken to Albus as soon as he had returned to Hogwarts was
Sirius’ reaction upon reading Potter’s letter, something that Roy had neglected to mention to Albus.
Sirius had wanted to talk to Potter through the floo network, risking to be seen in the process by
any other Gryffindor student because his plan was to floo the Gryffindor common room every hour
on Sunday night in hopes that Potter would stay up late.

It had taken all of Roy’s persuasion skills to convince Sirius to write what he wanted to tell Potter
in a letter that Roy himself would deliver to either Potter or any of the other students who knew
about the Order of the Phoenix. That way he would prevent anyone from intercepting and reading
it. Fortunately, what Sirius wanted to say wasn’t urgent and Roy could wait until Monday to
deliver the letter safely.

After Roy opened his copy of the Daily Prophet at breakfast on Monday, he decided that he would
never again take a sip or a bite of anything before checking the newspaper’s contents. He nearly
choke on his coffee upon seeing Umbridge’s large picture on the cover page and the headline accompanying it.

MINISTRY SEEKS EDUCATIONAL REFORM

DOLORES UMBRIDGE APPOINTED

FIRST EVER HIGH INQUISITOR

So that is their game, Roy thought, scanning the article. It was, as expected, a wordy piece of propaganda without more than a smidgen of truth. As far as Roy knew from what he had heard students say on the hallways and the considerable amount of information that had made it to the staff room, Umbridge was anything but a success amongst the students, despite what the *Prophet* claimed.

Roy looked around, first at the staff table and then around the entire Great Hall, to see everyone’s reaction to the news. It was clear that not even Albus had known, otherwise the staff would have been warned beforehand. While Roy had missed whatever Albus’ first reaction had been and could see nothing but easy calm on his face, the thinning of Minerva’s lips made it clear that she hadn’t known about this either. Everyone else at the staff table showed more or less noticeable expressions of displeasure—or a sneer in Snape’s case— though it seemed not many of the students had learnt about it. Roy could only see a handful of newspapers around the four house tables.

If Fudge had dared to take such a step barely a week after imposing Umbridge on the school, Roy wondered what else was in store for the remainder of the year.

He glanced at Umbridge’s overly pleased face.

*Probably nothing good.*

News of Umbridge’s first inspection spread that same day at lunch, when Professor Flitwick made sure that every member of staff knew he had been inspected. He, of course, shared this information behind Umbridge’s back. What he said didn’t sound so horrible —Umbridge had taken notes throughout the class and asked a few questions to Flitwick and the students— but Roy was certain that not everybody would have it so easy. He caught sight of a few professors exchanging glances, and guessed there was at least one name in mind already.

Roy’s suspicions were confirmed that same day at dinner. By then, the story of Divination’s disastrous inspection had already spread all over the school. That story was accompanied by another one: it would seem that Umbridge had put Harry Potter in detention again. Roy had overheard some interesting conversations about that incident, including a group of young boys — probably second or third years— laughing uproariously about the rumour of how Potter had yelled at the top of his lungs that a former professor had been possessed by Voldemort. Not exactly a good way to make himself look more believable on Potter’s part, but Roy had encountered so many bizarre things that he wasn’t willing to simply brush the statement off as either a lie or an exaggeration spawned by Hogwarts rumour mill.
Harry, Ron and Hermione had occupied a table in the common room late that night in an attempt to make up for the hours of working on homework that Harry had lost during his detention with Umbridge. Hermione ignored Ron’s complaints and focused on her essay, or at least she did until Fred Weasley dropped down next to her with a heavy and exaggerated sigh. Hermione raised her head and noticed that they, alongside Fred and George, were in fact the last ones left in the common room once more.

“We got something for you, Harry,” said George, who had sat next to Harry. He flourished his hand before reaching into his robe and pulling out a small piece of rolled-up parchment.

“Mustang gave it to us earlier,” Fred explained. “Ripped my bag open to make us stay behind,” he said, looking almost impressed, probably because professors didn’t usually use the same spells students resorted to when they pranked one another. Hermione would like to disapprove of that behaviour, Professor Mustang could certainly have used any number of methods to make Fred and George stay behind, but she remembered the conversation they both had with Rita Skeeter a few months ago. He certainly wasn’t above dirty tricks.

“Mustang?” Harry asked, confused. “Did he say anything?”

“Yeah, said he’ll be in the library tomorrow during lunch if you want to send a reply that can’t go through mail,” George said.

“Well, open it,” Fred urged him, leaning forward on the table.

Harry did, still with that confused expression, but his face cleared as soon as he unrolled the parchment.

“It’s from Sirius!” he said, thankfully without raising his voice.

Roy was sitting at the nook in the Muggle Studies section of the library, going over his plans for his next class this afternoon, when Hermione walked in and stood before the table. She looked unusually worried.

“Do you have anything for me?” Roy asked in a low voice that wouldn’t carry past this table.

Hermione nodded and handed him a tiny piece of folded parchment.

“Tell him not to come,” she asked in an equally low voice, “please.”

“Come?” Roy asked, thinking that maybe he should have read Sirius’ letter before passing it on. He pocketed the parchment.
“He said he’ll come for the next Hogsmeade weekend.”

Roy held back a curse, which he directed mentally at Sirius, and nodded.

“He won’t come. I’ll convince Moody to sit on him that day if that’s what it takes,” Roy replied, already planning what he would tell Sirius the next time he went to Grimmauld Place. At least the Hogsmeade weekend wasn’t until early October, so Roy wasn’t in much of a hurry to talk sense into Sirius. Or make sure that Moody, and perhaps Lupin as well, cleared their schedules for the day.

Roy was relieved when the time for his last class of the week arrived and he still hadn’t received an ugly piece of pink parchment (Minerva’s words) with a notice from Umbridge informing him of an inspection. So far this week, Minerva and Professor Grubbly-Plunk had been inspected as well, both of them during Potter’s class, just as Trelawney’s Divination class had been. As such, Roy had been nearly certain that Umbridge would inspect today’s Alchemy class, but it seemed she had decided to wait for another week.

The students began to arrive, settling down on the same places they had taken during the previous lesson, and they were all in the classroom by the time they were scheduled to begin. Roy waved his wand to close the door and stood up. He walked to stand before his desk.

“As you no doubt remember from last week,” he started, clasping his hands behind his back, “I stressed the importance of studying diligently. Now, I have no delusions about it, I know most of you would muddle through the school year and cram everything before the exam if left to your own devices,” (there were many glances exchanged around the classroom at this), “which is why you won’t be left to them. Put everything but your quills and inkwells away.”

Roy waited until all parchment and notes from last class were out of sight, then turned around and picked up a small pile of parchment. With another flick of his wand, he sent one piece flying to each student (maybe he was enjoying this whole magic thing a little too much, but it was better than walking around the classroom to hand them over).

“From now on, at the beginning of every class we will do a small test about everything we have covered, and the results will be part of your final grade.” Roy smirked when he saw the horrified faces and heard the groans that his words elicited. It was obvious that nobody had bothered to share this piece of information with their fellow students. “You will have twenty minutes to answer the questions, and once the time is up you will swap your parchments with your classmates for their correction. Don’t even think about marking anyone’s test incorrectly on purpose—I don’t care if it’s to help a friend or to get back at someone you don’t like—you won’t enjoy the consequences once I catch you,” Roy said, making sure he met the eyes of every student as he spoke, focusing especially on the Gryffindors and Slytherins.

“And I will catch you.” He let that sink in before continuing. “Now, those parchments have been charmed against cheating, obviously.” Roy had gotten that spell from Minerva. “The results will help you know if there is anything you should put more effort into studying, and they will let me know if there is anything we should go over again. Any questions?” Silence answered him. Roy nodded. “You may begin, then.”
Ron stared morosely down at his Alchemy test. Hermione had been the one to correct it, and most of his answers had been crossed out with red ink, the correct answers written next to them. Ron had thought that he would have a chance to pass when he had realized that most of the questions only asked for one or two words, but he obviously had been mistaken.

“Daily exams,” he said, still in shock over that development. “Who gives out daily exams?”

“Mustang,” Harry said, his expression as morose as Ron’s. Ron found some comfort in the fact that Harry’s test had as much red ink on it as his. So did Neville’s, but that was a given. “I almost miss Divination.”

“Almost?” Ron asked, for the first time in his life thinking wistfully of the too warm room up at the north tower with its horrid smell of incense.

“It’s nice not to have my death predicted in every class,” Harry said, and Ron had to nod in agreement.

“And you don’t have to do all that useless homework Trelawney gives out,” Hermione said, her usual disdain for Divination dripping into her voice. “Lavender and Parvati are writing dream diaries for this entire month.”

Ron held back a shudder at the mere thought of making dreams up for an entire month, but he wasn’t convinced this was better.

“No, we only have to study all this... what did Mustang call it? Chemity?”

“Chemistry,” Hermione corrected him. “I think it’s a good thing. As much as I like Hogwarts, there are some huge holes in its curriculum.”

“That. And everything else Mustang said we’ll be learning. What’s the point of so many numbers?”

He regretted his words immediately, because Hermione started going on about how important those maths were. Ron thought, if they were really so important, Hogwarts would have a class about them. But it didn’t. If they needed numbers for any subject, they just learned a little about them in class.

Ron remembered the huge tables he had copied in his notes so far (because Mustang had made it clear that anybody who didn’t take their own notes could leave the classroom) and thought he liked those holes Hermione was going on about exactly where they were, but he was at least smart enough to keep that comment to himself.
On Thursday afternoon, Roy adjourned to the staff room to go over the fifth years’ test responses. After the test was over and corrected Roy had used a very handy copying charm to duplicate the parchments before returning them to their owners. The test had been a massacre, just like every other class. Roy noted down that only three students (Hermione, Susan Bones and Draco Malfoy) had grasped the concept of Equivalent Exchange and added it to next week’s test.

Something thumped softly on the chair to his left and Roy glanced up. A pile of books had been stacked there and Filius Flitwick was climbing on it.

“Professor Flitwick,” Roy greeted with a nod. The books wobbled before Flitwick managed to settle precariously on top of them.

“Filius, please,” Flitwick said good-naturedly. “You’re too formal, Roy.”

Roy put on an easy smile.

“I’m used to it. I doubt my alchemy master would’ve appreciated it had I been too informal with him.”

Flitwick —Filius— chuckled and leaned forward on the books. Roy eyed them warily.

“Speaking of alchemy, what’s this I hear about your classes? Some of my sixth years had a very interesting conversation this morning.” Filius looked clearly amused, and Roy put on one of his softest helpless smiles.

“I’m just trying to make sure they study.”

Filius chuckled, and Roy was certain he found the situation hilarious.

“There were some very heartfelt comments of unfairness.”

“Nonsense,” Roy said, waving a hand. “It would take them the same effort if I set them essays. This is more productive.” And took a considerably shorter amount of time for Roy to grade, but he wasn’t about to mention it.

“Are those the infamous exams?” Filius asked, gesturing at the parchments before Roy.

Roy nodded.

“Fifth year. Barring a few exceptions, they’re abysmal. I’m starting to think I should’ve warned the students on the first class.”

Filius laughed again, and Roy was sure he was imagining the students’ original reactions to the test.

“May I look at them?” Filius asked.

“Certainly,” Roy said, and handed over the tests he had already revised.
Sirius hadn’t taken well to Potter’s letter, the one that begged him not to go to Hogsmeade during the school outing in October. Roy had decided that reasoning with Sirius at the moment was not an option, but leaving him to stew in his own frustration would be a terrible idea. That was how Kreacher had ended up confined to the kitchens for the time being and the second floor of Grimmauld Place had been turned into a temporary battleground. It was best to let Sirius release his bad mood, and Roy wouldn’t say no to some extra magical training.

Roy was currently behind a dresser in one of the rooms that had been occupied during the summer holidays, the curtains pulled closed and his wand at the ready while he listened to the faint sounds Sirius made as he tried to creep across the hallway.

Roy went still when he heard a soft thump a few feet to the left of Sirius’ position — the stairs? — and the light coming from the hallway through the bottom of the door flashed brighter twice in quick succession. Roy’s instincts kicked in and he rolled away from his position and settled behind the bed. When he looked up, Roy saw a small hole scorched through the wall right where he had been standing.

“Good reflexes, Mustang,” Alastor Moody said from the hallway.

“Mad-Eye!” Sirius exclaimed, sounding indignant. “What’re you doing here?”

“Saw you two creeping around up here and figured I’d test you. You gotta pay more attention to your surroundings, Sirius.”

Sirius scoffed, but he sounded more amused than indignant.

Roy stood up, ready to jump out of the way at the slightest flash because he didn’t trust Moody not to try to catch him off guard again, and walked to the door.

“What brings you here?” Sirius was asking when Roy stepped out of the room. He was sitting on the floor, though he had obviously already freed himself from whatever spell Moody had cast on him.

“I brought the latest report from the watch. Figured Mustang could pass it on without drawing attention.”

“Is there anything to pass?” Roy asked, hoping that they hadn’t lost contact with anyone else.

Moody shook his head.

“They must be planning their next step.”

Sirius jumped to his feet and waved his wand at the hole in the wall. It knit itself together.

“So things are as usual. Let’s go downstairs, I’ve been trying to learn how to cook and I could use some help.”

Roy raised an eyebrow, but Moody spoke before he could say anything.

“You’d better not be trying to poison me, boy.”

Sirius waved a negligent hand.

“That’s the whole point. I’m trying not to poison anyone, and you’re the best at sniffing poison, Mad-Eye, so I thought I’d ask you.”
Moody scoffed, but he moved to the stairs.

Roy glanced at Sirius.

“If Moody survives, I might agree to try something, but I make no promises.”

Sirius barked out a laugh, his bad mood from earlier vanished.

On Sunday, Roy sat on the floor of the study in his rooms, surrounded by a pile of parchment. He had decided to deconstruct the two soul-binding arrays to figure out their workings and base elements, but that was easier said than done.

Roy scratched out an entire set of equations and leant his head back on the chair. It was amazing what Edward had developed in a moment of desperation.

He could almost hear the brat laughing at him in his mind.

“Oh, shut up. At least I don’t need to wear raised insoles.”

On Monday morning, Roy received a letter from Tonks in her role of Andrea. With Umbridge’s presence in the school, Roy had realized that he would need a cover story to explain his comings and goings to Grimmauld Place. He had talked with Moody about it over the weekend, and Moody’s paranoia had come in handy. Moody had grunted that the Ministry had the power to monitor the floo network, and guessed it wouldn’t be above Fudge or Umbridge to eventually use it to keep an eye on Hogwarts (“if they haven’t started already,” Moody had muttered). As such, Roy had decided that he would need a roundabout way to stay in contact with the Order, given that meeting with Albus too frequently would draw Umbridge’s unwanted attention.

Roy opened Tonks’ letter, pretending that he hadn’t noticed Albus’ eyes on him. After the conversation about Sirius last week, Roy had decided to have someone else take care of this topic. It hadn’t been hard to convince Moody of his point, ever with the threat of the Death Eaters looming on the horizon, and Roy could imagine it hadn’t been easy for Albus to argue with Moody in full paranoid mode.

Now, if only Roy could convince Moody that Potter needed training...

Roy let himself smile when he read Tonks’ cheerful and, at first glance, inane letter.
On Thursday morning two owls swept down to Roy when the mail arrived during breakfast. One of them brought the newspaper, like every morning, but the other one had a tiny piece of parchment tied to one leg. A tiny, pink piece of parchment. Holding back a grimace, Roy untied the parchment and the owl left.

“Oh, dear,” Professor Sprout said, looking at the parchment. “Looks like it’s your turn, Roy.”

“It seems so.”

“Which class?” Minerva asked.

“Fifth year,” Roy said, checking the parchment to make sure of it. He had no other classes today and he doubted Umbridge would warn anyone with more than a few hours to prepare, and she hadn’t.

McGonagall snorted.

“Can she be more unsubtle?” she muttered, low enough that her voice wouldn’t carry down the table to Umbridge.

Roy shrugged. So far, Umbridge had inspected most of the professors who taught Potter during Potter’s class, as if she expected to learn anything to use against him. Or maybe she was checking which professors favoured Potter.

Roy reached for the newspaper and opened it, acting as if this was no big deal. So far, Umbridge hadn’t shown any interest in him and he intended to ensure things remained that way.

Chapter End Notes

Inspection comes next :D

In case anyone is curious, the fact that Ed wears raised insoles is canon: Arakawa showed it in the extra contents of one of the manga volumes (I don’t remember which one now).
Chapter Notes

Here I am with the next chapter :D

Thanks a lot to Lindril for beta-reading despite the hellish months we’re on right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry walked into the Alchemy classroom with his notes tucked under his arm. Next to him, Hermione was reviewing her own notes and Ron had an exasperated expression on his face, as though he hadn’t spent last night desperately going through his alchemy notes in an attempt to make up for the fact that he had been so focused on quidditch he hadn’t looked at them all week. Honestly, Harry hadn’t studied that much himself, what with Umbridge’s horrid detentions taking up so much of his time.

As it turned out, Hermione wasn’t the only one doing some last minute reviewing: all of the Ravenclaws and most of the Hufflepuffs, who were already in the classroom, were studying as well. Neville rushed in barely a minute before the time Mustang closed the door, out of breath and with his own notes tucked under his arm. It seemed most of the class had been intimidated after last week’s impromptu exam. Harry had heard many Ravenclaws, fifth years and others, whining about their poor results last week.

Shortly afterwards, Mustang checked his pocket watch, waved his wand to close the door and stood up.

There was a knock on the door before he could say anything. Harry froze, perfectly aware that all the fifth year students were already in the classroom. He exchanged a grimace with Ron and Hermione.

“Come in,” Mustang said politely and, sure enough, the door opened to reveal Dolores Umbridge in all her pink glory, her clipboard in hand.

“Good afternoon, Professor Mustang,” Umbridge greeted with that wide, fake smile of hers. “I trust you received my note informing you of the time of your inspection.”

“I did, yes,” Mustang said, his smile far more sincere and polite than Umbridge’s. He gestured at the classroom. “Take a seat, please, we were about to begin.”

Umbridge did so, taking hold of an empty chair in the first row and dragging it to one of the corners at the front of the classroom. She sat down and ran her eyes over everybody present.

Mustang turned to face the students again, his expression completely calm, as if he had no reason to be bothered by Umbridge’s presence in his classroom. Harry found himself very curious about how this inspection would go. Unlike every inspection before this one that he had witnessed or heard about, he couldn’t so much as guess the result. Mustang was an unknown factor in the school: so far, he seemed stern and unwilling to take any nonsense, but nobody had seen him under any kind of pressure yet. As far as anyone knew, this inspection could take any direction, from the horrible fiasco with Trelawney that Lavender and Parvati had complained about to McGonagall’s
spectacular show of disdain towards Umbridge and her so-called power in the school.

“Put everything except your quills away. As I said last class, you have twenty minutes to answer the questions,” Mustang instructed.

“Hem, hem.” Harry had developed a serious aversion towards Umbridge’s fake cough. Much to Harry’s disappointment, Mustang actually turned to look at her. Harry had expected that, as a member of the Order, Mustang might decide to ignore Umbridge in a similar way to how McGonagall had done it. Then again, Mustang wasn’t in the Order because of his bravery or his fighting skills.

“Yes?” Mustang asked with that same pleasant smile. How Mustang could smile at Umbridge as if she was anything but a disgusting person was beyond Harry’s comprehension.

“I was wondering, Professor Mustang, what these questions you have mentioned are.”

Harry exchanged a puzzled glance with Ron. Had Umbridge spent the last week under a rock or something? Harry had heard at least one conversation between students complaining about Mustang’s exams every day since his last class (and he still hadn’t forgiven Fred and George for hiding the existence of the exams in the first place), so he knew those conversations were very common around the school.

“Oh, it’s very simple,” Mustang started in a polite yet conversational voice, as if Umbridge wasn’t disrupting the flow of his class. “Alchemy requires a certain amount of theoretical knowledge before it can be applied in a practical way. To ensure the students truly understand that knowledge before we move on to the practical part of the subject, I have decided to hand out a small test at the beginning of each class to see the level of comprehension they have of what has been explained already.”

Much to Harry’s surprise, Umbridge nodded in what might be approval. She wrote something down on her clipboard.

“Well, then,” Mustang said, turning back to the class again. He flicked his wand and one exam flew to each student. Mustang pulled his pocket watch out to check the time. “You may begin.”

Harry looked down at his exam and held back a grimace. He had hoped Mustang would at least draw the alchemical symbols for some of the elements and ask them to recognise them, but no, he had listed twelve elements and was asking for the students to draw the corresponding symbols. And then, of course, there was the question everybody, even Hermione, had failed in the last class. All is one and one is all.

Harry saw another P in his future. Trelawney would be proud of his predictive skills.

“So, Professor Mustang,” Umbridge started sweetly, “I understand this is your first year at Hogwarts, is that correct?”

Harry didn’t look up, but he kept his attention on the conversation. From the list, he only remembered the symbol for hydrogen anyway.

“Yes, I’ve just started.”

Umbridge hummed.

“And how did you come by the position? There has been no Alchemy class at Hogwarts in a few years,” Umbridge said just as sweetly as before, and Harry had the sudden certainty that her
objective was to have a repeat of her inspection of Trelawney’s class, a story that had spread throughout the school in a matter of hours. Harry was reminded of Michael Corner’s question about the usefulness of transmutation circles on the first day, and he guessed it wouldn’t be a stretch to think Umbridge’s opinion on the subject wasn’t exactly high.

“I approached Professor Dumbledore a few months ago looking for some input on a project of mine—I am certain you are aware of his impressive reputation in the alchemical field—and after a few conversations he offered me the chance to teach at Hogwarts.”

“I see,” Umbridge said, and Harry risked a quick glance up just in time to see her write something else. “Have you ever taught before?”

“No, this is my first time.”

“I suppose you are a little young for a professor,” Umbridge said, almost casually, and Harry was convinced that was meant to be an offensive comment. “How old are you, Professor Mustang?”

The sound of quills scratching on parchment diminished considerably for a moment before people started to write again.

“Thirty.”

“Thirty?” someone hissed from the Hufflepuff section, far too low for Harry to recognise the voice. He was sure this information would have spread throughout the school by dinner time. Harry didn’t particularly care about Mustang’s age, but he didn’t look thirty.

He’s probably been using the Stone a few years now, Harry guessed.

Harry caught Umbridge glancing at him and pretended to pay attention to his exam. All is one and one is all... The first thing Harry thought about whenever he read that sentence was the Three Musketeers.

“Would you mind demonstrating your alchemy?” Umbridge asked, but Harry knew it wasn’t a request. This was just like the request for a prediction from Trelawney all over again: according to Lavender and Parvati’s retelling of the event, Umbridge had purposefully flustered Trelawney too much for Trelawney to be able to predict anything. While Harry didn’t doubt Umbridge’s unpleasantness, he was certain Trelawney wouldn’t have managed a prediction even if the nicest person in the world had asked her for one.

“Of course not,” Mustang replied easily, his demeanour completely opposite to Trelawney’s nervousness. “Do you mind if we wait until after the exam has been corrected, though? This way we don’t disrupt the students’ learning.”

Umbridge must have nodded, because there was silence after that.

Harry refocused on his exam, reading the elements again and again. He filled in two more elements, though he was reasonably certain that they weren’t the right ones.

“Two minutes,” Mustang said eventually, much to Harry’s relief. He could already hear Hermione telling him how he should study more for the class.

“Time is up, put your quills down,” Mustang said after those two minutes were over. Harry set his quill on the parchment. “I said quills down, Mr. Goldstein; that last line will cost you the full mark of this exam.”
Harry couldn’t see Anthony Goldstein’s face from his position, but he could read his annoyance from the way his shoulders tensed and he dropped his quill on the parchment. There was snickering from the back of the class, and Umbridge scribbled something on her clipboard.

“Now exchange your parchments with your classmates and bring out the red ink. Who can tell me which is the alchemical symbol for sodium?”

As the correction advanced, Harry started to fear that Hermione, whose frown kept deepening with every answer, would scrawl a large T at the top of his exam out of annoyance. Harry was considering doing the same on Ron’s parchment, which so far didn’t have a single right answer, but more as a joke than as a reprimand.

Just like he did last class, Mustang walked around the classroom and copied each piece of parchment before he let them put their exams away.

“Now, if everybody could stand up,” Mustang said once he was back by his desk, “Professor Umbridge has requested a demonstration of alchemy,” he said, as though the entire class hadn’t been listening in on the conversation, “and I thought we could use it as a bit of a practical test. I want all of you to stand over here,” he instructed, gesturing to the area right in front of his desk. He took a piece of chalk from the desk and walked to one of the empty spaces of wall. “And leave your notes behind, Miss Bones. If you could stand next to them, Professor Umbridge?”

Umbridge moved to stand with the group, her expression reminding Harry of a predator about to corner a prey. Fortunately, she stopped next to Goyle.

“I want all of you to pay attention to the array I am going to draw. Try to identify as many elements in it as you can, no matter how small they are.”

Next to Harry, Hermione was practically vibrating with excitement. Harry remembered her telling him and Ron just how “amazing” Mustang’s transmutations were, and Harry had to admit he was curious to see one. Not only because of Hermione’s words, but because he wanted to know what someone who knew how to create the Philosopher’s Stone was capable of.

Mustang started drawing, and it didn’t take long for Harry to be completely lost. Some symbols in the drawing looked familiar, but the circle was very complex and had far too many different symbols in it for Harry to even know where to start trying to decipher it. At least he knew what the outer circle was for, that was something, wasn’t it?

Once he was done, Mustang pocketed the chalk and pressed his hands to the circle.

Light burst out of it, spreading throughout the classroom in what seemed to be thin, electrical currents that caught on everything and just changed it. The stone on the walls seemed to hollow out, the smooth surface giving way to whimsical carvings reminiscent of the statues outside, the ceiling rising higher and recreating the table of alchemical symbols on its surface. Somehow, Harry expected the floor to shake as part of it was altered, but the area where they stood remained firm and stable. The rest of the classroom didn’t. The lines of desks rose, each taller than the row before it, turning the flat surface into a tiered, classroom-wide staircase. Some of the spare desks sank into the ground only for the wood and metal that made them to rise on both sides of the remaining desks, creating two rows of thin, twisting columns of metal topped by a railing of wood that ran along the steps. The remaining wood settled on the edges of the steps themselves, marking clearly the end of each one. The cabinet that had stood to one side of the classroom now hung from the wall, its legs gone, and the two element tables that had hung on the opposite wall had now sunk into it, the stone protruding around them as if it was a frame.
Mustang lowered his hands and turned around to look at the group. Harry was certain that his wasn’t the only mouth open right then, but he didn’t care. He doubted even McGonagall could transform a room like this with a single spell.

“It’s not a house, but I mentioned in the first class that a transmutation circle can change an entire place as long as it has the proper symbols in it,” Mustang said with an easy smile. “Well then, what did you notice about the array?”

Unsurprisingly, Hermione was the first one to raise her hand. Harry didn’t pay much attention to what she said. Instead, he glanced at Umbridge, who no longer looked like a predator about to get a tasty meal.

“How was your inspection, Roy?” Filius asked that afternoon in the staff room. It had become an unofficial agreement between the staff members that they would leave any remotely sensitive topics, or the Umbridge-related ones, for when they knew that Umbridge was occupied with one of her classes.

The ones currently in the staff room were Minerva, Filius, Roy, Aurora Sinistra and Rolanda Hooch.

“I’d say it went well, given that Professor Umbridge didn’t look particularly pleased with herself by the time she left the classroom.”

“Good,” Rolanda said with a satisfied nod. “She looked like a child about to get her first broomstick when she left the Great Hall this morning.”

“Did she now?” Roy asked with very little surprise.

As the conversation spiralled into a contest to see who could come up with the best complaint about Umbridge and Roy returned to marking his exams, Minerva frowned at him. She had clearly underestimated Roy. Three weeks into the school year and the Alchemy students looked closer to a nervous breakdown than he did. In fact, Roy didn’t seem fazed at all by having to teach the little monsters (and he even had to deal with Fred and George Weasley in his seventh year class), and if he didn’t crack by tomorrow then Minerva would lose the bet. She had been the most generous one when the staff had placed the bet on how long Roy would last before cracking, which meant they had all underestimated Roy’s character. Everybody but Albus, who had simply smiled infuriatingly and said he didn’t see the point of such a bet when Filius had offered him to join.

The students, however, were a different story. Two fourth years had approached Minerva today to ask for a change of class, which increased the number of drop outs to five when she added them to the three third years that had switched to Divination last week.

Filius had jokingly suggested that they could instead bet on how many students would have left Alchemy by the end of the year.
During the following week, a lot of people found one reason or another to poke their heads into the previously bland Alchemy classroom and Roy decided to leave it in all its transmuted glory. If nothing else, it would serve as a reminder to any sceptical students of the usefulness of alchemy despite the existence of transfiguration spells.

“I see there are no gargoyles on the walls.”

Roy raised his head to look at Albus. Roy had decided to use the classroom to deal with the fourth years’ exams because Umbridge was now at the staff room and he didn’t feel like being bothered at his office.

“My taste isn’t so terrible that I’d transmute gargoyles.” That’s more Edward’s style.

“Is that a criticism about the school’s appearance?” Albus asked in amusement, his eyes twinkling.

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t dare,” Roy replied. “I don’t think the stairs would forgive me if I did.” At some point, Roy had decided to simply go with the idea that the school had some level of sentience and didn’t question it. If you could create life using a Philosopher’s Stone as a core for it, why not have a whimsical castle? He imagined Edward’s frustrated groan at that comment.

Albus chuckled.

“Wise words, it’s best not to tempt the castle.”

“Is there anything I can do for you, Headmaster? Or were you just curious about the latest gossip in the school?” Roy asked coolly. Ever since Umbridge’s arrival, he and Albus had settled for polite but mostly impersonal conversations anywhere outside of Albus’ office. You never knew who could be listening.

“As interesting as the new décor is, I was wondering if I could tempt you with a cup of tea and some biscuits. I feel I have been remiss in seeing how you are adapting to life in Hogwarts.”

“That sounds lovely. I could certainly use a break from work at this point,” Roy replied, stacking the corrected exams on top of the ones he still had to go over.

“It can’t possibly be that bad,” Albus said in the amused way of someone who knew it could be that bad.

“Would you like to have a look?” Roy offered as he stood up. “I’m sure you would change your mind by the third exam.” He returned his pens to the top drawer of the desk and tucked the parchments under his arm. He wasn’t leaving any exams where devious students could get their hands on them. “After you, Headmaster.”

“What happened?” Roy asked as soon as they were in the safety of Albus’ office.
“I’m not certain yet,” Albus replied, walking to sit on one of the couches. He waved his wand and a tea tray appeared on the table. Roy settled on what had become his usual spot. “Filius just told me that Miss Granger asked him if students are allowed into the Hog’s Head. That is no place any students usually visit, and I expect she, and by extension at the very least Harry and Ron Weasley, are planning something they know won’t be well seen by certain people. Aberforth has promised to keep an eye on them and I am arranging for another Order member to be there this Saturday just in case, but I believe you should go on a date on Sunday.”

“Any theories on what they might be plotting?” Roy asked. He reached out for the teapot to serve himself a cup.

“Nothing specific, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it is related to our esteemed High Inquisitor.”

Roy snorted.

“I’m surprised nobody has started anything against her by now, to be honest.” Roy stirred some cream and sugar into his tea and took a sip.

Albus had prepared his cup using wandless magic and reached for it.

“So far she seems very selective about who she antagonises and most of the school is still unaware of how dire the situation might turn.”

“True. But I’m waiting for the day Minerva turns that pink cardigan into a straitjacket.”

“A what?” Albus asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

Roy sighed.

“It’s a muggle thing. A fairly commonly known one at that,” Roy explained. “This shows one of the main failings of the school’s curriculum. If you keep things as it stands, it won’t matter how much you preach acceptance of muggles: there will always be a large breach between muggles and wizards the way things are now. You are too focused on teaching only magic.”

“We have Muggle Studies,” Albus pointed out.

“Yes, as an optional class with a laughable book that at most has a ten percent of correct information in it.” Roy had checked out the official textbook, more out of curiosity than anything else, and had been surprised to find out that he had learnt more about the muggle world in under two months than wizards did throughout their entire education at Hogwarts. “You cannot change a society’s worldview while perpetuating its ignorance at the same time.”

Sirius had tuned Molly out last night and he was in no hurry to pay attention to her any time soon. Unfortunately, Tonks and Roy had just arrived, and that meant Sirius didn’t have a choice in the matter anymore.

“I assume something happened yesterday,” Roy said upon seeing Molly’s stormy expression.

“Something?!” Molly asked, and Sirius rolled his eyes when she started going on about how
irresponsible the children were to start a club as dangerous as that one in the current situation and how it was a terrible decision, followed by all of her reasons.

Roy hummed and nodded at all the appropriate points in Molly’s speech, and Sirius would have believed he agreed with her if he didn’t know that Roy was of the opinion that Harry and the others would benefit from some training. Molly seemed to have forgotten that particular Order meeting.

“I can pass the message to them, yes,” Roy agreed when Molly asked him to tell her children she forbade them from participating in this club (as if they would obey her) and to advise Harry and Hermione to stay out of it as well.

Molly sighed and smiled, looking relieved.

“Thank you, Roy. It’s good to have someone who understands,” she said, and threw a pointed glare at Sirius. Sirius rolled his eyes. “I’m going to continue cooking lunch now, it should be done in an hour. Some people are due for a meeting then; we have to plan for potential consequences of this foolishness,” she muttered, standing up.

“I’ll help you,” Tonks offered, like every time, and just as always Molly declined. Instead, she sent them off to work on one of the still dusty bedrooms.

For once, Sirius didn’t complain. Anything was better than waiting for Molly to get worked up all over again because of the defence club.

“So, any ideas of spells that I could recommend to them?” Roy asked when they were climbing up the stairs and away from that damned portrait.

Tonks snorted.

“I knew you would help them.”

“Can you fault me?” Roy asked, turning his head to meet her eyes. Tonks hadn’t taken his side the time Roy brought up the possibility of training Harry, but Sirius knew she didn’t share Molly’s hope that the children could actually be kept away from the fighting.

“No,” Tonks said, shaking her head. “Best to have them get started at a safe place like Hogwarts.”

Roy nodded in thanks.

“If you come up with anything today, tell me. I’ll be talking to Harry’s group tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Sirius asked. “I thought you had fifth years on Thursday.”

Roy smirked at him.

“You’re underestimating my ability to get others in trouble, Sirius.”

Neville yawned as he walked out of the History of Magic classroom that Monday morning. He, just like most of his classmates, was doing his best to force himself awake for the next class. In his case
that was Potions, which Neville would much rather avoid. At least it was a good distraction from
the horrid educational decree that had come out this morning, the one forbidding student groups
that made the entire defence group fear Umbridge might have learnt about them.

He heard giggling behind him and, curious, turned around to see what the issue was. He shouldn’t
have bothered. Since the start of term, it had become normal to see girls giggling wherever
Professor Mustang was, especially those who didn’t take his class (Neville had heard that more
than one girl had lost their crush on him as, in the words of a particularly frustrated sixth year
Ravenclaw, “he’s a slave-driver”). Mustang was walking down the hall, somehow managing to
dodge students while he read a thick book with oddly white pages that didn’t resemble those that
could be found at the library.

Turning around, Neville continued on his way. Or that had been his intent until he heard a muffled
yelp. Turning around again, he saw that Hermione had fallen to the floor and her bag, as full as
ever, had split on one side, spilling books, quills and ink all over the floor. Some people giggled
and went on, but Neville turned around to go help her. Harry and Ron bent over to start picking
things up.

“Are you all right, Miss Granger?” Mustang asked from behind Harry, and Hermione turned to
look at him, a book in her hand.

Neville stopped before he could reach them. He wasn’t sure how he felt about Mustang yet, and
that meant he didn’t feel at ease around him.

“Yes, I’m fine, Professor,” she said and lifted the book. A piece of parchment fell out of it.

Mustang’s eyebrows went up in his forehead, his eyes fixed on the parchment, and he bent down to
pick it up.

“Well,” he muttered, much to Neville’s confusion. “Mind explaining this, Miss Granger?”
Mustang asked, turning the parchment around. It had a circle drawn on it, some symbols inside the
circle and notes scrawled around in what was very much Hermione’s handwriting.

Neville paled. He remembered well Mustang’s repeated warnings about not attempting to create or
use a transmutation circle before he gave his explicit permission, and the threats that had
accompanied them. Hermione was smart, smart enough to maybe pull it off, but to be caught like
this...

“T-That’s not...” Hermione stammered, her voice faint.

“I believe I was very clear on this subject, Miss Granger. That will be a detention for you. This
evening at five o’clock in my office.”

“That’s not mine!” Hermione exclaimed, seemingly gathering her wits. That was an odd reaction
for her, Neville thought: he had never seen her deny something once she had been caught.

“No?” Mustang asked, and raised one eyebrow. He turned the parchment to look at it. “This looks
remarkably like your handwriting.”

They had gathered an audience by now, and Neville was selfishly glad he hadn’t joined the group.
He didn’t like to be at the centre of attention, even if he wasn’t the focus of it, and he would have
been now.

“That’s not Hermione’s!” Ron yelled, standing up. He wasn’t as tall as Mustang, but his body
language was more aggressive than it should be when directed to a professor. Ron hadn’t been in a
good mood since he realised the educational decree banned quidditch teams until Umbridge authorized them.

“Do you mean she was making this for someone else?” Mustang asked, sounding completely unaffected by Ron’s aggressive display. “Maybe you? Or perhaps Mr. Potter?” he added, looking down at Harry.

“No!” Ron exclaimed, indignant.

Mustang sighed.

“Well, whoever this belongs to,” Mustang began, raising the parchment higher for emphasis, “I can’t let it continue. I won’t deduct points, this time, but I’ll see all three of you this evening in my office at five o’clock.” That said, Mustang pocketed the parchment and walked away. The students parted to let him pass, muttering as they thought him out of hearing range.

Neville overheard more than one “bastard” in the whispers, and there was even a mention of Snape’s name. Neville had to agree; that had been harsh and quite unfair.

He finally approached to help Hermione, who now looked shocked more than anything else. Ron and Harry were openly angry.

Today had been an eventful day, and it was nowhere near over. It had started with that awful decree that pretty much confirmed someone present at the Hog’s Head on Saturday had tattled to the Ministry about Potter’s little group. Then Roy’d had to put his plan to give Hermione and her friends detention into action. Making Hermione trip and have her book bag break in a way that would seem natural had been easy enough, but slipping that piece of parchment with the beginnings of an array had required a tricky bit of magic that Sirius had been more than delighted to share with him yesterday.

Word had spread about the incident, of course, and Minerva had cornered him outside the Great Hall before lunch to demand why he had given such an unfair detention to her students. It was a good thing Minerva was part of the Order, because Roy had been able to tell her the truth and pacify her. He wondered what she would have done if Roy hadn’t been able to explain.

Worst of all, though, had been Umbridge. She had approached him after lunch, all sweetness and creepy giggles, to tell him how glad she was to know that there was at least one member of staff willing to deal with troublesome students the way it was supposed to be done. She had then handed him the results of his inspection, congratulating him on a great start. The conversation had left Roy feeling unnerved for well over an hour afterwards.

Then there had been his seventh year afternoon class, and Roy’s first exposure to Fred and George Weasley and the reasons as to why he had been warned about them. They had obviously heard about the unfair detention as well, and had spent the entire class casting annoying spells when Roy wasn’t looking at them: anything from vanishing what he wrote on the blackboard to make the tables fly all over the classroom. Roy had deducted points for the first time since he had started teaching and would have slipped them a note telling them it was Order business if it wasn’t too risky. He would ask Hermione to let them know, because the last thing Roy needed were two
inventive brats out to annoy him for however long it took them to get over their indignation.

And now, finally, it was time for the detention. Roy had brought out a couch from his quarters’ sitting room, in part because he didn’t feel like transmuting a third chair and mostly to spare the students the experience of sitting on the deliberately uncomfortable chairs. An apology of sorts.

There was a knock on the door at precisely five o’clock.

“Come in,” he called out and crossed his hands before his mouth.

Hermione, Potter and Weasley trudged in, all three of them showing different degrees of annoyance, indignation and even anger on their faces. Weasley slammed the door shut with far more force than necessary.

Potter opened his mouth.

“Before any of you starts on how that array wasn’t yours,” Roy said, cutting the protest off, “I know. I slipped it there. Now sit down: we have to talk about your little meeting at the Hog’s Head last Saturday.”

Chapter End Notes

I know there were great expectations for an epic confrontation during the inspection, but I must ask for patience here. Remember that, her attitude towards Harry aside, the threat Umbridge posed to the school grew gradually throughout the year, and that is something I’m respecting here.

In canon, the Monday after the DA meeting Hedwig was injured when Umbridge intercepted her. She carried a letter from Sirius telling Harry he’d call through the floo that night again. Because there are no floo calls here, Hedwig hasn’t been intercepted and injured, so Harry didn’t leave the History of Magic class to have her looked at (that’s when Hedwig showed up).

Also, if anyone is curious, the classroom will remain modified for the entirety of the year. Roy left all the necessary desks for the students of even his largest class to occupy.

In case anyone is interested, I’ve started a tumblr sideblog where I post updates about how my writing is going, what stories I update, what I’ll be working on... and the occasional cracky thing that happens to me while writing. Here's the URL, because I never get links to work on ANs for some reason: https://maisstories.tumblr.com/
Finally, here I am with chapter 13 :) 

Not much to say here, just hope you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hermione had walked into Professor Mustang’s office with a full speech and a long list of arguments to defend her case of why that array wasn’t theirs ready in her mind. Her speech died before she could even open her mouth upon hearing Professor Mustang’s admission.

She wasn’t the only one blindsided by his words. A short silence followed Professor Mustang’s confession that he had been the one to put the array in her book.

“What?!” Ron was the first one to react, and he sounded outraged. Hermione, however, had just realized what else Professor Mustang had just said. “You know about the Hog’s Head?” she asked in horror. If Professor Mustang knew, then their suspicion that Umbridge had somehow learnt about the meeting might be true.

Professor Mustang snorted. “A word of advice, Miss Granger: next time you want to organise a secret student meeting, don’t ask a teacher if students are allowed in the establishment beforehand.”

Hermione felt herself blush all the way down to her neck. Harry and Ron turned to look at her and, while there was some accusation in their eyes, they looked mostly as flummoxed as she felt now.

“Besides, of course, of the fact that you chose the worst possible location in all of Hogsmeade for your meeting,” Professor Mustang continued.

“What do you mean?” Ron asked, less aggressively than before.

“Take a seat,” Professor Mustang said, gesturing at the couch facing his desk.

With some hesitation, Hermione did as told, sitting on the middle of the couch. Whatever Professor Mustang intended, she understood that this wasn’t an average detention. Harry and Ron followed her example reluctantly.

“Why was the Hog’s Head a bad choice?” Hermione asked, needing to know why what had seemed such a smart decision had gone so wrong. “No students go there.”

“Precisely because of that. Having a large group of students meeting at a place where Hogwarts students never venture was bound to draw attention. And the Hog’s Head isn’t exactly known for its reputable clientele, as you may have noticed. I am not certain how our esteemed Professor Umbridge learnt about your meeting, but I imagine that, given how Mr. Potter here is undesirable number two for the Ministry of Magic right now, they would be willing to let some minor
infraction pass in exchange for useful information about him.”

Hermione felt her blush deepen with every word Professor Mustang spoke, because it made perfect sense and she couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of it with all the planning she had put into that meeting.

“So what? Are you telling us not to do it?” Harry asked, and he didn’t sound happy. Despite his initial reluctance to start the club, he had warmed up to the idea, and lately he had been less than pleased about being told what to do by others.

“Not at all,” Professor Mustang said, raising both gloved hands in a pacifying gesture. A thoughtful expression crossed his face then. He lowered his hands to the desk and turned his attention to Ron. “However, Mr. Weasley, your mother insisted that I pass on the message that you and all of your siblings at the school are forbidden from participating in any secret defence clubs.” He then turned to Hermione and Harry. “And, while she has no authority over the two of you, she strongly advises you against continuing with this endeavour. Please, let her know I passed the message along, I’d hate to be on the receiving end of her ire.”

Hermione blinked, but it was Ron who spoke.

“You want us to do it,” he said in obvious surprise.

Professor Mustang shrugged with a helpless smile.

“What can I say? As wonderful as it would be if the Death Eaters agreed to leave minors out of this war, last year’s events proved that it’s not a possibility. If we cannot keep you out of the conflict, as adults, our responsibility should be to ensure that you are as well prepared as possible to survive it.”

“Then why isn’t the Order letting us help?” Harry demanded, his anger over the issue seeping into his voice.

Professor Mustang crossed his hands before his mouth and stared at them.

“Because, unfortunately, Headmaster Dumbledore disagrees with me on this topic. Which is why I would appreciate it if you kept this conversation to yourselves. The only ones who know what I am doing are Sirius and Tonks. Though I expect Lupin will be brought into it as soon as Sirius has a chance to talk to him in private.” He leant back into his chair and looked at Ron again. “However, if you could tell your brothers that I wasn’t actually targeting the three of you earlier today, I would appreciate it. They can be truly annoying.”

Ron bit back a snicker, and Hermione’s general dismay over Fred and George’s actions this year grew.

“What did they do?” she asked, fearing the answer.

Professor Mustang waved a hand dismissively.

“Nothing that will land them on a real detention for now. Let’s focus on what we’re here for: your defence club.”

“How do you know that’s what we talked about?” Harry blurted out. He had a point: Professor Mustang had explained how he knew where they had met, but not how he knew what they had talked about.
“Mundungus Fletcher was the witch under the veil,” Professor Mustang replied. “A disguise I am glad I didn’t get to see.”

Ron grimaced.

“That was Mundungus?”

“So, first of all,” Professor Mustang said, opening the top drawer of his desk. He pulled out a rolled up parchment that he pushed towards Harry. “That is a list Sirius and Tonks helped me compile yesterday. It contains spells that proved useful to Sirius during the previous war, as well as some that Tonks uses often as an auror. I’m certain Miss Granger can look up how to cast them in the library without drawing undue attention.”

Harry reached out for the list, an eager expression on his face, and put it into his bag. As much as Hermione wanted a look at those spells, she understood they could look at them later.

“What do you have planned for your lessons?” Professor Mustang asked, leaning back into his chair again.

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged some uncertain glances.

“Well...” Harry, as the designated teacher, started, but Professor Mustang cut him off.

“Please, tell me you don’t intend to pair students up and have them cast spells on each other while standing still,” he said, and his voice held that touch of exasperation that people used when they knew they were right but wished they weren’t.

“Eh... yes?” Harry answered uncertainly.

Professor Mustang sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Mr. Potter, in a fight your enemies won’t be stationary and waiting for you to cast your spells. In fact, according to every story from the previous war I’ve heard, the Death Eaters have a strong preference for underhanded attacks and nasty curses that cannot be repelled with a standard shielding spell. They also have a tendency to avoid teamwork even when they are assigned to a mission in groups: something about standing out amongst the crowd. If you want this little club of yours to be effective past helping you with your official examinations, you should consider adding in strategies to effectively work in groups against one or several opponents, moving mock-battles that’ll allow you as close to real-life practice as possible without endangering anyone and improving your physical skills to dodge spells.”

“Why dodge them?” Ron asked. “If we know the spell, we can use the counter curse.”

The look Professor Mustang gave Ron then would have made most people shrink back. Ron did, discretely pressing himself against the back of the couch.

“Tell me, Mr. Weasley, do you know which are the Death Eaters’ favourite spells?”

Hermione paled, remembering one of Barty Crouch Jr.’s lessons from last year.

“The Unforgivables,” she said in a breathless whisper.
Ron grimaced, looking down at the list Professor Mustang had given them before they left his office. They were in the common room now, the last ones left there.

“I understand he wants to make it look like we got a real detention, but this is gross.”

Said list consisted of a compilation of truly gruesome accidents occurred during failed attempts at transmutation that, Ron had to admit, would dissuade most people from trying to transmute anything without Mustang’s approval and assistance. Mustang had ordered them to read the lists in case anyone asked them what the detention had been like. Supposedly, they had spent their time there copying these lists of accidents. And, somehow, the lists Mustang had given them were written in their own handwriting. If that was alchemy, Ron was starting to really see the appeal of the class.

“It’s worth it, though,” Hermione said. She, of course, had already finished reading her copy of the list. “He’s given us a lot to work with. That idea with the stunners for dodging spells will come in handy. And the teamwork. We hadn’t even thought about it, but he’s right: teamwork is the Death Eaters’ weakness, and it could save us against an opponent none of us could defeat on our own.”

“You’re going to spend a lot of time looking up strategies, aren’t you?” Harry asked, but he was in a much better mood than he had been since the start of the school year. He had also finished his list of disgusting accidents and was reading over the list of spells. Privately, Ron thought that knowing he had some Order members on his side and willing to help (and that one of them was Sirius) would do a lot of good for Harry, but Ron wouldn’t say it.

As a consequence of the amount of time Roy dedicated to his classes, he hadn’t been practicing the patronus charm much lately. That changed on Tuesday, after he decided to discreetly abandon the staff room where Dolores Umbridge was nearly yelling at Minerva for going behind her back and asking Albus to reinstate the Gryffindor quidditch team, something Umbridge had refused to do.

Neglecting his practice for a while turned out to be a good thing, because Roy’s frustration over his lack of progress with the spell had diminished considerably over the past couple of weeks and he could actually focus on casting it.

Determination. That was what Sirius had told him to use given that the happy memories weren’t working. Roy had plenty of determination, and it was all a matter of finding the right means to channel it into the spell.

Things remained reasonably stable that week. No professor other than Trelawney had been put on probation so far, much to the delight of the staff. Minerva, in particular, seemed to derive some
form of vindictive pleasure from the fact that Umbridge hadn’t managed to find fault with her teaching method despite Minerva’s disdainful attitude towards her during her inspection.

Roy had caught sight of Hermione in the library on Thursday evening, carrying a pile of charms books in which he had no doubt she had hidden some to look up spells from the list.

As a precaution, Roy had decided to avoid the nook in the Muggle Studies section, and had found another empty area in the Divination section for whenever he needed to check something up in the library. Halfway through one of the dense philosophical tomes that dealt with souls, Roy had an idea and wrote “Andrea” a letter, asking if she was free on Friday afternoon next week for a date. He followed it with a letter to Madam Malkins’ shop. During his first visit there, Roy had been informed that now that the shop had his measurements they could sew him clothes without his presence; provided, of course, that he was willing to pay a small extra amount of money for the self-adjusting fabric that would ensure any necessary slight alterations were taken care of.

Roy just so happened to have his untouched September pay available.

He had kept his outings so far fairly low-key, and he decided a change of pace was in order. His womanizer façade had worked wonders in the past, and he figured a modified version of it would come in handy now: the adoring boyfriend.

Letters written, Roy stood up to go to the owlery and decided a talk with Professor Sprout was in order.

Ever since the detention with Professor Mustang, Hermione had been worried about the first official meeting of the defence group (now called Dumbledore’s Army). As it turned out, she had no reason to be worried. Most of their members believed Harry’s story about Voldemort’s return, and the ones who didn’t believe it at least were willing to give the story the benefit of the doubt. Hermione had given the group a reasoning similar to the one Professor Mustang had used during the detention —respecting his request of keeping his involvement a secret— and it had helped to convince them that most of the spells in the list Sirius and Tonks had written would be good to know for extra points in either the O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. exams as well as for future defence.

Still, with the fighting tactics Hermione was working on to add to their meetings she thought calling themselves an army was oddly appropriate past the fact that it was one of Fudge’s fears.

She was currently waiting for a package from her parents. She had written to them on Saturday to ask for some books that talked about guerrilla fighting methods in the muggle world. She had told them that she needed the books because she was writing a comparative essay on these methods in the muggle and wizarding world for History of Magic and there was, unsurprisingly, nothing of use in the Muggle Studies section. Hermione felt a little bad about lying to her parents, but she was used to hiding the truth about what happened at Hogwarts from them by now, as she was afraid they’d take her out of the school if they knew about things like the story with the Philosopher’s Stone or what happened during the third task.

She had tried to look these things up in the library this week, but wizards didn’t seem keen in battle strategies past the basic “cover your companions’ backs” suggestions.
Aurora Sinistra sat next to Pomona Sprout for lunch on Friday. As she settled, her left foot brushed against something. She looked down to find a vase between their chairs. It held a beautiful bouquet of butterfly roses in it, their petals fluttering and making the colours ripple on them like a sea of tiny kaleidoscopes.

“Flowers?” Aurora asked, surprised. Pomona rarely brought any plants into the Great Hall unless they were necessary for a special occasion.

“Roy asked for them,” Pomona replied, turning to her with an impish grin. “He has a date.”

Aurora raised her eyebrows. She hadn’t had many chances to talk to Roy Mustang, but she certainly wouldn’t mind going out on a date with a man who looked like \textit{that}.

Aurora turned to face the room when the volume in the Great Hall decreased considerably, worried that something bad was about to happen.

Her mouth fell open.

“Oh, my...” Charity Burbage whispered from her other side, and Aurora agreed with the feeling wholeheartedly.

Roy was walking towards the staff table, moving between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw ones, and he looked...

\textit{Lucky witch}, Aurora thought with a healthy dose of envy.

Roy was certainly dressed for a nice date out. Black pants, black dress shoes, a dark grey waistcoat with the chain of his pocket watch dangling from the right pocket over a crisp white shirt with its neck upturned to show a thin, black tie that disappeared into the waistcoat. Over his left arm he had draped a bundle of black fabric that appeared to be a coat and a cloak as well as a light grey scarf. And he had his hair slicked back.

Heads turned as he walked, and the students started to whisper as soon as he was past.

Aurora was certain that Roy would be the main topic of gossip this weekend.

“I’d never seen a man look so good in just black and grey,” Charity said in a low voice, and Aurora nodded her agreement. Wizards usually went for eye-catching robes when they took someone out on a date, and Roy had just proven wrong the long-standing tradition that brighter was better with a single outfit.

Finally, Roy reached the staff table, obliviously greeting everyone with a nice smile that only emphasized how attractive he was. He set his coat, cloak and scarf on the back of the chair on Pomona’s other side before sitting down.

“I have your flowers,” Pomona said, her voice perfectly even, as if she hadn’t been staring too.

“Thank you,” Roy replied with an enchanting smile.
The conversation over lunch was normal enough, but Aurora kept part of her attention on the room at large. Whispering students failing miserably at their attempts to sneak glances at Roy were hilarious to watch.

Unsurprisingly, Roy was the first professor to finish his meal.

“Well, I believe I’ll be off now,” he said, standing up.

“Any idea of when you’ll be back?” Pomona asked with a knowing smile as Roy slipped his tailcoat on.

A sheepish grin took over Roy’s face. Aurora thought he might even be blushing slightly.

“Sometime tomorrow, I’d say,” he replied, bending his head down in what looked like a very deliberate gesture to avoid Pomona’s eyes. He turned to tie his cloak in place.

Next to Aurora, Charity stifled a snicker into her napkin.

“That sounds fun,” Pomona said far too innocently. She reached down for the flowers while Roy set the scarf around his shoulders and offered them to him. “Have a nice weekend, Roy.”

“Thank you, Pomona,” Roy said with that same sheepish grin, accepting the bouquet.

After a quick goodbye, he started walking towards the Great Hall’s open doors, the cloak billowing softly after him and many heads turned to watch him go.

Pomona leant closer to Aurora.

“Ten galleons say Roy’s name in hearts will have tripled by Monday.”

“I’m not taking that bet,” Aurora said with an amused snort. “However, I have ten galleons saying we’ll hear far less jokes associating black cloaks with bats.” Charity let out a disgusted sound and Aurora turned incredulous eyes on her. “Oh, come on, he looks dashing.”

Charity shook her head, pointing to the other end of the staff table. Aurora looked in that direction and grimaced. Umbridge’s beady eyes were fixed on Roy’s retreating back.

“Merlin, that’s disgusting,” Aurora said.

“I hope Roy hasn’t noticed,” Pomona agreed with a grimace of her own. “The poor boy doesn’t deserve that.”

Roy spotted Tonks’ disguised self easily once he emerged from the fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron. She was wearing a dress robe in what might be a light shade of either green or blue, accompanied by a cloak that was some shades darker in likely the same colour. She wore some discreet and elegant jewellery, a ring and a thin necklace that Roy would never associate with Nymphadora Tonks, and he wouldn’t be surprised to learn that her mother Andromeda had helped with the outfit. According to Tonks, Andromeda was quite enjoying herself with helping her get ready for these fake dates. Tonks had confessed she had never been one to dress up, and her mother
relished the chance to help her dress in ways Tonks would never choose of her own accord, even if it was for an entirely different body.

“Andrea,” Roy greeted her with a charming smile that hid his amusement at the situation. There were some nosy patrons from the Cauldron sneaking glances at them, probably because their outfits made it clear they didn’t intend to stay here.

“Hello Roy,” Tonks said with a sweet smile that showed her very impressive acting skills. Nobody would guess it from watching her usual demeanour, but Nymphadora Tonks was an amazing actress who could easily put on an act fitting whatever appearance she was wearing. Andrea was sweet and demure, if somewhat clumsy —because no amount of acting skills would fix that particular trait of Tonks’— and she appeared to enjoy their dates very much to the outside eyes. Her eyes fell on the flowers and her smile widened as though she hadn’t been expecting them. “Are those for me?” she asked in very convincing eagerness.

“Of course,” Roy said, offering the bouquet of changing flowers to her. “Unless you’d rather I carry them and draw odd looks when everyone thinks you gifted them to me?”

Tonks giggled, what would have been a snort of laughter from her real self, and accepted the flowers.

“Now, we couldn’t have that,” she said, and threaded her arm with Roy’s when he offered it.

They exited the Leaky Cauldron at a leisurely pace, Roy tapped the wall at the back in the appropriate order to open the access into Diagon Alley and they entered. After half an hour of wandering around, with Tonks trying on various hats Roy knew she wouldn’t be caught dead wearing at an expensive clothes shop called Twilfitt and Tatting they slipped into a side alley and Tonks apparated them away.

“I can’t believe you don’t know how to apparate,” she snorted, dropping her Andrea persona, the moment they landed in the middle of a cozy yet tasteful living room that was part of Tonks’ childhood home.

“I didn’t see the point in learning it,” Roy defended himself, as he usually did. He had read on the subject to find a way to justify his lack of such knowledge, and had been extremely relieved to learn that many wizards and witches never learnt to apparate, which made his situation less suspicious. He couldn’t learn it properly now, because that would mean letting the Ministry of Magic —and, by extension, Riddle and his Death Eaters— know about his vulnerability, so instead he had convinced Albus to teach him how to create very much illegal portkeys in case he needed to disappear quickly in an emergency.

“Too busy having your nose buried in a book?” Tonks teased, stepping away from him to drop on the couch in a very unladylike manner.

“Perhaps,” Roy said, following her to sit down. “So, this is your childhood home?” he asked, looking around.

“Yes. My mother should be back any time now to meet my fake boyfriend. She might insist you actually date me: ignore her.”

“As you wish,” Roy said, exaggerating a bow. Ostensibly, in their letters, Andrea was going to introduce Roy to her family before they went on a romantic, very public dinner date. The truth was that Andromeda Tonks was curious about this fake relationship and, according to Tonks, wanted more information to better work on Andrea’s wardrobe, so they had agreed to meet today. “In the
meantime, though, I believe we should work on perfecting our code.”

“Trouble at Hogwarts?” Tonks asked with a worried frown.

“Not yet,” Roy said, “but given how things have gone so far, I believe it’s only a matter of time before Umbridge decides to start monitoring the mail. I’d rather have a perfected, non-magical code to work with for when that happens.”

Despite her worried expression, Tonks rolled her eyes.

“You’re almost as paranoid as Moody. Has anyone ever told you?”

Roy smirked in amusement.

“Allus has suggested we should exchange tips, yes.”

It had been a while since the Malfoys had been out in public for more than a quick trip. Four months, to be more precise. Under the guise of keeping up the appearance of peace and the illusion that the Dark Lord hadn’t returned, Lucius had decided to take Narcissa out to dinner tonight. While that was part of his reasoning, the truth was that he also wanted to get away from the Death Eaters for a while. And, dare he think of it, away from the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord... wasn’t quite as Lucius remembered him. Aside from the fact that he was extremely displeased with Lucius over what had happened with the diary, he seemed somehow... less than he had been. Less thorough with his plans, less patient, less charismatic, less... sane. These were thoughts that Lucius tried to shy away from as much as possible, but they were still there.

The Dark Lord wasn’t quite as displeased with Lucius right now, though, given how Lucius had successfully managed to cast the imperius curse on an Unspeakable named Broderick Bode. With some luck, they would have the prophecy in their hands soon and that would appease the Dark Lord’s anger somewhat.

Lucius’ attention was momentarily drawn away from Narcissa when he heard voices approaching. The maître d’ was escorting a young couple to a reserved table close to the entrance of the restaurant. Lucius nearly dismissed them before he caught a better look at the man’s face.

He froze.

“Lucius?” Narcissa asked softly, noticing his sudden change in demeanour.

“That’s... interesting,” Lucius said, gathering himself again. “Do you remember Draco’s new professor, Roy Mustang?” he asked, keeping to words that could be safely spoken in public.

The Dark Lord had warned every single one of his followers about Mustang and how, for an undisclosed reason, it was forbidden to kill him and the consequences would be truly dire if someone did. He had even gone as far as showing them an image of Mustang taken from Severus’ memories to ensure they knew who to avoid killing once the fights started anew.

“The one that might be stricter than Severus?” Narcissa asked, affecting an amused smile. Even
though she wasn’t an official Death Eater, Lucius didn’t keep secrets from her, and thus she knew Mustang’s value to the Dark Lord.

“The very same. It would seem he has come with a lady friend tonight,” Lucius said in a light, somewhat disinterested voice. No doubt the girlfriend Severus had mentioned.

According to Severus’ reports, Mustang didn’t take Dumbledore’s warnings about his safety particularly seriously and often left to meet with a woman. In Severus’ less than kind opinion, that showed Mustang’s ignorance about the dangers of war, or perhaps his arrogance. While the Dark Lord conceded that it might be a possibility, he had delightfully theorised that perhaps Mustang didn’t find himself in as much danger as Dumbledore believed because he didn’t agree with Dumbledore’s views of the world.

From Draco’s letters, as well as those from the other children placed in Mustang’s classes to keep an eye on him, Mustang certainly didn’t appear to be a typical brainless Gryffindor or the sort of man who would willingly join a group like the Order of the Phoenix.

“Maybe we should greet him before we leave,” Narcissa suggested. They were waiting for the arrival of their dessert by now. “I’d like a more impartial opinion on Draco’s progress with alchemy,” she added with a note of amusement. While Draco’s first letter on the class and Mustang himself had been uneventful, the second one, as well as the ones that followed, had included impressive temper tantrums about Mustang’s unfair teaching methods and positively cruel daily exams. Fortunately, though, Draco’s grades had improved considerably in those exams.

“Maybe we should, yes,” Lucius agreed.

Their dessert was finally brought out and they kept to the same light conversation they had maintained for the duration of the meal, reinforcing their appearance of a well respected pureblood couple who nonetheless cared deeply for each other. Remaining in the general public’s good side was an important thing if Lucius wanted to keep his sway over Fudge now that Dumbledore had fallen out of grace. Fudge was so obsessed with his public image nowadays that he would never allow himself to be seen with someone he didn’t deem worthy of his company. As if Fudge was worth anything himself past his position and useful willing blindness to reality.

Fifteen minutes later, as Lucius covered their bill, he spied out of the corner of his eye as Mustang’s companion stood up after saying something to him with a tiny, shy smile, and headed in the general direction of the bathrooms. Lucius wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad development. While that saved them the trouble of extra introductions with whom could perhaps be an unworthy individual, it also robbed them of the chance of knowing the sort of people Mustang associated with outside of Hogwarts and the Order of the Phoenix.

He stood up, helped Narcissa with her cloak before putting his own on, and offered her his arm. They walked towards the door, and Lucius let Narcissa start the interaction.

“Oh, dear,” she exclaimed softly, coming to a halt next to Mustang’s table as if she had just noticed his presence. Mustang looked up, a puzzled expression on his face. “Pardon me, but would you happen to be Professor Mustang?” Narcissa asked with one of her perfect polite smiles.

Mustang looked taken aback for a moment before he gathered himself and nodded. He stood up, appearing a little flustered but showing a measure of manners. That was good, at least.

“Oh, yes, I am. Mrs...?” he asked.

“Malfy, Narcissa Malfy,” Narcissa introduced herself, keeping her voice kind in that way she did
when she wanted to win someone over. “And this is my husband, Lucius.”

“Draco Malfoy’s parents?” Mustang asked, surprised. Lucius held back what might have been a grimace or a snort of amusement. While he seemed to have manners, Mustang appeared very flustered by a simple encounter with a student’s parents.

*A scholar indeed,* Lucius thought. He didn’t know what was the issue with scholars, but they always appeared lacking in their social skills. The better one was in their field, the less they seemed to know how to handle themselves in social situations.

“Yes,” Narcissa replied, letting her pride over Draco show in her voice. “Excuse us for interrupting your evening, but I couldn’t help myself.”

“Don’t worry about it, ma’am,” Mustang said, his voice steadier now. “How can I help you?”

“I was wondering...” Narcissa started, pretending to hesitate for a short moment. “We have heard a lot from Draco about your classes, but I’d like to know how he is doing, from an impartial source,” she added just the right amount of curiosity and vacillation to her voice and facial expression, giving the impression that she had stopped on an impulse and now wasn’t sure it had been the right idea.

Mustang smiled, a pleasant and far less hesitant expression now that they were on a topic he was comfortable with.

“He is doing well. It’s a bit early in the year to tell for sure, but he might be one of my best students at this rate.”

Despite the charade, Lucius was glad to hear those words. Draco may have volunteered to take the Alchemy class under the guise of being the student to watch over the fifth year Alchemy classes, but he couldn’t fool Lucius: Draco had always found alchemy to be interesting, and he had jumped at the chance of having one of his interests proving useful to the cause.

They exchanged some pleasantries before parting ways, Mustang returning to his seat while Lucius and Narcissa left the restaurant. While they didn’t talk as they walked down Diagon Alley, Lucius exchanged a glance with Narcissa. The meeting had been... interesting. Mustang hadn’t shown any reaction to their identities past them being a student’s parents, which meant he either didn’t know Lucius was a Death Eater (an interesting possibility that raised many questions for a member of Dumbledore’s Order) or he did but simply didn’t care. For all his initial awkwardness, Mustang hadn’t been startled nor shown any signs of fear or nervousness, staying friendly and open during the entire exchange.

If Mustang *did* know that Lucius was a Death Eater, this chance meeting could give some support to the Dark Lord’s theory that perhaps Mustang’s beliefs weren’t as in line with Dumbledore’s as the Order seemed to think.

Had he been of a lesser standing, Lucius would have hummed to himself in contentment. This night had gone better than expected; not only had he been on a lovely date with his wife, but he had a report for the Dark Lord that could help improve Lucius’ current standing.
Originally I was going to write the scene with the Malfoys from Roy’s POV, but he refused to cooperate. In case anyone is curious, the real reason Tonks left was because they had noticed the Malfoys, as well as figured out their intention to approach them, and she wanted to settle in a position where she could curse them unexpectedly if necessary. Besides, they wanted to avoid the pesky detail of introductions. Tonks isn’t keen on meeting anyone from her mother’s side of the family other than Sirius.
Okay, so I went on a writing spree and chapter 14 is complete :D You can thank the heatwave that finally left and allowed me to live again.

I have to finish things for my draft for the FMA Big Bang, which is due July 13th, so I don’t know when I’ll start working on the next chapter, but don’t expect such a quick update again.

Roy received his berating with stoic serenity. Molly Weasley had the kind of terrifying air that came with being the mother of seven children, some of which were truly unruly, and this air served her well in dealing with anyone she believed had stepped out of line. Roy, however, was used to having Riza Hawkeye looking over his shoulder, with her disapproving glares, words and gun ready for whenever he did something she didn’t like —which was often enough. Molly’s scolding over the reckless move that had been Roy’s fake date with Tonks tonight —and she was all the more horrified because they had run into Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy— was positively refreshing in comparison.

Having Sirius stand behind her and childishly mimic her gestures proved harder to withstand, as it meant both Roy and Tonks (who was being scolded for having agreed to the date) had to put a lot of effort into keeping straight faces throughout the hour-long scolding.

Once satisfied that she had said everything she wanted to say, Molly announced she was returning home and stepped into the floo with one last baleful glare at Roy.

“Well,” Roy said after a short silence, “she certainly didn’t take that well.”

Sirius snorted.

“She’s adopted you,” he said, “and you know how she is.”

Roy sighed. Yes, he had noticed with Potter and her children. It was both a downside and the desired effect of his current mask; having Molly dedicate so much time to express her worry over his safety meant Roy was doing a good job of appearing as merely a scholar, but at the same time it was galling because Roy was certain he could take on most of the Order without any real trouble.

“Okay, boys, I’m going home,” Tonks said, stretching her arms over her head. She was still in her Andrea disguise, because —as she had grumbled before they returned to Headquarters— she had forgotten to take a more comfortable change of clothes and she was no good at transfiguring them.

“Are you going back to Hogwarts, Roy?”

“Oh, no. I’m not expected at the castle until tomorrow. Late, I’d say,” he replied with a smirk. Lunch had been fun.

Sirius barked out a laugh.

“I want that story,” he said.
Sirius blinked. There was a hawk perched on one of the kitchen chairs.

More accurately, there was a *patronus*-silver hawk perched on one of the kitchen chairs, looking up at him unnervingly while Roy sat on another chair and twirled his wand lazily in his right hand.

Sirius grinned.

“A hawk, really?” he asked.

“Yes, it seems so,” Roy said with a pleased smile, and dismissed his *patronus* with a wave of his wand.

“About time,” Sirius said with a laugh, happy to see that Roy had finally managed it. “Let’s eat something and I’ll show you what we use *patronuses* for in the Order.”

“Oh?”

“Did you know that Mustang encountered Lucius and Narcissa on Friday?” Severus asked, sitting on his usual armchair in Albus’ office.

“Yes, Roy told me when he returned yesterday,” Albus replied calmly, as if this encounter couldn’t have gone horribly. “Should I assume that is why Tom summoned you last night?”

“He wanted me to inform him of everything I’ve noticed about Mustang, even the smallest of details,” Severus said after a curt nod.

“Oh? And what did you tell him?” Albus asked, his eyes twinkling with mirth.

“What I always do. Mustang is, as the students have so helpfully put it, a slave-driver in his classes,” Severus had once overheard a group of fourth year Hufflepuffs comparing him to Mustang, which he wasn’t sure if he should find hilarious or offensive, “a very focused scholar, careless about his safety... I did add some new information, of course, like how most of the staff seem to think he is too formal for someone his age, and the fact that toad Umbridge seems to like him for some reason. I also mentioned how he appears to be pretty vain, which you can’t argue after that performance he put on Friday.”

“What about Roy’s role within the Order? I imagine Tom insisted on that aspect.”

“He did. But there isn’t much to be said about it, now is there? Mustang just sits back and watches.” In fact, Severus hadn’t seen Mustang contribute anything to a meeting since he had disagreed with the Order’s decision not to train Potter back during the summer holidays. “After hearing what Lucius had to say, the Dark Lord seems oddly convinced that he could sway Mustang
to his side if only he had a chance to meet him,” Severus said, and let the unasked question linger in the air.

Was the Dark Lord right?

Nobody knew much about Roy Mustang, after all, other than the fact that he could create the Philosopher’s Stone. For all his polite small talk, Mustang had never revealed anything about himself or his life before Hogwarts. And Severus wasn’t blind. Mustang was good, very good, at putting on his oblivious scholar front, but Severus wouldn’t have lived this long if he didn’t know how to spot deception; Mustang’s intellect wasn’t limited to the scholarly arts, Severus had seen the calculating glint in his eyes more than once.

Albus’ amusement moved to the line of his mouth now as well as his eyes.

“I assure you Roy has no interest in following Tom,” he said, with the same voice he used to tell the Order that Severus was trustworthy. One that few people believed in that second case, but which Severus knew was Albus being truthful about what he thought despite what others might think.

Severus almost opened his mouth to ask what made him so sure that Mustang was worth so much faith, but in the end didn’t. Aside from the fact that he doubted Albus would reply when he had been so deliberately vague about Mustang so far—even if nobody else seemed to have noticed—Severus wasn’t in a place to ask when he himself had requested his own reasons be kept secret.

“Answer me this at least,” he said instead, “how competent is Mustang in a fight?” While, as an auror, Nymphadora Tonks made for a good bodyguard if the Dark Lord decided to make a move, it would be a disaster if Mustang had no real combat experience.

“I have never seen Roy fight,” Albus said. “However,” he continued, cutting off Severus’ scathing and incredulous comment, “Alastor tells me that Roy has very good reflexes, and you know that Alastor doesn’t give compliments easily. Besides, Roy is awfully paranoid for someone who has never been in a life-threatening situation,” Albus added with renewed amusement.

Severus knew that was as much as he was going to get on the topic of Mustang. He nodded.

“Did you need anything else? I have a pile of abysmal essays to mark waiting at my office.”

“Oh, that.

“I haven’t overheard anyone boasting about the Dark Lord entrusting them with a special task, nor have I found any memory of such an event so far.” Albus hadn’t explained why such a thing was so important, but he had gone to the length of procuring a pensieve for Severus so he wouldn’t have to depend on the one Albus had in his office, which spoke volumes of the importance of whatever task the Dark Lord could have given someone.

“I see... In that case, I wish you luck with your essays.”

“Those dunderheads would need far more than luck,” Severus said, much to Albus’ amusement.
The remainder of October passed in what Roy couldn’t help but to think of as a period of calm before a storm.

The effort his students put into studying was starting to pay off, showing which of them might do well in alchemy and which wouldn’t. He hadn’t lied to the Malfoys about their son, it was clear that Draco was paying attention in class and studying, and his results in the daily exams reflected this, just as they reflected that the other two Slytherin students — Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle— weren’t giving the class a second thought and would fail the theory exam miserably. Hermione’s prodigious memory was showing in her results, as well as her refreshing skill to use that art so many wizards and witches ignored called logic. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley weren’t showing nearly as good results as Hermione did, but they might pass the exam depending on how things went. Roy assumed their attention was focused elsewhere, probably divided between the defence group and quidditch training if he had to bet.

A surprise, at least according to the other members of staff who occasionally asked about how his classes were going, was Neville Longbottom. Roy had been warned about Longbottom and his ability to botch even the simplest of spells, and yet he was grasping the concepts Roy taught with far more ease than many of the more studious students. Roy had been very displeased to overhear a group of students speculate about how Longbottom could have managed to cheat in the daily exams, and that was the first time he assigned a real detention. He had the students, who weren’t even in any of his classes, write ‘I won’t spread baseless rumours’ until they had filled an entire scroll of parchment each and were rubbing at their wrists in obvious discomfort, then he gave them a very stern and thorough speech about how nobody cheated in his classes because he had ensured it wasn’t a possibility.

Roy’s reputation amongst the students had taken another turn for the worse after the story of that detention, which had taken four hours —and which Roy had used to revise all of that week’s exams and some spells he had been reading about— spread amongst the students. “Arrogant bastard” had joined slave-driver as a way to describe him now.

Longbottom wasn’t the only surprise amongst his students, though. Despite all the warnings, Fred and George Weasley had behaved ever since the fake detention, and they seemed to regard Roy with a level of respect that he hadn’t seen them give other professors. They took the class seriously, which Sirius speculated was because they believed it could be useful for their joke shop. As long as they didn’t attempt anything reckless, Roy was fine with this.

But the most puzzling surprise to Roy was a fourth year Ravenclaw named Luna Lovegood. Lovegood didn’t seem to even know what logic was —Roy had given up on trying to figure out half the things she spoke about very early on in the school year— and yet it was clear she understood, not just memorised like many students attempted to do, what Roy explained in class.

Alchemy classes aside, Roy had finally finished his work on Al and Barry’s arrays, and had started to devise a way to achieve the opposite effect. Which would then be followed by creating a means to distinguish the different souls in a single body to expel only one of them. Slow, but it was progress.

He had gone on one more fake date that he had spent at Grimmauld Place, perfecting the art of sending messages through patronuses with Sirius’ and Lupin’s help.

As for the events taking place in the school, Umbridge seemed oddly content without implementing any new measures, which only increased the feeling that something would happen soon.
With the end of October and the arrival of November came a bubbling excitement over the first quidditch match of the year. Roy had no intention of attending it, he didn’t fancy watching as fourteen teenagers flew around on broomsticks while pulling off death-defying stunts. That didn’t mean he managed to stay out of the events preceding the match.

Gryffindor and Slytherin were facing each other, and Roy had long since learnt that the rivalry between those two houses was far beyond unhealthy. After Alicia Spinnet, member of the Gryffindor team, was cursed by Miles Bletchley from the Slytherin team, Roy decided he wasn’t going to deal with childish behaviour over sports in his classes.

He walked into his first class after the incident announcing that if anything the slightest bit funny happened to anyone, the entire class would have detention at the time of the match. And no, he didn’t care that some of his students were members of the two quidditch teams about to face off. It didn’t do much for his popularity, but it ensured the Alchemy classes leading up to the match were uneventful.

Finally the Saturday of the match arrived. Roy declined the invitations of the other professors to go with them to the quidditch pitch, claiming that he wasn’t a fan of quidditch —and earning a few odd looks because of it.

Roy settled on the plush carpet he had transmuted in his study for the sole purpose of being more comfortable and spread his notes around. The entirety of the school, with perhaps a handful of people who, like himself, had no interest in quidditch, were outside the castle at the quidditch pitch, which promised at the very least a calm morning for work. Perhaps longer, given how Roy had heard these matches could stretch even for days, though he had been assured such an occurrence was highly uncommon with school matches.

The calm lasted until Roy entered the Great Hall for lunch. He had hoped the match would stretch for the entire day, but not only was it over already, something had clearly gone wrong. The students were whispering furiously all over the room, some with worry, others with anger and others with glee. Roy noticed the gleeful ones were mainly Slytherins, and the angry ones, Gryffindors. A quick scan of the tables proved that the Gryffindor quidditch team was nowhere to be seen. Roy took in the faces at the staff table as he walked up to his usual seat. Albus appeared grim, Minerva had the look of someone who had bit on a lemon and Umbridge sported a worryingly pleased expression. The rest of the professors appeared to be between worried and cautious.

“Did I miss something?” Roy asked in a low voice as he took his seat next to Pomona, far enough from Umbridge not to be overheard.

“You mean aside from a brand new educational decree no one was informed about?” Pomona said in an unusually harsh voice, something Roy had never heard from her before. “Some things, yes.” And she proceeded to tell Roy about how Umbridge had gotten herself the authority to override everyone, including Albus, when it came to administering punishments, to the point where she could even change what other professors had deemed an appropriate punishment. An authority she had used to ban Harry Potter and Fred and George Weasley from playing quidditch ever again.
Well, that’s a problem, Roy thought, deliberately not looking in Umbridge’s direction. This decree ruined the possibility of Roy using another detention to talk to Hermione and her friends because he doubted Umbridge would pass the chance to take control over a detention involving Harry Potter or any of his close friends.

Hagrid was at the head table for breakfast on Monday. It was an unexpected sight given that, as far as Roy knew, he hadn’t warned anyone about his return. The Order had received word from Madame Maxime months ago about the giants’ refusal to join them —no surprise there— but she hadn’t given a concrete explanation about Hagrid’s delay and had simply told Albus that it was likely he wouldn’t make it for the start of term.

Looking at Hagrid now, Roy wondered what exactly had kept him so long. Hagrid looked as though he’d gone a round or two against a homunculus, covered in wounds and bruises that ranged from anywhere between freshly-acquired to nearly healed.

He didn’t have a chance to ask, not that he would have done so in the Great Hall of all places, when Hagrid grinned at him and leant over the back of the table to wave at him without any bodies in the way. Roy smiled in greeting, sat down and proceeded with breakfast as usual, acting as though his brain wasn’t running a mile a minute attempting to figure out how Hagrid’s return would feature in the current climate at Hogwarts. Not well, Roy could tell as much. Umbridge was a massive racist who wouldn’t simply accept the change from polite, agreeable Professor Grubbly-Plank to a half-giant. The way she kept darting calculating looks at Hagrid across the table confirmed as much.

It took all of one day for Roy’s theory to be confirmed. Umbridge inspected Hagrid’s class on Tuesday afternoon (fifth year with Harry Potter, of course), and the stories that came from it weren’t good. From what little had made it to the staff table by dinner, Pomona and Professors Sinistra and Burbage were certain that Umbridge would do everything she could to have Hagrid fired as soon as possible, even more than she was already doing in Trelawney’s case.

As unfair as the idea was, it was no surprise, and all three of them seemed to agree that Hagrid wouldn’t withstand Umbridge’s harassment very well. He was a good guy, they said, but very easily flustered. From what little Roy had seen of Hagrid a few months ago he was inclined to agree with them.
During the month of November Roy started to introduce his students to the basic concepts of mathematics and physics that they would need to even start approaching the practical uses of alchemy. He ignored the whining and eye rolls, but whenever he heard one of the frequent comments about how muggle things were beneath Hogwarts’ standards Roy was quick to stop before the one who spoke.

“Tell me, Mr. Warrington,” Roy said the first time, whirling on the seventh year who had been muttering to his friends, “if you think these subjects are so simple;” he repeated the word Warrington had used —simple muggle silliness, “then what is the issue? Shouldn’t you be able to learn them easily?”

He wasn’t able to, nor were a good deal of the other students. Mathematics were barely looked at in most Hogwarts classes, and physics were nonexistent, which meant most of Roy’s students found themselves struggling with this part of the subject far more than they had with chemistry and the memorisation of alchemical symbols.

At one point Roy was exasperated enough by the decline in exam results that he had told Albus he should really consider adding basic science to the school’s curriculum. Albus had laughed, taking Roy’s comment as the joke it was not, and reminded Roy that he was hardly in a position to make such suggestions to the School Board of Governors when the Ministry was looking for a chance to have him sacked.

The only good thing to come out of the students’ complaints was that, due to how nearly everybody in the wizarding world saw muggles as less than wizards, they were offended by the mere thought of being unable to master something that muggles could do. Roy hadn’t lost a single student since he had started countering the complaints, and it was clear more than one person had taken it as a personal challenge to prove they could learn the class syllabus for the exam. Unfortunately for them, their usual method of memorisation for theoretical content might not prove as useful as it did in other classes, because Roy intended to make them apply their knowledge in as much of a practical way as possible. He didn’t care about how well a student could memorise the basic laws of alchemy, he wanted them to understand what they learnt.

Tonks found Roy’s predicament hilarious. They went out on one of their dates on early December, taking the chance to do some Christmas shopping —Christmas didn’t exist on Amestris, but it was so obviously widespread here that Roy acted as though he knew what the fuss was about. He could do presents, they were just like buying birthday presents, and as long as he wasn’t asked to partake in any strange rituals things should be fine.

Tonks asked for Roy’s opinion about some of her choices, and Roy did the same with some of the presents he bought, though a few he had decided beforehand. He chose the most horrid, eye-scarring set of robes he could find for Albus —a petty way for him to get back at the school— bought the simplest ‘cooking made easy’ book for Sirius, who was still struggling with his culinary pursuits (Roy and Tonks made a bet on whether Sirius would be more amused or offended by the fact it was a children’s book) and convinced Tonks to venture out into the muggle world to find Hermione a suitable present. It might prove unnecessary, but Roy thought the defence group could use a decent book on how to best defend a castle, which was how Roy spent an hour checking the middle ages history section of a large bookshop near the Leaky Cauldron.

He pretended he didn’t notice the grumpy old man in mismatched clothes that was a very badly disguised Mad-Eye Moody.
Roy had set the exam for the last week of classes in December. It had taken him two weeks to get the questions ready, and during that time he had worried over a small detail he hadn’t considered up until he had to work on the exams: he wanted to use the same questions for all the years, to hold them up to the exact same criteria, but he needed a way to prevent the students from revealing these questions to the other classes.

Filius was the one who gave him the solution. It was a difficult spell that took a few attempts to master, but it was positively devious and a task he enjoyed immensely.

“I have no doubt,” Roy started on the last Thursday, addressing his group of fifth years, “that many of you have unsuccessfully attempted to gain some... assistance from the students who have taken this exam before you.” He smirked at the frowns that crossed most of the faces. “I hope their reluctance to cooperate didn’t dissuade you from studying. As you are the last group to take the exam, I saw no reason to curse your parchments. You’re free to discuss your answers once you leave the classroom, as will be your fellow students.”

Filius’ solution had been to curse the parchments so that he would know if any student spoke about the exam. It was a complex spell, as the magic needed to pass onto the student, but it would light up the parchment of whoever so much as mentioned what a question was about, and Roy had made it clear that if a single parchment light up before the fifth years were finished, every single Alchemy student would have to retake the exam upon their return in January, and he wouldn’t be nearly as lenient then as he was being now. Roy had a long list of questions he had discarded because they were too difficult for his classes’ current level, and those questions would become the January exam if he was forced to write it. He had also made this point very clear, and the students had behaved like any student who didn’t want to deal with extra, more difficult work would.

“You have the duration of the class to complete the exams. If anyone writes an answer after the bell rings, they will automatically fail. You will be informed of your results when you return from the holidays.” He flicked his wand to send a copy of the exam and an empty scroll of parchment to each student. “You may begin.”

Breakfast the following morning had a strangely strained air about it. Albus was grim under his calm outer appearance, Minerva looked as though she hadn’t slept at all the previous night and Umbridge was visibly annoyed, but nobody else in the staff seemed to know what was going on; many puzzled glances were exchanged, though no one asked.

Roy swept his gaze over the student tables in search of an explanation. Most of the students had the cheerful air around them that was expected of children about to go home on a break from school, but it didn’t take Roy long to spot the anomalies. Harry Potter and the four Weasley children were nowhere to be seen, and Hermione was frowning in concern as she exchanged a whispered conversation with an equally frowning Neville Longbottom.

Whatever had happened, it must have something to do with the missing students.
Roy threw a quick glance in Albus’ direction. He needed an excuse to corner him.

“Headmaster.”

Albus stopped on his way out of the Great Hall to wait for Roy to catch up. He had wondered how long it would take Roy to realize that something was wrong.

“Yes?” Albus asked with his best impression of his cheerful mask. It was hard to maintain under the current circumstances, but everybody at Hogwarts knew that Albus Dumbledore loved Christmas, and it would be suspicious if he was anything but cheerful with the holidays upon the castle.

“Do you have a minute? I’ve just realised I overlooked a very important detail in regards to my classes,” Roy said, his face the perfect reflection of shy embarrassment.

“Of course. Would you like to accompany me to my office? I’m afraid I have some paperwork waiting there for me,” Albus said with a put upon sigh.

Roy nodded and they started walking.

“What can I help you with?” Albus asked politely after a short silence. There were students and portraits around, some glancing at them and some ignoring them altogether.

“Well... do you remember how I intended to test my students before the holidays?”

Albus felt a spark of genuine amusement light up despite his worry over Arthur Weasley’s condition. Watching the alchemy students struggle over the class was one of the few sources of entertainment he’d had over the past few months.

“I hear your students weren’t very happy about it,” Albus said with an amused hum.

Roy smiled in amusement.

“Oh, not at all. However, I’m afraid I forgot to set up a way to notify them of their results. I know this is usually Minerva’s job, but she has classes most of the day, so I figured I could ask you about it.”

They had reached the gargoyle guarding Albus’ office.

“That’s easy to arrange. Fizzing Whizzbee.”

The gargoyle moved to the side and they stepped on the ascending staircase. Once the door to Albus’ office was firmly closed behind them, Roy turned to face him.

“What happened?” he asked.

Albus sighed.

“Do you remember when, the day we met, you asked me if there was any way to ascertain whether
or not Harry is an horcrux?” Roy nodded. “I’m afraid I now have proof of it. You should sit down, this will take a while.”

“What will you do now?” Roy asked, reclining in the armchair, once Albus was done explaining last night’s events, from Potter’s dream connecting him to the snake they had suspected to be a horcrux to the fact that Arthur Weasley was now fighting for his life at St. Mungo’s.

“After last night it is very likely that Tom became aware of his connection to Harry. I doubt he will guess the nature of it; he is far too arrogant to believe he could have created a horcrux by accident, but the knowledge alone is far too dangerous. Harry needs to learn to guard his mind.”

Guard his...? Roy shook himself mentally. Magic, this was magic.

“How will you teach him to do that?”

A strangely surprised expression crossed Albus’ face for a moment.

“Occlumency, obviously. I cannot teach him myself, it would take our esteemed High Inquisitor no time to jump into some bizarre conclusion for me meeting Harry regularly and that could be potentially disastrous. Which leaves me with few options.”

“Which are?”

“Either Severus, who is a superb occlumens himself, or yourself.”

“Me?” Roy asked, for once his mouth moving faster than his brain. He blamed this utterly ridiculous talk about protecting Potter’s mind on it, but the fact remained that he had slipped. Yes, slipped, because that same surprised expression flashed over Albus’ face for a moment before he reigned it in.

Albus smiled sheepishly.

“I’m afraid I have this regrettable habit of brushing over the minds of those whose intentions I don’t know for certain.” Roy froze, the implications of those words whirring and burning in his brain. “I apologize, from your reaction I gather that you didn’t notice. Though I must say your shields are the best I’ve ever encountered.”

My...? Roy started to think, trying to process exactly what Albus had just said.

The answer hit him suddenly and Roy relaxed back in his seat.

“I’m afraid I can’t teach Potter,” he said, maybe a little colder than he would have liked. The knowledge that there was a way to read people’s minds didn’t sit well with him.

“Why is that?”

“The shields you encountered,” Roy started, giving Albus a pointed glare, “aren’t mine. In fact, I was unaware of their presence until you mentioned them just now.” Albus opened his mouth, but Roy cut him off. “I don’t know how they got there, but if I had to guess, I’d say it has something to
“Why would Truth give you such shields?” Albus asked with genuine curiosity, like every time Truth and the Gate came up in conversation—which was far more often than Roy liked.

To keep people from gaining knowledge without paying a toll.

Roy shrugged.

“I don’t presume to know how Truth works. In fact, I’d rather not dwell on it.”

Albus nodded in understanding. He may not have been through the Gate, but he knew that some knowledge was best left untouched.

“I assume you’re not staying for the holidays?”

“No,” Roy said, and let a silly grin slip over his face, “I’ve made sure people overheard my plans to spend the holidays with my girlfriend.”

Albus chuckled. He had warmed up to Roy’s outings over the months, as it became clear that Umbridge didn’t suspect there was anything off about them.

“I believe you should start packing then. Or do you have anything else to do at the school today?”

“Nothing at all. Advantages of not teaching on Fridays,” Roy said lightly as he stood up to leave.

Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter covers a very large period of time, but I have a reason for it: in the book, Rowling goes from Hagrid’s inspection (first week of November or so) to December 18th in a single page. From the information we have, the Order doesn’t really do much of interest in this time, and Voldy is focused on his attempts at stealing the prophecy and his other plan of the moment. I decided to keep a similar flow here.
Roy was in the middle of packing for the holidays —something he had procrastinated on for weeks— when a sudden burst of fire appeared above his bed. Fortunately this wasn’t the first time Albus had used Fawkes’ powers to send him a message, so Roy wasn’t very startled when he saw a piece of parchment and a single golden feather fall on the bed when the fire disappeared.

The note held a simple message, informing Roy that Arthur Weasley was out of danger. Good news at last. Roy wasn’t very familiar with Arthur Weasley, he knew Molly and Bill far better by now, but he didn’t want anyone to die in this war. Naïve and idealistic, perhaps, but that didn’t stop him from wishing they had no losses despite the harsh reality of war.

Roy was done packing by lunchtime, all of his notes carefully shrunk and hidden in his pocket (he couldn’t risk leaving them here in case Umbridge found a way to snoop around his quarters, even if he doubted he would have time to work on anything during the holidays), so he decided to eat at the school.

Lunch was far more relaxed than breakfast had been. Both Albus and Minerva appeared noticeably calmer now, and Umbridge’s displeasure only served to raise the professors’ general mood. Roy talked about his supposed holiday plans with Pomona and Aurora —they both had shown a great deal of interest in his romantic life ever since Roy’s little show back in October— and accepted their suggestions for places to visit in his time away from the school.

He was the first to stand from the staff table, and left the Great Hall after exchanging well wishes for the holidays with the rest of the staff.

Every fireplace in Hogwarts save for the one in Umbridge’s office was being monitored by the Ministry, as Kingsley Shacklebolt had confirmed around a month ago, so Roy took a small detour on his way to Grimmauld Place. He flooed into the Three Broomsticks and from there he walked over to the Hog’s Head, which had a fireplace in the back room. Aberforth had agreed to let Roy
use his bar as a midway stop if it was necessary, though he wasn’t very pleased about it. Finally, he flooed to Grimmauld Place.

Sirius was the only one at the kitchen when Roy arrived. He was lounging on one of the chairs, waving his wand around as a large amount of dishes and cutlery washed themselves in the sink.

“They left for St. Mungo’s?” Roy asked. The house was far too calm to have five teenagers in it, and there was no way Molly would let Sirius take care of the household spells unsupervised if she was here.

“Yeah. Arthur will recover,” Sirius replied. He looked exhausted, and Roy wouldn’t be surprised to learn he hadn’t slept at all last night. He doubted anyone who’d been in this house had.

“So I hear. Why don’t you go catch some sleep? I’ll finish that for you,” Roy offered, gesturing to the sink.

There had been a change of plans during the morning, Roy learnt when Sirius walked down the stairs a couple hours later looking somewhat more refreshed. Due to Arthur’s stay at St. Mungo’s, of which nobody knew the length at this point, Sirius had offered Molly the option for her and her family to stay at Grimmauld Place for the holidays so they would be closer to the hospital. That would include Potter and, once school was over, Hermione, meaning a full house.

“Are you kicking me out?” Roy asked jokingly, aware that wasn’t the case, and raised an eyebrow at Sirius.

“No, but you don’t have a room anymore,” Sirius replied with a cheeky grin. “I’d offer you Regulus’ old room, but Kreacher might try to murder you in your sleep if you stay there. You could always bunk in with me, or we could transfigure one of those ugly armchairs in the drawing room into a bed. If you don’t mind the furniture.”

*I’ve slept in worse places,* was the first thought that came to Roy’s mind, accompanied by a memory of the tents back in Ishval, but he pushed it back and found something more suitable to say instead.

“No offence, but I’d prefer the drawing room. I’ve heard you snore.”

Sirius raised a hand to his chest in a gesture of mock offense, but before he could reply with something outrageous, they heard the front door open.

They exchanged a look and listened in silence as a group of people walked in, half-expecting Tonks’ usual crash against the umbrella stand and Mrs. Black’s subsequent screeching. Fortunately, there was none of that. The only unexpected thing Roy heard was a single set of footsteps climbing up the stairs before the rest of the group drifted into the kitchen.

For some reason, Sirius glanced at Roy and smirked. Roy sent him a questioning look, but had his answer almost immediately.

“Oh, hello, Roy,” Molly greeted him with a smile, and as one all of the four Weasley children
turned to look at him. From their dismayed expressions, it was clear Sirius hadn’t bothered to tell them Roy was going to spend the holidays here.

“Ooops, I forgot,” Sirius said suddenly with a most unrepentant grin. “I’d already invited Roy over for the holidays. I hope you kids don’t mind having a professor around.”

Harry Potter was hiding. Roy had suspected as much from his absence at dinner yesterday and the worried looks his friends exchanged from time to time, but it was confirmed when he didn’t show up for breakfast the following morning. Sirius had told Roy that Harry had been concerned about his dream yesterday, something that was understandable. Roy thought to give him some hours before convincing Sirius to go talk to him if nobody else did anything about it.

For now, though, Roy found himself immersed in the bizarre experience of decorating the house for Christmas and listening to some equally bizarre seasonal songs. Pretending he knew what he was doing proved to be easier than he had feared, given that everyone’s definition of decorating seemed to be ‘put everything wherever you want’. Roy suspected he should feel grateful that he couldn’t see all of the colours, even if the giant blue tree taking up one end of the kitchen was disturbing to look at.

There was no trace of Potter at lunch, but Fawkes arrived with the news that Hermione would be here later today. If Hermione Granger could be counted on for something, that was being thorough and persistent, and Roy doubted she would let Potter brood for long once she was here.

Potter joined them for dinner that night, no trace of sulkiness on his face, proving Roy’s theory.

Christmas morning started brightly for Harry, with his pile of presents and Ron on the other bed to chat with as they opened them. Things soured a little when Fred and George apparated, unannounced as usual, in the middle of the room to warn them not to head downstairs yet. Mrs. Weasley was crying in the kitchen because Percy had returned his gift unopened. They started talking, trying to make some time to let things calm down, but were interrupted by a yell outside.

“Mustang, you bastard!” it was Sirius, and Harry was on his feet and rushing to the door before he realised there had been a laugh in Sirius’ words. He heard Sirius stomp down the stairs, looked back at the others, and the next thing he knew the four of them were creeping down the stairs attempting to go unnoticed.

They stopped on the steps above the landing of the first floor, where they didn’t have a great sight but could hear Sirius perfectly. Mustang had clearly come out of the drawing room, because their voices reached the group without any distortion.

“First you refuse to eat my food, and then you do this?” Sirius demanded, and from his voice Harry
could imagine some exaggerated theatrics not unlike what Fred and George liked to do.

“I figured it could help you. If you’re failing with the theory, there’s nothing like an easy guide to work through it. It’s certainly more useful than this.”

Whatever ‘this’ was, Sirius burst out laughing.

“Oh, come on, your girlfriend will love it!”

“Do you really think I need something like this to impress a woman?” Mustang asked, his voice the same he used whenever he was addressing a student who’d done or said something he found stupid.

“Who knows,” Sirius said in a sing-song voice. Then his head appeared and Harry and the others moved further up the stairs. Fortunately, Sirius was facing downstairs. “Oi, Moony! Look at this! Can you believe he did this to me?”

All in all, Christmas was a pleasant experience for Roy. Grimmauld Place was free of the underlying tension that had taken over Hogwarts for most of December, the spirits high due to Arthur’s recovery.

Roy dedicated a handful of hours each day to mark the exams, so that the letters with the results could be sent before New Year’s Eve. Given how antsy Hermione became every time he mentioned he had to work, Roy took pity on her and told her she had passed as soon as her exam was marked. In fact, all six students currently in the house had passed, even if Ron had barely managed it. It was something Roy was charitable enough not to mention in Molly’s hearing range.

His classes, however, had shrunk in number of students once more.

The only incident, if it could be called such, happened when Snape dropped by to tell Harry about the Occlumency lessons that Albus had mentioned to Roy. It soon became clear that Snape and Sirius’ animosity — the one Roy had noticed the night of the third task — ran deeper than he had first suspected, but the only thing Sirius said on the matter was that he knew Snape was still a Death Eater despite whatever Albus believed. Roy had his doubts. Albus was a sharp man and did not easily place his trust in others. However, Roy knew when a conversation wouldn’t take him anywhere and left the issue be. Sirius asked him to keep a close eye on Snape and Harry, and Roy agreed. Despite disagreeing with Sirius’ main reasoning, he’d heard plenty of stories around Hogwarts. There was no harm in keeping track of one more development. By now he was aware that there was no love lost between Snape and Harry as well.

Arthur was released from the hospital on that same day, the last one of the holidays for the children, though Roy would have to return to the school that evening. He waited to leave until after dinner at Molly’s insistence.
The first day of classes, a Monday, passed with little fuss. Most students dragged their feet around, clearly mourning the loss of their holidays, but there were no incidents of note. His seventh year students, however, seemed very surprised to learn that Fred and George Weasley remained in his class after the exam.

The calm lasted until that night, when Fawkes showed up in his room with a short note telling Roy to hold onto Fawkes’ tail. Roy did, and suddenly he found himself in Albus’ office. He barely thought about having teleported through a bird, because Albus was standing behind his desk with one of the grimmest expressions Roy had seen on his face up to date.

“What happened?”

“As I am sure you know, Harry had his first occlumency lesson today,” Albus started, voice grave. Roy nodded. “Towards the end of it, Severus discovered that Harry has been experiencing recurring dreams about the Department of Mysteries for months now. Harry hadn’t realised what the dreams were about until then, it appears, and asked Severus about it. I’m afraid this proves Harry’s connection to Tom runs deeper than I feared.”

Roy frowned, disregarding Albus’ last sentence. So Harry knew about the Department of Mysteries now, and he and his friends had already learnt some pieces of information of what was happening back in the summer (Roy had heard plenty of rants about the infamous Extendable Ears incidents, and Sirius had told him he’d answered some of Harry’s questions as well).

“Perhaps you should tell him about the prophecy,” Roy suggested, and elaborated before Albus could object. “Riddle already knows about it anyway, and Harry isn’t likely to ignore this. He’s made it clear he wants to know what is happening, and if you don’t give him any answers then he’ll look for them himself.” What Roy had also learnt about was Harry’s track record of getting himself in trouble; Sirius was very proud of some of Harry’s so-called adventures.

Much to Roy’s frustration, Albus shook his head.

“It would be too dangerous for Harry to learn the contents of the prophecy. If Tom realises that Harry knows, he could actively try to use that connection to learn them.”

Roy opened his mouth, a retort about how the very vague contents of the prophecy weren’t vital enough to take this risk, when a streak of light entered the room and took the form of a patronus lynx.

“Azkaban has been attacked. The dementors have joined Him. Ten Death Eaters escaped,” said the patronus in Kingsley Shacklebolt’s voice before it vanished.

Albus’ face darkened further, his brows furrowing in a mix of frustration and what might be anger. He had warned Fudge about the danger the dementors posed, after all.

“All bets are off now, aren’t they?” Roy said, drawing Albus’ attention back to himself. Roy turned to look out one of the many windows in the office. Releasing his followers had been one of Riddle’s main objectives before starting an open war. He might or he might not wait to know the full prophecy before taking that step. “Any theories on who these ten Death Eaters might be?”

“Unfortunately, I am certain I can guess at least some of them. We’ll undoubtedly have confirmation tomorrow. Fudge can’t hope to hide something of this magnitude from the citizens.”
Indeed, the following morning’s *Daily Prophet* announced the breakout on the front page in large font, the article accompanied by the pictures of the ten fugitives. It, unsurprisingly, placed the blame of the breakout on Sirius, a convenient scapegoat to deny Riddle’s return. But Roy focused on the escaped Death Eaters, trying to place them from the stories he had heard about the previous war. Most of the names stood out to him as members of what Moody had called Riddle’s inner circle, responsible for many of the losses the first Order of the Phoenix had suffered.

The scales had finally tipped to one side, and Roy didn’t expect this cold stage of the war to last much longer.

He looked up from his newspaper to see the reactions around the Great Hall. Grim faces took up the whole staff table. Albus was talking hurriedly to Minerva, most others were either reading the news avidly or frowning down at their plates, and even Umbridge looked in a dark mood instead of the usual attentive malice she directed at the room. From her face alone, it was clear this incident had shaken the Ministry more than Fudge’s statement to the press suggested.

The students, however, were a different story. Most of them looked oblivious to the news, chatting animatedly amongst themselves, though some had their heads buried in a newspaper or were talking over it with worried or scared expressions. Hermione and her friends were amongst the latter group, and Roy wouldn’t be surprised if the intensity of the lessons in the defence club increased as a consequence. He certainly intended to hint at the suggestion as soon as he had a chance.

Suddenly, Hermione raised her head and met Roy’s eyes. There was a request in her gaze.

“Professor Mustang!” Hermione called out during the first break of the day, hurrying along the hallway when she spotted him. Some heads from the students walking through the area turned to her, which was good, because the last thing Hermione wanted was for someone to think Professor Mustang was doing something that would attract Umbridge’s attention.

She had the perfect way to prevent it.

Professor Mustang paused and turned around to face her, an eyebrow quirked.

“Yes, Miss Granger?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir, but I was wondering if you had a moment before the next period? I have a couple of questions about my exam results, and it’d help me study better for the next class to have the answers before then,” Hermione asked, making sure to sound as eagerly excited as she did whenever she approached a professor to ask extra questions out of class.

She saw a Hufflepuff snort behind Professor Mustang and knew she had managed it.
“Certainly. Who am I to discourage enthusiastic learning?” Professor Mustang replied, his lips pulling into a pleasant smile. Someone sighed wishfully behind Hermione. “Come along, Miss Granger. I have the exams in the classroom.”

Hermione followed him, and asked a question about the many issues that could arise from transmuting any metal with oxygen if done incorrectly, which Professor Mustang had once mentioned in passing during class. She saw more than one person roll their eyes as they walked by. Excuse or not, the response was fascinating.

Once inside the classroom, Professor Mustang closed the door, threw a short barrage of spells at it and turned to Hermione.

“I assume this meeting is about more than your worry about perfect marks. What is it?” he asked, walking over to his desk and leaning his back against it.

“Have you read the newspaper?” Hermione asked, dropping the ‘sir’ because, technically speaking, they would be on first name basis if not for his position as a professor.

“You know I have. What’s bothering you enough to risk a meeting under our beloved High Inquisitor’s nose?”

Hermione bit back a snort at the way Professor Mustang said the title and focused on the topic at hand.

“I’ve been thinking… With this breakout, people are bound to —finally— start being more critical of the Ministry. It’s a matter of time before Fudge’s lies stop working, and this would be the perfect chance to have Harry’s story from what happened at the cemetery published. In an interview.”

A calculating look took over Professor Mustang’s face.

“I assume you have a publication in mind, given that the Daily Prophet would never agree to release such an interview.”

Hermione shrugged. It wasn’t ideal, but it was better than nothing.

“Luna Lovegood’s father runs a magazine. It’s not the most serious magazine in the world,” there went an understatement, “but it’s the best option we have. I’m sure they’ll agree to publish it.”

“Well, in that case, I have no issue with you contacting our dear Miss Skeeter, provided that she holds to her end of our deal. Let me know when you’ve sent your letter so I can send one of my own confirming that I agree to let her write this interview.”

Hermione grinned.

That day, the main topic of conversation was the fact that Hagrid had finally been put on probation. Roy was actually surprised it had taken Umbridge so long to do it, given the stories he had heard about her inspections of Hagrid’s classes.
As the days passed, however, the story of the escaped Death Eaters began to spread through the school, until it took over any other subject that could have drawn the students’ attention, and with the news, the rumour mill began to work madly. In Roy’s not-so-humble opinion, Umbridge had contributed to this development with her latest educational decree. The day after the breakout was announced, Educational Decree Number Twenty-six had appeared on every notice board in the school, announcing that henceforth professors were banned from giving students any information that wasn’t strictly related to the subject they taught. This, as was expected, drew a healthy dose of curiosity, as there was no reason for such a decree unless Umbridge feared the spread of specific information.

It hadn’t taken long for students to put two and two together, and with this realisation came the seeds of doubt over the official version of events the *Prophet* and the Ministry insisted on spreading both over the breakout and over what had transpired during the third task of last year’s tournament.

Many members of staff made a point of being seen huddled in small groups by the students, talking to each other about the things that weren’t safe to say in the staff room anymore, which only fostered the doubt and suspicion amongst the student population. Roy, as much as he wanted to contribute to this development, decided to stay back and do nothing to draw attention to himself: his status as the only member of the Order and one of the few professors who wasn’t subject to Umbridge’s suspicion was too valuable to sacrifice yet.

So, instead, Roy used what little free time he had to work on the development of the array to separate a soul from solid matter, a process that wasn’t advancing as quickly as he would like because of the amount of time he had to spend monitoring the many events that took place at the school.

Besides, he had already added his two cenz with the letter he had sent Rita Skeeter in which he strongly recommended she accepted the interview with Harry Potter as a show of goodwill and improvement on her part.

As part of Roy’s show of distance with those Umbridge considered dangerous, he made a point of appearing focused on his classes whenever he was in the staff room. The students who had passed the exam had finally started working on small transmutations (though, much to general despair, that hadn’t freed them from theoretical lessons, even if now the exams were every month instead of every week). So far they were doing little more than grow frustrated at their failed attempts to accomplish transmutations Roy had been able to do shortly after he got his hands on his first alchemy book. It was a detail he was kind enough to omit.

He took these first lessons as an opportunity to prove his previous insistence on understanding the concepts instead of simply memorising them, and revealed that this was the difficult part of the subject. He lost some students during the month of January, as they grew discouraged by their lack of progress through several classes. Eventually, it was to the point where most of his groups were small enough to be considered nearly private lessons. This allowed Roy to focus more attention on each student.

By the fourth week, when he guessed everyone who would drop out after the exam had already
done so, Roy made an announcement.

“As of right now, and until the end of the school year, each of you will start on a project. You may have noticed the untouched cabinet in the classroom. Inside is a collection of materials. Each of you will choose two of them, and over the upcoming months you will start to develop your own transmutation circles to work with them. Whatever you create is up to you, but the resulting array and transmuted object will be three quarters of your final grade. I am willing to answer questions outside of class and help you reach your own conclusions and answers, but I will not give them to you. First of all, you will have to identify the materials, as they are not labelled. I believe by now you all understand the importance of knowing exactly what you are working with.”

All in all, most of the changes stayed under the surface for now. Riddle hadn’t made a move, and from Snape’s reports it appeared he intended to get his hands on the prophecy before revealing his return to the world. The Order kept tabs on known Death Eaters, but they no longer had a member watching the entrance to the Department of Mysteries after Arthur’s near death experience. Umbridge slowly closed her fist over Hogwarts, terrorising both Hagrid and Trelawney with her inspections of each of their classes and stalking the halls, handing out detentions for the smallest of infractions, attempting to squash any opposition. Most students tried to keep their heads low and stay out of the way, but some made their distaste and disregard for Umbridge’s authority clear. Roy wondered how long it would take for the opposition to gain force.

And like that, with tension slowly building but nothing changing to the outer eye, the fourteenth of February arrived and with it came the interview Hermione had scheduled with Rita Skeeter.

Roy had manoeuvred his hallway patrols and school duties to ensure he had the day free, and he headed out to Hogsmeade early in the morning under the disguise of running some errands before he stopped at the Three Broomsticks for lunch, where he settled on a very visible table to make sure Skeeter didn’t forget any part of their deal.

Surprisingly, Harry was the first one to arrive. Roy had heard through the grapevine that he had a date today, and from his expression things didn’t seem to have gone very well. Roy entertained himself with the idle thought of slipping that ridiculous book Sirius had given him into Harry’s bag. Harry fought his way to a corner table where Hagrid was moping over a large tankard and sat with him, partaking in what looked to be a very uncomfortable conversation before Hagrid left. The pressure was clearly getting to Hagrid, and it was an open secret that it was a matter of time —little time— before Umbridge sacked someone. And Hagrid was at the top of the list.

While this conversation took place, Hermione entered the Three Broomsticks accompanied by Luna Lovegood and Rita Skeeter, and waved Harry over as soon as Hagrid left. While Harry walked to them, Roy raised his butterbeer at Skeeter in a mockery of a polite greeting, then sat back and watched the events unfold.

Now it was just a matter of waiting until the next edition of the *Quibbler* was released to see how the Ministry, the Hogwarts students and the wizarding society in general would react to the truth.
It took a little over a week for the interview to be published. On the previous weekend there was
another annoying quidditch match, but by now Roy’s students knew he wouldn’t accept any
nonsense in his classes. Anyway, the tension preceding this match was nothing compared to the
previous one.

Finally, the second Monday after the Hogsmeade weekend, the March edition of the *Quibbler* was
released. Roy wasn’t officially subscribed to it, though he had asked Fred and George Weasley to
slip him a copy as soon as it came out under the pretence of revising their progress with their
alchemy projects. Thus he knew he would have a copy of it after his seventh year’s class when he
saw Luna Lovegood with her head buried in the magazine before she stood up and walked over to
the Gryffindor table.

As for Harry… well, he was surrounded by owls, and Roy watched as Hermione pointed him to
one in particular that turned out to be the owl bringing him a copy of the *Quibbler*. The rest, then,
must be carrying letters from people who had read the interview, and their presence had drawn the
attention of many people around the Great Hall. Roy pretended to focus on his breakfast, but kept
an eye on the Gryffindor table the entire time, and thus saw the exact moment Umbridge noticed
the ruckus and approached them.

He watched as Harry threw his copy of the *Quibbler* at her, saw Umbridge’s face go through a
myriad of emotions ranging from incredulity to pure rage, and then her lips move as she no doubt
issued some form of punishment.

Hours later, Umbridge did the best thing she could have ever done to ensure that every single
person in Hogwarts read the *Quibbler*: she banned it under threat of expulsion if anyone was found
in possession of the magazine.

In the privacy of his class, while reading his lesson for the seventh years, Roy shook his head. For
all her ambition and obvious cunning, Umbridge had too much pride, too much certainty in her
power and status, and that would be her downfall.

Roy expected the entire student body would have read the interview by the end of the day, if not
earlier. Magic made contraband and subterfuge so much easier when there were people willing to
put in the effort.

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Roy was taking a stroll through the hallways that were still full of students as there was still some
time left before curfew.

After a particularly frustrating hour in which he had been forced to discard all of his work on the
array so far, Roy had decided that he needed to just *move*, stretch his legs and walk around without
any real purpose, let his mind wander away from worries of fragmented souls, war and disturbing
politics at what was meant to be a peaceful school.

As he wandered, the school drew his attention, but in the simplest way it could. In his mind there
was no Umbridge, no politicians attempting to take over, no professors in danger of losing their position; no, he only saw the school, as he thought it might be during peaceful times. Students roaming the halls, no wariness or worry on their faces, just the stress of exams and classwork. House rivalries probably weren’t as pronounced during peace times, a topic that, when Roy thought about it, made him snort. He had heard plenty of speeches and muttered comments about the purported evilness of all Slytherins. Sirius in particular, amongst the members of the Order, held a real grudge against that house. Yet Roy was convinced, were the Sorting Hat to somehow bypass whatever barriers Truth had placed in his mind, that he would be sorted into Slytherin. His life now, his life since Ishval, was too full of intrigue and subterfuge for any other house to fit him better —though whether or not Roy classified as evil was up for debate, depending on whether the Sorting Hat focused more on past deeds or intentions for the future. And yet Roy was certain his eleven-year-old self would have been sorted into Ravenclaw in a heartbeat. He had been starved for knowledge at that age.

Roy found the entire house system in general to be an obsolete and terrible idea. He was yet to meet a person whose personality traits only qualified them for one of the four houses and dividing children like that while letting stereotypes of the houses fester amongst them was a recipe for disaster.

But he wasn’t thinking about disasters and their potential ramifications now. No, he was thinking about light topics. Riza would be a Hufflepuff, her loyalty so strong that it would probably eclipse even her intelligence in the hat’s judgement. The entirety of his team, Roy thought, would fit wonderfully into Hufflepuff, though most of them would also make good Ravenclaws. Except for Havoc. Havoc had enough recklessness in him to make an excellent Gryffindor.

Edward would either be in Gryffindor or become the strangest, most conflictive Ravenclaw in the history of Hogwarts. He’d probably pick a fight with Peeves the moment Peeves pulled one of his pranks on him.

Roy was walking through a second floor corridor, entertaining the mental image of Argus Filch close to a stroke due to an extremely inventive and destructive Elric-brand spell when he heard the first screams.

Chapter End Notes

I have switched around the Christmas decorations a little. Originally, the tree was at the drawing room, but as Roy took over it as his bedroom, they placed it in the kitchen instead. Also, the house was in a much cleaner state in this story than it was in canon (they had to clean all over again as they decorated for Christmas), which also helped.

From now on expect updates to be scarce. I spend a lot of time attempting to study and have one of those life-changing exams around late February (when it was meant to be in SUMMER), so my free time will be greatly reduced for quite a while.

You can keep track of how things are going on tumblr :)


Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Finally, chapter 16 is here. I intended to post it tomorrow, but something came up and I doubt I’ll have much free time until Sunday, so I’m leaving it here earlier.

As always, thanks a lot to Lindril for beta reading this mess :)

I hope you guys enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Roy rushed down the hallway and towards the stairs, encountering many students who’d had his same reaction upon hearing the screams. As the screams continued, Roy realized it wasn’t a fight that had caused them. There were no crashes, no loud bangs, nothing that would accompany a fight.

The screams belonged to someone who was wailing desperately.

Sobbing.

The voice was familiar. Roy hadn’t spoken much to Sybill Trelawney during his tenure at Hogwarts, being of the opinion that Divination was nothing but a load of nonsense, and yet he had the certainty that the voice belonged to her even before he made it down the stairs to the Entrance Hall.

He was sure he knew what scene he would run into even before he could see past the mass of students that had gathered there.

Roy remained a few steps above ground level to be able to see properly over the many heads between him and the scene that had drawn everyone here. The students had settled on a circle around the centre of the Entrance Hall, leaving a certain distance between them and the drama unfolding in the middle of the crowd.

Sybill Trelawney, her wand and a bottle of sherry in hand, stood there, an expression of pure horror and despair on her face as she loudly refused to believe her situation. There were two trunks thrown at her feet, two trunks that Roy was willing to bet she hadn’t brought here herself.

Trelawney’s words were directed towards the bottom of the staircase, and while Roy couldn’t see it from his position, he knew the person standing there, the one Trelawney was practically pleading with, was Dolores Umbridge.

Umbridge sounded delighted when she reiterated, for the entire school to hear, that she was sacking Trelawney here and now. Glancing around, Roy could see the shocked and horrified looks on many students’ faces, some of those people no doubt were now realizing how serious Umbridge’s threat to the school was.

Roy took a few steps up the stairs and walked over to a railing to have a view of Umbridge’s disgustingly smug face. He wanted to take in as many details as he could.
Across the room, Minerva looked ready to draw her wand on Umbridge. Roy wondered if anybody would stop her. He certainly wouldn’t. But, instead of attacking Umbridge, Minerva chose to approach a now sobbing Trelawney and attempt to comfort her.

Fortunately, before things could spiral farther out of control, Albus showed up and assured everyone that Trelawney could remain at the school. After all, her replacement didn’t want her living quarters.

Umbridge didn’t look pleased when Albus reminded her that he still possessed the authority to hire professors. The infamous decree that had saddled the school with Umbridge only covered the eventuality of the Headmaster being unable to find a professor for a subject. Her face was priceless when, immediately afterwards, he introduced the new Divination Professor to the school.

Firenze.

A centaur.

Roy’s jaw didn’t fall, he’d seen and read enough to know of magical creatures and steel his reactions to them.

Roy also knew that Umbridge was as much of a bigot and a racist as they came, and she looked as though she’d swallowed a lemon.

Well played, Albus, Roy thought, even when he knew Umbridge wouldn’t allow this slight to go unpunished.

The atmosphere in the school grew tense as the days passed.

Trelawney’s sacking had given Umbridge’s role in the school an air of reality that it had clearly lacked for many people up until that point. Some students looked wary, as though waiting for further events to unfold. Others could be seen with mutinous looks on their faces on occasion, glaring at Umbridge’s back or muttering to other like-minded students. Others, those who clearly approved of or benefitted from Umbridge’s actions, strutted around the school as though they owned the place. Most children, though, especially amongst the youngest ones, kept their head low and attempted to go unnoticed.

The staff no longer spoke about anything that wasn’t related to their classes in the staff room or at the head table, but many looks were exchanged in quiet moments, and Roy was unsurprised to find himself excluded from whatever planning was going on behind closed doors. Even if the part of him that had organised a coup d’état while under constant surveillance found the exclusion jarring, he was glad to know he was —mostly— amongst people who were willing to respect his apparent desire to remain out of trouble.

These were the kind of people that could be counted on if the worst happened, and Roy wasn’t naïve enough to discard the possibility of said worst happening.

As for his research, Roy was elated to claim that he had finally formed a solid theory on which to base his array. He still had work to do and the actual array to create, of course, but the parts on
isolating souls that had been giving him a headache for months were finally solved, and that was a
great step.

Probably the only good development in a while, all things considered.

The School Board and the Ministry of Magic had Albus swamped in paperwork, no doubt as part of
Umbridge’s retaliation, which meant Albus lacked the time to focus on locating the remaining
horcruxes.

Riddle, according to Snape’s reports, had figured out the way to acquire the prophecy, even if he
hadn’t shared his forming plans with his followers. While the prophecy itself was irrelevant to
Roy, as time passed and he learnt more about the Death Eaters and their modus operandi, he
became more convinced that they would make their return known once that step was over and done
with.

Perhaps if it wasn’t, too.

Ever since Harry’s interview had been released, the public opinion seemed more willing to admit to
the possibility that he was telling the truth about Riddle. Roy had overheard more than one
whispered conversation on the matter amongst the students.

The fact that the escaped Death Eaters were barely ever mentioned in the news hadn’t gone
unnoticed, either.

The building tension came to a head on mid-April.

Roy was dragged out of his work by a summons to all the Hogwarts staff to head to the staff room.
A summons issued by Dolores Umbridge herself.

“This can’t be good,” he muttered. He closed his notebook, activated the sealing arrays that would
make whoever tried to open it feel very sorry about their choices, and went to put on a robe and a
cloak.

Roy was amongst the last people to arrive at the meeting. There, he noticed the incredibly satisfied
expression on Umbridge’s face, Minerva’s tight-lipped frown, the various degrees of confusion and
disconcert of all other members of staff… and Cornelius Fudge’s presence.

Albus was nowhere to be seen.

Nor would he be seen, as it turned out.

Harry’s defence group —Dumbledore’s Army, as it was apparently called— had been found out
tonight. Albus had taken the fall for him, and fled the school to escape arrest after Fudge accused
him of attempting to take over the Ministry (Roy had to hold in a very strong snort at this part). The
story was told in a way meant to paint Albus Dumbledore as a senile, power-hungry wizard with
nothing but his own interests in mind, and the Ministry as the victims who had very nearly
captured him (another repressed snort). It fell short on all accounts, of course, because everybody
present was too loyal to Albus or knew too much about what was truly happening in the world to
believe a single word Fudge spoke.

Hagrid opened his mouth, no doubt to say as much out loud, but no noise came out of him. Roy didn’t miss Snape sliding his wand back up his sleeve, but fortunately neither Umbridge nor Fudge seemed to have noticed anything.

Unfortunately, the damage couldn’t be undone.

Fudge proudly named Umbridge as the new Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, to no one’s surprise.

A little more surprising was Umbridge’s first decision as Headmistress. She didn’t fire Hagrid, or Firenze. Roy had been expecting one of those. Instead, she announced the formation of a student group that she called the Inquisitorial Squad. Their job would be, in her words, ‘to watch over the rest of the students and prevent any further unfortunate incidents such as what happened today’.

Poorly disguised horror, clenched fists and hisses greeted her words. Umbridge simply smiled smugly and pretended she hadn’t noticed the reactions.

As for Roy, he put on a serious effort to blink in confusion, as though he still hadn’t fully processed everything that had been announced tonight. As though he hadn’t figured out the implications of creating a student police to lord over everyone else in the school.

There was a note on his pillow when he returned to his quarters. It was short, to the point, and in Albus’ handwriting.

*I’ll look for the locations and will try to draw Tom out.*

*If anything happens with your research, send a patronus.*

*Watch your back and stay low.*

‘Stay low’… Roy wondered about that. He had, for now, managed to do it with relative ease, but they had moved to an entirely new playing field now.

He clapped his hands and disintegrated the note, then went back to his work.

He wouldn’t be getting any sleep tonight.

The next morning dawned with the news of Albus having been replaced by Umbridge as head of Hogwarts for the rest of the school. Curiously enough, the entire school also happened to know the circumstances of Albus’ escape, up to and including the fact that Fudge had been there. Roy was
certain Umbridge had the portraits of the former headmasters and headmistresses to thank for the quick spread of the news.

The whispered exaggerated stories students shared when they thought they were safe were the highlight of Roy’s day, especially when the news came out that Umbridge hadn’t managed to enter Albus’ office. Roy hadn’t known, but the portraits and ghosts were happy to share the details of the temper tantrum that had followed with anyone who wanted to hear about it.

Hogwarts, as a seventh year Ravenclaw stated in the hallways, didn’t accept Umbridge.

That was bound to limit her power over the school to an extent, at the very least.

By lunch time, it became clear that at least some people were done laying low.

A loud explosion shook the Great Hall while most people were eating lunch. Roy, alongside the entirety of the staff table and many students, jumped to his feet. He had his left hand ready to clap and his wand on his right hand before he was fully on his feet, but forced himself not to take off running. Instead, he looked to Minerva, who shouted for the students to stay where they were before she marched down from the staff table and towards the large doors, followed by everyone at the table.

They hadn’t made it there by the time the first group of panicked students ran in.

Minerva was in the process of calming them enough to get a coherent story out of them when the story arrived on its own.

A massive, sparkly and very colourful dragon flew into the Great Hall above their heads. A dragon that by all accounts and purposes was made out of fireworks.

Roy relaxed his left hand.

He had a hunch this wasn’t an attack.

The fireworks couldn’t be stunned to stop, and they multiplied by ten if someone attempted to vanish them. Umbridge was running herself ragged trying to deal with them on her own. As Filius Flitwick had cleverly pointed out before she reached the Great Hall after the initial outburst, dealing with these fireworks might not be something the staff was allowed to do anymore, and they couldn’t possibly want to give their new Headmistress more work by acting outside of their roles. So nobody offered help when they saw Umbridge attempt to get rid of one of the fireworks, and of course she wouldn’t ask for it.

By the time the afternoon classes were to begin, the school was overrun by all manners of sparkly monstrosities.

Roy made a point of casting vanishing charms whenever he came across one of them on his own, and the portraits were more than helpful in pointing out where they knew more fireworks to be.

He didn’t pay Fred and George Weasley any extra attention during that afternoon seventh year
class, but he placed a carefully-hidden piece of parchment on top of Fred’s notes for his project while he was checking his progress.

_I want a crate of those._

Fred gave him a thumbs up, hidden by Roy’s own arm.

When he checked George’s project, there was a small slip of parchment with a price scrawled on it on top. From the low number, Roy knew he was getting a considerable discount.

_A few days. We’re out_, the parchment read below the number, and Roy bit back a smirk.

Yes, the castle was certainly full enough of loose fireworks to have used up an entire stack.

On Tuesday morning there were still some fireworks left, and Roy made sure of showering them with vanishing charms on his way up to the owlery.

It was no secret that Umbridge was monitoring all the mail coming in and out of the school now. She had let the entire staff know that reading the letters was one of the tasks of her Inquisitorial Squad on the night she was appointed, and said Squad had spent all of yesterday gloating about it to the other students. Roy was glad for his insistence on perfecting his code with Tonks for their communications.

There was no doubt that the Order already knew of Albus’ departure, and it changed the situation considerably. They needed to decide what to do now — probably nothing new; they idolised Albus too much to go against his plans — and Roy had to share the information of what was happening at Hogwarts. He wouldn’t put it past Umbridge to bring in Aurors again at some point, and he’d rather an Order member was amongst them if at all possible.

He tied the letter to the leg of a waiting owl, whispered the recipient to it, and let her out the window.

Pansy Parkinson let out a dreamy sigh as she read, leaning forward on her desk in the classroom they’d claimed as the Inquisitorial Squad’s Headquarters.

“What is it?” Draco asked from his own table. He had a pile of letters before him, and he’d been laughing a while about how the firsties were whining to their parents about the new order. Some of those letters wouldn’t leave this room, and Pansy knew the students who’d written them were in for a nasty detention or two.

“Professor Mustang is so dreamy…” she said, rereading the letter. Pansy would give anything to have a man so in love with her. And it was Mustang.
Millicent made grabby fingers at her and Pansy passed the letter over.

“He *cooks?*” Millicent asked, surprised. She scrunched up her nose. “That’s *house-elf work.*”

Warrington snorted.

“Like that guy has money for a house elf. He’s a *professor.* And I’ve never heard of a Mustang before.”

That was a point of contention in the Slytherin common room, especially amongst the children of the Death Eaters. Their Lord was interested in Professor Mustang, they’d all been told as much even before the school year began, which meant he was worth something big. Some of them, though, couldn’t see what it was.

“You wouldn’t say that about Professor Snape,” Millicent snapped, and Warrington glared at her before going back to his own letters.

“Does it say anything suspicious?” Draco asked Pansy.

She shook her head.

“No. He’s just planned a date for this weekend.”

Draco frowned.

“Mother and Father saw him with his girlfriend a few months ago. They didn’t recognise her.”

“You mean she’s a *mudblood*?” Millicent asked, surprised and disgusted.

Pansy understood it. Mustang was very good at staying calm, but he had too much poise to associate with that ilk.

“She could be a foreigner like him, too,” she offered. It made much more sense in her opinion. “Father tells me they haven’t had much time to investigate where Mustang is from.” It was part of why they were keeping an eye on him. “I think he must be from a pureblood family from far away. Wouldn’t that be great? We could make allies abroad. Like Grindelwald did in the continent, but better!”

Moody spent a good five minutes grumbling after Roy was done explaining Umbridge’s most recent changes. The Order had known of some through the information their members in the Ministry had gathered, but a firsthand account was always more shocking.

The most worrying part, in Roy’s opinion, was the future new decree Filch liked to go on about, one that would allow him to actually *torture* the students as punishment for misbehaviour. If that decree came to be, Roy was officially done with laying low. He wouldn’t wait for Riddle’s curse to take care of Umbridge before the end of the year in that scenario. In fact, by now Roy was certain that Filch had to go as well. Someone who took so much delight at the prospect of hurting children had no place in a school, and he intended to have that conversation with Albus as soon as Albus was back in charge of Hogwarts. Roy he wasn’t taking a no for an answer. Filch had been going on
about different types of whips and their advantages on Thursday.

He kept these thoughts to himself, as he didn’t feel like explaining how he could deal with Umbridge if things came down to it.

Meanwhile, Sirius was laughing, delighted by the tale of Fred and George’s fireworks.

“Oh, before I forget… Sirius,” Roy said, and held out an envelope to him. “Harry gave me this for you. He said it’s important.”

“They didn’t search you before you left the castle?” Tonks asked, voice only half-joking, and Roy grimaced at the mental image.

“Fortunately, Umbridge hasn’t thought of that yet. With my luck, she’d want to do it herself.”

Sirius burst out laughing again, and this time Tonks joined him. Even Moody looked amused by the thought.

“I can’t believe you’ve managed to lead her on for so long,” Moody said gruffly, sounding somewhat impressed—for him, anyway.

Roy shrugged.

“She thinks I don’t understand enough of politics to have an opinion.” And other things. “Besides, I’m just at Hogwarts because it pays well and has an amazing library, don’t forget that,” Roy added with a grin, and Moody snorted.

Roy was certain that Moody suspected Roy was a better fighter than he let on, but he wasn’t going to give him any answers. There was no reason for Moody to believe Roy was hiding anything deliberately; after all, Roy hadn’t been in any battles yet.

Sirius didn’t come down to the kitchen for dinner, and he didn’t show up for breakfast the following day either.

Worried—the last thing they needed now was for Sirius to get into a mood because he felt useless and trapped—Roy tracked him down. It wasn’t hard; Sirius liked to hide in Buckbeak’s room, and that was where Roy found him.

Still dressed in yesterday’s clothes, arms crossed over his knees and Harry’s letter on the floor before him. If glares could set things on fire, the letter would be a pile of ash.

“I find it hard to believe Harry could put you in such a bad mood,” Roy said, closing the door behind him.

“It’s Snivellus’ fault,” Sirius growled, his glare at the letter intensifying.

Roy raised his eyebrows. That was the same nickname Sirius had used on Snape during the Christmas holidays.
“Professor Snape? What did he do?” he asked, uncertain. Roy hadn’t heard of any incidents between Snape and Harry lately, and he suspected anything big enough to elicit this reaction from Sirius would have spread throughout the school in a matter of hours. Roy approached and lowered himself to one knee across from Sirius. “May I?” he asked, gesturing to the letter.

Sirius shrugged.

Roy picked the surprisingly long piece of parchment up and began to read. Harry had peered into Snape’s pensieve during his last occlumency lesson —Roy grimaced— and seen something that had disturbed him greatly. It disturbed Roy, too, as he read Harry’s account of the memory.

“‘He exists’?” he asked, quoting James Potter’s reasoning for attacking Snape in the memory Harry had witnessed.

Sirius frowned.

“We hated each other’s guts. From the very first time; Snape hated us, and we hated him. The greasy git was jealous of James—“

“This doesn’t sound like jealousy,” Roy said, cutting off what he knew to be an excuse. He raised the letter. “And even if he’d been… This is disproportionate, and unprovoked. I’m not surprised Harry feels ashamed of his father.”

Roy put the letter back down, and ignored the glare Sirius threw at him.

“James was a good person! We were just kids, it was a prank!”

Roy looked Sirius up and down for a moment; his hunched back, the arms wrapped around his knees, the frown on his face and the defiant glint in his eyes.

“A prank would have been turning Snape’s notes into a snake. This?” Roy gestured at the letter. “This was humiliation. Cruelty. And from the way Harry describes the scene I can bet it wasn’t the first time you did something like this.”

Roy kept his eyes on Sirius’ own, trying to convey how serious he was. Students behaving in such a way when he’d been a kid was why Roy had gotten into so many fights as a child and as a teenager. Soldiers acting this way was the main reason he demoted those under his command.

Sirius was a good person, Roy believed as much, but this? This was wrong on so many levels that Roy didn’t even know how to tackle it.

“He deserved it,” Sirius hissed. “He was a little greasy berk with his nose always buried in a Dark Arts book. He’s a Death Eater.”

And there was the hatred Roy had seen first on the night of the third task and later during the holidays.

“People can change, Sirius. He’s a spy for the Order, now,” Roy said, even though he knew Sirius’ thoughts on the matter.

Predictably, Sirius snorted.

“Yeah, like I’ll believe that bullshit.”

“I do.”
Sirius jerked in place, an aborted motion to stand or approach Roy.

“You believe Snivellus has changed? You didn’t even know him before!”

Roy rolled his eyes.

“No, I didn’t. But I know that Albus Dumbledore is a very perceptive and resourceful man. Lying to him or getting half-truths past him is incredibly difficult.” Just look at Roy’s first meeting with Albus. “I may not know Severus Snape, but I know Albus Dumbledore well enough to realise that he must have a good reason to trust Snape, even if he’s chosen to keep that reason to himself.”

Sirius shook his head and sighed.

“You’re too naïve, Roy. People don’t change. Not like that,” he said, his voice that of someone imparting great wisdom.

It hit Roy like a punch to the gut.

At some point, between Order meetings, strange sleepovers and spell training, Roy had come to think of Sirius Black as a friend in this world. And now he was left with a difficult choice. He could nod and drop the matter, let Sirius keep thinking like that, or he could say something potentially very foolish in an attempt to make him think.

Roy stood up. Sirius followed him with his gaze, eye contact never breaking.

“That’s where we disagree, Sirius. People may not be able to atone for their sins, but they can change. I need to believe that, or I wouldn’t be able to get out of bed in the morning.”

Sirius frowned, confusion plain on his face.

“What do you mean?”

Roy smiled. He didn’t need to be able to see his face to know which smile it was. He’d seen it so often on others’ faces —Riza, Edward, Maes…— that he knew what he looked like right now.

As though happiness was an alien concept to him.

“I’m just saying we all carry sins. Some are simply heavier than others. Trying to atone for them doesn’t mean they never happened.”

And without another word, without waiting for Sirius to snap out of his confused state, Roy turned around and exited the room.

He excused himself with the Order members downstairs, claiming he had a pile of unmarked tests waiting for him at Hogwarts, and left Grimmauld Place.

He flooed to the Hog’s Head, where he asked Aberforth to serve him the strongest shit he had at the bar. Aberforth took a look at Roy, grunted, and told him to take the bottle to the cot in the back room.

He claimed he didn’t want maudlin professors annoying his patrons.
Roy returned to Hogwarts on Sunday morning, as had been his original plan. Instead of coming back from Headquarters through his usual route, however, he dragged himself out of Aberforth’s spare cot with a splitting headache.

Aberforth was less than impressed when Roy walked into the main bar, now closed to the public. He threw Roy a rag that Roy caught only due to many years of training.

“I heard you can’t apparate. That’ll take you before the Hogwarts gates in five seconds.”

Five seconds that must be up, because Roy hadn’t processed the words and he was being pulled through the navel into a very unpleasant trip through a magical tube pipe. He fell to his knees mere feet outside of the Hogwarts gates and retched, dry heaving for a good minute or two before the world stopped spinning around him.

Once he was done having his insides trying to escape through his mouth, Roy drew himself to a kneeling position, a hand covering overly-sensitive eyes. He parted two fingers, squinted at the innocent looking rag and closed his eyes. He clapped his hands and set the thing on fire with extreme prejudice.

He dragged himself to his feet and moved to the gates. These, fortunately for his muddled brain, opened on their own for one of the school’s professors. He walked across the grounds, slowly coming awake thanks to the still-too-chilly air of the late April morning. By the time he made it to the castle doors Roy was capable of putting on a calm mask that covered up the fact he wanted to crawl into bed and stay there for a month.

Whatever Aberforth had given him had been strong. Roy belatedly realised that he hadn’t paid for the bottle, nor had Aberforth asked him to.

He had more pressing issues in mind than free killer booze, though.

There had been one part of Harry’s letter that he hadn’t talked about with Sirius (probably for the best, all things considered) but that he had to deal with. On his own, now that Albus was gone.

Biting back a sigh at the delightful experience ahead of him, Roy walked into the castle. He welcomed the diminished light, and the growing darkness was the only positive aspect of walking down into the dungeons. He hadn’t been to this part of the castle since his exploration of the school during the summer, but he remembered it well enough to find Severus Snape’s office with little trouble. He didn’t cross paths with anyone on the way down, but he’d come up with an explanation for his presence if anybody asked. This world mixed potions with alchemy often enough that nobody would blink twice if Roy said he had a potions-related doubt in regards to a personal project.

He knocked on the door, and shortly afterwards Professor Snape’s—annoyed—voice told him to come in.

Snape raised his head when the door opened, and he appeared surprised to see Roy standing there.

“Professor Mustang,” he greeted, putting a quill with red ink on the tip aside.

“Professor Snape.” Roy nodded at him. “I was wondering if you could help me with a doubt I have.” He met Snape’s eyes, making sure to convey the message that he didn’t mean some silly school-related issue.
Nodding, Snape gestured for Roy to come in. He did, closed the door behind him, and cast a silencing spell.

Snape raised an eyebrow.

“Has Mr. Potter improved enough to justify cancelling his occlumency lessons?” Roy asked, though he could already guess at the answer.

Snape snarled and stood up. Roy had the impression he wanted to storm out of the room.

“He told you?” Snape hissed, voice low and dangerous.

“Not quite,” Roy replied, showing no outward signs that he had noticed the threat. “He wrote to Sirius about what happened.”

“To share a laugh with his mutt of a godfather, no doubt,” Snape snarled, hatred visible on the very angles of his body. “Did Black show you the letter so you’d join in? You two are quite close, if I remember correctly.”

“No,” Roy said, and he blamed his hangover for the level of authority he put on that single word. He winced internally. That was the voice he used when he wanted to intimidate a fellow soldier or an enemy into silence. There was no way Snape wouldn’t have some thoughts about it once he calmed down.

For now, Snape was surprised enough by the tone to stop his tirade.

“Harry wanted to know why nobody had told him that his father was a jerk. He was pretty shaken up about it.”

Snape’s face then was one of disbelief mixed with that anger from earlier. It was clear he didn’t want to believe Roy, perhaps even couldn’t. Roy wondered how much of Snape’s hatred for Harry was due to James Potter.

“But I’m not here to try to fix a decades’ old feud. I know Harry Potter hasn’t improved to the point where stopping his occlumency lessons would be wise. Given the circumstances, we both know he needs to learn, that’s probably why you even agreed to teach him in the first place given your hatred of him.”

Snape, who by then had covered his emotions with an impressive mask of contempt, shook his head.

“He won’t learn. He doesn’t want to.”

“Oh?” Roy asked.

“He hasn’t practiced even once —I don’t care what he says, it’s easy to tell. He’s too curious about the bloody dreams.”

The dreams. Roy’s blood went cold. Harry was still having dreams of the Department of Mysteries?

How interesting, Roy thought sardonically. Given their one conversation after Roy learned of the dreams, he could just imagine the reasons why Albus had neglected to mention them again. Because if Snape knew, so did Albus.
“I see,” Roy said finally. “I guess we can only watch him then.”

Once again, Snape looked surprised by Roy’s words.

Roy smiled wryly.

“What? I know it’s futile to teach someone who refuses to learn. I won’t press the issue.”

Snape nodded at him, reluctantly, then turned and walked over to one of the many shelves lining his office. Curious, Roy watched as he rummaged until he found a bottle that he then pushed at Roy’s hands.

“What is this?” Roy asked, looking at the clear liquid in it.

“You may be a decent actor, Mustang, but I can tell when someone is too hungover to stand properly. Drink that and skip breakfast. You don’t want to know what’ll happen if you eat after drinking that potion.”

Taking the offered vial as what it was—an acknowledgement that Roy was worth something in Snape’s eyes—Roy nodded one last time and left the office.

He almost felt sorry for the students whose assignments hadn’t been corrected yet. Someone had a very bad mood to get out of his system after this conversation.

Chapter End Notes

When the twins set the fireworks off, Umbridge wasn’t at the Great Hall because she was busy attempting to interrogate Harry about Dumbledore (in canon about Sirius, too, but here the events that led to that suspicion haven’t happened) with (fake) veritaserum that she requested from Snape.

On the letter Harry wrote Sirius about Snape’s memory… originally, that happened in a hurried Floo conversation from Umbridge’s office while Fred and George provided a distraction. It wasn’t very well planned or thought out, so Harry didn’t say much of what he’d been thinking (as written in the book during the scenes leading to it) since seeing the memory. Here he had more time to plan what he’d say, and the letter shows those thoughts. During the floo conversation Sirius was a bit flustered, but he and Remus managed to brush off the magnitude of what was going on with Snape during school so Harry was pacified. I’m taking a closer approach here because that is some serious bullshit that should have been addressed in the books, especially considering that Harry himself was bullied.

Though Roy talking to Snape was entirely Roy’s decision. I hadn’t planned that one, it just… happened.

And I hadn’t intended to address the Marauders until, at least, the summer, but then the letter happened and Roy insisted.

For timeline reasons, Roy had planned a weekend-long “date” started on Friday. The conversation with Sirius takes place Saturday before noon. He spent most of that day getting drunk afterwards until he passed out. Here I’d like to point out that I fully
support the headcanon of Roy being a lightweight, so he didn’t drink even a third of what Aberforth gave him before he was out cold.

Remember that you can find me (and all my writing rambles, news and other stuff) on tumblr :/
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

After reading last chapter, some people were surprised that Fred and George hadn’t left the school. I’d like to point out that the fireworks were their first stunt against Umbridge once they decided they didn’t care about finishing their Hogwarts education anymore. They pulled a few more before the great escape.

There were also some questions about the blood quills and when they came up/started to be used. They’ve been used from the beginning: Umbridge had Harry use one in his first detention, but we never learnt whether or not any members of staff knew about them. Harry refused to tell any adult about it despite Hermione insisting on it. We know more students (like Lee Jordan, who didn’t tell any teacher either as far as we know) were punished with them at some point. Whether other professors know or not (I doubt they could do anything about it when Fudge has the wizarding world in a stranglehold), Roy certainly doesn’t. The downside of playing neutral and appearing harmless is that he is left out of the more “harsh” conversations between other professors, and somewhat sheltered by them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Roy was ravenous the entire morning on Sunday, but he followed Snape’s instructions of skipping breakfast after taking the potion that wiped out his hangover as though it had never been there.

The conversation during lunch, as was common by now, was kept light and to safe topics. The House Heads would be extra busy the upcoming week because the fifth year students had their career counselling meetings. The holidays had been a calm affair, with no trace of the mayhem that everybody knew to trace back to Fred and George Weasley. Everyone was getting ready for the six weeks that remained until the OWLs and NEWTs took place. Many professors had prepared especially hard lessons for these weeks. Roy was pushing his seventh year students to have their projects ready by mid-May, so that they could go over smoothing over any mistakes or adding in some flashier alchemical touches to their small repertoires before their exam.

Monday started out normal enough, but nobody had any hopes that the day would stay calm for too long. In fact, Roy had confirmation of it when Fred and George Weasley managed to stay behind after their class was over without any of their classmates noticing.

“May I help you, gentlemen?” Roy asked.

Fred and George exchanged a glance, then George marched up to Roy’s desk and placed a very tiny, clearly shrunken parcel on it.

“Here, sir. We added in a few extra things,” he said in a low voice. He then grinned. A wide, mischievous grin that Roy had seen far too often on Edward Elric’s face to trust. “By the way, you should head over to Gregory the Smarmy’s corridor, Professor. I hear it’ll be fun in no time.”

And with those ominous words, Fred and George left the classroom.

Roy hummed, pocketed the package as though it wasn’t filled with objects that had already been
banned from the school and others he suspected Umbridge would ban in no time, and charmed his belongings into his bag.

He left the classroom at a leisure pace, by all accounts and purposes taking a random stroll through the hallways as he followed George Weasley’s suggestion and climbed all the way up to the fifth floor. He had no intention of walking into the hallway itself, he was certain whatever Fred and George had planned would outshine the fireworks. And that was precisely the matter. It would be big, and those grins told Roy that this time around they wouldn’t even attempt to make it a covert stunt.

He heard screams long before he was close to the area, and stopped when he heard the stampeding feet that approached from the direction of the hallway. He moved against the wall before the first students passed him by, running, most of them covered in a gooey substance that smelled quite horribly. Peeves zoomed overhead towards the place the students were running from, cackling all the way.

Turning around, Roy hurried through a longer path towards the stairs, one that would make him appear from a different direction. The students were headed there, and no doubt would run all the way down to the Entrance Hall. However the chaos Fred and George had caused ended, it would be there.

Umbridge liked to have an audience.

He was almost to the stairs when he heard more running feet. They were less this time, and headed in the direction of that hallway. Roy ducked into an alcove, casting a quick disillusionment spell over himself just in time for members of the Inquisitorial Squad to pass him by.

Roy gripped his wand tighter.

That group had done nothing but abuse their fellow students since Umbridge had formed it, and he knew they’d take great pleasure in catching Fred and George. And yet, Fred and George had warned him for a reason.

Somehow, Roy had earned himself their respect, and their parting gift —because that was what it was, he realised now, a parting gift— had a clear message: don’t interfere.

Cancelling the spell over himself, Roy took off at a quicker pace and reached the staircase. Surprisingly, it had arranged itself in a perfect path downwards and no sections of it were moving, allowing the students a quick escape.

Roy followed, putting on a worried expression as though he’d been attracted by the commotion, and was joined by Filius halfway to the second floor.

“Any idea what happened?” Roy asked.

Filius shook his head.

They were amongst the first professors to reach the Entrance Hall, and the story of Fred and George turning an entire hallway into a swamp quickly took shape as people added in what they’d witnessed.

Roy saw the horror on many people’s faces, Filius included, when Fred and George themselves practically flew down the stairs, pursued by the members of the Inquisitorial Squad Roy had passed earlier. Wordlessly, the crowd arranged themselves in a circle the same way they had for Trelawney’s sake, against the walls and out of the way. Many people averted their eyes when
Dolores Umbridge pushed her way down the stairs to stand at the very same spot she had last time. She waited patiently until Fred and George were, by all appearances, cornered in the middle of the circle, and it was then that a wheezing and elated Argus Filch began to shove his own way down the stairs, a piece of parchment clutched to his chest.

“So!” Umbridge said. If possible, she sounded even more delighted than last time. “So you think it amusing to turn a school corridor into a swamp, do you?”

“Pretty amusing, yeah,” Fred replied quite flippantly, meeting Umbridge’s eyes unflinchingly. It was then that Filch reached Umbridge.

“I’ve got the form, Headmistress,” he said, sounding as though Christmas had come early. He waved the parchment around. “I’ve got the form and I’ve got the whips waiting… Oh, let me do it now…”

Roy’s stomach sank. Filch couldn’t have the approval for that, not now. Not yet.

Next to Roy, Filius gasped.

Roy readied his hands to clap them discreetly. He would set that form on fire and whatever whips Filch brought if necessary. There would be consequences later, who knew which ones, but he wasn’t going to stand by and do nothing.

He glanced at Fred and George. They didn’t look nervous, as though they had a plan.

They probably did.

“Very good, Argus,” Umbridge said in that sickeningly sweet way of hers. “You two,” she continued, turning to Fred and George, “are about to learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school.”

As Roy had suspected, they weren’t going to learn it.

He expected he would hear of Fred and George’s escape from Hogwarts for quite some time, given the way the students reacted. There was shock when they announced they were done with schooling, breathless anticipation when they summoned their confiscated brooms, and booming applause as they left after promoting their new joke shop.

Roy used the loud cheering as a cover to clap his hands and set the form in Filch’s hand on fire. Nobody, not even Umbridge, paid any attention to Filch’s yelp of pain as he let go of the flaming paper.

Just like with the fireworks, the staff sat back and watched Umbridge and Filch struggle and fail to deal with the swamp. Roy had absentmindedly come up with three different arrays that would remove it in the first week only, and he was certain most teachers knew of at least one way to deal
with it. On those first few days, many people incorporated the fifth floor hallway into their route to watch the duo struggle, until Umbridge gave up and cordoned off the swamp.

On the first night after the by-now-legendary flight, Umbridge had told Roy that she hoped without those two troublemakers the school would be calmer. She couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Inspired by Fred and George, and no doubt aware that as long as Umbridge stayed things would only get worse, the students banded together to make her life as miserable as possible. Whoever was sneaking in the many banned objects from Filch’s list was doing a fantastic job, because all manners of nasty prank objects were plentiful around the school. Many of them stank so badly that people took to using a charm that created a bubble-like helmet around their heads. Roy didn’t know the charm, but was saved from having to look it up and suffer the stink in the meantime by Luna Lovegood, who slipped him a parchment with instructions on how to cast it with one of her dreamy smiles before leaving the classroom on the first fourth year class after the escape.

How she had known Roy didn’t know how to cast the spell when only about half the school was using it by then was beyond him, but Roy had given up on understanding Luna Lovegood months ago.

Roy made good use of Fred and George’s parting gift. He set out fireworks at random places and intervals, sometimes using a stasis spell Fred had inscribed in the instructions parchment so the fireworks went off when Roy was surrounded by witnesses who could claim he wasn’t responsible. Three dragons were released into Filch’s office at dinner while everybody who’d been part of Dumbledore’s Army and thus likely to be the main suspects were eating at the Great Hall. The dragons wrecked the place so badly that none of Filch’s prized whips survived the experience in a decent enough state to be repaired by Umbridge’s mediocre spellwork. Filch spent a week stalking around the school looking for the culprit, but he didn’t find a single clue. He bemoaned the need of buying new whips, and how hard it was to come across the ‘quality stuff’. The fact that his catalogues kept disappearing shortly after they arrived by mail didn’t help his mood. Roy wasn’t even entirely to blame for that one.

Animals were released into Umbridge’s office, people ganged up on the members of the Inquisitorial Squad to subject them to various incapacitating spells, always too quick and too covert for the culprits to be identified. Peeves the Poltergeist delighted in causing as much chaos as possible, just as Fred had requested before leaving. The students were torn between amused that Peeves had listened to a student and terrified of some of the stunts Peeves pulled. Roy was mostly annoyed by the ones that affected him, but as long as Peeves didn’t do more than upend some tables and throw parchment around in his classroom, he would leave him be. He was a necessary evil to annoy Umbridge. She was Peeves’ target, after all, and not the rest of the professors.

Roy discovered, much to his delight, that Hogwarts students could use guerrilla warfare techniques, even if their awareness of their surroundings could use some improvement. He spotted Ernie MacMillan and Terry Boot sneaking into the Inquisitorial Squad’s Headquarters one night during his patrol carrying a suspicious box. The room was cordoned off the next morning.

Roy’s favourite, however, was the massive varied sickness symptoms every student who didn’t support Umbridge developed whenever she entered her classroom. He knew it had to be Fred and George’s doing, but he’d have to ask them when he saw them next. Umbridge couldn’t figure out the source, and Madam Pomfrey claimed there was nothing causing it. Whether she had figured the cause out or not was anyone’s guess, but she wasn’t any more cooperative than the teachers when it came to Umbridge’s demands.
With this new definition of normalcy, life went on.

Roy left the school twice under the premise of dates, which no longer drew the teasing comments he had earned at the beginning.

In fact, Roy had the sneaking suspicion that part of the staff had begun to grow a little wary of him since Fred and George’s departure. He was the only one of them who hadn’t—as far as the others knew—helped the rebellion in any covert way. Even Snape had ‘forgotten’ to close a supply closet once after a seventh year class, and some nasty potions had been used shortly afterwards around the school. This attitude only came from a few professors, of course, and it translated into little more than curt polite small talk. Roy hadn’t opposed Umbridge in their eyes, but he hadn’t supported her in any way either, which left them at a loss.

Minerva had taken to patting Roy on the shoulder whenever they crossed paths without an audience, a silent gesture of support that Roy couldn’t help but find nice.

The Order hadn’t accomplished much of anything in the time that had passed. Following the known Death Eaters had yielded no results so far, and Snape still didn’t know Riddle’s plan to get his hands on the prophecy. The most interesting thing was hearing Molly grumble about Fred and George and how they wanted to join the Order now that they weren’t students anymore. So far, she had managed to stall them by saying nobody could join until Albus returned, but that excuse had an expiration date and she knew it.

Sirius hadn’t approached Roy to talk neither of the times Roy had been to Grimmauld Place, but he wasn’t glaring at him either. Sirius mostly had a pensive expression on his face whenever he looked at Roy, and Roy could only hope he was thinking about what they had not-quite talked about. Roy shrugged when Tonks asked if they’d had an argument and told her it was just a difference in opinion. The only reason Roy even had a reply letter to give to Harry after the first meeting was because Lupin had given him one with an apologetic smile. Roy didn’t know what the letter had said, but Harry hadn’t looked too upset the following day.

As for Albus, nobody had heard from him yet.

Outside of pranks and the occasional sideways look, school was quite uneventful. Roy taught his classes and tried to act as though they didn’t have a giant toad lurking over their shoulders as he did so. He coached his students through the steps of basic transmutation and helped them reach the conclusions they needed to apply whatever changes they thought of to their projects.

He spent most of his free time working on his own project.

There were two more quidditch matches during May, but the days leading up to them were nowhere near as chaotic as they had been for the previous matches. Or, to be more accurate, they were way more chaotic, but it was mostly due to the pranks instead of team rivalries. A couple student fights didn’t stand out amongst hallways coated in dungbomb fumes or projectile flatware rushing down the main staircase’s well.

Finally, the time for the OWLs and NEWTs arrived.

Umbridge had been growing increasingly paranoid as June crept closer, and the continued pranks didn’t help. She threatened increasingly more dreadful punishments for any perpetrators that were caught, just as she did for anyone who attempted to cheat during their official examinations. Those examinations would reflect the success of her leadership system, she claimed, and everything had to be perfect. Upon sharing this information with the students, the professors —Roy included, for once— had to remind them that angering Umbridge wasn’t worth risking their future careers. The
fact that Roy even addressed the issue of Dolores Umbridge in class shocked his seventh years enough that Roy could hear whispers about it later that day wherever he went.

It seemed people had taken his words as a show that he had finally picked a side, and that side was the one opposing Umbridge.

The examiners arrived on Sunday night, the day before the first exams were to take place. Through the open doors of the Great Hall, Roy saw Umbridge simpering at them, looking more nervous than he had ever seen her look before. It didn’t escape his notice that she didn’t lead them into the Great Hall itself.

Filius chuckled next to Roy.

“I’d pay a lot of money to hear that conversation,” he said, loud enough to be heard across the table but not by any students.

Smirks and chuckles answered his comment, and Roy raised his eyebrows.

“Why is that?”

“Well, you see, Roy, the examiners have always been quite fond of Dumbledore,” Filius explained cheerfully. “I imagine our dear Headmistress is having trouble steering the conversation away from him.”

“I see… I get the feeling that she wouldn’t appreciate people distracting them, would she?” Roy asked innocently. That question drew some surprised looks from the professors who still weren’t completely certain what to think of his mostly neutral behaviour, but Minerva actually hid a smirk behind her cup.

“Not at all. We should steer clear from them for tonight,” she agreed.

At breakfast the next morning, Roy found himself sitting next to Professor Tofty, one of the examiners, who was positively thrilled by the prospect of an Alchemy NEWT.

“It’s been years since we last examined an alchemy student, mind you,” he was saying as he buttered a piece of toast. “And your approach to it… Delightful, truly! I can’t remember how long it’s been since I actually had to study in preparation for these examinations!” he exclaimed with the enthusiasm of a five year old. “I studied Alchemy back in my school days, but we barely brushed transmutation arrays. I can’t wait to see what your students have to offer!”

The Alchemy NEWT was scheduled to take place that same week, on Monday evening after the practical Charms examination. Usually, the theory and practice parts of the exams were taken
separately, but given the small size of his seventh year group, it had been decided they’d take both parts together.

Roy was relieved to see that the examiners appeared satisfied by the level his students had achieved, which wasn’t a bad one by this world’s standards, and he expected they would all at least pass. Professor Tofty reinforced this belief during dinner, which he spent gushing and complimenting the performance of his students.

Somehow, Roy found himself roped into performing some transmutations himself the following day before breakfast on the grounds right outside the castle.

Professor Tofty had neglected to mention he was bringing the entirety of the examiners to watch.

Roy went for flashy but harmless transmutations, and by the time they went back into the school there was a small park near the castle, complete with benches, statues of various magical creatures Roy had seen pictures and portraits of in books, and five small fountains. He had even moved some trees closer and arranged them so they would provide shade to at least one bench no matter the hour of the day.

These two weeks would be busier for Roy than the usual ones. Just like every other professor, he had been scheduled to help supervise exams on top of his usual lessons. That was how, on Thursday afternoon of the first week, he got to see Umbridge go purple with rage when Harry Potter cast a *patronus* for extra points during the practical part of his Defence exam. Roy smiled at Harry in congratulations on his way out, and Harry gave a mix between a sheepish and a smug grin back.

Roy caught himself halfway through the thought of retelling this story to Sirius and cursed under his breath.

On Wednesday of the second week —Thursday, really, as it was past midnight— Roy was awakened by a very loud bellow that had him rolling out of bed and ready to clap his hands before he’d completely taken in on his surroundings.

His bedroom was empty, there was no one in it, and as the commotion continued Roy not only realised that it came from outside, but recognised the voice as Hagrid’s. Hagrid, who was accusing someone of being cowards and, by the sounds of it, attacking them.

Roy rushed out of the room, grabbed a robe on his way out, and exited his rooms. He crossed the hallway, headed for the first window he could find. The window in his bedroom didn’t overlook Hagrid’s cabin, but those across from it in the hallway did.

He arrived just in time to see Hagrid’s towering figure running at full speed towards the ground gates, and heard Umbridge yelling for someone —the only other person Roy could see standing, he guessed— to catch him. This person didn’t obey, instead backing off. Terrified, no doubt, seeing the prone bodies around them.

Roy left the window and headed towards the staircase, putting his robe on over his pyjamas as he walked.
The lights in the Entrance Hall were on, and Roy ran into other professors on his way there. Pomona, Pomfrey and Hooch reached the bottom of the stairs with him, but they didn’t stop there. They could see more people gathered outside, halfway to Hagrid’s cabin. Filius’ short stature was easy to tell apart, and as they rushed over Roy saw the unconscious form of Minerva McGonagall lying on the floor, sprawled as though she’d been pushed there.

No amount of spells could wake her, not even when Pomfrey took over.

Everybody in the castle knew of what had happened by breakfast. The attempted arrest of Hagrid—for there was no other reason why Umbridge had taken four aurors with her to sack him, much less in the middle of the night—had been witnessed by the fifth year students that had been taking their practical OWL exam, Professor Marchbanks and Professor Tofty.

Madam Pomfrey had decided to send Minerva to St. Mungo’s due to her unresponsive state, and the gloom that permeated the Great Hall prevented even the most studious students from being anxious over their remaining exams. Many people kept throwing murderous glares at Umbridge, and Roy absently wondered if this year Riddle’s curse would manifest itself through a professor or a student who’d had enough of her.

He had no classes today, but he had agreed to help supervise the Muggle Studies exam in the morning. He spent the entirety of the exam prowling around the classroom, looking over students’ shoulders and attempting not to snort at the questions and responses that made up the OWL and NEWT exams. Had he been in a better mood, he might not have succeeded, but the current circumstances were too grim to laugh at the sheer ignorance he was witnessing.

That afternoon after lunch, Roy decided to leave Hogwarts to go visit Minerva at St. Mungo’s. Pomfrey had assured the staff that she would recover (“if she wasn’t to, we’d already know” she’d said grimly), but Roy couldn’t get the image of Minerva lying nerveless on the ground out of his head.

Filius, when he’d heard Roy’s plan, had given him a thick volume that had looked ridiculous on him. It was a treatise on silencing spells that he assured Roy would keep Minerva entertained once she woke up.

Roy had never been to St. Mungo’s. He was surprised to discover the place was far less chaotic than he had come to expect from wizards. The witch at the reception desk had been willing to direct him to Minerva’s room once Roy had identified himself as a fellow professor.

Fourth floor, damage from spells. In one of the temporary rooms, the witch at the reception had told Roy.
Minerva wasn’t awake when Roy entered the room, but there was a healer performing scans on her. The healer told Roy that Minerva should be awake either later today or early tomorrow, then left to continue her rounds.

Roy stood by the bed, observing how strange Minerva looked with her expression slack and her eyes closed, dressed in underwhelming patient clothes that didn’t suit her at all.

Roy set the book on the nightstand, and after a moment of hesitation summoned a small piece of parchment. He pulled out the pen he always carried around and scribbled a quick note.

*I know how boring hospitals can be. Filius assures me this should entertain you while you’re here. You can always think of the practical uses.*

*Roy*

He capped the pen, stood up again and looked at Minerva once more.

He reached a decision.

“If this isn’t solved by Monday, I’ll take care of it myself,” he said under his breath.

He’d overthrown a corrupt government while under surveillance from said government, there should be a way for him to get rid of a single corrupt person.

After taking a short, calming stroll through Muggle London, fully aware that the Order would have a fit if they knew he’d even left the castle on his own, Roy headed for the Leaky Cauldron and flooed straight to his office at Hogwarts. He almost pitied those monitoring the school’s fireplaces, given how careful everybody was about not flooing anywhere that would seem too out of place for them.

Almost.

Roy checked his pocket watch to see that it was nearly half past five. Classes were over, as was the History of Magic exam. The Great Hall should be back to normal by now, and Roy decided to head down and have an early go at dinner. Usually dinner started a little later, but it was tradition for the house elves to start sending food up right after the Great Hall was restored during exam periods. Exhausted students were notoriously ravenous.

Roy had barely closed the door to his office and turned to walk down the hallway when a voice startled him.

“Mustang.”

Roy turned around, wand raised, to find Snape approaching him from the opposite direction.


Roy had a sinking feeling in his stomach. The only room of any particular interest in the direction Snape came from was Umbridge’s office.
Without a word, he opened the door, held it for Snape, then closed it behind him. The silencing charm required a mere thought.

“What happened?”

“Potter decided to be his stupid, reckless self. What else?”

Hermione’s mind was racing.

She believed Professor Snape had gotten Harry’s meaning when Harry had yelled that ‘He’ had Padfoot, but that wasn’t important now. Trying —and probably failing— to convince Harry to wait was for later.

For now, the main problem was Umbridge.

The Inquisitorial Squad members were still holding all of them except for Harry, and Umbridge had begun muttering shortly after Snape had left.

Hermione didn’t know where Umbridge’s mind was going. She needed a way, any way, to distract her. Something that would work, not like their previous attempt at keeping her out of their way.

But nothing came to mind even after Umbridge kept talking and claimed out loud that she intended to use the Cruciatus Curse on Harry to learn what they had been doing in her office. Nothing came to mind when Umbridge admitted she had been the one to send the dementors after Harry last summer.

“Somebody had to act,” Umbridge spoke, justifying her actions. She trained her wand on Harry. “They were all bleating about silencing you somehow —discrediting you— but I was the one who actually did something about it… Only you wriggled out of that one, didn’t you, Potter? Not today though, not now.” She took a deep breath. “Cr—”

Hermione opened her mouth to scream, to stop her.

Umbridge’s wand burst into flames.

Umbridge shrieked, letting go of her wand, which fell into little more than a pile of ash to the floor.

Everybody jumped. Bulstrode’s hold on Hermione tightened painfully for a moment before it slackened in shock.

They all stared at the remnants of the wand while Umbridge whined in pain and held the back of her injured hand.

“An Unforgivable, Headmistress? I’d like to say I’m surprised, but I’m done lying.”

Hermione turned abruptly to the door. She hadn’t heard it open, but there it was, the light streaming through it blocked by a figure.

Professor Mustang.
Professor Mustang stood in Umbridge’s open door, gloved hands down by his sides and his wand nowhere in sight. His face was a stern mask Hermione had never seen before, a cold expression that could have been carved from marble as he stared Umbridge down.

Something in his eyes sent chills down Hermione’s back, and he wasn’t even looking at her.

“R-Roy?!” Umbridge asked, pain-laced shock in her voice as she stared at him.

Ignoring her, Professor Mustang looked around at the cramped office.

“You should let go of your classmates,” he said —no, ordered— addressing the Inquisitorial Squad. “I’d rather not hurt children.”

They wouldn’t, Hermione realised, but his words were enough to snap her out of her daze. She took advantage of Bulstrode’s loosened hold to free her left arm and push back, hard, slamming her elbow into Bulstrode’s neck and making her double over in pain.

Both Bulstrode and Hermione’s wands rolled to the floor, and Hermione hurried to grab them and step away from Bulstrode before she could recover. She raised her wand and aimed it at her in clear warning.

Hermione looked around. Neville had shoved the knuckles of his left hand against one of Crabbe’s eyes, but in the ensuing struggle one of them had stepped on Neville’s wand and snapped it in half. Ginny was free —she’d headbutted the girl holding her in the nose, from the looks of it— and she fired a leg-locking jinx at Warrington with impressive accuracy to make him let Ron go. Warrington toppled forwards, and Ron barely managed to shove him off enough to avoid being crushed. The girl holding Luna wisely let go after seeing what Ginny had done. Crabbe dropped to the floor clutching his stomach and Neville scrambled to his feet.

Malfoy’s hands were empty, his and Harry’s wands now in one of Professor Mustang’s hands.

“What do you think you’re doing, Roy?!” Umbridge demanded, still cradling her hand and glaring around at her defeated Inquisitorial Squad.

“I’m stopping you from continuing with your reign of terror, obviously,” Professor Mustang said condescendingly.

“You won’t get away with this,” Umbridge hissed, wobbling in place. Her palm looked horribly burnt, enough that Hermione wondered if they weren’t third degree burns. “I’m the Minister’s right hand!”

“Not for long,” Professor Mustang said, and he shoved his free hand into his pant pocket. “I hear there is a Department of Mysteries full of Death Eaters that’s about to cost Fudge his position. Not th—“

“Professor!” Harry yelled suddenly, those words finally snapping him out of whatever shock he’d been in at the sheer absurdity of this situation. “He’s got Padfoot!”

Professor Mustang sighed.

“No, Potter, he doesn’t. If you’d just—“ A silvery dog streaked into the room. A patronus. “Oh, there.”

“Roy? Yeah, I’m home. Why? What the hell is going on?” the patronus asked in Sirius’ voice. He sounded very confused.
“See?” Professor Mustang said, turning to Harry. “He’s fine. What you saw was a trap.”

“B-But,” Harry stammered, “but Kreacher said…”

“Kreacher lied,” Hermione said, realising it with sudden clarity. “But why?” she added, addressing Professor Mustang.

Professor Mustang was frowning. He offered Harry and Malfoy’s wands to Hermione, who took them bemusedly, then flicked his wrist and his own wand came to his hand.

“Just a moment,” he said, raising the wand and aiming for the window. “Expecto Patronum.”

A silver hawk dashed out of his wand and disappeared from sight almost immediately. Seeing that Sirius’ patronus had spoken, Hermione was itching to ask about it, but now wasn’t the time.

Professor Mustang flicked his wand and a red stream hit Umbridge. She dropped down, unconscious.

“I believe you lot,” he said, looking at each of the members of Dumbledore’s Army present, “owe me an explanation. But first, if the members of the Inquisitorial Squad could find a place to sit down…”

“Why?” Warrington snarled, still on the floor. He was giving Professor Mustang one of the fiercest glares Hermione had ever seen.

“Why? Because I’m going to stun you, obviously. Though I guess you’re fine there, Mr. Warrington,” Professor Mustang mused. Another red stream left his wand and knocked Warrington out.

Professor Mustang glanced around at the rest of the Inquisitorial Squad. They didn’t look so smug anymore, and they rushed to follow the instruction. Professor Mustang still had traces of that chilly look in his eyes. They were all unconscious in short order.

The door slammed shut untouched and Professor Mustang leant back against it.

“Well, Mr. Potter? What’s this I hear about a suicidal rescue plan? Please, start at the beginning.”

Harry blinked.

“Is Sirius… Is he really okay?”

Professor Mustang’s features softened.

“Yes. You heard him. I sent him a patronus asking him to contact me as soon as he could. That was his reply. He’s assembling the others as we speak. Now, if you don’t mind? What did you see? I need all the details.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed the ride through mostly-canon events, because we’ve reached the tornado part of the butterfly effect. Things start to really deviate from canon now :D
In canon, Harry went to Umbridge’s office because he thought there was no Order member to warn (well, amongst other things. He was panicked and wanted to leave immediately, but Hermione convinced him to try to contact Sirius first). Here, Ginny had overheard that Roy had left the school to go see how McGonagall was doing, so as far as they knew he wasn’t there either. Thus, same scenario.

As for Fred and George leaving, originally they used the swamp prank as a distraction to allow Harry to talk to Sirius about the memory he witnessed last chapter. The way they spoke, however, makes me think that prank had already been planned and they simply offered to use it to help Harry. So, just as they did in canon, they left Hogwarts when they were cornered.

While Harry never snuck into Umbridge’s office to floo Sirius over the Snape memory thing, which raised some alarms, Umbridge still had wards set in place because Lee Jordan (as happened in canon) kept sneaking nifflers (magical animals) into her office to attack her. He did this twice, and it was shortly after the second time that Umbridge attempted to arrest Hagrid, believing he was the one responsible.

And on Filch and the decree… It wasn’t exactly an official educational decree, I think Fudge didn’t have the balls to do something so public, but Filch got an “authorization for whipping”. That’s what Roy set on fire.

We don’t know what Sirius’ patronus looks like (at least I haven’t found the information), so I chose a dog because it’s his animagus form. It seemed fitting, given that James’ was a stag and Remus’ a wolf.

As always, you can follow my writing misadventures on tumblr :)
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Hi, guys! :D

I’m overwhelmed by the response the last chapter received. Thank you! Thank you so very much for showering me with all your wonderful comments! They really made me happy. Also, I loved the amount of fire puns you guys came up with, they cracked me up. Please, keep them coming.

Also, Colonel Roy Mustang appreciates the warm welcome. Seriously, so many people mentioned his rank that I half-thought you’d decided to do it behind my back or something. (Btw, as some people asked, YES, I was dying to write that last scene. I spent a lot of time deciding on the best way for Roy to take down Umbridge before I settled on that scene, and I was itching to write it!)

Before we delve into the chapter, I’d like to tell you that this month there will be two updates. I’ll post the next chapter on May 20th, because it’s my birthday and I like to post things on my birthday.

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Remus, Mad-Eye, Kingsley and Tonks sat around the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place, watching as Sirius paced back and forth across the length of the room.

He had been treating an injury that Buckbeak had suffered somehow when Roy’s patronus reached him. Given that they hadn’t exchanged a word in over a month, seeing the familiar hawk was odd enough. Hearing Roy’s voice, in a clipped tone Sirius had never heard from him before, asking if he was home and telling him to answer as quickly as possible had triggered all the alarms in Sirius’ head.

So he had replied immediately, fearing the worst had happened at Hogwarts.

Roy’s next patronus had barely taken a few minutes to arrive, and it was as strangely serious and to the point as the previous one. Order Kreacher to stay put and make sure he had no loopholes to leave. Gather the Order.

No reason, no explanation that Sirius could give the members that had been able to come. Just an order —because that had been an order, not a request—to gather as many people as possible. Immediately. Roy said he’d be here as soon as he could.

The fireplace flared green, and Roy stepped out of it, his face a stony mask Sirius would have never thought him capable of.

“I’m just saying we all carry sins.”

Sirius shook himself. This wasn’t the time to think about that.

“What’s going on, Mustang?” Mad-Eye demanded gruffly. Everybody had stood up to approach him.
Roy didn’t reply, and instead he turned to Sirius.

“Where is Kreacher?”

“In his cupboard. He has orders to stay there and not move or use any kind of magic until I order him that he can,” Sirius replied.

Roy nodded in approval.

“Good.” He then turned to look at everyone, his back straight, and said something that pulled the ground from under Sirius’ feet. “There are Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries waiting for Harry Potter to go rescue Sirius from Lord Voldemort. Harry is safe at Hogwarts,” Roy added quickly, before Sirius could bolt for the door. Roy then summarised in a few sentences what had happened at Hogwarts during the last hour.

There was a drawn-out silence when Roy was done speaking. He was the one to break it eventually.

“I don’t think Voldemort himself is the one waiting at the Department of Mysteries,” Roy said. Sirius was shocked to hear him say that name without any hesitation. Half the Order still flinched when they heard it. “He wouldn’t need to draw Harry there to take the prophecy if that was the case, but there must be Death Eaters waiting.”

“You want to go fight them,” Kingsley said. He was frowning, but Sirius noticed he wasn’t dismissing the idea. Damn, Sirius wanted to charge in there and start cursing those bastards himself.

“You shouldn’t go,” Mad-Eye said.

Sirius turned, a protest ready, but then he realised Mad-Eye was addressing Roy.

“On the contrary,” Roy said, voice suddenly light, “I should definitely go. I have a plan, after all.”

Sirius frowned, but then his eyes were drawn to Roy’s hands. He was removing those white gloves he always wore. Ugly, large scars were on his palms —on both sides; through Roy’s hands— and Sirius drew an involuntary breath upon seeing them. How the hell…?

Except for Mad-Eye, everybody reacted to Roy’s hands.

Mad-Eye looked Roy up and down with his magical eye before fixing both that one and his real eye on Roy’s face in a glare that would have sent most people running.

Roy didn’t even blink.

“This plan of yours better be good, Mustang. We’re not offering you to Voldemort on a silver platter.”

“Of course not,” Roy said, and then he smiled. “First things first, though. Moody, as I know you’re going to be extremely paranoid by the time I’m done explaining, why don’t you send Albus a patronus telling him what’s happening? We’ll really need him there at the Ministry to put an end to this farce.”

Sirius didn’t like this. At all. Most of the time, he’d be amused at the idea of making Mad-Eye even more paranoid than usual, but there was something strangely grim about Roy’s smile that sent a chill down Sirius’ spine. He looked at Tonks, trying to see if she had any more idea than Sirius of
what Roy could be thinking. She was frowning, and shook her head at Sirius.

Keeping his magical eye trained on Roy, no doubt already suspicious from those words alone, Mad-Eye drew his wand and sent his *patronus* off to find Dumbledore.


“Well, first of all…” Roy said, and he pulled a pair of gloves out of an inner pocket in his robe. These were white, too, but they had something stitched to the back of the hands.

Alastor couldn’t believe he’d agreed to Mustang’s plan. He’d expected to have to shoot the kid down and organise his own strategy to engage the Death Eaters, but Mustang’s plan was actually far better than anything most aurors usually came up with. Something that Alastor hadn’t been expecting.

In fact, Alastor hadn’t been expecting a few other things he’d learnt today.

He was going to have a very long talk with Dumbledore once this was done with. He refused to believe Dumbledore didn’t know about any of this.

He’d also eat his own peg leg if Mustang hadn’t been to a few serious fights in the past. Or a few dozens of them. Alastor had known that Mustang was holding back on them, but he hadn’t expected something like *this*.

He watched the two figures disappear into the room they had managed to identify as the Hall of Prophecies. They left the door open, a spell ensuring it wouldn’t close by accident and send the circular main room spinning to reorganise the doors. Alastor’s eye couldn’t see through the walls and doors of the Department of Mysteries, so they had no way of knowing how many Death Eaters awaited in there. He could, however, see through disillusionment charms, and he glanced at where Kingsley stood against a wall. The Death Eaters had somehow disabled the silent alarm that warned all aurors and high ups in the ministry about this kind of intrusion into the building, but, as an auror, Kingsley could trigger it with a spell.

He would do it as soon as Mustang gave the signal.

Alastor bit back a snort.

That was if the *signal* didn’t break whatever magic the Death Eaters had used to block the spells.

At this point Alastor wasn’t sure what to expect.

Sirius frowned, leaning back in the kitchen chair.
In the end, he had been forced to stay behind.

“We can’t afford the aurors arresting you along with the Death Eaters,” Roy had said, and he had looked so genuinely worried that it had been enough to make Sirius reconsider all the other reasons to stay back that he’d been given.

At least he wasn’t waiting while doing nothing.

They had opened the floo to Umbridge’s office again to prevent anyone from trying to reach her that way. In that office, Ginny Weasley and Neville Longbottom were coordinating Dumbledore’s Army as they went around the school incapacitating the members of the Inquisitorial Squad. Alastor hadn’t been too happy to learn that Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood would have to be told about the Order after today’s events. Longbottom had paled when he’d seen Sirius’ face in the fireplace, but he had taken Ginny’s reassurance that Sirius was innocent far more easily than Sirius would have expected.

As for Sirius, aside from checking on the kids, he had a task he was actually looking forward to. It wasn’t kicking Death Eater ass, but it was the next best thing.

“So, Kreacher,” he told the annoying house elf, who was standing very still before him, “how did you manage to help the Death Eaters? The truth. It’s an order.”

He was the one in charge of interrogating Kreacher because, as his owner, Kreacher couldn’t outright lie to him.

“About time,” Macnair muttered under his breath when the door to the Hall of Prophecies opened after long hours of waiting.

Rodolphus Lestrange hissed at him to shut up. In the silence that followed, they could hear steps echoing through the large chamber.

Two sets of feet.

“Ooooh,” Bellatrix whispered, fortunately under her breath as well. “Itty Bitty Potter brought a friend.” She sounded delighted, and for once Lucius had to agree with her, even if he found her mostly distasteful. Potter having a companion meant there was someone they could use to threaten him into cooperation if it was necessary.

“I can’t believe you followed me!” complained a young voice. It hadn’t changed since their encounter at the ministry this summer, so Lucius could easily recognise it as Potter’s. The brat was whining. “I’m not going back!”

“Be reasonable, Mr. Potter. This is ridiculous. You simply had a nightmare. There is nothing in here.” This second voice was that of an adult. It sounded vaguely familiar, but Lucius couldn’t place it.

That was until the two turned into the hallway that held the prophecy they were here to retrieve and Lucius had his first look at Potter’s companion.
It was Roy Mustang.

Hisses and a few muted gasps behind him told Lucius that every member of the group had recognised him as well.

That erased the possibility of using him as a threat to Potter (the Dark Lord would kill anyone who so much as scratched Mustang), but it was so much better at the same time.

Bellatrix excitedly pulled her sleeve down and pressed the tip of her wand against her Dark Mark. The Dark Lord had ordered them to warn him the moment they had captured Potter. She was being a bit hasty with her warning, but Lucius understood her excitement.

The Dark Lord would be so pleased by this development.

“It was here,” Potter was saying as he and Mustang approached the spot where the prophecy rested on a shelf amongst so many others. “I know this is the place.”

“Well, then. There is nothing here, Mr. Potter,” Mustang said, sounding completely unimpressed and unsurprised. “Now that we’ve ascertained you merely had a nightmare, let’s go back to Hogwarts before anyone notices your absence.”

Potter ignored him and looked around. His eyes passed right over the disillusioned Death Eaters, and the idiot even turned his back to them.

He paused.

“Hey! This has my name!” Potter exclaimed.

Lucius held his breath as Potter reached out to pick the prophecy.

Finally. After so long, after so many failed attempts, after so many punishments…

Mustang’s hand closed around Potter’s wrist halfway to the prophecy, stopping him.

“Don’t touch that, Mr. Potter,” Mustang said, pulling Potter’s hand back.

Lucius belatedly realised that, at least for now, Mustang was with the Order of the Phoenix. Dumbledore had ensured he didn’t know of any other options. What Mustang knew of the war was what Dumbledore wanted him to know.

“Why not?” Potter demanded. To Lucius’ frustration, he didn’t try to free his hand or use the other one to take the prophecy. Potter was looking at Mustang.

Sighing, Lucius realised they would have to intervene.

He looked around at the other Death Eaters — one of the few advantages of disillusioning a group of people with a single spell was that they could see each other — and made the signal to spread out around Potter and Mustang.

The spell broke as they moved away from one another, but Potter and Mustang were facing the prophecy.

“We’d appreciate it if you let Mr. Potter take the ball, Professor Mustang,” Lucius said, keeping his voice polite instead of the sneer he would have used to address Potter.

Mustang and Potter both turned around, visibly startled. Mustang let go of Potter’s arm in the
“Death Eaters!” Potter exclaimed dumbly, and fumbled for his wand.

Bellatrix’s wand was up and aimed between his eyes before he could reach it.

“I wouldn’t do that,” she said in a sing song voice. They weren’t allowed to hurt Potter —much— but Potter didn’t know that.

Mustang didn’t look at either Bellatrix or Potter. He didn’t move to draw his wand.

“Mr. Malfoy,” he said instead, meeting Lucius’ eyes through the slits in his Death Eater mask.

Lucius was surprised to learn that Mustang remembered him from their one meeting months ago. Pleasantly so.

“Professor Mustang,” Lucius greeted, raising a hand to remove his mask. No need to hide his face when he’d already been identified. Besides, everyone here would leave for the same place. “You have no idea how glad we are to see you here,” he said.

Mustang raised his eyebrows.

“Are you?” he asked, looking around very pointedly, at all the wands ready to attack if necessary. He was surprisingly calm. Lucius would have expected a degree of fear —terror, really— upon finding himself surrounded by a dozen of Death Eaters. Mustang didn’t look the slightest bit afraid.

The Dark Lord’s theory about Mustang gained weight with every passing second.

“Of course. Our Lord is very eager to meet you —he means you no harm, Professor, don’t worry,” Lucius added, aware of how the mention of the Dark Lord affected everybody. “However, we really need Mr. Potter to take that little sphere behind you before we can move on to other things.”

“And if I don’t?” Potter demanded defiantly. He even had the gall to cross his arms over his chest like the insufferable brat he was.

Bellatrix let out a cackle.

“I’m sure I can convince you, Baby Potter,” she purred, inching forwards.

Potter took a step back, but Mustang didn’t move at all.

Bellatrix opened her mouth.

The world exploded.

A very loud noise filled the stillness of the circular room in the Department of Mysteries. The open space of the door to the Hall of Prophecies lit up in orange and yellow reflections. Crashes, small explosions, and many echoing voices rose at once. A cacophony that made it impossible to discern anything.
Cursing under his breath, Alastor rushed forward, dismissing the spell concealing him as he went. He cast an anti-apparition spell on the entire Department even before he reached the door and hurried through it, Kingsley and Lupin right behind him.

There was a column of fire in the middle of the large room, signalling without a doubt where they had to go.

They ran.

Three hallways in every direction from the centre of the fire had been destroyed. As the echoing voices began to die down, Alastor belatedly realised that they were the prophecies, releasing the words in them one last time after being destroyed.

Well, that took care of Voldemort ever getting his hands on the prophecy.

The flames had vanished by the time Alastor reached the spot they had originated from.

There, standing inside a circle of unscorched floor stood Mustang and Tonks, who was still disguised as Potter. They were surrounded by the downed bodies of a dozen or so Death Eaters. Tonks appeared shocked, looking up at Mustang with wide eyes and her mouth agape. The glasses she had transfigured were askew on her nose. Mustang, meanwhile, had an inscrutable expression on his face, one that told Alastor that this wasn’t the first time he’d unleashed such an attack on someone.

When Mustang had said he could manipulate fire with those gloves of his, Alastor had been expecting the alchemical equivalent of an *incendio*. Instead, it had been like a controlled *fiendfyre*.

For a moment, Alastor hesitated as to where to aim his wand.

*Who in Merlin’s name is this man?*

It was the fact that Mustang had willingly come up with an efficient way to deal with the situation that helped Alastor decide where to aim his wand. That, and the knowledge that with a power like *that* at his disposal, they would all be dead by now if Mustang was an enemy.

Alastor cast a bubblehead charm on himself to block the disgusting stench of burnt flesh, and approached, his wand raised cautiously in case any of the Death Eaters moved. Some were groaning and whimpering in pain.

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Tonks was frozen in place.

She was distantly aware of the pained noises of some of the Death Eaters, but she couldn’t move her eyes away from Roy.

Roy, who had an easy smile and a mischievous side to him that rivalled Sirius’. Roy, who had taken her out on better dates than most of her real boyfriends ever had. Roy, whom the Order was charged to protect.

Roy, who had created a roaring inferno with a snap of his fingers. An inferno that had surrounded
him and Tonks but had never touched them. An inferno that had disappeared with a single movement of his gloved hand.

“They’re all alive,” Roy said, breaking Tonks out of her shocked stupor.

It took her a moment to realise he was addressing Mad-Eye.

“A bloody miracle,” Mad-Eye grumbled, his magical eye swivelling around at a dizzying speed. He had his normal eye fixed on Roy.

Remus and Kingsley approached cautiously, and it was then that Tonks noticed all three of them had bubbles covering their heads.

The smell of burnt flesh finally registered, and Tonks quickly covered her mouth and nose with a hand, nausea clawing up her throat. A bubble appeared around her head and cleared the air of that horrid smell. She raised her eyes to see it had been Remus who had cast the spell on her and nodded her thanks.

Roy moved forward —no bubble around his head, Tonks noticed— and knelt next to the Death Eater Tonks had recognised as Bellatrix Lestrange despite her mask. Bellatrix’s wand arm was missing, a gory mess of strips of burnt flesh and blood hanging from her shoulder, the bone visible through it all.

Tonks swallowed, glad that she hadn’t eaten anything since lunch.

“The wounds will have to be tended to, though, or some of them might die,” Roy said, pulling his wand out and aiming it at Bellatrix’s ravaged shoulder. A yellow flash later, the skin had knit itself back together and healed enough to form a large, ugly burn scar where her arm had once been.

“We should… stun the still conscious ones,” Remus said, looking around with an uneasy expression on his face.

“Get to it then,” Mad-Eye growled, sending a stunner at the closest moaning Death Eater.

Reminding herself that she was an auror, that she had seen plenty of horrible scenes and would see even more during the war, Tonks finally drew her wand and walked over to Lucius Malfoy. He still had both arms, but half of his right hand had been burnt away along with his wand. There was a large hole in his Death Eater robe, at knee level. From where she stood, Tonks couldn’t discern how much damage his legs had suffered, but she could see burnt skin. Tonks knelt down, cast two quick spells to clean and properly close the wound on his hand, and reached out with her free hand to push the robe aside.

Albus appeared at the atrium of the Ministry of Magic, encased in the flames of Fawkes’ teleportation power. Upon receiving Alastor’s first patronus, Albus had intended to head to Grimmauld Place first to receive a more accurate account of what was going on. But, mere minutes later, as he exited the warded area where he had been, a second patronus had arrived, informing him of Roy’s plan.
Oh, it was a good plan, Albus would give him that much. But it put Roy in direct danger, playing bait like that for the Death Eaters, and it would be a disaster if Tom managed to capture him.

Tom, who was in this very atrium.

Albus’ eyes focused on him the moment he took in his surroundings. Tom had turned around and away from the elevators, and the parody of a noseless face that Harry had described last year twisted into a hateful snarl.

“Dumbledore,” Tom hissed, wand at the ready. “I see I did well in coming here tonight, after all.”

“Did you?” Albus asked, aware of the fact that Kingsley must have triggered the alarms by now. “I find it foolish. The aurors will be here soon.”

“By which time I shall be gone, and you will be dead!” Tom spat, and predictably sent a killing curse at Albus.

The room shook around them, a booming noise coming from above, and Alastor instinctively looked up to find the source. His magical eye still was no use through these walls.

He cursed.

A quick whirling look around with said eye showed that all the Death Eaters were unconscious, bound, and their wounds mostly closed. Lupin knelt next to Rabastan Lestrange, wand hovering in mid-air and head turned up. Tonks, back to her usual pink-haired appearance, was done patching up Dolohov’s elbow —as far as his arm reached now— and had raised her wand in a defensive move that Alastor approved of. Kingsley had already been standing, and he trained his wand on the door. As for Mustang, he didn’t react past looking up at the ceiling.

Something was happening above them.

The room shook again.

A fight, no doubt, and not a mild one.

After a moment of hesitation, Alastor decided they had to check it out. He had his suspicions about who it might be, and if Dumbledore was fighting, there were two possibilities: either aurors had shown up and decided to be brainless idiots and attack him, or Voldemort himself was up there as well.

“Mustang,” Alastor barked out, “you’re coming with me. The rest of you, keep an eye on these,” he ordered, tapping Malfoy’s head with the tip of his peg leg.

Alastor wasn’t sure how comfortable he felt having Mustang with him, but he’d feel a lot less comfortable having him out of his sight right now.

Kingsley and Tonks nodded immediately, their auror training having kicked in after the initial
shock of the non-battle. After a moment, so did Lupin. Mustang simply gestured at the door, indicating Alastor should go ahead. So the paranoid bastard didn’t trust having Alastor at his back? Well, Alastor could see where he was coming from.

They walked out of the Hall of Prophecies and to the entrance of the Department of Mysteries in silence, Mustang falling into step next to Alastor whenever the path allowed it. Whether it was a way to subtly say he wasn’t under Alastor’s orders, or to imply he wasn’t going to attack him from the back, Alastor wasn’t sure.

As soon as they were outside of the Department of Mysteries and its accursed walls, Alastor turned his magical eye upwards.

They didn’t stop walking.

Above them, all the way up in the atrium, Dumbledore was fighting against Lord Voldemort.

“Do you see anything?” Mustang asked.

The lift they had used to come all the way down was still here, and they stepped into it.

“Dumbledore and Voldemort,” Alastor said, pressing the button for the atrium.

As the doors closed, a fireplace burst to life up at the atrium, and a wizard stepped out of it. He jumped in place, eyes wide and shocked as he stared at the duel in front of him. Neither Dumbledore nor Voldemort seemed to have noticed him, but as the lift rose quickly and the next killing curse was fired and dodged, more fireplaces filled with green flames and people rushed out of them.

At the atrium, the lift doors opened just in time for Alastor to see Voldemort disapparate with both his eyes, a furious snarl on his face.

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Cornelius Fudge stood, speechless, in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic.

He’d been pulled away from a delicious late night snack and a glass of fine fire whiskey by the alarms of the ministry going off. As the Minister, it was his duty to show up immediately at such events as part of his show of diligence, but he hadn’t expected to find more than a drunk intruder or perhaps an incident in one of the departments where members sometimes stayed late. That was what most of these alarms were about, after all.

Walking in on Albus Dumbledore duelling He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would have never crossed his mind.

And yet here he was, staring at the spot where the most feared Dark Lord of their time had been standing moments ago, surrounded by rushing and panicking people.

“He was there!” auror Williamson shouted, destroying any hope Cornelius had that he might have been mistaken. “I saw him, Mr. Fudge, I swear it was You-Know-Who. He disapparated!”

“I know, Williamson, I know, I saw him too!” Cornelius said, and the words burned in his throat.
He was done for. “Merlin’s beard… Here —here!— in the Ministry of Magic! Great heavens above… It doesn’t seem possible… My word… How can this be—?”

“If you proceed downstairs into the Department of Mysteries, Cornelius,” Dumbledore said, ignoring the few wands pointed at him. Most people were too busy gaping and being in shock to remember Dumbledore had an arrest order on him. Truthfully, so had been Cornelius until Dumbledore spoke, “you will find several Death Eaters contained in there.” Then, Dumbledore turned around, towards the lifts. “Am I wrong?”


Cornelius stared at Mad-Eye Moody for a moment, then back at Dumbledore. Surely, Dumbledore couldn’t expect Cornelius would believe the word of someone like that. Or do as Dumbledore said, for that matter. He should arrest him here and now; Dumbledore had attempted to create an army, resisted arrest, escaped—

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Minister,” a voice cut through his thoughts, and Cornelius turned to look in the direction it had come from. It was Roy Mustang, staring at Cornelius with such a piercing look that Cornelius took an involuntary step back. “Aside from the fact that the Headmaster would overwhelm your men again, you are in a poor enough position as it is.”

“H-Headmaster…?” That was the first word that left Cornelius’ lips in his shock. Hadn’t Dolores said Mustang was on their side? That he was a naïve but charming and reasonable scholar who wanted nothing to do with politics? Where was that scholar now? “My position is not poor!” Cornelius felt the urge to protest, even though he knew that yes, he was close to falling from the broom at this point.

Moody snorted.

“Roy is right, Cornelius, and we both know it,” Dumbledore said, cutting off any more protests. “Why don’t you do as I suggested and arrest those Death Eaters? I am certain my people would like to get them out of their hands.” Here, he turned to Moody. “I trust nobody was badly injured.”

For some reason, Moody snorted again.

“Not a scratch,” he said, and his magical eye whirled around in a sickening way.

Turning his back to Moody and that disturbing eye of his, Cornelius did the only thing he could think of to salvage the situation.

He sent Dawlish and Williamson down to the Department of Mysteries.

Alastor wanted to stun that buffoon Cornelius Fudge. He was certain that things would proceed far more smoothly with him out of the way.

He’d met Dumbledore’s eyes long enough to use legilimency and show him what had happened.
down at the Department of Mysteries, a quick exchange he doubted anyone would have noticed. Now he gave Dawlish and Williamson a doubtful look as they passed him by, far too stiff and disoriented for his tastes. They would have been walking into their deaths had those Death Eaters not been so thoroughly out of commission.

Alastor glanced sideways at Mustang.

Mustang’s expression was as inscrutable as it had been since he had taken down the Death Eaters. Alastor had no idea what could be going on in that head of his, but he wasn’t stupid enough to try to see into his mind. Who knew what surprises he could find in there.

“Now, Cornelius,” Dumbledore continued, “you will give the order to remove Dolores Umbridge from Hogwarts. You will tell your aurors to stop searching for my Care of Magical Creatures teacher so that he can return to work. I will give you…” Dumbledore pulled out a pocket watch and checked the time, “half an hour of my time tonight, in which I think we shall be more than able to cover the important points of what has happened here. After that, I shall need to return to my school. If you need more help from me you are, of course, more than welcome to contact me at Hogwarts. Letters addressed to the Headmaster will find me.”

Alastor didn’t bother to bite back a smirk at the gaping expression of disbelief on Fudge’s face.

“If I may, Headmaster?” Mustang asked, a polite note to his too cold voice.

“Of course, Roy,” Albus agreed, his voice far more friendly to Mustang than it had been to Fudge. If Alastor didn’t know better, he’d think Dumbledore wasn’t concerned by what he’d seen of the battle.

Mustang turned to look at the still gaping Fudge.

“You should have Umbridge arrested,” Mustang said, his voice cutting. He ignored the gasps and widened eyes around the room. “Unless, of course, you condone the usage of Unforgivable Curses on children. Which you might, given your authorisation to have them whipped.”

“Whipped?!”

Everybody turned around at the new voice. Amelia Bones stood before one of the fireplaces, a horrified expression on her face that turned thunderous when she whirled on Fudge.

“What is he speaking of, Minister?” There was so much venom in her voice that Fudge shrank back.

Alastor smirked again. He knew he liked Bones for a reason.

“I—” Fudge began, stammering, but Bones didn’t give him a chance to try to excuse himself.

“Robards!” she snapped. “Go to Hogwarts and arrest Dolores Umbridge,” she ordered, which, as head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was within her power to do. “We’ll sort this out later. Take…” She looked around, but there was no other auror present.

“I’ll go with him,” Alastor offered, much to Fudge’s obvious dismay.

Bones nodded.

“Thank you, Mr. Moody,” she said.
Alastor gave Mustang one last look, met Albus’ eyes, and then headed over to one very shocked Gawain Robards.

“Come on, Robards. Hope you haven’t lost your touch,” Alastor grumbled, and Robards snapped to attention as though Alastor was still a senior auror.

As he headed for the nearest fireplace, Alastor thought of the best way to have Sirius or the kids cut off the floo connection before Robards could see Sirius in the fireplace.

Chapter End Notes

You know, I’ve been aware that Roy outclasses pretty much every wizard since the beginning of this story, but it wasn’t until I had to write the Department of Mysteries that I realised just how much he outclasses them. There was no way around an underwhelming fight after that, because Roy wouldn’t hold back and risk his allies being killed when they’re up against a sadistic and murderous group that outnumbers them twelve to five if he could take care of them himself. That resulted in a chapter of many people’s POVs to show their reactions, and no Roy POV. We’re far from done with reactions and consequences, though.

Many people have mentioned how badass it’d be to see Flame Alchemy in action, and wanting to see the wizards’ reactions to it. Well, the thing about Flame Alchemy is that it is as terrifying as it is badass, even more so when used to fight people. The Order of the Phoenix, with only a few exceptions, are an incredibly naïve and idealistic group when it comes to fighting, especially given their circumstances.

I find Voldemort’s arrival at the Ministry too well timed during the original battle, which makes me think that the Death Eaters had some way to let him know that they’d completed the mission (or believed they had, at least). I don’t know when they would have done this in canon, but here Bellatrix got ahead of herself in her excitement to see Roy. It was this enthusiastic call that raised Voldemort’s curiosity enough to show up earlier than in canon. He wasn’t expecting to run into any opposition.

As for Dumbledore, in canon he went to Grimmauld Place first, where he interrogated Kreacher about what was happening before he went to the Ministry.

While the battle didn’t happen nearly as late here as it did in canon (Harry wasn’t back to the school until past midnight then), it was late enough that only the night guards were at the ministry. Harry didn’t see any guards in canon, but I’m going to assume the ministry has a modicum of competence and has them. They were rendered unconscious by the Death Eaters. Not killed, because the original plan looks like it was to get out of there undiscovered.

On a side note; have I ever mentioned that I love Amelia Bones? She’s the only rational Ministry high up we meet in the books. She’s refreshing to read.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

As promised, here is chapter 19. It may seem early in some places, but it’s past midnight here, so it’s May 20th and I’m officially a year older -sobs- So here I am, posting the chapter before I go to bed because I love to wake up to reviews :D

This chapter is on the short end for this story, but I wanted to end it with the last scene, so it couldn’t be avoided.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once the half hour he had given Cornelius was over, Albus cut him off mid-sentence and announced he had to return to Hogwarts. He walked over to Roy, who had been waiting by the wall as Williamson, Dawlish, Tonks, Kingsley, and even Remus carted the downed Death Eaters off to St. Mungo’s.

Williamson and Dawlish had appeared ashen the first time they returned with prisoners —Bellatrix and Rodolphus Lestrange— and everybody, even the frantic Cornelius, had paused to watch them pass in morbid fascination and horror. Their arms, especially Bellatrix’s, looked like something out of a horror story.

Albus had stared, too, before he drew Cornelius’ attention back to himself and continued explaining what, exactly, Cornelius would do once Albus left the ministry. Cornelius’ career was over, they both knew as much. What remained to be seen now was how far he would fall with Dolores Umbridge, and that would depend on how he acted from now on.

Fawkes flew over, halfway through his growing process after having blocked one of Tom’s killing curses, and settled on Albus’ shoulder. Taking hold of Roy’s arm, Albus searched for another Order member and met Remus’ eyes. Remus nodded, letting him know that he would return to Headquarters and update whoever was there.

Albus took hold of Fawkes’ tail and Fawkes obligingly transported both him and Roy to his office.

Once there, Fawkes flew over to his perch and Albus released Roy’s arm. The portraits stirred, looking at them curiously, but Albus’ attention was focused solely on Roy.

“I expect you have some questions,” Roy said, not bothering with pleasantries.

Both of them knew that Alastor wouldn’t have left the ministry without updating Albus first.

“I do, yes. More than only some, I’m afraid.”

“Send the portraits away,” Roy said, looking Albus in the eyes and ignoring said portraits’ protests.

Albus didn’t bother to argue. The portraits were bound to follow his orders, that much was true, but he wouldn’t always be Headmaster, and Roy was too stubborn to argue with him over small details.

The portraits complained loudly as they vacated the office frames on Albus’ command.
Albus looked down at Roy’s hands, at the transmutation array on both of his gloves. It was related to fire —obviously, he’d seen Alastor’s memory— but Albus couldn’t even begin to decipher it.

“I have never seen such an array before.”

“And you won’t see it again,” Roy replied.

“Your invention?” Albus asked, unsure of how he felt about it. Roy was a good man, he still believed it, but what he’d seen…

“My master’s. I simply adapted it,” Roy replied, looking down at his right hand.

“I see,” Albus said, and stared at Roy’s right hand for a moment as well. “We should sit,” he finally suggested.

It didn’t go unnoticed to Albus that Roy didn’t remove his gloves as he settled in his usual armchair.

Paranoid indeed, Albus thought, but he couldn’t blame Roy. Albus himself would be very wary if he were in Roy’s shoes right now.

Albus sat down in his chair.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to repeat a question I asked you a year ago, Roy. And this time, I want a more detailed answer. Why do you want to kill Tom?” And, after a moment of hesitation, Albus asked a second question. “Why did you perform human transmutation?” He hadn’t asked before, but now he needed to know. Because Roy wasn’t just a scholar who possessed some damning knowledge; he was dangerous.

Albus wanted to believe Roy was a good person, Roy had done nothing but help since his arrival, but the scene Alastor had shown him kept repeating itself in Albus’ head. Roy had singlehandedly, in one attack, defeated nearly every one of Tom’s most powerful followers.

Roy fixed his eyes on Albus’ own, gaze stony and piercing. He clasped his hands on his lap —not unlike during their first meeting, Albus noted— and a humourless smile pulled at his lips.

“Most people would think I’m crazy if they heard my answer to either of those questions,” Roy finally said.

Albus’ eyebrows went up.

“I believe I’ve proven I have a different perception of ‘crazy’ than most people,” Albus said, feeling an odd sense of reversal from their first meeting.

Roy leant forward, hands still firmly clasped together.

“What I am going to tell you stays between the two of us,” Roy asked. No, demanded. “I don’t care if the entire Order thinks I’m a monster or a Dark Wizard after today.” Another humourless smile twisted Roy’s mouth, as though there was a joke in those words that Albus wasn’t privy to. “You won’t tell anyone about this.”

This wasn’t the first time that Albus heard such a request. He didn’t like it any more now than he had last time, but he nodded his understanding.

“Very well. If you don’t want anyone to know, then I won’t tell them.”
Nodding, Roy moved to lean back in the armchair.

“Everything I’ve told you so far is true, though I admit I’ve kept most of it intentionally vague. I won’t give you my life story, Albus, and that isn’t negotiable, but I’ll answer your questions. Tell me, has anybody ever speculated on the existence of other worlds?”

Albus blinked, taken aback. Whatever answer he’d been expecting—and he wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting—that wasn’t it.

“Not as far as I’m aware.”

Roy nodded, as though he already knew that was going to be his response.

“Neither had I, until Truth dragged me here as part of our deal.” Roy straightened in his seat. “I guess I should introduce myself properly if we’re doing this. I am Colonel Roy Mustang, of the Amestris State Military, also known as the Flame Alchemist.”

“Amestris?” Albus asked, and it took a great amount of effort to keep his face calm and his voice even. What Roy was saying now surpassed by far anything Albus had heard before, and yet Albus didn’t think Roy was lying. Despite Roy’s undeniably impressive acting skills.

A Colonel, though? Wizards had no official armies, not as far as Albus knew. Albus was only passably familiar with armies. The fact that somewhere wizards did have them was mind-boggling.

“Amestris is the country I come from. Which leads us to your questions. Through a series of coincidences, and later investigations, I, alongside some other people, discovered that our government was corrupt and setting up something that would have destroyed us all.” Roy leant forward, rested his elbows on the edge of Albus’ desk, and moved his clasped hands before his mouth. Somehow, this position made the intense look in his eyes stand out even further. “They had excavated a nationwide transmutation array and intended to turn the entire country into a Philosopher’s Stone in a bid for immortality.”

Albus’ blood ran cold.

An entire... country?

Silence stretched between them.

Albus focused on Roy’s dark eyes. He may not be able to read his mind, but Roy’s eyes right now said a lot despite their hard edges. Because of their hard edges, in fact. They spoke of a difficult struggle, of harsh truths and pain. Of war.

Albus reached for a lemon drop, unwrapped it, and ate it. His throat had gone dry at this revelation.

Roy said nothing, waiting him out.

“Where does your human transmutation fit in this... charming tale?” Albus asked, his voice thankfully steady. Right now, Albus was immensely glad to have Roy firmly against Tom, to know that, no matter what, Tom wouldn’t be able to extract this knowledge from him. The ramifications of such an array...

“While I don’t know all the details of the experiment, activating this array required... sacrifices. Or that is how they were referred to. Five people who’d performed human transmutation and survived their encounter with the Gate. For the plan to be successful, they had to activate the array at a very precise moment, and by then they only had four sacrifices. So they... improvised,” Roy added, and
for the first time separated his hands to show his palms to Albus. Despite the gloves, Albus remembered well the scars Barty Crouch Jr., under his disguise as Alastor, had told him about.

They made a horrifying amount of sense.

“I take it you weren’t willing to cooperate.”

Roy smiled bitterly.

“For all that it was worth. No, I refused.”

“What was your toll?” The question was out before Albus had consciously decided to ask it. He didn’t take it back. He’d been wondering about it from the beginning. The only other injury to Roy’s body was the burn scar on his side, and Albus failed to see how that would amount as a toll, given what Roy had shared with him about the Gate.

Roy clasped his hands before his mouth again.

“My eyesight. And before you ask, I have it back as part of my bargain with Truth.”

“I’m surprised,” Albus began, getting his mind back on track, “to hear that this Truth was willing to return your toll. From what you’ve told me, it seems quite odd.” Albus hadn’t thought much about Roy’s deal with Truth, but he had assumed it was unrelated to the toll itself. To hear that it wasn’t, and remembering Nicolas’ notes…

Roy shrugged.

“As I told you once, I prefer not to try to guess how Truth thinks. However, it did mention that the circumstances of my performing human transmutation were unusual. I believe that is why it agreed to bargain with me in the first place.”

Albus’ eyes slid to Roy’s gloved hands again. Unusual indeed. Albus would have never guessed it was possible to force someone to perform human transmutation. The thought was chilling.

“And once Tom is defeated?”

“Then I’ll be able to return home,” Roy replied easily. As though it was obvious.

He was trapped here in the meantime.

“Well?” Roy asked after the silence had stretched for what might have been minutes. “Have I passed? Or do you think I’m a Dark Wizard now?”

Albus was unable to smile, despite the slight dryness to Roy’s voice. He had a suspicion that Roy wasn’t any more amused by the situation than Albus himself.

“I’ve never doubted your intentions, Roy. But you must understand, what happened today is…”

Albus trailed off, looking for a tactful way to express it.

“Horrifying,” Roy finished for him. “I’m aware of the reactions my abilities elicit, Albus. I am a soldier. It’s not meant to be pretty or comforting.”

Of course. As Alastor had conveyed, this couldn’t have been the first time that Roy used such a technique. To think of any war that would require a power like Roy’s to be mastered to the point Roy seemed to have developed it was something Albus would rather not dwell on.
“What about Tom?” Albus asked, switching subjects. “He’ll want answers. It won’t take long before he summons Severus.” In fact, Albus was surprised that Severus hadn’t come yet to inform him of a summons. Tom was showing a remarkable amount of patience given the loss he had just suffered.

“Tell him the truth; that I took out the Death Eaters,” Roy said without hesitation. “It’s only a matter of time before the Ministry figures it out, anyway. Once they’re done panicking about how to fix the mess Fudge has dragged them into. Now, if that’s all,” Roy continued, and stood up, “I’ll be in my rooms while you talk to the Order.”

“You’re not coming?” Albus asked, quite surprised. Roy had been very adamant about being included in things since he agreed to help with the horcruxes.

Roy smiled again, just as bitter and unamused as before.

“Moody nearly turned his wand on me earlier. I’d rather avoid whatever panic they’re going through right now. I hope you’ll warn me if they’re going to try to have me arrested or something.”

Albus opened his mouth, ready to argue that the Order wouldn’t turn on Roy, but closed it. He’d seen the damage, he’d seen some Order members’ faces following the fight, and he knew his people. While he doubted anyone would try to have Roy arrested, Roy wasn’t wrong in being wary of their reactions.

Roy shook his head, undoubtedly guessing Albus’ thoughts, and left the office.

Pushing his worries aside, Albus recalled the portraits and had Phineas Nigellus call Severus to his office. They needed to talk before Tom summoned him.

A long silence stretched over the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Arthur and Molly had arrived while Sirius had been interrogating Kreacher, and they’d agreed to wait with him for news of the team that had gone to the Department of Mysteries.

Now they had that news.

Remus had been the only one to come back. Tonks and Kingsley had been forced to stay in their auror capacity to help smooth over the mess, and even Moody was helping with that. As for Roy, well, he’d returned to Hogwarts with Dumbledore. And he was the reason for the silence.

“I don’t know exactly what happened in there. I had no time to ask Tonks, what with the Death Eaters and everything that followed,” Remus was saying, “but…” he trailed off and shrugged.

Molly had gone ashen and had dropped into the nearest chair, hands over her mouth. Arthur was looking at Remus, his expression lost, waiting for an explanation that wouldn’t come. Sirius knew Remus too well, he could tell he’d run out of information to relay.

As for Sirius, he was staring over Remus’ shoulder, mind racing to make sense of the story Remus had just shared.
“Dark Arts?” Arthur asked eventually, his voice filled with reluctance.

“I… don’t think so,” Remus said, but he shrugged. “Mad-Eye didn’t turn on him, and neither did Dumbledore. Whatever that was, I don’t think it was Dark Magic.”

“Does it matter?” It was Molly who asked the question. “He… oh, *Merlin*… I can’t even imagine what you just described,” she said. There might have been a choked sob in her voice. “He’s always been so sweet…”

“*People may not be able to atone for their sins, but they can change. I need to believe that, or I wouldn’t be able to get out of bed in the morning.*”

Sirius frowned. Was that bloody conversation going to haunt him forever? Roy had used… whatever *that* had been, to maim twelve people. Death Eaters, admittedly, but still. From the way Remus had described the event, it sounded like Roy had been scarcely calm the entire time.

The look on Roy’s face when he’d stepped out of the fireplace earlier came back to Sirius’ mind.

The fireplace flared green, and everybody turned around. Sirius hoped it was Tonks. She was the only one who’d been there to witness everything.

It wasn’t Tonks who stepped out of the floo.

It was Dumbledore.

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Roy walked through the deserted hallways and down the shifting staircase until he reached his quarters. Once inside, he flicked his wand out, threw a barrage of warding spells at the room, and leant his back against the door. He let himself slide down the wooden surface, no longer forcing his legs to hold him up.

The smell of carbonized flesh and burnt muscles still clung all the way down to his lungs. Tonks’ shocked face was seared into his brain. Lupin’s horror, Shacklebolt’s shaky composure, Moody’s open distrust…

There went his cover as a harmless scholar, blown up in a storm of fire, blood, and screams.

*So familiar.*

Roy hadn’t intended to go all out when he’d walked into the Department of Mysteries. But upon seeing they were up against twelve Death Eaters when their group was composed of only five people, upon recognising one of those Death Eaters as Bellatrix Lestrange and realising at least some others must be from the escaped ten… Well, Roy had investigated them after they’d escaped Azkaban. He’d read about them during his search for Tom Riddle, what felt like years ago now.

He’d understood that the odds were against the Order, that the likelihood of some of them dying was too high a risk.

And he’d reacted accordingly.
The Flame Alchemist was nothing if not highly efficient in battle.

And, despite everything, he’d held back. Moody may have called it a miracle, but Roy had been very careful to avoid killing any of the Death Eaters, and he’d mainly done it because the Order refused to kill. While under normal circumstances Roy himself refused to kill, his inhibitions diminished considerably when facing a group of psychopaths who were there with the sole objective of capturing a fifteen year old boy and take him to what would undoubtedly be a painful and very gruesome death. He had nearly burnt Lestrange’s face off after she’d pulled her wand on whom she had thought had been Harry Potter and had shown such delight at the idea of torturing him.

Roy bent his head forward and ran his hands through his hair. He rested his forehead on his left, bent knee.

Whatever the circumstances, no matter how many justifications he could come up with, the matter remained that the Order of the Phoenix were the most naïve participants of a war that Roy had ever met. He’d be lucky if nobody tried to curse him after this.

The smell of burnt flesh still hung around him.

The atmosphere at Malfoy Manor was tense, to say the least.

Severus thought it was foolish to have a Death Eater meeting here when the aurors could show up any minute now that Lucius had been arrested, but he kept this thought to himself. He had no desire to die.

The Dark Lord was… Furious wasn’t a strong enough word to describe his mood. He wasn’t ranting, he wasn’t raging, and he hadn’t tortured anyone yet. There was a strangely frozen air around him that made him appear the most terrifying than he had since his return. His wand was clasped in a death grip in his too long, too pale fingers, and nobody dared to even look in his direction.

In fact, no one had uttered a single word since Severus’ arrival. A silent and grim Narcissa Malfoy had welcomed Severus into the house and led him to the ballroom where the Dark Lord was holding the meeting. Her composure had looked brittle at best, and Severus knew the only reason she hadn’t collapsed yet was because she was too proud to allow anyone here to see her break down.

Around the room, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, the Death Eaters kept themselves as close to the shadows and the furniture as they could get away with. Their masks may be covering their faces, but nothing could hide the fear in their eyes.

Severus didn’t have the luxury of even attempting to hide. He knelt in the middle of the room, and waited for the Dark Lord to break out of whatever thoughts he was immersed in.

“Well, Severus?” the Dark Lord finally spoke, his hissing voice disturbingly devoid of inflections. “What happened?”
“From what I could gather, Roy Mustang was the one who took down the team dispatched to the Department of Mysteries.” And hadn’t that been a surprise? Severus hadn’t been sure of what to expect when he’d gone to Mustang about the situation with Umbridge—an interruption faking cluelessness, perhaps. Severus would never have expected that Mustang would attack Umbridge, but she had been carted off to St. Mungo’s by aurors to have her hand treated before they imprisoned her.

Severus certainly hadn’t expected Mustang to be so frighteningly powerful, but Albus had looked deadly serious when he’d relayed the events from the ministry.

There were some whispers around the room, but the Dark Lord remained silent for an unsettlingly long minute.

“Are you certain of this?” he asked, his voice colder and with an underlying note of fury that didn’t bode well. Severus resolutely ignored the potential implications of the Dark Lord unleashing his anger.

“That is what Dumbledore said. As it turns out, he deliberately kept Mustang’s power from the Order of the Phoenix. He was rather… displeased to learn that Mustang had broken his cover.” That was the story they were playing with. The second part was an outright lie, but Albus had tried to convince Severus that he’d known of Mustang’s fighting skills.

Severus didn’t believe him.

“…I see.”

There was a green flash, immediately followed by a small explosion and the too familiar sound of a body hitting the ground. Someone had just paid the price of the Dark Lord’s anger. Nobody spoke, but Severus heard shuffling. As though cowering would save anyone.

“What else can you tell me?” the Dark Lord demanded, his voice back to the angry hiss Severus was more used to hearing.

Severus steeled himself. It was time to weave what he knew to be true with what they needed the Dark Lord to believe.

“Right now, the Order of the Phoenix is in an uproar. No one save for Dumbledore knew of Mustang’s power, and they are having a… moral crisis,” Severus made sure to inject as much disdain as possible into the words, even though for once he could understand the Order’s reaction, “over what they saw. It’s too early to say how this will affect their dynamics—“

As the meeting progressed, Severus put all his skills to test by relaying information that anyone could guess if they stopped to think about it long enough, while trying to make it sound like he’d put on a great effort to obtain it.

Three more Death Eaters died, and by the end of the meeting the man who’d been in charge of investigating Roy Mustang was left wishing he was dead too.
Tonks found Sirius in Buckbeak’s room, absentmindedly twirling a bone with his left hand and staring sightlessly at the opposite wall.

“Remus told me about Dumbledore’s visit,” she said as a way of greeting.

She let the door close behind her, walked over to Sirius, and heavily sat next to him.

Tonks was exhausted, both physical and mentally. There was nothing she wanted more than to head home, drop down on her bed, and sleep for a week. But she knew what she would see as soon as she closed her eyes, and she had no wish to revisit the memory of today’s battle.

“I can’t believe he kept something like this from us. That they did,” she amended. Because Dumbledore had known of Roy’s fighting skills from the beginning, and he’d deliberately had made the Order believe that Roy was defenceless. To fool Voldemort, he’d said. It was no wonder that Dumbledore didn’t argue with most of Roy’s actions when Roy ignored his orders.

Sirius hummed noncommittally and threw the bone up in the air. He didn’t move to catch it again, and it clattered to the ground.

“What happened?” he finally asked, turning to Tonks.

Tonks shrugged.

“I’m not entirely sure,” she said. She leant her head back and let it hit the wall a little too harshly. “The plan was for us to take cover until the others arrived, you know that, but…” But they hadn’t been expecting twelve Death Eaters — why would Voldemort send twelve Death Eaters when they only expected Harry? Tonks’ team had expected to have time to set up the fight, to take advantage of the surprise factor. In a way, they had. Nobody had expected Roy’s attack. Tonks closed their eyes. “We were following the plan, even when they surrounded us. I was bratty, Roy was cool and unaffected. Then Bellatrix Lestrange raised her wand. To torture me.” Tonks’ blood had gone cold when she’d seen Bellatrix, when she’d realised she would likely find herself on the receiving end of the *cruciatus* curse before she could draw her wand.

Sirius looked at her intently for a moment after her words.

“You don’t look injured,” he said, but there was some hesitation to his voice.

“No, I don’t,” she agreed. “Roy snapped his fingers before Bellatrix could cast anything. It was…” Disconcerting. Terrifying. Oddly reassuring now that Tonks had been able to process events a little. “He saved me, Sirius,” she said, turning to look at him. “I don’t know what would’ve happened if he hadn’t attacked; I’m damn certain I couldn’t have protected myself. But it was horrible.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. Sirius looked conflicted, about as conflicted as Tonks herself felt. Finally, he broke the silence.

“Do you still trust him?” he asked softly. Hesitant.

Tonks turned to look ahead, at the dark and dirty wall across from them.

“Yes. I think I do.”

Not many people shared these thoughts. Mad-Eye had argued with Dumbledore about Roy, Molly looked as though someone had killed her kitten, Remus had brought out a bottle of firewhiskey as soon as the meeting was over, and he’d deliberately left Kingsley to retell today’s events to the
Order members who’d arrived during and after the meeting. None of them had looked particularly pleased.

“Roy told me something some weeks ago,” Sirius said.

Tonks glanced sideways at him, taking in his still too conflicted expression.

“When you fought?” she asked. She hadn’t gotten a straight answer about what had happened after Roy brought Harry’s letter, from either of them. She might get it, now, and she wasn’t sure she wanted it.

“Yeah. He… he was a bit cryptic, but he implied that he’s trying to atone for something. Something bad. I don’t think he believes he can do it.”

Tonks hummed noncommittally and looked down at her legs. She remembered the burnt Death Eaters and Roy’s emotionless reaction to the carnage.

She could believe Sirius’ words.

“Can I stay here tonight?” she asked instead of pursuing that line of conversation. She didn’t want to think about the implications of Roy’s lack of reaction. “I don’t want to go home. I don’t want to sleep.”

“I have a stash of firewhiskey here. Buckbeak is a good listener,” Sirius offered.

Tonks smiled weakly, grateful.

She could use a stiff drink, or ten.

Chapter End Notes

We’re nowhere near done with the Order’s reactions. This was just the first batch, with some immediate reactions. Nobody but Albus has interacted with Roy yet, after all.

Lindril pointed out that I should specify a little on Albus’ thoughts about the war in Amestris (as far as he knows, it’s one) and the need for Roy’s powers: while Albus is somewhat familiar with muggle wars due to having been around for WWI and WWII, he is far more used to wizarding wars. Wizarding wars, even in their most crucial battles, rely heavily in duels. To Albus, Roy Mustang is a wizard. Once more, Roy has kept what he’s shared to the minimum necessary, and mentioning he’s been using magic for only a little over a year wasn’t part of it. As Albus believes him to be a wizard, he’s also more inclined to picture a war in which Roy took place as a wizarding war. Flame Alchemy just doesn’t fit the parameters of a duel, so it’s both disconcerting and terrifying.

Not many notes today. Remember that you can find me on tumblr.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Finally, after a very, veeery long wait, here is chapter 20! I’m very sorry about the delay, but I won’t entertain you with excuses about why it happened. Let’s just hope I don’t take so long with the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alastor stepped out of the fireplace so late that it was already early in the morning of the day following what was already coming to be known as the Battle of the Department of Mysteries.

Alastor thought that “battle” was a far too generous term to describe what had happened.

Albus was waiting at his desk, his expression sombre and his eyes heavy, not quite as calm as he had looked at the Order meeting a few hours ago.

There was a glass of firewhiskey frozen with a stasis charm on the desk before the seat across from Albus. Alastor walked over, waved his wand to dispel the charm, downed the drink, and plopped down on the seat.

“You’d better have more of that,” he said.

Albus waved his wand and a bottle flew over to the desk.

Alastor drank again, and Albus simply waited him out in silence.

“All right,” Alastor finally started, “what in Merlin’s name happened last night?”

Earlier, Albus had assured the Order that everything was fine with Mustang, to varying degrees of comfort from the Order members.

“As you saw, Roy is quite the proficient fighter.”

Alastor snorted.

“Way to put it. What I want to know is why he is here. Mustang clearly doesn’t need the Order’s protection. Hell, he could protect us. So why did you lie?”

Albus closed his eyes, and Alastor knew he wouldn’t receive a straight answer even before Albus opened his mouth to speak.

“I can’t tell you, Alastor. Don’t mistake my words, I wish I could, but it is a very delicate matter.”

Alastor stared, making his displeasure very clear. He knew he wouldn’t get any more information than that.

“Do you trust him?”

“I do.”
When a small burst of fire startled Aurora Sinistra awake and dropped a piece of parchment on her bedside table, she nearly fell out of bed in her haste to read it. It was a summons to the staff room in an hour’s time, written in the familiar handwriting of Albus Dumbledore.

There was no chance she’d waste time after that.

Aurora dressed up far quicker than was her custom, throwing on the first set of robes she found in her closet, and she rushed out of her rooms. It was early in the morning, so early that not even the portraits were awake, but late enough that both prefects and professors were long since done patrolling. She doubted even any students who’d broken curfew were still around.

Aurora stopped by a window and used the reflection to check her appearance. She straightened her clothes, charmed her hair into a semblance of order, and continued on her way.

She wasn’t the first one to reach the staff room.

Argus Filch was there, his expression sourer than usual. Pomona was sitting in one of the plush armchairs, nursing a cup that smelled strongly of coffee. Seeing the wisdom in Pomona’s choice of drink, Aurora headed for the side table the house elves had set up with snacks and prepared herself a cup.

She settled on the armchair next to Pomona.

“Do you know what’s happening?” Aurora asked.

“Some of it,” Pomona replied, a vicious glint in her eyes. She shifted to sit sideways, facing Aurora as much as the armchair allowed. “Late last night aurors came to the school and arrested Umbridge for attempting to use the *cruciatus* curse on Harry Potter.”

Aurora nearly dropped her cup. She blinked, half-expecting Pomona to say it was a joke. But Pomona’s face was threatening to break into a smirk, and nobody would dare to joke about something as serious as finally being rid of Dolores Umbridge.

“And you didn’t *tell me*?” Aurora asked instead. She would feel offended were the news not so good.

“Filius thought it best to keep it quiet after Robards showed up. The only reason I know is because I was with Filius.” Pomona leaned forward. “But I expect the students will already know about it.”

Aurora raised her eyebrows, silently asking for more details. When Pomona pretended she didn’t get the message, Aurora gave in and asked.

“And why is that?”
“Half of the Inquisitorial Squad and part of Potter’s defence group were there. And that’s not even the best part.” This time Pomona did smirk. “According to Robards, it was Roy who told them about Umbridge. And Umbridge looked pretty bad off when they carted her away.”

“Roy?”

Aurora jumped in place. She hadn’t heard anyone approach, but now Charity Burbage was leaning over the back of her armchair to listen to Pomona, surprise written across her face.

“Are you sure?” Charity asked, placing a hand on one of Aurora’s armrests. “Roy Mustang? Nice, charming Roy?”

As they spoke, other professors had arrived at the staff room, but when the door opened again it was to let in Dumbledore and Roy. Aurora, along with many others, stood up when she saw Dumbledore in all his multicoloured, shimmering glory. She’d never thought she would be glad to see his personal brand of style anywhere, but here she was, grinning at the mere sight of him.

Merlin, she’d missed Dumbledore.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled in that way of his.

“Ah, I see we have all developed a penchant for arriving early to meetings during my absence,” he said, voice full of amusement. “Shall we begin, then?”

It took fifteen minutes for the meeting to begin.

To Filius’ complete lack of surprise, his fellow professors all wanted to welcome Dumbledore back to Hogwarts before they moved on to anything else. Once they were finally settled around the table, Dumbledore began to update them on everything that had happened last night. Filius already knew about Roy’s run-in with Umbridge, of course —and he had to admit a certain level of curiosity over the spell Roy had used to stop her— but he nearly fell off the pile of books on top of his chair when Dumbledore told them about the Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic and his own duel with Lord Voldemort.

“As you can no doubt imagine, the Ministry can no longer deny Voldemort’s return,” Dumbledore continued, his face disturbingly sombre as he retold the story. “They are in quite the upheaval now, and I expect they will continue that way until they replace Cornelius Fudge at the very least. We shall take advantage of this period to right all the wrongs Dolores Umbridge has wrought at Hogwarts this past year. All of Fudge’s educational decrees have, of course, been annulled, and the Inquisitorial Squad has been disbanded. All of you have been here for the last months while I was not, and I expect you have a better idea of which issues should be addressed first.”

Dumbledore fell silent, opening the ground for suggestions.

Filius looked around, trying to decide which of the many issues plaguing the school were more pressing. They had all been so caught up in their passive-aggressive resistance that the ease with which the problem of Umbridge had been solved in the end had caught everybody off-guard.
“You should fire Filch.”

Everybody turned to the source of the words to see Roy on his armchair, leaning forward with his elbows resting on the table and his hands clasped before his mouth. His expression was one of complete seriousness.

Argus was the first one to react. He jumped to his feet, a livid expression on his face.

“Fire me?! How dare you, you little—!” Argus cut himself off. Roy was giving him a very dark glare, one that gained a lot of weight with the knowledge that Roy had been in a fight against Death Eaters and come out of it unscathed.

“If I remember correctly,” Roy began, his voice calm and cold, “you were **delighted** when Fudge authorised you to whip students. And I am certain you would have done it if I hadn’t destroyed your whips.”

All of Filius’ curiosity and slight amusement vanished at the reminder, at the memory of Argus shoving his way through a crowd of students with that horrid slip of paper that allowed him to whip students.

“That was you?!” Argus demanded, his face red with anger.

Roy ignored him and turned to Dumbledore instead.

“I understand that you don’t want to leave Mr. Filch in need, but I am certain any of the many people who will be falling over themselves to get back on your good side would be more than willing to find him new employment. Hopefully somewhere he won’t be in contact with children.”

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The Great Hall was abuzz with whispers. Ginny was stopped by three different groups on her way to the Gryffindor table. The story of yesterday’s run in with Umbridge and the ensuing skirmish between Dumbledore’s Army and the Inquisitorial Squad, as well as Umbridge’s arrest, had made the rounds throughout the school, and people wanted details from someone who’d been there.

Ginny herself felt elated.

Not even in her wildest dreams would she have expected the aurors to come and arrest Umbridge after Professor Mustang had left, but that was what had happened. Mad-Eye had also taken a moment to tell them that everybody was fine before he and that auror with him dragged Umbridge out of the office. After that, Flitwick and Sprout had shooed the members of Dumbledore’s Army back to their common room, saying they’d take care of the bound —and in some cases unconscious — members of the Inquisitorial Squad.

Ginny was disappointed to see said members still at the school today, but their crestfallen and angry faces almost made up for it.

The volume in the Great Hall suddenly decreased. Curious, Ginny raised her head and she felt her jaw slacken when she saw Albus Dumbledore walk up to the head table from the side door members of staff used sometimes.
She had no idea what had happened yesterday outside of Hogwarts, but she found herself grinning and joining the sudden boisterous applause that greeted the Headmaster.

Hogwarts was back to normal.

Draco wasn’t hungry.

He kept his head down and ignored Dumbledore as he rattled on about who-knew-what stupid thing the old coot thought important to address now that he was back at the school.

Earlier today, so early Draco had still been in his dormitory, an owl from his mother had arrived. It only carried a short note, written in a barely perceptible shaky hand. In it, his mother told Draco that his father had been arrested. There were no details, no information. She didn’t know more, at least not through whatever meagre explanation the aurors had deigned to give her, and she couldn’t risk giving away anything else through a letter now that the mail was no longer safe for Slytherin.

*His father had been arrested.*

Draco clenched his jaw until it was painful. Officially, they may not know more information, but he was no idiot. Potter’s ravings yesterday when he’d tried to use Umbridge’s floo left little up to the imagination: his father had been on a mission for the Dark Lord.

And now Draco’s world was turned upside down.

Yesterday, he’d led the most powerful student organization in Hogwarts and his family had been firmly favoured by the Dark Lord. Today, students were free to despise him without repercussions and the Dark Lord was no doubt livid for whatever had happened.

Draco didn’t look forward to going back home this summer.

The Daily Prophet made no mention of yesterday’s Death Eater incursion. Roy had half-expected as much, given that the Ministry of Magic was likely still too panicked to even make a statement. It didn’t, in fact, mention *anything* about yesterday, despite the fact that at least Umbridge’s arrest should have reached their ears on time for the morning edition.

“They won’t do anything without the Ministry’s permission,” Albus said, breaking Roy out of his contemplation of the bland articles. “Given the control Fudge has exercised over the paper this last year, they wouldn’t dare.”

Roy snorted, completely unsurprised. He set the paper on the desk and crossed his arms, looking up at Albus.
“That will be a problem as the war advances,” he pointed out, reminded of Amestris’ own media and how little people thought of it. Taking Mrs. Bradley’s fabricated story to the radio during the Promised Day had been a risky bet, one that Roy was still amazed had been taken so well by the radio’s workers.

“I’m aware. It’s fortunate then that the population have other papers to turn to now, isn’t it?” Albus said, a twinkle in his eyes.

“The Quibbler?” Roy asked. It was true that magazine had been all people could talk about for weeks, but it was a monthly publication with too many whacky articles to be relied on as a steady source of information.

“I believe Xenophilius will take good advantage of this opportunity,” Albus said with a nod.

Roy shrugged. He wasn’t here to talk about wizarding media.

“How was the meeting yesterday?” he asked.

“It went better than you doubtlessly fear,” Albus replied with a smile, his eyes twinkling. “I even convinced Alastor to refrain from cursing you unless you provoke him.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Roy deadpanned. “What about the non-paranoid members of the Order?” he asked, though he could imagine the answer.

“Their reactions varied considerably. I’m afraid Molly Weasley was rather scared of what Remus shared about last night, but some people —like Sirius— appeared more thoughtful than anything else.”

Yes, of course. Roy would eat his gloves if he needed two hands to count those people.

“Speaking of Sirius,” he said, taking the chance to broach a topic he’d been thinking about for a while, “now that the Ministry has those Death Eaters and they can no longer deny the war, it would be a good time to have his name cleared.”

“I agree,” Albus said, an easy smile tugging his lips up, “and as soon as there is a new Minister for Magic I intend to address Sirius’ situation.”

Roy nodded, glad that they could agree on this.

“Is there anything we can do now?”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” Albus admitted. “Tom is regrouping, and so is the Ministry. We can’t do much more than wait and see what will happen. I do, however, have good news.”

“What is it?”

“I believe I have located one of Tom’s horcruxes.”

Roy spent the remainder of the day holed up in the study in his rooms. On his way out of Albus’
office he’d received some awed looks from the students he passed that made it clear the news of how he’d dealt with Umbridge had spread. Even if he knew he couldn’t escape the consequences forever, the thought of children being in awe of him for burning off a person’s hand was sickening.

Thus, Roy chose to spend as long as he could get away with sequestered in his rooms and focused on his research. Albus locating one of Riddle’s horcruxes meant Roy would have a chance to test an array soon. Now he only had to get on with it and finish the damned thing.

Roy didn’t emerge from his rooms again until Sunday morning, after an owl with that day’s Daily Prophet arrived with his copy. The news about the Death Eaters were finally out, and he wanted to observe people’s response to them. Having something to distract the students from Roy himself was an incentive.

He arrived at the Great Hall for the second half of breakfast, hungry despite the fact that house elves had been popping into his rooms over the last two days to bring him food.

As Sunday went by, people could be found all over the school whispering to one another, in many cases holding copies of the newspaper. Hostile glares were exchanged between students, noticeably those students whose families had participated in opposing sides of the previous war. No fights broke out, but the tension didn’t bode well for the foreseeable future.

That day, both Minerva and Hagrid returned to Hogwarts.

On Monday, a pantomime of normalcy settled over the school. Classes resumed, and it was the professors’ duty to try and keep the students calm and focused on the present. Roy spent that last week of classes evaluating the alchemy projects and fending off questions about how he’d dealt with Umbridge. While no student had drawn the connection between the fire and alchemy, many had asked to be taught the “spell” Roy had used. He’d had to state in every class that he had no intention of teaching anyone the technique. He didn’t disabuse them of the belief that he had used a spell.

Meanwhile, Albus had been reinstated to all the titles he’d lost last summer, the Ministry was doing everything it could to save face after their year of denial of Riddle’s return, the pranks throughout the school had stopped (Filius had even removed Fred and George’s swamp, though he’d left a small part of it as a memento), both Firenze and Trelawney would share the position as Divination professors, and Filch kept throwing murderous glares at Roy every time they crossed paths. Albus had heeded Roy’s words, and Argus Filch wouldn’t return to Hogwarts next year. Someone had caught word of this news even though there had been no official announcement yet, and the students didn’t bother to hide their glee and relief over it, something that did nothing to appease Filch’s animosity. Roy couldn’t care less about what someone like that thought of him.

Roy was vegetating on the couch, taking a break from the formulas and calculations for the array, when there was a knock on his door.

Sighing, Roy stood up and walked over to the door. The very complex wards he’d cast on the wood hadn’t been triggered, which suggested the person on the other side bore no ill intentions.

Roy was ready to clap his hands all the same.
When he gestured the door open with a lazy use of wandless magic, Minerva McGonagall stood in the hallway.

Roy blinked, allowing himself to show the surprise he felt.

“May I help you?” he asked, taking a step back in case Minerva wanted to come in.

Minerva did indeed accept the offer to walk inside, and she subjected Roy to a long scrutinizing look before she answered.

“I hear you have spent a lot of time on your own,” she said. Waving a hand, she made a chess board materialise on the coffee table. “I understand that having so much attention focused on you may be daunting, Roy, but you won’t gain anything by holing yourself up here.”

Roy looked at her, at the expectant look she was giving him and the lack of judgement and reprimand in her face. He smiled, and was surprised to find the expression was genuine.

“Of course. You’ll have to excuse me, Minerva, it’s been a while since I last played chess. I’m not sure if I’ll be a good match.”

As a fifth year student, the only class Hermione had to attend after her OWLs was Alchemy. This meant she, along with every fifth and seventh year student, had most of the last week of term free to do as she wished.

Hermione Granger had never been one to laze about with no purpose and so, after three days spent talking with Harry and Ron, she marched down to the second floor.

She would be lying if she said she wasn’t nervous, but she wasn’t afraid. No, past the initial shock, Hermione had quickly realised she had no reason to be afraid. This was Professor Mustang, who’d gone out of his way to help them and had saved them from Umbridge on Thursday. It was something they had all agreed quickly on.

And so, with determination coursing through her, Hermione raised her hand to knock on the door to Professor Mustang’s office.

After a short pause, Professor Mustang called her in, and Hermione pushed the door open. She found him sitting behind his desk, a pile of parchment pushed to one side despite the fact she knew he had nothing left to mark, with one of his green pens on top of it.

“Miss Granger,” he greeted her, nodding at one of the chairs before his desk. “How can I help you?”

Hermione closed the door behind her and walked over to the chair. She sat down, her nerves making an attempt to come back that she managed to resist.

“I want to ask you a favour,” Hermione said before her nerves took the better of her. There, with the words out she wouldn’t back out.

Professor Mustang raised his eyebrows, though he looked more amused than anything else. He
leant forward, resting his forearms on the desk.

“What kind of favour?” he asked, and the way it took him a moment too long to close his mouth made Hermione think he’d been about to say something else.

“We’ve been talking, with Harry and Ron, over the weekend, and we’d like to resume the lessons with Dumbledore’s Army next year.” Professor Mustang’s lips twitched at the mention of the defence group. Hermione belatedly realised it must have seemed amusing to the professors. “But we want to do it right,” she added.

“And you want me to back you up when you ask the Headmaster?”

Hermione nodded.

“That won’t be necessary,” Professor Mustang surprised her by saying. “I’m sure the Headmaster will be more than willing to authorise your defence group, especially under the current circumstances.”

Yes, despite Harry’s doubts, Hermione had thought as much, but that wasn’t the only reason she was here.

“Maybe, but I read in *Hogwarts: A History* that student clubs that use more than basic spells need a professor to supervise them, and I wanted to ask if you’d be willing to do it for us.” The last part of Hermione’s sentence had been rushed, and she felt her cheeks heat up.

That had been the main point of contention during their arguments the past few days: convincing the boys, and especially Ron, that Professor Mustang was the best option for the DA. Ron had wanted to ask Professor Flitwick, because he’d been a champion duellist in his youth. As for Harry, at first he’d wanted to ask Hagrid, but he’d conceded quickly that Hagrid wasn’t the best choice around delicate magic and kids that had to be taught said magic. Professor Mustang was the best choice; not only had he helped them set the DA up, but he was the professor Harry was willing to trust the most after Hagrid. Professor Mustang had cemented Harry’s trust in him on Thursday.

Professor Mustang’s eyebrows were back up in his forehead.

“You want me to watch over your defence club? You do realise, Miss Granger, that I’m no Defence Against the Dark Arts professor?”

That last question was clearly meant to point at Professor Mustang’s lack of fighting skills, something Hermione wasn’t too sure was true. Not only because of what she’d seen, but because his absence during dinner on Thursday made her think he’d actually gone to the Department of Mysteries with the other Order members. He hadn’t looked any worse for wear on Friday.

“You wouldn’t have to teach,” Hermione said anyway. “Just make sure we don’t do anything dangerous. Check over our spells and whatever other things we want to learn,” she said, and gave him a very pointed look. Like you did, she didn’t say.

Professor Mustang smiled with amusement, as if accepting her unsaid point.

“Very well, Miss Granger. Tell me when you go talk with the Headmaster. I suppose we’ll have more than enough time to work the details out over the summer, am I right?”

Hermione nodded, unable and unwilling to hold back her grin. They’d have the DA next year to keep learning, and they’d be able to teach even more students now it was an approved club.
Hermione did seek Roy out to go talk with Albus, and he accompanied her, Harry, and Ron Weasley to the office and watched with some amusement as Albus agreed to approve the club and give them a classroom with no argument on his part (this made Roy wonder briefly where the DA had been meeting this year and why they didn’t want to use the place anymore). Once the students left, Albus did raise some concerns with Roy, and Roy promised to keep him updated on the comings and goings of the defence club.

“I won’t limit them,” Roy said at one point. “Riddle and his Death Eaters have shown time and again that they won’t hesitate to attack children, you know this even better than I do. If we can’t keep them out of the war, the least we can do is give them the tools they may need to survive.”

Much to Roy’s surprise, Albus didn’t argue his point the way he’d done last year. His expression grim, Albus closed his eyes and let out a long sigh.

“Unfortunately, you are right. And I believe there is no better person to teach someone to get through a battle, Colonel.”

Albus clearly meant it as a vote of confidence, perhaps even a compliment, but hearing his title after so long felt like a blow to the stomach to Roy.

Still, for once, being Colonel Mustang would help him do some good.

Roy nodded.

The remaining days of term ended in an odd mix of cheerfulness over the arrival of the holidays and apprehension over the impending war. The mood in the hallways could go from excited to grim in a matter of a few paces, and this year, when the end of term feast arrived and Albus gave a speech much like the one he’d given last year, Roy knew the worry, the fear, and the scattered determined looks he saw on many of the students’ faces wouldn’t fade over the summer.

Now, unlike last year, there was no denying the threat of Lord Voldemort for anyone.

A grim part of Roy wondered how many of these students would be able to return to Hogwarts next September. The darkest part of this thought was the knowledge that it was almost certain that not all of them would make it back.

Chapter End Notes
I’m exhausted, so no notes today (if I forget something I should mention, I’ll come back here to edit another day).

Remember that you can find me on tumblr.
Believe it or not, I got this chapter out earlier than I thought I would.

And we have art! YES! In the months that have passed, three truly beautiful people have taken the time to draw fanart for this fic on tumblr!

We got three pieces by rochenxart rochenxart:
Roy dressed up for his date
Roy with his patronus
The carnage at the Department of Mysteries

By maikkuax we have wizard!Roy

And bylonelyperegrine we got another take at the Department of Mysteries

Repeated knocking on his door drew Roy out of the diagram he had been working on for the entire afternoon. Leaning back, Roy stretched his arms above his head. He collected his work from the floor, stood up, and stored everything in the secure drawer before heading for the door. A new set of knocking came before he reached it.

Roy waved the door open to find Albus standing in the hallway, a grim expression on his face that had Roy immediately on alert.

“I was beginning to think I’d have to break through the wards,” Albus said easily, but his voice was missing the lightness that would usually accompany such words. There was no twinkle in his eyes.

“My apologies, I was absorbed in my research.”

“Of course,” Albus said with a nod. “I’m afraid I’ll have to take you away from it, though.”

“What happened?”

Albus shook his head.

“A dire event. We are expected at Grimmauld Place.”

Fred Weasley sat leaning back in the kitchen chair, looking around at the already packed room. Next to him, George was finishing off a chocolate frog. The Order of the Phoenix had been called to an emergency meeting, and much to their mother’s displeasure, Dumbledore had officially
accepted Fred and George into the Order two days ago. So here they were. From the expressions around them, it was clear no one knew why they had been called; Sirius had just shrugged when they’d asked him.

Finally, the fireplace flared green and Dumbledore stepped through. Professor Mustang followed him a moment later.

Fred didn’t miss the tension in the room when Professor Mustang entered. He glanced over at George to confirm he had noticed, too. Mum had told them about what had happened in the Department of Mysteries, no doubt hoping to dissuade them from joining the Order, but it hadn’t worked. Fred and George hadn’t been there, it was true, but they had been at Hogwarts for most of the school year. They’d gotten to see enough of Professor Mustang that they had decided to trust their own judgment over what others believed about him. Mum hadn’t been pleased.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Dumbledore said even before he’d reached a chair. His eyes passed over the room and they stopped an instant on Fred and George. “I was hoping our next meeting would be under brighter circumstances; alas, that wasn’t possible.”

Dumbledore didn’t sit down, and instead moved to stand at the head of the kitchen table. Professor Mustang did take a seat, and next to him Mundungus Fletcher squeaked and scooted his chair over in the opposite direction.

“Two hours ago, Emmeline Vance was found dead at her home, the Dark Mark suspended in the sky over it.”

Horrified gasps and exclamations met this announcement. Down the table, Mum covered her mouth with her hands.

Something inside Fred froze.

He’d known joining the Order would mean following a harsh path, but he hadn’t expected his very first experience as part of it would be the death of a fellow member. He’d barely spoken to Emmeline Vance last summer, but suddenly her face was sharp and clear in his mind.

“How?” Mad-Eye asked, his face grimmer than anything Fred had seen on him before. His magical eye was oddly still, focused intently on Dumbledore.

Dumbledore closed his eyes. For once, he looked as old as Fred knew him to be.

“The Cruciatus curse. We don’t know anything else for now.” Fred felt himself blanch. He remembereded last year, when the fake Moody had shown them the Unforgivables. The Killing Curse was one thing, but to kill someone using the Cruciatus? He might be sick.

“So they could’ve gotten anything out of her,” Moody muttered, drawing Fred out of the path his mind had taken. Fred’s first reaction to Moody’s words was to think that was a very callous thing to say, but he reminded himself that they were at war and there was a reason Fred and George had been made to take all those oaths before they were allowed to join the Order.

This wasn’t just about individual lives; it was about the future of the entire wizarding world.
The meeting was long and sombre. For some people it was clear Emmeline Vance’s death had brought home the dangers of war, while others were more shocked and grieving than anything else. Roy had barely exchanged a few words with her outside of Order meetings, but no death was to be taken lightly.

At the end of the meeting, Fred and George Weasley stood up and walked over to him. For a moment, Roy wondered if they knew about the Department of Mysteries, but quickly realised that they must know now that they were part of the Order. Molly’s expression was certainly displeased enough to suggest as much, and Fred and George were not looking at her a little too deliberately.

“Evening, Professor,” George greeted him with a grin, plopping down on the chair that Mundungus Fletcher had hurried to vacate the moment the official part of the meeting was over.

“How’s Hogwarts? We heard there aren’t pink toads around anymore,” Fred continued, leaning against the table.

They looked ready to burst out laughing, though their expressions weren’t quite as relaxed as Roy had seen them in the past. Roy conceded that they had reason to be pleased, given the amount of effort they’d put into getting rid of Umbridge. And if they clung to that fact too hard… well, they certainly could use an excuse to put aside what had been discussed at the beginning of the meeting.

“Surprisingly uneventful as of late,” Roy replied easily. “We can even breathe in the hallways now.”

Fred and George grinned and exchanged an undecipherable look.

“Yeah, about that—” Fred started.

“—We wanted to thank you—“ George continued.

“—For helping our baby siblings,” they finished together.

Roy was taken aback by their words and how honestly they spoke them. He smiled, feeling more grateful than he would have expected to be to realise this meant at least they wouldn’t be jumping out of the way whenever he walked around Grimmauld Place.

“It was my pleasure.”

Now, Roy was more on alert about his surroundings than he had been for months in this particular house, and thus he hadn’t missed Sirius’ glances or his approach. He had, however, pretended that he hadn’t noticed.

“Hey, Sirius,” George greeted, waving at him.

“Hey,” Sirius replied with a grin. Roy didn’t miss the tension in his expression. “Mind if I borrow Roy?” He addressed the twins, but he was looking at Roy.

Roy nodded. Excusing himself from the twins, he followed Sirius out of the kitchen. They walked up the stairs in silence, and Roy couldn’t say he was surprised when Sirius led him all the way to Buckbeak’s room —Buckbeak didn’t look bothered by their presence, he simply glanced up at them before returning to his snack of some animal extremities. What surprised Roy was to see Sirius draw his wand and ward the room. *That* was new.
Sirius took a deep breath to steel himself. He could do this, this conversation was way overdue already.

“Should I be nervous?” Roy asked, his voice light. Sirius knew him better than to take that tone at face value right now.

He turned around.

“No. Well, I don’t think so,” Sirius said. He pocketed his wand. Moody would have scolded him for putting his wand in one of his trouser pockets. As if he cared what Moody would say right now. “I just want to talk.”

Roy nodded. His face was unreadable, something that Sirius took to meaning he was uncomfortable, too. Roy had always been quite open with his expressions. This was a new facet for Sirius, and one he didn’t care to have directed at him. He liked open Roy better. Sirius missed him.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said. A lot,” Sirius started. He fidgeted in place, then started pacing, in need of a way to let out his nervous energy. “I’m not sure I fully understand what you meant; to be honest, I’m not sure I want to.” No, most certainly not. “But what I am sure about is that you’re a good person, Roy. And you’re my friend.” Sirius stopped his pacing and turned to look at Roy, determination settling in him. “Listen, about that letter, I’m never gonna like Snape, he’s a greasy git and he was a Death Eater in the making, but... I guess you had a point. Existing isn’t a crime.”

This realization had come to him like a slap to the face. He’d finally gathered his resolve to write to Harry after the close call with Voldemort’s trap, and after two letters Harry had told him why the memory had unsettled him so much. He’d told Sirius about his life with the Dursleys, more than he’d shared so far, about how they thought themselves so much better than him because of how he’d been born.

The only reason Sirius hadn’t marched over there right then was because Remus had been with him and had talked some sense into him.

Still, the similarities between the Dursleys’ treatment of Harry and the Marauders’ own behaviour towards Snape had been enough to shake Sirius.

“I’m not asking you to like Snape,” Roy said finally. “I’m not even asking you to stop hating him. But there is a great difference between hating someone and thinking they are inferior to you. That’s what Death Eaters do, Sirius.”

Yes, Sirius had eventually reached that conclusion, too. He hadn’t liked it. He’d spent his entire life trying to distance himself from his family; realizing that he shared such a mindset with them had been staggering. Sirius still hadn’t recovered, but he had every intention to reappraise his perspective.

He sighed.

“It won’t be easy,” he admitted, “but I’m working on it.”
“That’s all I’m asking,” Roy said. And, just like that, the expressionless mask was gone.

Being back at Grimmauld Place for dinner was a strange but very welcome change in Roy’s life. After his part in Riddle’s scheme, Kreacher had been confined to his cupboard-bedroom, which left Roy and Sirius alone in the mostly-clean kitchen to fend for themselves. Sirius had cooked dinner, a surprisingly edible stew that would have been impossible a few months ago. As they ate, Roy told him about the plans to have Sirius’ name cleared, which led to a long and animated chat about all the things Sirius wanted to do.

Roy returned to Hogwarts past midnight, and he stepped out of Albus’ fireplace expecting to find the office dark and empty save for Fawkes. Instead, he found Albus awake and behind his desk. His face was a picture of grimness reminiscent of earlier in the day.

“Ah, Roy, right on time,” Albus greeted him, and gestured to Roy’s usual armchair.

“What happened?” Roy asked, walking over. His good mood had all but evaporated.

“It appears Tom is making up for lost time. Not even an hour ago, he sent an ultimatum to the Ministry of Magic: if Fudge doesn’t hand power over to him in three days, he will do something terrible.”

Which meant something bad was coming up. That demand wouldn’t be met, and Riddle must know it. He no doubt expected to place the blame for whatever he planned to do on the Ministry’s shoulders.

“Do we know what he has planned?”

“Not yet. It seems Tom is keeping his cards close; none of his followers know the details, only that he is aiming for something large that cannot be covered up,” Albus replied with a frown.

Wonderful.

“Anything else?” Roy asked dryly.

“Draco Malfoy has been Marked and ordered to kill me,” Albus said simply.

Roy cursed.

“He can’t expect that plan to work,” Roy said, torn between scepticism and the sinking certainty that Draco’s mission was a punishment for Lucius’ failure. In a way, the blame lay at Roy’s feet.

“Most certainly not. Severus believes Tom expects him to be the one to kill me once Draco fails.”

Under different circumstances, Roy would find it odd that Riddle was so confident of his chances after his recent loss, but he knew better. During the Order meeting, they’d discussed the fact that giants had been spotted moving, many werewolves now served under Riddle openly, and dementors wandered the outskirts of muggle cities. There were three confirmed victims of the Dementors’ Kiss so far. The unfortunate truth was that the Death Eaters were no longer the deadliest or most dangerous of Riddle’s followers, and the Ministry was hardly in a position to face
his forces. Right now, the Ministry was fumbling around and trying to put themselves together while Riddle moved to begin his campaign openly.

Roy sighed and stood up.

“I’m going to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Tomorrow they were going to the old house of the Gaunt family.

That morning Roy didn’t head downstairs to eat breakfast. He dressed in one of the sets of clothes he usually reserved for exercising, pocketed two lighters and two pieces of chalk, put on his traditional ignition gloves, and secured his wand in its holster. Not for the first time, he missed his gun. He could just see Riza’s scowl if she knew he was walking into potential danger without more weapons, but he didn’t really believe a gun would make much of a difference when dealing with whatever wards Riddle had set up. Having Riza covering his back, though, would be a great help.

Roy shook his head, checked his various pockets one last time, and walked out of his rooms. He passed Filius in the hallway, who wished him a pleasant run and reminded him to eat something with the same amused smile he reserved for what he saw as Roy’s quirky muggle habit.

Albus was in his office, standing by his desk in very much uncomfortable wizard robes that Roy knew better than to try and talk him out of wearing. What surprised Roy was Fawkes’ presence, perched upon Albus’ shoulder.

Roy raised his eyebrows.

“I figured Fawkes might help us leave if Tom’s wards are too unpleasant,” Albus answered the unasked question.

He offered Roy his arm and Roy accepted it with some reluctance, steeling himself for the very distasteful experience of side-along apparition.

They appeared in the middle of what could have been nowhere, but Roy knew was the forest surrounding Little Hangleton, well away from the eyes of prying villagers.

“Now, stay alert,” Albus cautioned, wand raised. “I doubt the house would be easy to find under the best of circumstances, and who knows what Tom set up around it.”

Roy flicked his right wrist to bring out his wand, and poised his left hand to snap his fingers at a moment’s notice.

As they walked, Albus kept casting an obscure tracking spell that—he assured Roy— was less likely to trigger wards than the more average spells were. Surprisingly, it didn’t take them as long as they’d feared to find the old Gaunt house. While there were strong muggle-repellent wards around it, the house itself hadn’t been disillusioned, nor did it have any other spells designed to confound people around it. Not that it was in much need of such magic. If Roy and Albus hadn’t known about the house in advance, they would likely have missed its dilapidated remnants amongst the vegetation that had grown in and around it over the last fifty years. Roots had broken
two of the four walls, and many branches shrouded it in shadow, adding to the air of abandonment Roy had seen even in the oldest of memories. No windows remained, and the door had rotted to the point it had fallen from its hinges. Moss had completely taken over the walls. It didn’t look particularly sanitary to be around.

“You know, this place grows more charming every time I see it,” Roy told Albus conversationally.

“It has a certain appeal to it,” Albus agreed in the same way.

Albus pulled a stick out of his pocket and waved his wand over it. The stick immediately grew and changed shape, until Gryffindor’s ornate sword was resting in Albus’ hand.

“Could you carry the sword?” Albus asked.

“Of course,” Roy agreed, taking the proffered weapon. While their plan was to take the intact horcrux with them to test the array along with the locket, they’d both agreed there was a possibility that whatever spell Riddle had put on it could be too dangerous to move the horcrux. In that case, they would destroy it here rather than risk leaving it whole.

Albus waved his wand in a series of complex figures, casting various detection and diagnostic spells. Some Roy knew, others he didn’t and guessed their purpose from context.

“Curious,” Albus said. “It appears Tom has left no surprises on the house itself. All the magic I can detect lies beneath the floor.”

“I hope it doesn’t explode if we step on it.”

“Only one way to find out,” Albus said.

He moved towards the house and Roy followed him, Fawkes flying comfortably above their heads. They stepped over roots, broken furniture, and shattered pottery as they moved into the shack. The rotten floorboards creaked ominously under their feet, but none gave way. They came to a stop in the middle of the room, wands trained on a floorboard that appeared no different from the others. Albus levitated it out of the way, revealing what looked like a solid gold box underneath.

“That’s tacky,” Roy commented. He cast a detection spell, and it came back with news of twisted magic right beneath the surface of the box.

The box itself couldn’t be moved with magic, but they managed to pick it up without touching it by using various floorboards as floating makeshift shovels. Albus cast a spell on the kitchen table to stabilize it before Roy lowered the box on it. Ten minutes of spells later, they confirmed the box itself had no harmful spells on it, which didn’t speak very favourably of what they were likely to find inside.

Albus cast a complex unlocking spell on the box and it sprang open, revealing its contents to be Marvolo Gaunt’s garish ring, something Roy should have expected in retrospect.

The ring was almost as Roy remembered from the memories, gold with a large black stone inlaid in it. From this close, and not hindered by the missing details of any memory, Roy could see there were lines engraved into the stone, a strange triangle with a circle inside that looked nothing like any symbol Roy had ever seen before.

Albus’ hand closed around the ring.

Fawkes cried out.
Roy turned before he could fully process what was happening, slamming the pommel of Gryffindor’s sword into Albus’ hand to force him to let go of the ring. The ring clattered to the floor, followed by Albus’ suddenly boneless body. Roy dove after him, catching Albus just before he banged his head into a broken pot.

Fawkes was already there, crying over Albus’ now blackened fingers.

“What the hell was that!?” Roy demanded. He brought his wand up and called to mind every healing spell he had learnt, but nothing had any effect. The diagnostic spell he cast only showed meaningless wiggles, and the healing spells bounced off Albus’ hand as though a barrier repelled them.

Roy turned to Fawkes.

“Take us to Hogwarts,” he ordered, and reached out to grasp Fawkes’ tail with his left hand while he kept hold of Albus with his right one.

He saw Albus’ hand close around the ring once more right before Fawkes complied with Roy’s order.

Roy batted the ring out of Albus’ hand with the sword again and pushed him down on one of the couches. He looked around, trying to find anything that might be of use, when Albus muttered something.

“Severus…”

Which was actually a good idea —the first one in a while— and Roy might have thought of it himself if he was more familiar with the man.

“Get Snape!” Roy barked at the portraits, who were giving them very baffled and curious looks.

He saw them startle and heard some rustling, but his attention was immediately back on Albus. Fawkes was crying over his hand again, and yet Roy could swear the black on Albus’ fingers had spread the slightest bit.

Cursing to himself, Roy raised his wand again and tried something other than basic healing spells. On the third attempt, and after shoving an exhausting amount of energy into it, Roy managed to freeze Albus’ hand in a stasis charm.

Chapter End Notes

About Dumbledore and the ring… There was no avoiding it. In canon, despite being fully aware that it was a horcrux, whatever spell Voldemort put on the ring was enough to compel Dumbledore to put it on, probably latching onto his desire for the Deathly Hallows. I have my doubts Dumbledore had realized just what Gaunt’s ring actually was before he laid eyes on it, or it’s likely he would’ve managed to resist it. As such, Roy had no forewarning to expect something might go wrong.
Hey, guys!

It’s been a long time since the last update (though admittedly not as long as certain previous instances), but finally I am here with chapter 22 :)

I’d like to thank everyone who’s taken the time to read and comment. While it’s true I don’t answer comments anymore (for which I’m very sorry, but I’m very short on time), you should know I love all of them. I go back through the comments when I’m feeling down to cheer myself up :)

Unfortunately, I will have very little time to write until December, and what little I’ll have I intend to focus on stories that I haven’t updated in a while, so it’s unlikely there’ll be a new chapter for Colours until after the New Year. I’m sitting a very important set of exams on October-November, and I’m focusing pretty much all of my effort on them. If I pass, I’ll get a job for the state that’s basically for life, so, as you can guess, I really, really, want to pass (...let’s not mention there are a little over a thousand job spots and over forty thousand people sitting the exams... shhhh)

Wish me luck, send good vibes, pray for me, or whatever you can do, please. Think about all the writing time I’ll have if I get a job xD

For now, though, enjoy the chapter :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Severus had been reinforcing the preservation spells on the jars in his office when Phineas Nigellus Black burst into the usually empty portrait frame on his wall announcing that Dumbledore was dying.

Severus hadn’t asked any questions; he’d grabbed the bag in which he kept his vast supplies of healing potions and rushed to the floo. He found Albus slumped on a couch, Mustang hovering over him with his wand trained on Albus’ right hand, a hand over which Fawkes was crying, perched on Albus’ lap. Albus’ fingers were blackened, somehow not healed despite having a phoenix crying liberally over them.

As he approached, Severus cast the most complete diagnostic spell he knew. The first thing the spell showed him was a powerful stasis charm wrapped around Albus’ whole hand, and what Severus discovered proved it had been the best course of action Mustang could have taken.

Mustang stepped out of Severus’ way without a word. Severus set the bag down and waited until all the results from the diagnostic spell had appeared —nothing good, he noted grimly— before asking Mustang to remove his charm. Severus immediately set to chanting the healing spells more likely to have any effect on this particular curse.

“There’s a vial with a golden potion in the bag,” he said without looking up from Albus’ hand. “Make sure Albus takes all of it.”
He heard Mustang move, and shortly after Mustang was keeping Albus’ head tilted back while he carefully tipped the potion down Albus’ throat. Albus’ skin was sickly pale, his eyes were lidded shut, and his breathing was heavy. However, as the potion settled and the healing spells acted, he lost some of his pallor and his eyelids fluttered open. Fawkes flew off to his usual perch, freeing Albus’ lap and giving him back some range of movement.

“What in Merlin’s name happened?” Severus demanded as soon as his concentration wasn’t required for any more spells.

“I... was a fool. Sorely tempted...”

“Tempted by what?” Severus asked, but he wasn’t the only one who spoke.

“You knew the horcrux is cursed. What were you thinking?” Mustang demanded.

Severus froze.

Albus’ expression turned more pained than it had been, and understanding dawned in Severus. Albus hadn’t wanted Severus to know what had cursed him. For who else would dare create a horcrux but the Dark Lord himself?

Albus closed his eyes, a gesture that often heralded a refusal to give any more information. Thus, when Albus replied to Mustang’s question, Severus was understandably surprised.

“The ring... Marvolo’s ring is no mere heirloom. It surprised me. I wasn’t expecting...” Albus trailed off, his head turning sideways to look past them, at something on the floor by Mustang’s feet.

Severus turned to look, and immediately found a gaudy ring with an inlaid stone. A stone carved with a symbol Severus had only seen drawn in fairy tale books and highly speculative essays.

“You can’t be serious,” Severus breathed out, and the only reason he didn’t dismiss the possibility altogether was because the one implying it was Albus Dumbledore.

“I am very serious, my boy. That is, without a doubt, the Resurrection Stone.”

Severus was vaguely aware of Mustang tensing up next to him, but his attention was soon focused solely on the ring lying innocently on the floor.

The Resurrection Stone, the dream of many a wizard, said to be able to breach the veil between life and death. Unable to bring people back to life despite what its name implied, it could, however, bring their souls to the world of the living as a shade, allowing communication with the dead. Allowing for conversation, for a new chance to apologize—

A crackle of light snapped Severus out of his thoughts. The stone floor rose, wrapping itself in a fist around the ring and hiding it from sight.

Somehow, at some point, Severus had taken a step forward. He stepped back, startled.

He looked first to Albus, who was falling back to the couch as though he had been in the process of standing up, then to Mustang, crouched on the floor before a quickly-sketched transmutation array, a piece of chalk clutched in his right hand.

“I’ll be taking care of that ring,” Mustang said, voice firm and leaving no room for arguments. Severus had heard him speak like that once before, during a conversation about Potter’s
Severus had no intention to argue. In this room the only one who hadn’t been ensnared by the ring was Mustang. Mustang, whom Severus suspected might be the only person aside from Albus who had known about the horcrux.

Severus’ mind, now free of the shock and the ring’s fog, was trying to make the most sense of the situation, to fit it with the puzzle pieces he already knew.

“This object you have me looking for,” he started slowly, looking at Albus, “would you happen to have any idea what it looks like?”

It took a moment, but Albus responded. Again.

“There is a likely possibility of it being the Cup of Helga Hufflepuff. It might even be the Diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw, if Tom was diligent and determined enough to locate it.”

*Of course*, Severus deadpanned in his own head. If the Dark Lord was capable of creating multiple horcruxes (which Severus didn’t find anywhere near as unlikely as he should), then why wouldn’t he have desecrated some of the wizarding world’s most cherished legendary items as he did so?

Surprisingly, or perhaps not so much, Albus had agreed to Severus’ strong suggestion that he rest for the remainder of the day, allowing Mustang to take the ring and speak to Severus about the situation. He had simply requested Severus come back tonight for a talk. The fact that Albus Dumbledore was willing to give so much freedom of movement to anyone under his command was nothing short of unprecedented, and it led Severus to once again wonder who, exactly, Roy Mustang was.

They had walked to Mustang’s office in silence, the stone fist that held the ring floating before them. Mustang set it in a corner of the room and threw a quick barrage of spells at it.

“I’ll work on something safer later,” he muttered, before turning around to face Severus.

Mustang didn’t offer a seat, and Severus didn’t request nor take one. There was so much adrenaline thrumming through his veins that he doubted he would be able to remain still much longer. He intended to go blast off some corner of the school grounds as soon as he could spare the time.

“How long does Albus have?” Mustang asked directly. Severus was surprised Albus hadn’t asked him earlier despite his exhaustion, but perhaps for once Albus was willing to respect the limits of the human body. He must already be unconscious again.

“Twenty months, two years at most. He is fortunate we were there for him after he was cursed, or he would be dead by now.” Severus replied bluntly. The Dark Lord really took no chances with his curses; the only reason Albus was alive at all was a combination of Mustang’s level headed thinking and Severus’ knowledge of the Dark Arts and Potions.

Mustang nodded, and a relieved glint in his eyes told Severus he had been expecting a worse prognosis.
“There is another horcrux you should be aware of.” That was how Severus learnt that the Dark Lord’s bloody snake, Nagini, was a horcrux.

He needed to destroy something. Badly.

Albus’ morning was shaping up to be as dreadful as the rest of the week had been so far. It had started with a very early conversation with Severus in which they had discussed Tom’s plans for Draco Malfoy, and in which Albus had drawn a terrible promise from Severus. Their meeting had been cut short by Tom’s summons of Severus through the Dark Mark. Shortly afterwards, Albus had received news from Kingsley that the Death Eaters had attacked. A muggle bridge had been destroyed, and what the aurors suspected to be giants had caused havoc on the countryside.

Albus had called an immediate meeting of the Order of the Phoenix, and sent his own patronus to go fetch Roy.

Order members were still arriving at Grimmauld Place when Tonks’ jack rabbit patronus appeared and spoke five words in what might be the grimmest voice many of those present had ever heard from Nymphadora Tonks.

“Amelia Bones has been murdered.”

Silence fell in the kitchen. Many people just stopped moving, some of them staring at the place where Tonks’ patronus had just vanished.

From the back of the room, Sirius cursed.

The Order meeting dragged on.

It appeared that Riddle was trying to overwhelm both the Order and the Ministry by making as many moves at once as he could manage. It was a show of power, a way for him to prove that, despite his losses at the Department of Mysteries, he still had plenty of pawns to use in this war.

None of the Order members who worked for the Ministry were present. Even Arthur Weasley had been called to lend his wand to the cleanup tasks required after so many public moves. This left the Order lacking in inside information save for those first reports of events.

Two hours into the meeting an owl had arrived with the morning edition of the Daily Prophet, later than its usual release time; a grim affair surprisingly lacking in pro-Ministry propaganda that betrayed how little faith many people had in the Ministry these days. For once the newspaper served as a source of information, revealing the extent of the damage from the attacks. There was an entire page in which a reporter rambled on about the future of the Ministry now that one of its
most important members had been killed, a page that must have caused disquiet in more than one person. It was clear whatever organism the Ministry had in place to monitor the newspaper releases hadn’t gone over the morning’s edition before it was printed and sent out; otherwise that day’s *Prophet* would have been half the length it was.

Not much was accomplished that morning.

During the lunch break, a second owl arrived, this one bringing a special edition of the newspaper. Cornelius Fudge had finally been sacked, and to replace him the Wizengamot had chosen a man named Rufus Scrimgeour, who had been the head of the Auror Office until today. Despite how eager most of the Order had been to see Fudge lose his position as Minister, the mood was too sombre for anyone to show any cheer over it. Privately, Roy thought the Wizengamot had waited until Voldemort acted to dismiss Fudge, so that they could place the blame on his shoulders and have the new Minister arrive under a more hopeful light.

The articles praising Scrimgeour’s brilliant career and skills certainly suggested as much.

The Order meeting was finally over and Sirius thought its conclusion was way overdue. Nothing had been accomplished today, no useful reports given and no tasks assigned. It had been a grim affair that had reminded Sirius far too much of those last few meetings before the end of the first war against Voldemort, when loss after loss hit them and the days did nothing but grow darker. A few people had left Grimmauld Place less sober than they had arrived, but nobody had commented on it.

Only Sirius and Roy remained at the kitchen now.

“Want to stay the night?” Sirius had asked right after Dumbledore had called the meeting off, and Roy had agreed with an absent nod. If things followed the patterns from last time, then tomorrow there would be a new meeting in which their Ministry employees would report. Unless Voldemort attacked again.

“What do you say we do something useful?” Roy asked, voice calm but serious in a way Sirius rarely heard from him.

Sirius looked down from the ceiling to raise an eyebrow at Roy.

“Didn’t know there was anything useful to do,” he said, maybe more cuttingly than he had intended.

“We never did go over what you learnt from Kreacher,” Roy said.

Sirius snorted.

“Not much to learn there. The little bugger used a loophole in an order to go crawling to my dear cousins.” Sirius had nearly wrung Kreacher’s neck out when he had heard Kreacher’s very unwilling answers to his questions. He had only refrained because he was better than that. Strangling a house elf in rage was something Bellatrix would do. Sirius was *better than that.*
“Yes, but why?” Roy asked. He leant forward on the table and laced his fingers before his mouth, fixing his gaze on Sirius. Sirius had the sudden impulse to sit up straight, and he could only guess how effective that look must be on Roy’s students.

But Sirius wasn’t a student, so he forced himself to remain slouched in his own chair.

“That’s no big mystery. Kreacher’s always hated me. He’s all for that blood purity bullshit my family used to spew.”

Roy hummed and fell silent long enough that Sirius thought the conversation was over.

“When you say your family, do you mean your brother as well?”

Sirius didn’t snort this time. It was a close thing, but that small, bitter part of him that always choked up when thoughts of Regulus came up stopped him.

“Yeah. Kreacher adored my parents, but he worshipped Regulus. He loves to bemoan that I’m the only Black left now.”

Roy hummed again. Sirius could see the figurative cogs in his brain turn, but he had never claimed to understand Roy’s overcomplicated head.

“If I remember correctly,” Roy began to say, slow and deliberate, “your brother disappeared near the end of the previous war. And from what little hints there are, it doesn’t seem like it was due to the Ministry’s actions.”

And there, in Roy’s nearly toneless words, was Sirius’ trouble with Regulus. His disappearance. The mysterious way in which he had vanished without leaving a single trace. The one fact that hinted Sirius’ little brother might not have been as on board with Voldemort’s bloodthirsty agenda as their parents had been. The one answer Sirius would never have, because Regulus was gone. And what if the rumours were true? What if Regulus had wanted a way out? What if—?

“Could you call Kreacher?” Roy asked, thankfully snapping Sirius out of that particular spiralling train of thought. It never led anywhere good.

“What are you planning?” Not that he cared for Kreacher’s fate—as far as Sirius was concerned Roy could go and burn him to a crisp—but he’d prefer to be in the know from the beginning.

“I want to talk to him. As things are, he is a threat to the Order, and keeping him confined to a cupboard isn’t a long-term solution.”

Sirius knew as much; the entire Order did. There had been more than one discreet suggestion to get rid of Kreacher, but it was an action Dumbledore wouldn’t condone, and everybody knew as much. It was why it hadn’t been suggested in any meeting since Kreacher’s treachery was discovered.

“Kreacher!” Sirius barked out.

There was a stretch of silence, the clearest sign of rebellion a house elf could show to a direct order from their master, and then a loud crack accompanied Kreacher’s appearance before him in the kitchen. If looks could kill, Sirius would be dead.

“We have some questions for you. I’m ordering you to answer them. You can’t use magic or attempt to harm us in any way,” Sirius snapped at him.

Another stretch of silence, then Kreacher nodded with as much reluctance as he was capable of
showing when faced with a direct order.

“Tell me, Kreacher,” Roy began. His voice wasn’t conversational as Dumbledore’s would have been. No, instead, it reminded Sirius of that planning session from before the Department of Mysteries.

“When you ran off to work with Lord Voldemort,” Kreacher flinched at the name, “did it occur to you that he is most likely to blame for Regulus Black’s disappearance?”

Sirius expected Kreacher to fly into a rage at those words, to attempt to lunge at Roy for daring to utter Regulus’ name before the power behind Sirius’ orders froze him. What Sirius wasn’t expecting was for Kreacher to flinch again and recoil as though he’d been struck, nor for his large eyes to widen almost impossibly.

A long silence followed, but this one Sirius suspected had nothing to do with any sort of rebellious behaviour.

“Master Regulus—“ Kreacher finally spoke, but he choked off the rest of his words. Instead, he shivered.

Master Regulus would have understood, Sirius’ mind provided. And it was true, wasn’t it? In a way. Any pureblood supporter would believe so, any pureblood supporter would reject the possibility that Regulus might have tried to flee. Especially Kreacher, who had always loved Regulus above any other in the family. If anyone was to refuse the possibility that Regulus could have changed his mind, it would be Kreacher.

And yet Kreacher had cut himself off. Refused to say the expected words.

“Kreacher,” Roy’s voice cut through the kitchen, softer than it had been before, and Sirius watched Kreacher’s body stiffen, “do you know what happened to Regulus?”

Kreacher was still as a statue, not even breathing. Only his eyes moved, up from the floor to look at where Roy was sitting, then sideways to Sirius. Sirius had no idea what his face must look like, he had no idea what he even thought of this conversation that wasn’t going anywhere he had expected it to go. Whatever Sirius’ face looked like, though, was enough to make Kreacher crumble.

Sirius had stormed off of the kitchen with a bottle of firewhiskey. After listening to Kreacher’s tale, Roy expected Sirius would pass out drunk in Buckbeak’s room. Nobody could blame him for it. Sirius clearly needed some time alone, time to grieve and fight whatever demons had ensnared him as Kreacher spoke. And Roy could do nothing but wait for him to work through his grief. For all his skills, Roy Mustang had never been one who knew how to deal with other people’s grief in a tactful manner.

Yet there was something Roy could do.

He turned his back to the door and his eyes fell on the crumpled form of Kreacher on the floor. He’d fallen there sobbing, as though a marionette whose strings had been cut, as soon as Sirius had left the kitchen.
Roy walked over and lowered himself to one knee before Kreacher.

“There is only one reason anyone would want to destroy that locket, Kreacher,” he said as softly as he could manage, which admittedly wasn’t as soft as he probably should be right now. Kreacher looked up at him and sniffled, but he didn’t speak. “Destroying it is a step to kill Lord Voldemort.”

Horror took over Kreacher’s face, and he let out a long wail right before he started slamming his forehead on the floor, insulting himself as he did.

Roy reached down to hold him still, and Kreacher thrashed and continued with his insults for a long minute before he stilled.

“It’s gone,” Kreacher whimpered. “Kreacher couldn’t destroy it, and it’s gone!” Kreacher renewed his efforts to hurt himself and Roy had to physically pull him off the floor and hold him aloft to stop him.

“It’s not,” he said, but Kreacher didn’t listen. ”Kreacher, look at me,” Roy ordered in his most authoritative voice. Kreacher froze and did as told. “The locket isn’t gone. I’m working on a way to destroy it.” Not entirely true, but before Roy could think much about it he found himself with an armful of newly-sobbing house elf swearing his services to help destroy Lord Voldemort as Regulus Black had attempted.

Usually, Tonks loved her job. Sometimes, though, she truly hated it.

After today she didn’t want to be alone, and she most certainly didn’t want even a second left with her own thoughts. Amelia Bones’ death had been hard on everyone, certainly; Tonks had respected her greatly, but above any personal feelings, Amelia’s death had put an end to the hope that the Order could count on the Ministry’s assistance to fight this war.

Yet it was the bridge that haunted Tonks.

She refused to close her eyes for fear of seeing the child. There had been many victims, both dead and injured, for the Death Eaters had attacked at the busiest hour in the morning. Tonks had seen many dead people over the years she had been an auror, and while she wouldn’t say she was used to it, she had certainly developed a certain skill to detach herself from a case. No amount of skill would have prevented her from throwing up when she saw that little boy strewn over a broken vehicle, his body ripped to pieces as though someone—a giant— had ripped him in half and tossed him aside. The terrified mask the child’s face had become in death told Tonks more than she would ever have wanted to know about his death.

She called for Grimmauld Place at the Ministry’s fireplace with barely enough conscious thought to remember to keep her voice low. She didn’t want to go home. Her parents would try to make her feel better, Tonks knew, but the only thing that might help her was to get completely plastered, and that wasn’t something she could do at home. Sirius, though, would understand. He would be more than willing to get Tonks drunk and keep her company while she wasn’t really fit to be around people.

Tonks stumbled through the fireplace and fell to her knees on the kitchen floor, barely managing to
stop her fall with her hands.

She heard chairs scrape across the floor, and wondered vaguely if she had arrived during the meeting before Sirius crouched in front of her, a worried expression on his face.

“Tonks? You okay?” Sirius asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Tonks didn’t reply. Her eyes caught on who was standing behind Sirius, lingering by the table, and her tenuous control on her emotions snapped.

In hindsight, throwing her wand at Roy wasn’t the smartest move, but she needed to throw something and her wand was the only thing she had on hand.

“You idiot!” she accused, nearly choking on her words. “Don’t you dare hide again.”

Roy blinked. Tonks had never thought she would see Roy Mustang looking, for all accounts, at a loss for words.

She snorted. Then burst out laughing. If there were tears running down her face, the boys had the courtesy not to mention them. Sirius helped her to her feet and to the table, and Roy set a bottle of something alcoholic and very strong in front of her.

Tonks would remember very little of that night, and wake up on the couch with Sirius and Roy sprawled on armchairs nearly.

When Kreacher brought them coffee and a light breakfast, Tonks was fairly certain she must still be drunk.

Rufus Scrimgeour had hoped he wouldn’t become Minister for Magic. He knew the Wizengamot had been debating between him and Amelia Bones to replace Fudge, but he had honestly hoped Madam Bones would be given the job. She was a very competent woman, had always been a good boss, and she would have made a fantastic Minister. Rufus much preferred his old job as an auror, to be on the front lines fighting while others took care of the bureaucracy.

But now Amelia Bones was dead and Rufus had been made Minister for Magic. With no other competent candidates, he had been left with no choice but to accept.

He didn’t think Ministers usually spent their first night on the job waiting outside of the office of the headmaster of Hogwarts to be allowed in for an audience with the man, but Rufus knew Albus Dumbledore was the person best prepared to fight this war. Thanks to Fudge’s foolishness, the Ministry had spent an entire year in denial. Now that the war had openly started, they were woefully underprepared to fight it. Dumbledore, meanwhile, had a group of highly competent people already working to oppose the Death Eaters. Even more competent than Rufus had thought only weeks ago. He had seen the aftermath of the battle at the Department of Mysteries.

The gargoyle moved aside to reveal the staircase that led to Dumbledore’s office.

Rufus steeled himself. Dumbledore was unlikely to be amenable to Rufus’ proposals. Not that...
Rufus could blame him, given the events of the last year, but he hoped that reinstating Dumbledore to all his former positions would help ease the path to a common understanding.

The Ministry could use Dumbledore’s great influence and reputation. They could use Harry Potter’s public support. And the aurors would benefit greatly from knowing whatever spell Roy Mustang had used at the Department of Mysteries.

Chapter End Notes

In canon, Snape scolded Dumbledore for not going to him immediately after he was injured, saying he could’ve gotten him more time if he had. He destroyed the horcrux first, and I don’t think he had Fawkes along. Here, things are different, and so Dumbledore’s prognosis is better. Still dying, but he’s been given more time.

In Half-Blood Prince, Snape remarked that Tonks’ patronus had changed. This change was due to her feelings for Remus. As you may have noticed, this development hasn’t taken place in this story, thus I am using the patronus Rowling said Tonks had before the wolf.

I intended for Tonks’ scene to be different, but she insisted she wanted to yell at Roy a little.

As for Scrimgeour, I truly believe he’d rather be on the front lines, provided there is a competent leader, of course. People who become aurors aren’t the sort to want a political career, and whenever an auror has become Minister it was because of circumstances, not because they openly wanted to be (just look at Kingsley).

Remember that you can find me on tumblr.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Finally, I bring you chapter 23! :D

These have been some complicated months. After months of studying to memorize a program I had never used in my life, I took a four hour drive to another city, where the exam was held. Once there, I found myself unable to take the exam, as they had provided me (a person with a grave visual disability) a 15” screen to work with despite my request for disability accommodations. I filed a complaint, of course, but I was pretty down for a couple weeks after that. Now, with this whole coronavirus thing, I have spent the last ten days down with symptoms. I don't know if I actually have covid or not, because the government is handling the whole situation horribly and they're barely testing people.

So, basically, not the best of times. Still, I'm pretty satisfied with some of the scenes in this chapter, and I hope you enjoy them.

On a bright note, we have new and beautiful fanart! A comic depicting the Department of Mysteries, by amandaigaskins.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Roy didn’t return to Hogwarts until after dinner the following day. He had spent the time with Sirius and Tonks, doing little of anything but lying about and regretting their life choices until Kreacher had appeared with a hangover potion that had returned them to being functional human beings. The rest of the day had been spent going through suggestions for the students’ defence group. Tonks had needed a distraction, which Roy had been more than willing to provide, and by the time they had departed from Grimmauld Place, Tonks had been mostly back to her usual self.

It had been nice to spend some time with friends. To know he still had friends.

Roy felt more human than he had in weeks when he stepped through the fireplace and into Albus’ office.

“Ah, Roy. Welcome back,” Albus greeted him jovially from his place at his desk.

By now Roy knew Albus Dumbledore well enough to recognize that particular cheerful tone of voice as a cue that Albus had something to discuss with him.

Roy raised his eyebrows and made for his usual seat.

“I take it yesterday’s meeting was interesting?” he asked.

Albus' sigh wasn’t surprising.

“That would depend on your definition of the word interesting.”

Roy settled back and crossed his hands on his lap.
“Meaning?”

“Meaning that, while the Ministry no longer wishes to openly oppose our efforts, the new Minister for Magic and myself do not see eye to eye.”

That was as much as Roy had expected. Disappointing, yes, but he would have been shocked if the meeting had brought out any positive developments.

“Rufus Scrimgeour is rather interested in you,” Albus continued. “He asked about the magic you utilized at the Department of Mysteries. He believes that such a spell would be of great assistance to the aurors.”

“I hope you told him I have no intention of sharing that knowledge,” Roy said, though he knew Albus must have done so. Albus had understood well the dangers of Flame Alchemy, and he was too well acquainted with the world to believe sharing its workings would lead to anything but disaster.

“I did. The Minister didn’t appear surprised. He came prepared for my refusal.”

Albus reached over to the left and picked up two parchment envelopes, which he placed before Roy on the desk. They were addressed to him.

“These are citations from the Ministry of Magic. Officially, they want your statement regarding the events at the Department of Mysteries, and for you to be a witness at Dolores Umbridge’s trial.”

And, of course, to have a chance to get Roy away from Hogwarts.

Sighing, Roy reached forward and picked up the letters. He opened first one, then the other, and gave them a cursory read over.

“Assuming what happened with Harry’s trial last summer isn’t the standard procedure, how do these processes usually work?”

Much to the Order’s surprise and general disapproval, Roy had refused to take an escort to the Ministry the day he was scheduled to give his statement about what had happened at the Department of Mysteries —apparently, setting that trial up would take some time. Roy didn’t expect any excessively bold moves on the Ministry’s part, not given the effort they were putting forth to clean face after Fudge’s removal, and he preferred to form his own opinions and cause his first impression unimpeded by any Order member’s expectations or good intentions.

According to Tonks, security at the Ministry had been increased after the Death Eater’s incursion. Roy was subjected to a few scanning spells, and some were cast on his wand as well —to determine if he had performed any dark magic, according to the guard. None of the spells reacted to Roy’s white gloves.

He was greeted right past the security checkpoint by a man Roy vaguely remembered from the clean-up that had immediately followed the fight at the Department of Mysteries: Gawain Robards, recently elected Head of the Auror Office after Scrimgeour’s promotion. While being led to the Auror Office to give his statement should have been the standard procedure, Roy wasn’t surprised when Robards instead escorted him to Scrimgeour’s office, claiming that the Minister wished to see
to such a dire matter in person.

Rufus Scrimgeour’s appearance fit more or less what Roy had expected to find: a slightly dishevelled man—despite clear efforts to appear otherwise—with an obvious old injury, no doubt a consequence of his job as an auror. While, unlike Moody, he kept both legs, Scrimgeour used the assistance of a cane and had a noticeable limp when he moved.

Scrimgeour had been standing when Robards opened the door into the office, and he wasted no time in approaching Roy.

“Ah, Professor Mustang. I have been looking forward to meeting you,” Scrimgeour said, extending a hand for Roy to shake.

Roy did, keeping his grip deliberately firm but not too strong. This wasn’t a competition of wills. Not yet, at least.

“Minister. I’m afraid I can’t say the same, as I hadn’t heard of you until quite recently.”

Robards, standing to one side, gave Roy an incredulous look, but it was Scrimgeour’s reaction that interested Roy. Scrimgeour didn’t appear offended by Roy’s admission, though the smile he gave him wasn’t quite flawless.

“Understandable. I believe you have been focused on Hogwarts until very recently? Please, take a seat, Professor. I’m afraid this is an important matter we must attend to.”

They settled around the desk, Scrimgeour on his fancy seat that didn’t quite rival Albus’ throne-like chair, Roy on a comfortable armchair, and Robards on an armchair to one side of the desk, parchment and quill poised to take notes on the meeting. Roy somehow doubted it was standard procedure for the Head Auror to take notes while the Minister for Magic asked the questions, but he didn’t bring attention to it.

Scrimgeour offered a drink, which Roy refused. He didn’t miss the tension around Scrimgeour’s eyes and mouth. Roy couldn’t comment on his skills as a wizard, but Rufus Scrimgeour was most definitely not a politician. While decent enough for daily situations, his skill to control his own body’s reactions left a lot to be desired in such a field. Not that, from what little Roy had seen, Cornelius Fudge had been any better.

Scrimgeour forewent a drink himself and instead sat up straighter, squaring his shoulders and settling his hands, right palm wrapped over left fist, on the desk.

“We are here to discuss the events that took place at the Department of Mysteries, Ministry of Magic, on June 18th, 1996. Interview by Rufus Scrimgeour, Minister for Magic, to Roy Mustang, Professor of Alchemy at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, witness and participant at the incident. Notes taken by Head Auror Gawain Robards,” Scrimgeour stated in an official manner, followed by the case number and current date and time.

Robards’ quill was enchanted to write on its own.

“Professor Mustang,” Scrimgeour addressed him, much more in his element now than he had been a moment ago, “how did you come to learn of the presence of Death Eaters at the Department of Mysteries?”

Roy leant back on his armchair, a movement that would be seen as him getting himself comfortable, and crossed his hands on his lap.
“I had just returned to the school from St. Mungo’s, and was walking around the second floor when I heard a commotion coming from Dolores Umbridge’s office—“

“Professor Mustang,” Scrimgeour interrupted him. “We are here to discuss the events of the Department of Mysteries, not the situation with Dolores Umbridge.” Roy could tell it took a great effort to speak those words politely instead of barking them out as an order.

“I’m aware,” Roy said calmly. “However, it was what happened with Umbridge that led me to discover about the Death Eaters. So, if you don’t mind?”

Robards gave Scrimgeour an uncomfortable look. It was clear that Dolores Umbridge and her upcoming, very public trial, was a sore topic in the Ministry. Tonks had told Roy there had been an attempt to hold the trial behind closed doors, but the outrage over what the students had already shared about Umbridge’s reign of terror over Hogwarts was so great that the Wizengamot had refused to even listen to the proposal. Besides, as Shacklebolt had pointed out, hiding that trial would make for a terrible start at an attempt to distance the current administration from Fudge’s rule.

Scrimgeour gestured for Roy to continue.

And so Roy did, weaving the truth into a story that conveniently omitted he had used alchemy on Umbridge, keeping out the name of the loved one Lord Voldemort had attempted to use to lure Harry Potter out to the Department of Mysteries (Scrimgeour hadn’t flinched when Roy had used Riddle’s chosen name, which was interesting; Robards, however, had), and giving no details on how he knew the individuals who had accompanied him that day. He once again left Sirius’ name out of the story, as well as the location where they had met—it turned out mentioning the fidelius charm was a very effective way to stop that line of questioning.

Roy had no choice but to reveal that he had used an alchemical array to neutralize the Death Eaters, because everyone who had gone with him had known as much and he couldn’t risk such a potential inconsistency in his story.

“No,” Roy said before Scrimgeour could even finish his next question. “I will not share that array. Aside from the fact that it would take literal years for anyone to learn how to control the technique, I refuse to put such power into anyone’s hands.”

“But it’s safe for you to have it?” Robards asked, not for the first time interrupting the questioning.

Roy gave him an unimpressed look.

“Whether it is safe or not is a moot point, Auror Robards. I have it. I know this power, and I won’t pass it on to anyone. End of story.”

Robards sank back into his seat. Then, clearly realizing what he had just done, straightened again.

“That array could change the course of the war,” he argued.

“Yes,” Roy agreed. “But can you guarantee it would be for the better?”

The silence that followed was telling. The Ministry’s security had been heavily compromised less than a month ago, and Roy was fully aware there had been spies, both willing and imperiused, in important Ministry positions during the last war.

It was clear Robards and Scrimgeour knew it as well.
“If that is all, I believe we are done with the interview,” Scrimgeour said, breaking the awkward silence. “You may go, Gawain,” he added, glancing at Robards before focusing fully on Roy. “If you don’t mind, Professor Mustang, I was hoping we could have a conversation. I wanted to speak to you the other day, but I was informed you weren’t at Hogwarts.”

“I needed a break from life,” Roy offered, and made no move to stand up.

Much to Roy’s surprise, Scrimgeour actually smiled.

“Don’t we all?”

Robards stood up and excused himself, closing the door after him.

“I must admit,” Scrimgeour said when the door was closed, “that, after my conversation with Dumbledore, I did not expect you to agree to remain here.”

“Well, I am not Albus,” Roy pointed out. He noted the raised eyebrow at his use of Albus’ given name. “While I admit, after the events over this past year, I have many reservations about the Ministry, I also understand that any infighting between those who oppose Lord Voldemort would only benefit him, so I am willing to listen to whatever proposal you have.”

Scrimgeour gave him a scrutinizing look.

“You are a very brave man, aren’t you, Professor?” Roy simply raised his eyebrows. “Throughout this interview, you have used You-Know-Who’s name on multiple occasions, and not even once have you hesitated about it. Nowadays I know of only one other man who dares to do so.”

Roy shrugged.

“It’s just a name. And not even a very imaginative one.”

Roy had the pleasure of seeing Rufus Scrimgeour choke on nothing. He waited for Scrimgeour to be done coughing and then compose himself again.

“...I see,” Scrimgeour said eventually, at a clear loss for words.

Roy held back a smirk.

“If you don’t mind, Minister, I would like to take over the conversation from this point on.”

“Oh? How so?” Scrimgeour asked, sounding more curious than annoyed.

“I spoke to Albus about your meeting, and I must agree with most of what he said to you. However, that doesn’t mean I am not open to other forms of cooperation.”

Scrimgeour tensed, his face going stony, but he nodded for Roy to continue.

“First of all, Harry Potter is a child. While it has been made clear that Voldemort and his Death Eaters do not care about the ages of their victims, that is no reason for us to follow that same mentality when we have other options available. I cannot condone the usage of a child as a war symbol. That said, even if you somehow gained Albus’ consent, Mr. Potter would refuse to cooperate with you. The Ministry has done him much harm over the past year, and he has no reason to trust in it now.”

Scrimgeour gave a stiff nod. While Albus hadn’t gone into much detail about this part of their conversation, Roy knew it was unlikely that he had bothered to explain the reasoning behind his
refusal to allow Scrimgeour to use Harry for propaganda.

“You must understand, Minister, that actions have consequences. The face and standing of the Ministry may have changed, but that doesn’t erase what has happened in the past.” Scrimgeour opened his mouth to speak, but Roy continued before he could utter a word. “I’m not condemning you for staying silent this past year. I don’t know what your beliefs were all this time, but I understand that sometimes it is best to remain under an ineffective or even dangerous power in order to do as much good as the circumstances will allow. What I mean to say is that now words aren’t enough. If you want the support of those of us who have spent this last year opposing Voldemort, you will have to prove yourself worthy of that support.”

Scrimgeour stayed silent for long moments following Roy’s words. He may be no politician, but he was clearly a soldier, and the scrutinizing look he was giving Roy now left him with no doubts that he was evaluating Roy as one right now.

“I take it you have a few ideas on how I could start gaining that support.” It wasn’t a question.

Roy smiled mirthlessly.

“Just one. Sirius Black.”

Scrimgeour scoffed.

“We’ve had no leads since we were informed he was in London last September.”

Roy snorted.

“Minister, please,” he said, perhaps with more exasperation than he should have. Scrimgeour was clearly not the type to play the political game —at least not well— so Roy didn’t see the point in dancing circles around this topic in particular. “You were Head of the Auror Office two years ago, weren’t you?” Roy asked, but didn’t bother to wait for an answer. He had investigated Scrimgeour prior to this meeting. “You know what happened at Hogwarts two years ago with Sirius Black and Harry Potter and his friends.”

It was Scrimgeour’s turn to snort, but he paused immediately after and gave Roy an incredulous look.

“You cannot be serious.”

“You don’t have to believe me,” Roy said, shrugging. “Right now, you have twelve Death Eaters in custody. According to Harry Potter’s account, it was Peter Pettigrew who performed the ritual that gave Lord Voldemort back his body, and Mr. Potter named a few of your current prisoners as some of the Death Eaters who answered Voldemort’s call that night. Any of them could confirm Pettigrew’s survival. As for Black being a Death Eater... I’m certain you can confirm that too. With no need for secrecy, I’m sure the truth has made its rounds through the Death Eater ranks. I wouldn’t be surprised if they find it amusing. And, unless I am very much mistaken, the Ministry has decent stores of veritaserum, which should guarantee the validity of any responses you obtain.”

Scrimgeour stared at him for another long moment. He was an intimidating enough man that such a gaze would have been effective on many people he questioned. Roy simply waited him out.

“Professor Mustang. You do realize that you have just admitted to being in contact with one of the most wanted criminals in the British Wizarding World, don’t you?”

“Actually, I haven’t admitted such to a thing,” Roy replied. He had very carefully limited his
arguments to information he could have easily obtained from sources other than Sirius himself. “I simply pointed out a way in which you could finally solve the matter of Sirius Black. If I, and quite a lot of other people, am right, then you would clear the name of a powerful wizard who could assist in the war against Lord Voldemort and show you are willing to take necessary action, even if it may not paint the Ministry under the best of lights. And, unless I am very much mistaken, the blame for Sirius Black’s wrongful imprisonment would fall neatly on the shoulders of Bartemius Crouch Sr., whose reputation was already ruined when it was revealed he had smuggled his son out of Azkaban and unwittingly enabled the return of Lord Voldemort to power.”

Roy could see the wheels turning in Scrimgeour’s head. Roy had just given him the tools to clear Sirius’ name and improve his standing with the Order of the Phoenix. Scrimgeour was no fool, he had likely already guessed that if Sirius was in fact innocent, he must be connected to the Order somehow. He might even have gone as far as guessing Sirius’ name was the one Roy had refused to give during the questioning.

Roy certainly hoped so.

“You raise a compelling argument, Professor Mustang,” Scrimgeour finally said. “And, I guess, it would be no hassle to add a few extra questions to the prisoners’ interrogations.”

“I’m glad you see it that way,” Roy said, offering his first sincere smile since his arrival.

“I suppose we are done for today, are we not?” Scrimgeour asked.

“I’d say so. I don’t believe we have anything else to discuss until a few matters have been dealt with,” Roy agreed.

He waited for Scrimgeour to stand up before doing so himself.

“I will see you at Dolores Umbridge’s trial then, Professor Mustang.”

“You did what?” Sirius asked. His fork fell out of his limp hand, but he didn’t appear to notice.

Not that anyone could blame him.

Mustang had returned from his meeting with Rufus Scrimgeour not long ago. He had passed through Professor Dumbledore’s office, both to report and to cover up for his next destination, before coming to Grimmauld Place for lunch.

A good amount of Order members had gathered at Grimmauld Place throughout the morning, worried about how Mustang’s meeting might have gone. The Order had yet to reach a consensus about Mustang and his actions at the Department of Mysteries: not everybody was as willing to trust him as Sirius and Tonks had proved to be, and some had even raised doubts about Mustang’s loyalty to the Order and his reasons for wanting to go to the Ministry alone.

Mustang’s account over lunch had calmed many nerves, proving to be even amusing on some points —the Ministry’s unease over Umbridge was something the Order found grim satisfaction in. Until now, when Mustang had dropped a figurative dungbomb in the middle of lunch.
“It seemed the right moment. Albus’ dismissal of the Ministry is too hasty. While it’s true they are unlikely to be of much assistance, they can have their uses,” Mustang answered.

The response to those words didn’t take long to come.

Everyone spoke at once. Some shocked by Mustang’s casual disregard of Albus Dumbledore’s decisions. Others were more focused on Roy’s actions themselves.

Because he had, somehow, convinced Rufus Scrimgeour to clear Sirius’ name.

That was, of course, provided that Scrimgeour followed through with Mustang’s suggestion. The Order’s faith in the Ministry had never been particularly strong, and it had reached a new low point over this past year.

Roy stood with his back to Albus, looking out one of the many windows that showed the school grounds in their stunning summer glory, and remained silent. Albus waited, giving him time to process the information he had just shared. Severus’ report about Narcissa Malfoy’s visit to him last night wasn’t altogether surprising. Somewhat unexpected, certainly, but Severus had always maintained a close friendship with the Malfoys, and Narcissa Malfoy was nothing if not a devoted mother.

“I understand the benefits of having Professor Snape kill you instead of Draco Malfoy if the war is still raging when the time comes,” Roy said finally. He had crossed his hands behind his back, and his stance was too straight to be called relaxed, but not tense enough to be rigid either. “However, have you considered the possibility that the war might be over before Malfoy is cornered into attempting to murder you?”

“I have,” Albus replied. Draco Malfoy would be given some time to act, considering the second part of his orders, and their search for the horcruxes was advanced enough that Albus hoped they would be able to collect all but Nagini before his time was up. “If the war ends before Draco makes his move and we are both still alive, I will put an end to myself before the Unbreakable Vow can kill Severus.”

Roy turned to meet his eyes, expression grim. After a moment, he nodded.

“Any ideas on how to deal with Malfoy’s other task?” Roy asked, walking over to his usual armchair.

“Severus will offer his assistance to Draco in hopes of learning his plans before he sets them in motion. However, I am open to suggestions.”

Roy’s eyes slid away from Albus, up the wall behind him, and a pensive expression took over his face.

“How familiar are the students with the appearances of the former Heads of the school?”
Roy had pondered over the possibility of writing this letter for a while now, going back and forth on both its contents and its recipient. When it came down to it, though, the fact remained that he had built a much better rapport with Hermione Granger than he had with Harry Potter, and after an entire year of correcting their exams and assisting them with their projects, he knew Hermione would provide a much more detailed report.

Thus, Roy finally sat down and began to compose a short missive.

_Dear Miss Granger,_

_I hope your holidays thus far are going well. I would enquire after your homework, but I believe by now you will have already finished it and be in search of new academic pursuits. May I recommend muggle sciences? A deeper knowledge of Chemistry and Physics would be most beneficial, for you and for any student who wishes to continue on with Alchemy next year._

_I am writing to you to request information on the Defence Club (Dumbledore’s Army, truly?). If I am to become its overseer, I would like to know what we will be working with beforehand. Could you write me a list of the spells and tactics you studied? I would also like to know how you set up the training room. While I expect Umbridge dismantled it, any information you can give me would be useful to decide how the new one will be organized. Likewise, if you have any suggestions you would like to see implemented, please feel free to share them with me. I wish for this activity to be as useful as possible, and for that to happen, feedback is a necessity._

_Awaiting your response,_

_Prof. Roy Mustang_

Roy startled awake, clapping his hands before he could fully process his surroundings. Fire burst in the middle of the room, followed by a musical yet indignant trill that snapped Roy out of his battle-ready daze.

Grimacing, Roy clapped again to extinguish the fire, and was met by the very unimpressed gaze of Fawkes. The phoenix was perched on Roy’s newly-scorched coffee table, looking considerably more dishevelled than usual.

Roy raised his eyebrows at the bird.

“Don’t give me that look,” he said dryly, but felt relieved to know Albus had the forethought to send Fawkes to wake him up instead of a too flammable house elf.

Speaking of waking, Roy noticed the light streaming in through the window and glanced over at the clock. He was unsurprised to see it was already past noon and he had missed breakfast. Roy then looked down, to where his notebook had fallen after he passed out, and felt a small flood of relief at knowing he hadn’t burnt his research. While he knew it by heart, writing it again would be a pain.

“I take it Albus wants to see me?” he asked, focusing back on Fawkes.

Fawkes, who hopped into the air and slammed into Roy, wrapping both of them in his flames.
A loud crash broke the silence in the office. Albus spun around, wand out at the ready, only to falter at the tableau that greeted him. Roy was sprawled on top of the broken coffee table—which had been very much whole before Albus turned his back to the office—and glaring at Fawkes, who perched rather smugly on Roy’s chest.

*Oh, dear.*

Albus lowered his wand.

“What did you do?” he asked in amusement, not sure which of the two he was addressing. It had been a long time since he had seen Fawkes be so careless with anyone, as Albus’ age no longer allowed for such things and most people were too reverential to a phoenix to ever figure out said phoenix had a temper as fiery as its rebirth.

Fawkes trilled at him happily and flew off to his perch, leaving Roy to pick himself up from the remnants of the table.

“I may have, *accidentally*, set him on fire,” Roy said, shooting a glare in Fawkes’ direction.

Fawkes trilled in response, a sound Albus knew to interpret as a refusal to believe whatever was said to him.

“Accidentally?” Albus asked. He pointed his wand at the table and cast a non-verbal *reparo* on it.

“I was asleep and he startled me. I just,” here Roy grimaced, “reacted.”

Reacted. By setting an ally on fire. Albus didn’t ask; he remembered war well, what honed instincts could do to someone, and he didn’t want to know what kind of circumstances would result in a person attacking so quickly they did it before they had taken in their surroundings.

Yes, Albus had done well in sending Fawkes to pick Roy up, even if the original idea was for Roy to arrive in a more dignified manner.

“Let’s have a seat,” Albus said, gesturing at the couches.

As soon as they were settled, a tray with various breakfast foods appeared before Roy. Roy gave Albus a questioning look, but Albus simply looked down at the tray and gestured for Roy to eat. Roy had missed breakfast, and hadn’t been present for dinner last night either. Albus couldn’t guarantee how long this would take. It would be remiss on his part to let Roy go on without a meal.

“As you well know,” Albus began once Roy had given in and reached for the coffee, “my efforts to convince Horace Slughorn to share the true memory of his conversation with Tom have been unsuccessful so far. I visited him yesterday, and our meeting did not end well. I worry he will try to leave Great Britain soon if I can’t convince him otherwise.”

Roy raised his eyebrows, and gestured for Albus to continue.

“How you well know,” Albus began once Roy had given in and reached for the coffee, “my efforts to convince Horace Slughorn to share the true memory of his conversation with Tom have been unsuccessful so far. I visited him yesterday, and our meeting did not end well. I worry he will try to leave Great Britain soon if I can’t convince him otherwise.”

Roy frowned and shook his head.
“I was going to do it, but I had a thought and spent the whole day on my research,” Roy replied.

*The whole day?* Roy had mentioned that he was close to having a potential array, and Albus hoped this meant they could attempt to destroy a horcrux soon. However, now was not the right moment for that conversation.

“I see. Much has happened, but what is relevant to us is that Garrick Ollivander and Florean Fortescue were taken by Death Eaters yesterday.”

“Do we know why?” Roy asked without flinching.

Albus shook his head.

“Not yet,” he confessed. While he could make a guess or two over Ollivander’s disappearance, Fortescue was a mystery.

“Why is that relevant to Slughorn?”

“Because Tom always wanted Horace to join him. While Tom kept a low profile, Horace was ensured a certain leeway that allowed him to stay ahead of Tom’s followers, but now that the war has broken openly, he is at grave risk. Thus, I thought to offer him back his old teaching position here at Hogwarts. Unfortunately, Horace saw it as an attempt on my part to corner him into giving me the memory, and refused.” While, admittedly, Albus intended to obtain that memory from Horace, the horcruxes had nothing to do with his offer.

“What position is that?” Roy asked, a curious expression on his face.

“Potions.”

Roy’s eyebrows went up, and his mouth pulled up in a dry smirk.

“Are you freeing Snape from the lower years?”

Albus laughed, startled by the thought. Severus would certainly appreciate that.

“No, I am not. But I figured, as this might well be my last year as Hogwarts’ Headmaster, I could give Severus the position he has wanted since he joined the staff.” Roy frowned at the reminder of Albus’ impending death, but said nothing. They both knew how unlikely it was that Draco Malfoy would be given longer than the school term to complete his orders. Short of winning the war, Albus would be dead come next June.

“I see,” Roy said. He set his fork down after eating far too little of his food and leaned back on the couch. “And you think I can help you change Slughorn’s mind? How?”

Albus smiled, pleased by Roy’s quick uptake.

“Horace has always had a weakness for talent and novelty. It is my hope that, by introducing the two of you, he will be interested enough to return to Hogwarts in spite of his current wariness of me.” Failing that, Albus would attempt to take Harry Potter to Horace’s house, but he would rather avoid such drastic measures.

Roy raised his eyebrows again.

“Am I a party trick now?”

Albus smiled in amusement.
When Albus saw the door to Horace’s current hiding place swinging wide open, he felt a chill run down his spine. Fearing the worst, he glanced to the side to see Roy had already drawn his wand, did the same, and approached cautiously. It wasn’t until they had entered the house that Albus realized something didn’t quite fit. In the previous two kidnappings —both Garrick’s quiet one and Florean’s rather violent attack— the Dark Mark had been left suspended over the spot, but there was no trace of it here.

Taking a glance around, Albus’ eyes fell on an overturned armchair that he could swear hadn’t looked quite like that yesterday.

“This isn’t good,” Albus said out loud, and caught Roy’s eye over the destroyed room.

Roy moved sideways, stepping on the shattered glass and china that coated everything, and shook his head, frowning.

Taking a step forward as though to investigate, Albus poked the tip of his wand into the seat of the armchair.

The armchair yelped and transformed back into a disgruntled Horace Slughorn.

“Was that necessary?” Horace asked in aggravation, rubbing at his belly where Albus’ want had pressed.

“Would you have transformed back otherwise?” Albus returned, torn between amusement and slight offence that Horace had believed this farce necessary.

Horace huffed and rose to his feet.

“What gave it away?”

“My dear Horace,” Albus said, settling on amusement over Horace’s excessively bothered expression, “if the Death Eaters really had come to call, the Dark Mark would have been set over the house.”

“Besides,” Roy added from where he had moved to stand by the piano, “in a fight to escape them, you would have either succeeded or been captured long before the destruction reached this level,” he said, gesturing around to encompass the thoroughly devastated sitting room.

Horace looked at Roy, clearly taking him in properly for the first time. After a moment, he sighed and slumped forward.

“I knew something wasn’t quite right,” Horace muttered to himself.

“Would you like my assistance cleaning up?”

“Please,” Horace said, sounding tired. He had undoubtedly spent a lot of energy in a rush to set up this scene.

Roy stood back and watched as the two of them returned the sitting room to what it had looked like yesterday, before Horace got this hare-brained scheme into his head. At least he hadn’t fled yet.
Once the room was presentable again, Horace turned to Albus.

“As much as I don’t appreciate this visit,” he said with some irritation, “my answer remains the same, Albus.”

Albus had expected as much, and was fully prepared to ignore those words, move on with introductions, and dangle some philosopher’s stone-shaped temptation in front of Horace’s face. Before he could speak, however, Roy did.

“Do you sleep well at night, Mr. Slughorn?” Roy asked from where he was now leaning against the wall by the newly-repaired piano, piercing gaze fixed on Horace’s form.

Horace turned, his expression a mix of confusion and slight outrage, and paused when he met Roy’s eyes.

“I—what?”

“I hear you are not on Lord Voldemort’s side,” Roy continued conversationally, and ignored Horace’s flinch at the name, “yet you refuse to share that memory with Albus.”

Horace’s eyes turned, wide on a now incredulous face, to look at Albus, as though he couldn’t believe Albus had willingly shared such information with anyone. This wasn’t the first time someone showed surprise upon learning that Albus shared knowledge with Roy, and Albus wondered if he had truly grown so isolated in receiving counsel that no one expected him to rely on other people for assistance.

Before Horace could put his thoughts into words, Roy went on.

“So I was wondering how you slept at night, knowing that every day you withhold that knowledge is a day the war goes on. How can you live with yourself knowing people die and are taken away every day Lord Voldemort is out there?” Roy finished his thought casually, eyes still piercing Horace, who by now was staring determinedly at the wall.

Albus hadn’t intended to bring up the memory in this meeting, something he now realized he should have told Roy beforehand. Now Horace would become even more defensive than he had already been, and they would accomplish nothing today.

Horace’s shoulders shook, and Albus realized he had clenched his fists.

“And what…” Horace began, voice devoid of his usual joviality, “what would you expect me to do?” he demanded of the grandfather clock, still turned away from both of them.

“What could you do?” Roy returned the question. “What would you do, Mr. Slughorn, if I were to tell you that I am but days away from completing a safe, fool-proof method of destroying horcruxes?”

Horace spun in place so quickly that he almost lost his balance, focusing on Roy for a long moment before he turned to Albus, his eyes wide.

“Is that true?” Horace asked of him in a sliver of a voice. For the first time since Albus had first contacted him, it looked like that mark of denial Horace had hid behind might come off.

“It is,” Albus confirmed. He looked over Horace’s shoulder, raising an eyebrow at Roy. “Though I didn’t know the method was so close to completion.”
Roy gave him a cocky little smirk.

“Why do you think I was awake all night?”

Horace drew Albus’ attention again when he took a step forward, closer to Albus.

“Can you stop him? If I give it to you, can you stop him?” Horace asked, and the guilt Albus knew was there, the one he had never managed to bring out, was so plain on his face now that it seemed impossible Horace had lived with it for so long.

“We can,” Albus assured him.

Horace sighed.

“I’ll give it to you,” he said, defeated.

Albus smiled, surprised and relieved. He met Roy’s eyes again over Horace’s shoulder, marvelling at how easily Roy had managed to bring out and play on Horace’s guilt. Perhaps the lack of a personal relationship gave him a different perspective that Albus had failed to see.

“If that is the case, then please reconsider my offer of re-joining the Hogwarts staff. Hogwarts would be a much safer location for you than moving around every week.”

Horace frowned, his displeasure clear on his face.

“I want a salary raise if I go back.”

Albus chuckled.

“We’ll see about it.”

“If he gets a raise, I want one as well,” Roy said, making Albus laugh and drawing Horace’s gaze once more. Horace frowned at Roy for a long moment.

“I don’t believe we have met. I have a feeling I would remember you.” By which, Albus knew, Horace meant that Roy would have been part of the Slug Club had he been a student at Hogwarts while Horace taught, something Albus didn’t doubt for a moment.

“No, you have not,” Albus said, and stepped between the two to make introductions. “Horace, allow me to introduce Roy Mustang, Hogwarts’ dreaded Alchemy Professor,” Albus said jovially. Roy smirked.

Horace’s face took on an interested expression at the mention of Alchemy.

“Oh?”

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: I made a very silly mistake when writing this chapter. As some people have pointed out, Bellatrix was mentioned when she shouldn't have been. My bad. The unbreakable vow happened in this AU, but without Bellatrix there to witness, Severus and Narcissa... improvised. Nobody ever expected to keep that vow hidden from
Voldemort (as if Bellatrix wouldn't have told him in canon anyway). Everyone, save Draco at first, knows that Draco's mission is a punishment, and no one expects him to fully succeed: Draco's chances of survival always hinged on reducing failure as much as possible. Thus, when Narcissa, desperate, asked for the vow, Severus thought fast. Refusing to do it could be interpreted as a refusal to assist Voldemort in one of his most important plans, jeopardizing his position as a spy. Fortunately, Voldemort had forced Pettigrew on him that summer, so Severus brought Pettigrew out and threatened him at wandpoint to witness the vow. Between certain and very unpleasant death and perhaps-only-torture, Pettigrew chose the second and did it. Severus, of course, spun this as a measure to guarantee Dumbledore's death were Draco to fail (I imagine it's the same tale he used in canon).

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